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School Counselors as Leaders for Social Justice and Equity

E Mackenzie Shell

Abstract

The demographics of public schools in the United States have changed immensely since the peak of the Civil Rights Era in 1968 from a majority White population to a nearly 50% heterogenous mix of Culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students. Culturally and Linguistically Diverse students face longstanding issues of inequity within public schools in the United States. Culturally responsive school leadership is one method to address and redress the longstanding inequities for CLD students. School counselors are uniquely positioned to bridge the multicultural and social justice leadership practices to traditional models of school leadership based on their training, access to school-wide data and infusion of Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts and Greenleaf, 2017). This conceptual article seeks to promote school counselors as culturally responsive school leaders by revealing their training and skillsets through a Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies framework.

Keywords: Culturally Responsive School Counselors, Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students, Educational Leadership

Introduction

Since the peak of the Civil Rights Era in 1968, the demographics of public schools in the United States have changed immensely from majority White to a more culturally and linguistically diverse student population. Over the last 50 years, the demographics shifted from a majority White student population to a more heterogenous mix (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014) where culturally and lin-

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guistically diverse (CLD) students comprise nearly 50% of K-12 public school students (U. S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). Concurrent with the shifting demographics, the prevailing notions in the post-Civil Rights Era in the U.S. shifted to minimize the impacts of race (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). Public school systems, in aggregate, serve the most racially, linguistically, and ethnically diverse students in their histories (Ford, 2012). The increasing diversity does not intrinsically pose a problem; the problem lies within the persistent disparities in educational outcomes for CLD students. As public schools continue to diversify, research outcomes continue to show that students' identities often influence their educational outcomes more than the students' performance in school (Kramarczuk Voulgarides et al., 2017).

Historically oppressive systems and structures work to disadvantage CLD students (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Research done on school outcomes for CLD students over the last 50 years has shown that the disparities experienced by CLD students have been nearly intractable and longstanding (Orfield & Frankenburg, 2014). Currently, these students experience more highly segregated, under-resourced schools with newer, more inexperienced teachers (US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016), higher risk of exclusionary discipline, referral to special education (Belser, Shillingford, & Joe, 2016) and court citations (Khalifa et al., 2016), lower graduation and retention rates (Belser et al., 2016, Carter et al., 2017), and lowered access to Advanced Placement classes and gifted education (Carter et al., 2017; U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). As Orfield and Frankenburg (2014) noted "we do not know how to make segregation equal" as we continue to implement policies to rectify issues that minoritized populations face within the public schools (p. 720).

Continued disparate outcomes for CLD students directly implicate public school culture as hostile to these minoritized students (Khalifa et al., 2016). The current political climate in the United States has made supporting CLD students more challenging. The rise of White nationalists and their extremist views toward immigrants, refugees, and minoritized students has fanned fears and racial/ethnic tensions in American schools (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). Academic outcome data and the current political zeitgeist require serious examination of appropriate methods of educational, social justice, and multicultural leadership (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017; Santamaria, 2013) to support CLD students. Infusing equity-based leadership into traditional leadership models gives school leaders opportunities to address educational outcome inequities for CLD students (Santamaria, 2013).

School counselors are uniquely positioned to bridge the multicultural and social justice leadership practices to traditional models of school leadership based on their training, access to school-wide data and infusion of Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Janson, Stone, Clark, 2009; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). The transformation of the school counseling profession incorporates systemic practices to meet the academic, social/emotional, and career needs for

all students and promotes educational equity and equitable access to high-quality educational practices (Chen-Hayes et al., 2014; Erford, 2015). School counselors have a professional mandate for leadership from the American School Counselor Association (ASCA). The ASCA National Model (2019) emphasizes leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change (ASCA, 2019) which highlights the need for school counselors to be at the table in a leadership role. School counselors act as leaders when collaborating and consulting with stakeholders (e.g., families, staff, community members, students) for student success (Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009; Mason & McMahon, 2009), especially in consideration of today's current shift in student demographics in K-12 schools. It is even more paramount for school counselors to be visible as social justice advocates.

Therefore, this conceptual research article will show how collaborative school counselor leadership can occur at the intrapersonal, institutional, community, and public policy levels to improve outcomes for CLD students through the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies as a framework. Combining the multicultural and social justice traditions with leadership is critical because it addresses challenges associated with diversity within American schools (Ratts, 2011; Santamaria, 2013).

Culturally Responsive Educational Systems

An educational system based on one standardized approach will not prove a panacea for CLD youth who sit outside the norm of the 'average' student (Cramer, 2015). Ideas about normality and the 'average' have a basis in White, middle class standards (Reid & Knight, 2006). Too often, the standardized approach reifies a deficit-oriented view of learning in which cultural or linguistic diversity is used to justify disparate educational outcomes (Artiles et al., 2010; Garcia & Ortiz, 2008; Reid & Knight, 2006). Moreover, the use of a standardized approaches often leaves just two options to explain challenges faced by struggling learners: within-child deficits or within-educator deficits (Artiles, Bal, & King Thorius, 2010). An educational system that considers culture may situate learning challenges within systemic or ecological contexts and recognize the sociocultural resources of CLD students (Orosco, 2010). A culturally responsive educational system will shift the discourse from fixing the deficits of CLD learners to the creation of systems "that are responsive to cultural diversity" (Klingner et al., 2005, p. 8). Implementation of culturally responsive education could lead to culturally responsive instruction, assessments, and interventions (Klingner et al., 2005) which would undergird any attempts of creating culturally responsive educational leadership (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Attending to the "debt" (Ladson-Billings, 2006) owed to CLD students and their families requires a shift to equity-laden leadership practices that address structural and systemic barriers that reproduce historical inequities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). Moreover, this shift includes a

focus on advocacy to rectify current injustices coupled with an understanding of power and privilege (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017) and the socio-political nature of American schooling (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017).

A Culturally Responsive School Counselor Leadership Framework

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) developed the ASCA National Model (2019), a comprehensive school counseling program, to emphasize the role of school counselors as educational team members who use advocacy, collaboration, systemic change, and leadership skills to foster more equitable and emancipatory school milieus (Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017; Strear et al., 2018). Embedded within the model is the ASCA School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies (2019). The standards provide an outline of knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that help school counselors address the needs of all their students (ASCA, 2019). Four of those standards seem particularly apt in this discussion: "B-PF 6. Demonstrate understanding of the impact of cultural, social, and environmental influences on student success and opportunities; B-PF 7. Demonstrate leadership through the development and implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program; B-PF 8. Demonstrate advocacy for a comprehensive school counseling program; B-PF 9. Create systemic change through the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program" (ASCA, 2019, pp. 3,4).

School Counselor Leadership and Advocacy Activities

The current model of school counselor leadership reflects a shift to a culturally responsive leadership framework that incorporates transformative, social justice, and equity leadership tenets (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015). The culturally responsive leadership framework focuses on collaboration through egalitarian processes and shared power (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017), emancipatory practices that oppose oppressive processes within schools and redress current inequities (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016), and affirmation and incorporation of intersectional identities and cultural practices of CLD students into the educational milieu (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). Within a culturally responsive school leadership framework, school counselors incorporate several practices which are grounded in social justice and educational equity.

Assessment and use of data. School counselors have access to quantitative data about student groups and qualitative data about the concerns of teachers, students, and parents (Perusse & Colbert, 2007). As data-driven practitioners, school counselors collect and analyze data to assess inequities in student achievement for CLD students, to determine equity in academic attainment and access to services, to evaluate school climate and culture, and to determine professional develop-

ment needs (Hines et al., 2017; Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017; Singh et al., 2010). Additionally, they use data to develop and implement their comprehensive school counseling programs and to create and monitor systems of accountability for redressing inequities, improving access to opportunities, and increasing equitable student academic, career, and social/emotional growth (Hines et al., 2017; Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017; Singh et al., 2010).

Counseling. Through counseling services, school counselors use their specialized skillset to address the needs of students in individual and small group sessions (Hines et al., 2017) and provide necessary resources and supports for students' academic success and well-being (Lashley & Stickl, 2016). School counselors implement culturally responsive counseling with individuals and small groups that emphasizes student empowerment while simultaneously focusing on strengths-based approaches that accentuate and incorporate students' cultural practices and worldviews (Grothaus, McAuliffe, & Craigen, 2012). The individual and small group sessions also provide space for counselors to teach students self-advocacy skills (Singh et al., 2010). The work with individual students also provides more data for school counselors to evaluate as preparation for consultative duties with teachers, parents, and administrators (Lashley & Stickl, 2016).

Consultation. The ASCA National Model (2019) identified consultation as an essential skill for school counselors to use collaboratively with other stakeholders to create culturally responsive school settings (Schultz et al., 2014) and to discuss students' academic, behavioral, and/or socio-emotional needs or outcomes (Brigman, Mullis, Webb, & White, 2005). The context of school consultation is expanding because of increasing diversity of K-12 public school students which has direct implications for culturally responsive, systems-level school consultation (Newman et al., 2017). The collaborative nature of consultation allows school counselors and educational partners to find solutions to increase equity, access to educational opportunities, and create additional supports for students within the schools and their communities (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Hines et al., 2017). School counseling consultation with teachers and administrators reinforces improvements in pedagogy and access to educational opportunities in a culturally responsive school environment (Schultz et al., 2014). School counselor access to data allows for disaggregation and examination to unearth inequitable patterns and target teachers for consultation, training, and difficult conversations about equity issues (Carter et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2010).

Professional development. The development of workshops/trainings for teachers, administrators, and staff members serves as a key area of culturally responsive school leadership for school counselors (Janson et al., 2009; Schultz et al., 2014). These trainings promote a culturally responsive school environment by helping participants understand their multicultural identities, power and priv-

ilege within the school, and the school's socio-political dynamics to further the evaluation of the school's practices and mission (Schultz et al., 2014). Furthermore, the professional development helps to create anti-discriminatory practices by incorporating students' cultural and linguistic experiences into classroom guidance lessons (Hines et al., 2017) and promoting teachers' use of strengths-based approaches with CLD students (Hines et al., 2017; Santamaria, 2013). The strengths-based training involves assisting school staff members to identify the cultural practices and assets in the students, their families, and communities and to infuse those assets into curricular activities to engage students and improve educational outcomes (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Green, 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016; Schultz et al., 2014). The strengths-based approach provides a counternarrative to colorblindness, deficit beliefs, and behaviors that oppress CLD students (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Schultz et al., 2014).

School Counselors as Cultural Bridges

School counselors occupy a unique position as culturally responsive school leaders. They serve as the nerve center for the school and their daily activities on the school site impacts their day to day schedule (Shultz et al., 2014). Moreover, as the nerve center of the school, counselors continually connect "students to parents, teachers to administrators, and administrators to community members" (Shultz et al., 2014, p. 23). School counselors act as cultural bridges between families and the school at large by sharing cultural information that promotes a culturally responsive school environment and by developing community partnerships to provide additional supports for students and to extend advocacy into community-based issues (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Khalifa et al., 2016).

Sharing cultural information. Scholarship suggests that public schools and educators within them often blame CLD students for their persistent challenges in education (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Green, 2017, Khalifa et al., 2016). This blame shows up as deficit-oriented opinions and beliefs about CLD students, their families, and communities and serves as a barrier to an equity-based educational environment (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Khalifa et al., 2016). The prevailing narrative about individual and cultural deficits masks knowledge about systemic racism, concentrated poverty, and other inequitable community conditions (Green, 2017) and their effects on students and their families (Bryan & Henry, 2008). School counselor preparation and training provide tools to gather counternarratives of CLD students and their communities. Those counternarratives allow school counselors to infuse strengths-based, culturally responsive practices into counseling, consultation, and staff development interventions (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Schultz et al., 2014). Additionally, school counselors can evaluate and facilitate discussions regarding the contribution of school processes, adult actions and adult interactions to disparate school outcomes for minority students (Carter et. al,

2017). School counselors can use their array of culturally responsive leadership interventions to positively affect a school climate that will ultimately boost students' academic successes (Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017; Schultz et al., 2014).

Community partnerships. Scholars encourage school counselors to develop and cultivate collaborations with community stakeholders and agencies (Hines et al., 2017). The collaborations often improve the schools' abilities to promote culturally responsive school contexts and culturally affirming school environments (Amatea & West-Olatunji, 2007; Hines et al., 2017; Khalifa et al., 2016). The partnerships prove invaluable in addressing inequities that CLD students face with the added realization that schools alone cannot redress all inequities (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). Acting as cultural bridges with teachers, administrators, staff, students and their families, and community stakeholders allows school counselors to build supports and cultivate strengths to remove systemic barriers to school success (Bryan & Henry, 2008; Hines et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2010). Community partnerships also provide opportunities for school counselor leaders to learn about, address, and advocate for community-based issues that impact CLD students (Khalifa et al., 2016). The reciprocal nature of the partnership may mitigate challenges in the neighborhoods in which CLD students live which, in turn, would improve educational outcomes for CLD students (Green, 2017). School-community partnerships also engender mutual trust and welcoming environments between the schools and the communities in which they are embedded (Santamaria, 2013).

Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

Although many facets of school counseling involve culturally responsive school leadership, no overarching framework of culturally responsive school leadership existed until Ratts and Greenleaf (2017) applied the recently developed Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC, 2016) to school counselor leadership practices. The MSJCC framework bolsters school counselor leadership with tenets of social justice advocacy and multicultural responsiveness (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). The introduction of the MSJCC creates an expectation that school counselors will become proficient in attending to oppression, issues of power and privilege dynamics, and the intersectionalities of CLD students that influence educational outcomes (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017) and discrimination against these students (Schultz et al., 2014). Multicultural and social justice school leadership provides an ideological foundation for culturally responsive school leadership. Ratts and Greenleaf (2017) defined multicultural and social justice school counseling leadership as leadership interventions that consider the cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews of culturally diverse students and that addresses systemic inequities and barriers impacting students' academic, social/emotional, and career development (p. 2). The MSJCC lays the ground-

work for multicultural and social justice school counseling leadership. The MSJCC has four developmental domains that incorporate intersectionality and issues of power and privilege within the counseling relationship (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). The developmental domains are: counselor self-awareness, student worldview, counseling relationship, and counseling and advocacy interventions (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017).

Counselor self-awareness. Counselors as leaders need to have an awareness of their own dispositions, beliefs, intersectional identities, and cultural backgrounds and their power dynamics when interacting with students (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). This critical self-awareness must be an iterative process that allows the school counselor leader to interrogate their own practices and mitigate potential oppressive practices (Khalifa et al., 2016; Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017).

Student worldview. After school counselors have gained a critical self-awareness, they can understand students' experiences through the student's worldviews unfettered by the counselors' biases. This understanding allows the counselor to develop deeper knowledge of students' values, dispositions, and cultural norms (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). More importantly, the deeper knowledge abates deficit-based beliefs of students and their communities (Khalifa et al., 2016).

Counseling relationship. The synthesis of counselor self-awareness with student worldview provides school counselors with a window into how student and counselor intersectional identities, cultural backgrounds, and power dynamics influence the relationship between students and school counselor (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). Counselors gain insight into their counseling practices and recognize oppressive and helpful practices (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017).

Counseling and advocacy interventions. With the knowledge gained through critical self-awareness, student worldview, and the counseling relationship, school counselors can then make evidence-based, culturally-informed decisions about next steps with students. The socioecological model informs whether the process for the next steps involves individual interventions or systemic interventions or both (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). The socioecological model provides context for school counselors to address student problems at the following levels:

- intrapersonal (e.g., individual attitudes, beliefs, and attributes),
- interpersonal (e.g., family, friends, colleagues),
- institutional (e.g., school, churches, businesses),
- community (e.g., spoken and unspoken values and norms in society),
- public policy (e.g., rules, laws, and policies),
- and global/international (e.g., world affairs). (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017, p. 4)

These socioecological systems influence both student educational outcomes (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017) and counseling strategies to gain a holistic view of students within their specific contexts (McMahon et al., 2014). The complicated

nature of addressing students' needs and redressing inequities requires effective leadership to maximize efficacy of interventions and advocacy efforts (McCarty et al., 2014). Often, school leadership is seen as the sole province of principals/administrators (Khalifa et al., 2016), but socially just, culturally responsive school leadership requires collaborative leadership to positively impact individual students, the schools in which they learn, and the communities in which they reside (Lashley & Stickl, 2016; Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017).

Application of the MSJCC to School Counselor Leadership

When applying the Multicultural and Social Justice Advocacy Competencies (2016) to a concern in school, school counselors should consider the following areas: (1) description of the multicultural/social justice issue, (2) counselor self-reflection, (3) student's worldview, (4) impact of culture(s) on the counseling relationship, (5) culturally responsive counseling and socioecological model for interventions (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). The following section is a composite case vignette to describe how a school counselor might infuse the MSJCC into their leadership practices.

Case Vignette

Duval, a Haitian American male in the tenth grade, attends a high school in Miami, Florida. His high school is near the area known as Little Haiti. Duval dislikes school and has accumulated many absences with corresponding low grades. Duval presents no discipline issues when he does attend school.

1. *The potential multicultural/social justice issue*: Is this problem connected to a systemic issue?

A school counselor would want to investigate the impact of Duval's social identities on his experiences in school. The counselor could examine data to determine any patterns of discrimination toward Haitian students. The counselor could also connect the challenges in the school to the larger anti-immigrant and historic anti-Haitian sentiments.

2. *Counselor self-reflection*: School counselors must acknowledge their biases, their social group identities, and the influence both have on their beliefs about the multicultural-social justice concern.

School counselors will need to examine their biases, beliefs, and values around immigration and students from immigrant backgrounds. The counselors must also think about how their social group memberships might influence their perception of the problems or help/hinder their connections to Duval.

3. *Student worldview*: School counselors must attempt to understand the student's cultural background and how that impacts the student's perception of the problem.

Ascertaining the ways Duval sees the problem from his cultural background can help school counselors determine culturally responsive leadership practices. What beliefs, biases, or values might Duval carry from his Haitian American background? How could those traits foster positive change?

4. *Impact of culture(s) on the counseling relationship*: Examine the combined effects of counselor self-reflection and student worldview on the counseling relationship.

School counselors consider in what ways Duval's social group identities and the school counselor's identities influence their interactions. The school counselor would consider factors that hinder or engender trust and sharing.

5. *Culturally responsive counseling and socioecological interventions*: School counselors would examine the effects of the issue on Duval and propose interventions on six socioecological levels.

a. *Intrapersonal:* Counseling as an intervention would teach Duval self-advocacy skills and help to identify oppressive factors that hinder Duval's school success.

b. *Interpersonal*: Counselors identify community assets, including peers and family members, that could bolster Duval's school success. The counselor may share cultural information with school stakeholders to build assets.

c. *Institutional*: School counselors can use data to explore patterns of oppression within the school. Additionally, they can examine school policies that negatively impact students. School counselors may design professional development for school staff to foment a success culture for Duval and other Haitian American students.

d. *Community*: School counselors learn about oppressive practices within the larger community in which the school is housed. They learn about issues and community assets by learning from and partnering with community stakeholders. Engaging and collaborating with the community helps to create relevant advocacy for the students.

e. *Public Policy:* School counselors learn about local, state, and/or federal laws that may adversely impact students and their communities. They then learn about and connect students to services that may help mitigate some of the harm. Counselors may write letters to politicians or participate in marches to change policies.

f. *Global/International:* School counselors learn about current and historical issues of Haiti and Haitian immigrants in the United States. This knowledge can help counselors understand the challenges and the gifts offered within the multicultural-social justice concern.

Implications for Practice

School counselor preparation programs and professional development trainings need to prepare graduates/practitioners to partner with other educational

stakeholders to develop shared participatory and emancipatory leadership practices that address and redress oppressive educational practices that adversely impact culturally and linguistically diverse, marginalized students (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Santamaria & Santamaria, 2015). Effective culturally responsive school leadership requires evidence-based, data-driven practices in the current climate of accountability (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Therefore, school counselor preparation programs and professional development must incorporate the use of data equity-oriented interventions as well as continued training on using data for accountability. Most importantly, schools cannot solely mitigate all inequities and oppressive practices that impact CLD learners and their families (Green, 2017). Training of culturally responsive school leaders requires development of mutually beneficial community partnerships and community advocacy to push culturally responsive school leadership from the school to the community (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2017). Policy makers should consider the strengths of educator collaboration and encourage school boards to develop programs to foster collaboration to improve school reform efforts and, ultimately, academic outcomes for all students (Rock, Remley, & Range, 2017). School counselors in training and practicing school counselors would benefit from intentional training on social justice advocacy that highlights the promise and pitfalls of advocacy work (Singh et al., 2010). Importantly, school counseling programs and trainings should focus on infusing both the ASCA Model (2019) and the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies to build school counseling leadership skills. Other educator preparation programs may benefit from the inclusion of the MSJCC into their trainings as well.

Conclusion

School counselors receive the training and development to challenge inequitable, oppressive practices through the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC, 2016), their strengths-based counseling focus (Grothaus, McAuliffe, & Craigen, 2012), and their use of a socioecological model to undergird their counseling interventions (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). This work requires school counselors to develop their self-awareness about their social group identities, biases, values, and beliefs while also requiring them to seek knowledge of the forces that adversely impact students within the school and within the communities in which the schools serve. The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies provide a framework for school counselors to incorporate multicultural responsiveness and social justice advocacy into their leadership practices. Along with this promise comes a continued challenge for school counselors—the lack of awareness of their roles as social justice advocates within schools (Singh et al., 2010). As school counselors continue to implement multiculturally responsive and socially just leadership practices, the knowledge of their roles will become less

hidden and their tasks will align more with direct student services to improve academic achievement by removing inequitable structures.

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