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Empowering Chicana/o and Latina/o Students: A Framework for High School Counselors

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Abstract

Researchers have documented that traditional counseling approaches to school counseling have failed to meet the social and cultural needs of Chicana/o and Latina/o high school students. The intent of this paper is to examine the role high school counselors can play in facilitating academic achievement for Chicana/o and Latina/o students by drawing on an empowerment approach to school counseling.

Introduction

School counselors are charged with empowering Chicana/o and Latina/o[1] students who encounter systemic oppression in the forms of academic tracking, classism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, and other biases (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Dickson, Zamora, Gonzalez, Chun, & Callaghan Leon, 2011; Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Martinez, 2003; Ortiz & Gonzales, 2000). Academic tracking is the sorting and grouping of students in schools, which disproportionally places Chicana/o and Latina/o students in remedial courses limiting them to college-bound curriculum (Rubin & Noguera, 2004). The call for the transformed school counselor places counselors in the positions of activists and leaders in contemporary educational reform by emphasizing social and educational equity and equal opportunity for all students (Bemak & Chung, 2005). High school counselors must be willing to go beyond their comfortable boundaries in order to become social change agents and advocate for marginalized youth in the educational process (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). This requires high school counselors to teach students about their rights and formulate partnerships with school administrators who will assist in working toward social justice and decreasing the achievement gap for students of color (Bemak & Chung, 2005).

Holcomb-McCoy (2007) defines a social justice school counselor as one who takes… "responsible action that [and] contributes to the elimination of systemic oppression in the forms of racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, and other biases" (p. 17). While scholars and practitioners alike recognize the need to practice social justice

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The term Chicana/o and Latina/o will be used to represent people who trace their ancestry to Latin-America.

school counseling, there continues to be a lack of social justice school counseling in practice. Therefore, empowerment theory can serve as a theoretical framework for this practice (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007).

Although high school counselors are overloaded (Tornatzky, Pachon, & Torres, 2003) with the number of students on their caseloads as well as other school duties they have to perform, counselors need to "understand their students' needs and help them achieve not only academically but socially, emotionally, and psychologically" (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007, p. 18). There is a sense of urgency in the school counseling profession to provide quality educational services for all, including the Chicana/o and Latina/o population (The Education Trust, 2009; Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Given that a surge of Chicana/o and Latina/o students reside in California, scholars have documented the importance of advocacy for Chicanas/os and Latinas/os students in California (Bemak & Chung, 2005; Yosso & Solórzano, 2006; Zarate & Burciaga, 2010).

By 2020, Chicanas/os and Latinas/os are projected to be California's majority population (The Education Trust, 2011). Therefore, the educational achievement of Chicana/o and Latina/o students is important to the success and vitality of California and the nation. Moreover, through their professional roles and duties, school counselors are uniquely positioned to advocate for academic achievement for students of color including Chicanas/os and Latinas/os (Bemak &Chung, 2005). For this reason, this paper seeks to investigate how high school counselors can promote personal and community empowerment on the behalf of Chicana/o and Latina/o high school students to help facilitate their academic achievement.

Empowerment Theory for the Professional School Counselor

The author will utilize *empowerment theory* (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007) to provide the framework on how high school counselors can become social change agents by facilitating academic achievement for Chicana/o and Latina/o students. According to Gutierrez (1995), "empowerment is the process of increasing personal, interpersonal, or political power so that individuals, families, and communities can take action to improve their situations" (p. 229). Further, Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) asserted that empowerment theory, then, can serve as a theoretical guide for the practice of social justice in school counseling. In adhering to empowerment theory, "professional school counselors might become active in the process of liberating the students of marginalized communities by promoting personal empowerment of students, promoting community empowerment, and engaging in activism on behalf of their students" (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007, p. 329).

Empowerment theory is rooted in the educational theory of Paulo Freire (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Freire (1970) emphasized the humanity of the oppressed and their needs as learners and rejected the methods of education that serve to keep the oppressed submerged in a reality of passivity, unconscious of their potential as agents of social change (Maldonado, Rhoads, & Buenavista, 2005). Freire (1970) proposed that praxis is vital to the development of empowerment since empowering action is strengthened by critical reflection which leads to action. Hence, in building on the work of Freire, Hipolito-Delgado and Lee (2007) stressed that empowerment is a process that can take place at three levels: the personal, the community or organizational,

and the sociopolitical. Personal empowerment involves formulating several key ideas, including critical consciousness, positive identity, and taking social action (Gutierrez, 1995).

A person can develop a critical consciousness by changing his or her beliefs and philosophical views on the social ills by actively engaging in social change (Gutierrez, 1995). Carr (2003) stated that critical consciousness, "involves several subprocesses: interpreting one's positions and relationships in society, creating and/or recreating an identity in relation to one's environment, and effecting social change" (p. 15). Gutierrez (1995) posited that individuals who identify with groups who have historically been oppressed share a common experience and form a group consciousness about their differential status in society. Members from these groups are then able to connect their personal problems within the social order of society. Through this process, members discover their identities and develop their self-awareness (Freire, 1970).

Second, as individuals go through the process of critical consciousness, mobilization for political action emerges (Carr, 2003). Breton (1994) declared that, "The consciousness-raising process [is] not only a personal process of cognitive restructuring, but a . . . politicization process and a liberation process which create a demand for socio-political restructuring" (p. 31). That is, as people mutually reflect on their social positions and circumstances, new approaches are framed and action is taken (Carr, 2003). High school counselors can help facilitate community empowerment and civil action by encouraging students to participate in their communities through social advocacy groups. This can assist students in their development of self-confidence with respect to community organizing and assist students in the action portion of critical consciousness. This is a milestone in the developmental process of empowerment.

Last, students can be emboldened to partake in the associated student body in their school, faculty/student advisory meetings, and parent-teacher committees (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). These activities will provide students the opportunity to begin to take control of their sociopolitical reality and support their effort for the betterment of their community (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Through the adoption of empowerment theory as a guide for this paper, the author will focus on themes related to school counselor advocacy and empowerment among Chicana/o and Latina/o students. With a growing surge of Chicana/o and Latina/o students in public high school (Yosso & Solórzano, 2006), it is vital that high school counselors understand the needs of the students they serve and the potential of using empowerment theory.

School Counselors and Chicana/o and Latina/o Empowerment

Scholars have documented that school counselors can help Chicana/o and Latina/o students experience academic success through personal empowerment (Aviles, Guerrero, Howarth, & Thomas, 1999; Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007; Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Personal empowerment is a process whereby individuals seek to rid themselves of internalized racism and actualize a healthy identity (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Bemak and Chung (2008) argued that in collectively joining partnerships with multiple stakeholders, school counselors promote optimum educational opportunities for all students, and become effective multicultural advocates and institutional change agents. Even more specific to Chicana/o and Latina/o students, Aviles et al. (1999) posited that

school counselors must draw from an empowerment theoretical framework and actively promote activities in the school that positively reflect Chicana/o and Latina/o culture and history. These activities can be offered to all students and can range from youth empowerment conferences to Chicana/o and Latina/o course offerings at respective school sites. School counselors can advertise these opportunities through school wide announcements and classroom presentations.

School counselors may facilitate youth empowerment conferences for all students at their school sites by involving Chicana/o and Latina/o adult roles models to conduct various workshops such as positive ethnic identity development, community involvement, and panels of college students to share their personal success stories. Additionally, school counselors may take an active approach in advocating for Chicana/o and Latina/o course offerings on their campus. Chicana/o and Latina/o curricula and/or cultural pedagogy is relevant, meaningful, and affirming of Chicana/o and Latina/o identities (Sleeter, 2011). Chicana/o and Latina/o courses offer a "curriculum that is culturally and historically relevant to the students, focus[ing] on social justice issues, is aligned with state standards but designed through Chicano intellectual knowledge, and is academically rigorous" (Sleeter, 2011, p. 14). The academic focus in Chicana/o and Latina/o courses is designed to provide students with an alternative perspective on the history of Chicanas/os and Latinas/os in the U.S. allowing students to make sense of the social and economic conditions that exist in their communities. In her dissertation, Ramirez (2008) found that a Chicana/o and Latina/o studies course offered at a California High School increased Chicana/o and Latina/o students' ethnic identity, increased their critical consciousness, and positively impacted their educational and life aspirations. Chicana/o and Latina/o courses provide all students with the tools to reflect on history and its current impact on their lives and experiences which allows them to critique existing social conditions. When Chicana/o and Latina/o students see themselves in their cultural reality, they become insiders whose knowledge is valued and useful to academic learning (Ramirez, 2008). In this context, students' thinking and problem-solving abilities are triggered and engage in deep intellectual discussions where an action driven approach is taken (Sleeter, 2011).

Other scholars have affirmed culturally relevant pedagogy to be successful for students of color. DeCuir-Gunby, DeVance Taliaferro, and Greenfield (2010) examined teachers', counselors', and principals' perspectives on culturally relevant pedagogy on students of color. Using interviews, the researchers explored participants' perceptions regarding the curriculum's impact on students' academic achievement, sense of ownership, sense of belonging and cultural competence, and the development of critical consciousness through community service. School counselors were supported and advocated for the curriculum because of its focus on cultural empowerment and its mission to civic engagement. One high school counselor commented:

> There's no other group in this school [for high achievers] that…students of color are involved in. For students who are achieving, who are excelling, the 3.0s or higher, this is the only place that these students can go to. And I think they found out that this is a place where they can talk to each other. And I've heard all kinds of conversations about prejudices. (p. 193)

As presented in empowerment theory, this study is evident of the power of raising critical consciousness among students resulting in what Freire (1970) termed "praxis," whereby individuals recognize their oppression and take action in his/her community.

Scholars have utilized quantitative data to demonstrate the effectiveness of empowerment theory. In a recent study, Chun and Dickson (2011) examined 478 Latino students to investigate the relationships of parental involvement, culturally responsive teaching, sense of school belonging, and academic self-efficacy on their overall academic performance. The researchers found that the variables mentioned above were significant predictors of the students' overall academic performance. In terms of personal empowerment, Chun and Dickson found that through culturally responsive teaching and the integration of a cultural frame of reference, Latino students felt a sense of empowerment and pride in their culture, resulting in their academic improvement. As noted in empowerment theory, students see the value of their culture which results in students building a positive identity, contributing to healthy psychological and emotional adolescent development and improved academic achievement.

In contrast to the Chun and Dickson study, Aviles et al. (1999) conducted a qualitative study using focus groups to explore the perceptions of 72 Chicana/o and Latina/o students' experiences on why they dropped out of high school. The researchers reported that several themes influenced students to dropout including attendance, non-participation in school activities, alternative educational programs, expectations of teachers and staff, and personal situations such as pregnancy and perceptions of racism. In turn, to address the dropout rates, the students in the study recommended that schools offer culturally diverse history curriculum so they can take pride in and provide Chicana/o and Latina/o role models who motivate students. The authors concluded that school counselors must go beyond their traditional job descriptions and go out of their way to connect with community resources and agencies in an effort to impact the academic and personal lives of Chicana/o and Latina/o youth. Altough the Aviles et al. study provided recommendations of what to do to help prevent the dropout rates for Chicana/o Latina/o students, it lacked the voice of school counselors who are taking a stance on this pressing issue.

Scholars in school counseling research have also found that through the formation of small counseling groups, school counselors can also draw on an empowerment approach to address systems of oppression with students of color. In an effort to address high rates of expulsion and suspension, teenage pregnancies, absenteeism, poverty, and poor academic records in a Midwest inner-city high school, Bemak, Chi-Ying, and Siroskey-Sabdo (2005) used an innovative group counseling approach called Empowerment Groups for Academic Success (EGAS) to allow 7 African American girls to critically reflect on their educational experience. The approach of EGAS was to allow students to share their feelings and thoughts of discrimination, racism, and other systems of oppression inside and outside of school. The researchers found that the EGAS approach allowed students to feel empowered about their lives and find solutions to their own personal and interpersonal issues faced in schools and society. After several months of attending the EGAS group, the program yielded positive improvements for the students' academic performance and attendance. Although the EGAS method was applied to African American students, it may also be applied to Chicana/o and Latina/o

students, given that both groups have historically been silenced and oppressed by mainstream schooling (Cammarota, 2006).

School counselors in urban schools carry high caseloads which limit the number of students they can work with. As such, school counselors must involve the community (i.e., parents, community members, agencies, etc.) in the educational journey of Chicana/o and Latina/o students in an effort to enhance their chances of academic success and empowerment.

School Counselors and Community Empowerment

As leaders and advocates in the school system, school counselors are catalysts in collaborating with parents and the community in bridging the academic achievement gap for students of color (Astramovich & Harris, 2007; Schaeffer, Akos, & Barrow, 2010). In working with Chicana/o and Latina/o students, school counselors must understand the cultural values and beliefs of the Chicana/o and Latina/o community and the parents they serve (Villalba, Brunelli, Lewis, & Orfanedes, 2007). Dotson-Blake, Foster, and Gressard (2009) argued that school counselors can serve in the role of "brokers" in connecting the family, school, and community by creating partnerships to engage Chicana/o and Latina/o families in the operation, culture, and practices of U.S. schools. Dotson-Blake et al. further reported that school counselors can assist in developing these partnerships to help alleviate barriers (e.g., immigration status, racism, psychosocial health issues, and other stressors) faced by Mexican immigrant families.

In a study investigating the educational and personal-social development needs of a growing Chicana/o and Latina/o student population in North Carolina, Villalba et al. (2007) found that school counselors and teachers felt unequipped to meet the needs of the parents and the larger community. The school counselors in the study stated that they lacked resources, bilingual translators, academic support, and the understanding between home "culture" and its connection to the school environment. Additionally, school counselors reported that the Chicana/o and Latina/o community demonstrated the importance of "closeness" or being unified, a strong work ethic, and high parental educational aspirations for students. Villalba et al. (2007) concluded that in burgeoning Chicana/o and Latina/o communities, high school counselors must draw on the strength of the Chicana/o and Latina/o community and connect parents with culturally appropriate settings (i.e., bilingual parent meetings, translators, bilingual pamphlets). This study speaks to the need for school counselors to apply an empowerment approach when working with the marginalized communities.

In contrast to the Villalba et al. study (2007), Gándara (2005) conducted a case study of the effectiveness of a nationally recognized educational program in California known as the Puente Project. The Puente Project was designed to increase high school graduation and college attendance rates for Chicana/o and Latina/o youth. Its major emphasis was on improving students' reading and writing skills through Chicana/o and Latina/o literature, a community leadership component, and a counseling component. The school counselors were responsible for finding professionals in the community to serve as mentors for high school students. The community mentorship component helped students establish networks and role models in the community and were often offered opportunities to shadow various careers. Gándara analyzed data comparing Puente and

non-Puente students about the admission requirements to attend a four-year university and found that 82 % of students in the Puente program were aware of the requirements compared to 59% of non-Puente students. Gándara suggested that the effectiveness of the Puente program stemmed from the strategy of having a school counselor who monitored the progress of the student and connected students to members from the community. Model programs such as the Puente program demonstrate how high school counselors can collaborate with parents and community members to bring a wealth of resources into the school system (Gándara, 2005); however, it takes advocacy on the part of the counselor to initiate that process (Bemak & Chung, 2008; Lee & Rodgers, 2009). Drawing on an empowerment framework, school counselors help students connect with their communities which empowers them to take an active role in their educational process.

School Counselors and Advocacy

Counseling for social justice in public schools requires important character traits that are rooted in promoting access and equity for all students. A counselor must be willing to take a leadership role, stand up to systemic injustices (Lee & Rodgers, 2009), and tap into formal and informal structures of authority in the school and the district, negotiating with key stakeholders (Dollarhide, 2003). Bemak and Chung (2005) posited that a call to action for the school counseling profession and counselor education programs is needed to address the perpetuation of inequities in the public school system. House and Martin (1998) suggested that school counselors can focus on three areas to become advocates for students and to be a viable and integral part of a school designed to empower all students to achieve. First, when working with students school counselors should expect all students to achieve at a high level and actively work to remove barriers to learning. Second, when working within the school system, school counselors must use data to promote system change and offer staff development training that promotes high standards for all students. Lastly, when working with the community school counselors must organize community activities to promote supportive structures for high standards for all students and work as a resource broker within the community to identify all available resources to help students achieve (House & Martin, 1998). The elements that were pointed out by House and Martin (1998) reinforced the need for drawing on empowerment theory and demonstrated that there is a high demand for school counselors to be equipped with the tools to engage in advocacy on behalf of students. However, scholars continue to find schools where school counselors lack the competence in advocating for students.

A phenomenological study of 18 high school counselors showed that school counselors are unprepared to work in schools that are attended by students of color. Schaeffer et al. (2010) explored the perceptions of school counselors on their abilities to advocate for students of color in preparing them for post-secondary education. The researchers found that the majority of the school counselors lacked skills in advocating for underrepresented students of color. The authors reported that most school counselors blamed the families and the community for the low performance among Chicanas/os and Latinas/os and African American students. Schaeffer et al. (2010) concluded that:

> The reticence of many of these school counselors to actively advocate for their students in a systemic rather than individual manner may be explained by a factor called Nice Counselor Syndrome (NCS). NCS is described as school counselors who strive to be likable and promote harmony within their schools. The drawbacks of NCS include a reluctance to appear confrontational by challenging policies, practices, and inequities in their schools as well as a sense of powerlessness. (p. 23-24)

Despite the lack of school counselor advocacy skills presented in this study, other studies demonstrate that the school counselors play a vital role in advocating for students of color.

In contrast, Singh, Urbano, Haston and McMahon (2010) explored the strategies of 16 school counselors who identified as social justice agents. The respondents in the study reported that school counselors must develop effective strategies to address interpersonal challenges in the workplace such as being politically savvy to navigate power structures, consciousness raising, initiating difficult dialogues, building intentional relationships, teaching students self-advocacy skills, using data for marketing, and educating others about the school counselor role of advocate. The researchers suggested that further empirical studies should focus on the importance of developing family, school, and community partnerships that reflect the needs of the communities being served.

An example of this type of study, conducted by Smith-Adcock, Daniels, Lee, Villalba, and Indelicato (2006), examined issues concerning Florida public schools' efforts to meet the academic, career, and personal needs of Latino children and families. Using descriptive statistics the researchers found that administrators in the schools preferred bilingual school counselors because they advocate for changes needed within the educational system to address the needs of Latino students and families while helping them to navigate the current system. This study confirmed that there are pockets of schools or individual counselors who stand up to the injustices that they encounter in urban schools. In sum, in an effort to heed that call for social justice school counseling, conceptual literature and empirical studies that address how school counselors can bridge the academic achievement gap for Chicana/o and Latina/o students are critical for the future of this growing population.

Conclusion

In summary, this paper revealed that through the lens of empowerment theory, high school counselors are instrumental in facilitating academic achievement for Chicana/o and Latina/o students by promoting personal and community empowerment and advocating on their behalf. First, participants in the Aviles et al. (1999) study recommended that school counselors have the power to advocate for Chicana/o and Latina/o studies courses which serve to incorporate Chicana/o and Latina/o history and culture, giving students a sense of pride in their ethnic identity. In doing so, school counselors indirectly empower students, ultimately resulting in academic success (Aviles et al., 1999).

Second, in addition to personal empowerment, this paper supports the belief that school counselors have the ability to tap into the community to enhance students'

academic achievement. Gándara's (2005) longitudinal study of the Puente program served as a model in which school counselors have the capacity to reach out to professionals in the community to help serve as mentors for Chicana/o and Latina/o youth. This ongoing partnership with the community enhanced the social capital of students, increasing their knowledge of college and career options (Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Additionally, by increasing the participation of parents in schools, school counselors were able to create a space in which parents feel part of the larger school community. In advocating for students and parents, school counselors act as vehicles for systemic change.

Lastly, in engaging in advocacy on behalf of Chicana/o and Latina/o students, school counselors addressed the existing inequities in the public school system (Bemak & Chung, 2005). A Singh et al. (2010) study revealed effective strategies school counselors implemented in addressing systemic change in their schools. Some of those strategies included being politically savvy to navigate power structures, initiating difficult dialogues, building intentional relationships, and educating others about the school counselor role of advocate. The school counselors in this study reported that by utilizing these techniques, school counselors' help promote access and equity for all students.

This paper highlighted that Chicana/o and Latina/o students are the fastest and largest growing population in the U.S. and historically have been underrepresented in the educational arena. The studies revealed in this paper have outlined the critical role high school counselors can play in closing the achievement gap and facilitating academic achievement on behalf of Chicana/o and Latina/o students. Through a social justice framework, high school counselors can promote personal empowerment, community empowerment, and advocacy, which have significant implications for future research, in addition to policy and practice applications.

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