

Dismantling the Achievement Gap: What Counselors Need to Know

Pedro Portes

Transforming Counselor Education

It now seems quite evident that school counselors must answer the call to help close a massive achievement gap that prevails in the United States. Until recently, education reforms have left counselors out of center stage. They are now being called upon to play more direct roles in state and district efforts that would assist students placed at risk (SPARs) and their teachers by both their professional national organization and the Education Trust. However, disagreement exists in deciding how counselors' roles might change, and the purpose of their new roles or their preparation. Well-justified critiques of counselor education programs suggest that counselors are not well prepared for significant roles in educational reform. These initiatives are founded on the common premise that transformations should center on improving achievement scores. While there is a need for transforming higher education, tests or accountability alone can not achieve either equity or excellence in education. There is a need to prepare and empower counselors differently than in the past but also in areas in which the gap is rooted.

A primary role of school counselors is that of a proactive prevention expert. SPARs rely much more on what is offered at school than others who have more social capital or advantages at home. The new school counselor envisioned in the author's model (see Portes

& Sandhu, in press) directs efforts to close the gap by ensuring that adolescents graduate with a set of critical thinking skills and social knowledge that would otherwise be absent. Secondary school counselors often deal with SPARs when they are already well behind others academically. There is only so much educators can do at this point without a preventative approach that can impact on students across generations.

Consequently, the principal role of counselors may lie in promoting development in areas that are not necessarily tested in today's current reforms. Yet, it is precisely in these areas of social competence and life skills that we can pave the way for increased and lasting parental involvement in future generations. Parental involvement depends greatly on knowledge, beliefs and skills that depend on social learning (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978) that can be maximized during adolescence. SPARs in most schools feel academically alienated and unmotivated to persist when they are already years behind and tests just confirm cumulative gaps in instruction and learning. While it is important to provide extra support for SPARs academically, adolescence is a critical period for developing higher-level thinking and social development.

Counselor education programs represent the ideal field for preparing experts in primary intervention. The challenge remains serious because few policy-makers understand and support primary prevention as a long-term approach to a complex set of problems. Some that are of specific relevance are:

- A. New roles for professionals, which engage schools in effective prevention and promotion practice, need to be constructed through collaboration;
- B. Those who instruct educators in higher education must also be included in developing, implementing and evaluating the new curriculum and practices to be deployed systematically in the schools;
- C. Schools and communities themselves need to support and collaborate in the prevention activities;
- D. A critical mass needs to become aware of how children are placed at risk for school failure, drugs, conduct and

emotional disorders and violence, often through the very ways we have chosen to organize schooling in society. Prevention activities can be organized in the lives of youth that can influence course of development, particularly with respect to academic parenting and interpersonal skills.

Mediation as Guidance

To develop skills in mediating the development of students, one must see that we are not only targeting the problems of students who are at risk, but also their future roles as parents of SPARs and society. Remediation from a cultural-historical perspective (Cole, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) is different from traditional meanings associated with that term. It involves co-constructing strategic tools with students placed at risk in order to circumvent the risks that are social in nature. It includes concept development, when and where SPARs are ready and creating zones for proximal development. Once a new concept or skill is mastered, future interactions with the environment are changed forever with respect to acting with new skills, expectations, and goals. For example, when an adolescent identifies with a film or a play regarding teen pregnancy and its consequences, she may draw the conclusion that early parenthood can hurt everyone and thus alter a (risk) behavior. Or, perhaps following a counselor-led peer discussion, attitudes and concepts may change so that poor decisions are avoided. The remediation occurs when an idea, concept, or disposition derived from an activity leads to a change in attitude, emotion or behavior.

Counselors can work proactively with groups of students to promote strategic areas of social development and to prevent certain extenuating risks. They lend their awareness and that of experts and models. They collaborate with adolescent students who are negotiating their identities. In doing so, the new counselors must be prepared for two new roles and allowed to fulfill each of them. The first is to extend guidance activities by organizing and overseeing a new human growth and development curriculum in secondary education. They

may help close the gap by organizing activities aimed to support academic development and college preparation in programs such as AVID (see Mehan et al. 1994) that aim to prepare SPARs for college. The latter fit the model well in providing for a seamless academic support system for SPARs. Secondly, the role of the counselor in primary school is to be focused mainly on not allowing the gap to emerge by organizing sufficient support for SPARs over time. This component needs to be reflected in the elementary certification program courses and guided practice in higher education.

Connecting all SPARs with the support systems required in and out of school is the gist of prevention and promotion strategies. Counselor educators need to ensure that counselors collaborate across levels to maximize continuity in extra-curricular activities. Mentoring and tutoring from Head Start through K-12 for each SPAR is important to sustain, particularly from those in under-represented groups. In ways similar to special education students, each SPAR needs to have an Individualized Development Plan (IDP) to gauge the level of external support needed for academic learning. The extra assistance negotiated through the counselor's leadership and actions helps to reduce the class size and improve the student-adult ratio indirectly that are key influences on achievement in school.

At the secondary level, counselors continue in this role and direct a second component in terms of organizing and supervising human development workshops. Consequently, counselors need these competencies to be aligned within restructured counselor education programs. The counselor must learn about curriculum development, and work with principals and teachers to design district level programs and evaluation procedures. They need experience in program design, evaluation and writing for gaining external support along with principals. Together they need to advocate and assist teachers indirectly by ensuring low performing students have mentors and tutoring activities as part of their educational package.

Counselor education also needs to contribute in defining the human development curriculum units to be co-constructed with adolescent students, particularly SPARs. This is not difficult since human growth and development defines the counseling field.

However, the author is only suggesting that growth-oriented activities be aimed toward skills and knowledge that are advantageous to future generations of SPARs (rather than already advantaged students). This curriculum, unlike others, must be values-free and defined carefully to gain public support. It must be activity-based, meaningful and linked with the community. It may be partly integrated with other classes but must have a separate space in the curriculum, and be aligned with basic developmental principles and curriculum standards. For example, adolescents might consider the effects of neglect, malnutrition and abuse on learning. Another unit might entail budget planning and the consequences of financial stress on the family. A minimum set of units may form part of graduation requirements. National and local models may be developed, assessed, and disseminated.

The school culture is often at odds with the culture for at-risk adolescents. This is because adolescents' identities generally are formed more in peer cultures that strive for differentiation from adults. Human development workshops are to be organized in ways that connect with the identity formation process that is mostly peer-based in adolescence.

Teachers' goals and activities are generally not those that concern SPARs whom counselors are often called upon to help after problems arise. Through a comprehensive prevention approach, counselors need to be prepared and empowered to prevent future generations of children and adolescents from being placed at risk. Yet, counselor education generally does not address the problem of the achievement gap directly but rather attempts to deal with many of its consequences. For example, most of the literature in this field is limited to secondary types of interventions that are unlikely to affect the gap in the long run (see Brown, 1992;). One way to address the problem in higher education is to include activities in college courses for educators (e.g., in adolescent or human development) that focus on the gap as a social science problem. This focus allows traditional content to be incorporated in theory and research more meaningfully and paves the way for including service-oriented mentoring with SPARs. Students can present different models, interventions, case studies,

outcomes and analyses.

The school district and state must not only allow this restructuring of secondary education but lead in its development. This implies that counselor education needs to include information about current initiatives and how they come about. This dual role for the secondary school counselor calls for empowering educators to develop activity-based workshops and experiences to help close the gap. Counselors need practice and support in adapting existing models and workshops into units for SPARs' present or future academic success. For example, the University of New Mexico's Health Sciences department offers an Adolescent Social Action Program (ASAP) that is prevention-oriented in the area of substance abuse (<http://hsc.unm.edu/commun/educ.html>). While the model is not directly connected to the achievement gap, educators might explore some of its features such as the peer-oriented methodology as they focus on co-constructing various life skills. Other existing programs can be adapted toward the common goal of preventing academic gaps. Elementary school counselors might examine the emerging literature pertaining to after-school environmental, economic education programs and their effects on achievement. In the above cases, and others that include local programs, this activity-oriented approach enables educators to assist SPARs' development. After all, they are the ones prepared to adapt and extend what is available based on the local context. In sum, traditional preparation of counselors and disempowered roles are two areas of concern that warrant immediate attention if counselors are to become active players in closing the achievement gap.

Current Developments in School Counseling

A number of models are already addressing parts of the problem. By far, the newest movement in counselor education today reflects considerable agency in one of the above respects. The DeWitt Reader's Digest initiative in counselor education is noteworthy. It aims to transform counselor education programs by having them play a direct role in raising test scores. This is noteworthy since most states and districts using various models for closing the gap focus on

instruction and leadership decisions that exclude school counselors. The De Witt-Reader's Digest approach to "transformation" is limited to supporting the existing higher stakes reform that calls for raising standards and accountability. Realizing that the latter exacerbates the achievement gap, their plan seems to have counselors moderate this "side effect" for SPARs as other educators concentrate on meeting higher academic standards more directly in the classroom and school. The transformation is superficial to the extent that it revolves around the goals of the Education Trust recommendations for the current reform movement that aims to raise the bar for all students. What drives their concerns about SPARs is not centered on restructuring either the educational system or its traditional functions of sorting and reproducing GBI. Rather, the aim is centered on achieving higher standards through more of the same, instruction based on tests without substantive changes in structures or primary prevention. The relativity of the achievement gap thus remains preserved although the semblance of equity appears on the surface. That is, in improving the educational productivity or outcomes of the system, some SPARs will achieve higher scores, meeting higher standards than before. Obviously, this aspect of the reform is yet to be linked to increased participation in college and better jobs for this sector. Herein lies the problem for underrepresented groups; that is, to what extent do they gain relative to the status quo? Of the few calls for counselors to play more active roles in educational reform, few target them for key roles in reducing the gap through primary prevention.

In sum, in spite of several similarities, the author's approach differs in terms of goals and the means required to achieve them. Current reforms do not go far or deep enough or represent a fundamental change in the traditional system. Raising the bar in terms of higher standards essentially speeds up the educational production line. In attempting to fix a longstanding problem, this trend exacerbates it, producing a host of secondary interventions (band-aids) that leave the system essentially untransformed. Counselors and their educators require a more thorough understanding of what is essentially a cultural and historical problem.

Comprehensive School Counseling Programs

Other literature on school counseling programs has emerged (Lapan, Gysbers & Petroski, 2001) that calls for structural change. However, the evidence regarding reducing the gap is tenuous and not all school counselors are permitted to develop and implement such programs. Most counselors in schools with high concentrations of SPARs are a) under prepared and b) limited in role (e.g., assisting the principal with paperwork, testing and student assignment). A body of evidence exists that suggests traditional counseling has a very limited impact on school achievement (Whiston & Sexton, 1998). In fact, many students report negative experiences with counseling services, particularly SPARs (Blustein, Phillips, Jobin-Davis, Finkelberg and Roarke, 1997). Counselors are simply told what to do by administrators who are more concerned with local pressures than the lofty issue of educational equity or professional ethics for counselors. There is a huge gap between the role of the counselor as defined in higher education and that found in school districts.

Another problem lies in the fact that counseling is associated with treatment of maladapted students with emotional and behavioral problems. School counselors often provide the first time professional help sought and often refer SPARs to specialists. This might create some problems as well as opportunities for the few counselors who actually are allowed direct contact with SPARs. With very high helper/student ratios, at best, the scarce resources are targeted at symptoms rather than root causes. Below grade-level achievement in school represents but one among many interrelated consequences associated with the broader consequences of a society that structures group-based inequality (Portes, 1996).

Most of the literature in school counseling is prescriptive for students and practitioners. Journal articles generally describe how they may play more integral, proactive, collaborative roles in schools. They encourage counselors to be leaders and advocates of students. A few studies attempt to evaluate particular programs. There is an emerging literature in the applied field that while beyond our scope

here, is relevant to this component. Yet, counselors (and some school psychologists) tend to play mostly into two traditional roles that impact only indirectly on the achievement gap: low expectations and sorting students based on tests. Sometimes counselors become part of the achievement problem directly by what they do and, at other times, by what they fail to do (or are not allowed to do). In sum, the area of counselor education is ready for change, yet the direction and purpose of the transformation varies considerably based on the current literature.

Related Major Problem Areas

As we have seen, a major block to progress in empowering counselors in the schools is their lack of preparation (CACREP, 1994). Despite current efforts to establish standards for national counselor education curricula, less than 25 percent of schools' counseling programs were accredited by CACREP in 1992. The average age of secondary school counselors was 60 more than a decade ago with large numbers retiring in the following years. Hence, at least three major problems appear before the field if school counselors are to play key roles in establishing equity in education:

1. **Theoretical and Practical Knowledge/Skills**—Counselor education needs to have higher standards based in the areas of primary prevention program design and evaluation, human development, learning theory and research. Few programs provide guidance and preparation to promote SPARs' development directly. For secondary school counselors, adapting programs like AVID (Mehan et al) or SEER (www.seer.org) that help under-represented minorities prepare for college (via funded university-high school partnerships) is important. For elementary school educators, directing after-school programs such as those described in Safe and Smart's exemplary programs represents a new role that assists SPARs' academic progress. Educators also

need to be prepared in social science well enough to not only apply but generate actions grounded in human development.

2. Fidelity to a Professional Identity—Regardless of preparation and certification, counselors remain at the mercy of administrators who may not be committed to closing the gap or aware of the strategic contributions that counselors can make insofar as collaborative school cultures, community-based mentoring assistance, prevention and other areas are concerned. Often, they are not allowed to apply their professional skills. It seems then that a double-edged problem must be resolved. One is internal and the other is external to the profession and the roles it must be able to exercise in the areas of social and vocational development.
3. Delivery capacity—Well-prepared counselors must be allowed to be proactive and consistent in addressing various aspects of the gap. Two primary mechanisms appear relevant. First, as higher education programs become more interdisciplinary, the unique and shared roles played by counselors would be apparent to principals and teachers. Counselor organizations can help ensure counselors practice their profession across districts by working with principal and teacher organizations nationally and state professional certification boards.

Summary

Unlike in the past, counselors today are being called upon to play direct roles in state and district efforts to assist students placed at risk. Critics state that counselor education programs do not sufficiently prepare counselors to play such a role. However, these criticisms are often founded on the notion that transformations should center on improving achievement scores. This article answers the critics by identifying the major problems that block progress in

empowering counselors, and then specifically delineating what counselors themselves can do to help at-risk students, as well as what counselor education programs can do to help counselors influence policies that affect these students.

Conclusion

The double-edged problem is that knowledge base limitations are compounded by structured roles that in turn limit change or agency. That is, many educators are constrained from pursuing preventive educational activities (even if they were prepared adequately). For many who are veteran teachers, counseling is an add-on certification (Baker, 1994). Mostly, counselors are trained one or two courses at a time as they teach full-time, something that results in a vague professional identity that is not substantive (Hayes & Dagley, 1996). Too often their skills in group work, values clarification and related areas remain under-utilized. We conclude with a call to unify higher education in its preparation of educators and transform the educational system in establishing *excellence through equity* in opportunity to learn, regardless of students' background. This will require counselors to play major roles in primary prevention and extending their knowledge base.

References

- Baker, S. B. (1994). Mandatory teaching experience for school counselors: An impediment to uniform certification standards for school counselors. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 33, 314–326.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Blustein, D., Phillips, S., Jobin-Davis, K., Finkelberg, S., & Roarke, A. (1997). A theory-building investigation of the school-to-work transition. *Counseling Psychologist*, 25(3), 364–402.

- Brown, A. L. (1992). Design experiments: Theoretical and methodological challenges in creating complex interventions in classroom settings. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 2, 141–178.
- Brown, D. (1999). *Proven strategies for improving learning & achievement*. Greensboro, NC: CAPS Publications.
- CACREP. (1994). *Accreditation standards and procedures manuals*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Cormier, S. & Hackner, H. (1999). *Counseling strategies and interventions*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hayes, R. L., Dagley, J., & Horne, A. M. (1996). Restructuring school counselor education: Work in progress. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 74, 378–384.
- Lapan, R. T., Gysbers, N. C., & Petroski, G. F. (2001). Helping seventh graders be safe and successful: A statewide study of the impact of comprehensive guidance programs. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 79(3), 320–330.
- Mehan, H., Hubbard, L., & Villanueva, I. (1994). Forming academic identities: Accommodation without assimilation among involuntary minorities. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, 25(2), 91–117.
- Portes, P. R. (1996). Ethnicity and culture in educational psychology. In D. Berliner & Robert Calfee (Eds.), *The Handbook of Educational Psychology*. New York, NY: MacMillan Publishing.

Portes, P. R. & Sandhu, D. S. (in press). *Dismantling the achievement gap*. Alexandria, VA: ACA

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society*. Translated by A. R. Luria. Edited by M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, and E. Souberman. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Whiston, S. C., & Sexton, T. L. (1998). A review of school counseling outcome research: Implications for practice. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 76, 412–426.