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# Promoting Cultural Responsiveness and Closing the Achievement Gap with Standards Blending

*In this article, standards blending—the integration of core academic and school counseling standards—is demonstrated as a culturally responsive strategy to assist in closing the achievement gap for a group of third-grade African American males. The small-group intervention described resulted in knowledge gains in both the school counseling and academic curriculum content areas. All participants also reported experiencing increased self-esteem.*

Effective, equitable, culturally responsive school counseling practices are essential to successfully address the pernicious achievement gap pervasive in schools nationwide (Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Howard & Solberg, 2006). Historically, students of color and those from families with low income have experienced a significantly lower rate of academic achievement than their White middle-class peers (Gordon, 2006; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). Students of color make up 43% of the student census under age 5 in public schools (Lim & A'Ole-Boune, 2005), reflecting the rapid growth of diverse racial and ethnic groups in schools (Reitumetse & Madsen, 2005). Despite these seismic demographic shifts, schooling practices have not undergone significant changes to address the diverse student population (Lim & A'Ole-Boune).

Professional school counselors are uniquely trained and positioned to identify and alleviate the cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral barriers to student success and the schoolwide environmental conditions that interfere with academic achievement (Galassi & Akos, 2004; Hines & Fields, 2004). Through culturally responsive, data-driven practices, school counselors can address the need to use data to connect accountability with issues of equity (Grothaus, Crum, & James, in press). While the need to uncover and respond to systemic issues of bias and barriers to success is paramount and has been well documented (Erford, House, & Martin, 2007; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007; Stone & Dahir, 2006), this article offers an empirically supported framework for interventions that address the

achievement gap in a culturally responsive fashion.

## SHARING THE VISION AND ACHIEVING ALIGNMENT

*Standards blending* can be used as both a systems support and a responsive service mechanism. It is a systems-focused, integrative, standards-based, and student-centered crosswalking strategy that aligns school counseling programs with academic achievement while addressing an aspect of the achievement gap (Schellenberg, 2007, 2008; Hines & Fields, 2004). Standards blending provides research-supported curriculum activities, meeting the accountability and programming requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB; U.S. Department of Education, 2001), the Transforming School Counseling Initiative (Education Trust, 1997), and the ASCA National Model® (American School Counselor Association, 2005). It is illustrated here via a culturally responsive, small-group intervention with six low-achieving African American males in the third grade of an urban public elementary school located in a Southeastern U.S. state.

## EDUCATIONAL EQUITY, CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS, SELF-ESTEEM, AND STANDARDS BLENDING

Academic achievement has been consistently linked to self-esteem (Dalgas-Pelish, 2006; Purkey, 1970; Roberts, 2002; Task Force on the Family, 2003; Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004). Research indicates that students with higher levels of self-esteem attain higher levels of academic achievement, establishing a need for school programs that increase self-esteem. Researchers also have discovered a reciprocal relationship, whereby academic achievement improved student self-esteem (Liu, Kaplan, & Risser, 1992; Rosenberg, Schooler, & Schoenbach, 1989; Ross & Broh, 2000).

Unfortunately for students of color and those from families with low income, research indicates

that students perceive that their peers from low-income families and students of color are not treated in an equitable fashion in U.S. schools (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). In addition, DeCastro-Ambrosetti and Cho's (2005) study revealed a significant number of teachers doubt that education is important to the parents of students of color and students from families with low income. The U.S. Department of Education also reported that pre-service teachers had "feelings of inadequacy ... for teaching students of color, specifically addressing the needs of non-English speaking students or ... students from diverse cultural backgrounds" (Marbley, Bonner, McKisick, Henfield, & Watts, 2007, p. 9). These findings confirm Manning and Baruth's (2004) observation that "educators can have a negative impact on students' self-image, academic achievement, and overall school relations" (p. 315). Professional school counselors can be advocates and model the importance of taking "responsibility for helping each student understand himself or herself as a unique, competent, and valued member of a diverse cultural community rather than a deprived minority in a dominant culture" (Lindsey, Roberts, & CampbellJones, 2005, p. 44).

Culture, seen as encompassing a constellation of factors (e.g., gender, ability status, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, spirituality), is an essential factor in forming behaviors, attitudes, strengths, beliefs, and values (Delpit, 1995; Harris, Thoreson, & Lopez, 2007; Lindsey et al., 2005). Schools can no longer justify operating with the previous paradigms that ignore the cultural backgrounds of students (Grothaus et al., in press; Manning & Baruth, 2004). Culturally sensitive school counseling interventions can help empower students from diverse groups to overcome the dominant culture's negative views of their cultural characteristics and instead to embrace and utilize their cultural attributes (Harley, 2009). A key technique used with standards blending to ensure cultural responsiveness was noted by Erickson (2005):

Direct connections between the daily lives of students outside the classroom and the content of instruction ... can make the curriculum come alive. These connections also afford the teacher [*and counselor*] to learn the cultural backgrounds ... [of] each set of students. (p. 47)

Standards blending explicitly aligns school counseling interventions with school academic missions and demonstrates a direct impact on student achievement and closing the achievement gap. Rather than assuming a stance of cultural blindness, school counselors systematically identify and blend specific core

academic standards with school counseling standards in a culturally sensitive fashion to produce integrated lessons that assist students across curricula (Schellenberg, 2008). The intervention described below successfully addressed self-esteem and invited students to access salient cultural strengths as a means of empowerment and as a means to promote their academic success.

While any of the core academic standards can be blended with school counseling standards to create alignment, language arts and mathematics standards are the focus of standards blending because reading, writing, and arithmetic are essential in building a solid foundation from which to learn other core subjects. In addition, reinforcing language arts and mathematics standards assists schools in meeting the goal of reading and math proficiency by the 2013-14 school year as set forth by NCLB (Schellenberg, 2008). The National Mathematics Standards (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000), the Standards for the English Language Arts (National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), and the National Standards for School Counseling (Campbell & Dahir, 1997) are the focus of standards blending. Preliminary data from a study with 103 students from diverse backgrounds indicated that standards blending reinforces the academic standards that have already been covered by classroom teachers while teaching new information and concepts embodied in the academic, personal/social, and career development domains of the national school counseling standards (Schellenberg, 2007).

## METHOD

### Participants and Procedures

The "Me I Wanna Be" group consisted of six third-grade African American males in an urban public elementary school of approximately 600 students located in a Southeastern U.S. state. The school's demographics included students from the following: American Indian/Alaskan Native (1%), Hispanic (2%), Asian/Pacific Islander (2%), Caucasian (43%), and African American (52%). Forty percent of the students' parents or guardians served in a branch of the military and 60% were white-collar workers with a variety of occupations across many disciplines. The participants were not considered special needs students. Students were identified by either parents/guardians or teachers as having poor self-esteem, few friends, some behavioral issues, and low performance in mathematics and language arts.

For the academic content, math and language pacing guides were used to ensure that the school counselor was reinforcing content in those core academic areas and not teaching new mathematical and language arts concepts. The psychosocial curriculum

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**Research indicates that students with higher levels of self-esteem attain higher levels of academic achievement, establishing a need for school programs that increase self-esteem.**

**Table 1. Group Means and Percentages of Change by Session Based on Correct Pre-Post Questionnaire Responses for Each Content Area**

Curriculum	Session 1		Session 2		Session 3		Session 4	
	Mean <i>Pre:Post</i>	% Difference	Mean <i>Pre:Post</i>	% Difference	Mean <i>Pre:Post</i>	% Difference	Mean <i>Pre:Post</i>	% Difference
School counseling	1.5–2.8	87%	1.3–2.7	108%	1.2–2.8	133%	1.7–2.3	35%
Language arts	1.7–2.8	65%	1.7–2.8	65%	—————	—————	—————	—————
Mathematic	—————	—————	—————	—————	1.8–2.8	56%	1.5–2.7	80%
Blended	3.2–5.7	78%	3.0–5.5	83%	3.0–5.7	90%	2.7–5.0	85%

offered opportunities to appreciate students’ cultural backgrounds and the strengths these provide. It offered a counterpoint to the pervasive negative messages and attitudes often experienced by African American males in the public school setting (Gollnick & Chinn, 2006). The curriculum also was designed to enhance affiliation, relationship, mission, and competence—constructs upon which self-esteem is engendered (Anderman & Leake, 2005; Dalgas-Pelish, 2006; Kagan & Snidman, 1991; Ross & Broh, 2000).

The group met weekly for four 30-minute sessions. The day of the week varied depending upon the availability of all group members. Details including the core academic and ASCA standards addressed in the group sessions are listed in the action plan, the School Counseling Operational Plan for Effectiveness (SCOPE; see Appendix A).

**Instruments**

A six-item multiple-choice questionnaire reflecting the standards-based curriculum content was developed and administered by the school counselor immediately before and after each group session. Items 1–3 measured core academic curriculum competencies (language arts for sessions 1 and 2, mathematics for sessions 3 and 4). Items 4–6 measured school counseling curriculum competencies covering self-esteem (see Appendix B for an example). A 10-item questionnaire designed to assess lesson effectiveness in meeting program objectives was administered by the school counselor immediately before and after the 4-week small-group program. Items 1–3 measured language arts curriculum competencies, items 4–6 measured mathematics curriculum competencies, and items 7–10 measured school counseling curriculum competencies, highlighting self-esteem reinforced by accessing cultural awareness and pride.

SCOPE and the School Counseling Operational Report of Effectiveness (SCORE), an interactive Microsoft Office school counseling data reporting

system developed by the lead author, were used in this study to (a) guide and document accountable programming from conception to evaluation using the check boxes, text boxes, and drop-down menus; (b) meet the essential component guidelines for action planning, namely closing the achievement gap action planning and results reporting recommended by ASCA (2005); (c) simplify the process of data analysis with the preformulated worksheets; and (d) reduce the complexities of identifying standards using the program’s embedded links to data sources, core academic standards, and ASCA standards (ASCA; Schellenberg, 2008).

**Data Collection and Analysis**

The method of data collection included a pre- and post-session measure and a pre- and post-group measure. The pre-session measure was administered immediately prior to the beginning of each session. The post-session measure was administered immediately following each group session. The pre-group measure was administered immediately prior to the beginning of the first group session along with the pre-session measure. The post-group measure was administered immediately following the final group session along with the post-session measure. Data from the questionnaires were analyzed with SCORE using descriptive statistics. Details are listed in the results report, SCORE (Appendix C).

**RESULTS**

Results indicate that the standards-blended group was effective in meeting both the school counseling curriculum objectives and the core academic curriculum objectives. Knowledge development occurred on both the school counseling and academic curriculum contents for the entire group per session (see Table 1). Pre-group and post-group measures also indicated knowledge development on both the school counseling and academic curriculum contents for the entire group (see Table 2). Students also experi-

**Table 2. Group Means and Percentages of Change Based on Correct Pre-Post Group Questionnaire Responses for Each Content Area**

Curriculum	Pre-Post		
	Mean		% Difference
	<i>Pre</i>	<i>Post</i>	
School counseling	1.3	2.8	115%
Language arts	1.7	2.8	65%
Mathematics	1.5	2.7	80%

enced knowledge development individually in the language arts, mathematics, and school counseling domains. Self-esteem as reported by participants increased by 72% from pre- to post-program.

## DISCUSSION

The students who participated in the Me I Wanna Be group had a history of the low academic achievement characteristic of the inequity in achievement often experienced by African American males in U.S. schools (Gordon, 2006; Holcomb-McCoy, 2007). Reinforcement of core academic curricula blended with programming designed to counter culturally biased negative messages with positive, culture-affirming self-talk led to increased performance on measured academic competencies for these students as well as increased performance on school counseling curriculum competencies, which indicated that students gained knowledge pertaining to self-esteem and reported higher levels of self-esteem after participating in the group. In addition to reporting the findings to stakeholders, the study supported the continued use of standards blending as a culturally responsive practice with students experiencing low academic achievement.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL COUNSELING

Standards blending is a practical approach that school counselors can adapt to the academic and cultural needs of each unique school community. Culturally sensitive standards blending interventions show promise in establishing an overt alignment of the school counseling program with the academic mission of schools and demonstrating a direct positive impact on academic achievement for all students, including those who have experienced the often unintentionally inequitable practices of school personnel.

Professional school counselors can take the lead and initiate discussions about culture with school

staff. Research suggests that it is beneficial for the counselor to initiate discussion about culture and cultural strengths (Day-Vines et al., 2007; Erickson, 2005; Harley, 2009). Professional school counselors also can train faculty on the effective use of standards blending, which incorporates students accessing their cultural knowledge and strengths (Manning & Baruth, 2004). Staff development using the standards blending format can serve as one of the catalysts for the implementation of more effective culturally salient instruction (Grothaus et al., in press). Ongoing training and professional development can help teachers to become more culturally conscious and competent (Gay, 2002; Sleeter, 2001; Villegas & Lucas, 2007). Teachers are more successful with diverse learners when they have high levels of awareness and understanding about the cultural factors that influence academic achievement.

Standards blending also allows school counselors to develop programming that positions them as partners in closing the achievement gap by addressing the academic needs of low-achieving students while also enhancing their personal, social, and emotional well-being and cultivating a more culturally responsive school climate. Aligning school counseling programs with academic achievement missions also allows school counselors to exercise our role of educational specialist, explicitly reinforcing core academic standards, while simultaneously attending to our role of mental health specialist, addressing the personal, social, emotional, and career development needs of students (Schellenberg, 2008). ■

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# APPENDIX A

## School Counseling Operational Plan for Effectiveness

### SCOPE

**School** Virginia school **Counselor** Schellenberg **Date** March 2007

#### Needs Assessment, Data Collection and Evaluation

Program Type:  Prevention  Intervention  Closing the Gap Strategy  
Evaluation Type:  Outcome  Process  Proximal  Distal

*Data Source(s):* Pre-post measures.

*Details:* Pre-post for lessons and group. Students selected by parent/teacher: poor self-esteem and academic challenge.

#### Program/Activity Title

The Me I Wanna Be

#### Goal(s)-Objective(s)

**Group Goal:** To enhance self-esteem and academic achievement (language arts and mathematics) for all group members.

**Session 1 Objectives:** Enhance the ability to identify the characteristics of biographies and autobiographies.

Develop an understanding of the importance of positive peer relationships.

**Session 2 Objectives:** Enhance the ability to gather, evaluate, synthesize data, and communicate findings.

Develop an understanding of self in relation to others.

**Session 3 Objectives:** Develop a greater understanding of mathematical inverse operations.

Gain an understanding of goal setting and attaining.

**Session 4 Objectives:** Develop a greater understanding of fractions as parts of a whole.

Understand the purpose of and demonstrate the use of positive self-talk.

#### Target Population

Students in Grade(s): 3 Other:

*Details:* Six African-American males in third grade.

#### Method of Delivery

Small Group  Classroom Guidance  Presentation/Workshop  Other:

#### Research-Supported Program Curriculum

Number of lessons/sessions: 4

Program/Lesson Activities and Timeline

Four 30-minute sessions, once a week for four weeks. Detailed session plans are noted below.

#### National Standards Addressed

##### **Mathematics**

- Number & Operations NM-NUM.3-5.1.3; NM-NUM.3-5.2.3
- Algebra
- Geometry
- Measurement
- Data Analysis & Probability
- Problem Solving NM-PROB.PK-12.2
- Reasoning and Proof
- Communication
- Connections NM-PROB.CONN.PK-12.1
- Representation

##### **Language Arts**

- Listen-Speak NLA.4; NLA.12
- Read NLA.1
- Write NLA.7

##### **School Counseling**

- Academic A3.2
- Personal/Social A1.1-3,5; A1.9-10; A2.1-8; B1.7,9
- Career A1.4, 6, 7; C2.3

### **State Standards/Additional Information**

School counselors may wish to include standards specific to their state here.

Research-Supported Group Activities:

#### **Session 1 (You and Me)**

Literature and research underscore the importance of having a sense of affiliation and friendship during the elementary school years in developing a sense of belonging and positive self-esteem (Dalgas & Pelish, 2006; Leary, Schreindorfer, & Haupt, 1995; Roberts, 2002; Schellenberg, 2000).

Activities: Students are introduced to the counselor, fellow students, topic, and group process. Group rules are discussed. Students pretend to be reporters interviewing an important person—as we all are! In pairs, students ask each other three questions that they would like to know about the other. A list of questions is provided for students if desired. Students note the question asked and response received. Characteristics of biographies and autobiographies are described. Individually, students write a biography of the student interviewed. Papers are shared and the importance of friendship and positive relationships with others is discussed.

#### **Session 2 (We Are the Same, We Are Different)**

The self-belief that one does not meet societal norms or have a sense of individual identity contributes to a low sense of competence (Kagan & Snidman, 1991; Schellenberg, 2000). Relationship-building activities help students to recognize their own sense of individualism and self in relation to others, fostering an environment of belonging, and creating a feeling of competence, which is linked to academic achievement and self-efficacy (Anderman & Leake, 2005).

Activities: Round-robin check-in. In pairs, students spend 5–10 minutes talking to each other to gather information about how each are different and alike. Prior to the information gathering, students are given 2 minutes to think about the questions they would like to ask. After the information gathering, individually, students reflect on the information, synthesize it, comparing and contrasting self in relation to the other student, and share their findings. Students are encouraged to think about what they learned from their partner's biography in the previous group session.

#### **Session 3 (Goals Are Not Just for Football)**

A sense of mission contributes to motivation and goal attainment (Ross & Broh, 2000; Youngs, 1992), which leads to a sense of competence (Anderman & Leake, 2005). The process of goal achievement requires individuals to identify limitations and problem-solve, promoting a sense of autonomy and personal control (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Activities: Round-robin check-in. Goals (short- and long-term) are defined. Students are asked to select one of the three goals listed on the board to achieve during this session. The goals are to (1) say something nice to a group member, (2) say something nice to the school counselor, (3) ask someone for help during the lesson. Students use a deck of cards, self-created or other, with a goal on one side and the steps to achieve the goal on the other. Students take turns reading the goal and asking fellow group members to identify possible steps to achieve the goal. The cards are manipulated by the school counselor to demonstrate the mathematical concept of inverse operations. Students identify by a show of hands who met their goals. Obstacles encountered? What might each do differently next time?

#### **Session 4 (Thought Power)**

Individuals who perceive self as competent and worthy behave in ways that create success and view self as successful (Ellis & Harper, 1997; Ross & Broh, 2000). Self-perception is altered by internal dialogue that creates our thoughts and, in turn, our feelings and behaviors (Ellis & Harper).

Activities: Self-talk is defined, modeled, and demonstrated by students. The effects of positive vs. negative self-talk are discussed and examples are provided on 20 individual strips of paper (10 positive self-talk statements and 10 negative self-talk statements). The strips of paper are described as a whole and then manipulated to illustrate fractions. Students take turns manipulating the strips. Group closure.

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**APPENDIX B**  
**Pre-Post Group Session Measure**

**Measure of Session 4 Effectiveness**  
**Thought Power**

Pre \_\_\_\_\_ Post \_\_\_\_\_

Student ID # \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Class ID # \_\_\_\_\_

1. Name the fraction for the shaded part.

- a.  $\frac{3}{6}$
- b.  $\frac{5}{6}$
- c.  $\frac{2}{6}$
- d.  $\frac{1}{6}$



2. John made a cake and took one slice. What fraction of the cake was left?

- a.  $\frac{1}{5}$
- b.  $\frac{4}{5}$
- c.  $\frac{3}{5}$
- d.  $\frac{5}{5}$



3. Name the fraction for the shaded faces. \_\_\_\_\_

- a.  $\frac{2}{7}$
- b.  $\frac{7}{7}$
- c.  $\frac{4}{7}$
- d.  $\frac{5}{7}$

4. The use of self-talk:

- a. can impact how we feel and behave
- b. does not impact our feelings and behaviors
- c. is not accepted in our society
- d. is not allowed in school

5. Self-talk can be:

- a. good and bad
- b. controlled
- c. a and b
- d. against school rules

6. The following is *not* an example of self-talk:

- a. Everyone dislikes me
- b. Today is going to be a wonderful day
- c. There is 12 months in the year
- d. School is so boring

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Ethnicity Code \_\_\_\_\_ IEP-504-ESL: Y or N Gender \_\_\_\_\_ Achievement Gap: Y or N

# APPENDIX C

## School Counseling Operational Report of Effectiveness

SCORE 

School Virginia school Counselor Schellenberg Date March 2007

**Activity Title**

Enhancing Self-Esteem, Language Arts, and Mathematics

**Goal(s)-Objective(s)**

To enhance self-esteem and academic achievement for all group members.

**Data Collection and Evaluation**

Number of Program Participants: 6 Grade(s): 3 Other: AA-Male

Type of Evaluation:  Outcome  Process  Proximal  Distal

Data Source(s): pre-post measure.

Details:

**Method(s) of Data Analysis**

Percentages  Means/Averages  Frequencies  Counts  Statistical Testing  Other

Details:

**Evaluation Outcome/Program Impact**

The program was effective in meeting the program goal(s) and targeted objective(s) in the following area(s):

Academic  Personal/Social  Career  Closing the Achievement Gap

Details: Knowledge development occurred on both the school counseling and academic curriculum for the entire group per session (math, 56–80%; language arts, 65%; school counseling, 35–133%). Pre- and post-group measures indicated knowledge development on both the school counseling (115%) and academic curriculum (math, 80%; language arts, 65%) for the entire group.

**Directions for Future Programming**

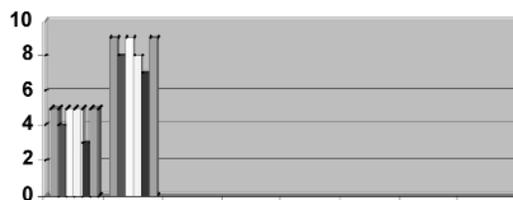
Continue Implementation of Current Activity  Modify Activity Based on Results

Details:

**Pre- and Post-Group Measures  
for Each Student**



Pre-Post Data  
Worksheet



(left to right):

- Student 1
- Student 2
- Student 3
- Student 4
- Student 5
- Student 6