Preparing Professional School Counselors as Collaborators in Culturally Competent School Administration[*]

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Abstract

In collaboration with principals and other leadership team members, professional school counselors have ethical responsibilities in promoting culturally competent school environments. Pre-service training is the ideal time for school counselors and principals to develop the necessary background information, tools, and assessment skills to assist them as they move into leadership roles in public schools. The purpose of this article is to provide a training model for professional school counselors as school leaders to develop their effectiveness in assessing and creating school environments that are inclusive of all students regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation or ability. Practical applications for counselor preparation programs and school leadership team collaboration are discussed. This publication aligns with the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISSLC) Standard 5: "An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner."

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[*]Version 1.2: Feb 11, 2009 3:02 pm -0600
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1 Introduction

Ensuring that all students have access to a quality education is a responsibility for which professional school counselors as school leadership team members are ideally positioned (Bemak, 2000; Hanson & Stone, 2002; House & Sears, 2002). Harris (1999) stated that counselors and principals are the most visible in the school and share an important job in promoting cultural diversity within the school. When strong school leaders partner for systemic change, they are more likely to create an atmosphere of acceptance of all students, which, in turn, is reflected in a positive learning environment (Lindsey, Robbins, & Terrell, 2003; McKenzie, et al., 2008; Theoharis, 2004). Like principals, recent literature suggests that school counselors should play an integral role in promoting social justice issues, advocating for marginalized youth, and stimulating activism in schools and communities made up of predominantly poor and minority families (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007; Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). School counselors, as leaders, have a professional, ethical, and humanistic responsibility in creating school environments that are socially just and culturally sensitive (ASCA, 2004a). Professional school counselors must be accountable for taking the next logical step in creating safe and inclusive environments for all students by assessing the cultural climate of the schools in which they work and creating programs that enhance the learning environment for all students. One way to do this is by understanding how to develop culturally competent and proficient schools.

2 Professional School Counselors and Cultural Competence

Culturally competent educational organizations value diversity in both theory and practice and make teaching and learning relevant and meaningful to students of various cultures (Klotz, 2006). The notion of school-wide cultural competence aligns with the position statements of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2004b, 2005, 2006) and Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2004a). Traditionally, however, cultural competence in the school counseling literature has primarily focused on how to be effective when counseling culturally and ethnically diverse students (CACREP, 1994; Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Lewis & Hayes, 1991; Sue, D., Arredondo, P., McDavis, R., 1992). Yet, school leaders, including professional school counselors, must also be concerned with the "big picture" of the cultural competence of the total school environment. Teaching students in graduate school counseling programs to assess organizational cultural competence may be one step toward creating school leaders who are more likely to be social justice advocates.

Interestingly, professional school counselors may experience unique deterrents to the development of cultural competence and true social action in schools that may not be as commonly experienced by principals. Bemak and Chung (2008) described the *nice counselor syndrome* (NCS) as manifested by well-meaning practitioners who may believe in equal access for all students, but are not able to advocate effectively for systemic change because they are unwilling to engage in disagreements which, as expected, arise during shifts in organizations. These "nice" counselors simply cannot place more importance on social justice advocacy than their desire to maintain a public image of accord and avoidance of conflict at all costs. In our work training professional school counselors as school leaders, we have found that pre-service training allows for reflection about NCS characteristics and opportunities for leadership development that can promote transformational change in schools. Like school administrators, counselor educators need to recognize the integral role of professional school counselors on school leadership teams (Hayes & Paisley, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003). Counselor educators then can assist counselors in training with the skill development required to assess and enhance organizational cultural competence in school settings, as well as provide graduate students with tools and opportunities to effectively promote an inclusive school environment.

3 Using Culture Audits to Train School Counselors and Other School Leaders

One way to train school counselors to become systemic, inquiry-oriented change agents is to introduce them to the value of conducting *culture audits*. A culture audit is a systematic process for examining how culturally competent a school is, or how well diverse cultural perspectives are integrated into the values and behaviors manifested in the overall organizational culture (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2005). Culture audits involve multiple data collection methods and sources to assess how well a school's

policies, programs, and practices reflect the cultural perspectives of diverse groups in the school and school community (Bustamante, 2006). Data collection methods typically include observations, surveys, interviews, and analysis of documents and existing data to access insider and outsider perspectives from various groups.

As a major course assignment in preparing school leaders, counseling students practice collaborating with the leadership team of the school by conducting culture audits in actual school settings. This data is then used to plan for school improvement efforts aimed at meeting the academic and social needs of all groups in the school and school community. Specifically, professional school counselor candidates are asked to conduct focused observations using the School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist (SCCOC) (Nelson, Bustamante, Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, 2008) as a course field activity. The SCCOC is a 33-item checklist relevant to school-wide cultural competence. The checklist includes groups of items organized within eight domains: (a) school vision, (b) curriculum, (c) student interaction and leadership, (d) teachers, (e) teaching and learning, (d) parent and community outreach, (e) conflict management, and (f) assessments. Table 1 displays sample items from the SCCOC.

Table 1: Sample Items from the School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist	
Sample Domains	Sample Items
School Vision/Mission	There is a school Mission or Vision Statement that includes a stated commitment to diversity and/or global citizenry.
Curriculum	Literature selections in the curriculum reflect a variety of cultural perspectives (classrooms and library).
Student Interaction and Leadership	Racial/ethnic representation in advanced placement classes, honors classes, and gifted programs is balanced.
Teachers	Teachers representing diverse groups are actively recruited by the principal and the district.
Teaching and Learning	Instruction is differentiated to address students with special needs, while challenging all students.
Parents and Outer Community	Community outreach programs involve regularly eliciting perspectives of community constituencies and stakeholder groups, including parents.
Conflict Management	The tendency for intercultural conflict is recognized and addressed through peer mediation programs and other proactive approaches to conflict resolution.

Assessments	Authentic student assessments are used to complement standardized tests in assessing achievement.

Table 1

Source: *The School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist* ©2008 Authors. All rights reserved.

4 The Culture Audit Process

Throughout a semester course, graduate students in professional school counseling are taken through the steps of the culture audit process as follows:

1. Students assess their own levels of individual multicultural competence using Holcomb-McCoy's School Counselor Multicultural Checklist (2004). After completing the assessment, the students write a short paper reflecting on the experience of taking the assessment and their feelings about the results. The most commonly cited low score on this assessment is having the ability to confront others when they are being culturally insensitive.
2. Students participate in lecture and discussion around the subject of organizational cultural competence. They are also asked to choose an article on cultural competence in schools from a selection of 10 articles. After reading their articles, students discuss in small groups what they learned.
3. Students are introduced to the SCCOC, have the opportunity to ask questions and discuss the instrument, and are provided examples of what types of documentation are relevant.
4. Students introduce the concept of organizational cultural competence and the SCCOC to their principals/supervisors and ask permission to conduct an assessment of the school's cultural competence. We stress that this is not an "official" assessment of the school, but rather a learning experience for the student.
5. Students use the SCCOC to assess the organizational cultural competence of their schools and bring the information to class.
6. In groups, students identify three strengths and three challenge areas of their respective schools and discuss possible action plans for improvement. There is no official scoring of the instrument. Students are taught to look at the data they have collected *qualitatively* even though each item is assigned a score on a scale with 1 = never; 2 = almost never; 3 = sometimes; 4 = almost always; 5 = always.
7. Action plans are created by individual students and submitted along with the actual SCCOC results. The action planning phase of the assignment is critical. Students meet in groups to analyze their data, decide on strength and challenge areas, and brainstorm ideas for action. They then each write an action plan specific to their own campus consisting of strengths, needs, and plans for improvement. Students are encouraged to integrate the action plans into their schools' Campus Improvement Plans, therefore, making organizational cultural competence a mission of the entire school population. Although this is not an official assessment of the cultural environment of their schools, many of the students ask their administrators to participate in the assessment or to look at the results of the assessment and to comment on the value of the results of the assessment. Some students actually enlist a "team" of school leaders to assist in the assessment which more accurately represents the way in which a true assessment would be conducted.

5 Follow-up Research

Pre-service training in school counseling programs can include utilizing the SCCOC in a variety of school settings as a data collection and program planning tool. Follow-up studies were conducted in one university setting with school counselor trainees being asked to examine their perceptions of the utility of the instrument in conducting culture audits to assess school-wide cultural competence. The findings were as follows:

Table 2: *Results for Field Experience Regarding the Utility of the SCCOC*

ITEM	AGREE	DISAGREE
The SCCOC was clear and easy to complete.	96.4%	3.6%
I understood what evidence to look for to document my ratings of each item on the SCCOC.	92.7%	7.3%
I believe other school leaders would find the SCCOC useful.	100%	0.0%
I know that to do with the information collected on the SCCOC.	90.9%	9.1%
My principal would see the utility of this instrument.	94.6%	5.4%
Counselors should advocate for organizational change that supports school-wide cultural competence.	100%	0.0%
As a result of completing the SCCOC, I am more aware of my own attitudes and biases.	98.2%	1.8%
As a result of completing the SCCOC, I have initiated changes in my own behavior.	89.1%	10.9%
As a result of completing the SCCOC, it is clear what changes need to be made to improve the cultural competence of our school.	98.2%	1.8%

Table 2

Source: mhtml:file://E:\School Counselor SCCOC\FreeOnlineSurveys_com

The results of the survey were consistent with what students discussed in class. They believed that the instrument was relatively easy to use and understand and that improving school-wide cultural competence is an important role for school counselors. Although most students had not thought about their roles as school counselors in systemic change, they agreed that they should take the lead in providing an inviting learning environment for all students and that after the training they received in this course, they felt that they had the skills to confront inequities and marginalized groups.

Best Practices for School Counselors to Improve School-Wide Cultural Competence Some specific practices for school counselors to consider as they work to improve the cultural proficiency of their school settings include: (a) partnering with the principal to be the leaders in assessing school-wide cultural competence; (b) identifying a diverse team of teacher leaders, including students and other stakeholders to assist in the assessment; (c) utilizing a research-based instrument such as the SCCOC to determine strength and need areas in school-wide cultural competence; (d) including activities in the comprehensive guidance program to address the cultural competence need areas of the school such as providing group counseling for minority students who might be able to qualify for honors or gifted programs with additional support, offering support groups for marginalized youth such as gay, lesbian, or questioning youth, and developing a prevention program for conflicts arising from cultural differences; (e) becoming knowledgeable about racial identity development and include this knowledge in the comprehensive guidance program through classroom guidance

lessons, small group sessions, staff development, and school programs designed to enhance the understanding of the impact that race and ethnicity has on child development; and (f) modeling cultural competence and challenge inequitable organizational policies and practices.

6 Conclusion

An essential step in promoting cultural competence in schools is first to involve professional school counselors as school leadership team members, along with school administrators. Professional school counselors as leaders bring specialized training in social/ emotional and academic behavior and individual cultural competence to complement the administrative function of managing a school. As leadership team members, school counselors may be ideally positioned to participate in the culture auditprocess and determine need areas for systemic, school-wide change (Bemak, 2000; Hanson & Stone, 2002; House & Sears, 2002). Culture audit data reveal strengths and need areas to inform strategic planning for comprehensive guidance programs. The framework of school-wide cultural competence aligns with the position statements of the American School Counselor Association and the Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2004).

Professional school counselors as leaders must be equipped with the necessary tools to collaborate with school administrators in assessing how well policies, programs, and practices align with the needs of diverse groups (Hayes & Paisley, 2002; House & Sears, 2002; Paisley & Hayes, 2003). During pre-service training, counselor educators can introduce students to individual and organizational cultural competence and provide students with organizational assessment tools. Also, faculty who prepare school principals should consider the changing roles of the professional school counselor as a collaborative leadership team member, and, consequently, encourage school administrators to involve counselors in strategies for assessing and promoting school-wide cultural competence. A culturally competent school encourages the academic success and social engagement of all students regardless of gender, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, or other differences, while also encouraging the development of individual cultural competence among the students and teachers (Lindsey, et al, 2003). Overall, the use of the culture audit in school counselor preparation courses has been found to raise graduate student awareness and skills in assessing and promoting inclusive, culturally competent schools as evidenced by the informal, exploratory investigation of the authors' students.

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