

**School Counselors' Use of Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling
Competencies (MSJCC) Leadership Framework in Title I School Settings**

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Abstract

School counselors have been called to be leaders in K-12 schools (ASCA, 2012; Education Trust National Center for Transforming School Counseling, 2009). School counseling leadership emphasizes the promotion of equitable academic achievement, career development and social/emotional development for all students. To do this, school counselors must be culturally competent, socially just, and able to advocate for the needs of the diverse students served. School counselors working in Title I schools are uniquely challenged as the population served is often vulnerable, disadvantaged, or marginalized. This article promotes the use of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) as a leadership framework to assist school counselors in their leadership development and equity work for students - specifically in Title I schools.

Keywords: school counseling, leadership, multicultural counseling, social justice, Title I schools

School Counselors' Use of Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) Leadership Framework in Title I School Settings

Leadership and advocacy are essential aspects of comprehensive school counseling programs and practices. School counselors are called to deliver services that support the academic achievement, career readiness, and social/emotional development of all students through the coordination and facilitation of their comprehensive counseling programs (ASCA, 2019). Additionally, counselors are socially, morally and professionally responsible for addressing social issues (Betters-Bubon & Schultz, 2017) and eliminating environmental obstacles. School counselors are obligated to be leaders in K-12 schools (ASCA, 2019; Education Trust National Center for Transforming School Counseling, 2009). Subsequently, practicing school counselors across the United States have transformed their mindset to that of educational leaders and systemic change agents, in order to help all students succeed (Erford, 2019).

Historically, leadership in schools was viewed as the domain of school administration, due to its authoritative power or position within the hierarchical structure in schools. Within this structure, leadership has not been inherently connected to school counseling, and school counselors typically have not viewed themselves as leaders (Mason & McMahon, 2009). Today, the school counselor's role has changed from solely providing student support, to leading a comprehensive counseling program. These changes in the field have now transformed the role and responsibilities of school counselors (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). School counselors are now trained to critically examine the connections between social, familial, emotional and behavioral factors and

academic achievement (CACREP, 2016). These skills enable them to know in which situations to provide leadership and support the emergence of leadership in others (Sink, 2009). The ASCA National Model from the American School Counselor Association (2019) emphasized themes such as leadership, advocacy, systemic change and collaboration.

The current social-political climate in the United States has further fueled the need for school counselors to be effective leaders in the school setting. As the demands of the school system increases, it is imperative that school counselors are viewed as a major component of the leadership team. According to ASCA (2019) *leadership* is defined as the “capacity or ability to guide others” (pg. 148). As leaders, school counselors provide vision, facilitate new processes, motivate others, and take risks to guide comprehensive school counseling programs, promote academic and student development, and enhance professional identity (Shillingford & Lambie, 2018).

Like leadership, advocacy is a key component in serving as an effective school counselor. The ASCA Ethical Standards (2016) state that school counselors must “affirm the abilities of and advocate for the learning needs of all students” (pg. 1). In school counseling, advocacy involves collaborating with others (e.g. education and community stakeholders), within and outside of the school, to help eliminate barriers, create opportunities for all students to learn, ensure access to a quality school curriculum and promote positive systemic change in schools (ASCA, 2019). School counselors utilize both leadership and advocacy skills to promote equal and equitable outcomes and opportunities for all students regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or intellectual ability.

School counselors often experience systemic barriers that impact their ability to lead and advocate on behalf of the students and families. Systemic barriers exist on many levels; ranging from classroom, school, district, state and federal levels. School counselors often observe or are met with these barriers as they work on behalf of the students and families they serve. Once these barriers are identified, school counselors use school data (e.g. attendance, suspension, free/reduced lunch) to support leadership, advocacy, and collaborative efforts with education stakeholders to foster systemic change and remove barriers that prevent all students from academic achievement. The implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program allows school counselors to proactively work with students, parents, school officials, and the community to overcome these barriers. Utilization of an identified leadership model such as Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) leadership framework could also serve as an evidence-based guide toward eradicating these barriers (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018).

School counselors' leadership in Title I schools is discussed in this section. Initial discussion centers on school counselor leadership and advocacy. Next, the unique nature of Title I schools will be discussed. This is followed by a discussion on MSJCC leadership framework; as a specific leadership approach that school counselors can employ. Finally, a case vignette is provided to demonstrate how school counselors use the MSJCC leadership framework to intervene to successfully support and assist students.

Understanding Title I

Title I is a federally funded program for school districts that is designed to improve academic achievement of disadvantaged students (United States Department of Education, 2004). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2004), the basic principles of Title I stipulate that schools with large concentrations of low-income students will receive supplemental funds to assist in meeting students' educational goals. From the inception of the Title I program in 1965 to its present form in Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), its legislative purpose has been consistent and clearly communicated to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments (United States Department of Education, 2004 & 2016). Title I was originally enacted under the ESEA to provide financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children can meet challenging state academic standards (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare: Office of Education, 1969).

To qualify for Title I funds, students from low income families must make up at least 40% of the school's enrollment (United States Department of Education, 2018). Federal funds are given through four legislative formulas that are based primarily on census poverty estimates and the cost of education in each state (United States Department of Education, 2018). Additionally, schools must make adequate yearly progress (AYP) on state testing and focus on best teaching practices in order to continue receiving funds (United States Department of Education, 2018). Students

served by Title I funds include migrant students, students with limited English proficiency, homeless students, students with disabilities, neglected students, delinquent students, at-risk students or students in need of reading assistance (United States Department of Education, 2004).

Title I schools are built on the shared belief that students are fully capable of attaining academic success, closing the achievement gap and experiencing educational equity (Desimone, Smith, Philips, 2013). Major challenges to reaching the shared belief or academic goals in Title I schools include understanding how to effectively meet the social/emotional and educational needs of students of low socioeconomic status (low SES). Students from low SES backgrounds often face challenges at home (e.g., community violence, single parent household) that make it difficult to overcome barriers or focus on personal achievement in school. Sadovnik (2009) contended that students will benefit if researchers can seek to better understand why students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds do less well in school and to provide pragmatic policy recommendations for successful school reform and to reduce the achievement gap. Due to the challenges that students in Title I schools experience and the potential impact it can have on their academic achievement, there is a need for school counselors to utilize leadership skills to better support these students.

Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies Framework: A Model Toward School Counselor Leadership

Multicultural and social justice competencies framework (MSJCC) provides a systemic and clear approach to effectively providing school counselor leadership. MSJCC merges critical components of both multicultural and social justice counseling.

The vision of this leadership approach is that stakeholders will work to address inequity issues impacting school aged children in the school setting. This framework requires school counselors to address issues of power, privilege, and oppression that impacts students and their academic achievement, career development, and social/emotional wellness (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). The framework also requires school counselors to explore those domains (academic, career and social/emotional) in the context of an oppressed society and intervene more contextually and systemically (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018).

School counselors employing MSJCC as a leadership framework work within developmental and dynamic quadrants to promote multicultural and social justice competencies (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). These quadrants encourage school counselors to be competent in attending to *intersectionalities* such as race, gender, class, disability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation and religion and how they shape the lives of students and their families (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). School counselors employing MSJCC understand the cultural values, beliefs and world views of students and their families through these intersectionalities. School counselors use this awareness, knowledge and skill to advocate- display action (AKSA; Ratts et al., 2016) for the academic, career and social/emotional needs of students.

School counselors implement a socioecological model to effectively contextualize the student within the MSJCC quadrants and then activate AKSA. Essential to implementation of this socioecological model component of the framework is the school counselors competence in navigating ecological spaces/spheres (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). This model allows the school counselor to contextualize the student on various

levels that include the following: intrapersonal, interpersonal, institutional, community, public policy, and global international (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). Each level encompasses ecological spaces/spheres; examples within each level include the following: intrapersonal (e.g. individual attitudes, beliefs, values), interpersonal (e.g. friends, family), institutional (e.g. school, church, work) (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2018). School counselors should use their training and competence in navigating these spheres to determine where the focus of attention is needed, intervene to successfully support and assist the student, and provide resources where they may be lacking. The following case vignette about Emmanuel and subsequent leadership interventions provide examples of how a school counselor working within the MSJCC framework would employ leadership interventions utilizing the quadrants, AKSA, and socioecological model.

Case Vignette: Emmanuel

Emmanuel is a 10 year old African American male who resides in a rural community in the south eastern part of the United States. He is a fourth-grade student who attends a Title I school. On a typical day Emmanuel eats breakfast in the cafeteria after an hour long bus ride to school. Although Emmanuel has the potential to be successful in school and make friends, he finds it difficult because of his academic, social and behavioral challenges.

Emmanuel also has mental health concerns, has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD); and has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). He takes medication for ADHD. Unfortunately, Emmanuel may not take his medication regularly because of financial

issues. His mother is currently unemployed and his stepfather works as a custodian. When Emmanuel does not take his medication, it is very apparent at school. He is very active in class, easily agitated, and often gets upset when he raises his hand in class and is not called on by his teacher. His aggression sometimes escalates very quickly and results in him flipping desks and tables. He also throws chairs and displays physical aggression towards peers and adults. Emmanuel has been hospitalized three times in the last year for psychiatric (therapy and medication management) treatment.

Emmanuel and his mother have shared information that has been useful in determining how best to support him and his family. Emmanuel's mother has shared in IEP meetings that mental health professionals and teachers have expressed concerns about Emmanuel's activity level dating back to pre-school. Emmanuel has shared with his teachers and school counselor that he witnesses his mother and stepfather arguing and fighting about finances and his stepfather's obsessive drinking problem. Emmanuel shares that he constantly worries about his mother's safety while he is at school and finds it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork. As a result, Emmanuel is failing his classes and is often very sad.

School Counselor Leadership Using MSJCC Framework

School counselors can utilize MSJCC leadership framework in working with students and their families in Title I schools. Because many of the students served in Title I schools represent a vulnerable/disadvantaged population, it is even more critical that school counselors understand the importance of this framework in addressing their academic, career and social/emotional issues. Examples of these interventions are

utilized below to highlight how a school counselor might use MSJCC to work with Emmanuel in a Title I school setting.

The authors of this article are female, African American school counselors. As such, they utilize two of the four quadrants to work with the student in the case vignette- Emmanuel. The school counselor begins working from quadrant IV (marginalized counselor- marginalized student) as both individuals represent oppressed groups. However, understanding that the quadrants are dynamic and developmental, the school counselor moves between quadrant I (privileged counselor- marginalized student) understanding that the school counselor possesses social power over the student.

In line with AKSA, the school counselor is self-aware and understands that her educational background, professional and socioeconomic status influences her worldview. She is also aware of her values and beliefs and recognizes they may be different from the students and perhaps his family. Additionally, the school counselor works to ensure her biases do not negatively influence her ability to work with the student and build a healthy rapport.

The school counselor explores the impact intersectionalities such as race, class, gender, disability/mental health have on the student's identity influence and educational experience. The school counselor establishes a plan to address many of Emmanuel's issues within the socioecological model. The school counselor contextualized Emmanuel's challenges within most of the ecological spaces/spheres.

To address intrapersonal issues, the school counselor provides individual, brief-resolution focused counseling to explore the impacts of multiple marginalization on the student's identity influence, educational experiences and mood. Attainable goals were

developed between the school counselor and Emmanuel and focused on social skill development and making friends, listening skills, following rules, setting boundaries, managing anger, time management and staying organized- to name a few. Additionally, the school counselor uses person-centered counseling to build a rapport with Emmanuel so that he recognizes that he has an ally at the school.

Concurrently, the school counselor addresses interpersonal issues by collaborating with the school social worker and on site mental health counselor. This allows the team to provide extended/wrap around services to Emmanuel and his family. These extended services to address interpersonal issues include home visits by the school social worker to explore some of the challenges in the home that may be negatively impacting Emmanuel. The onsite mental health team works to provide intensive therapeutic support for Emmanuel. Additionally, the team has referred the step-father for substance abuse counseling, the mother and father for couple's support and the mother for individual counseling to explore healthy relationship dynamics. The mother has been referred to an agency for employment support. Each individual on the team (school counselor, school social worker, mental health professional) provides different levels of follow-up services to determine how to continue to support Emmanuel and his family, and to ensure they are active in obtaining the needed support.

The school counselor addresses institutional, community and public policy issues by using school data to better understand the overrepresentation of African American boys in the special education program at her school. Additional research yields district, state and national data reflecting the disparity in the identification and labeling of African American boys in special education programs. The school counselor created a brief

report that outlines the aforementioned information and shares it with her principal, school faculty at the faculty meeting, district administration, community leaders, school faculty and parents at the school board meeting. Eventually, a district committee is formed (made up of school faculty, district administration, community leaders, students and parents) to look at the disparity and the school counselor is asked to chair the committee. The goal is that this committee can make recommendations to inform how to better work with African American boys and to contextualize their cultural experiences in order to reduce misdiagnoses, or overrepresentation of this group in special education programs.

By utilizing MSJCC leadership framework, the school counselor was able to follow a clear model for working with Emmanuel. Emmanuel represents many vulnerable/disadvantaged/marginalized students in Title I schools. The MSJCC framework allowed the school counselor to display leadership skills to effectively work with Emmanuel within the context of his experiences. To do this, the school counselor had to do a self-assessment, effectively work across cultural differences, provide diverse counseling skills, collaborate with school/district/community personnel, and advocate for equity.

Conclusion

School counselors working in Title I schools are tasked with ensuring academic, career and social/emotional wellness for diverse students. Meeting these demands are challenging as students in Title I schools are migrant, have limited English proficiency, homeless, have disabilities, neglected, delinquent, at-risk or in need of reading assistance, and have low socio-economic status- to name a few. As such, student need

is high and the complexity of the challenges are higher. Managing and negotiating these challenges in a Title I school setting requires school counselors to display strong leadership skills. MSJCC framework provides a clear leadership model grounded in multicultural and social justice to effectively meet the unique needs of diverse yet often underserved students in a Title I school setting.

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