

## Multicultural School Counseling With Children in Grades K-6

*Richard C. Henriksen, Jr., and Holly Nikels*

School counselors today are mired in a plethora of activities that often challenge their ability to provide individual and group services to students (Behring, 2002). When combined with the needs of an ever-changing student population, the challenges faced by school counselors can be daunting. Making the challenges faced by school counselors even more complex is the need to meet the many multicultural and diverse needs of students.

Sue and Sue (1999) have pointed out that for effective counseling to take place, future counselors and current counselors require training in meeting the needs of culturally different clients. The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP) requires accredited counselor preparation programs to provide training in the areas of multiculturalism and diversity. However, a quick review of the literature concerning multicultural counseling in elementary schools resulted in only a handful of articles being found. Additionally, many counseling programs discuss multicultural issues based on working with adults. A greater focus is needed to address the multicultural needs of children in grades K-6.

### School Trends

Over the past several years, numerous diversity sensitivity training programs have evolved across the nation (Baker, 2000). These programs are a direct response to the growing need for multicultural education in schools based on the changing notion of the typical American public school student. Gollnick and Chinn (2002) reported that students of color comprise more than one third of the public school student population. It is estimated that by the year 2020, students of color will represent nearly half of the elementary and secondary school population. As the faces of our nation's youth change, it is essential that professionals within the school systems assist young people as they transition into a diverse global community.

The problems associated with racism, discrimination, prejudice, and stereotyping within

public schools have been well documented (Baker, 2000; Gollnick & Chinn, 2002; Pine & Hilliard, 1990). When students have adhered to beliefs about others or self based on racial, ethnic, religious, gender, or other stereotypes, a number of challenging situations have occurred. These challenges have ranged from public displays of blatant discrimination, such as name-calling or racially motivated violence to more subtle scenarios, such as the segregation of social groups within the school or academic injustice in curriculum and instruction.

Racism can take many forms in schools. Peers, teachers, and administrators stereotyped and discriminated against students due to their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender, ability, or other perceived differences from the majority. The harm inflicted upon minority students came about through action and inaction on the part of peers and school personnel (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). For example, actions that might harm minority students included physical and verbal violence, harassment, and social and academic segregation (Baker, 2000). Inactions that might cause harm to students included the allocation of insufficient educational resources, exclusion of minority contributions in the curriculum, stereotyping, and a lack of attention received from teachers and peers.

For the oppressed, the experience of racism can have devastating effects. Students reported feeling as if they did not fit in at their schools or as if school was not a safe place for them to be (Gollnick & Chinn, 2002). In an effort to belong, some students have abandoned their cultural identity and tried to assimilate into the dominant culture. Other students have responded to this lack of belonging by skipping classes, not participating in academic and/or extracurricular activities, or dropping out of school altogether. Pine and Hilliard (1990) stated, "Schools, which ought to be a civilizing influence in our society, seem instead to be incubators of racial intolerance" (p. 593).

Because schools are a microcosm of society, researchers have contended that racism, discrimination, and prejudice would be preventable if it was effectively dealt with throughout the American school system

(Baker, 2000; Pine & Hilliard, 1990). Pine and Hilliard stated, "The effort to learn to treat one another as members of the same human family grinds on. Those who discriminate and those who tolerate discrimination are graduates of our schools" (p. 594). It seems that the best approach for schools to handle such a challenge will be to incorporate multicultural education training programs into the curriculum.

### **Developmentally Appropriate Practice**

When implementing a multicultural training project or program into a school setting, it is essential that professionals know and understand the population with which they will be working (Allerton, 2001; Baker, 2000). Of foremost importance is the recognition that today's youth are a culture in and of themselves. Known as Generation Y, today's youth number approximately 60 million, with one in three being from a minority culture, one in four living in a single-parent household, and three in four having working mothers. Additionally, they have been using computers since before kindergarten. The National School Safety Center (Stephens, 2002) defined the culture of today's youth. They

- are roughly between the ages of 4 and 22;
- tend to be more aware than any other generation of growing up in a society with increasing diversity and fragmentation;
- are more apt to address and cross racial lines with ease, grace, comfort, and matter-of-factness;
- often, in the case of recently arrived immigrants, serve as a bridge for their parents and family into the larger society and its services, particularly with regard to language translation;
- are more technologically savvy than any other generation; and
- will be the bulk of the population within the next 20 years (pp. 3-4).

For elementary school children, this is a time of tremendous change and growth. The entrance into schools marks the beginning of reading, writing, and exposure to ideas that are different from those they have been accustomed to. Additionally, for some children, the entrance into school may be the first exposure they have had to people and cultures outside their own families (Stern-LaRosa & Bettemann, 2000). For some, this transition can be a difficult and painful one, if not appropriately addressed by school professionals.

Many elementary school children lack the skills needed to function effectively in a multicultural society. At this stage of their development, children look to their parents and other adults (e.g., teachers, counselors) whom they respect for approval and guidance. As Stern-LaRosa and Bettemenn (2000) stated,

One of their primary motivations in learning at this stage is to master the skills and follow the examples of the adults around them. If parents and caregivers talk to children about prejudice, stand up to words and acts of discrimination they encounter, and model other ways of resolving conflict, children can learn to do the same. (p. 32)

### **Multicultural Practices**

Henriksen and Trusty (in press) proposed a paradigm of counselor education that used Banks' (1993, 1994) model of multicultural education to infuse multicultural training throughout counselor preparation programs. Banks' model could also be used by school counselors to meet the diverse needs of elementary school students. Banks' five dimensions of multicultural education can provide school counselors with a paradigm to teach acceptance of self and others from a multicultural perspective, which could lead to reductions in the acting out of prejudice in elementary schools.

Banks noted that, with *content integration*, individuals from diverse backgrounds could be included in the academic material presented in the classroom. School counselors could focus on the diversity in the classroom and thus help classrooms become more inclusive and help students accept each other. One activity helpful to students could be to draw their cultural selves and then share their drawings with the class. Students could be assisted, depending on their grade levels, with drawing pictures that represented their cultural selves. Pictures could include flags from the different countries in their backgrounds, cultural foods eaten in their homes, symbols, and even words that reflect their cultures. Students could share their pictures with one another and share in the excitement of learning. The result would be that students could learn about a variety of cultures and celebrate them together.

Another dimension of Banks' model is *knowledge construction*, which focuses on the creation of new knowledge. Children are constantly creating new understandings of the world around them as they develop. To help children create new knowledge and

recognize the similarities and differences that make each person unique, school counselors could help students create pictures that reflect their families. Drawings could include the places in which they live, the vehicles in the home, who lives in the home, some of the items contained in the home, and descriptions of the music the family listens to. Children would be able to create their own knowledge of the similarities and differences among people and learn that we are more similar than different and that it is what is different about us that make us unique.

By partnering with teachers and students, helping students and teachers to integrate new content into the classroom, and assisting the students with the creation of new knowledge, counselors can shift the focus to *prejudice reduction*. Prejudice reduction involves assisting students with the creation of positive attitudes toward diverse groups (Banks, 1993).

The implementation of the dimensions of Banks' model can and often does lead to prejudice reduction in schools. Moving in the direction of acceptance of others leads to positive attitudes toward diverse groups. One activity that can help in this area is the Pass Right, Pass Left exercise by Jackson (1993). In this exercise, students are read a story that they must summarize while also passing an object from left to right on cue. The object is that they must work together as a team in order to be successful. Students learn that it is important to listen to one another. Through the process of working together, students learn that prejudice can get in the way of successfully working out problems.

Banks (1993) also noted that different techniques and methods can facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse backgrounds. By getting to know the students, school counselors can help teachers develop new and innovative techniques and methods that will not only meet the needs of diverse students but will also enhance their academic success and thus their overall sense of well-being. When students believe that their needs are being met, they are less likely to experience problems academically and behaviorally. School counselors can conduct needs assessments designed to assess and identify the needs of the diverse groups in individual schools and then assist with implementing activities in the classroom that will meet those needs.

The final dimension of Banks' model is *processes*, which is the creation of an empowering school culture and social structure. The role of the school counselor is to ensure that all students have the opportunity to become involved in all activities in the school and are encouraged to become involved. Because school counselors are personally involved with the children, they are a source of comfort. When they ask a student

to become involved in an activity, the student is more likely to become involved. The result is that, as children of diverse backgrounds become more involved in a variety of activities in schools, they will believe that the school is there for them, and they will be more likely to experience academic success.

## Conclusion

School demographics will continue to change as society continues to become more diverse. The need to incorporate a multicultural approach to school counseling that assists with the creation of an environment that meets the diverse needs of students is vital to academic success. By employing a model of multicultural education in the developmental counseling process, school counselors will have a positive impact on the changing environments in schools.

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