Addressing the Needs of Racially, Ethnically, and Linguistically Diverse Students with Disabilities: Suggestions for Professional School Counselors

Ahmad R. Washington, Ph.D., NCC
The University of Louisville

Renae D. Mayes, Ph.D., NCC
Kevin T. Cannon
Ball State University

Abstract

Racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse (RELD) students who have been identified as having special educational needs encounter institutional obstacles that can impede educational attainment. As change agents mandated to uphold the ideals of social justice, professional school counselors can advocate on behalf of diverse students with special needs and their families so these students receive the services they are entitled. Unfortunately, non-counseling administrative duties can interfere with a professional school counselor's ability to adequately serve students most in need of help. To address these institutional obstacles, the authors enumerate professional advocacy strategies school counselors can use to unencumber themselves so they can support the unique educational necessities for racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students with special needs.

Keywords: School Counselors, social justice, special education

Introduction

Approximately 6.4 million students in U.S. public school students ages 3-21 received mandated special education services to address a range of disabilities that would have otherwise had an adverse impact on their educational performance (NCES, 2015). The majority of students with disabilities are identified as having specific learning disabilities (35%), followed by speech/language impairments (21%), other health impairments (12%), autism (8%), intellectual disabilities (7%), developmental delays (6%) and emotional disturbance (6%) (NCES, 2015) As such, these students are entitled to educational interventions and services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; 2004).   The IDEA operationalized the term 'a child with a disability' to signify a student "with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this title as 'emotional disturbance'), orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities" (p. 6).

According to the IDEA (2004), educators, professional school counselors, and other educational leaders are legally obligated to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) including the necessary interventions and accommodations that preK-12 students with educational needs require to succeed. This legislation reflects a belief that the provision of interventions and accommodations enables students who confront educational challenges to achieve immediate and long-term educational success. IDEA also states that once a student has been assessed and diagnosed as having special needs, the onus to provide accessible and free appropriate education rests squarely on the educational institution with the input and collaboration of parents and guardians. In other words, although students with disabilities can encounter a bevy of obstacles as they pursue their educational goals, existing legislation has been devised to ensure that access to

a free, appropriate, comprehensive, and specialized educational plan is not one of them (Rock & Leff, 2015).

While federal legislation like IDEA (2004) provides protections that apply, in theory, to all students with disabilities, pervasive historical and contemporary educational inequities between racially and economically privileged students and their racially and economically marginalized counterparts have often conspired to constrain the educational possibilities of racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse (RELD) students with disabilities (Cramer, 2015). These challenges include, but are not limited to, lower teacher expectations, more restrictive educational settings, limited access to rigorous courses, disproportionate exposure to more severe forms of in-school and out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, and overcrowded and under-funded schools and classrooms environments where exposure to assistive learning technologies and other resources is severely limited (Carter, Fine, & Russell, 2014; Grady & Bost, 2014; Laskey & Karge, 2011; Lucio, 2014; Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014; Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014; Toldson, 2014; Wollak & Koppenhaver, 2011). Not surprisingly, then, RELD students with disabilities often drop out prior to graduation, which can limit post-secondary educational and occupational opportunities. These limitations can have profound personal and socioeconomic repercussions that can often linger into adulthood. As such, it is vitally important that professional school counselors, acting as agents of social change, work diligently to supplant the systemic barriers that often inhibit the path towards positive educational outcomes for RELD students.

School Counselors as Change Agents

Professional school counselors are in a key position to serve as a support for the success of all students in preK-12 schools. More specifically, school counselors focus on the holistic development of all students in the academic, socio-emotional, and

career domains with an understanding that impairment in any domain inherently impacts the positive development in other domains (ASCA, 2012; Chen-Hayes, Ockerman, & Mason, 2014). School counselors have been called to move past traditional models of guidance that centered on reactive approaches and to focus on comprehensive practices that are preventative and data-driven in nature. These practices push school counselors to understand and address systematic social inequities that impact student success (Griffin & Steen, 2011; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Data is both used to understand gaps in access, attainment, and achievement, as well as an evaluative tool to understand how students are different because of the prevention and intervention activities carried out by professional school counselors (Lee & Goodnough, 2015; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). It is important to note that school counselors do not work in silos. In fact, school counselors are called to create a consistent community of support for the success of all students which means teaming and collaborating with school staff, families, and members of the community (ASCA, 2012; Chen-Hayes et al., 2014).

As previously mentioned, school counselors have a stake in the success of all students and actively take responsibility for reducing inequities in preK-12 schools. This is particularly important when looking at students receiving special education services as these students often have unique needs. School counselors play a key role on the multidisciplinary teams that identify areas of need, set annual goals, and make decisions on appropriate supports needed to ensure that the student has access to free and appropriate education (ASCA, 2013; Chen-Hayes et al., 2014). For example, as a part of the identification process, school counselors may help to determine eligibility for special education services by developing a comprehensive understanding of student functioning which includes multiple perspectives from teachers and family members (Geltner & Leibforth, 2008; Owens, Thomas, & Strong, 2011). Additionally, because school counselors have experience in group work and group dynamics, they are qualified to coordinate interdisciplinary teams of education professionals

tasked with collaborating with students and parents to develop an *Individualized Education Plan* (IEP; Milsom, Goodnough, & Akos, 2007). Should it be determined that the student is eligible for special education services, the professional school counselor can help the team create an IEP that incorporates strength-based approaches to ensure healthy development in the academic, socio-emotional, and career domains (ASCA, 2013).

As school counselors contribute to the multidisciplinary team, it is important to note that parents and families serve an even more critical role. Not only are parents and families called to be a part of the team per IDEA (2004) standards, but they also provide key insights to the strengths and challenges that their student face in school and at home. However, when parents are present at IEP meetings they may feel devalued and lack opportunities to provide input prior and during meetings (Bryan & Henry, 2012). Parents may also be disadvantaged when they have limited understanding of how the school system operates in addition to the jargon often used in these professional meetings (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013; Zeitlin & Curcic, 2014). This may lead to parents simply being present at a meeting to "sign off" what other members of the team suggest rather than feeling like a valued partner in the process. Given the potential for parents to be excluded in this process, it is imperative that school counselors help to create an environment that welcomes parents as valued members of the IEP team. As such, professional school counselors should help parents and families understand their rights and responsibilities in the special education process. Furthermore, school counselors should ensure that parent voices are present and heard throughout the special education process by seeking opportunities for communication before and during meetings.

In addition to serving on multidisciplinary teams in special education, school counselors are also called to monitor the implementation of special education services. For example, school counselors should examine data to understand who is identified for special education services. More specifically, school counselors should disaggregate data to understand how different student

groups (e.g., by race, ethnicity, gender, SES) are represented in special education. This is particularly important as nationally, students of color, specifically Black males and Latinos are overrepresented in special education (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010). A disproportionate representation of any group in comparison to the total school population may represent a larger school culture issue (e.g., deficit thinking, unconscious bias, hidden curriculum, etc.) that may push diverse students to the margins, promote underachievement, and increase misidentification of special needs (Artiles et al., 2010; Gardner & Mayes, 2013). In order to address disproportionate identification issues, more professional development and training on culturally responsive educational practices may be needed. For example, when special education identification data is disaggregated, school counselors may find certain groups are overrepresented in special education when compared to the whole school population. This may warrant specific professional development activities aimed at building cultural responsiveness among staff. An example of professional development aimed at building cultural responsiveness may include Boykin's (1994) work on the nine characteristics of Black students, which include spirituality, verve, harmony, movement, oral tradition, communalism, expressive individualism, affect, and social time perspective. This professional development may help staff to build on students' strengths rather than misinterpret student behaviors as needing special education services (Trotman Scott, Mayes, Griffith, Garrett, & Watkins 2015).

Similar to monitoring identification data, school counselors should examine placement data to see the proportionality related to educational environments that students in special education are served. For example, research suggests that despite having similar disabilities students of color are more likely to be placed in more restrictive environments (Artiles, et al., 2010; Cartledge & Dukes, 2010; Raines, Dever, Kamphaus, & Roach, 2012). Although classes in more restrictive environments tend to be smaller, they are more likely to be less rigorous than general education, leaving

students with limited exposure to courses that require higher level critical thinking and problem solving skills (Ahram, Fergus, & Noguera, 2011). As such, these students who are inappropriately placed in more restrictive environments are at a clear disadvantage when it comes to postsecondary educational opportunities. For example, these students may not meet the minimum requirements or have developed skill sets that would lead to admission and success in postsecondary educational opportunities. This lack of preparation may severely limit the career decision-making process, leaving these students in careers that do not match their potential. With this knowledge, school counselors should advocate that students in special education be in settings that most appropriately match their skill set and developmental needs to provide the best setting to reach their potential (ASCA, 2013).

Supporting Racially, Ethnically, and Linguistically Diverse Students with Special Needs

As school counselors have a stake in the success of all students, including those who are in special education, it is important that their school counseling program activities are comprehensive in nature. First, it is important that professional school counselors model their school counseling program after the ASCA (2012) national model where social justice and leadership are at the core. School counselors must align their school counseling program with the mission of school and take a proactive approach in promoting the success of all students. This means that throughout the school year, school counselors are examining data to locate critical needs and implementing a comprehensive curriculum that goes beyond individual counseling, but incorporates group counseling, classroom guidance, grade level, and school-wide prevention and intervention activities. With these particular practices in place, school counselors can monitor the success of students of color in special education and identify areas were more supports or professional development is needed (Trotman Scott et al., 2015).

In order to implement comprehensive programs, school counselors must work closely with school administrators, teaching and expanding on their current knowledge of just what school counselors can do beyond scheduling and testing (Dahir, Burnham, Stone, & Cobb, 2010; Zalaquett & Chatters, 2012). This is important as role definition and clarification typically is framed by school administrators' understanding of professional school counseling. That being said, school counselors are encouraged to work collaboratively to advocate for their positions, define annual expectations, and set goals with school administrators (ASCA, 2012). School counselors should also use other school meetings (e.g. student support team meetings, faculty meetings, etc.) to share with educational stakeholders about school counseling programming and activities. These meetings can set the standard for school counselors demonstrating their skill set and role in special education, especially in serving and supporting racially and ethnically diverse students with special needs. School counselors can also use this meeting to advocate for the specific needs of racially and ethnically diverse students and bring attention to systemic issues, like racial biases and deficit-thinking, that may require more professional development and training for school staff (Trotman Scott et al., 2015). It is important to note that frequent communication and collaboration with school staff while implementing a comprehensive school counseling program is critical in helping all educational stakeholders understand the role of professional school counselors.

Barriers to School Counselors' Ability to Do This Work

Despite the existence of clearly articulated directives about how school counselors should serve as educational advocates for students, particularly marginalized students and those facing considerable odds to succeed (ASCA, 2012; The Education Trust, 2009), institutional constraints often prevent this from occurring. While ASCA (2012) has repeated emphasized the ideal student to school counselor ratio is 250:1, school counselors in large

metropolitan cities are routinely expected to work in schools with student caseloads twice as large (ACA, 2014). This reality is exacerbated by the fact massive budget cuts constrain the number of school counselors school administrators can feasibly employ (Clark, 2014). As a consequence, it is not at all uncommon for school counselors to be saddled with non-counseling administrative duties (e.g., designing master schedule, test administration, disciplinarian, etc.) (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012) that can interfere with the direct and indirect services they should ideally be delivering (ASCA, 2013). Even when these administrative responsibilities place school counselors in proximity to students, they can foreclose other facets of the school counselor role if assigned too frequently.

In our estimation, these duties become cumbersome when they impede the important advocacy work school counselors desperately need to provide on behalf of RELD students with special needs. When school counselors are burdened with non-counseling administrative duties to the extent this creates an imbalance with actual counseling duties, they become relegated to the role of "quasi-administrators" which can undermine their counseling and advocacy skills (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012).

Using the ASCA National Model to Address Students' Educational Needs

The ASCA (2012) National Model is a framework school counselors can use to proactively collaborate with RELD students with disabilities, their families, other educational leaders and stakeholders to strategically address educational needs. Below the authors discuss the integrative nature of the comprehensive model and how the components enable school counselors to support culturally diverse students with special needs in achieving short and long-term educational success.

Classroom Guidance

Classroom guidance is a time-efficient modality that gives school counselors consistent contact with large numbers of students at once (ASCA, 2012). Acting as an educator, school counselors can engage students through the guidance curriculum in a developmentally appropriate manner to address topics germane to the holistic development of all students, but especially RELD students with special needs. One potential topic that often comes up in the school counseling nomenclature is how habitually students experience bullying and harassment in schools. For students with special needs, especially students from economically disenfranchised backgrounds, the nature of the harassment is distinctly different from the antagonizing non-disabled students' experience (Maag & Katsiyannis, 2012; Rose, Swearer, & Espelage, 2012). So, for instance, if a school counselor were to learn that a student with a speech impediment is being physically tormented for speaking with a deliberate cadence, or that a student with cerebral palsy is teased verbally because she is ambulatory only with the assistance of a wheelchair, the school counselor might seriously consider integrating a sequence of bullying modules into the existing classroom guidance schedule to see that this behavior ceases.

Group Counseling

Group counseling is tailor-made to address important personal/social, academic and career concerns in elementary, middle, and secondary school settings (Gladding, 2016). Through group counseling school counselors can work with RELD students on a number of topics including strategies to make informed decisions, identify personal, academic, and career goals, and to self-advocate (Owens, Thomas, & Strong, 2011; Rock & Leff, 2015). School counselors can design or replicate pre-existing evidenced-based group interventions specifically for RELD students with disabilities to address issues they may encounter,

including educational progress, personal and social development or career exploration. The Student Success Skills (SSS) is one group intervention that has garnered attention for its ability to produce tangible increases in students' academic performance (Brigman & Webb, 2007; Webb & Brigman, 2007). There is empirical support suggesting the SSS group intervention made a statistically significant improvement in students' performance on key state standardized assessments (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, FCAT).

In addition to helping RELD students in acquiring the skills necessary to achieve academic success, groups are also excellent mediums for stimulating interpersonal learning and providing socioemotional support (Gladding, 2016; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Group dynamics over the progression of the group are known to foster a sense of connectedness and cohesion among group members. Because students with disabilities are often subject to ridicule and isolation, a group may provide a sanctuary where universality and other beneficial therapeutic factors (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) are consistently present.

Individual Planning

Providing students with assistance in next step decision-making is a vital component of the professional school creed. As it relates to students with disabilities, IDEA (2004) makes clear that under no circumstance should the presence of a disability circumscribe the postsecondary educational opportunities of students with disabilities. IDEA has helped students with disabilities carve their way through preconceived notions of what is educationally attainable. In fact, since the early 1990s, there has been a steady increase in the number of students with disabilities attending postsecondary institutions (National Council on Disability, 2000; Stodden & Conway, 2003).

Unfortunately, while the overall number of students with disabilities has increased, RELD with disabilities lag behind their White peers in participating in postsecondary educational

opportunities (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004). This is likely due to the challenges these students face in securing rigorous preK-12 educational experiences and deficit perspectives and low expectations that often characterize these students as disciplinary problems (Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, & Moore-Thomas, 2012; Skiba, Horner, Chung, Rausch, May, & Tobin, 2011;Trotman et al., 2015). Should RELD students with disabilities successfully complete high school, they are more likely to have transition plans for vocational training programs despite wanting to attend college (Cameto, Levine, & Wagner, 2004; Trainor, 2005).

The reauthorization of the IDEA (2004) has heightened the need for transition planning for students with disabilities. As such, these plans must be documented in individualized education plans (IEPs; Levine & Nourse, 1998). These transition plans should include child's needs, strengths, and interests tailored to specific postsecondary settings (i.e., college, the workforce, independent living, etc.). Because of this requirement, it is paramount that professional school counselors and special educators work together to ensure the college and career readiness of all students with disabilities, especially students of color (ASCA, 2010). Milsom and Hartley (2006) highlighted five key tasks for school counselors involved in transition planning. They include (1) providing transition plans for all students; (2) providing information about support services available in postsecondary education settings; (3) helping students identify important questions to ask personnel in postsecondary settings; (4) providing individual planning; and (5) helping students develop self-advocacy skills.

Stodden and Conway (2003) recommended integrating strategies to raise self-determination and improve self-advocacy skills into the secondary school curriculum, along with encouraging students to have a greater role in the IEP process. Students who possess self-advocacy skills and knowledge regarding the differences between the laws that protect them in the secondary school setting and those in IHEs will adapt better to the transition (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Kochhar-Bryant, Shaw, and Izzo, 2007; Lock & Layton, 2001; Stodden & Conway, 2003). Students

with disabilities in IHEs are responsible for: disclosing their disability to an office of disability services (ODS), providing their ODS with documentation to verify their disability, and must self-advocate for the necessary accommodations (Battle, Dickens-Wright, & Murphy, 1998; Gajar, 1998; Salter, 2009). Students gain self-advocacy skills and legislative knowledge through active involvement in their transition planning, as encouraged by school counselors and others involved in their IEP (Graf, Whelley, & Jones, 2004; Hurtubis Sahlen, & Lehmann, 2006).

Stodden and Conway (2003) emphasized the important role technology plays in aiding students in educational settings and highlight the need for secondary students to become technologically literate before transitioning to postsecondary settings. This is especially important given previous research that suggests students with disabilities are almost half as likely to own a computer (Kaye, 2000). Increasing knowledge of and competence with assistive technology can enhance postsecondary and career participation by students with disabilities, including participation in increasingly popular online distance education programs (Burgstahler, 2002; Kim-Rupnow, Dowrick, & Burke, 2001). Stodden and Conway (2003) also emphasized the importance of connecting students with Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) services, whose services include postsecondary education supports and can aid students in accessing higher education.

In addition, to working directly with students, it is dually important for school counselors to work with families in the transition planning process. This is particularly important for families of color, as they are likely to have a minimal role in the transition planning process. In fact, culturally and linguistically diverse families report similar challenges as their students in the IEP process, which include experiences of discrimination, lack of information and communication, and a power imbalance between themselves and school staff (Geenen, Powers, & Lopez-Vazquez, 2005; Kim & Morningstar, 2005). Interestingly, IDEA (2004) requires that families are included in the IEP process. As such, it is important that school counselors work with school staff to create

a positive environment where all families, especially culturally and linguistically diverse families, are seen as valued partners in the IEP process including transition planning (Trotman Scott et al., 2015). Further, school counselors should help families locate community supports and resources that can help with their child's postsecondary endeavors in addition to providing more information about the student and family rights under IDEA and ADA (Baditoi & Brott, 2011).

Systems Support

Successful system support initiatives empower school counselors to have positive impacts on the lives of RELD students with disabilities. When school counselors engage in system support by publicizing how their comprehensive counseling programs enabled them to nurture the strengths of RELD students with special needs, people inside and outside of the building see school counselors as resourceful, knowledgeable and valuable educational professionals. As a way of promoting system support and contributing to the positive outcomes of RELD students with disabilities, school counselors can consult periodically with colleagues, parents, and community stakeholders (Hall, 2015). Communicating with colleagues, parents/guardians, and people from the surrounding community helps school counselors determine if RELD students with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environments, and have access to extracurricular activities and post-secondary preparatory programming (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; Owens, Thomas, & Strong, 2011).

So, rather than being relieved of counseling duties or being inundated with some of the aforementioned administrative responsibilities that obstruct the delivery of counseling services, system support initiatives help school counselors circulate narratives about how their services contributed to the successes of RELD students with disabilities. Being recognized as assets can engender institutional and public support for school counselors and their work, which can go a long way in helping RELD students

with disabilities pursue their educational endeavors throughout the PreK-12 pipeline and well after they graduate high school (Dollarhide & Saginak, 2012; Rock & Leff, 2015). Having mobilized support for their comprehensive counseling program and the educational and counseling services it allows, school counselors can confidently contribute to the design and implementation of IEPs and 504 plans for future RELD students with disabilities.

Conclusion

Under the law, specifically IDEA (2004), RELD students are entitled to an unfettered free appropriate public education (FAPE). Rather than ancillary pieces, school counselors are expected to play an integral role in coordinating and implementing the necessary educational interventions and accommodations to help ensure that the needs of RELD students with disabilities do not go unaddressed. Empowered by organizations like ASCA (2012), school counselors must object, at all costs, to constant and unreasonable requests that they perform noncounseling related duties. We are not suggesting these measures be undertaken as simple acts of spite or defiance or to usurp the authority of school administrators; on the contrary, we contend this stance represents a desperately needed act of professional advocacy that frees school counselors from the obligation of performing menial tasks that do not capitalize on their unique skillsets and interfere with the important advocacy work school counselors should ideally satisfy in relation to RELD students with special needs.

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