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## Conceptual and Curricular Frameworks for Infusing Social Justice in Urban School Counselor Education

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### Abstract

Conceptual and curricular frameworks are needed for school counseling education programs seeking to promote social justice in urban settings by eliminating achievement and opportunity gaps that exist for some student groups. Key areas for the application of social justice in school counseling education include: program goals, admission criteria, coursework, cultural diversity, urban experience, community engagement, and service learning. These conceptual and curricular frameworks will assist school counselor educators to infuse social justice in their program's philosophy and practices. A sample school counselor education program is presented that focuses on developing future counselors' competencies in urban settings that incorporates social justice throughout integral facets of the curriculum.

### Keywords

School counselor education, social justice, conceptual frameworks, curricular frameworks, achievement/opportunity gaps

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Conceptual and curricular frameworks are needed for school counseling education programs seeking to promote social justice in urban settings by eliminating achievement and opportunity gaps that exist for some student groups. Key areas for the application of social justice in school counseling education include: program goals, admission criteria, coursework, cultural diversity, urban experience, community engagement, and service learning. These conceptual and curricular frameworks will assist school counselor educators to infuse social justice in their program's philosophy and practices. A sample school counselor education program is presented that focuses on developing future counselors' competencies in urban settings that incorporates social justice throughout integral facets of the curriculum.

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The professionals who developed the transforming school counseling initiatives (Education Trust, 2010) envisioned school counselors as agents of social justice working to eliminate the achievement and opportunity gaps that exist for low-income and minority students. A conceptual framework of socially-just education rests on fairness (in the sense of equity rather than equality) and the belief that *all* children can learn. These beliefs impel school counselors to advocate for policies and practices that will lead to equitable learning experiences for all students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). As schools and communities become more demographically diverse (Roberts, 2004), recognizing and confronting systemic inequities become key dispositions and

skills for school counselors to remove barriers that contribute to achievement discrepancies between student groups.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2002), "urban" refers to a densely populated area or cluster with a core block of at least 1000 people per square mile and surrounding blocks with at least 500 people per square mile. An urban area may encompass a city and its surrounding municipalities. In addition, the Census Bureau provides a concept of an urban area as one that involves a high degree of economic and social interaction. Therefore, urban not only refers to a city location but also to a cultural context. City life is diverse, incorporating people of different races, languages, beliefs, values, customs,

and economic strata, all living together in close proximity.

It is the diversity and complexity of urban culture that both enriches and complicates education in urban schools. In a report issued in 2000, the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that the predominant issue confronting urban school counselors is chronic academic failure. Urban schools face qualitatively different issues than schools in suburban or rural areas, and school counselor education programs need to provide learning experiences that address those differences (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Lee, 2005; Wilczenski, 2009). To be effective in urban settings, school counselors need to know the meaning of urban culture, the impact of culture on learning and schools, the nature of ethnic, racial, and inner city cultures different from their own, as well as the role of culture in socialization, interaction, and communication. They need to understand the sociopolitical context that may limit low-income students and their parents' participation in school life. They need to understand the life experiences of urban students. In order to gain a broad and deep understanding of urban communities, graduate students need to engage with those communities by being given several opportunities to work and socialize with urban youth during their school counselor training.

Through experiences in designing and implementing a school counseling program to promote social justice, it is clear that urban school counselors need something more than generic school counseling competencies. In urban settings, an effective school counselor cannot simply hold technical competencies and lack an understanding of urban culture and urban schools' bureaucratic structures and/or lack a commitment to preventing and eliminating achievement and opportunity gaps.

Competent urban school counselors must not only be skilled practitioners but also strong advocates for educational access and equity.

In order to develop competent school counselors in urban settings, it is important to understand what it means to work in an urban setting and the necessary competencies counselors must have to effect change in this setting. In preparing future professionals for the role of change agent, the conceptual and curricular frameworks of urban school counselor education need to explicitly address developing a social justice mindset and skill set. In this article, we present an example of a school counseling education program focused on developing future counselors' competencies in urban settings that incorporates social justice throughout integral facets of the curriculum. We hope to initiate a dialogue among urban counselor educators and supervisors about the specific components of a school counseling program to effectively promote social justice.

### **School Counseling Program**

A commitment to social justice is clearly stated in the University of Massachusetts Boston School Counseling Program mission statement and program goals as a guide to the conceptual and curricular frameworks. This commitment, in itself, is a challenge because there is not an agreed upon definition of social justice in the field of education (Chubbuck, 2010). Chubbuck's conceptualization of social justice, as it pertains to school counseling, would emphasize that all students, regardless of background, have the same rights, opportunities, and services and that all students can learn.

A social justice agenda to promote educational equity is embraced by the American School Counseling Association

(ASCA, 2007). School counselor education at the University of Massachusetts Boston adheres to those ASCA standards. A philosophy of social justice is infused throughout the school counseling program coursework and implemented through field experiences in urban areas.

### **Mission and Goals**

The University of Massachusetts Boston school counseling mission statement and program goals incorporate social justice as an integral component in meeting its urban mission. Excerpts from its mission statement are as follows:

The fundamental principle of the School Counseling program emphasizes social justice by cultivating a respect for the dignity and worth of all people and an appreciation of human diversity. The School Counseling Program is fully committed to train school counselors who are sensitive to multicultural differences, individual diversity, and the demands of living within an urban environment... The program views the role of a school counselor as a social change agent and the tasks of school counselor as educational, developmental, and preventive. The emphasis of the curriculum is to ensure that all our graduate students are able to maximize their unique qualities in working to help *all* students succeed in school to eliminate achievement and opportunity gaps.

The school counseling program goals at the University of Massachusetts Boston, developed by program faculty, also incorporate the importance of social justice. The goals relevant to social justice in urban settings are as follows:

- Create K-20 programs that work to remove barriers to student success, thus closing the achievement and opportunity gaps;
- Increase equity in access to school counseling services and interventions leading to increased enrollment and completion of rigorous coursework;
- Organize program coordination with staff, parents/caregivers and community resources; and
- Engage in data analysis of school counseling outcomes and variables for school improvement planning;

The urban focus, mission statement, and program goals guide the conceptual and curricular frameworks of the program and set the stage for fostering a professional identity as a change agent for social justice. Skills for becoming effective social justice change agents are acquired by incorporating social justice issues into course content and class activities and then are enhanced through practice during field experiences and community-based service learning.

### **Recruitment and Admission**

The University of Massachusetts Boston school counseling program's dedication to social justice starts with recruitment and admission. Consistent with the Association of American Colleges and Universities' (2003) affirmation of higher education's commitment to diversity, we seek a diverse student cohort so that diversity is a lived experience. Applications are not only reviewed for academic aptitude and performance (GRE/MAT, GPA, recommendations), but for evidence of compatibility with the program goals and social justice mission. Applicants write a personal statement about their interest in pursuing a career in school counseling at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The interest is not to identify applicants who

have experience in urban environments with diverse populations; very few have this experience. Rather, the intent is to identify applicants who are committed to the program's mission and have a strong commitment to diversity and urban education.

Interview day consists of an individual and group interview as well as time for a writing sample. Students invited for an interview are asked to access and review the Massachusetts Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs (2006). (Note: The Massachusetts Model is similar to the American School Counseling Association National Model [ASCA, 2003]). As the applicants wait their turn for an individual interview, they are asked to write a brief reflection on the Massachusetts Model. The purpose of the Massachusetts Model review is two-fold: (a) to give applicants a sense of the orientation of the program, and (b) to obtain a spontaneous writing sample. This activity provides an opportunity to screen applicants' interest in the model of school counseling practice promoted at the University of Massachusetts Boston and gives the admissions committee evidence of written communication skills.

During a 15-minute individual interview session, applicants are asked a series of questions and directives to judge their commitment to practicing school counseling from a social justice perspective as well as to assess their poise, professionalism, and emotional maturity.

The following questions and directives are a sample of items with an urban focus presented to applicants during the individual interview.

1. Currently, we know that a number of educational barriers prevent academic achievement for all students. Please select one barrier

about which you are most passionate. Describe the barrier and how, in your view, the barrier impacts achievement for all students.

2. Describe what social justice means to you?

Group interviews provide an opportunity to assess interpersonal skills and group dynamics as well as further affirm a commitment to the social justice mission of the program. The group interview includes two tasks. First, applicants are asked to respond to a case study that depicts a scenario of potential inequity and development of opportunity gaps among minority and low-income students. The following is an excerpt of the case study:

You are a new high school counselor of three months. You have just received a memorandum from the Department of Education with a cover memo from the District Supervisor of Guidance about the requirements for a scholarship (\$2500 per year for four years of college) for minority and low-income students. Scholarship requirements are: four years of mathematics to include trigonometry; 4 years of science to include physics; a full year of a performing art; a 3.0 GPA; and a 1000 SAT. The GPA and SAT requirements are attainable for large numbers of students but many students will miss the requirements because they may not have a full year of a performing art or will opt not to take physics.

The guidance department at your school has weekly staff meetings and the chairperson states "This scholarship is for those motivated students who are in band or chorus and strive toward high

academic courses such as physics. The students who should get this scholarship are going to take the right courses and will not need prodding from us.” In reviewing this case study, applicants are prompted to discuss their reactions and how they might proceed if presented with this situation.

Following discussion of the case study, applicants are directed to discuss their reactions to a data set culled from several sources including the College Board, Sallie Mae, and Education Trust. For example, the following data set that the Alliance for Excellent Education presents to demonstrate national graduation rates for the 2005-06 school year could be used as a discussion prompt to assess applicants’ awareness of achievement and opportunity gaps (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009).

*National High School Graduation Gap:*

- 79% of Asian students graduate high school
- 76% of White students graduate high school
- 55% of Hispanic students graduate high school
- 51% of African American students graduate high school
- 50% of Native American students graduate high school

\*Note that the data presented above represents an “estimated 4-year graduation rate” (p. 1).

Applicants are rated on a 3-point scale (Below Average, Average, Above Average) along the following dimensions:

- Academic background (Prerequisite coursework, Undergraduate GPA, GRE or MAT scores)
- Purpose and support for entering the field (Letters of reference, Personal statement, Previous experience, Knowledge of the field)

- Interview (Ability to communicate clearly, ability to handle stress, understanding of UMB social justice mission, maturity and professional demeanor, overall quality of responses)
- Response to case study (Awareness/sensitivity to equity issues, strength of argument)
- Reaction to data set (Quality of content, overall impression)
- Writing sample (Content, mechanics)

### **Curriculum**

Some school counseling education programs may still be using more traditional methods of school counseling education. These methods may not be broad enough for programs preparing urban school counselors. Urban school counselors must be able to address the needs of children and adolescents in urban settings to eliminate achievement and opportunity gaps. Holcomb-McCoy (2007) provided a succinct summary of the differences between a traditional versus social justice approach to school counseling. A traditional orientation includes minimal attention to mechanisms of oppression and focuses on reinforcing the status quo, whereas a social justice approach emphasizes the importance of challenging oppressive acts and changing existing practices that preclude academic achievement. At the University of Massachusetts Boston, students are required to complete assignments and readings across courses that focus on social justice issues.

The following are some examples of how the topic of social justice is integrated throughout the curriculum. In an introductory course requirement, students interview an urban school counselor to share opinions on how the field is addressing social justice issues and how the field could do more. Sample course readings include

Kozol's *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (2005) and Suskind's *A Hope in the Unseen* (rev. 2005). In a group counseling course, students observe two skilled group counselors lead a group of elementary school students in a group exercise that explores their attitudes toward racial prejudice and its effects on students' participation in school. The counselors are seen debriefing the exercise and considering alternative strategies. The students then discuss how they might approach this topic in their own practices. Social justice is also integrated through a multicultural counseling course providing an opportunity for self-appraisal, exploration, and reflection. In a counseling theory course, students are required to present and facilitate a class discussion on the topic of social justice in practice. Sample course readings to accompany this assignment include Aldarondo's *Advancing Social Justice through Clinical Practice* (2006). Additionally, in an internship course, second year students explore the role urban schools play in the cycle of poverty, crime, and substandard education that underlay social injustices through discussions, readings, and popular media.

### **Community Engagement**

Enhancing the competence and commitment of urban school counselors requires that school counselor education be structured differently from conventional coursework and field experiences. School counseling internships in urban areas need to extend beyond the school walls to include time working in human service and recreational community agencies which support families and youth. Service learning is a powerful pedagogy for social justice in school counselor education (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2007; Wilczenski & Schumacher,

2008). Through a curriculum-based service learning pre-practicum, graduate students, assigned to community settings outside the school, can learn first-hand about urban contexts, provide personnel resources to human service organizations, and grapple with social justice issues they experience. The pre-practicum consists of a minimum of fifteen hours of service learning, which is completed during an introductory course in the school counseling program.

Urban community experiences can transform thinking and give school counselors-in-training the mindset they need to be agents of social change (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Lee, 2005). Transformation depends upon systematic and critical reflection with the hope that students' values and beliefs will be changed by their experiences. For example, transformation occurs by asking students to consider the following questions: How did you feel about helping in the homeless shelter? Why are so many families in this community homeless? The second question orients the student to change and is likely to raise issues of poverty and social inequities. Opportunities for this type of deep reflection are imperative so that students working in urban environments do not blame the victim or engage in deficit thinking about children and families who are economically disadvantaged (Bomer, Dworin, May, & Semingson, 2008).

Following the pre-practicum, the school counseling students move to a 100-hour practicum in a high-need urban high school in Boston. Their service and learning in this setting involves mentoring and preparing students in grades 9 through 12 for post-secondary education. The school counseling students complete a legacy project during the practicum. Working with the school counseling department, the graduate students identify a need and then work together to find a solution. For

example, in 2009, the school counseling students initiated and resourced a college information center in the high school library. This center provided much needed materials for post-secondary education planning for the high school students. As the legacy project intended, the school counseling students planned for sustainability by ensuring that the high school was on a national mailing list to receive annually updated materials.

During practicum, the school counseling students are closely supervised by University faculty who remain at the high school throughout the day while the graduate students are in attendance at the site. This unique supervisory model allows graduate students frequent access to University faculty for guidance in their work. University faculty are also able to model professional conduct and implement best practices in school counseling at the practicum site. School counseling students' attempts to solve problems encountered during the urban practicum can foster new ways of thinking and acting, framing problems systemically rather than in terms of individual deficits.

This urban practicum is a mutually advantageous partnership between the University of Massachusetts and the Boston Public Schools. Three school counselors from the Boston Public Schools shared their experiences in supervising graduate students.

School Counselor, Jill Luisi, offered her assessment of the value of the collaboration:

The partnership is the ideal way for the University of Massachusetts Boston graduate students to learn from our high school students. The relationship that forms is one of learning on both ends, for our students and for your graduate students. More specifically for our students, having that once a week

check in can prove to be invaluable. We sometimes forget that many of our students have little to no consistency in their lives, so being able to have a weekly check in is invaluable to them (personal communication, May 14, 2010).

Dan McCaul, School Counselor, shared his thoughts about the partnership:

The UMass Boston graduate students are extremely valuable to our school because they are another person for our students to connect with. The students have another adult checking in with them and monitoring their academics and social/emotional development (personal communication, May 14, 2010).

Lastly, Olie Osinubi, School Counselor, also shared her experience in collaborating with the school counseling program at the University of Massachusetts Boston:

I cannot think of any other means by which students can prepare for work in an urban school without participating in an urban practicum. In today's world many concerns and issues are universal for young people. However, some are particular to urban school children and dominate much of our time as urban educators. These issues impact students' achievement and their ability to connect with school: street violence; parentified students; students as wage earners; poverty. (personal communication, May 17, 2010).

As the culminating experience of the program, a 600-hour internship consolidates prior coursework and field experiences. Part of the capstone completed during internship requires a data-based intervention to help solve a systemic problem that may be contributing to achievement and/or opportunity gaps (e.g., a dropout prevention

program). More specifically, students conduct an intervention and measure its outcome with pre- and post-tests by comparing achievement and other relevant behavioral data (e.g., attendance). In doing so, they can measure the result of the intervention in furthering student success. Another capstone component is a presentation to school faculty on a social justice issue to support the mission of the school.

### **Student Reflection and Feedback**

In order to gain information about the school counseling students' personal views of social justice and how the program impacted those views, stimulus questions and class discussion are components of the supervisory seminars held in conjunction with field experiences. The following are sample questions for reflection and feedback.

What are optimal acts?

1. Which everyday acts by educators counteract an inequitable world and inequitable ideas about "types of people?" Which acts help kids and which acts hurt kids?
2. Which everyday acts by educators counteract opportunity/achievement gaps and which acts maintain opportunity/achievement inequities?

What are optimal beliefs?

3. Which everyday statements by educators counteract an inequitable world and inequitable ideas about "types of people?" Which statements help kids and which statements hurt kids?
4. Which everyday statements by educators counteract opportunity/achievement gaps and which statements maintain opportunity/achievement inequities?

What are optimal policies?

5. Which policies by educators counteract an inequitable world and inequitable ideas about "types of people?" Which policies help kids and which policies hurt kids?
6. Which policies by educators counteract opportunity/achievement gaps and which policies maintain opportunity/achievement inequities?

### **Program Evaluation**

Learning and program outcome data are collected regularly to ensure that students are acquiring professional knowledge and dispositions. Those data inform decisions about curricular improvements. Holcomb-McCoy's (2007) multicultural competence and social justice surveys were adapted to address the University of Massachusetts Boston's program goals and expected learning outcomes. School counseling students completed self-assessments when they entered the master's program, prior to internship, and at the conclusion of the program. This Social Justice Survey was administered in order to assess students' sense of competence in applying a social justice framework to their work in school counseling. Students rated themselves on each item for identification mastery (ability to recognize cultural or social justice issues), basic mastery (ability to engage with students around cultural or social justice issues), or teaching mastery (ability to teach others about cultural or social justice issues), and also wrote personal goals to further their knowledge and skills. Thirty-seven students completed the survey at the end of the last academic year. The school counseling goal of students' achieving at least a basic mastery across all multicultural and social justice competencies was realized for the vast majority (>80%) of those who completed the program. The following is a

sample of statements adapted from Holcomb-McCoy's (2007) Social Justice Survey and the percentage of second year school counseling students who rated themselves as achieving at least a basic mastery of the particular skill or strategy.

1. Ability to identify cultural differences (92%).
2. Ability to build trusting relationships with culturally diverse students (85%).
3. Ability to appropriately advocate for students during consultation (81%).
4. Ability to recognize when others' communication style is negatively impacting relationships with parents of culturally diverse backgrounds (86%).

During focus groups, students reflected on the importance of field work to enhance their learning and suggested expanding the service learning pre-practicum hours to allow for greater depth or breadth of experiences in community agencies that intersect with the schools. The recommendations from the students are being implemented by increasing the pre-practicum field experience requirement from 15 to 30 hours.

## **Conclusion**

This article presented conceptual and curricular frameworks for infusing a social justice philosophy throughout a school counselor education program. An essential factor for success is that the school counselor education program infuses a commitment to social justice at all levels of the curriculum: program description, mission, goals, course content, assignments, and field experiences.

Although the current school counseling program at the University of Massachusetts Boston reflects a social justice agenda, it is a fluid process continually changing to advance our ideals. The mission, goals, and courses are the foundation for encouraging students to become social change agents. The student body, community partners, and field-based projects are more variable and inevitably shift as new students, new partners, and new community needs require programmatic adjustments to maintain the commitment to social justice.

As school counselor education aims to promote social justice, the program's conceptual and curricular framework needs to encourage students to embrace a social justice perspective by developing both a mindset and skill set that will enable them to be effective change agents. We hope this discussion about the University of Massachusetts Boston's school counseling program can be of help to enhance students' knowledge and work around issues of social justice among all school counselor education programs. Given that our nation's schools are becoming increasingly diverse, the suggestions presented on how to infuse a social justice framework within school counselor education programs will be essential across all communities and not exclusively urban settings. Moreover, it is imperative that school counselors who work with students and their families are committed to social justice, including fairness of access and opportunity as well as a belief that all children can learn.

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