



CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND ETHICAL ACTION: CAN'T HAVE ONE WITHOUT THE OTHER

BY CAROLYN STONE, ED.D.

Scenario: When you look at the disaggregated demographic data for your school population and compare the data with the demographics of program and/or course assignments two pieces of data jump out at you. Certain ethnic groups are overly represented in the special education class and underrepresented in the advanced classes. What is the ethical response of the culturally competent school counselor?

The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors state: “Professional school counselors develop competencies in how prejudice, power and various forms of oppression, such as ableism, agism, classism, familyism, genderism, heterosexism, immigrationism, linguicism, racism, religionism and sexism, affect self, students and all stakeholders. (E.2.b)

School counselors affirm the multiple cultural and linguistic identities of every student and all stakeholders; advocate for equitable school and school counseling programs, policies and practices for every

student and all stakeholders including use of translators and bilingual/multilingual school counseling program materials that represent all languages used by families in the school community; and advocate for appropriate accommodations and accessibility for students with disabilities.” (E.2.d)

These two sections of the Ethical Standards are important as they discuss the ethical responsibility of developing cultural competence and affirming and advocating for every student. The updated Ethical Standards for School Counselors,

scheduled to be released in July 2016, will build on these sections and include more rigorous action words such as implement, demand, pressure, battle, fight, bargain, collaborate, discuss, navigate, instigate, employ, fulfill, broker, carry out, engage and negotiate. Political astuteness for school counselors is absolutely essential to ensure our effectiveness in advocating for students, but the political velvet glove sometimes needs to encase the iron fist to move stubborn system barriers. School counselors can be political while still insisting on and working toward necessary changes. Each day that a culturally incompetent, broken system is allowed to operate is another day that hundreds of students emotionally, intellectually and/or physically are pushed out of the school system. Time is not on our side.

Challenging the status quo is an ethical imperative as well as a legal one. The legal system is based on the premise that every citizen should be given consideration without fear or favor. Law is the minimum standards, and ethical standards are aspirational. Actually school counselors’ ethical codes promote equity over equality so school counselors hold themselves to a higher standard ethically than the legal standard of fair and equal. Justice for school counselors is equity; providing what is needed is not a one-size-fits-all approach.

The definition of cultural competence can be found in any publication on the subject. A compilation contains certain tenets such as: The culturally competent school counselor is aware of his or her own cultural identity and has the ability to be effective with students from cultures other than their own. Culturally competent school counselors understand within-group differences that make each student unique. However sound the definition of cultural competence is, it remains hollow without action. Knowledge of cultural competence in a vacuum without action is meaningless, empty rhetoric. Many can espouse eloquently on cultural competence, but look behind people’s words to see if their words are matched by their deeds.

Access to advanced coursework is a predictor of future economic opportunities and allows students to choose

from the widest array of postsecondary opportunities. Using the results of analyzed data, the culturally competent school counselor can illuminate and then eradicate equity gaps. School counselors challenge the status quo and question the rules and regulations that deny equity for all students. Students have the right to understand the full weight and meaning of their program of study and to have the safety nets to stretch and strive to encourage them to challenge themselves.


Political astuteness always at the ready, the ethically competent school counselor will take up the charge to promote a social justice agenda to help all students from all ethnicities, cultures, classes, socioeconomic levels, genders and sexual identities to realize brighter futures. School counselors are in an influential position to help students learn to negotiate through the systems in which they must move. School counselors strive daily to offer every child optimum opportunities in school, fervently influencing the school environment so

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students have equitable access to rigorous course work.

Annually Congress receives a report on the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This report disaggregates data on special education placements by gender, ethnicity and other demographics. The 2011

report showed the continued overrepresentation of African-American students in the emotional/behavioral disturbance classes at an elevated rate roughly twice the national average. Only 27 percent of African-American male special education students graduate from high school.

Ethical standards change as the needs of students and schools change. The 2004 and 2010 Ethical Standards for School Counselors served us well, but we look forward to an even more robust 2016 standard of practice. The 2004 standards were the first to implore the ethically responsible of school counselors to serve as social justice advocates, and this imperative was expanded in 2010. The 2016 ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors will take the imperative to the next level. 

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