Faces of the Future: School Counselors as Cultural Mediators

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Twenty years ago, futurists examined the changing role of the school counselor and forecasted what the 21st-century school counselor would need to know. This article forecasts the future of school counseling in the next 20 years by focusing on expected diversity of K–12 students. Speculation on student enrollment based on projected trends and extrapolated data is used to describe the professional knowledge, awareness, and skills school counselors will need to touch the lives of the students of the future.

“The future, as a concept of time, can be viewed as taking place anytime from this instant into infinity” (Hays & Johnson, 1984, p. 208). This statement from early counseling futurists is so fundamental, school counselors may often overlook the reality that each moment lived is a step into the future. Forecasting the future of school counseling for the next 20 years is too broad; thus, this article is dedicated to anticipating the changing diversity of K–12 populations served by school counselors. Speculation based on projected trends and extrapolated data on student enrollment is used to describe the professional knowledge, awareness, and skills counselors will need to touch the lives of the students of the future. The terms diversity and cultural diversity are used interchangeably in this article. For clarity, these words will convey “the lived experiences and the related perceptions of and reactions to those experiences that serve to differentiate collective populations from one another” (Marshall, 2002, p. 7). This definition aligns with the concept of social construction—each individual is the cumulative embodiment of all their experiences and interpretation of those experiences in relation to other individuals as cultural beings. Professional school counselors may be required to facilitate the social construction of students, families, and community cultures in the future, while heeding to social, political, economic, environmental, and psychological societal issues that move beyond cultural competence.

What kind of future do school counseling professionals want? Intentionality is necessary in considering the kind of future the school counseling profession desires and in making the decisions necessary to achieve such a future. Using intentionality in pursuing activities to achieve a desired future may increase the potential for predictable outcomes. Futurists have identified four guiding concepts in contemplating future scenarios of a social phenomenon: (a) probable future, the future that will likely be; (b) possible future, the future that may be; (c) plausible future, the future that could be; and (d) preferable future, the future that should be (Inbody, 1984). Inbody has elected to consider a probable future (the future that will likely be) to reflect on and conceptualize potential demands of school counseling professionals in working with diverse student populations.

Projects of Population Trends Through 2025

Currently, U.S. public schools are filled with student populations that are “multiethnic, multicultural, and multilingual” (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2007, p. 75). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2000) reports, in the 1990s, racial and ethnic minorities made up 80% of the nation’s population growth. In the 2000s, there were roughly 87 million people of minority backgrounds living in the country, corresponding to a 43% increase from the 1990 population data (Roseberry-McKibbin, Brice, & O’Hanlon, 2005). An examination of the U.S. Census Bureau reports during the past 20 years indicates that the White, non-Hispanic population grew by 7.6% because the population of individuals from racial minority backgrounds grew by more than 90%. T. M. Smith, Young, Bae, Choy, and Alsalam (1997) estimated that by the year 2010, there will be a 50% or more increase in the number of Latino/a, Asian/Pacific Islander, American Indian, and Alaska Native students joining public school systems. During the same period, the monolingual English-speaking White population is expected to decrease by more than 10% (T. M. Smith et al., 1997). Public school enrollments are expected to reach an all-time high of 50 million students by 2014 (Livingston & Wirt, 2005). These most recent data demonstrate the increasing need for school counselors to develop cultural competence and to be better prepared to support the school success of the expanding, culturally diverse student population.

Projections of schoolchildren ages 5 to 17 have been calculated through the year 2020 by the U.S. Census Bureau (2000). States projected to have the “smallest proportion” of population under age 20 are West Virginia and Florida, which are both at 21% (Campbell, 1996). However, Campbell projected two states will have the largest proportion of their population less than 20 years of age—Alaska (34%) and California (33%). In addition to the 1996 general population projections, the U.S. Census Bureau has predicted race/ethnicity populations in the United States through the year 2025. When the school-age children data are combined with the race/ethnicity data, a
clearer forecast in student diversity emerges. An overarching picture of diverse faces in U.S. schools may be projected. By 2020 the racial and ethnic distribution for school-age persons between 5 and 17 years old is projected to be 30 million White; 9 million African American; 13 million Latino/a; 3 million Asian/Pacific Islander; and 4 million other, which includes American Indians, Alaska Natives, and those of multiple race/ethnicities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

The previous information provides insight into the future students seeking help from school counselors in the next 20 years. More important to the school counseling profession may be the predicted regional shifting of racial/ethnic populations. These shifts may create the largest changes for school counseling based on differences in public school enrollments by geographic region. The U.S. Census Bureau population division reports the 10 fastest growing population states through 2025 will be Nevada, Arizona, Utah, Idaho, New Mexico, Colorado, Georgia, Texas, Wyoming, and Florida, with the largest growth being in the South and West regions of the country (Campbell, 1996).

Population projections and trends for each racial/ethnic group are offered as an indication of the changes in diversity that constitutes a probable future for school counselors. The U.S. Census Bureau uses four regions (Northeast, Midwest, South, and West) as categorical divisions when considering population projections. The fastest growing population group in all regions is the Asian population. Projections indicate the Asian population will have the greatest gains in the West and Northeast regions, with an increase of 2 million people. In 2025, California will remain ranked first with approximately 41% of the nation’s Asian population residing in the state. New York, Hawaii, New Jersey, and Texas will follow behind California in composing the five states that will account for more than one half of the nation’s Asian population (Campbell, 1996).

The second fastest population growth in every region will be the Latino/a population with a projected increase equivalent to 44% of the Latino/a population growth—an increase from 32 million to 72 million people (Campbell, 1996). Regionally, the Latino/a population ranks second in every region except the West. The majority of Latinos/as are anticipated to remain in five states: California (with the highest Latino/a population), Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois. The Midwest region is anticipated to increase from 6% to 9% in Latino/a population numbers by 2025 (Campbell, 1996).

The smallest population group is the American Indian population, which is expected to be the third fastest growing population group in all regions except the South, according to Campbell’s (1996) projections. Approximately one half of the American Indians added to this population group by 2025 will reside in the West. States predicted to have the largest proportion of the American Indian population are Oklahoma, Arizona, New Mexico, California, and Washington. It is expected that 45% of American Indians in the nation will reside in these five states by 2025 (Campbell, 1996).

The fourth fastest growing population in the United States is the African American population. By 2025, Florida is expected to replace New York with the largest population gain among the African American population. More than one third of the African American population is expected to live in five states: Florida, New York, Texas, Georgia, and California. Regionally, nearly 12 million African Americans will be located in the South. It is anticipated that the majority of the African American population added to the U.S. population will be in the South (Campbell, 1996). This will have the South as the third-ranking region for the African American population.

Overall, the White population is projected to show the slowest growth among all of the racial/ethnic groups in the United States through 2025. The White population is projected to constitute one fifth of the increase in three regions (Midwest, South, and West) and decline in size in the Northeast (Campbell, 1996). In 2025, Texas and Florida will see an increase in this population compared with no change in California and decreases in New York and Pennsylvania. The states with the greatest increase in White population are expected to be Florida, Texas, Washington, North Carolina, and Georgia. Campbell (1996) stated, “Whites will have net population losses in 12 States” (p. 18). After 2025, the West region will replace the Northeast region as the third largest region for the White, non-Hispanic population. The South region is expected to continue to have the largest share of the nation’s White population (Campbell, 1996).

Contemplating these regional changes in diversity, one can anticipate that all four regions of the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) will experience shifts in race/ethnicity population distributions. The greatest change is anticipated in the ASCA Western region with five states being affected by the population projections: Arizona, California, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Washington. The ASCA Southern region will have three states with significant racial/ethnic population changes: Florida, Georgia, and Texas. The remaining two ASCA regions will have two states each affected by these changes (North Atlantic region [New Jersey and New York] and Midwest region [Illinois and Oklahoma]). These anticipated changes will require school counselors to reassess their services to all students.

Sociodemographic Changes and the Faces of the Future

Continued diversification of society and public school enrollments has been discussed for many years (e.g., Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2007; Lee, 2001; Marshall, 2002; Wrenn, 1985). These discussions have led to concrete attention to the importance of multicultural competencies in professional counseling organizations and in school counselor preparation programs. Progress toward the incorporation of multiculturalism into the school counseling profession has
been demonstrated through 10 key initiatives: (a) adoption in 1996 of a position statement on multicultural counseling by ASCA (1997); (b) articulation of what accomplished school counselors should know and be able to do through the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (2002) School Counseling Standard V on equity, fairness, and diversity in school counseling; (c) creation of new inclusive definitions of cultural diversity in literature and training (e.g., Marshall, 2002); (d) formation of the National Center for Transforming School Counseling in 2003 with the primary focus of helping all students achieve (Education Trust, n.d.-a); (e) recent revisions to ASCA's (2004) Ethical Standards for School Counselors, Standard E.2. Diversity; (f) increased inclusion of classroom guidance lessons on oppression and social justice in professional literature (e.g., Bailey & Bradbury-Bailey, 2004; S. D. Smith & Chen-Hayes, 2004; Stone, 2004); (g) focus on the concept of social justice in counseling literature and professional organizations (e.g., the Counselors for Social Justice division); (h) movement in the professional counseling literature toward embracing the social construction of culture as a basis for cultural competence and “affirming diversity and challenging oppression” (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2007, p. 75); (i) emphasis on cultural diversity and cultural competence in professional development workshops and sessions at state, regional, and national conferences; and (j) inclusion of cultural diversity requirements in Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2001) documentation for school counselor preparation programs. Given the solid groundwork of school counselors in the past 10 years, what will the future hold for school counselors? What more must be accomplished?

The future must intentionally build on the past. Successful negotiation of cultural diversity in the future relies on building a bridge from the present focus on awareness, knowledge, and skills required for attainment of cultural competence to the application of cultural competence through cultural mediation, which leads to academic, personal/social, and career success of culturally diverse students. School counselors are the structural engineers in building this bridge to the future. Now is the time for counselors to attend to the lifelong process of gaining cultural competence as well as developing leadership and advocacy skills necessary to expand their professional development and role as cultural mediators.

Cultural Mediation and School Counselors

Cultural mediation is a term used in international settings in relation to working with refugees and cross-cultural integration processes. However, in these international settings, cultural mediation is a reaction to a given circumstance. For example, a sudden influx of refugees, needing help negotiating linguistic and cultural differences, into a major urban area becomes a reactive process. I define cultural mediation in school counseling as an intentional process through which a school counselor, in the role of cultural mediator, engages in prevention, intervention, and/or remediation activities that facilitate communication and understanding between culturally diverse human systems (e.g., school, family, community, and federal and state agencies) that aid the educational progress of all students.

It appears that the school counseling profession may be on the cusp of a paradigm shift regarding cultural diversity. Currently, the focus has been void of systems theory, except in a few instances, and has been “counselor-centric,” ignoring for the most part interdisciplinary discussions related to cultural and social mediation. For instance, professionals in counseling are expected to be aware of their own values, biases, and assumptions about human behavior and how these may affect others, the focus being on the school counselor first. Although a change in population alone may not substantiate a need for school counselors to reconsider their cultural performance, when added to increased societal awareness of cultural oppression, prejudice, and social injustice issues, attention to population changes may be the only measurable indicator of needed change. The forecast for the future will require school counselors to develop and maintain fluidity between a self-and-other focus embedded within systems thinking for the purposes of mediating culture.

The functions of a cultural mediator in a school system may vary from current role statements. It is anticipated that the future will demand school counselors to consider all activities of the school embedded within the cultural context of the school and community. I present the following 10 functions a school counselor should consider when becoming a cultural mediator in a school: (a) gather and examine demographic data on students enrolled in the schools in their community; (b) develop an awareness of cultural backgrounds of all stakeholders in the school, including students, parents, teachers, staff, administrators, and neighboring communities (e.g., rival athletic teams, cooperative education programs); (c) communicate with families and community organizations regarding cultural diversity; (d) seek further education in cultural competence and linguistic skills acquisition; (e) work and think “outside of the box” or be culturally creative to affect ongoing social constructions of themselves, students, parents, teachers, staff, and administrators; (f) facilitate access to helping resources and social service agencies; (g) help culturally diverse students gain intrapersonal skills to facilitate relationship building; (h) help culturally diverse students develop social mediation skills to gain knowledge of cultural tools; (i) create a supportive and encouraging culturally diverse school and community climate; and (j) serve as an information hub for culturally diverse families.

Paisley and McMahon (2001) stated that school counseling professionals need to consider the context in which they perform and the relevant challenges and opportunities that
exist in these context. Although some challenges and opportunities will not be original in the future, others will be new because of the changes in the society, educational expectations, and issues faced by schools, communities, families, and students. In future contexts, the cultural mediation roles of school counselors may require balancing the needs of multiple stakeholders in a complex and political environment.

The task of cultural mediation for school counselors in the future is predictable based on impending cultural changes in student populations. My specific futurist forecasting predicts that school counselors will be required to develop skills in cultural mediation specifically to advocate and serve (a) linguistic diverse students and families, (b) culturally competent family partners, and (c) community consultants and social advocates.

**Cultural Mediation and Linguistic Diversity**

Linguistically and culturally diverse (LCD) students across the nation face dilemmas stemming from language barriers. Discrepancies between LCD students’ cultures, values, and the school system may result in students becoming disenchanted with educational systems and eventually dropping out of school. Academic disenfranchisement is a reality today and will require greater attention to the future to satisfactorily meet the challenge. Given this challenge, school counselors may not possess cultural mediation skills to provide such assistance. Despite the emphasis on multicultural awareness, very little is known about counselors’ perceived skills in the area of linguistic diversity.

Targeted research in this area is long overdue in counseling. It is critical to identify and evaluate professional development activities designed to address the challenges counselors face in their work with LCD students. In addition, incorporation of such knowledge into existing models for the delivery of a comprehensive school counseling program is crucial for the future, or we may find the “one voice” being oppressive. Future studies dedicated to developing a knowledge base focused on cultural competence skill building is essential for school counselors to successfully provide school counseling programs to future diverse populations (Schwallie-Giddis, Anstrom, Sánchez, Sardi, & Granato, 2004).

School counselors and comprehensive school counseling programs are anticipated to play a dynamic role in addressing the discrepancy between diverse families, cultural communities, and educational systems. The future will not allow ambivalence related to cultural competence but will demand mastery of cultural mediation skills. Counselors may function as a bridge between the home, culturally diverse communities, and the school. Lee (2001) stated, “A culturally responsive comprehensive guidance program can function to make the system more responsive to culturally diverse communities while at the same time increasing the level of effective participation by communities in the educational process” (p. 258).

**Cultural Mediation and Culturally Competent Family Partnerships**

It is critical to examine the role of school counselors as cultural mediators when working with families and community agencies. Parents and community agencies are significant stakeholders of the educational systems; thus, they play a central role in promoting needed changes (Davis, 2005). Taylor and Adelman (2000) stated the following regarding this integrated relationship between schools, families, and communities:

Schools can better address barriers to learning and teaching and promote positive development when they are an integral and positive part of the community. Reciprocally, families and other community entities can better address barriers to development, learning, parenting, and strengthen the fabric of family and community life by working in partnership with schools. (p. 299)

Parents and community agencies are essential partners of the education system and are central to encouraging needed changes. Thus, school counselors would be remiss if they did not use this resource to prepare for the future changes in cultural diversity in schools. School counselors should acknowledge that students, although appreciated for their individuality, are part of their family systems. Therefore, school counselors should make an effort to provide consistent assistance for students and their families by connecting with community services and agencies in a unified manner (Davis, 2005). The goal of family–school partnerships is to enhance the school success of all students through equal accessibility for all students with increased opportunities for the achievement of average students. Fine (1993) stated that parental involvement is a power issue, but power is not equally distributed across social groups. The distinction between family status and process variables is critical. Educators know family process variables (e.g., what parents do to support learning) predict scholastic ability more than do family status variables (e.g., who these families are culturally). Christenson and Sheridan (2001) stated that social class or family relationships make up to 25% of the variance in educational success, whereas Walberg (1984) indicated that family support for learning or interaction style make up as much as 60% of variance in educational success.

Home-environment influences appear to correlate positively with students’ academic achievement and school performance. Parent participation in schooling is positively correlated with benefits for students and such benefits desired by educators. “When parents are involved, students show improvement in grades; test scores, including reading and math achievement; attitude toward schoolwork; completion of homework; academic perseverance; and participation in classroom activities” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 50). Parent participation in education facilitates creating home–school connections. Parents’ benefits include an increased sense of self-efficacy,
better understanding of the school program, greater appreciation about taking part in their children’s education, enhanced communication with their children about schoolwork, and active involvement in home learning activities (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001). These parental benefits in culturally diverse families may create a more culturally supportive and encouraging school climate that could transfer over into a cultural supportive community climate.

Cultural Mediation in Community Consultation and Advocacy

ASCA’s (2004) Standard D.2. briefly addresses the professional school counselor’s responsibility to the community with emphasis given to the collaborative relationship between agencies, organizations, and individuals in the community. When collaborating with these parties, the school counselor serves as cultural mediator between the school and the community. This relationship is vital to promote good public relations and support for school projects and activities that demand community participation.

Through facilitating connections, school counselors consult with parties external to schools. Therefore, using effective consultation is an important element in cultural mediation with community members, businesses, agencies, and other mental health professionals. Cultural consultation nurtures the creation of connections between the school counselor and members of the community. This consultation may require social justice action on the part of the school counselor as a cultural mediator. “The concept of social justice is central to the practice of multicultural school counseling. Social justice refers to equity, equality, and fairness in the distribution of societal resources” (Holcomb-McCoy & Chen-Hayes, 2007, p. 81). The school counselor may be in the best position in the future to ensure that culturally diverse students receive equity, equality, and fairness in community interactions.

Impetus for aligning school and community partnerships adds a “critical dimension to the school counselor’s consultative function” (Keys, Bemak, & Lockhart, 1998, p. 385). These partnerships are fundamental to school counselors who serve as liaisons to connect the groups. The community should be aware that school counseling programs provide valuable cultural resources. This awareness helps to integrate the school counseling program as a reciprocal partner in supporting these community programs as they face financial, political, or cultural strain (Davis, 2005).

In an endeavor to act in response to Goals 2000, “The Educate America Act (EAA) of 1994, ASCA adopted School Counseling 2000, a set of goals for school counseling derived from the six broad goals for achieving success in American education in the EAA” (Baker & Gerler, 2004, p. 22). The overarching goal of the school counseling program is to work collaboratively with students, parents, teachers, community members, and employers in order to develop policies and programs to meet the identified needs (Baker & Gerler, 2004). This will be of greater importance in the next 20 years with the expected population trends.

Connecting with the community as a cultural mediator is essential if school counselors want to influence system interventions. Several authors (Hobbs & Collison, 1995; Keys & Lockhart, 1999) have advised school counselors to begin the process of reflecting on their roles as community consultants and collaborative partners. Action in the form of integrating resources and services (e.g., health, social services, substance abuse, and juvenile justice) will “strengthen school programs, family practice, student learning, and personal development” (Thompson, 2002, p. 174).

Furthermore, Bemak (2000) advised counselors to work with community organizations in three ways: (a) connecting students and their families to the resources in the community according to their unique needs (e.g., mental health, employment, health care), (b) arranging with community services to bring them into the school as much as possible (e.g., substance abuse counselors who provide services to students during the school day), and (c) working in partnership on the development and application of prevention and intervention services that may be provided either inside or outside of the educational site (p. 327). One social justice aspect of this partnership is in community collaboration with the school counselor in the provision of services for all students based on their unique cultural needs. For example, school counseling offices may be involved in distributing information regarding summer programs, enrichment programs, or camps and may facilitate reduced fees for students and their families in need.

School counselors as cultural mediators are viewed as key players in facilitating these collaborations in order to improve the potential services for students and their families, allowing these students to attend to higher order needs of rigorous academic offerings (Baker & Gerler, 2004). In summary, the importance of being considerate to culturally diverse students (e.g., who have limited access educational opportunities) is addressed as a central theme in the Education Trust’s (n.d.-b) National School Counselor Training Initiative (Green & Keys, 2001).

School counselors in 2025 may be eager to increase their involvement in the foundational programs supportive of culturally diverse students. Such initiatives as comprehensive guidance and counseling programs and Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Education Trust, n.d.-c) development have redefined the school counselors’ role, which enables counselors to be aware of the systemic barriers that prevent culturally sensitive and quality education (Lee, 2001). As a cultural mediator in the future, with a redefined social justice and advocacy role, school counselors may intervene for culturally diverse students in educational systems and communities to eliminate institutional barriers and cultural insensitivities. The work of Lee will come to fruition regarding school counselors helping to bridge crucial cultural gaps among students, teachers, and administrators to integrate culturally diverse children into the school.
Conclusion

Anticipating and preparing for the future requires the school counseling profession to change with the sociological transformations expected in education. Changes in student populations may hold the equivalent impact of the National Defense Education Act of 1958 or the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002) on education and school counseling in the next 20 initiatives. Change is certain. How school counseling as a profession will react to this change is yet an unanswered question. Ideally, school counseling professionals will continue to dialogue about the changing faces of the future in schools and speculate and proactively respond to the needed knowledge, awareness, and skills necessary for student success.

References

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