A Personal Journey in Promoting Social Justice as a School Counselor: An Action Research Approach

Angel Riddick Dowden

North Carolina State University

Abstract

This article describes the author's journey as a school counselor utilizing an action research approach to advocate for social justice in education. Two case studies are provided to discuss the process utilized to advocate for equal education for all students as a school counselor. Lastly, the author reflects on the successes and failures experienced during the process, and provides pertinent information for school counselors who seek to infuse action research and social justice into the work they currently do.

Keywords: social justice, school counseling, multicultural counseling

A Personal Journey in Promoting Social Justice as a School Counselor: An Action Research Approach

Education statistics have shown that African American, Hispanic and Latino students are historically underrepresented and underserved in many valuable education courses and programs in schools. For example, according to the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) (2004) in 2004 only 5% of African American graduating students had taken an advanced math or science course in high school, 7% of Hispanic or Latino students compared to 33% of Asian/Pacific Islander students and 16% of White students. According to the College Board (2010) in 2009, nationally, 8.2% of the African American senior population took an Advanced Placement (AP) exam as compared to 59.4% of the White senior population. Although these statistics are alarming, they are not surprising. As a former school counselor, I have personally seen how educational barriers are erected that negatively affect the education opportunities of underserved/underrepresented student populations.

Students who have been historically underserved/underrepresented in education overtime begin to underachieve (Reis, Colbert and Hebert, 2005). The underachievement is the result the aspiration/expectation gap that research has shown is experienced by some African American, Hispanic and Latino students (Diemer & Hsieh, 2008). Educational barriers have the potential to increase underserved racial/ethnic groups in education, which may result in underachievement, heightening the potential for a cycle of school dropout, underemployment, poverty, crime, or even teen pregnancy (Reis, Colbert & Hebert, 2005). Because ensuring equal education opportunities is so critical to the lifelong health and wellness of individuals, as a school

counselor one of my goals was to empower and advocate for equity in education for students who were being underserved.

This article is a personal reflection of my experience as a school counselor employing social justice strategies to counteract educational barriers in order to improve the education opportunities for underserved students. While I did encounter pitfalls, the lessons learned and the achievements were invaluable. The goal of the article is to inspire other school counselors to utilize action research when employing social justice in order to take action in the name of equity, access and equality in education. To do this, I present two case studies that express how underserved populations were disadvantaged as a result of educational barriers. Within the article, the case studies have been targeted as they represent the problem identification phase of the action research model employed. Immediately following each example, there is a discussion of how I, both independently and collaboratively, worked as a school counselor to overcome those barriers. Lastly, I reflect on my experience in order to provide recommendations on how school counselors can effect change for the students they serve by implementing action research to promote social justice practices. From the outset, the article discusses social justice and action research, and how essential the utilization of the two are in school counseling. Throughout the article the terms African American and Black are used interchangeably to refer to individuals who have origins with any of the Black populations in Africa.

Social Justice and Action Research in School Counseling

Social justice is a fundamental valuing of fairness and equity in resources, rights and treatment of marginalized individuals and groups (Fondacaro & Weinberg, 2002).

Social justice counseling is the deliberate act of promoting equity, access, participation, and harmony to ensure that individual and environmental injustice in ameliorated (Constantine, Hage, Kindaichi, & Bryant, 2007). The goal of social justice is to advocate for the elimination of systems of oppression, inequity, inequality, or exploitation of marginalized populations and communities (Constantine et al., 2007). According to Vera and Speight (2003), the four social justice objectives include advocacy, prevention, intervention, and psychoeducation (which empowers). Bradley and Lewis (2000) synthesized social justice well by stating:

> Each counselor is confronted again and again with issues that cannot be resolved simply through change within the individual. All too often, negative aspects of the environment impinge on a client's well being, intensifying personal problems or creating obstacles to growth. When such situations arise, effective counselors speak up! We think of advocacy as the act of speaking up or taking action to make environmental changes on behalf of our clients (p. 3).

As school counselors, our mission is to take action and speak up on behalf of students and their parents who are, in some cases, unable to advocate for themselves. In many cases, school counselors have been guilty of protecting the status quo of education at their schools (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). However, school counselors must think critically about how the education system provides advantages for some while disadvantaging others, and work to improve those systems in order to meet the needs of all students.

One approach to meeting the needs of all students is to employ an action research approach in order to promote social justice. Action research provides school counselors an effective research model that is action-oriented, responsive, practical,

immediate yet effective in providing outcome data (Rowell, 2006) that can assist in developing and revising programs that can be instrumental in assisting student populations who are often underserved in schools. I utilized the problem identification, plan, act, observe, reflect model (Kolb, 1984) of action research in my attempts to promote equity and access for all students in the schools in which I worked. This model allows school counselors to identify a problem, gather and interpret data in order to generate a plan, carry out the plan, observe the results of the action by collecting and evaluating outcome data, and reflect on the results.

Action research assisted in developing program accountability, while also raising consciousness about a particular problem (Rowell & Carey, 2009). As a practitioner with a full school counseling caseload, I had limited time and minimal research experience, so action research provided an effective and efficient way to utilize data to assist a population of students in need of support, chipping away at the archaic culture of the schools, while also reaching the goal of the research. Also, the specificity of the research was beneficial in developing a program that would be valuable for similar students over time (Rowell & Carey).

Advocacy served as the action aspect of the action research. Rooted in social justice, advocacy involves helping clients challenge institutional and social barriers that impede academic, career, or personal-social development (Lee, 1998) Harris and Martin (1998) state that advocacy can be defined as the ability to fight injustice through both individual and collective action in order to improve conditions that will benefit the individual and group. According to Lee (2007), social justice advocacy is essential in addressing systems of oppression. According to Lewis, Arnold, House and Toporek

(2002) there are three levels of advocacy competencies (a) client/student advocacy, (b) school/community advocacy, and (c) public arena advocacy that school counselors use in education environments. *Client/student advocacy* is the ability to assertively communicate or negotiate one's interests, desires, needs, and rights (Van Reusen, 1996). The client/student advocacy involves using direct counseling to empower individuals and providing advocacy at the individual level (Ratts & Hutchins, 2009). *School/community advocacy* involves community collaboration and system advocacy (Ratts & Hutchins). It can include parents, member of the community or educators taking action to improve school/community relations. *Public arena advocacy* focus one affecting public opinion, public policy, and legislation (Lee & Rodgers, 2009).

According to Lewis et al. (2002) advocacy on behalf of individuals may take the shape of negotiating for relevant services, helping individuals gain access to resources, identifying barriers, initiating a plan to confront these barriers, recognizing potential allies, and carrying out the plan of action. Utilizing an action research approach, both self-advocacy and school/community advocacy were employed.

Utilizing an Action Research Model

Case Study #1

As a result of a lack of information and education some parents, students and professional staff at the school in which I worked had conformed to the social norm that privileged some while disadvantaging others.

My first school counseling position was in a suburban high school in a southeastern college town. The demographic composition was mostly White middle to upper middle class (60%) students, low to lower- middle class African American

students (30%), and first generation Hispanic and Latino students (9%). It did not take long to determine that classes and the cafeteria were, in many cases, segregated based on race and class. There was seemingly a school within a school. The White, middle and upper middle class students were enrolled in advanced curriculum courses such as AP. The Black students were enrolled in “regular” level courses, and the Hispanic and Latino students were enrolled in mostly English as a Second Language (ESL) courses that would extend their stay in high school to five years or more.

It was puzzling that honors classes, in many cases, had one or no “minority” students in them. On the other hand, regular education classes were overwhelmingly full of “minority” students. Were the superintendent, principal and other counselors aware of this? Upon further probing of teachers, counselors, and students of all races, it became evident that everyone was aware of this, but no one saw this as a problem. This system had been in place for so long that everyone had accepted it.

Student/Client and School/Community Advocacy

As a school counselor, I believe some of my responsibilities were to advocate for equal education for all students, to motivate students to think critically about the environment and question the social systems that were in place, to build their self-concept and to decrease their aspiration-expectation gap as well as establish support systems for students who sought to meet these challenges. This became my plan. According to the American Counseling Association (ACA) (2003) *student/client advocacy* includes school counselors’ awareness of external factors that act as barriers to the academic success of underrepresented populations and taking action; while

school/community advocacy includes counselors responding by alerting school and community organizations in order to improve access and outcomes.

The first stage of the plan was to inform and educate students, parents and even staff about the current disparities that existed at the school and how those disparities promoted unequal educational opportunities for specific student groups at the school. To do this, I initially used individual counseling sessions and group counseling opportunities to urge underrepresented students to challenge themselves by taking more rigorous courses and take chances in the face of adversity. Students who accepted the challenge were provided support as I worked to ensure that they participated in academic enrichment programs, had mentors, and could rely on me to advocate on their behalf, if needed.

An after school program was established to inform and educate minority students about the disparities that were taking place at their school in addition to providing options for overcoming these disparities. Student discussion forums were organized in order to allow other students who were successful in overcoming social barriers to converse with their peers about what they could do or had done to overcome inequities as well as discuss what actions could be taken to ensure that other students did not have these same encounters. Groups were organized to promote social justice.

I also took advantage of existing programs such as the College Board's AP Potential (College Board, 2010) program (web-based tool that allows schools to see who has the potential to do well in an AP course based on PSAT results) and Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program (AVID, 2010) (provides rigorous curriculum instruction and basic academic skills, such as note-taking skills, to

“middle of the road” students) in order to establish improved recruitment practices among school staff for underrepresented students in advanced curriculum classes. I encouraged underrepresented students to take on leadership roles such as class president in order to build their self-concepts while lobbying for social change. These students were also encouraged to join established programs such as the math club.

Parent meetings were held to educate and inform parents about their options and encourage them to think critically about their sons/daughters education. I collaborated with the nearby university to recruit Black males from the school to participate in their mentoring program. The program allowed underrepresented Black male students to engage in campus life, attend campus events, tour the campus, hang out with their mentor who was also a Black male, and take part in the college experience with the goal of motivating them to go to college. I also worked with officials from local churches to recruit motivational speakers to speak at the after school programs about self-determination, motivation, and persistence. In addition to those strategies, the next stage of the plan was to enact my own social action plan. My goal was to challenge the racial inequality that existed in the schools’ art program.

Before each new semester, the art teacher would appear in the main office and go through students’ files. Afterward, she would make a list of all the students who she did not think should take her Art I class (Art I being the most basic and entry level art class that the school offered). Most of those students were “minorities.” She would quote previous discipline problems, or low grades, saying she thought an academic course that could assist them in doing better in school would be more beneficial. In addition, within the first week of school students would flee to the student services office

to get out of many of the art classes. They would cite various reasons ranging from inability to afford the approximately $500 plus cost of band, or the approximately $200 camera that was recommended for photography, or the theater class that did not do productions that represented their cultural/ethnic background. Therefore, there were not parts in plays for many non-White students. As a result, the art department, as a whole, lacked diversity in a seemingly diverse school setting. With this in mind, my goal was to advocate on behalf of the many non-White students who were interested, but unable, for various reasons to take the classes in the art program. I began to personally approach teachers in the art department hoping to encourage program change/revision. The theater teacher was encouraged to put on a variety of productions that represented all the students in her class, and at the school. To that the response was I've worked hard on developing what plays will be offered for the next two years. It would be difficult to change them at this point to satisfy a few students.

Next was the band teacher. He was made aware of the growing number of African American students who were very talented musicians, but unable to afford the band fees or disinterested because of the selective music and music style used for both the marching band and formal band. He responded that his band was a competition band full of tradition that had won many awards by traveling and participating in numerous events. He went on to say that in order to travel students would have to pay the designated fees and that he was not willing to compromise the band to suit the needs of individuals that did not participate in the program. It was recommended that funds be raised by the booster club in order to offer scholarships for those students who

truly wanted to participate in band, but could not afford it. There was no response as he excused himself.

Over time, I experienced an increasing frustration with the inequities that existed. As a result, the third step was to discuss these problems with the principal and propose providing students with a brief overview of social justice and surveying them about their perception of inequities that exist at the school. Next, the information would be tallied and used to inform the professional staff and develop strategies to improve educational opportunities for all students. This request was not well received and was abruptly disregarded. He responded that he was not willing to anger students and staff. The other veteran counselors who were supportive of my enthusiasm and energy to advocate for underrepresented students eagerly contested the principals' response and set up a meeting to negotiate the initial request. During negotiations, the principal commented that I had a type "A" personality. He went on to say that he did not think the survey would improve things at the school, but would only further separate people and cause additional hate and frustration. Because of this, he decided that I could not move forward with the survey.

Since I was not able to do the survey, I decided to use student test scores, registration information, attendance and suspension data to determine, by race, if there had been any improvement in underrepresented student academic achievement or academic motivation, overall, since I had begun my efforts. Initially, I collected and disseminated the data by race to determine the effectiveness of my efforts. I used attendance and suspension data to assess academic motivation, test scores to assess academic achievement, and registration information to assess course enrollment by

race. Based on the collected data, I was able to determine that gradual improvement was made in increasing underrepresented student academic achievement and motivation during my tenure.

It is my belief that had I stayed at that school and continued to utilize data to establish programs to improve access and equity as well as student achievement, inform and education students, parents and staff as well as advocate for underserved students groups, I would have continued to see gradual improvement overtime. However, after my third year, I left that school district and moved to another school district because I thought the educational policies in place in the other district provided better opportunities for all students.

The decision to move to the new school system was based on their rich resources and policies that emphasized the use of neighborhood socioeconomic status to determine school zoning. The methodology, in this large district, was to prevent neighborhood schools that correlated to wealthy, well educated schools and the converse of that.

At my new school, the race and class of the student, seemingly, equated to their academic ability. Because of the way school zoning was accomplished, all schools had an equal distribution of low to middle and upper socioeconomic class students. On the surface, this seemed like an exceptional way to ensure equal education for all students. This approach made educational white flight (or transferring to the suburban, wealthy, all White school) impossible. Because of this however, teachers overtly marginalized students by seemingly hand picking who they wanted and did not want in their class; thus segregating classes. This issue of overtly oppressing students' educational

opportunities became the elephant in the room; again I was unwilling to ignore the unjust circumstances that so many underrepresented students were encountering.

Case Study #2

Oppressive *social systems negatively affect student development and achievement.*

African American and Hispanic and Latino groups were the most severely marginalized groups. Teachers used gatekeepers (unnecessary prerequisites or standards to create barriers to access) to segregate the school, programs and classes. Students were degraded and emotionally abused in the classroom by teachers who were unwilling to work with them. Emotional abuse is used to establish power and control. The negative perception that some teachers held of many students in these groups effected the academic motivation of many of these students. This negative form of power and control attainment severely affected the self-concept of many underrepresented students who experienced it.

On one occasion a Hispanic student enrolled in school late into the second semester. The student was new to the United States, did not speak English and had not been in school prior to his enrollment. After consulting other counselors and administrators, a schedule was determined for him. After his first day, his new Spanish teachers approached asking that he be removed from the class stating that because of the language barrier and the timeframe in which he was starting school he could not be successful in the class. After further consultation with administration, English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher and other counselors, it was again decided that the class would be a good option for him. The teacher and I went back and forth for over a

week negotiating whether or not he should stay in the class. At last, I advised that I would not be able to remove the student and further communication should be made to administration. One of the ESL teachers had decided that she would serve as the students' mentor. After a few weeks I spoke with her to determine how he was transitioning. She said that the teacher, who did not want him in her class, made him sit in the hall and complete worksheets in English every day until he stopped coming. She added that since he had that class third period, he eventually stopped going to fourth period too and before the end of the month he stopped attending entirely. Unfortunately, those experiences were not uncommon.

I employed the problem identification, plan, act, observe, reflect action research model (Kolb, 1984). Again, initially utilizing group observational data to assess and identify the problem. Because of these types of incidents, one of my social action plan goals was to improve attendance and academic achievement of Hispanic and Latino students. The school dropout data indicated that Hispanic and Latino students represented the highest dropout population at the school. The truancy problem that eventually led to dropping out also contributed to low academic achievement. I felt we could improve student dropout if we improved communication between the parent and school.

I collaborated with the ESL staff and the other counselors to hold an all day parent support meeting. Because of the language barrier, the ESL staff contacted the parents of those students who had severe truancy problems in order to bridge the communication gap and invite them to the school. They invited parents to come in to meet with a counselor and translator to discuss their son/daughters truancy and

academic concerns in order to develop strategies to improve in the identified areas. Meeting times were flexible to accommodate parent work schedules. During the meetings parents were provided with information on best practices in helping their student become successful in school, they were given the name and contact information for an individual at the school who spoke Spanish that they could contact as a resource to receive information relative to their son/daughter.

Mostly, we sought to reaffirm that the school wanted to support their students and assist them in being successful in school. Although we did improve the communication gap between the school and Hispanic and Latino parents thus increasing the trust these parents had in us (the school), the improvements in truancy and drop out were slow to change.

Next, I collaborated with other counselors in the Student Support Services Department to implement parent/teacher conference nights. The parent/teacher conference night was held after the first interim report was issued during both semesters. I felt the parent/teacher conference night would increase parent/teacher/student communication, encourage parents to advocate for their students, and provide more information to parents about their students' achievement. The parent/teacher conference night was held from 6-8 p.m. to encourage the participation of working parents. It also served as an efficient way of promoting increased parental involvement without maximizing the time and efforts of one school counselor.

Data indicated that at the end of my two years at this school, dropout and truancy among Hispanic/Latino students had minimal improvement. However, collected survey

data indicated that parents approved of the parent meetings. Survey data collected from the parent/teacher conference night overwhelmingly indicated that parents approved of the program; some teachers did not like the conferences, commenting that it was too late in the evening. As a department, we felt it was a twice a year compromise that, as a school, we were willing to make. Additionally, both programs were effective in reaching the parents of the school underserved populations. As a result of the parent/teacher conference nights, we saw grade improvements in one-third of the students whose parents attended.

Implications for School Counselors

Although I worked tirelessly and had some success in improving education opportunities for students who had been historically underserved in the education setting, there were certainly times when working differently could have improved the quality of my work. For example, through reflection I realized I would have potentially experienced less frustration and more success, if I would have utilized school data versus group observational data from the outset in the first case study. This reflection allows me to now provide insight to school counselors as they work to promote social justice moving forward.

Utilizing an action research model provided a framework for effectively accomplishing many of the tasks that needed attention at the schools in which I worked. Inasmuch, it is important that school counselors seeking to infuse social justice competencies into their work be culturally competent. Culturally competent counselors are self-aware, knowledgeable, and skilled in working with diverse populations (Arrendondo et al., 1996). Culturally competent counselors effectively meet the needs of

all students, use data to support their concerns, develop a plan to improve the quality of the concern, work systemically to advocate for improved systems, collaborate to reach effective outcomes, and evaluate the outcome in order to share findings with students, parents, school staff, and individuals in the community, as well as to plan next steps (Dowden, 2009). The utilization of this approach has the potential to decrease anxiety and stress that can ultimately led to burnout in school counselors, while also creating equitable education opportunities for students.

School counselors should establish high expectations for all students, encourage parent and community involvement, establish support programs, be proactive and data driven (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Social justice requires counselors to take action when inequities exist, which in some instances, may require school counselors to speak out against the majority. School counselors work to advocate for students, especially those who are currently unable to be their own advocates. In doing so, school counselors become leaders as they collaborate with parents, the community and other school officials to ensure equity and access for all students. With social justice in mind, school counselors use data to develop goal oriented social action plans. Additionally, school counselors verify the effectiveness of their work by using outcome data to determine academic achievement. Effective delivery of these services is critical to ensuring the academic achievement of underrepresented populations.

A drawback to implementing social justice competencies in a school setting could be compared to the heated debate over healthcare reform that the United Stated is currently experiencing. That is, individuals usually fall on one of two sides of the social

justice platform. They either believe in equity for all or do not believe in equitable access to critical needs such as education.

As a result, the non-believers will potentially be very critical of your efforts to reform school programs and could even work against those efforts. This process becomes very frustrating. The lack of support could result in ongoing self-doubt and poor self-care, which could cause counselor burnout.

Reforming efforts that have been embedded in schools and communities takes time to change and observing significant improvements in outcome data is gradual. Because of this, it becomes important to develop programs that can be sustained overtime to ensure appropriate timelines for change to occur. While it is important to be mindful of these possible drawbacks, school counselors must remain mindful of their role in the school setting. Maintaining “the status quo” can work against the best interest of many students. Therefore, finding creative ways to overcome the drawbacks in order advocate for the needs of all students in order to build an equitable school environment is vital.

References

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) (2010). *AVID*. Retrieved from http://www.avid.org/

American Counseling Association. (2003). *Advocacy Competencies.* Retrieved from http://www.counseling.org/Publications/

Arrendondo, P., Toporek, R., Brown, S. P., Sanchez, J., Locke, D. C., Sanchez, J., & Stadler, H. (1996). Operationalization of the multicultural counseling competencies. *Multicultural Counseling and Development, 24*(1), 42-78.

AVID. (2010). Delivering the dream: College readiness for all. Retrieved from http://www.avid.org/dl/med_press/press_20100511.pdf

Bradley, L., & Lewis, J. (2000). Introduction. In J. Lewis & L. Bradley (Eds.), *Advocacy in counseling: Counselors, clients & community* (pp. 3-4). Greensboro, NC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services.

College Board. (2010). *The 6th Annual AP Report to the Nation*. Retrieved from http://www.collegeboard.com/html/aprtn/pdf/ap_report_to_the_nation.pdf

College Board (2010). *AP potential*. Retrieved from https://appotential.collegeboard.com/welcome.do

Constantine, M. G., Hage, S. M., Kindaichi, M. M., & Bryant, R. M. (2007). Social justice and multicultural issues: Implications for the practice and training of counselors and counseling psychologist. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 85*, 24-29.

Diemer, M. A., & Hsieh, C. (2008). Sociopolitical development and vocational expectations among lower socioeconomic status adolescents of color. *The Career Development Quarterly, 56*, 257-267.

Dowden, A. R. (2009). Implementing self-advocacy training within a brief psychoeducational group to improve the academic motivation of Black adolescents. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work, 34*(2), 118-136.

Fondacaro, M. R., & Weinberg, D. (2002). Concepts of social justice in community psychology: Towards a social ecological epistemology. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, *30*, 473-492.

Holcomb-McCoy, C. (2007). *School counseling to close the achievement gap: A social justice framework for success*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Kolb, D. (1984) *Experiential Learning. Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Lewis, J. A., Arnold, M. S., House, R., & Toporek, R. L, (2002), *ACA advocacy competencies.* Retrieved from http://www.counseling.org/Publications/

National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2004). *The conditions of education in brief 2004*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2004076

Ratts, M. J., & Hutchins, A. M. (2009). ACA advocacy competencies: Social justice advocacy at the client/student level. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 87*, 269- 275.

Reis, S. M., Colbert, R. D., & Hébert, T. P. (2005). Understanding resilience in diverse, talented students in an urban high school. *Roeper Review, 27*(2), 1-42.

Rowell, L. (2006). Action Research and School Counseling: Closing the Gap Between Research and Practice. *Professional School Counseling, 9*(5), 376-384.

Rowell, L., & Carey, J. (2009, April). Action research, outcome research and evidence-based school counseling practice. *Counseling Today, 1*, 56-57.

Van Reusen, A. K. (1996). The self-advocacy strategy for education and transition planning. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 32*, 49-54.

Vera, E. M., & Speight, S. L. (2003). Multicultural competence, social justice and counseling psychology: Expanding our roles. *The Counseling Psychologist, 31*(3), 253-272.

Biographical Statement

Angel Riddick Dowden is a doctoral student in the Counselor Education program at North Carolina State University. Her mailing address is 9342 Tabriz Point Raleigh, NC 27614. Her email address is adowden@hotmail.com. Phone number is 919-641-9093. Angel worked as a school counselor for five years.