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Reaching Students of Diverse Populations Through Sociocultural Poetry



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A Missing Link in Professional School Counseling

Abstract

Sociocultural poetry can be used in conjunction with a counselor empathy model to assist school counselors in understanding the life experiences of students of diverse populations. Sociocultural poetry can serve as a medium for developing empathy and increasing cultural awareness for youth and students of diverse populations, as well as those of all cultures. Sociocultural poetry can also assist the professional school counselor in promoting social justice and empathy toward underrepresented students and transforming the school setting as cultural identity moves toward diverse multicultural worldviews. This model can also be used to help school counselors explore their own feelings and thoughts as they pertain to the convergence of race, gender, and ethnicity.

Students of diverse populations are increasing in number throughout K-12 public and private schools across the nation (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 1999). As a result, the need for professional school counselors who have multicultural perspectives is paramount (Teacher Standards and Practice Commission, 2000; Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, 2001). Unfortunately, many school counselors do not adequately understand the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, including those of various underrepresented groups. Consequently, there can often be a culture clash between the school counselor and the minority student based on the convergence of race, gender, ethnicity, and sociocultural background. A creative way to bridge this sociocultural gap between students and counselors is by incorporating sociocultural poetry into the school counseling program. Sociocultural poetry is a unique way to meet the needs of culturally different, underrepresented students.

Outlined below are several goals and objectives for the adoption of sociocultural poetry in a comprehensive school counseling program at the high school level. Although sociocultural poetry can be used in lower grade levels, the focus of this article will be on grades 9 through 12. The discussion also includes a process that high school counselors can use to help learn basic empathy skills. The article will also address the importance of connecting with core relational attributes that can promote empathic relationships among individuals from culturally different backgrounds.

Sociocultural Poetry in School Counseling

As stated above, one method of assisting professional high school counselors to meet the needs of culturally different students is through the employment of sociocultural poetry. This genre of poetry encompasses poetic writings that address the racial, cultural, and social

history and experiences of members of underrepresented and diverse populations (Angelou, 1978; Fukayama & Reid, 1996; Komunyakaa, 1999; Mazza, 1999; Ingram, 2000; Ingram & Nakazawa, 2003). Sociocultural poetry captures the essence of life experiences, which consist of the stories and narratives that people share about themselves and their culturally distinct world (Ingram & Ward, 2002).

A basic method of utilizing sociocultural poetry in school counseling incorporates a four-step process. The steps are as follows:

- 1.) Select a poem that embodies the racial, cultural, and social history and experiences of members of underrepresented and diverse populations.

- 2.) Employ the poem in the school counseling curriculum (e.g., guidance lessons, group activities, individual counseling).

- 3.) Ask the student(s) to reflect on the life experiences of the people and/or groups represented in the poem, including issues regarding race, culture, gender, and social history.

- 4.) Discuss the transformative nature of the poem in terms of motivation, social action, and diversity awareness. For example, ask students how the poem transformed their thinking, feeling, and behavior toward the people and/or groups represented in the poem.

To employ sociocultural poetry in the guidance program, school counselors must obtain poetic writings that reflect the racial, cultural, and social history of underrepresented and diverse populations. There are several examples of this type of poetry in the popular media (e.g., spoken word and poetry slam competitions) as well as poetic literature. (For a listing of resources that may be useful for finding works of poetry that will be appropriate for your needs, see page 19.)

The following guidelines will assist you in choosing sociocultural poetry for a school counseling program. First, choose poetry that embodies the racial,

cultural, and social history and experiences of members of underrepresented and diverse populations. Second, choose poetry that reflects a wide variety of groups of people, diverse experiences, and unique histories. Third, ask the students to share poetry that follows the first two guidelines and is meaningful to them.

Sociocultural Poetry: Counseling Goals and Objectives

School counselors can realistically expect to achieve four basic goals through the implementation of sociocultural poetry. The goals are as follows: to explore the life experiences of persons from underrepresented groups as they are expressed through poetry and creative expression; to understand how poetic metaphor can mediate between culturally different lived experiences and the dominant discourse; to acknowledge the feelings behind another person's experience through counselor empathy and active listening; and to view poetry in teaching contexts as being transformative in terms of motivation, social action, and diversity awareness.

When sociocultural poetry is used in the high school setting, professional school counselors can demonstrate genuine empathy that transcends cross-cultural barriers. Further, and perhaps more important, is the fact that the content in such writings can assist in the process of critically challenging the historical, racial, and cultural stereotypes that exist about people of diverse backgrounds (Dubois, 1968; Wallace, 1979; Takaki, 1994).

In an effort to illustrate the above goals, the poem *Shelling Beans* (Ingram, 2000) will be used as a case example. *Shelling Beans* is the story of a young man who discovers, through his mother's wisdom, what real wealth is and why it is important to remember the common and simple things in life. This poem reflects the cultural heritage of an African American man who grew up in a southern state:

*Come son she said in a voice both nice and sweet,
 come sit here at the table
 and help your ol' mama while she still able
 chile' what a day I've seen -
 grab that sack and help shell these beans!
 Mama, I said with an incredulous voice,
 I came here by choice,
 I've been out walking with kings and queens,
 Shelling Beans
 is for the common man,
 I gave that up when I left the land
 so ask me mama about my plate of riches
 you need a new dress?
 I'll buy you one inlaid with gold stitches!
 She looked at me in her wise old way,
 although I did not know exactly what she would say
 I knew that it would contain the riches of the ages
 you see she had lived a good life,
 therefore her life book was full of pages.
 She said, Son don't you ever forget -
 no matter how big you get -
 that true wealth comes from the fruit of the earth -
 from any place else - what is its true worth?
 So my son,
 tell me your story
 is it only of the riches and the glory?
 Or is also of remembering
 how to do the common and simple things
 like shelling beans,
 in addition to all that you have seen?
 Mama, I said, with a trembling voice, I do remember,
 I do remember and I grabbed that sack and helped
 shell those beans - for on that day,
 I did not mind shelling beans, because I shelled them
 at the feet of a Queen!*

Regardless of race, ethnicity, and gender, people can relate to two life lessons reflected in this poem. First, it is easy to lose sight of the perspective of others while striving to reach educational, professional, and personal goals. Second, family and cultural values can often be abandoned and replaced with societal ones that perpetuate stereotypes and cultural oppression.

If this poem were to be employed by a high school counselor in the classroom setting, students would be able to express their thoughts and feelings about the life experience of the author and how

In an effort to assist school counselors with accomplishing this goal, sociocultural poetry is introduced into the guidance curriculum as an alternative way to teach empathy skills. Metaphorically, school counselors help students shell beans. The professional literature has documented that students need school counselors who understand new ways of being (Rogers, 1980), have knowledge of cultural dynamics (Sue & Sue, 2002), and have bilingual competencies (Garcia & Zea, 1997). Yet, school counselors still struggle with building trust and cultural rapport with students when life

it relates to them. This poem demonstrates both historical and personal experiences (i.e., shelling beans), raises cultural sensitivity, and educates about the importance of understanding lived experiences.

Perspectives about other groups of people are often derived from the systematic exploration of individual and collective life experiences (Garcia & Zea, 1997; Garretson, 1993; Uba, 1994). Developing a clear understanding of another cultural perspective or worldview can be a difficult task to achieve. It requires moving beyond presuppositions (e.g., biases, judgments, stereotypes) and empathically entering into the world of the other person (Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble, 1996).

issues pertain to social, economic, cultural, and racial differences. This is a difficult task to overcome given the cultural mistrust, negative stereotyping, and, in many areas, the growing backlash against multicultural awareness (Howard, 1999).

As a consequence, attempts to embrace new paradigms and world philosophies that champion affirmation of cultural differences are thwarted by various forms of oppression (i.e., sexism, racism, ageism, culture-ism) and beliefs that espouse messages of sympathy instead of messages of empathic understanding. School counselors must learn how poetic metaphors can mediate between culturally different life experiences and the dominant discourse. Many young professional school counselors leave the university setting after master-level training without understanding the universal commonality that exists in human experiences. Through sociocultural poetry, these experiences can be disseminated, shared, and discussed in order to increase awareness of and aid in the process of multicultural development.

The belief that stories and poetry are a key to learning is supported by research concerning how the brain functions. According to Shank, one part of human memory, labeled episodic memory, assembles experiences into stories, lessons, and wisdom that are remembered long after facts fade (Watson, 1997). The phrase in the above poem, "therefore her life book was full of pages," symbolizes the wisdom that results from lifelong learning and development (Baird-Carlson, 1995). In African and other oral traditions, the understanding of life was conveyed through stories. Noddings (1991) stated, "Stories have the power to direct and change our lives. Stories are pearls of wisdom." The layers of complexity and ambiguity found in poetry or stories add to their use in the complexity of teaching and learning (J. Moule, personal communication, September 25, 2002). Each poem or story

provides entrée into another person's lived experience. In essence, school counselors can listen to the words of voices beyond the dominant discourse and attempt to meaningfully interact with the experiences behind the words.

Therefore, when school counselors employ poetry written by people from culturally diverse populations in the school counseling program, it has the potential to develop knowledge and understanding of diverse populations; it also promotes multicultural awareness. Furthermore, it has the potential to move these emerging professionals beyond stereotyping and bias toward social advocacy.

The use of sociocultural poetry in the school setting promotes the development of student empathy. Sociocultural poetry teaches students to acknowledge the feelings behind another person's lived experience as demonstrated by school counselor empathy. In *Shelling Beans*, the mother attempts to assist her son to remember the importance of empathy as it relates to the experiences of others. As stated earlier, empathy is the ability to enter into another person's world, approximate their experience, and connect based on the underlying thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that occur during the interaction (Ivey, Ivey, & Morgan, 1997). Empathy is a skill that students can use to build rapport and trust in relationships, and empathy can teach students how to understand each other. Empathy can also be used with students to create the desire and ability to listen to another person's story without judgment or bias.

School counselors need to foster this empathic ability in order to facilitate students' personal growth and development. This means moving beyond sympathy. Sympathy, feeling sorry for another person, can be viewed as a hierarchical position that does not entail acknowledging other people as being equal. Students may hear the other person, but there is still a distancing from

the person that precludes the possibility for a close understanding of that person's feelings. In other words, "It happened to her and not to me. Therefore, I feel sorry for her, but can't really do anything." Empathy, on the other hand, is feeling with the other person. It means being with the person in terms of approximating an understanding of his or her thoughts and feelings (Noddings, 1991). The following poem (Seward, personal communication, August 8, 2000) captures the essences of students demonstrating empathy versus sympathy toward others.

Sympathy

I see you
I hear you
I feel for you

Empathy

I see you
I hear you
I am with you

Professional school counselors can use sociocultural poetry in academic contexts as a transformational tool in terms of motivation, social action, and diversity awareness. The poem *Shelling Beans* demonstrates what can occur when the common and simple things in life that sustain existence are forgotten—essential things such as reaching out to others and assisting them—regardless of personal educational and professional attainment. Furthermore, it demonstrates the importance of advocating and working with others to bring about social change and empathic understanding. Students must learn that social advocacy pertains to any action designed to fight injustice, discrimination and racism, gender bias, heterosexism, or ageism. School counselors can demonstrate social advocacy to students by taking a stand against societal ills, either as individuals or as part of a collective group (Clemente, Mandell, & Ternerup, 1998; Lee & Walz, 1998). School counselors are trained to promote social

change and to implement strategies that combat the causes and effects of institutionalized forms of oppression. Therefore, it is essential that school counselors understand the inherent differences between advocating for an individual and advocating with an individual (Baker & Gerler, 2004).

It can be very difficult to move beyond one's own position of comfort (i.e., cultural zone) to develop empathy and demonstrate social advocacy against the dominant discourse that permeates society in various forms of oppression. Yet, understanding cultural constructs and cultural identity are important in an era of growing cultural encapsulation (Wrenn, 1962). Therefore, we need school counselors who understand social advocacy issues (Clemente, Mandell, & Ternerup, 1997) as well as the unique cognitive and affective needs of culturally diverse students and schools (Lee, 1999).

Conclusion

Sociocultural poetry can serve as a medium for developing empathy and increasing cultural awareness for students of diverse populations, as well as those who are members of the prevalent culture. Sociocultural poetry will assist the professional school counselor in promoting social justice and empathy toward underrepresented students and in transforming the school setting as cultural identity moves toward diverse multicultural worldviews. School counselors should adopt a model of sociocultural poetry to use with students, teachers, and administrators to help them understand the life experiences of diverse populations. By doing so, the sociocultural gap between school counselors and the culturally diverse will begin to close.

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See the following resources to find examples of sociocultural works of poetry that may be appropriate for your counseling program.

Unsettling America: An anthology of contemporary multicultural poetry, by M. Gillan & J. Gillan (Eds.).

From totems to hip-hop: A multicultural anthology of poetry across the Americas, 1900-2002, by I. Reed (Ed.).

The spoken word revolution: Slam, hip hop & the poetry of a new generation, by M. Eleveld (Ed.).

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