

**Increasing Career Self-Efficacy Through Group Work With Culturally and  
Linguistically Diverse Students**

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### **Abstract**

Group counseling is a practical way for school counselors to deliver career services. School counselors face competing demands on their time coupled with the problematic student to counselor ratios that often exist in schools, group counseling thereby offers a pragmatic solution. This article provides implications for implementing group counseling career interventions in urban schools in order to illustrate ways that school counselors may close the achievement gap and advocate for all students in pursuance of career goals. Thus, group counseling initiatives will help to meaningfully provide students with real world skills both for school and in the world of work.

*Keywords:* Group work; career; urban school counseling

## **Increasing Career Self-Efficacy Through Group Work With Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students**

Urban school counselors continue to seek transformative interventions that will reach culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and provide equitable opportunities so that all students may reach their academic and career potential. The long-standing problem of the achievement gap accounts for much of the barriers CLD students face as they approach tests, class placement, and ultimately career development. The achievement gap is defined by the difference between the academic achievements of low socio-economic status (SES) students and middle-class SES students; furthermore, an achievement gap persists between Black and White students even when SES is similar (Rothstein, 2004). Professional school counselors (PSCs) are called to bridge this gap through planned interventions and culturally competent approaches that meet the social, personal, and career concerns of students (Erford, 2011; Mitcham- Smith, Hayes, Jackson, Bryant & Fefer, 2010).

According to Erford (2011), social justice and advocacy must be the foundation of a comprehensive school guidance plan, which PSCs should tailor to meet the needs of all students. School counselors are called to provide data on how advocacy services benefit all students' personal, social, and academic concerns as well as data on the status and closing of the achievement gap (Erford, 2011). Sue and Sue (2008) noted CLD students account for 45 percent of the public school population. This statistic directs that PSCs are called to counsel students of diverse cultures on a more frequent basis as the student body continues to change on a national level.

### **Advocacy: An Imperative Role for School Counselors**

With a growing emphasis on cultural competence, the term advocacy has been stressed in two national initiatives aimed at transforming the profession of school counseling. The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) position statement on equity for all students reflects the significance of the PSC advocacy role:

“Professional school counselors recognize and distinguish individual and group differences and strive to value all students and groups equally. Professional school counselors advocate for the equitable treatment of all students in school and in the community” (ASCA, 2006). In keeping with this standard, The Education Trust has developed a National Center for Transforming School Counseling (NCTSC), dedicated “to transforming school counselors into powerful agents of change in schools to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement for low-income students and students of color” (NCTSC, 2009).

In addition to what is previously mentioned, the gap is also existent between low-income and high-income students' career preparedness. School counselors are called to facilitate adolescent career development and to help all students select areas of career interest and discover ways of applying this knowledge (Alliman-Brissett, Turner, & Skovholt, 2004; ASCA, 2005; Mitcham-Smith et al. 2010; Owens, Simmons, Bryant & Henfield, 2010) to reduce the gap. Nationally however, CLD students are unlikely to have the same educational experiences as White students (Cartledge, Singh, & Gibson, 2008), and they are not likely to have the same exposure to professional career roles (Mehan, 2007). Consequently, these educational deficiencies for CLD students leads to the persistence of the achievement gap.

## **Barriers to Social Justice**

More specifically, Black, Latino, and Native American populations remain significantly underrepresented in advanced classes (Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008). This may be partly due to the tendency of educators and community members to hold low expectations for the academic and career development of Black students in particular (Bemak, Chi-Ying, & Siroskey-Sabdo, 2005). Ford, Harris, Tyson, and Trotman (2002) term this low expectation some educators hold for Black students a “deficit orientation,” which accounts for fewer Black students in advanced classes and their over-representation in special education classes (Cartledge et al., 2008). Furthermore, another invisible contributing factor to the achievement gap is school tracking, whereby students are placed on college-bound or non-college-bound paths, subsequently limiting exposure to rigorous curriculum and diverse educational experiences (Martin & Robinson, 2011; Mehan, 2007).

While examining the achievement gap for CLD students, Ford et al. (2002) attributed much of the biases of educators to a lack of cultural understanding of the Black community and a belief that Black students themselves suffer cultural deprivation. The urban school counselor is called to advocate for those students viewed with a deficit, and adopt a social justice perspective in order to reach all students (Simcox, Nuijens, & Lee, 2006; Singh, Urbano, Haston, & McMahan, 2010). Part of the career development standards counselors are called to adhere to includes goal-setting and decision-making skills as well as facilitating adolescents’ exposure to work in groups (ASCA, 2005). There is a need to provide CLD students with more career awareness of academic and professional roles (Mehan, 2007) as well as exposure to career interest

inventories and searches. With this said, it is incumbent upon the urban school counselor to embrace the role of advocacy so that all students are able to achieve (Lee, 2005; Mitcham-Smith, 2007; Simcox et al., 2006) their social, academic, and career potential (ASCA, 2005).

### **Advocacy Through Group Work for Career Exploration**

Just as the school counselor role is changing to embrace social justice, advocacy and leadership, a shift is occurring for the counselor to be culturally competent and create a culturally competent school system (Simcox et al., 2006). Through ASCA's suggested group counseling, CLD students may be exposed to a greater range of career opportunities as well as fostering positive attitudes among students of different backgrounds. School counselors should provide interventions that include helping CLD students achieve their potential beyond their years in school by giving them practical tools as well as challenging them to think critically (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007). In order to work toward closing the achievement gap and rid the educational system of a pervasive deficit orientation toward CLD students, a paradigm shift is necessary in how to address student needs while facilitating career development. School counselors should address "deficit thinking" and its consequences that entail "a heavy reliance on tests with little consideration of biases, low referral rates of CLD students for gifted education services, and the adoption of policies and procedures that have a disparate impact on CLD students" (Ford et al., 2008, p. 293). The purpose of this article is to explore how PSCs may holistically advocate for CLD students through group counseling career interventions.

## Career Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy describes an individual's beliefs about his or her own ability to successfully engage in a task to obtain a desired outcome (Bandura, 1977). One's level of efficacy impacts choices made, level of effort invested, level of perseverance and whether tasks are approached with hesitation, confidence, or avoidance. A significant issue, which abounds career choice and development literature, is how one's career interests and pursuits may be limited by one's perception of incapability. Perceptions of efficacy have been theorized to originate from four main avenues: (1) *performance accomplishments*, (2) *vicarious learning* which includes role-modeling, (3) *verbal persuasion and support from others* and (4) *emotional arousal*. These interact reciprocally and in turn affect one's performance judgments, which then influence actions and decisions (Stickel & Bonett, 1991).

Career self-efficacy describes one's belief that one can successfully accomplish job duties, locate employment and advance within a field of choice (Brooks, Cornelius, Greenfield, & Joseph, 1995). Spokane and Hawks (1990) identified some other variables that may influence career self-efficacy of CLD students; these are:

- Limited consideration of certain careers.
- Reduced expectations that stated aspirations will be attained.
- Increased salience of external factors in career choice.
- Need for structured interventions to overcome social constraints.
- Increased stress for women and minority group members (p.106).

The overrepresentation of minorities among high school dropouts and the underprivileged has been an area of concern for decades (Fawcett & Maycock, 2001;

Hawks & Muha, 1991). Black males and females in America are also “more likely to be unemployed, underemployed and limited to occupations at lower socioeconomic levels” (Chung, Leob & Gonzo, 1996).

These alarming statistics begin to illustrate the tremendous need for effective early intervention with CLD students. High school students need to be equipped with effective career counseling opportunities to encourage and allow them to experiment with and discover new interests, skills and abilities. Career planning at the high school level should also include activities to not only expose the student to new careers but allow them to test their compatibility with these.

### **Applying Gottfredson’s Theory**

In light of the many obstacles that interrupt urban student access to opportunities, urban school counselor advocacy necessitates facilitation of student career development. Through her theory of circumscription and compromise, Gottfredson (1996) analyzed how both individual psychological factors as well as broader sociological factors impact children during the course of their career development. Children consider their career options differently as they come of age (Gottfredson, 2004; Shoffner, 2006). At younger stages of development beginning as early as pre-school, children’s career possibilities tend to be very broad; they may envision themselves in a variety of roles (Gottfredson, 1996; Shoffner, 2006). However, as children grow older, their career interests become narrower due to social expectation, including within their socio-economic status and gender role expectations (Gottfredson, 1996). Women, in particular, may eliminate roles traditionally associated as being male positions. Gottfredson (1996) acknowledged that all individuals become

cognizant of “images of occupations,” or a vision of people who work in a given field through which they see groupings of similar personality and lifestyle (p.184). Individuals come to assess the social ranking of particular lifestyles, and compatibility with their own social background, race, and gender (Gottfredson, 2004; Shoffner, 2006). Incumbent upon these social comparisons, CLD students may not have exposure to see an array of occupations in their immediate community or to witness professional roles and responsibilities within their family system.

It is important that urban school counselors understand and incorporate CLD student exposure to careers in high school. In addition to cultivating student career interest, the ASCA (2005) career standard required school counselors to possess an educated awareness of equity and facilitate understanding of student access to career opportunities. Furthermore, CLD students may perceive high career expectations as “acting White” (Grantham & Ford, 2003, p. 20). Consequently, CLD students who more easily succumb to peer pressure and those who have not progressed far in terms of their racial identity development may not access their career potential even if they are attracted to a professional role (Grantham & Ford, 2003; Mitcham-Smith et al. 2010; Owens et al., 2010). In the case of Latino students, the acculturation process tends to impact career decisions, and there is often a clash between school and community cultural values (Constantine, Kindaichi, & Miville, 2007). Furthermore, Mexican Americans often have dreams of high status careers; however, many tend to perceive an inability to accomplish these goals (Constantine et al., 2007). Depending on their racial identity development stage, some Black students may place a higher priority on

peer views than career aspirations, leading to an identity that is socially acceptable rather than scholarly (Ford et al., 2002).

Gottfredson (1996) concluded both men and women tend to compromise by limiting career options; this process is complex and often unconscious (Shoffner, 2006). However, Gottfredson (2004) argued that adults and adolescents may become aware of their professional potential as they begin to critically assess and plan career paths that best fit personal abilities. The role of the PSC is to facilitate student career exploration and awareness through a comprehensive career counseling curriculum. The PSC responds to the need to facilitate student career development through building career self-efficacy along with closing the achievement gap. According to the ASCA National Standards (2005), school counselors are called “to provide the foundation for the acquisition of skills, attitudes and knowledge that enable students to make a successful transition from school to the world of work, and from job to job across the life span.” A school counselor’s attention to career exploration will touch upon personal-social and academic domains since these areas are interrelated. School counselors may effectively facilitate career development through group counseling sessions.

### **A Call to the Profession for Career Advocacy**

School counselors are held to the ASCA standard of providing career knowledge and facilitating career exploration for all students (ASCA, 2005); these career incentives are for every student though they are more visibly being applied in the era of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (Stone & Dahir, 2004). School counselors have worked to maintain accountability standards through data indicating student progress as well as the progressive closing of the achievement gap (Erford, 2011). This change in educational

policy combats the traditional at-risk career status of CLD students and enables a rendering of guiding services that reaches students of all income levels (Jackson, Kacanski, & Rotenberg, 2007). However, Butler (2003) argued views that presented Black students as at-risk both academically and in terms of career choice. He further stated that it can be dangerous due to the predestined implications of statements such as this. In other words, it is possible that this label may fail to counteract the placement of CLD students into non-college bound classes.

### **Group Counseling for Adolescents**

Urban school counselors possess the professional skills to reach CLD adolescents (Bemak et al., 2005; Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007) and group counseling is an effective means to reach more students at once and more rapidly close the achievement gap (Perusse, Goodnough & Lee, 2009). Beyond providing the benefit of reaching more students at one time, group counseling may also offer a developmentally appropriate service for adolescents. Group work accomplishes this through addressing adolescent needs for socialization and providing opportunities to facilitate peer acceptance within the group (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Perusse et al., 2009). From a developmental and pedagogical perspective, students learn best from each other, therefore group counseling provides both preventive and remedial counseling services (Erford, 2007). Gottfredson's theory may be applied in groups by asking students to consider the role gender, race, and SES play on perceptions of career opportunity, and to evaluate how they may overcome barriers to success (Gottfredson, 2004). Students may first discuss whether they think the impact of their support system,

environment, and experience limits their consideration of career options and later determine which career paths they wish to eliminate and pursue (Gottfredson, 2004).

**Addressing career needs of CLD students.** Group counseling offers services to a number of students facing unique challenges in an urban environment (Bemak et al., 2005), and provides a forum in which school counselors may teach skill sets to help students become more academically and career driven. PSC's advocacy role is particularly crucial in an urban school as they may teach minority students to advocate for themselves and each other through group counseling and a comprehensive curriculum (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). According to Clark and Breman (2009), PSCs may also adopt an inclusion model, which demonstrates "traditional large-group guidance, small-group counseling, and individual work, all taking place in a classroom setting" (p. 9). This model, originally from special education literature, caters to diversity as accommodations are made for students of every level and counselors manage to offer services to students while relieving them from the stigma of leaving the classroom (Clark & Breman, 2009).

Due to rising student-counselor ratios and the ever-present achievement gap, PSCs are in a position where they must become more efficient in how they approach marginalized students (Hippolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Empowerment has been identified as an imperative focus for CLD students in career and academic groups (Bemak et al., 2005; Lee, 2005; Hippolito-Delgado and Lee, 2007). Hippolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) suggested PSCs address the achievement gap and foster the awareness of marginalized students by creating consciousness-raising groups and encourage educational experiences to support creative learning for these students.

Furthermore, they suggested exposure to empowered community members and courses or lessons in ethnic studies will encourage social action on the part of students and encourage participation in community and student groups (Hippolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007).

If given the opportunity to interact with community members, who advanced professionally, CLD students may find that occupational goals and success appear more reachable (Gottfredson, 2004). This degree of exposure is particularly significant for students from lower income backgrounds who may be afraid to explore career options not previously explored in their families. Additionally, these experiences may facilitate an opportunity to confront the fear of separation from the community *through achievement* (Gottfredson, 2004). Such interventions take group counseling a step further by combining school community advocacy levels with community-outreach.

### **Interventions for CLD Student Groups**

The value of cultural competence cannot be overlooked in constructing groups that are empowering for CLD students (Lee, 2005). Trust is a fundamental goal of group counseling, and in order for students to trust a culturally different counselor or culturally different peers, there must be continual group building of trust (Ibrahim, 2010). Building trust is particularly relevant to the subject of career and practical skill building that is both personal and professional; it involves a discussion of bridging past understandings and family career roles with personal beliefs concerning future goals. Thus, PSC leadership engages group members while providing blocking when necessary in order to facilitate meaningful bonding for successful group building and respectful discussion. Furthermore, a goal of school counselors remains in not just advocating for CLD

students, but in teaching these students how to advocate for themselves, and in so doing, cultivating their self-efficacy (Astramovich & Harris, 2007). In looking through the lens of circumscription and compromise, school counselors may cultivate awareness and self-efficacy of CLD students through career groups.

### **Group Building: Dreams Portfolio**

Along with the necessary skill building and practical application intended for career groups, school counselors must creatively engage students in ways that will stimulate imagination and reach adolescents with different learning styles in order to effectively reach all group members. Thus, an Identified Scholars group is proposed that will help students to not only position themselves in view of scholarly and career opportunities, but to help students think in creative and constructive ways. Within the counseling group, the central aim of the school counselor will be to assist students to foster a scholarly career identity. Students will consider the role models available to them and partake in activities that require consideration of individuals they identify as “like them.” Thus, students will become aware of how roles may be stereotypically associated with specific cultures and genders, ways to challenge these social notions, and peer and self-perceptions (Gottfredson, 2004.) Observing these layers surrounding career potential allows students to process what has likely taken place unconsciously (Gottfredson, 1996). Thus, the school counselor will facilitate group member filtering of career possibilities they deem possible or unlikely for themselves.

The Identified Scholars group will consist of four sessions, during which school counselors will uphold the following group objectives: students will be able to identify careers, develop a career identity, determine steps towards career goals, become

aware of social barriers, and articulate how to overcome possible obstacles. Students will journal throughout the course of the four weeks. The group will include homework assignments to help establish continuity between group sessions, and each group member will maintain their own Dream Portfolio. Collage, media, and discussion activities will render student processing of ways they personally identify and their culture in relation to the world and success available to them. The first week will include a music collage, which will be a way for students to identify personal strengths and motivation through songs. Students will add empowering lyrics along with motivational sayings to their Dream Portfolio. Each week will serve to empower students through creating a community of scholars, each in search of his or her own career potential.

The second week will introduce bibliotherapy in the form of the Langston Hughes poem, *A Dream Deferred*. A thematic piece for the group, *A Dream Deferred* lends itself well to Gottfredson's (2004) theory of circumscription and compromise. Students will be asked to process the meaning of a dream that lingers or is compromised. Students will voice reactions within the psychoeducational group setting as well as journal their personal reflection. Week three will include an internet search of careers and inventories. The fourth week will incorporate closure along with a final reflection on career aspirations and the Dream Portfolio.

The group consists of four weeks that will help students to successively build on their career self-efficacy. Students will compile a Dream Portfolio in which they will identify points of inspiration, such as statements and mentors. They will journal about readings and their thought processes in considering career options. Students will identify measurable goals and ways that they foresee themselves beating the odds, or

obstacles they identify throughout the group work. Finally, students will be given a list of resources as well as asked to collaborate on ways to find further career opportunities, such as through computer guidance career services (Fowkes & McWhirter, 2007).

Career group interventions can assist students in exploring cultural prescriptions that tend to be assigned to various life roles (Erford, 2007). To maximize time, professional school counselors may also collaborate with classroom teachers to implement group projects that infuse career related topics. For instance, students learning about government may complete group projects also focused on qualifications of legislators, salaries, job descriptions etc. This can also be adopted and modified to other classes and allow for the cultivation and integration of the academic and career development of students (Erford, 2007).

Another option is to infuse that of a career planning portfolio which helps students engage in “purposeful planning, exploring, information gathering, decision making and reality testing related to their life roles” (Erford, 2007, p. 209). This portion of the portfolio will assess student readiness for the life roles. Students will use assessments such as the Self-Directed Search (SDS) and others to assess for career interests, skills, work-related values and other career relevant data about themselves. A family genogram can be incorporated into the career planning portfolio. The family genogram is one activity that can be used to help students process these topics. Professional school counselors help students discuss their perceptions and interpretations of these expectations and how they influence their career self-efficacy, career decision making and planning.

Many minority students shy away from professional occupations due to lack of exposure, lack of adequate knowledge, perceived inabilities and lack of professional role models. Professional school counselors can help change this by (1) providing interventions that allow students to explore professional careers they would otherwise not be exposed to, (2) provide interventions that allow students to safely become immersed in professional roles and (3) afford students a great level of control and flexibility over their desired outcomes. Implementing an organized mentoring program where students are paired with successful professionals is another intervention that has the potential of positively impacting the career self-efficacy and career decision making of CLD students.

### **Implications for Practice**

CLD students are presented with barriers to receiving the fullest education available to students; this seems to occur because of traditional educational practices such as tracking as well as due to a deficit orientation among educators (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Martin & Robinson, 2007; Mehan, 2007). Mehan (2007) demonstrated how traditional tracking practices in education perform a disservice to CLD students in that it divides the education students receive; those in low-track classes will receive neither the academic nor career knowledge that higher-track courses present. Tracking lends itself to teacher bias and the continued placement of CLD students in lower-track or special education courses, perpetuating the trend of fewer collegiate or professional opportunities for CLD students (Ford, 2002; Mehan, 2007). Finally, Mehan suggested “detracking” schools and implementing an alternative “multiple pathways” curriculum instead (2007, p. 11). In this case, while giving students a plethora of academic

opportunities to choose from, the coursework is challenging in each of the subject area concentrations from which students select. Similarly, Martin and Robinson (2011) suggested the policy of school counselors to steer some students into college-prep courses while navigating others toward technical or other tracks is no longer an acceptable process particularly because current educational policies increasingly ask that all students be prepared for the option of college.

Clearly, group counseling services offer a way to help students achieve career success while making developmental strides through simultaneous social learning and peer acceptance (Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2007; Perusse et al., 2009). It is a central goal of school counseling to advocate for students, and the tools of self-efficacy and empowerment are recommended components of group practice, particularly when working with CLD students (Astramovich & Harris, 2007).

School counselors are the transformative leaders for CLD students. As the achievement gap is bridge and social justice is achieved the public schools will achieve a success that would provide students with the tools to compete in the global market. Career preparedness is an essential part of establishing a framework for students to become successful. Career group interventions can increase the self-efficacy of CLD students through career awareness and career exploration. Thus, the aim of group counseling career interventions ends not in barriers encountered within the educational system, but in providing students with tools to overcome obstacles in any setting.

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## **Biographical Statements**

Michelle A. Mitcham, Ph.D., CFM is an Associate Program Chair and Associate Professor at Argosy University in the College of Psychology and Behavioral Sciences, Sarasota, Florida. Dr. Mitcham, a Counselor Educator, has worked as a Professional School Counselor, Florida Supreme Court Certified Family Mediator and Parenting Coordinator with high-conflict divorcing parents. Her research agenda embodies components of social justice and advocacy in counseling to include multicultural competencies for counselors, transformational multicultural pedagogy, school counselor advocacy in promoting diversity and multicultural issues, and mentorship.

Wendy-lou Greenidge, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor in the Counselor Education program at the University of South Florida Polytechnic in Lakeland. Her research focuses on multicultural competencies for counselors, career counseling, culturally appropriate counseling for Caribbean families, and infusing technology in counseling. She is also the Chi Sigma Iota Advisor.

Michelle Bradham-Cousar, MA, CRC is a Rehabilitation Counselor and Vocational Consultant for the Department of Education providing career counseling guidance for individuals with disabilities. Michelle Bradham-Cousar is a doctoral student in the Counselor Education program at the University of South Florida.

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