Racial Disparities in New Millennium Schools:

Implications for School Counselors

Ireon LeBeauf

University of Nevada – Reno

Abstract

This article explores the role of race in new millennium schools and its impact on students. Multicultural, psycho-social, and academic issues are addressed, and interventions for school counselors are discussed. Racially correlated disparities in K-12 education are apparent in: test scores, grades, retention and drop-out rates, identification for special education and gifted programs, extracurricular and co-curricular involvement, tracking, and disciplinary rates showing disproportionate disadvantages to students of color. This article identifies the primary targets of racial harassment in school, issues of ethnic groups, and psycho-environmental concerns that affect the service delivery and practice of today's school counselor.

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According to a national survey in Careers and College magazine, seventy-seven percent of teenagers on the magazine's Teen Advisory Board believe there is racism at school, and seventy-five percent say that the student body is racially segregated (Schroeder, 1995). Forty-four percent of those surveyed believe that teachers or administrators discriminate against students because of race, and thirty two percent believe that racism has a profound impact on the quality of education received by students in minority groups (Schroeder).

A majority of reported hate crimes against juveniles reflect racial and ethnic biases (Crimes Against Children Research Center (CRCC), n.d.). The National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCRJS) reported that racially and ethnically motivated incidents were more likely to be crimes of a violent nature including the use of weapons (NCRJS). Recent national statistics indicate that thirty-eight percent of hate crimes against juveniles had anti-Black motivations and twenty-two percent had anti-White motivations. Anti-Hispanic sentiments were the cause of thirteen percent of juvenile hate crimes. In reports of hate crimes against juveniles reported to the police, eighty-one percent of the juvenile victims were twelve to seventeen years of age, two-thirds are male, with a fifth (21%) of all conflicts occurring on school property (CRCC). The prevalence of peer harassment has been difficult to assess due to the plethora of behaviors that constitute harassment (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Perry, 2003). Moderate estimates suggest that almost three quarters of adolescents experience some type of harassment while at school.

Communal Demographics

Socio-race, racial identity development status, gender, educational level, and age each represent salient cultural group memberships in the United States (Constantine, 2002). These variables are cultural lenses through which teachers, counselors, and administrators in education experience their students; therefore, such variables affect their perceptions and decisions within the educational system; considering each of the above listed variables as a singular phenomenon fails to accurately examine the complexities of decision-making of educators, counselors, and administrators. Although research is sparse regarding the interaction of socio-race, racial identity development, gender, educational level, and age in schools, failure to recognize the intersection of such variables in the educational setting is incongruent with the practices and standards of effective, culturally competent service delivery (West-Olatunji & Watson, 1999 Constantine; Helms, 1994). Racial and ethnic disparities in educational equity and resource access are not novel to the American educational system. However, identifying when such disparities are the result of discrimination is challenging (Mickelson, 2003).

Academic and Matriculation Issues for Students of Color

Recent research reconfirms that achievement gaps between Euro-American students and students of color continues to widen year after year (Fusick & Charkow-Bordeau, 2004). Racially correlated disparities in K-12 education are apparent in test scores, grades, retention and drop-out rates, graduation rates, identification for special education and gifted programs, extracurricular and co-curricular involvement, tracking, and disciplinary rates showing disproportionate advantages to students of color. The

challenge of determining when educational disparities are caused by racial bias is complicated by the intersection of race and socio-economic status (Mickelson, 2003).

African-American, Latino, and Native American children arrive at kindergarten or first grade with lower levels of oral language, pre-reading, and pre-mathematical skills, as well as lower levels of general knowledge, than possessed by their Euro-American and Asian-American counterparts (Farkas, 2003). It has been speculated that if the performance gap between majority and minority groups could be eliminated at entry then incidences of racially based educational placements would decrease. Also noted in between group differences is that children belonging to a racial minority group present behavioral difficulties that are not well suited to the school's learning environment which sets the stage for future disciplinary challenges (Farkas).

Dabady (2003) found that African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, when compared with Euro-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Pacific-Islanders are more likely to attend lower quality schools with degraded access materials and teacher resources, and are more likely to have lower test scores, drop out of high school, or end educational pursuits upon graduation from high school. Drop-out rates are the lowest among Euro-Americans and highest among Latinos. African-American students are more likely than Euro-American to repeat a grade and to be placed in special education and behavior disordered classrooms (Mickelson, 2003).

Mickelson (2003) also reports that a critical gap in achievement is the relative absence of African-Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans in higher level courses and a disproportionate level of enrollment in lower level tracks. Race and class play a large role in tracking or placement of students, and teachers who are not culturally

competent may refer Euro-American students toward gifted tracks and African-Americans into special education. One year of school performance becomes the condition whereby the duration of a child's education is shaped launching children into disparate pathways for the rest of the academic career. Again, the courses that students are tracked into are highly influenced by counselors, teachers, and administrators cultivating the racial disparity gap in education.

Issues Impacting Ethnic Minority Students

Due to residential and commercial zoning, students of racial minority status are more likely to live in highly segregated, economically impoverished, high crime, neighborhoods which create negative impact on psychological functioning (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Imagine living in constant fear or in a maintained hyper-vigilant state in fear of police brutality or becoming the instant victim of a violent crime on a day-to-day basis. In addition to direct victimization, prolonged exposure to violent acts such as stabbings and shootings increases the likelihood of post-traumatic syndromes and symptoms. Students of color are more likely to have an incarcerated parent, resulting in adverse mental health consequences, making them more prone to emotional, behavioral, and academic problems. Similarly, African-American, Latino and Native American students are suspended and/or expelled in numbers vastly disproportionate to their peers (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 2003).

Psycho-environmental Issues

Racism and racial harassment in the school setting creates a hostile environment that not only makes it difficult for students of color to learn, but the effects of racism extend far beyond bullying and educational placements. Experiences of discrimination

serve as a well spring of emotional and psychological distress for the victims (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Researchers have found that the acceptance of the stigma of inferiority on the part of some students of color can lead to impaired psychological functioning (Williams & Williams-Morris). A recent study of 5,000 immigrant children in Florida and San Diego found a positive association between reports of discrimination and depressive symptoms (Rumbaut, 1994 as cited in Williams & Williams-Morris). The psychological impact of racism include, but are not limited to, higher levels of psychological distress and lower levels of life satisfaction and happiness, as well as diminished physical well-being.

A large majority of the research pertaining to racism and racial harassment focuses on African Americans (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Many of the issues discussed pertain to other stigmatized people of color. However, the experiences of African-Americans are characterized by the residual history that lingers in America of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. Williams and Williams-Morris (2000) state:

> 'The challenges for the African-American population are likely to be unique and greater than those of other minority groups. African-Americans are darker in skin color than any other racial group. There is a fairly universal negative perception of the color black. Moreover, studies of African-Americans, Mexican-Americans, and Jews in multiple settings reveal that darker skin color predicts higher levels of discrimination. American Indians and most immigrant groups to the United States have experienced, and many continue to experience prejudice and discrimination, but Blacks have always been at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future' (p.261).

School-Based Trends

In the past decade, most school districts have adopted a philosophy of valuing diversity and have implemented a variety of initiatives intended to effectively utilize and manage the current and projected diversity. However, whether or not teachers, administrators, and mental health practitioners in these industries subscribe to, or even understand, the principles and dynamics of multiculturalism presented in these employer-sponsored diversity management programs largely remains an unanswered question (Tackey, 2001). Employers are urging their teachers to celebrate issues of diversity but fail to realize that, beyond celebration, the average classroom teacher is ill-equipped to navigate the complexities and impacts that socio-race, racial identity development, gender bias, educational level, and age bring to the educational setting. There is an increasing body of literature that suggests that differences in performance evaluations, particularly the assessment of capability, are the result of teachers utilizing embedded cultural stereotypes when evaluating minorities (Tackey, 2001). Specifically, European-American teachers' biased perceptions of ethnic minority employees' abilities to perform in the classroom are often informed by influences other than documented performance.

As a result of school personnel cultural incompetence and lack of awareness and knowledge, ethnic minorities are not treated equally to their White counterparts (Davis, 2000). Consequently, the role of school counselors becomes critical in ensuring that the ethnic minority student is receiving culturally responsive services as part of his or her educational experience.

Schools that hope to reduce racism and racial harassment by creating a learning environment where diversity is accepted, rather than tolerated, should find a way to integrate and practice the principles of effective diversity management. Seeking consultation from professionals who understand the influence of various socio-cultural factors on school personnel abilities to make culturally competent decisions to reduce the effects of racism is the first step toward making progress in the fight to eradicate racism and racial harassment in the schools.

Multicultural Foundations and Counseling

According to the article entitled *Operationalization of the Multicultural Counseling Competencies,* researchers insist that there are standards of multicultural competency that every counselor should not only be aware of, but should continually strive to adhere to as a professional (Arredondo, Toporek, Jones, Locke, Sanchez, & Stadler, 1996). At the crux of these multicultural competencies is the idea that culturally competent counselors are those who possess an awareness of their own cultural biases and values. "Culturally skilled counselors are aware of how their own cultural background and experiences have influenced attitudes, values, and biases about psychological processes" (Arredondo et al., 1996, p.57). As a mental health provider, the importance of multicultural competency cannot be emphasized enough, if one desires to be considered an effective practitioner. Counselors are professionally and ethically bound to "actively attempt to understand the diverse cultural backgrounds of the clients with whom they work. This includes, but is not limited to, learning how the counselor's own cultural/ethnic/racial identity impacts his/hers values and beliefs about the counseling process" (American Counseling Association, 1995, Section A.2.b., p.2).

Cornel West (as cited in Parham, White, & Ajamu, 2000) reminds us that whenever there exists a social reality where underrepresented folks must fight for legitimacy and self-affirmation, there will be instances of unjustified suffering, unmerited pain, and undeserved harm; the question is not whether hardship will come, but rather how will people deal with it. All counseling is cross-cultural, and if the counselor is to bridge the gap, then grappling with racial identity is indeed an integral part of the process. As society becomes more racially and culturally diverse, its members are becoming more tainted with unconscious racism, and it is imperative that professional and ethical counselors learn how their racial identity affects the therapeutic process (Pack-Brown, 1999). Helms and Cook (1999) assert that both the counselors' and clients' reactions to each other are potentially influenced by the psychological qualities (e.g., attitudes, values, perceptions) that were acquired in response to racial socialization. Aponte and Wohl (2000) discuss the impact of race in the therapeutic process by stating that clients may passively resist engaging in the process when they are not comfortable with the socio-race of the counselor. This passive resistance could be defined as cultural mistrust, which usually occurs when peripheral group members resist the formation of interpersonal relationships with members of the dominant group (Aponte & Wohl; Helms & Cook 1999). Cultural mistrust, also known as healthy cultural paranoia, is most evident in the areas of education and training, business and work, interpersonal and social relations, and politics and law (Phelps, Taylor, & Gerard, 2001). However, the effective, culturally competent counselor is able to exhibit skills that are embedded with cultural intentionality, and is able to initiate a dialogue on how issues of multiculturalism are impeding the counseling process (Ivey & Ivey, 1999).

Helms and Cook (1999) state that it is unwise for counselors to assume that the client's perceptions are identical to their own; therefore, an examination of the counselor's attitudes toward the members of the client's racial group is an ongoing part of the assessment process (Helms & Cook, 1999). Sue and Sue (1990) outline how counselor educators can use issues of race, culture, and ethnicity in the assessment of a new client. If the counselor is conscious of the impact of racial identity development then there will be: (a) an awareness of the sociopolitical forces that have impacted the minority client; (b) an understanding of the challenges that differences in class, culture, and language bring to the counseling process; (c) recognition of how the clients' worldviews and receptivity to counseling are affected by their perceptions of the counselor's expertness trustworthiness and lack of similarity; (d) an emphasis on how the client's worldview guides their phenomenology; and (e) an understanding of culture and subculture bound communication styles between and within racial groups (Sue & Sue).

Often unbeknownst to themselves, most clients will enter therapy behaving in a manner that conforms that is highly indicative of which racial identity status is their primary modus operandi (Helms & Cook, 1999). Once the counselor and client attribute a racial classification to one another, they may consciously or unconsciously relate to one another based on their previous - actual or vicarious- experiences with members of the other person's socio-racial group. Using a psychoanalytic perspective, racial and/or cultural transference or counter-transference may be aroused. Counselors who lack cultural competence may find it difficult to establish healthy working alliances with clients of certain races, believe in their inherent goodness, or even have genuine

communications with them. Due to internalized racial stereotypes, these counselors

may be unable to visualize these clients engaging in healthy lifestyles; which in turn

biases their expectations for the outcome of the counseling experience. In order for

effective counseling to occur, the counselor must be able to send and receive both

verbal and nonverbal messages accurately and appropriately (Sue & Sue, 1999).

Therefore, the counselor must maintain a heightened awareness regarding issues of

racial identity in the assessment of a new client in order to minimize

countertransference (Helms & Cook, 1999). If counselors learn to properly recognize

reactions to transference and countertransference, they will neither personalize nor be

overwhelmed by such reactivity, but will utilize these reactions to the benefit of the

counseling process (Sciarra, 1999). The culturally competent counselor is able to

understand the worldviews of the clients as an outgrowth of the phenomenology they

experience. Without the worldview as a mediating variable, both knowledge of specific

cultures and culture specific techniques can be misapplied, leading to charges of ethical

violation and cultural oppression. Once the worldview (of the counselor, client, educator,

supervisor, or student) is clearly understood, appropriate application of theory and

research can take place (Sciarra).

<div align="center">Interventions for Eradicating Racism</div>

Any effective intervention for eradicating racism needs to be systemically rooted

and must target the very core of the bureaucracy perpetuating the cycle of racism and

racial harassment that continues to plague our students in the new millennium.

Culturally competent service delivery, wrap-around service delivery, structures

interventions to be holistic and comprehensive while maintaining a heightened

awareness of cross-cultural issues. Conventional mental health delivery, lacking in cultural sensitivity, is not effective as evidenced by the underutilization of mental health services by ethnic minorities is pervasive across multiple settings (e.g. community agencies, schools, and employee assistance programs). A historical analysis of mental health delivery reveals that the demographic make-up of mental health practitioners rarely matches that of the clientele seeking assistance. That is not say that trait-factor matching is the solution, however, service providers need to be culturally competent and believable in order to secure a working relationship with clients from historically oppressed groups. Reactions to typical social service agencies by minorities frequently include disdain, apathy, and suspicion from individuals who were not treated appropriately (LeBeauf, 2003).

One of the underlying causes for the underutilization of services is that many interventions designed to target minorities do not include input from the target populations. Many intervention programs tend to be designed on the marble tables of boardrooms in dollars and cents, rather than constructed with messages sent by the community and individuals in need. A blind needs-assessment fails to incorporate the impact of differences along socio-racial, socio-cultural, and socio-economic lines. Therefore, the reason a large majority of the typical social service interventions are failing is because the culture of the targeted community is not considered as paramount, and the interventions are symptom-specific rather than systemically based.

A systems perspective of intervention, the "wrap around" approach, is considered a best fit approach to planning and implementing comprehensive and holistic child and family centered services and supports. The wrap around philosophy enlists the help of

teachers, administrators, mental health providers, and family/community members and organizations to make sure that no child is left behind.

The wrap-around approach links non-traditional supports with traditional mental health services. For example, a wrap around intervention might include a local church minister in the school counseling of a troubled child. Wrap-around is community based and includes individualized services and supports that reflect cultural sensitivity and awareness. This approach also demands a culturally competent needs assessment that begins with gaining appropriate access and entry to the targeted population through interviews with indigenous community members and building rapport within the community. Any effective mental health intervention intended to target cross cultural issues will not work if the system is not infiltrated with a working knowledge of the realities and challenges that exist within. It is with this conceptual framework of wrap-around, a holistic wellness approach that the following discussion of interventions is based (LeBeauf, 2003).

Interventions

In order to appropriately and effectively address social and behavioral issues within K-12 schools involving students, it is imperative to recognize that societal conditioning, on a macro-systemic social scale, is at work (Helms & Cook, 1999; Helms, 2003). It is equally important to realize that while racial factors, often brought into the school setting by students from their own experience, are not limited to just the student body. No member of a society is immune from the psycho-environmental conditioning mechanisms experienced as one simply goes about living in a communal social group. In short, all individuals housed and working in some fashion within and/or in partnership

with any school will unavoidably bring in their own biased perceptions. The issues within student populations usually reveal the biases that are embedded within the larger social systems in which we live.

In order for meaningful dialogue to exist, race-related issues must be addressed in ways that recognize the interconnectedness of the issue through a framework of social system conditioning, along with its embedded content messages. Racism and racial harassment within the school setting involving students are often systemic manifestations, whether it involves only the student, or the student with peers, teaching personnel, staff or administration (Fontes, 2003). In essence, the systemically induced challenges must be intervened with in a way that addresses its socially derived orientation.

Student Centered Intervention

Often issues surrounding student behaviors can be traced to reactions that are centered within their extended worlds. The counselor must investigate the world of their student: their family (both immediate and extended, blood related or not), the quality of the familial interactions and relationships (genograms might be a helpful start), and the relationships developed with non-family members (especially peers within their neighborhood and school). Knowledge of significant events related to their existence; namely, psycho-historical elements regarding their family, as well as, information regarding their social circles would also be helpful (Cross, Smith & Payne, 2002; Fontes, 2003; Helms & Cook, 1999).

Often behaviors observed on the school site are not in and of themselves racially charged. Many presented issues are, increasingly, seen as simply occasions for the

expression of fear, pain, frustration, loneliness and anger. Sessions that are increasingly family-centered with members in attendance can afford the counselor the opportunity to observe first hand family system operations which can lead to a greater understanding of the issues emanating from the student (Helms, 2003). Resistance to intervention by the family system itself can be expected by the school counselor, especially if schools and/or its personnel are not generally held in high esteem by the families in counseling (Colbert & Colbert, 2003; Fontes, 2003). More and more, efforts to aid the student might have to be coupled with parallel efforts to increase the functionality of the family as a unit. Such efforts may have to be a new and significant method in the school counselor's approach. In addition, the counselor may need to increase their flexibility in such areas as scheduling (to accommodate working family members) and session location (to overcome initial distrust by association).

Student and Peer(s) Issues

In recognition that students are often unaware of preconditions that may serve as precursors to objectionable behaviors with each other, an effort must be made to help students become more culturally competent peers. Peer conflict resolution and mediation can be quite effective interventions. However, more attention must be brought to bear on issues that students are encumbered with as they come onto the school site. Preventative awareness of issues that are unconscious or undetected by the student before they can induce problem behaviors would be optimum for both the student and the school. Small group topic sessions (with the counselor as facilitator) discussing common issues that all youth encounter can often assist in the generation of level of awareness regarding elements within a student's life that they themselves might have

been unaware of or suppressing (Fontes, 2003; Helms & Cook, 1999; McKenna, Roberts, & Woodfin, 2003).

School Consultation

Though much of what a counselor does in schools is centered on the child, the counselor will inevitably serve as an advocate at large for a student in distress. While it is essential for counselors to see the necessity of examining the student's world to gain insight into their issues, it should not be forgotten that the rest of the school (teachers, staff and administration) are also a part of the students world and play an equally important role with the parents and others in the effort to maximize the student's academic growth and maturation (Colbert & Colbert, 2003; Locke, 2003). It is necessary therefore for the counselor to form a consulting relationship with the entire school staff as an advocate for the student.

The consulting counselor in the school informs other elements as to the issues of note regarding students in a way that increases the level of understanding of fellow staff. Though such consultative topics as classroom management are traditional, not so traditional would be the communication to faculty and staff as to the true causal elements that can often provoke their students and even parents. Such knowledge could serve to diminish the level of defensiveness often exhibited by both teachers and administrators towards their students and parents (Lee, 1999; Slattery, 2004). Another consultative effort would be teacher-focused discussion groups. Here, such an effort could provide a non-provocative venue where issues of importance to the teaching staff could be aired and possible resolutions put forward.

Conclusion

To assist today's students through the stress of physiological and psychological maturation, within a socialized structure rife with conditioned stressors, the school counselor of today must address the student's world in a holistic manner. The student's world includes the home, neighborhood, society, and the school (Fontes, 2003; Herlihy & Watson, in press). Despite years of anti-discrimination and anti-poverty policies and programs, those who do not embody the icon of central group, (the young, White, Christian male, financially secure, heterosexual, and able bodied) are still subjected to the ill effects of racism, classism, and sexism. Unfortunately, some programs merely serve to marginalize, stratify, and oppress people of color, women, and the working poor. Unfortunately, there are gatekeepers that embed the necessary flaws in administrative policies to prohibit their system from infiltration by those with relatively little social value (Harley, Jovivette, McCormick, & Tice, 2002; Watson, 1998). Although the dominant group promotes the egalitarian premise that all people are created equal, this belief breeds the myth of meritocracy in the United States. Perpetuating this farce of "sameness" allows the dominant group to ignore the diversity present in modern society (Harley et al.).

The multifaceted and, at times, conflicting implications of the interactions between socio-race, racial identity development, gender, educational level, and age are interrelated, not only in the school setting but in the larger macro-system, and cannot be isolated from historical, social, political and economic factors. At a minimum, every person has dual identities dictated by gender and socio-race; but for racial minorities, females, and those in challenged socio-economic circumstances these identities only

serve to confine them under the glass ceiling in educational attainment. Although many

other ecological and sociological constructs affect students of racial minority status, the

reality is that the socio-race, racial identity development, gender, educational level, and

age of the attending teacher, counselor, or administrator places significant strain on the

ability to make appropriate decisions because these variables are inextricably

intertwined (Harley et al., 2002).

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