Meeting the Psychoeducational Needs of Minority Students

Evidence-Based Guidelines for School Psychologists and Other School Personnel

Craig L. Frisby
Meeting the Psychoeducational Needs of Minority Students
This book is dedicated to Professor Thomas Oakland, 
a fine human being and scholar, whose pioneering work 
on behalf of serving minority children in schools 
established a large footprint 
for others to follow.
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CHAPTER

1

Why the Need for This Book?

In 1977, barely a decade after the creation of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), Professor Thomas Oakland published Psychological and Educational Assessment of Minority Children. This groundbreaking edited text, developed for a school psychology audience, was the first of its kind to focus the field’s attention on minority children and issues related to (what was referred to at that time) “non-discriminatory” psychoeducational assessment.

Although school psychologists are widely viewed as top specialists in the area of individual assessment for diagnosing pupils’ psychoeducational problems, the field has pursued additional areas of expertise over the decades that extend beyond individual assessment for placement in special programs. In addition, the world has changed considerably in the 35 years since Prof. Oakland’s text was first published. As one example, immigration—barely acknowledged 35 years ago—is an issue that has risen to the forefront of contemporary social, educational, and political discussions. Today, more and better research informs educational practice, generally, and school psychology practice, specifically, about minority children and schooling. Unfortunately, much of what is popularly promoted in school psychology today on these important issues remains stuck in the 1970s. A simple analogy illustrates the nature of this problem.

SCRIPTED KNOWLEDGE

Large commercial theme parks (e.g., Six Flags, DisneyWorld, SeaWorld) use elaborate transportation systems, such as ferry boats, chair lifts, monorails, and bus trams, to give customers a safe, structured, and controlled means of getting from point A to point B within the park. Such rides control how many persons can ride at one time, the speed at which the ride moves, and which areas of the park are covered. Typically, a company
tour guide points out carefully selected “areas of interest,” about which park officials provide “canned,” company-approved stories and descriptions.

Psychoeducational issues and problems involving racial/ethnic/language minority students are choreographed for school psychology audiences in much the same way. That is, the field invents its own terms (e.g., cultural competence), as well as its own definitions for them; frames multicultural problems in a prescribed manner that suits particular sociopolitical agendas (e.g., eradicating disproportionalities; promoting “social justice”); dictates how multicultural issues are to be framed, interpreted, and discussed; dictates the “correct” attitudes and feelings (e.g., “tolerance,” “sensitivity”) that audiences should have toward problems; and carefully arranges structural contingencies that determine how programs are to be rewarded or sanctioned for the extent to which multiculturalism ideology is infused into training.

In contemporary school psychology, multiculturalism ultimately boils down to an “everything-is-biased-against-CLD-children” message. This message has an intuitive appeal, as most students and professionals have a natural affinity for a professional identity that exposes injustices and “fights for the underdog.” Although this message may have seemed new and fresh 35 years ago, it has grown increasingly more stale with each passing decade. This is because the field has the benefit of much more high-quality empirical research than it did 35 years ago, which includes clear evaluations of so-called “multicultural” remedies that have been tried (and most of which have failed) in the real world. When it comes to racial/ethnic conflicts in society, careful analyses have shown that there are no simplistic morality plays involving clear saints and clear villains. Hence, facile explanations for minority pupils’ school problems that may have been persuasive decades ago are no longer persuasive to better informed researchers and scholars today.

Unfortunately, such insights have not permeated contemporary discussions of multicultural issues in school psychology. For all practical purposes, the field is figuratively held hostage by two primary messages on multicultural issues, which are as scripted and predictable as the rising and setting of the sun every 24 hours. First, racial/ethnic minority groups are viewed as “culturally exotic,” which presumably requires nonminority school psychologists to learn about the odd cultural traits of different groups in order to be effective in serving them. Second, minority groups are seen as perpetual “victims” of racism, discrimination, and/or prejudice—which presumably lurks just beneath the surface of polite society, is expressed in countless subtle ways (e.g., “stereotype threat,” “micro-aggressions”), and serves as the all-purpose explanation for most problems faced by minority groups in schools. The role of school psychologists, therefore, is to develop a zeal for “social justice”—which then prepares them to parachute into schools to rescue minority children from the harm that most assuredly awaits them at the hands of culturally insensitive educators.
The fundamental message of this book is that these ideas, no matter how appealing they may sound, have nothing at all to do with actual practices that effectively help vulnerable minority children in schools. Before discussing the material covered in this text, however, the principle of truth in advertising requires an initial discussion of what this book will not cover.

**WHAT THIS BOOK IS NOT**

There exist many outstanding texts for school psychologists that describe specific academic and behavioral interventions that are effective for helping children, youth, and families in school settings. With the exception of interventions that require non–English language modifications, no credible data-based psychological theory has demonstrated that such interventions cannot also be used with minority children. First and foremost, minority children and their families are not kitchen appliances that come equipped with a “multicultural instruction manual” for proper care and service. Hence, this book is not an inventory of scripted how-to recipes designed to magically work with nonwhite or non-English-speaking children. Contrary to current fashions, knowing the racial or ethnic status of students—by itself—provides no useful information on their school adjustment, academic performance, or how they are to be served when they experience problems in educational settings. The reality is that many minority students adjust well and achieve satisfactory in schools, and many do not. Therefore, knowledge of minority status alone is not sufficient for problem solving. It is the correlates of racial/ethnic/language status, and how these correlated variables interact, that must be understood before school psychologists (and other school personnel) can appreciate how best to effectively serve vulnerable children in schools.

Second, although special education issues are discussed in various places within this text when necessary, the exclusive focus of this book is not on special education. Many texts attempt to marry special education with multiculturalism, but this hybrid often seems forced and artificial. Many school psychologists were initially motivated to enter the field because of its characterization as a profession that applies psychological knowledge to helping all children in schools. Only after entering the field as graduate students did many begin to realize how special education plays a dominant role in defining school psychology roles and functions. This text departs somewhat from this tradition by addressing problems of minority children throughout all levels of the education system, which is in keeping with a simple definition of the field as the application of psychology to education, defined broadly.

Third, many school psychology students and scholars who are interested in multicultural issues find themselves attracted to ideas and insights drawn from the specialty of counseling psychology. Counseling psychology, compared to other applied psychologies,