

Promoting Self-Advocacy Among Minority Students in School Counseling

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This article presents self-advocacy competencies developed to promote the academic, career, and personal/social success of minority students. The authors discuss challenges faced by minority students in today's educational environment and review principles of self-advocacy. Competencies for developing self-advocacy awareness, knowledge, and skills are discussed along with school counseling strategies for promoting self-advocacy among minority students.

Client advocacy has recently received a heightened focus in the counseling professions as practitioners have recognized that many clients face significant environmental challenges and limitations to their well-being (Ivey & Collins, 2003; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Rooted in social action and activism, advocacy counseling emphasizes that counselors may play key roles in helping clients identify and confront oppressive sociopolitical policies and practices that impede their success (Toporek, 2000). Members of historically oppressed groups, including women, people of color, people with minority sexual orientation, people of low socioeconomic status, and people with differing abilities, may routinely experience racism, discrimination, and other systemic forms of oppression (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2000). Unfortunately, counseling has been criticized for historically viewing minority clients from a deficit model that promotes the ideals of the White middle class (Arredondo, 1999). Advocacy counseling, however, calls upon multiculturally competent counselors (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) to help minority clients develop a strong sense of self-worth and self-efficacy, helping empower them to challenge discriminatory social, economic, and political policies (Helms, 2003a; Mays, 2000; Toporek & Liu, 2001).

Today's school counselors have also been called upon to advocate for minority clients, especially to help close the achievement gap between ethnic minority and Caucasian students (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 1999; House & Sears, 2002). Historically, minority students from all grade levels have scored lower than their Caucasian counterparts on standardized tests of achievement (Bali & Alvarez, 2004). Studies on the causes of the minority achievement gap point to multiple factors, including racism and oppression within the educational environment as well as larger sociopolitical and economic factors that negatively affect the lives of minorities (Kozol, 1991; Roach, 2004). Recognizing the importance of advocacy in the counseling professions, ASCA's (2003) National Model for School Counseling Programs included advocacy as a critical leadership

component of comprehensive school counseling programs. Also emphasizing the role of advocacy, the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Education Trust, 2003) called upon school counselors to take an active role in helping minority and disadvantaged students receive needed support for achieving academic success. Corresponding with the growth in multicultural and social justice approaches counseling, today's school counselors are assuming active roles in advocating for all students to succeed in their personal, educational, and career goals.

As a result of the growing interest in advocacy counseling, the Task Force on Advocacy Competencies of the American Counseling Association (ACA) developed a guiding set of principles to help counselors work from an advocacy perspective. The Advocacy Competencies (ACA, 2004) are founded upon a social justice philosophy that acknowledges the impact of social, political, economic, and cultural factors on human development. Accordingly, the three main domains of counseling advocacy work are client advocacy, community advocacy, and public advocacy. Within each of these domains, counselors may act on behalf of their clients or along with their clients. A central component of this model involves client empowerment or self-advocacy. Accordingly, counselors may significantly help clients by focusing on empowerment strategies and by fostering self-advocacy skills to help clients identify and respond effectively to environmental and institutional barriers to success.

Given the challenges often faced by minorities, school counselors may be especially powerful in their advocacy work by fostering self-advocacy skills among minority students. Self-advocacy has been defined as the ability to assertively communicate or negotiate one's interests, desires, needs, and rights (Van Reusen, 1996). Empowerment of minority students with self-advocacy skills may serve as a catalyst for change in the education system and may ultimately help transform society (McWhirter, 1991). Field and Baker (2004) recognized that an important part of school counseling advocacy work involves

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empowering students and helping them develop self-advocacy skills. Yet approaches for fostering self-advocacy skills with minority students have not been significantly discussed in the school counseling literature. To that end, this article presents self-advocacy competencies and related school counseling strategies for promoting self-advocacy among minority students.

■ Challenges to Minority Student Success

From a social justice perspective, minority students include people of color; women; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning students; students with disabilities; and students from families living in poverty (Bell, 1997). D'Andrea and Daniels (2000) described these populations as socially devalued and emphasized that, because of societal stigmatization and marginalization, they frequently have little power in influencing decisions that affect their lives. Furthermore, people from oppressed groups are often the targets of verbal and physical violence as a result of their minority status (Baruth & Manning, 2003; Sanders, 2000). As pointed out by Arredondo and Rice (2004), the oppressive treatment of minority groups ultimately serves to reinforce stereotypes and discriminatory practices within organizations and institutions.

In the educational system, Nieto (2004) identified several potentially oppressive policies and practices, including tracking, retention, standardized testing, curriculum, pedagogy, inadequate physical structures, disciplinary policies, limited roles of students and teachers, limited parental or family involvement, and limited community involvement. Oppression often occurs in the context of routine practices and rules that go unquestioned by society, despite their deleterious consequences (Bell, 1997). Consequently, many educational policies and practices that seem designed to help students succeed may result in reinforcement of stereotypes and disempowerment of minorities. For instance, the ongoing focus on the achievement gap between ethnic minority and Caucasian students has led to school reform measures, including an emphasis on raising standardized test scores (Haycock, 2001). Yet, according to Nieto, standardized testing has historically been used to segregate minority students and has perpetuated barriers, such as tracking. Thus, minority students may face barriers to their academic, career, and personal/social success that are a function of oppression embedded within the educational system.

The academic challenges faced by minority students have been widely discussed in recent years. Beginning as early as kindergarten, ethnic minority children are often disadvantaged academically, especially if their parents were unable to afford to send them to preschool (Hale, 2004). Minority children who fall behind in the early elementary school years, particularly in reading proficiency, face significant hurdles in their later academic success because achievement gaps have been shown to widen substantially with increasing grade levels (Bali & Alvarez, 2004). Furthermore, minority students are disproportionately

assigned to remedial tracks, labeled as "slow learners" or "learning disabled," and placed into special education settings (Potts, 2003). Although the No Child Left Behind Act (U.S. Department of Education, 2001) has helped focus attention on the academic success of minority students, strategies for helping minority students excel have been underutilized in the public education system (Roach, 2004).

In addition to academic challenges, minority students may face barriers in their career development and postsecondary education plans. Children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly those attending urban schools, often graduate from high school with limited job skills, leading them to take low-wage positions in the workforce (Kenny, Blustein, Chaves, Grossman, & Gallagher, 2003). Minority students typically receive less career counseling than do their nonminority counterparts (Constantine, Erickson, Banks, & Timberlake, 1998) and are less likely to pursue and complete postsecondary education and training (Carey, 2004). Leong and Tan (2003) noted that career development approaches have traditionally emphasized Western values and failed to address the sociopolitical factors and economic realities that affect the career choices of minorities. Not surprisingly, minority students have reported significant limitations to their career development and a lack of effective strategies for coping with these challenges (Luzzo & McWhirter, 2001).

The personal/social development of minority children may be significantly compromised by oppression in the educational environment. Hale (2004) criticized schools for focusing solely on academic success to the exclusion of social factors that affect minority student success, particularly family and community support. Furthermore, schools rarely support the racial identity development of ethnic minority children (Helms, 2003b; E. J. Smith, 1991) and fail to address the needs of sexual minority youth (S. D. Smith & Chen-Hayes, 2004; Stone, 2003). Unfortunately, some minority students, in an attempt to acquiesce to oppression, may try adopting the values and norms of the dominant culture, leading to a destructive internalization of myths, stereotypes, and misinformation about their minority group (Lewis & Arnold, 1998). As a result of oppression, minority students may experience low self-esteem, relationship difficulties, high levels of stress, and a sense of powerlessness (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2000; Lee, 1991).

Clearly, oppression within the educational environment can have a profound impact on the success of minority students, yet school counselors have been criticized for failing to challenge oppressive practices in the educational system, specifically those that sort and segregate students based on minority status (Bailey, Getch, & Chen-Hayes, 2003). Effective school counseling with minority students requires counselors to understand the dynamics of oppression and the systemic barriers often faced by minority students (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Vera & Speight, 2003). Furthermore, school counselors

can help empower minority students by providing them with opportunities to develop and use self-advocacy skills.

Self-Advocacy Principles

Theory and research on fostering self-advocacy among minority students is quite limited. Self-advocacy has been more commonly discussed in the literature on students with special needs and students with disabilities (e.g., Brinckerhoff, 1994; Pearl, 2004; Phillips, 1990; Skinner, 1998; Van Reusen, 1996; Weimer & Cappotelli, 1994; Yuan, 1994) than in the literature on minority or disadvantaged youth. In addition, advocacy literature in counseling typically emphasizes individuals who are in positions to advocate for students and for social change (e.g., Aspy & Aspy, 1991; Grieger & Ponterotto, 1998; House & Martin, 1999; Kurpius & Rozecki, 1992; Lee, 2001; Musheno & Talbert, 2002; Osborne et al., 1998) rather than helping students develop self-advocacy skills. Although not yet extensively discussed in counseling, three principles related to self-advocacy have been explored in counseling and education disciplines: self-determination, empowerment, and social justice.

Self-Determination

Self-determination has been defined as the ability of an individual to make meaningful decisions and implement choices that relate to the quality of life events (Malian & Nevin, 2002). According to Wehmeyer (1995), self-determination involves attitudes about personal effectiveness and attitudes about controlling the environment. Thus, a central philosophy of self-determination is that of personal empowerment and an inherent right to live with dignity, respect, and choice (Wehmeyer, Bersani, & Gagne, 2000). In the educational setting, self-determination is evidenced through the successful use of problem solving, decision making, and goal setting that helps empower students to take charge of their educational success (Browder, Wood, Test, Karvonen, & Algozzine, 2001). Self-determining students are those who have cultivated self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-confidence, with a high sense of self-efficacy and a largely internal locus of control. Malian and Nevin's review of self-determination research suggested that self-determination is a teachable skill that can lead to success in adult life. Ultimately, when students have a sense of control over their education, they are more inclined to take a vested interest in their academic success.

Empowerment

Client empowerment has increasingly been emphasized within the advocacy movement in counseling (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 2003). As defined by McWhirter (1991), empowerment refers to helping individuals and groups develop an awareness of the role of power and privilege in their lives, helping them develop knowledge and skills for appropriately

taking control over their life situations, and helping them empower others in the community. From a systemic perspective, Neath and Reed (1998) called for counselors to adopt a radical democratic multiculturalism that empowers minorities by promoting egalitarian relationships, equitable resource distribution, cultural responsiveness, and social change. Bolton and Brookings (1996) identified several key qualities of empowered individuals, including assertiveness, autonomy, interdependence, and personal and social responsibility. Ultimately, empowered individuals experience a sense of self-mastery and control over life decisions, and they are aware of the potentially damaging role of power structures in society.

Social Justice

During the late-20th century, counselors became increasingly aware of the unique needs of minority client populations. Multicultural counseling competence became a critical part of counselor training, and multicultural counseling competencies were developed to guide practitioners in developing multicultural counseling skills (Vera & Speight, 2003). Stemming from the momentum of the multicultural counseling movement, social justice counseling has become a distinct influence in 21st-century counseling. A social justice perspective emphasizes individual and collective social responsibility in fostering inclusive and equitable social systems (Bell, 1997). Major elements of a social justice counseling approach include helping clients identify and challenge environmental limitations to their success (Lee, 1998); challenging systemic forms of oppression through counselor social action (Lewis & Arnold, 1998); and, ultimately, liberating clients from oppressive social practices (Ivey & Collins, 2003). In the school setting, social justice education promotes self-determination and interdependence among students as a means for personal and societal liberation (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997).

Defining Self-Advocacy

Although not extensively discussed from a counseling perspective, self-advocacy has been emphasized in the literature on children with special needs and disabilities. Generally conceptualized as a specific skill of self-determining individuals, self-advocacy involves identifying and meeting personal needs in ways that do not compromise the dignity of oneself or others (Brinckerhoff, 1994; Skinner, 1998). More specifically, self-advocacy emphasizes personal rights and responsibilities and the ability to effectively communicate needs and negotiate for help (Pocock et al., 2002). According to Pearl (2004), in order for students to become self-advocates, they must first develop self-awareness skills and become more knowledgeable about their specific needs. Additionally, Skinner and Lindstrom (2003) stressed the importance of students learning social skills for effective communication with their peers and teachers because strong interpersonal skills increase a student's

ability to self-advocate. Self-advocacy thus helps students become proactively involved in their academic progress and take responsibility for their success.

In addition to children with special needs, Wehmeyer (1999) emphasized that self-determination and self-advocacy skills are important for the success of all children. With many potential challenges to their educational success, acquiring self-advocacy skills seems especially important for minority students. Drawing upon the principles of self-determination, empowerment, and social justice, minority student self-advocacy may be defined as the ability to (a) value one's cultural identity, (b) identify personal and educational needs, (c) recognize the influence of social power structures in meeting needs, and (d) assert and negotiate for one's needs in ways that promote the dignity and self-respect of all people. Portman and Portman (2002) stressed that students' development of awareness, knowledge, and skills regarding social justice issues occurs developmentally. Accordingly, school counselors who help minority students become self-advocates may use a competency-based model that emphasizes the development of self-advocacy skills within the context of a comprehensive school counseling program.

A Self-Advocacy Framework for School Counseling With Minority Students

In recent years, competencies have been developed for a wide variety of counseling-related skills, including multicultural

competence (Sue et al., 1992) and, more recently, advocacy competencies (ACA, 2004). Competency-based frameworks such as these may provide counselors with identifiable goals to help guide practice. By using a competency-based framework, school counselors can identify goals and implement self-advocacy skill-building strategies designed to help minority students develop self-advocacy competence.

Self-Advocacy Competencies

Cultivating self-advocacy skills may be conceptualized from an empowerment perspective (McWhirter, 1991). Arredondo and Vazquez (2000) emphasized that empowerment helps clients develop the self-confidence and skills necessary to promote personal and systemic change. School counselors can empower minority students by helping them develop awareness, knowledge, and skills for addressing oppression and systemic barriers to their success within the school bureaucracy (House & Hayes, 2002; Lewis et al., 2003). Based upon self-determination, empowerment, and social justice principles, the Self-Advocacy Competencies (see Table 1) emphasize the development of self-advocacy awareness, knowledge, and skills by minority students in order to facilitate their success in school. Paralleling the organization of multicultural competencies for counselors (Arredondo et al., 1996), each goal comprises specific objectives designed to help minority students develop into effective self-advocates.

TABLE 1
Self-Advocacy Competencies

Goal	Objective
1. <i>Awareness</i> The student will develop an awareness of his or her own cultural heritage and develop an appreciation for the diversity of worldviews and cultures in society.	The student will 1.1 Recognize and value his or her cultural background and experiences. 1.2 Develop an awareness and sensitivity to customs and beliefs of various groups and their worldviews. 1.3 Develop an awareness of how cultural background may affect one's ability to self-advocate. 1.4 Develop an awareness of how fear of rejection and failure may prevent minority students from advocating for their school success. 1.5 Develop an awareness of the role of individual and collective action in promoting social justice in education.
2. <i>Knowledge</i> The student will develop an understanding of the individual, group, and societal consequences of prejudice and oppression.	The student will 2.1 Identify prejudicial and oppressive practices in society. 2.2 Identify the role of power, privilege, and status in sustaining prejudice and oppression. 2.3 Identify the impact of oppression on minority student success in education. 2.4 Identify the goals of a social justice perspective in education and in society. 2.5 Demonstrate an understanding of systemic change strategies and effective methods for promoting minority student success and lasting changes in education and society. 2.6 Identify policies and procedural guidelines that may affect advocacy plans.
3. <i>Skills</i> The student will develop effective self-advocacy skills for promoting equity and social justice in the educational environment and in society.	The student will 3.1 Identify personal strengths and abilities to draw upon as a self-advocate. 3.2 Demonstrate assertiveness and negotiation skills for effectively dealing with barriers to success. 3.3 Work with mentors to develop effective and just means for promoting social change. 3.4 Develop alliances and establish/participate in advocacy groups with peers, teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and community members. 3.5 Work with allies to develop action plans for promoting positive changes in his or her school and community.

Self-advocacy awareness. In order for minority students to become strong self-advocates, they must develop awareness and appreciation of their cultural background and sensitivity to diverse worldviews and cultures. Therefore, the awareness competencies focus on valuing culture-specific experiences and on becoming aware of how cultural oppression and fear of rejection may affect the ability of minority students to self-advocate. Additionally, students should develop an awareness of the roles of individuals and groups in promoting social justice principles in the educational system.

Self-advocacy knowledge. Building upon the awareness objectives, the knowledge competencies emphasize building an information base that will help students begin developing self-advocacy skills. More specifically, students should develop an understanding of the role of power, privilege, and status in oppression and be able to identify oppressive practices within society. Students should also understand the ways that groups and systems sustain prejudicial and oppressive practices and how these may affect the educational success of minority students. Furthermore, students should be able to identify proactive means for addressing oppressive practices and barriers to their success and understand policies and procedural guidelines that may affect their self-advocacy.

Self-advocacy skills. The skills competencies establish major activities that are essential for minority students to effectively advocate for their success in school. To begin with, minority students need to develop assertiveness and negotiation skills and work with mentors to help develop effective means to promote change within the educational system and society. Students should also work collaboratively with peers, teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and community members to develop alliances and create advocacy groups for promoting the school success of minority students. Working with advocacy groups, minority students can help develop and implement action plans to promote their success in school and in the community. Finally, minority students can help empower others to become self-advocates.

School Counseling Strategies for Promoting Self-Advocacy

As leaders in the school system, school counselors may be a catalyst for helping schools focus on the success of minority students (ASCA, 2003), especially by helping them become self-advocates. The Self-Advocacy Competencies provide a framework for integrating self-advocacy skill development into comprehensive school counseling programs. By adopting a community of helpers (Sanders, 2000) approach, school counselors can help minority students support each other in developing self-advocacy skills. Furthermore, to help students acquire self-advocacy skills, support must occur systemically. School counselors must therefore work collaboratively with teachers and administrators to ensure that minority students receive ongoing encouragement to become self-advocates (Kurpius & Rozecki, 1992).

A variety of strategies may be incorporated into comprehensive school counseling programs in order to help minority students develop self-advocacy skills. By using developmentally appropriate interventions, self-advocacy awareness, knowledge, and skills may be fostered among students at all grade levels. The following approaches are provided to illustrate ways school counselors can foster self-advocacy competence and empower minority students to take a proactive role in their academic success.

Awareness-building strategies. In order to help minority students develop awareness necessary for self-advocacy, school counselors may consider using self-reflective and experiential activities both individually and in small groups. At the elementary level, school counselors can use narrative activities and multicultural children's literature in small- and large-group guidance lessons to help students learn about their own cultural backgrounds and the diverse cultural heritages of others (Singer & Smith, 2003). At the secondary level, writing and sharing cultural autobiographies may help students explore and value their cultural background and experiences. Secondary students may also benefit from community and peer networking with other minority students in order to develop awareness of the role of both individual and collective action in promoting minority student success. For all levels, encouraging students to participate in schoolwide culture-centered programs and celebrations may help increase awareness and appreciation of their cultural heritage and the cultural background of others.

Knowledge-building strategies. School counselors can assist minority students in increasing their self-advocacy knowledge through guidance presentations and activities designed to help students recognize prejudicial and oppressive practices and their consequences on individuals, groups, and society. At the elementary level, dramatic presentations and plays can help minority students begin to identify and appropriately respond to prejudice and oppression. In secondary settings, school counselors may help promote self-advocacy knowledge by using bibliotherapy—encouraging students to read about minorities' experiences in dealing with prejudice and oppression and to learn effective ways of promoting social justice in the educational system and in society. For example, Beverly Tatum's (1997) book *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria? And Other Conversations About Race* provides an overview of prejudice and racial identity development that may help high school-level minority students understand the legacy of oppression in the educational system and provide them with inspiration to advocate for social change. Other knowledge-building strategies appropriate for all levels include helping students dialogue with family and community members who have personal experiences with prejudice and oppression, using small-group discussions to examine the role of power and privilege in sustaining oppression, and implementing guidance lessons to teach social

justice principles and effective means for social activism. Such interventions can help provide students with a critical understanding of prejudice, oppression, and privilege and of the need for effective self-advocacy among minorities.

Skill-building strategies. Finally, school counselors can help minority students develop specific skills to become effective self-advocates. At the elementary level, helping students develop assertiveness, negotiation, and mediation skills may be fostered in small-group and large-group guidance lessons. During such training, students can learn and safely practice appropriate techniques for identifying and communicating their needs. At the secondary level, school counselors can help minority students develop alliances and create school-based advocacy groups designed to develop action plans for promoting positive changes in the school and the community. At all levels, school counselors can help match minority students with mentors to help them cope with challenges to their school success and model self-advocacy skills. In order to ensure systemic support for minority student self-advocacy, school counselors can provide training in the principles of social justice education for students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Overall, the objective is for students to develop a sense of empowerment and self-efficacy for maneuvering through potential systemic barriers. With this foundation, students can become proactive in establishing personal, academic, and career goals that lead to school and life success.

Conclusion

Founded upon principles of self-determination, empowerment, and social justice, self-advocacy can be a powerful tool for helping minority students succeed in the educational system. School counselors can play a central role in helping minority and disadvantaged students gain the skills and confidence necessary to advocate for their own success in school. In the future, research on self-advocacy may help guide the development of specific programs and curricula that target skills needed by minority students. As the population of the United States continues to diversify, school counselors will increasingly need strategies for promoting the success of minority populations. By integrating self-determination and self-advocacy principles into comprehensive school counseling programs, minority students can be helped to develop the self-awareness, self-esteem, and self-confidence necessary for succeeding in their academic, career, and personal goals.

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