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Sisters of Nia: A Social Justice Advocacy Intervention for School Counselors in Their Work with Adolescent African American Females

Lee Edmondson Grimes, Valdosta State University and Breyan Haizlip, Tiffany Rogers, and Kimberly D. Brown, Georgia Southern University

Abstract

Adolescent African American females face multiple obstacles that hinder their educational success. High school completion and college attendance rates remain lower for African American females than those for other racial and gender groups, while pregnancy rates for African American teens are higher. Group work holds promise for meeting the developmental needs of adolescent African American females, particularly group work focused on cultural and ethnic relevance. School counselors are called by their professional organizations to respond to the needs of disempowered students through social justice advocacy interventions (ASCA, 2005). The program of group work *Sisters of Nia* (Belgrave et al., 2004) uses cultural and ethnic values to empower adolescent African American female students. *Sisters of Nia* is introduced as an advocacy intervention at the student/client level of the ACA Advocacy Competencies. Implications for further school counseling advocacy efforts at the school/community/systems and public/social/political levels are included.

Lauryn is an eighth grade, African American student in middle school in a small city in Georgia. After her parents divorced, Lauryn and her mother moved to their current home from an urban setting in New York where Lauryn's classes and her neighborhood were very racially and socioeconomically diverse. Her new school is predominately White and middle class and is far from the closest urban area. Lauryn misses her extended family in New York and has been reluctant to become involved in activities at her new school. With her grades suffering, Lauryn has begun to skip school, and when she is in class, finds herself at odds with classmates. In the past month, Lauryn has received three discipline referrals regarding behaviors with

other students and her teachers. Lauryn reports that no one at her school thinks she matters.

On the surface, Crystal's life is very different from Lauryn's. Crystal lives in a rural area in Georgia where the demographics are changing rapidly with an increased growth of students at her school of Asian and Latino descent. Crystal's family has lived in the farming community for generations, and Crystal and her extended family have watched the community go from a busy agricultural center to a dwindling factory town. Like Lauryn, Crystal is an eighth-grade African American student. Recently her grades, attendance, and discipline have diminished while the time she spends with her boyfriend has increased. Crystal reports that she sees no reason to attend school because people like her cannot be successful at her school.

The Marginalization of Many African American Female Students

Unfortunately for students such as Lauryn and Crystal, research and statistics appear to support their beliefs. Mickelson and Green (2006) state that African American adolescent females are affected by their culture and socioeconomic status in critical ways. Adolescent African American females face a complicated array of societal hurdles that can prevent or deter their ultimate success in life as these hurdles lead to marginalization. It is very likely that African American adolescent females will be exposed to hurdles that are detrimental to their academic success (Ogbu, 2003). These difficulties include high teenage pregnancy, decreasing high school completion, and lower college enrollment rates than adolescent Caucasian females. During the 2007-2008 school year, African American females attended high-poverty public elementary and secondary schools at a greater percentage than Caucasian students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in 2009, 77% of African American females graduated from high school in the United States (2010). Also in 2009, only 47% of African American females ages 18-24 were enrolled in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Although more African American females enroll in college than African American males, African Americans females on average still have a lower median income than their African American male counterparts and of both Caucasian males and females (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010).

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(Kost & Henshaw, 2012). The National Campaign also reports that the rate of African American teen females who become pregnant at least once before the age of 20 is almost twice the national average (Kost & Henshaw, 2012). According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the state of Georgia has the 13th highest teen pregnancy rate in the United States (2009). The Georgia Department of Community Health reports that the rate of African American teen female births is 58.3 per 1,000 (2010). This rate is nearly double the 31.9 per 1,000 for Caucasian teen females (2010). In 2009, African American teen females had the highest proportion (47%) of teen births in Georgia (Georgia Department of Public Health, 2010).

A Call to Action

Meeting the needs of students such as Lauryn and Crystal, students whose futures deserve greater promise as evidenced in the struggles of many adolescent African American females, requires interventions from educators who respond to student marginalization. School counselors are perfectly positioned to address the needs of all students in schools, and as professional educators, possess skills particularly attuned to address the needs of individuals who have been marginalized and disadvantaged (Dahir & Stone, 2009; Education Trust, 2003; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Throughout the school counseling literature, discussion centers on the need for social justice advocacy in school counseling (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003; Bemak & Chung, 2008; Field & Baker, 2004; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Mitcham-Smith, 2007; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Uehara, 2005). Experts in the field contend that social justice advocacy and a focus on multiculturalism are key for professional school counselors as they attempt to remove barriers for marginalized students.

Advocacy, Social Justice, and Multiculturalism in School Counseling

From a historical perspective, significant changes in the counseling profession began with the introduction of the multicultural competencies in 1992 (Sue, Arrendondo, & McDavis). Defining the multiculturally competent counselor, Sue, Arrendondo, and McDavis urged counselors to adopt a multicultural focus so that clients benefitted not only from the counselor's helping skills but from a heightened perspective of respect and acceptance for the cultural influences of race, ethnicity, gender, class, age, and sexual orientation. In the years following, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) and the American Counseling Association (ACA) adopted the multicultural competencies as a part of their standards. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) issued the call as well and encouraged school counselors to "take action to ensure students of culturally diverse backgrounds have access to appropriate services and opportunities which promote the maximum development of the individual" (ASCA, 2005). Throughout the past decade, counseling and school counseling have changed



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and expanded to include a perspective far beyond the White, middle-class worldview that dominated counseling for decades. Often called the fourth force in counseling, multiculturalism paved the way for the next major force in counseling—social justice.

In terms of school counseling, a social justice perspective “acknowledges the role that dominant cultural values have in shaping the educational success and failure of youngsters” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 18). Challenging the status quo and dominant cultural values while attempting to remove systemic barriers to success for all students at the individual level, the school/community level, and the political level characterize the work of the school counselor with a social justice advocacy orientation. Dahir and Stone (2009) stated that school counselors “must accept responsibility as social justice advocates, focus strategic and intentional interventions to remove barriers to learning, and raise the level of expectations for students for whom little is expected” (p. 18). The authors suggested that the key to a thriving future for school counseling lies in social justice advocacy (Dahir & Stone, 2009, p. 18). School counselors acting as social justice advocates hold the key to a thriving future for marginalized students as well.

Social justice in school counseling is built in part on the American Counseling Association Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003). Within the three ACA Advocacy domains, counselors work to confront inequity at the individual student/client level, the community/systems level, and the political/social/public information level, as shown in the following table:

When counselors use the advocacy competencies to conceptualize their work with students or clients, they recognize that the problems individuals face are not isolated in the lives of the individual, but that individuals are products of and are affected by systems, communities, and society as a whole. Most recently, the third edition of the ASCA National Model (2012) aligned itself with the ACA

Advocacy Competencies, urging school counselors to use advocacy efforts that address barriers and marginalization. As evidenced through the growth of the profession in terms of multiculturalism, social justice advocacy, and in the calls from their professional organizations, school counselors must provide interventions that empower students and challenge oppressive forces in the systems in which individual students learn and live.

Group Work as a School Counseling, Social Justice Advocacy Intervention

With social justice advocacy in mind, school counselors respond to the needs of marginalized students with a broader perspective than the traditional counseling models espoused. Rather than focusing on the problems in a student’s life and how the student can change to adapt to problems, a social justice advocacy perspective calls for working with students and advocating on their behalf to determine strengths already present in the student’s life and community. In terms of the ACA Advocacy Competencies and the Advocacy Components of the ASCA National Model, the approach stresses the use of “Student Empowerment—Efforts that facilitate the identification of external barriers and development of self-advocacy skills, strategies and response to those barriers” (ASCA, 2012, p. 5). At the student level, group activities are suggested in the Advocacy Component of the ASCA National Model as a delivery method to increase student empowerment. Group work has been identified as being particularly helpful for working with groups made up of culturally diverse individuals (Merta, 1995). Group work provides an ideal

method for empowering students faced with marginalizing and defeating factors that hinder their success.

The Power of Group Work to Meet Developmental Needs of Students

As individuals transition from childhood to early adolescence, they experience physical, cognitive, and social changes. Adolescents search for their identity outside of their families, discovering how they fit into the world, and discovering what they want out of their life in terms of their career, romantic relationships, and responsibilities (Powell, 2004). According to Erikson (1968), adolescents experience a crisis of “Identity versus Identity Confusion;” without being given opportunities to explore their identity and follow a positive route, they will continue to experience uncertainty about their identity. Self-concepts begin to develop and adolescents create more abstract characterizations about themselves, defining who they are by their personal views and standards rather than by social comparisons (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). While both male and female adolescents experience a decline in self-esteem during this developmental stage, self-esteem for adolescent females is twice as low as boys’ self-esteem during this time (Santrock, 2001), and the individuation process is more conflicting for females (Powell, 2004). When adolescents are in social environments that do not fit their psychological needs, they are likely to experience decreased motivation, interest, and performance, as well as a decline in positive behavior (Eccles et al., 1993). Simmons and Blyth (1987) further this argument by adding that adolescents need a safe yet challenging environment that contributes to their

personal growth and helps them to adjust to change. Group work can serve as that safe environment in which adolescents can develop the sense of autonomy they are seeking.

Cultural Values to Empower Adolescent African American Females

Culturally relevant values and beliefs are positively associated with psychological and social indices among ethnic minority females, and the promotion of culturally relevant beliefs and values may provide a mechanism by which adaptive and positive behaviors are conveyed to children (Belgrave, Brome, & Hampton, 2000; Belgrave, Chase-Vaughn, Gray, Addison, & Cherry, 2000; Stevenson, 1995; Warfield-Coppock, 1992). Thus, efforts to develop program interventions that focus on cultural identity development from a values framework may hold the key offering support, coping skills, and advocacy to ethnic minority females. Cultural beliefs and values are viewed as resiliency factors for the target population and thus are expected to directly and indirectly protect youth from internal and external stressors. This is particularly relevant for African American females who must learn to navigate the systematic oppression related to race and gender simultaneously. The importance of cultural variables is seen in recent prevention and intervention programs that infuse cultural elements in programs for children and adolescents. Although cultural sensitivity and cultural congruence have been acknowledged as important in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs for ethnic minority youth, less attention has been devoted to intervention programs

specifically designed to increase cultural beliefs and values from a counseling paradigm. Similarly, far less attention has been paid to utilizing culturally relevant approaches to address the needs of “at-risk” ethnic minority youth, suggesting that culturally-responsive curriculum has the potential to be a catalyst for empowerment for African American females.

Sisters of Nia, How it Works

For girls in particular, participating in activities such as sports, psycho-education programs (i.e., groups), and social affairs creates a sense of camaraderie (Hirsch et al., 2000), which is often absent in peer relations amongst African American females due to relational aggression (Gomes, Davis, Baker, & Servonsky, 2009). For minority adolescents, increased self-esteem and self-efficacy are associated with a strong sense of ethnic identity (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Thus, group work which focuses on ethnic identity can be a significant approach in meeting the developmental and cultural needs of adolescent African American females. *Sisters of Nia* (Belgrave et al., 2004) is a group work-based program built on fostering the cultural and ethnic identity of African American females. The *Sisters of Nia* intervention is a 15-session cultural activity program that focuses on strengthening three cultural variables among adolescent African American

females. Specifically, the program is aimed at: (a) enhancing ethnic identity, (b) promoting an androgynous gender role, and (c) strengthening mutually positive relationships and decreasing negative relationships girls have with their peers.

Ethnic Identity

Ethnic identity appears to be a particularly salient issue for adolescent African American females who may be confronted with racism or the isolation of “minority” status (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990). Several studies have shown that ethnic identity is positively and favorably related to psychological and social variables. High ethnic identity has been associated with higher achievement and self-esteem among African American youth (Phinney & Chavira, 1992), increased prosocial behaviors and efficacy beliefs (McCreary, Slavin, & Berry, 1996; Romero & Roberts, 1998), and decreased use of violence (Arbona, Jackson, McCoy, & Blakely, 1999).

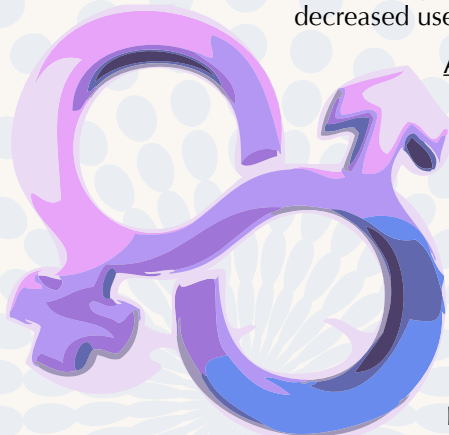
Androgynous Gender Roles

The *Sisters of Nia* intervention also seeks to enhance both feminine and masculine gender role beliefs by promoting androgynous gender roles. Unlike the sex role socialization of female adolescents in other ethnic populations, African American females are socialized to possess both masculine characteristics (e.g., assertiveness, self-confidence, and nonconformity) and feminine characteristics (e.g., nurturance, emotional expressiveness, and a focus on personal relationships) (Basow & Rubin, 1999; Binion, 1990; Harris, 1996). Research suggests that an androgynous gender role is predictive of positive social and psychological outcomes for adolescent girls (e.g., Evans, Whigham, & Wang, 1995; Lau, 1989) and that androgynous gender roles are especially adaptive for African American girls (Townsend, 1999).

Relational Aggression

Parallel to gender issues, relational theory holds that relationships and interpersonal connection are important to females and form the core for the development of their personal identity (Giddings, 1984; Gilligan, 1982; Miller, 1986). This theory suggests that females need mutually positive relationships with others, including their peers, to develop a positive sense of self. Research with adolescent girls has consistently shown a link between relational aggression and higher levels of social maladjustment and perceptions of hostile intentions (Crick, Bigbee, & Howe, 1996; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). The *Sisters of Nia* intervention encourages a relational orientation that promotes positive and respectful interpersonal peer relationships and discourages negative interpersonal relationships, such as relational aggression, that will serve the girls well as a resiliency factor.

The *Sisters of Nia* program is a small group intervention that provides fifteen 1.5-hour sessions focusing on the cultures of being female and of African descent. As part of the *Sisters of Nia* curriculum, girls are exposed to an African American



female intervention staff called “mzees” (Kiswahili for respected elders) that serve as role models of what females can do. The program format for the sessions creates a routine that reinforces the program objectives.

Format for Sisters of Nia

Each program session begins with a unity circle in which mzees and girls stand in a circle and hold hands to represent the connectedness of the group. While in the unity circle, the girls conduct a libation, an African ritual of pouring water onto a plant to remember one’s ancestors. Mzees and girls take turns calling out the names of their ancestors, which may include relatives, friends, celebrities, and historical figures. After each name is called, the girl in the middle of the circle pours a drop of water into a plant and in unison everyone says, “Ah-shay” (or “and so it is”). Libations acknowledge that African American progress is due to the struggles, sacrifices, and accomplishments of the girls’ African American ancestors.

After libation, the girls break into small groups of about twelve girls with two mzees per group. Within their small groups, jamaas (“families”), girls are selected to read the African proverb and Nguza principle for the session. The principles of Nguza Saba are guidelines for healthy living developed by Ron Karenga (1965) to celebrate Kwanzaa, an African American holiday. These principles are Umoja (unity), Kujichagulia (self-determination), Ujima (collective work and responsibility), Ujamaa (cooperative economics), Nia (purpose), Kuumba (creativity), and Imani (faith).

The mzees then ask the girls how the principle and proverb are related and introduce the session discussion topic. For example, the principle and proverb for the orientation session is Nia (purpose) and “Before shooting, one must aim.” This principle and proverb prompts girls to consider the trajectory of their actions, thoughts, and behaviors for the program—a focus of the session.

Another component of each session is a team-building activity that is either before or after the jamaa discussion. Finally, when the small group discussion ends, the girls and mzees reconvene to recite the *Sisters of Nia* creed, which emphasizes positive ways of interacting with others. Using the described format, the curriculum guides the girls through the three program phases.

The group *Sisters of Nia* shows great potential for empowering adolescent African American females; however, the same potential for the empowerment of other racial groups is not as clear. Considerable research has been done with regard to racial identity and racial for African American youth, while far less research has focused on racial salience and racial identity development for White and European American youth. Many researchers have pointed out that there are significant differences between Whites and members of other racial/ethnic groups in terms of how they define their own identity. (Diemer, 2007; Grossman & Charmaraman, 2009; McDermott & Samson, 2005; White & Burke, 1987). According to Knowles and Peng (2005), White racial identity has been an under-investigated construct, perhaps because race and ethnicity play a less salient role for

White adolescents simply because they are in the majority. Many Whites do not believe they have a race at all (Jackson & Heckman, 2002). Nonetheless, according to Arroyo and Zigler (1995), a strong racial identity has been shown to facilitate the development of competencies among African American adolescents and can serve as a suit of armor to protect youth from negative environmental influences (Miller & MacIntosh, 1999) - factors that all youth regardless of their race and ethnicity, tend to face. Thus, such group work has the potential to be a catalyst for healthy cultural identity development in White students as well.

Further Interventions Beyond Group Work

The group *Sisters of Nia* provides a powerful tool for school counselors to use to empower marginalized students. As an intervention at the ACA Advocacy Competencies (Lewis et al., 2003) level of working with students/clients, this group has the potential to set into motion significant challenges to the individual, systemic, and societal forces that negatively affect adolescent African American female students. However, *Sisters of Nia* is only a first step for school counselors operating from a social justice advocacy approach. Interventions and collaborations beyond the individual level are necessary as well. At the school/systems/community level, school counselors must “take action where the school counselor and community collaborate to address [a] problem and devise an advocacy plan” (ASCA, 2012, p. 5). School counselors might consider initiating community partnerships with churches and recreational organizations to provide support for adolescent African American females outside of the school. Additionally, school counselors might partner with local clinical mental health counselors to provide culturally relevant groups for students outside of school. Systems advocacy also entails “identifying systemic problem[s], gaining information and insight from those most

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affected and implementing advocacy at a systems level” (ASCA, 2012, p. 5). School counselors must, for example, use school-wide data to determine if African American females are represented equitably in rigorous courses and if discipline practices in the school show that African American female students are over-represented. As empowering as a culturally focused small group can be, if school-wide policies negatively impact students, school counselors must take their advocacy to the level of addressing systemic forces that prevent equity and access for all students. Collaboration is paramount at this level, as stakeholders in the school and community must have input on systemic change efforts to believe that they are connected and have viable contributions for bringing about positive changes for students. Finally, at the public information level, school counselors facilitate “collaboration between school counselor[s] and the community in effort to alert the public to macro-level issues regarding human dignity” (ASCA, 2012, p. 6). At the social/political level, school counselors have the ability for “recognizing when student problems must be addressed at a policy or legislative level and advocating for change within those areas” (ASCA, 2012, p. 6). Efforts at this level of social justice advocacy often take the form of district committee meetings, school board presentations, involvement at the state and national levels of professional associations, and even in legislative interactions (ASCA, 2012, p. 6).

Ultimately, students must be empowered to advocate for themselves and can be supported to do so through culturally-relevant interventions such as *Sisters of Nia*, but sometimes professional power must be exerted by the school counselor as well. Professional school counselors acting as social justice advocates who work with students in their schools, communities, and at the public and political levels are key players with the knowledge and skills to make a difference for students such as Lauryn and Crystal, and for all students who struggle to be successful in school.

Ultimately, students must be empowered to advocate for themselves and can be supported to do so through culturally-relevant interventions such as *Sisters of Nia*, but sometimes professional power must be exerted by the school counselor as well.

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Sisters of Nia is a group work-based program built on fostering the cultural and ethnic identity of African American females. The *Sisters of Nia* intervention is a 15-session cultural activity program that focuses on strengthening three cultural variables among adolescent African American females. Specifically, the program is aimed at: (a) enhancing ethnic identity, (b) promoting an androgynous gender role, and (c) strengthening mutually positive relationships and decreasing negative relationships girls have with their peers.