Cultural Competence in School Psychology: An Assessment Perspective

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In a multicultural society, understanding cultural issues is required for competence, responsibility, and ethical comportment by professional persons. This paper describes my own research on culturally competent services for multicultural populations. This research was designed to provide teaching materials for Anglo-American clinical psychologists. The objective of this paper is to suggest that cultural competence is a professional skill requirement for school psychology.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence includes a blend of ethno-relativistic attitudes and culture-specific skills, knowledge, and behaviors that contribute to credible and acceptable professional services to children/adolescents from visible racial/ethnic groups in school settings. Cultural competence not only permits an understanding of children/adolescents as cultural beings prior to any assessment or psychological intervention, but suggests appropriate assessment tools. As a result, any subsequent educational or mental health services become more individualized and are more likely to be desired and effective.

Cultural competence in educational settings requires that both instructional and mental health services occur in the students' first language, or in bilingual-bicultural contexts. Learning styles characteristic of each cultural group should be recognized and teaching techniques designed to conform with these styles. The extent to which parents can be directly and constructively involved in all school activities is related to a knowledge of the belief systems of the cultural groups represented in the school population and surrounding community. As a consequence, cultural competence needs to be practiced by teachers, school psychologists, counselors, administrators, policy makers on school boards, and by members of community organizations who work with schools.

A Personal Research Basis

My own agenda began with an examination of assumptions and methods used in assessment and intervention practices (Dana, 1987). Next, a format for culturally competent assessment practice was developed (Dana, 1993) that included service delivery styles, use of moderator variables for acculturation status (i.e., cultural orientation), subsequent selection of standard, modified, or culture-specific tests, and culturally appropriate feedback. These components are being examined, including cultural orientation (Dana, 1992), use of standard assessment instruments (Dana, 1995b) and modifications of these standard assessment instruments with visible racial/ethnic groups (Dana, 1995a), as well as culturally-relevant feedback of assessment findings (Dana, 1995, in press). Culturally competent practices should conform to the 1992 APA Ethical Code, although this code neglects a humanitarian commitment to protect consumers (Payton, 1994) and is weak on recommendations for implementing cultural competencies (Dana, 1994).

Culturally Competent Practice in School Psychology

Cultural competency in school settings has been increased by use of a culture-relevant picture-story test, TEMAS (Costantino, Malgady, & Rogier, 1988) that is the single most important multicultural assessment instrument now available for use in schools. This test consists of a set of pictures redrawn to depict persons from different racial/ethnic groups. The scoring system adequately represents the protocol dimensions and yields valid diagnostic and personality information.

Moreover, cultural competency can be increased by awareness of assessment bias. By adequate translations of standard intelligence tests, and by increasing recognition that standard tests can be corrected to minimize misinterpretation and pathologization. There is also recognition that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual has blatant inadequacies for school populations (e.g., Cervantes & Arroyo, 1994; Johnson, 1993). We know that classroom instruction and other services should occur in bilingual or first language contexts to be most effective, although this understanding is still controversial (Padilla et al., 1991).

School psychologists can potentially benefit from augmented cultural competencies by enhanced self-awareness, sensitization to student needs that stem from non-Eurocentric world views with differing health-illness beliefs, coping styles, and symptomatology, as well as by acquisition of new clinical skills. As a result, they can contribute not only to a continuing probity and vigor of their own profession, but can also participate more fully in a multicultural society.

As a more general concern, many psychologists remain embedded in their cultures of origin and have been socialized to unwitting conformity by their professional training. As a consequence, the application to multicultural groups of an Anglo-American research tradition, standard tests/interventions, and service delivery styles has seldom been questioned. Nonetheless, these components of assessment have a documented history of tragic outcomes in the form of caricature, pathologization, and dehumanization for many persons from visible racial/ethnic groups.

School children and adolescents are essentially cultural beings in a multicultural world. They often need to explore and appreciate the impact of their own world views within a professional context that contains understanding and respect for their culture. Providers are ethically responsible for examining and understanding their own racial-cultural identities and their stereotypical attitudes toward culturally diverse groups as a prerequisite for competent practice.

We live in a time of legitimate demands from many groups to be recognized as cultural beings with ultimate responsibility for determining the conditions of their own lives. Ethno-relativistic professional responses to these demands can only stem from understanding and acceptance of diverse cultures. An increased sensitivity and emphasis upon cultural competence provides a foundation for understanding current changes in expectations of these groups and responding in ways that can maintain and increase mutual respect and societal cohesiveness.

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15 years to encourage and ensure cultural/ethnic competence in the profession suggest increased attention to this topic.

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