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The School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist for Professional School Counselors: An Assessment Tool for Leading Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Schools

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Culturally competent educational organizations value diversity in both theory and practice and make teaching and learning relevant and meaningful to students of various cultures (Klotz, 2006). Cultural competence in the school counseling literature has primarily focused on how to be effective when counseling culturally and ethnically diverse students (Lewis & Hayes, 1991; CACREP, 2001; Holcomb-McCoy, 2004; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). While individual cultural competence is essential, school leaders, including professional school counselors, must also be concerned with the "big picture" of the cultural competence of the total school environment.

Our work involved looking at school-wide cultural competence or how a school reflects diversity through its policies, programs, and practices. A culturally competent school maintains an environment that is inclusive and inviting for all students regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and learning differences. We agree with Nuri-Robins, Lindsey, Terrell, and Lindsey (2007) that a paradigm shift is needed to reframe equity and inclusion as a problem to be solved to viewing equity and inclusion

as an opportunity to understand and embrace differences. This paradigm shift allows educators to view their roles as meeting the needs of underserved students rather than helping underachieving students (Nuri-Robins et al., 2007).

The new vision of the school counseling profession includes the following skills: (a) focusing on improving student achievement; collaborating with students, staff, and parents, (b) using advocacy skills to challenge social inequities, (c) using data to advocate for minority and impoverished students, (d) becoming an expert in organizational change, (e) becoming a competent user of technology, (f) using counselor competencies such as group facilitation skills to seek systemic change, and (g) developing the competencies to operate in a diverse community (Martin, 2002, p. 152). With the growing diversity of public school students, a more holistic perspective and a more comprehensive role as a school leader is required of school counselors. This new role requires skills that go beyond individual cultural competence to a more global perspective in which school counselors are instrumental in creating "culturally competent" schools.

Courtland Lee (2001) described the *culturally responsive* school which was supported by the notion of *culturally proficient schools* and school leaders (for our purposes we include counselors as leaders) proposed by Lindsey, Robins, and Terrell (2003) and Lindsey, Roberts, and CampbellJones (2005). A culturally responsive and proficient school is essentially a school that promotes inclusiveness and appropriate responses to differences as reflected by its policies, programs, and practices. This idea of a culturally competent school is further supported by Banks' (2002) seminal work in describing multicultural schools and echoed by recent work that analyzed systematic and organizational cultural competence (Pederson & Carey, 2003; Sue & Constantine, 2005).

As we examined the professional school counselor's role in school-wide cultural competence, we turned to the ASCA National Model (2005) outlining the assessment of student needs, the ASCA position statements guiding our professional judgments, and the

ASCA Code of Ethics (2004) proclaiming our integrity and cautioning us to do no harm. The ASCA position statements clearly guide professional school counselors to ensure equal access and an enhanced school environment to all students, to promote equity for all students through comprehensive guidance programs, to ensure the rights of all students regardless of sexual orientation, and to support policy that protects students from unfair treatment. Although these position statements are clearly affirmed, one study of 24 state developmental guidance programs revealed almost non-existent attention to ethnic developmental issues (MacDonald & Sink, 1999). As the numbers of diverse students entering public schools increase dramatically, professional school counselors must be prepared to assist in creating culturally competent school environments.

According to Lee and Goodnough (2007), the new vision of school counseling includes a commitment to social justice and educational equity for all students. Creating programs that promote equity is paramount to the development of a comprehensive guidance program and requires systemic assessments to identify student needs of all subsystems of diverse populations. These assessments include multiple methods to examine many types of data and, we believe, should include an audit of the ability of the system to be competent in providing an inviting learning environment for a diverse student population. Further, school-wide interventions have the greatest potential for eliminating systemic barriers and creating optimum learning policies, programs, and practices (House & Hayes, 2002).

While the literature in multicultural counseling in schools suggests that school counselors act as "change agents," it rarely specifies how to go about influencing changes that are culturally competent. The literature also provides little to no guidance in how to assess strengths and needs and evaluate progress at the organizational level specific to professional school counselors. We propose the use of an assessment tool designed to measure school-wide cultural competence, an assessment that will identify areas of strengths and challenges for school leaders, including professional school counselors. Our research results illustrate the role of school

counselors in promoting culturally competent schools as part of the leadership team and describe an observation checklist, the *School Cultural-Wide Competence Observation Checklist* (SCCOC), designed for use by school leaders, including professional school counselors, in conducting culture audits in schools.

School-Wide Cultural Competence Assessment Tools:
The Culture Audit

While some scholars have discussed the idea of cultural competence at the organizational level, limited attempts have been made to identify ways to empirically assess cultural competence in schools beyond the use of equity audits (see Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2006). We suggest that *culture audits* are one way to do this. Just as financial audits assess the financial health of an organization, culture audits are a comprehensive way to examine how well the school culture reflects the perspectives of diverse groups in the school community (Bustamante, 2006). The culture audit essentially serves as a comprehensive means for assessing school-wide cultural competence by identifying strength and need areas to guide strategic planning efforts. The empirical groundwork for applying culture audits in schools comes from the field of human services and mental health organizations (Darnell & Kuperminc, 2006).

The School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist

The *School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist* (SCCOC) was designed for use by school leaders, including professional school counselors, for conducting culture audits in schools. Specifically, the checklist provides a protocol to guide observations (see Table 1). The instrument focuses observations on potential domains of cultural competence in schools as gleaned from literature on multicultural education (Banks, 2002), cultural proficiency (Lindsey, Robins, & Terrell, 2003: Salvaggio, 2003), inclusive schools (Riehl, 2000; Henze, Katz, Norte, Sather, & Walker, 2002), and cultural competence in human service

organizations (Darnell & Kuperminc, 2006; National Center for Cultural Competence, 2005; Sue, 2001).

Table 1: The School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist

The School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist

Sample Domains	Sample Items
School Vision/Mission	There is a school mission or vision statement that includes a stated commitment to diversity and/or global citizenry.
Curriculum	Literature selections in the curriculum reflect a variety of cultural perspectives.
Student Interaction and Leadership	Racial/ethnic representation in advanced placement classes, honors classes, and gifted programs is balanced.

Source: The *School-Wide Cultural Competence Observation Checklist*
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The SCCOC examines policies, programs, and practices through observations rated on a scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The SCCOC contains 33 items relevant to school-wide cultural competence. The checklist contains an additional column asking observers to note evidence or documentation supporting their observations (e.g., a mentoring program handbook or calendar dates for new teacher orientations). An area for additional field observation notes is also included in the checklist. The SCCOC essentially allows school leaders to assess strengths and needs as they relate to characteristics of cultural competence suggested in the literature. Based on the observations that become evident by using the checklist as a guide, leaders can then determine action plans identifying strengths and addressing need areas.

The SCCOC was tested for construct validity with a sample of 151 school leaders (Nelson, Bustamante, Wilson, & Onwuegbuzie, in press). The results of an exploratory factor analysis revealed two significant domains in the areas of policy and practice that were

consistent with the literature on organizational cultural competence and supported the use of all 33 items on the SCCOC. Additionally, the observation checklist was field tested by practicing school leaders who used the SCCOC to make school-wide observations and determine areas of strength and need in moving their own schools toward cultural competence. School leaders selected three primary need areas based on low ratings on the checklist scale (below a 3) and developed short and long term goals focused on improving cultural competence in these need areas. These goals were included in an overall cultural competence action plan. School leaders reported that they found the SCCOC very helpful in guiding both their observations and their strategic planning efforts.

The Cultural Competence Action Plan

After conducting a school-wide culture audit including the SCCOC, the professional school counselor can work with other school leaders and a committee or task force to develop a cultural competence action plan. The task force, guided by school leaders, analyzes the SCCOC and other data for the purpose of creating systemic change and adopting culturally proficient practices. Specific goals, activities, barriers, and target areas are identified to assist in carrying out the action plan. The short-term and long-term goals provide direction for the action plan, and formative and summative evaluations, including subsequent culture audits, monitor progress.

Action plans can focus school improvement efforts to assure that certain groups are not marginalized in the school setting or that minority students will be overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in rigorous academic classes. Using data from the SCCOC can help educators shift from blaming students and their cultures for underachievement to placing responsibility on the system itself for implementing new programs, practices, and policies that will enhance student success. As part of an administrative team, the professional school counselor can lead the school staff through a culture audit and the development of a cultural competence action plan.

Integrating the SCCOC in the Comprehensive Guidance Plan

We believe the SCCOC will be a useful assessment tool as part of the Comprehensive Guidance Plan. The Program Audit in the ASCA National Model (2005, pp. 131-141) is used to assess the school counseling program and includes specific criteria for the framework of a viable program. The criteria relating to the philosophy of the counseling program include the beliefs that every student can achieve, that every student has a right to access the counseling program, and that there are programs in place for closing-the-gap for underserved populations. The criteria that relate the mission of the school to the school counseling program embrace the notion of long range results for all students. Additionally the expectation is that student competencies are based on the assessment of student needs. Furthermore, professional school counselors are charged with advocating for systemic change to reduce barriers to student learning and to use data to change policies that hinder student achievement. The data must be disaggregated by variables including ethnicity to determine needs and these identified needs must become the source for determining closing-the-gap activities which in turn become the impetus for changing policies and practices that hinder student achievement. Data gleaned from the culture audit and the SCCOC will assist professional school counselors as they examine their Comprehensive Guidance Programs and implement prevention plans and interventions to create culturally competent school environments.

Conclusion

As the role of the professional school counselor expands to include the sharing of leadership responsibilities and ensuring the success of all students, they will require tools to assess how well schools respond to the needs of diverse students. The first step in promoting school-wide cultural competence in professional school counseling is for school counselors to become an integral part of the "culture audit" process to determine need areas for systemic change.

Culture audit data reveal strengths and need areas to inform strategic planning for comprehensive guidance programs. School-wide cultural competence aligns with the position statements of the American School Counselor Association and Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2004). Guidance programs are the logical venues for implementing action plans based on culture audit data.

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