

# New Professional Roles and Advocacy Strategies for School Counselors: A Multicultural/Social Justice Perspective to Move Beyond the Nice Counselor Syndrome

Fred Bemak and Rita Chi-Ying Chung

The transformed role of school counselors as advocates is key in reducing the academic achievement gap. Redefining the school counselors' role requires culturally competent practitioners, social justice advocates, and organizational/social change agents. A major obstacle to implementing culturally responsive social justice advocacy and change in schools is referred to as the *nice counselor syndrome* (NCS). This article discusses the insidious effects of NCS and outlines a set of recommendations designed to assist school counselors in moving beyond this syndrome.

Numerous researchers have documented the wide disparity that exists in the academic achievement of students of color and economically impoverished students in comparison with their White middle-class counterparts (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.; Viadero, 2006). These investigators have shown that such academic incongruities are a result of environmental, historical, sociopolitical, sociocultural, and institutional factors rather than students' capabilities (Bemak, 2005; Bemak, Chung, & Sirosky-Sabado, 2005). Given the racial/cultural and economic underpinnings that are linked to the academic achievement disparities that continue to exist in the United States, experts have increasingly directed attention to the new roles school counselors can play to proactively address these differences (Bemak, 2005; Bemak et al., 2005; Ming, 2006).

A major project that addresses the academic achievement gap in the United States in this regard is the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Erford, House, & Martin, 2007). This initiative encourages school counselors to embrace their roles as culturally competent social justice advocates and organizational change agents when working to close the achievement gap. Accepting these new professional roles requires school counselors to significantly alter their traditional ways of thinking and operating by implementing proactive multicultural/social justice counseling and advocacy services that are designed to ensure equal educational access, opportunities, resources, and fair treatment for all students (Erford et al., 2007; House & Martin, 1998).

These are particularly important social justice issues to address because it is well established that the racial/ethnic demographics in the United States, and subsequently the makeup of U.S. public schools, are rapidly changing. These changes include substantial increases in the number of students of

color and poor students in the public school system (Education Trust, 2006; Grieco & Cassidy, 2001; Proctor & Dalaker, 2003; The Urban Institute, 2005). Despite the changes occurring in the United States' demographics and the growing awareness of the need to make substantial changes in the public school system to address the injustices and inequities that underlie the academic achievement gap, many school counselors resist implementing the multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services that are recommended by various experts in the field.

This article explores factors that contribute to the resistance that is manifested by some school counselors who continue to refuse to exercise new professional roles as multicultural/social justice leaders, advocates, and change agents in educational settings. We begin by examining the present state of students' educational achievement from a racial/ethnic/socioeconomic perspective followed by a discussion about the implications of the academic achievement gap on school counselors' roles.

We continue this discussion by exploring various factors that underlie the resistance exhibited by some school counselors in making the sort of professional changes thought to be necessary in successfully addressing the academic achievement gap in U.S. public schools. The nice counselor syndrome (NCS; Chung, 2006) is presented as a way of understanding much of the resistance that counselors demonstrate in failing to make the kinds of professional changes recommended by multicultural/social justice school counseling advocates. Finally, recommendations regarding the ways that school counselors can implement proactive interventions to effectively address the academic achievement gap by assuming the role of multicultural/social justice advocates and organizational change agents are presented.

**Fred Bemak** and **Rita Chi-Ying Chung**, Counseling and Development Program, and Diversity Research and Action Center, George Mason University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Fred Bemak, Counseling and Development Program, George Mason University, MSN4B3, 4400 University Drive, Fairfax, VA 22030 (e-mail: [fbemak@gmu.edu](mailto:fbemak@gmu.edu)).

## The Present State of Students' Educational Achievement

Racial/cultural disparities in academic performance have been clearly established by numerous researchers. Fifty-nine percent of African American, 56% of Latina/Latino, and 52% of Native American eighth-grade students in the United States are below a fourth-grade reading level in comparison with only 25% of their White counterparts (Education Trust, 2006). Other investigators report that only 15% of poor students compared with 39% of nonpoor students achieve a Grade 4 reading proficiency level by the end of their fourth-grade school experiences (Rocha & Sharkey, n.d.). Similar findings are evident when examining math proficiency. For example, 58% of African American, 50% of Latina/Latino, and 45% of Native American eighth-grade students reportedly perform below basic math levels compared with 21% of White students at the same grade level (Education Trust, 2006).

The academic achievement gap that exists in the United States directly contributes to high dropout rates among a disproportionate number of students of color and poor students. Given the large number of African American, Latina/Latino, and Native American students living in poverty (Proctor & Dalaker, 2003), it is not surprising to find that approximately 50% of students in these racial/cultural groups do not graduate from high school (Thornburgh, 2006). Related research findings further indicate that low-income students are 6 times more likely to drop out of high school compared with youth from higher income families.

There is a high social and economic cost when such large numbers of students drop out of high school. This cost is reflected in the fact that those who drop out of school are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, become incarcerated, and have children who also drop out of high school (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006). Although it is generally acknowledged that personal factors lead many students to do poorly academically and to ultimately drop out of school, many underachieving students also report that the unchallenging, unsupportive, and boring nature of their school experiences also contribute to the dropout problem and the academic achievement gap that continue to exist in the United States (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2006).

## What Are the Implications of These Findings for School Counselors?

Commenting on these educational problems, Noguera (2002) stated,

When I look at American Education . . . I know that it is largely about will and belief—that is, do we really believe that all children can achieve and learn at high levels? And so far, the only answer I can come up with is that we don't. We believe that about some kids and not others. (p. 1)

To address the educational challenges that students face, in general, and the challenges in ameliorating the academic achievement gap that continues to exist in public schools, in particular, counselors are encouraged to ask themselves similar questions, such as the following: "As a school counselor, do I genuinely believe that all children can achieve and learn at high levels?" and "If I do, how can I foster greater academic success by helping reduce the academic achievement gap that disproportionately affects poor youth and students of color?"

In an effort to answer these questions in affirmative and pragmatic ways, multicultural/social justice counseling advocates have issued a challenge to education and counseling professionals. In articulating this challenge, Ward (2006) and Lotan (2006) called upon all educators to help build a more equitable and just public education system for all students, one that provides equal access to high-quality education, especially for those youth from marginalized and devalued racial/ethnic and low-income groups. Focusing on high-risk student populations, Lupton (2005) emphasized that educators and school counselors need to collaborate on ways that they can work together to implement a broad range of social justice counseling, advocacy, and organizational change interventions in economically impoverished schools and neighborhoods.

Other researchers have outlined specific interventions school counselors can use to positively affect students' academic achievement through multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change strategies in their schools and communities (Bemak et al., 2005; Fitch & Marshall, 2004; Green, Conley, Barnett, & Benjamin, 2004; Webb, Brigman, & Campbell, 2005). Among the common recommendations that consistently emerge in this regard is the importance of having school counselors move beyond the use of traditional services by implementing more proactive approaches to ameliorate the academic achievement gap. This includes applying a broad range of social justice advocacy intervention strategies that are intentionally aimed at fostering organizational changes to stimulate positive educational outcomes, thereby enhancing students' future career options and life opportunities.

The multicultural/social justice strategies school counselors are encouraged to implement are consistent with the professional advocacy competencies that have been developed and formally endorsed by the American Counseling Association (ACA; Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003). The ACA advocacy competencies represent a comprehensive set of guidelines that assist school counselors in better understanding the types of awareness, knowledge, and skills they need to become effective multicultural/social justice advocates and institutional change agents. These guidelines are relevant for the present discussion because they (a) describe different approaches to individual and systems advocacy; (b) emphasize the importance of promoting student empowerment; (c) identify specific advocacy strategies that are useful to implement when collaborating with teachers, administrators, and other community partners; and (d) stress the need to disseminate

information that complements all of the aforementioned advocacy concepts to a wide constituency base.

In short, the ACA advocacy competencies illuminate the critical need to extend and redefine the important role school counselors can play in addressing the academic achievement gap that exists in the United States by implementing a broad range of multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change interventions in school settings. By implementing the guidelines presented in the ACA advocacy competencies in their schools and districts, counselors are able to redefine their professional roles in ways that will help promote a high-quality education for all students (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House & Hayes, 2002; House & Martin, 1998).

Despite the glaring problem of the academic achievement gap in the United States and the growing literature that emphasizes the need for school counselors to implement new multicultural/social justice advocacy roles and services to address this problem, some counselors are reluctant to use such interventions. Redefining one's professional roles in these ways presents a unique set of challenges and problems that some school counselors are not willing to address (Bemak & Chung, 2005).

Clearly, numerous factors contribute to the resistance that school counselors exhibit in failing to implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change interventions to address the academic achievement gap. This article explores an important although rarely discussed variable that adds to the underlying disinclination by some counselors to do so. This factor is referred to as *NCS*.

## NCS

*NCS* is typically manifested by many good-hearted, well-meaning practitioners who are commonly viewed as being "nice" people to be around and to work with in school settings. These counselors live up to their reputation of being nice people by the manner in which they consistently strive to promote harmony with others while avoiding and deflecting interpersonal conflicts in the school setting.

Counselors exhibiting *NCS* are often noted to be comfortable assuming the roles of mediator and problem solver when working with students, parents, and other school personnel. However, the value these counselors place on being viewed as nice people by others overshadows their willingness to implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services that predictably result in interpersonal disagreements and conflicts with other school personnel, especially those interested in maintaining the existing educational status quo (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1999).

Many school counselors experiencing *NCS* may truly believe in the importance of promoting educational equity for all students and particularly those youth who are from marginalized racial/cultural/socioeconomic groups. However, their overarching concern to be perceived as being nice people, who promote acceptance, peace, and interpersonal harmony

at any cost, leads them to shy away from initiating multicultural/social justice advocacy services that may be viewed as controversial, conflictual, or challenging by other persons in the school community.

In an effort to keep the peace and maintain harmony at their schools, counselors manifesting *NCS* frequently agree to undertake any task that they are asked to do by administrators and teachers. By doing so, these school counselors demonstrate that they are team players who try to be helpful to those who are in need of their assistance, even if assisting these persons compromises the professional services they have been trained to implement in the schools. In short, school counselors exhibiting *NCS* strive to be agreeable by supporting the status quo and avoiding unpleasant realities related to the injustices and inequities many students of color and poor students are subjected to in many public school systems.

Thus, *NCS* is characterized by those counselors who demonstrate a willingness to help perpetuate the status quo by conforming to the expectations and needs of other school personnel and to the current school policies and educational practices that reinforce the inequities that contribute to the academic achievement gap. This typically involves providing counseling services that are designed to assist students in learning new ways of coping with and adapting to situational stressors and unfair practices without also implementing other interventions aimed at fostering constructive environmental/organizational changes that help all students realize their full academic, personal, psychological, and social potential.

Another commonly manifested characteristic of *NCS* is the general willingness of many school counselors to undertake various quasi-administrative/clerical tasks that administrators ask them to do (Bemak, 2000). Among the nonprofessional duties school counselors are commonly asked to undertake are overseeing safety patrol and bus duty responsibilities, lunch monitoring, substitute teaching, and completing an abundant amount of paperwork. Counselors manifesting *NCS* are largely motivated to comply with requests to do such quasi-administrative/clerical tasks to (a) maintain harmony with other school personnel, (b) avoid conflict by not asserting that such duties are inconsistent with the professional school counselor's role, and (c) appear to be agreeable and cooperative when asked to do such tasks.

Essentially, the obsequious school counselor who exhibits *NCS* in these ways helps to reinforce the status quo and diminishes the time she or he might otherwise have to address school policies and practices that perpetuate educational inequalities and unfair treatment of students from marginalized racial/cultural/socioeconomic groups. Effective multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational development change requires that school counselors move beyond *NCS*.

## Moving Beyond NCS to Become a Multicultural/Social Justice Advocate and Organizational Change Agent

It is challenging for many school counselors to avoid being drawn into NCS and to, instead, become effective multicultural/social justice advocates and organizational change agents. When counselors embrace these latter roles, they actively demonstrate their commitment to promote the right of all students to high-quality educational opportunities by confronting school policies and practices and challenging administrative decisions that reinforce rather than eliminate social/educational injustices.

Speaking directly with teachers who intentionally or unintentionally discriminate against students in marginalized and devalued groups or challenging administrators to address various forms of institutionalized educational inequities are daunting tasks to take on in the school setting. Undertaking such work is particularly difficult because it is likely to alienate and frustrate many persons who are content in maintaining the status quo regardless of the professional and respectful manner in which school counselors address these issues. To help counselors acquire a greater understanding of the dangers and stressors that are associated with implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational development services to address these issues, in the following sections, we explore some of the pros and cons of doing such work and examine why the stressors of doing so lead many school counselors to exhibit NCS to avoid negative repercussions from others in their schools.

There are five questions the reader is encouraged to keep in mind when proceeding through the following sections of this article. The first two questions are simply stated as follows: "Why did I become a school counselor?" and "What do I hope to achieve in doing this sort of work?" The next three questions are "What am I doing to address multicultural/social justice issues at my school in general?" "What am I doing to address those systemic factors that contribute to the perpetuation of the academic achievement gap in particular?" and "What sort of professional and personal risks am I willing to take to address these issues in the future?"

How one answers these questions helps determine the degree to which one may be susceptible to NCS or willing to move beyond this syndrome by implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services in their schools in the future. For instance, if a counselor were to list a number of specific interventions she or he is implementing to address the academic achievement gap in the school and describe how these interventions involve taking professional risks, then this counselor would arguably be viewed as being minimally affected by NCS.

However, if a counselor responded to the aforementioned questions by noting that she or he really does not do very

much to implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services to address the academic achievement gap nor take many risks that involve social justice issues that might lead to conflicts with others at work, then this counselor would more likely be operating from an NCS perspective. The following sections briefly describe some of the personal and professional factors that (a) contribute to counselors' increased susceptibility to NCS and (b) discourage many practitioners from implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services to ameliorate the academic achievement gap that persists in the public school system.

## Personal Obstacles

### Personal Fear

Emotional factors contribute in different ways to increasing or decreasing school counselors' susceptibility to NCS and their motivation to implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational development services to address educational injustices and inequities. Many school counselors are fearful of being disliked, subjected to negative peer pressure, and targeted for professional ostracism when they do not conform to the traditional role of being noncontroversial, nice, supportive, and friendly helpers in the school setting. The fear of social and professional rejection is, indeed, a strong inhibitor in becoming a multicultural/social justice advocate and organizational change agent. The emotional ramifications of this sort of personal fear increase many school counselors' susceptibility to NCS.

### Being Labeled as a Troublemaker

Several counseling researchers and theorists have noted that counselors run the risk of being stigmatized as troublemakers when they are actively engaged in promoting multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change initiatives in educational settings (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Sue, 2003; Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, & Israel, 2006). School administrators, teachers, other colleagues, and many students may see such advocacy and organizational development efforts as being outside the expected professional role of school counselors, especially for nice counselors. School counselors who avoid expanding their roles to become multicultural/social justice advocates and organizational change agents increase their risk of becoming vulnerable to NCS.

### Apathy as a Coping Strategy

Another obstacle to counselors' willingness to implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change strategies in schools and a factor that fuels NCS is the apathetic disposition some counselors exhibit when encouraged to implement such interventions to address the academic achievement gap. Personal apathy helps counselors avoid controversy and conflict with other school personnel who do

not support multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change initiatives in the schools. This personal factor leads some school counselors to become complacent with what exists and supportive of the existing status quo at their schools, thereby increasing their susceptibility to NCS.

### Anxiety Leading to Guilt

School counselors who become aware of the lack of opportunities and inequalities afforded to students in marginalized racial/cultural/socioeconomic groups may become anxious about these realities. Such anxiety leads some school counselors to experience personal feelings of guilt, apprehension, and uneasiness. To alleviate these feelings, school counselors may experience a diminished interest and motivation in redefining their professional role in ways that include the provision of multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change initiatives at their schools.

### Anger That May Lead to Ineffective Responses to Injustices

Witnessing the lack of interest and inaction that many school administrators, teachers, and counselors exhibit in failing to address multicultural/social justice issues that are tied to the educational failure of students in marginalized racial/cultural/socioeconomic groups leads some counselors to become angry and resentful. Although such reactions represent genuine and natural feelings that underlie the strength of the character of many multicultural/social justice advocates, strong and persistent feelings of anger and resentment may interfere with the development and implementation of effective advocacy and organizational change efforts. Without harnessing this anger and resentment in ways that lead to constructive and effective outcomes, counselors are likely to isolate themselves and become neutralized by school administrators and teachers who prefer working with counselors who do not feel or express such anger.

### A False Sense of Powerlessness

Many school counselors support the idea that counselors need to play an active role in closing the achievement gap by implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change strategies in educational settings, yet many also believe that they personally have little or no power to redefine their role in these ways.

For some, this sense of personal powerlessness becomes a reason to avoid redefining their professional roles in ways that reflect a genuine commitment for multicultural/social justice advocacy. To reduce their susceptibility to NCS, school counselors must differentiate between those realistic barriers that they face in redefining their professional roles and the self-defined sense of disempowerment as a form of personal resistance. Holding on to the belief about one's powerlessness and subsequent helplessness represents another personal factor that increases one's susceptibility to NCS.

### Personal Discomfort

All of the personal factors discussed previously generate discomfort among those school counselors who are committed

to redefining their roles to include multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational development services. Because the stress from such discomfort can erode even the most resilient counselor's commitment to this perspective, it is important that counselors with a multicultural/social justice orientation consider what they can do to develop a broader threshold in dealing with the discomfort that accompanies such work.

Researchers have noted that it is important for multicultural/social justice counseling advocates to routinely collaborate with like-minded colleagues in the field as a way to deal with this sort of personal discomfort. It is useful to do so not only so they can receive the emotional support and encouragement that buffers the discomfort that commonly accompanies this kind of work, but also so they can develop new ways of thinking about future intervention strategies to implement in redefining their professional roles from a multicultural/social justice perspective (D'Andrea & Daniels, 1995; D'Andrea et al., 2001). D'Andrea et al. described practical strategies that have been tested and found to be effective in developing these sorts of professional/emotional support and development networks on both the local and national levels. Recent multicultural organizational development research findings by Zalaquett, Foley, Tillotson, Dinsmore, and Hof (2008) describe additional ways that innovative multicultural/social justice advocacy have been successfully implemented to build new and lasting collaborative partnerships with counselor educators and other allies in higher education settings as well.

## Professional Obstacles

School counselors who do not fall prey to NCS think differently about their job, professional roles, and personal responsibilities in promoting fairness and justice in society and within the schools where they work. As noted throughout this article, such a perspective typically results in professional behaviors and actions that conflict with others' expectations about the school counselor's role. In addition to the personal obstacles discussed earlier, there are also a number of professional barriers that deter many school counselors from implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy services and increase their susceptibility to NCS. The following section describes several of these professional obstacles.

### Professional Paralysis

When school counselors think about the complexity of the racial/cultural inequities and injustices that are perpetuated in schools, they may feel overwhelmed and confused with the complexity of these problems. These reactions lead many school counselors to ask questions such as the following: "What can possibly be done to address such problems at my school?" "How can I ever tackle such a momentous task?" "Is it really my job to challenge the injustices that underlie the academic achievement gap at my school?" "I do not think one person can create the changes that are necessary to deal with these issues, so why should I try to address

them at my school?" and "What will happen to me if I do raise these issues?"

Questions such as these can create feelings of uncertainty and bewilderment that may result in professional paralysis and inaction. Counselors who allow the complexity of the aforementioned challenges to result in this sort of professional paralysis increase their own susceptibility to NCS. Striving to be a nice person who avoids dealing with the complexities and conflicts that predictably ensue from implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services in educational settings is a much simpler and less stressful way of operating.

#### Resistance Based on Professional Turf Considerations

Although counselors, teachers, and administrators work in the same organizational context (e.g., the school setting), they operate from different views of their roles, responsibilities, and professional turf. Traditionally, many school administrators and teachers have viewed the counselor's role as primarily being supportive of and supplemental to the work done by administrators and teachers. Although it is clearly important for school counselors to work with others in cooperative ways that demonstrate commitment to teamwork, overextending oneself to meet the expectations of other school personnel in order to minimize interpersonal conflict may increase one's susceptibility to NCS.

In contrast, school counselors who operate as multicultural/social justice advocates and organizational change agents are likely to ruffle the feathers of those teachers and administrators who prefer more compliant counselors. Counselors who avoid falling prey to NCS and implement multicultural/social justice advocacy services in their work are likely to raise questions about the ways in which organizational policies and practices may contribute to the academic achievement gap. This may, in turn, breed conflict with others who believe that the counselor may be inappropriately interfering with their professional turf. Two examples of such professional turf conflicts are briefly described in the following paragraph.

A school counselor raised concerns with a social studies teacher about student and parent complaints regarding the manner in which this teacher seemed to systematically give lower grades to Latina/Latino students in comparison with White students in his classes. Another school counselor tried to constructively point out how an assistant principal's disparaging remarks about students of color in staff meetings and the faculty lounge were having harmful effects on others. In both of these situations, the school counselors were told that they were "out of bounds" and operating "beyond the scope of their work" by raising such concerns in consultation with these persons.

#### Dealing With Administrative Edicts

Administrators routinely make decisions that affect school counselors' work. As noted earlier, this organizational factor frequently results in counselors being asked to address various

quasi-administrative/clerical duties that take time and energy away from implementing interventions aimed at addressing the underachievement of students in diverse racial/cultural and lower socioeconomic groups (Bemak, 2000). When faced with administrative edicts that demand school counselors to attend to the nonprofessional activities, many practitioners avoid conflict by capitulating to administrators' wishes. By consistently responding to such administrative edicts in this way, counselors allow others to define their role, help perpetuate NCS, and diminish their ability to address the achievement gap.

It is important to point out that much of the progress realized in the multicultural/social justice counseling movement has been attributed to the repeated use of various forms of constructive confrontations to overcome such organizational impediments (Arredondo, Tovar-Blank, & Parham, 2008). Given the success of using such techniques in the past, counselors are encouraged to consider using various constructive confrontation interventions when dealing with school administrators who view counselors as being responsible for a broad range of quasi-administrative/clerical duties that ultimately detract from the counselor's ability to ameliorate the academic achievement gap. Passively accepting these administrative demands and unquestionably fulfilling such organizational duties represent characteristics of NCS.

#### Perpetuating a Culture of Fear

Currently, in U.S. society, there is a great deal of fear, particularly since September 11. This fear permeates throughout U.S. society and is also evident in schools (Chung, Bemak, Ortiz, & Sandoval-Perez, 2008). Test scores, lawsuits, high dropout rates, fights, and other forms of violence are all concerns for educators. Fear is also a force that perpetuates NCS, whereby some school counselors are immobilized by different fears ranging from social concerns to apprehension about maintaining their jobs. Unfortunately, for some counselors, the end result of such fears is to not take action, to not advocate, and to not tackle serious multicultural/social justice problems, all of which contribute to the perpetuation of NCS.

#### Professional and Character Assassination Efforts

Another organizational factor that relates to the present discussion involves the way some individuals deal with conflicts that arise when multicultural/social justice counselors challenge organizational policies and practices that maintain the academic achievement gap. Challenges to the status quo by multicultural/social justice advocates often lead to efforts by administrators, teachers, students, and even other counselors to raise questions about the multicultural/social justice counselor's professional competence or personal character.

Researchers have reported different types of professional and character assassination strategies that have been commonly used by organizational leaders to discredit social justice advocates who challenge aspects of the status quo that are known to perpetuate unfair policies and practices (Daniels, D'Andrea, & Comstock, 2007). This factor tests the

commitment of those school counselors who are interested in redefining their professional roles in ways that include the provision of multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services to address the ongoing academic achievement gap. It also leads other counselors to fall prey to NCS as a way of avoiding having others raise questions about their professional competence or personal character.

### Job Security

The counselor's continuing efforts to implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services in educational settings may jeopardize her or his job. Several multicultural/social justice researchers and theorists have discussed this factor, recognizing that raising issues of justice, fairness, and equal opportunity in educational settings frequently leads individuals to fall in disfavor with and be subjected to various forms of retribution by administrators and other personnel in ways that threaten these individuals' sense of job safety and security (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Constantine & Sue, 2006; Daniels et al., 2007; Sue, 2003).

Challenging administrators, teachers, and students to consider how they might unintentionally help perpetuate educational injustices and inequities that directly or indirectly contribute to the academic achievement gap can cause similar negative reactions. Concerns may be heightened when counselors receive poor job performance evaluations that, in their opinion, relate to misplaced frustrations, anger, and other negative reactions school personnel have to the counselors' multicultural/social justice advocacy work. Subsequent apprehensions may contribute to increased passivity and inactivity among some counselors and, thus, increase their susceptibility to NCS.

## Recommendations for Moving Beyond NCS to Become Multicultural/Social Justice Advocates and Organizational Change Agents

On the basis of our multicultural/social justice work in the public schools and building on the ACA advocacy competencies (Lewis, Arnold, et al., 2003), we offer the following 16 practical recommendations. These recommendations are presented to assist counselors in avoiding or moving beyond NCS so that they might become more effective multicultural/social justice advocates and organizational change agents in educational settings.

1. *Align multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services with school mission and goals.* All multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services need to be closely aligned with the school's primary mission and goals (Bemak, 2000; Bemak & Chung, 2005). In following this recommendation, counselors are encouraged to

make sure that their work complements six major domains that embody the primary mission and goals of public schools. Thus, when working as a multicultural/social justice school counselor, it is critical to articulate the relationship of the counselor's work to (a) improved academic achievement for all students, (b) better attendance rates and reduced student tardiness, (c) promotion of higher test scores, (d) fewer disciplinary referrals, (e) reduced school dropout rates, and (f) promotion of a healthy school climate that contributes to the other five domains.

2. *Use strategies that are data driven.* It is critical that school counselors use data to demonstrate the efficacy of implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change strategies to achieve the school's primary mission and goals. If the data do not support changes in the aforementioned six domains, then it would be important to redefine the counselor's role and work in these areas.
3. *Do not internalize victimization.* It is not helpful to have school counselors view themselves as being victimized by the personal and professional obstacles that are outlined in this article (G. Cicero, personal communication, August 16, 2006). Professional school counselors who internalize their own victimization run the risk of significantly reducing their effectiveness in promoting a greater level of educational justice and equity.
4. *Remember that the work is toward a greater cause.* It is important to remember that multicultural/social justice advocacy is not about the individual counselor and what makes her or him feel good. Rather, it involves the fostering of social and civil justice in ways that promote fairness, equality, equal opportunity, and equitable access to educational opportunities among all students to assist these individuals in reaching their full human potential regardless of their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.
5. *Be aware of NCS.* It is essential that counselors are aware of the ways that NCS is commonly manifested and to make conscious efforts to prevent this syndrome from interfering with their ability and willingness to implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services in the schools. One does not need to be everyone's friend at the expense of justice, equity, and fairness.
6. *Remember that it is not personal.* A crucial aspect for effective multicultural/social justice work is for school counselors to avoid personalizing negative reactions when breaking from the expectations other school personnel may have regarding the need for counselors to continue to exhibit NCS. It is helpful to remain focused on higher level goals of equitable, fair, just, and nondiscriminatory treatment for all students to reduce the negative feelings one may personally experience

as result of being subjected to negative reactions by other people in educational settings.

7. *Have the courage to speak up and speak out as a multicultural/social justice counselor.* Silence is a means of maintaining and reinforcing the status quo (Chung, 2002). Thus, it is important to appropriately challenge the intentional and unintentional ways in which the existing status quo perpetuates various forms of injustice that result in negative educational outcomes, including the academic achievement gap in the United States. Failure to acknowledge and address the differential and inequitable treatment many routinely experience is to be complicit with the existing problem.
8. *Address environmental, cultural, social, historical, political, and organizational factors that affect students' personal, social, and academic development.* Issues such as oppression, discrimination, institutional racism, poverty, various forms of structural violence, and family problems have a major impact on students' personal and social development and academic achievement (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Bemak & Conyne, 2004). By implementing consultation, staff development, family outreach, organizational change, and community organizing interventions from a multicultural/social justice advocacy perspective, counselors can help students realize their human potential for academic achievement and personal empowerment (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 2003).
9. *Take calculated risks.* Remaining committed to implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational changes that are aimed at addressing social injustices, in general, and the academic achievement gap in schools, in particular, requires taking calculated professional and personal risks. Although potentially difficult and painful, multicultural/social justice advocacy essentially leaves no options but to take such calculated risks in striving to achieve the outcomes discussed earlier.
10. *Allow time for process when implementing multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational changes services.* Multicultural/social justice advocates must balance their desire and tenacity for organizational change with patience. School counselors are taught about the importance of recognizing and respecting how change processes are manifested in personal, organizational, and social development. Counselors differ from other school professionals in that their professional training enhances their understanding of the temporal conditions that underlie individual, organizational, and social change processes. Consequently, school counselors are encouraged to maintain an awareness of how change unfolds and harbor realistic expectations when engaging in the change process, understanding that one-stop interventions or "quick fixes" are generally not conducive to long-term sustained change.
11. *Develop political and personal partners.* It is important that school counselors who want to move beyond NCS collaborate with allies (i.e., teachers, principals, other staff, and parents) sharing similar views and values. Collaborating with these individuals and developing personal and professional alliances with others are vital in working to realize the goals of educational equity and justice in promoting the academic development of all students. It is important to remember that one is not expected to have all the answers to all the challenges when assuming the roles of a multicultural/social justice advocate and organizational change agent (Lewis, Lewis, et al., 2003).
12. *Remember that conflict is part of the package.* For those school counselors who are interested in moving beyond NCS to redefine their professional roles in ways that include multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services, it is necessary to expect interpersonal conflict. Interpersonal conflict simply comes with the territory of expanding one's professional role and breaking from NCS. However, it is helpful to keep in mind that, when handled effectively, conflict can be healthy and can stimulate further individual, organizational, and social development.
13. *Be politically astute and knowledgeable.* It is vital to be knowledgeable of the political dynamics that underlie the culture of one's school and district. Knowing who possesses formal and informal organizational power can be instrumental in effecting multicultural/social justice changes that have the potential to benefit all students. Being politically astute and aware is necessary when one becomes an advocate who works for such social and organizational changes.
14. *Always maintain the high road.* Regardless of the types of resistance one encounters working as a multicultural/social justice advocate and organizational change agent, it is important to operate in a principled and professional manner (Bemak, 1997). In doing so, it is important to not reduce oneself to attacking other persons who may actively try to undermine one's professional efforts or raise questions about one's personal integrity and character. Avoid engaging in senseless arguments and unproductive conflicts with others, while being conscious of the importance of not personalizing others' resistance. Stay the course.
15. *Appreciate the necessity of dealing with uncertainty and ambiguity in the change process.* The process of individual, organizational, and social change always necessitates some level of uncertainty and ambiguity. One skill a multicultural/social justice advocate and organizational change agent must develop in this regard involves learning how to constructively deal with uncertainty and ambiguity. Trusting the process of change and trusting oneself are key components to being an effective multicultural/social justice counselor.



16. *Have faith.* Last, it is important that multicultural/social justice counseling advocates maintain faith in the evolutionary propensity of human development, social justice, and equality. It is essential that counselors maintain this faith as they redefine their professional roles and responsibilities in the schools. Equally important is the recognition that one is building on the work and successes of many other multicultural/social justice advocates whose historical accomplishments have advanced the level of justice and equality school counselors have realized in the schools and contemporary society. In short, it is important to maintain courage in the face of resistance and have the bravery to take a stand for one's convictions and beliefs by understanding the historical tradition and successes upon which the future of multicultural/social justice advocacy is based.

## Conclusion

This article addresses the challenges counselors face in dealing with the inequities and injustices that adversely affect a disproportionate number of poor youth and students of color in U.S. public schools. We suggest that counselors are well positioned to address this complex problem given their unique position in the schools and the professional training they receive in becoming multicultural/social justice advocates and organizational change agents. As noted in various articles included in this special issue, counselor education training programs and other professional development initiatives are increasingly striving to assist counseling students and practitioners to acquire the competencies that are necessary to more effectively implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services in different work settings.

These training initiatives provide a basis from which counselors can redefine their professional roles to address complex problems that are directly related to multicultural/social justice challenges the United States currently faces. This includes but is not limited to the critical need to implement multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational development services to address inequities in the public schools. To do so, counselors must be aware of the personal and professional obstacles to redefining their roles in ways that are closely aligned with the overall mission and goals of educational institutions.

Information presented in this article is specifically designed to enhance counselors' thinking about these obstacles. Particular attention is directed to NCS, the personal and professional factors that increase counseling practitioners' susceptibility to this syndrome, and guidelines counselors are encouraged to consider in moving beyond or avoiding experiencing NCS in their work.

In conclusion, we raise the following questions to challenge counselors to consider the need to move beyond NCS in the schools as they strive to become effective multicultural/social justice advocates and organizational change agents: "If not

you, then who will do this important work?" and "If not now, then when will the multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational services discussed in this article be implemented to address the academic achievement gap in the United States?" Having the courage to step up, speak out, and take professional and personal risks to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities to access high-quality education and are treated fairly in the educational system is a professional imperative, not an professional option.

## References

- Arredondo, P., Tovar-Blank, Z. G., & Parham, T. A. (2008). Challenges and promises of becoming a culturally competent counselor in a sociopolitical era of change and empowerment. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*, 261–268.
- Bemak, F. (1997). Counseling at-risk populations: Keeping the faith. In J. A. Kottler (Ed.), *Finding your way as a counselor* (pp. 85–88). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Bemak, F. (2000). Transforming the role of the counselor to provide leadership in educational reform through collaboration. *Professional School Counseling, 3*, 323–331.
- Bemak, F. (2005). Reflections on multiculturalism, social justice, and empowerment groups for academic success: A critical discourse for contemporary schools. *Professional School Counseling, 8*, 401–406.
- Bemak, F., & Chung, R. C.-Y. (2005). Advocacy as a critical role for urban school counselors: Working toward equity and social justice. *Professional School Counseling, 8*, 196–202.
- Bemak, F., Chung, R. C.-Y., & Sirosky-Sabado, L. A. (2005). Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (EGAS): An innovative approach to prevent high school failure for at-risk urban African American girls. *Professional School Counseling, 8*, 377–389.
- Bemak, F., & Conyne, R. K. (2004). Ecological group work. In R. K. Conyne & E. P. Cook (Eds.), *Ecological counseling: An innovative approach to conceptualizing person-environment interaction* (pp. 195–217). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. (2006). *New report illuminates America's "silent" dropout epidemic*. Retrieved March 20, 2008, from <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/UnitedStates/Education/TransformingHighSchools/Announcements/Announce-060302.htm>
- Chung, R. C.-Y. (2002). Combating racism: Speaking up and speaking out. In J. Kottler (Ed.), *Finding your way as a counselor* (2nd ed., pp. 105–108). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- Chung, R. C.-Y. (2006, March). *Multiculturalism and social justice: School counselors moving forward*. Keynote address presented at the annual conference of the Pennsylvania School Counseling Association, Lancaster, PA.
- Chung, R. C.-Y., Bemak, F., Ortiz, D. P., & Sandoval-Perez, P. A. (2008). Promoting the mental health of immigrants: A multicultural/social justice perspective. *Journal of Counseling & Development, 86*, 310–317.
- Constantine, M. G., & Sue, D. W. (Eds.). (2006). *Addressing racism: Facilitating cultural competence in mental health and educational settings*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

- D'Andrea, M., & Daniels, J. (1995). Promoting multiculturalism and organizational change in the counseling profession: A case study. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *Handbook of multicultural counseling* (pp. 17–33). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- D'Andrea, M., & Daniels, J. (1999). *Youth advocacy*. Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.
- D'Andrea, M., Daniels, J., Arredondo, P., Ivey, M. B., Ivey, A. E., Locke, D. C., et al. (2001). Fostering organizational changes to realize the revolutionary potential of the multicultural movement: An updated case study. In J. G. Ponterotto, J. M. Casas, L. A. Suzuki, & C. M. Alexander (Eds.), *The handbook of multicultural counseling* (2nd ed., pp. 222–253). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Daniels, J., D'Andrea, M., & Comstock, D. (2007, October). *Implementing social justice advocacy and change strategies: Research and practice*. Paper presented at the national conference of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision, Columbus, OH.
- Education Trust. (2006). *Education watch: The nation. Key education facts and figures: Achievement, attainment and opportunity from elementary school through college*. Retrieved March 20, 2008, from <http://www2.edtrust.org/edtrust/summaries2006/USA.pdf>
- Erford, B. T., House, R. M., & Martin, P. J. (2007). Transforming the school counseling profession. In B. T. Erford (Ed.), *Transforming the school counseling profession* (2nd ed., pp. 1–12). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Merrill Prentice Hall.
- Fitch, T., & Marshall, J. (2004). What counselors do in high-achieving schools: A study on the role of the school counselor. *Professional School Counseling*, 7, 172–177.
- Green, A., Conley, J., Barnett, K., & Benjamin, E. (2004). Reflecting on the gap: What can the implementation of an urban school counseling project teach us about the achievement gap. *E-Journal of Teaching & Learning in Diverse Settings*, 2, 9–23.
- Grieco, E. M., & Cassidy, R. C. (2001). *Overview of race and Hispanic origin: 2000* (Census 2000 Brief, C2KBR/01-1). Retrieved March 20, 2008, from <http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-1.pdf>
- House, R. M., & Hayes, R. L. (2002). School counselors: Becoming key players in school reform. *Professional School Counseling*, 5, 249–256.
- House, R. M., & Martin, P. J. (1998). Advocating for better futures for all students: A new vision of school counselors. *Education*, 119, 284–291.
- Lewis, J., Arnold, M., House, R., & Toporek, R. (2003). *Advocacy competencies*. Retrieved August 4, 2007, from <http://www.counseling.org/Counselors/>
- Lewis, J., Lewis, M., Daniels, J., & D'Andrea, M. (2003). *Community counseling: Empowering strategies for a diverse society* (3rd ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Lotan, R. (2006). Teaching teachers to build equitable classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 45, 2–39.
- Lupton, R. (2005). Social justice and school improvement: Improving the quality of schooling in the poorest neighborhoods. *British Educational Research Journal*, 31, 589–604.
- Ming, C. (2006). Programming students for academic success: The PLS—An alternative to traditional tracking. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 29, 3–10.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (n.d.). *Percentage of students within each reading achievement level, Grade 4 public schools: By state, 2003*. Retrieved April 30, 2008, from <http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/results2003/stateachievement4.asp>
- Noguera, P. (2002). Prominent researchers and educators: Convening of prominent researchers and educators in Oak Park. *Network News*, 7, 1–2.
- Proctor, B. D., & Dalaker, J. (2003). *Poverty in the United States: 2002* (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-222). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Rocha, E., & Sharkey, A. (n.d.). *Education: The state we're in. Achievement gaps persist among people of color and the economically disadvantaged*. Retrieved March 19, 2008, from <http://www.americanprogress.org/kf/achievement%20gap.pdf>
- Sue, D. W. (2003). *Overcoming our racism: The journey to liberation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Thornburgh, N. (2006, April 9). Dropout nation. *Time Magazine*, 16, 1–9.
- Toporek, R. L., Gerstein, L., Fouad, N. A., Roysircar, G., & Israel, T. (Eds.). (2006). *Handbook for social justice in counseling psychology: Leadership, vision and action*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- The Urban Institute. (2005). *The new demography of America's schools: Immigration and the No Child Left Behind Act*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Viadero, D. (2006, June 21). Race report's influence felt 40 years later. *Education Week*, pp. 1, 21–24.
- Ward, N. L. (2006). Improving equity and access for low-income and minority youth into institutions of higher education. *Urban Education*, 41, 50–70.
- Webb, L. D., Brigman, G. A., & Campbell, C. (2005). Linking school counselors and student success: A replication of the Student Success Skills approach targeting the academic and social competence of students. *Professional School Counseling*, 8, 407–413.
- Zalaquett, C. P., Foley, P. F., Tillotson, K., Dinsmore, J. A., & Hof, D. (2008). Multicultural/social justice training for counselor education programs and colleges of education: Rewards and challenges. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 86, 323–329.

# Test to Earn CE Credit

Please complete the following test and send your answers (with payment) to the address listed on the form below.

*Note:* Correctly completing 3 of 3 test questions earns 1 continuing education contact hour.

*New Professional Roles and Advocacy Strategies for School Counselors:*

*A Multicultural/Social Justice Perspective to Move Beyond the Nice Counselor Syndrome*  
(*JCD*, Volume 86, Number 3, Summer 2008)

## Examination Questions

- A major project that addresses the achievement gap in the United States and suggests new roles for school counselors is the
  - a. No Child Left Behind Initiative
  - b. New Millennium Counseling Initiative
  - c. National Assessment of Academic Performance
  - d. Transforming School Counseling Initiative
- One indicator of the disparate education in the United States is that low-income students are likely to drop out of high school at what rate in comparison to youth from higher income families?
  - a. Double
  - b. Four times
  - c. Six times
  - d. Eight times
- The authors recommend that all multicultural/social justice advocacy and organizational change services need to be closely aligned with
  - a. Individual counselor philosophy
  - b. Counseling program philosophy
  - c. School mission and goals
  - d. Comprehensive multicultural/social justice public policy initiatives

## Mailing Information for Certificate

PLEASE PRINT CLEARLY:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

ACA Member Number: \_\_\_\_\_

Street address: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

State/Province: \_\_\_\_\_ Zip code: \_\_\_\_\_

Country: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

## Payment Method

Total amount enclosed or to be charged: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

\$18.00 member       \$25.00 nonmember

Check or money order, **made payable to ACA** and in U.S. funds, enclosed

VISA       MasterCard

American Express       Discover

Credit Card #: \_\_\_\_\_

CVC Code: \_\_\_ \_\_\_ \_\_\_      Card Expiration Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
(AmEx, 4 digits above card number; VISA, MC, Dis., 3 digits by signature line)

Cardholder's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Authorized Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

**Return your completed test, form, and payment** (with check or money order made payable to American Counseling Association) to:

Accounting Department/*JCD*, American Counseling Association, 5999 Stevenson Avenue, Alexandria, VA 22304

For further assistance, please contact Debbie Beales at 800-347-6647, x306, or [dbeales@counseling.org](mailto:dbeales@counseling.org)

Copyright of *Journal of Counseling & Development* is the property of American Counseling Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.