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Cultural Awareness and Implementation: The School Counselor's Role

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Abstract

This research paper proposes the need for cultural consciousness and culturally appropriate services within the school system. It suggests that prerequisite awareness, knowledge and skills are needed in order for school counselors to implement a successful culturally diverse program. Most importantly, it addresses the primary roles of the school counselor and how each of those roles can positively effect the student's ecosystem and aid in the mastery of the developmental tasks of childhood in a culturally receptive manner.

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In the year 2001, we will enter a new century and a new millennium. Ushering in the next 1000 years of history, what will we as counselors say we have accomplished? For counseling professionals the start of the new millennium provides an opportunity to begin the development of a shared vision of a society which celebrates the diversity of all people. This shared vision should foster the awareness, knowledge and skills necessary to bring about societal change as it relates to the primary roles of the contemporary school counselor – counseling, consultation, and coordination (American School Counselor Association (ASCA), 1990). As the United States becomes increasingly more diverse, perhaps as never before, school counselors have the opportunity to redefine their roles based on the commitment to help *all* students master the developmental tasks of childhood. The challenge lies in defining these roles so that they are culturally responsive and holistically encompassing. What is needed at the brink of the twenty-first century is a paradigm shift that brings multicultural services from the periphery to the core of this profession (Ibrahim & Arredondo, 1986).

The Rationale for Cultural Responsiveness

The United States is fast becoming a multiethnic, multiracial and multilingual society (D.W. Sue, 1991). “Estimates are that by the year 2020, the majority of school-age children in the United States will be from racial and ethnic minority groups” (Lee, 1995, p.4). Yet, the cultural value system inherent in traditional counseling theory and practice has been criticized as being culturally encapsulated and incompatible with the values of many culturally diverse students (Wrenn, 1985). Much research has been done on the ineffectiveness of traditional counseling approaches when used with diverse populations (Casas, Ponterotto, & Gutierrez, 1986; D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 1999). These studies have postulated that this ineffectiveness is due

to a combination of factors: (a) Counseling not being directly applicable to ethnic minority students, (b) the lack of training at the counselor's graduate institution, (c) the belief that the White middle class value system that is deeply rooted into most psychological research, theory, assessment instruments and practice is inherently biased and (d) the counseling process being influenced by the state of race relations in the larger society. To the extent that these arguments are true, counselors fall short in meeting the needs of their culturally diverse clientele. What can school counselors do to move beyond these barriers? How do they bridge the inevitable gaps? This process must begin with the counselor's understanding of his or her own culture as well as the students.

Understanding Worldview

Pedersen (1991) defined multicultural counseling as “a counseling perspective that seeks to provide a conceptual framework, recognizing the complex diversity of a pluralistic society and acknowledging bridges of shared concern that bind culturally different persons to one another” (p.7). This perspective suggests that counselors need an awareness and understanding of their *own* culture in addition to an awareness and understanding of *other* cultures. This is often referred to as understanding a person's worldview. D.W. Sue & D. Sue (1999) explained that each of us possesses a worldview that affects how we perceive and evaluate situations and how we determine appropriate actions based upon our appraisal. Therefore, it can be argued that defining a child's problem is a culturally bound activity and appropriate interventions are based on the counselor's understanding of how that child views the problem.

Student's Worldview

A student's worldview shapes their identity, and all human psychosocial development is influenced by it. Although there are universal aspects to this development, it would be negligent

not to consider the cultural context in which this development occurs and what shapes an individual's ethnic identity (Lee, 1995). Variables that need to be taken into account include the notion of kinship, community, religion/spiritual values and language, as well as environmental factors such as acculturation, economic disadvantage, historical hostility and racism (Lee, 1995). In most cases, culturally different students have a greater possibility of holding worldviews different from those of counselors that serve them due to these variables. Counselors have the responsibility to increase their awareness so that students are counseled with approaches that recognize the influence of cultural group membership.

Counselor's Worldview

To effectively work with students belonging to diverse groups, responsibility is placed on the counselor to acquire specific knowledge and understanding of other cultural groups, as well as strive for personal awareness in terms of how one's own cultural background, experiences, attitudes, values and biases influence the therapeutic process. For example, if a counselor is unaware of his or her own worldview and feels uncomfortable when a student presents issues in regards to racism, then the counselor may lack the skills to create a trusting and understanding environment. Conversely, the counselor who understands his or her own worldview may facilitate an open line of communication between the student and the counselor, and establish a collaborative rapport. The values and attitudes inherent in the counselor's worldview affect the counseling relationship in terms of counselor behaviors, therapeutic goals, and treatment planning. This being said, a culturally unaware counselor could do more harm than good in situations where their culture does not correspond to the students they assist.

Sociopolitical Effects on Worldview

Counselors need to keep in mind that the worldview of both the counselor and student is affected by historical and current experiences of racism and oppression (Helms, 1990), and that there is significant relevance in understanding the sociopolitical differences between the two (see Table 1). Because the effects of sociopolitical issues are woven into a person's perception of their own worldview it is valuable for the counselor to become knowledgeable of these perspectives. Counselors need to be reminded that all people exist in multiple contexts and are affected by those contexts. Institutions that are acceptable and helpful to some are not to others. Instruments and strategies that are learned need to be understood within their cultural-bound limitations. This understanding will help facilitate an effective relationship.

Building the Bridge– From Awareness to Practice

Although the resurgence in the professional development of counselors has advanced the notion of culturally responsive helpers, the concept of *multicultural counseling skills* is tenuous at best (Lee, 1997). Counselors on the frontlines of multicultural service delivery stress the need for more practical direction in addressing student's needs in a culturally responsive manner. Studies have consistently revealed that counseling effectiveness is improved when counselors use methods and define goals consistent with the culture of the student (D. W. Sue, Arrendondo, & McDavis, 1992). There will never be a "cookbook approach" to counseling diverse populations. Applying the awareness of and knowledge about different cultures by developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques is where the true test of competency lies. According to Zayas, Torres, Malcolm, & DesRosiers (1996), only 34% of counselors they surveyed (n=150) defined culturally sensitive counseling as actively integrating awareness and knowledge of the student's cultural background into therapy. Counselors need to view

developing and practicing appropriate and sensitive intervention strategies as means to practice more ethically and effectively. The cultural awareness achieved by the counselors through understanding worldview and ethnic identity should be looked upon as the foundation to finding effective ways to integrate cultural sensitivity with effectiveness of intervention (Swartz-Kulstead, & Martin, 1999). The challenge and duty of school counselors in the twenty first century is to move beyond cultural *awareness* and into multicultural *practice*. This can be realized through the multiple roles the school counselor plays within a child's "ecosystem".

A Framework for Practice

To effectively service students belonging to different cultures, the counselor needs to come to the table with more than just awareness, knowledge and skills pertaining to an individual's culture, or even the understanding of the sociopolitical systems operative in his or her life. The school counselor needs to synthesize this information and look at each individual as a whole. A useful model that allows for the integration of these critical variables is the ecosystems model borrowed from the social work practice. The ecosystems model recognizes that there are relationships between and among individuals, families, psychosocial groups, institutions and society (Caple & Salicido, 1995). These interactions between or among these systems have a significant impact on human behavior and functioning. The school counselor's role in this framework is in assessing the entire ecosystem and intervening at the most appropriate point (i.e., individual, peers, teachers, family, community, school system) to facilitate change. This approach allows the counselor to address problems holistically, to incorporate into assessments the true complexity of people's lives, and to present a wide arena for multiple interventions. School Counselors can utilize this ecosystem framework assuming the various roles intrinsic to counseling - counselor, coordinator and consultant.

The Counselor

The tremendous influx of school age children from diverse cultural groups entering the U.S. public school system has raised concerns in regards to the negative effects the ethnocentric approach to education has on academic achievement, self concept and psychological development (Lee, 1995). School counselors have the responsibility to help culturally diverse students work to change stereotypical thoughts and beliefs, as well as educating majority groups about prejudicial, stereotypical behaviors. School counselors have an obligation as advocates to become leaders of change and aid in the development of more culturally relevant and deferential learning environments. Diversity appreciation is integral to the goal of a culturally respectful school setting. Although this can be achieved in a variety of ways, including individual and group counseling, for the purposes of this article we will focus on the large group guidance.

Multicultural Group Guidance

Through multicultural guidance activities a school counselor can help all children develop a sense of personal comfort and security, as well as assist them in becoming more respectful and sensitive to persons who are different from themselves. Both of these goals are important considerations in helping children learn to become responsible citizens within the context of a culturally and racially diverse society. Initial research findings suggest that multicultural education offers promise in promoting students' psychological well being, yet there is a lack of available resources in this area (Omizo & D'Andrea, 1995). If counselors are to be successful in promoting the psychological well being of all students, they must step into the role of developing and facilitating school-wide activities that foster the appreciation of diversity. These activities should be designed with three purposes: (a) Helping students better understand why children from diverse backgrounds may think, act or feel similarly and/or differently from

them, (b) assisting in the development of appropriate social skills, and (c) fostering sensitivity and awareness of diversity (Omizo & D'Andrea, 1995). Implementing these types of activities have a tremendous potential in assisting all children in developing positive self-image, promoting effective social skills, and increasing their understanding of people who come from different racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The Coordinator

Counselors are often referred to as the person who knows the most about students and their needs, as well as the resources available to meet those needs. Counselors are therefore expected to identify, refer and link resources on the behalf of the student (Miles, 1995). Although coordination is the aspect of counseling which is least talked about and is often referred to as "everything else" the counselor does beyond counseling and consulting, I contest that it is the most important aspect in regards to fairly serving a culturally diverse population. School counselors as coordinators manage a variety of services and act as liaisons between the school and the community. In a diverse environment coordination takes on a new dimension as a school counselor tries to gather information about various cultures and culture-specific organizations, as well as offer programs similar to social service agencies, such as clothing banks or food drives when needed. Coordination takes on many shapes and forms including: planning and scheduling, program development & evaluation, community outreach, research and organization. It provides the framework through which counseling and consulting roles are performed and establishes a medium through which all student services specialists can work together as a team (Kamen, Robinson, & Rotter, 1985). The coordination aspect of the school counselor's job is a time-intensive one and the increase in school diversity presents both a

challenge and an opportunity for schools and counselors to broaden traditional areas of service (Miles, 1995).

The Consultant

Young people are influenced by their environment, which includes many different adults and groups. Counseling a student therefore, may be only partly effective unless attention is given to the adults who are integral parts of a student's life (Myrick, 1997). The duty of a culturally sensitive counselors is to activate their natural talents as communicators, leaders and facilitators, and reach out to parents, communities, teachers and administrators as activists for diversity.

Family and Community

It has been established how important the roles of family and community play in the life of a culturally diverse student. This is why increasing parent and community awareness of school programs, goals and expectations in regard to diversity and multiculturalism is essential. The family and community constellations influence and shape the values, beliefs and actions in a young child's life. Unfortunately, some home and community environments are not the culturally supportive settings we wish them to be. Therefore, it is necessary that parent and community consultation take place in order to gain insights on perceptions and work to understand and change those that are counterproductive to a child's development. Professional counselors who want to be effective in multicultural communities must discover and become proficient in using nontraditional methods of service delivery, including the utilization of indigenous helping resources with the community.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has done an exemplary job in regards to family and community involvement. The Los Angeles Unified School District is one of the largest and

most ethnically diverse school districts in the United States with approximately 636,000 students enrolled. In order to serve diverse populations the school district created a branch called The Los Angeles Unified School District Parent Community Services, which “promotes increased student academic achievement by building the capacities of local schools and communities to train, educate, and support parents as partners in their children's education”

(<http://www.lausd.k12.ca.us/PCS>). This branch organizes parent workshops on such topics as multiculturalism, career awareness and enhancing their child's education. It also creates parent newsletters, provides services such as, linking community social services, articulating district policy and procedures and conducting parent/community needs assessment and satisfaction surveys. One of the best things they have put in place is the School Compensatory Education Advisory Committee (CEAC), which exists at the school, zone and district level. The advisory committee receives information describing the programs and activities provided with funds from compensatory education and advises the principal on the development of an effective educational program and plan that will raise the achievement of disadvantaged students. They are also involved in assessment of educational needs, establishment of priorities, planning the educational program and budget resources and evaluation of the school and its academic effectiveness. This committee is made up of a majority of parent members, as well as community members, PTA, school counselors, faculty and students. This example of a synergistic team illustrates where multicultural consulting should be moving towards in this next century. Because counselors play strategic roles within the school and community they are uniquely positioned to have a significant impact on the development and enhancement of team structures across these environments.

School Personnel

School counselors are often limited in the time they are able to give each child. As educators and advocates of multicultural awareness, counselors are in the unique position to sensitize all school personnel to the cultural issues influencing the adjustment of children in the schools, as well as help personnel explore their attitudes, behaviors and interactions as they pertain to different cultural groups. A few ways in which educating school personnel can be accomplished are through activities such as staff development workshops, conferences, teacher/counselor teams and open dialog and discussion. An excellent example of this type of consultation is teacher support groups, which rely on the expertise of group members to explore concerns, identify pertinent issues, suggest alternatives, and plan action. The emergence and application of this kind of “teacher’s expertise” is made possible through the facilitative skills of the counselor as a group leader (Herring & White, 1995).

Accountability

Counseling services once had such general appeal that counselors were accepted on good faith and good intent that they were doing their jobs successfully (Myrick, 1997). That time has changed. Counselors are being held accountable on what they do in their programs, who they serve and whether they are getting results. If counselors are to remain focused on community and student based priorities, it is critically important to incorporate observations and recommendations of parents, administrators, community leaders, teachers and students in this assessment. This can be done in a variety of ways including diverse advisory groups, surveys, parent/community forums and interviews (Lee, 1995). Only once a counselor has completed these assessments can he or she set goals and objectives that are reflective of the student and the community.

A critical element in the accountability process is providing evidence by means of data collecting. The use of time logs, constituent data, case studies and outcomes are frequently used in this process (Lee, 1995). Only after this data has been collected and analyzed against the goals and objectives of the program can the counselors assess the effectiveness of their programs. The analysis of this data should serve as the basis of making culturally appropriate decisions and modifications in counseling services. Counseling professionals are responsible for ensuring that all programs and services reach all students in the community and accountability efforts make this task easier.

Conclusion

Preparing counselors for the cultural changes in the future is paramount. The current trend in demographics suggests that the United States will experience even greater diversity by the year 2020. As a result, not only is there a need for culturally aware and sensitive professionals, there is a call to the counseling profession to take a proactive stance in modifying existing services, implementing multicultural programs and monitoring program efficacy. As never before, the school counselor's multiple roles as coordinator, counselor and consultant are at the heart of success for *all* students within the school system. School counselor's must embrace this challenge by becoming culturally knowledgeable and use that knowledge as a springboard to cultural implementation. They can lead this shared vision of a society which celebrates the diversity of all people, and bring about the societal change necessary in this new millennium.

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Table 1

Sociopolitical Differences between Diverse Populations

	European American Cultural Biases	Multicultural Reactions to these Biases
Bias #1	European Americans are born the benefactors and beneficiaries of racism, although they may not be consciously aware of that bequest (Helms, 1993).	The minority student may approach counseling with healthy suspicion as to the counselor's conscious and unconscious motives (D.W. Sue et al, 1992).
Bias #2	European Americans deny, distort and repress realities of race relations in their environments, although they most likely have inherited racial and cultural biases (Corvin & Wiggins, 1989).	Just as with identity development, the worldview of racial and ethnic minorities is highly correlated with their historical and current experiences of racism in society, as well as with their cultural upbringing and life experiences (Ibrahim 1985; D.W. Sue & D. Sue, 1999).
Bias #3	Individualistic, self-directed and monoculturally designed models, developed primarily by White, male social scientists, are creatures of their creators (Arrendondo, 1999). Those who do not meet the demographic similarity are often viewed as deficient.	Culturally diverse populations are often inappropriately served by mental health services and are likely to underutilize professional counselors (Ibrahim & Arrendondo, 1986).