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# Beyond Social Justice for the African American Learner: A Contextual Humanistic Perspective for School Counselors

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## Beyond Social Justice for the African American Learner: A Contextual Humanistic Perspective for School Counselors

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### Abstract

African American students' ability to persist in an educational system that has historically viewed them as uneducable is a testament to their persistence and resilience. The authors provide a brief historical overview of how African American students have been treated since they were first brought to what later became the United States. A social justice framework is discussed as a solid foundation for addressing current inadequacies, with emphasis on the need for school counselors to move beyond their traditional understanding of the so-called "achievement gap." Using a contextual humanistic approach, the authors suggest micro and macro level action steps that school counselors can take to enhance their efficacy when working with African American students.

*Keywords:* African American students; Humanistic Counseling; Oppression; Social Justice; Urban Education

### **Beyond Social Justice for the African American Learner: A Contextual Humanistic Perspective for School Counselors**

According to many scholars (e.g., Blanchett, 2006; Hale, 1994, 2001, 2004; Irvine, 1990, 2003; Kozol, 1992, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2006, 2007), a central problem in schools has been educators questioning the innate intellectual capacity of African American students. Downey and Pribesh (2004), using data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS-K) and the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), found that White educators judged African American students as low achievers and therefore, behaved less favorably towards them. Additionally, when educators believe African American students cannot achieve, they are less enthusiastic and respond less supportively (Ascher & Branch-Smith, 2005; Ferguson, 2003; Irvine & York, 2001).

Current research indicates that African American children are disadvantaged by educator biases in the classroom (Au, 2006; Guerra, Attar, & Weissberg 1997; Hale, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2001), and are more likely to experience unwarranted punitive practices in schools (Moore, Hensfield, & Owens, 2008; Noguera, 2003; Talbert-Johnson, 2004). As a result, African American students are disproportionately referred to and placed in the high-incidence special education categories of mental retardation, emotional or behavioral disorders, and learning disabilities (Blanchett, 2006; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002). Like racism, this is a form of dehumanization in which education disability programs are used as a method to sort, stratify, and exclude African American students (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). Dehumanization, in this sense, is not only isolated to educators. For example, Holcomb-McCoy and Johnston's (2008) study revealed that school counseling trainees viewed working in a predominately African American school environment as a challenge (e.g., felt fearful, believed students were hard to manage). This perspective may be considered a reflection of how the school counseling profession perceives the personhood of African American students. While Butler (2003) argued that the continued negative perception of the academic abilities of African American students could compromise their academic development, the school counseling profession has consistently highlighted the underachievement and struggles of African American students (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Day-Vines, Patton, & Baytops, 2003; Hensfield & Washington, 2015). This deficit orientation has negatively impacted student course placement, service delivery, special education placement as well as distribution of resources (Harris, 2013; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Moore-Thomas & Day-Wines, 2010; Williams & Portman, 2014). A school counselor's perception of the African American student has an enormous amount of influence over their educational experience (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007).

#### **The Social Justice Perspective**

There is a growing movement of school counseling professionals acknowledging the issues of bias, White privilege, and oppression within our schools (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Butler, 2003; Holcomb-McCoy & Johnston, 2008). Specifically, a social justice perspective has become the prevailing counseling paradigm used to address inequitable social, political, and economic conditions that impede on students' academic, career, and personal/social development (Ratts, 2009). Today, the expectation is that a school counselor regularly assesses and is knowledgeable of school and student issues; maintains and involves a collaborative network of

stakeholders; intervenes at various levels to promote justice, equity, and access; and works to close achievement gaps (American School Counselor Association, 2012; Ockerman & Mason, 2012). This perspective requires school counselors to acknowledge the role oppression plays in student behavior and serves as a channel to connect student problems with the oppressive environmental conditions that often surround African American students (American Counseling Association, 2014; Bemak & Chung, 2005).

The social justice framework acknowledges the need for the school counselor to possess an in-depth awareness of oppression and its impact on student development (American School Counselor Association, 2012). Yet this framework fails to directly respond to the situation and/or context of living in a society that continually sees African Americans, African American children in particular, as unintelligent and uneducable (Pigott & Cowen, 2000; Wong, Derlega, & Colson, 1988). This form of dehumanization cannot be simply rectified by addressing inequities in education because it fails to recognize African American children as thriving, promising, and worthy learners.

In the sections that follow, we offer an extension to the social justice perspective that includes a historical and current examination of the educational opportunities of African American students. We then conclude with implications that will move school counselors beyond the social justice perspective to better serve the African American student.

### **Historical Educational Context**

An understanding of the long-standing challenges faced by African American people in pursuit of education is critical to any serious discussion of the current state of affairs and, more importantly, how we need to move forward. Indeed, the systematic and regular exclusion of African American students from quality schooling and the public educational process in the United States is well documented, both historically and in current literature (Anderson, 1988; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Blanchett, 2006; Fultz, 1995; Woodson, 1919). The 1600s shaped the denial of education for Negroes<sup>1</sup>, beginning with a multigenerational enslavement of people from Africa by Europeans in the United States and the Caribbean. The systematic denial of education began with “Black Codes,” the restriction of African American people from learning to read or write by penalty of death (Anderson, 1988; Litwack, 1999). Europeans ultimately introduced Black codes as a preventive tactic to maintain Negroes as slaves (Taylor, 2013). The 1700s transitioned the Negro's experience from being denied education to being prohibited to learn. Throughout U.S. slave states, it was declared unlawful for Negroes above the age of five to meet for educational purposes. This prohibitive legislation extended for more than a century for southern slave states (Woodson, 1919). Moreover, the “Negro Act” made it illegal for slaves to move abroad, assemble in groups, raise food, earn money, and learn to read English (Vaughn, 1946).

During the 1800s, Europeans were overtly intentional about dehumanizing African Americans and refusing to fund any form of their educational experience. By 1835, the public education of all African Americans in the South was strictly prohibited (Woodson, 1919). Both northern and southern states refused to require public school funds to be used for African American people until 1849 and then only for segregated schools (Gundaker, 2007). In the

1850s, a turn of events revived the harsh enforcement of the “Black Codes”. African Free Schools in the North were burned and vagrancy laws were enacted; students could be given ten lashes of the whip for attending the free schools (Erickson, 1997). In the southern states, where education of slaves was prohibited, many state legislatures required that all free African Americans leave the state so they would not be able to educate or incite the slave population (Woodson, 1919). In 1896, the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case was used as the legal basis to justify “separate but equal” schooling for most of the 1900s. The legal practice of segregated schools, also known as “de jure” segregation, was common in both the North and the South for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Anderson, 1988).

During the early 1900s, every southern state increased tax appropriations for building schoolhouses, but virtually no tax dollars were given to Black schools (Walker, 1996). Despite the requirement that Black schools be equal to schools White children attended, such conditions were never met. The maintenance of state-sponsored racial segregation in public schools finally ended with the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) decision. Overturning the *Plessy* decision, the *Brown v. Board of Education* (Brown I) (1954) case declared “separate but equal” educational facilities were “inherently unequal” and segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and lacked a strategic plan of implementation (Orfield & Lee, 2005). It is important to remember that the pattern of denial, banning, ill-resourced, and underfunded education for the African American learner was not only an intent to refuse the African American people opportunity for humane growth, it also created a stigma consciousness in the African American people that persists right up until the present day (Kellow & Jones, 2008; Pinel, 2002).

### **Current Educational Context**

In 2003, the West and the South had the lowest proportions of African Americans in intensely segregated schools (32% and 30% respectively), while the Northeast and the Midwest had the highest numbers of segregated schools (51% and 46% respectively) (Orfield & Lee, 2006). The Midwest, and specifically the states of Illinois and Michigan, has consistently illustrated the nation’s most segregated schools (Orfield & Lee, 2006); the state of Michigan, in particular, has remained highly segregated without much change since 1970. Orfield and Lee (2006) found that cities such as Chicago and Detroit have the largest concentrations of students in extremely “apartheid” segregated schools with 99%-100% of African American and Latino students.

The percentage of African American students attending majority non-White schools has increased since the Supreme Court’s *Dowell* decision (1991), which allowed school districts to declare themselves unitary, end their desegregation plans, and return to neighborhood schools (Orfield & Lee, 2006). Orfield and Lee (2006) discovered that the population of African American students attending non-White, intensely segregated schools (schools comprised of 90%-100% of minority population) increased from 66% in 1991 to 73% in 2004. Similarly, the average White student attended schools where more than 78 percent of the student body was also White. Within the last decade, the total growth of African American students in this country is more than twice that of Whites (Orfield & Lee, 2004). Yet, almost 90 percent of African American and Latino students attend poor urban or “hyper-segregated” schools (Orfield &

Frankenburg, 2008). U.S. Census Bureau population projections suggest that by 2050, little more than two-fifths of school-age youth will be White (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010)

A considerable body of research (e.g., Ayers & Ford, 1996; Blanchett, 2006; Kozol, 1992; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Losen & Orfield, 2002) shows that extreme disparities exist both qualitatively and quantitatively between the educational environment of predominantly African American K-12 schools and those that are predominantly White. For example, in 2009, Detroit Public Schools spent \$7,580 per pupil whereas nearby Bloomfield Hills spent \$12,443 per pupil. Detroit Public Schools have a 97% African American and Latino population, whereas Bloomfield Hills has a population of 92% White students (Kozol, 2005). Nationally, predominantly African American urban districts spend less per pupil than do non-urban districts (Ladson- Billings, 2007). Funding disparities present a startling picture of a racially segregated reality; unfortunately, funding disparities are only a small portion of the sizeable list of inequalities faced by African American students.

### **Implications for School Counselors**

**Humanistic Counseling Goals.** Humanistic counseling in theory and technique focuses on an individual's capacity for choice, freedom, creativity and self-development (Scholl & Brady- Amoon, 2014). It is the counselors primary responsibility to respect the student's subjectively experienced needs, sense of purpose and meaning- making ability during goal setting. However, Johnson (2006) asserted that the situation of the African American student cannot be solely explained in terms of their inborn potential or needs. He recommended a contextual humanistic approach as an appropriate lens for understanding the role of the school counselor when working with African American students. In order for this population to be effectively served contextual humanistic counseling suggests that the conditions of the African American student or school environment must be understood from a historical (and present) experience of racism and racial oppression, which has been manifested through the enslavement of Africans in the United States (Johnson, 2006). Therefore, it is critical that school counselors are not only knowledgeable about the sociopolitical history of African Americans (i.e. the aforementioned educational timeline), but that they are also able to explore their own thoughts about African American students. According to Adkison-Bradley (2011), counselors may intellectually support diversity but still harbor feelings or thoughts of superiority or dehumanization of African Americans. As noted by Johnson (2006), how we think about African American students determines how we respond to their needs.

Bohart (2003) asserted that humanistic counseling goals are more likely to be goals for the counselor than they are goals for the clients. School counselors may need to deconstruct their negative conceptualizations of the African American student. Wright (2012) explained that a humanistic approach to counseling does not focus on fixing a problem experienced by a child but rather assists a student in becoming self-directed. As such, school counselors should focus their attention more cogently on mitigating the obstacles that inherently prevent each student from making substantive progress toward the realization of their life goals. A counselor's beliefs about and attitude toward a student may be one of these obstacles. Below are four critical reflection statements school counselors can use to explore their own knowledge, beliefs and role as competent counselors for the African American student.

- “When I am working with an African American student I have spent time trying to find out more about his/her ethnic group, traditions, customs and individual practices.”
- “I am active in organizations or social groups that include a large number of members of African American ethnic groups.”
- “In order to learn more about African American history, traditions and customs, I have often talked to and asked questions of African American people.”
- “I think a lot about how my life and the lives of my students are affected by my ethnic group membership.”

Self-reflection statements such as these require school counselors to engage in an honest personal and professional self-evaluation of their beliefs and any implicit biases they may hold towards African American students. As school counselors are the product of their cultural conditioning, which may be reflected in their counseling and work with racial and ethnic minority students (Moss & Singh, 2015), ultimately being aware of biases can influence the school counselors’ intentional actions. Specifically, strategies associated with cultural awareness and knowledge of self and students can influence school counselors changing their automatically favorable perception of the in-group and negative perception of the out-group; focusing on the student in the context of their culture; or becoming more aware of environmental contexts (e.g., decorations in office, administrative procedures) (Delgado-Romero, Barfield, Fairley, & Martinez, 2005). Recognizing ways in which personal biases and values can affect how a school counselor works with students who are culturally different can assist them in better understanding and connecting with their students.

**Moving away from Deficit Language.** The role of the school counselor in working with African American students has expanded tremendously from developing guidance programs to advocating for change of policy and practices that meet the 21<sup>st</sup>-century students’ need for equitable learning experiences (Love, 2008; Mitcham, Greenidge, Bradham-Cousar, & Figliozzi, 2012; Wilczenski, Cook, & Hayden, 2011). School counselors who understand the meaning and the impact of disparities on African American students’ learning experiences are capable of advocating on their behalf (Wilczenski, et al., 2011). Likewise, when professional school counselors truly believe African American learners are worthy of educational achievement, they will advocate to get rid of the deficit language (i.e., achievement gap, urban education, at-risk students) that plagues our education discussions (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

A deficit view of blaming African American students and families has dominated the educational and counseling arenas. Specifically, the American School Counseling National Model includes a direct pronouncement regarding “achievement gap” and “call to action” for school counselors to promote student success by closing the existing achievement gap (American School Counselor Association, 2012). The adoption and promotion of the term “achievement gap” is an imprudent way to explain and recognize a persistent inequality that has always existed in our nation’s schools. Achievement gap language suggests that each African American student is responsible for his or her educational experience and in turn needs to “catch up” to their White counterparts (Ladson-Billings, 2013).

The dynamics associated with the “achievement gap” construct make it abundantly clear that the notion of “catching up” is exceptionally difficult, given the well-documented structural

barriers that continue to be imposed by society (i.e., historical educational inequalities, adverse socioeconomic conditions, disparities in income, etc.) (Ladson-Billings, 2013). School counseling professionals must un-identify with and un-embrace the term “achievement gap” as a way to describe the scholastic differences between African American students and their White, middle class counterparts. This action demands the school counselor to fulfill more leadership roles within their buildings and throughout their school districts to expose and condemn the repeat of such historical practices (Blanchett et al., 2009). One method of doing this is through an active involvement in the assessment of school culture. School culture assessment includes a purposeful review of the norms, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, traditions and language used within the school community (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). In that way school counselors can provide resources and promote interventions that use affirming language to inspire the African American learner.

**Affirming the African American Learner.** The core principles of humanistic theory (creativity, choice, freedom, and self-determination) and the realities of African Americans’ experience can be used to help students affirm themselves and understand their own psychological functioning as African Americans (Johnson, 2006). African American students have demonstrated resiliency through the illustration of coping strategies, problem solving skills, and support of their racial consciousness and identity (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Harvey & Hill, 2004; Mitcham, et al., 2012). While there is no question that racism, social class and other forms of oppression have exacted a tremendous price for African American students as they strive to realize their human and academic potential. It is important that students are made aware of those capacities.

School counselors are in position to help students become aware and identify their own internal motivators, resiliency, and strengths. Classroom guidance lessons and small group curriculum (see Bradley, 2001; Fuller, 2011; Washington, 2015) that emphasize these strengths are ideal delivery platforms. For example, Fuller’s (2011) Rites of Passage group curriculum can be used to help African American girls: (a) focus conversations about race and gender within identity; (b) discuss how societal descriptors, and judgments play out in their lives; (c) become aware of how issues related to racism and sexism influence ones choice; (d) and examine healthy gains and losses of their individual/group life survival tactics. Similarly, Washington (2015) suggests an exploration of certain hip - hop lyrics as a culturally relevant instrument in highlighting African American male strength, creativity and resiliency. Through the use of books, short stories, media, role models, and practical activities, school counselors can help students begin to redefine their relationship with institutionalized power and recognize their ability to survive enormous odds (Hensfield & Washington, 2015). Notable short story authors include Edward P. Jones, Wallace Thurman, Ernest Gaines and Sherley Anne Williams.

African American students need support while navigating an educational system that once banned their learning, and continues to devalue their presence (Bradley, Johnson & Rawls, 2005). One of a school counselor’s primary responsibilities should be to educate school personnel on issues around race and the African American student’s ability to successfully negotiate the constant environmental and educational challenges. More salient is the education of how to support the personal identity development of the African American student within a system that is shaped according to and organized symbolically around Whiteness (Johnson,

2006). Knowing that aspects of the school environment is influential to the formation of a student's identity development, the school counselor can help school personnel understand the complexities of racial and ethnic identity development. Within the context of humanistic counseling, self-awareness, self-determination, and the desire to strive toward self-actualization are building blocks of self-identity development (Wright, 2012). School counselors can model multiple channels and opportunities to promote racial identity development for the African American student by developing year round culturally relevant ceremonies, rituals, school-wide announcements, and guest speakers. Black history month alone should not be the only time educators promote African American self-awareness, self-actualization and racial-identity development. The school counselor's ability to promote racial identity development for the African American student is an ethical responsibility (Akos & Ellis, 2008). In the end, it is incumbent that school counselors affirm the persistence and self-determining qualities and characteristics that make up the identity of African American students.

## **Conclusion**

A history of racism and discrimination toward African American students has been pervasive in schools (Wiggin, 2007). At every educational level from elementary to high school, African American students have matriculated in a system that does not always express positive attitudes or validate their identity (Weinstein, Gregory, & Strambler, 2004). As demonstrated in the timeline, historically and presently, educational environments and educators have been among the most instrumental systems in the oppression of African Americans (Johnson, 2006; Ladson-Billing, 2006). Unfortunately, most school counselors and educators have been trained in the same system. In this article the authors attempt to educate the mis-educated with regard to the African American learner. The historical portion of this article is used to heighten the awareness of education practitioners who come from a traditional educational system that has excluded the full history of education. The story told in educational and school counselor training programs has also failed to address the resilience, and pursuit for knowledge possessed by the African American learner.

In the future, school counselors will need to move beyond social justice to effectively attend to the social and emotional needs of African American students. School counselors will also need to implement proactive, educational, strategies within their working environment with all stakeholders. Within this context, school counselors must view each African American student from a first-person perspective that honors, cultivates, and advocates for their human needs on multiple levels.

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