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## Professional Identity

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*The Boyce R Williams Student Writing Award is given to recognize and reward exemplary student writing in the area of human services to persons who are Deaf, Deafened, and/or Hard of Hearing. This award is focused on the writing ability of the student rather than research. The award is open to students in any human services discipline.*

*Dana Stewart Kline, the 2015 Boyce R. Williams Student Writing Award winner, wrote this piece in exploration of developing her professional identity.*

*Ms. Stewart Kline currently works at Delaware School for the Deaf with students with deaf-blindness and additional special needs, ranging in ages from 18 months to 21 years. She provides both direct services to the students as well as consultation to the staff and support therapists that work with these students on a daily basis. She earned a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Stevenson University and is currently enrolled at Gallaudet University in the Summers and Online School Counseling Graduate Degree Program combined with the Deaf & Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers, and Families: Collaboration and Leadership Interdisciplinary Graduate Certificate Program. She resides in Baltimore, Maryland with her wife, Tiffany.*

The roles and responsibilities of the professional school counselor have shifted dramatically over the years. Influences such as legislation, school reform, and how society views children, education, and special education have impacted the professional school counselor's day-to-day work (Erford, 2015). In addition to being a counselor, other roles include advocate, leader, collaborator, team member, teacher, data collector, and evaluator.

In 2012, I made the decision to leave the corporate work world and return to the field of education. In all honesty, I had very few expectations for what I considered a "transition job." I was hired as a paraprofessional in the pre-kindergarten spoken English classroom at Delaware School for the Deaf. Little did I know my experience would lead to such happiness, and motivation to further my own education. I began working one-on-one with a five-year-old boy who was deaf-blind and had CHARGE syndrome, and he changed my life. On our first day, we sat looking at each other. I was clueless about what to do. He did not talk, sign, or walk. In those first few months, I read as many articles as I could, talked to many deaf-blind professionals, and attended numerous professional development opportunities and workshops to learn as much as possible about language acquisition, the communication matrix, deaf-blindness, and CHARGE syndrome. He and I worked together daily for six hours each day for several months. We worked on communication together, we went to physical therapy and occupational therapy together, we ate together (although he ate through a g-tube), we played together, and most importantly, we learned together. After two short months, we had formed an incredible and indescribable bond. It was then that he signed his first word. Shortly thereafter, he began walking. The coordinator of Delaware's Statewide Deaf-Blind Program told me this: "if you enjoy your time with him, then you 'get him,' which means you've opened your world to be more than it was before you sat with him." This student inspired me to become an advocate, and to have and be a voice in order to support, encourage and fight for equal educational opportunities for all children. I applied and was accepted into Gallaudet University's School of Counseling Graduate Program combined with the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Infants, Toddlers, and Families: Collaboration and Leadership Interdisciplinary graduate certificate program.

As advocates, our responsibility is to have and be a voice in order to support, encourage and fight for equal treatment and educational opportunities for all children. We must remain cognizant of the fact that we may be the only advocate that some students have. Gandhi said we

must “be the change we wish to see in the world.” We do this by accepting the role of a leader. The walk of change does not move if there is no leader to guide the way.

The foundation of our work is based upon our ability to build relationships. This does not only mean with our students, but also with teachers, service providers, administrators, families, community members, and members of legislature (local, state, and federal). We must be active team members by sharing our knowledge, ideas, and feelings. We should also remain open to others’ expertise, experiences, and thoughts. In creating these connections, we are building alliances to help in our efforts to create change within the system(s).

In our first class discussion, we were told that in addition to being professional school counselors, we would also be considered as agents for social change. This made my responsibility as a professional school counselor feel even more personal. A vivid image popped into my mind: lurking under my business casual school counseling attire was a superhero’s uniform with the words “AGENT FOR SOCIAL CHANGE” across the chest, while my cape was peeking out from my shirt collar. I identified it as a uniform instead of a costume, because it was something that we would be expected to take pride in when we put it on daily. All students deserve the same quality curriculum and instruction. I am clear on the responsibility that I have in ensuring that this happens through the work that I conduct on a daily basis. We must have an engrained belief that each student is just as deserving as the next. This includes *all* races, gender identities, socio-economic backgrounds, sexual orientations, cultures and beliefs, students with various emotional challenges, physical challenges, varying cognitive abilities, the gifted, the privileged and the less or not privileged, etc. We must learn to appreciate our differences and realize that the ability of each student being able to bring a different perspective/experience into the classroom will not only educate and facilitate the growth process, but empower students.

As counselors, it is important that we also remember our role as teachers. We are, and will be, responsible for delivering guidance instruction and lessons derived from the American School Counselors Association (ASCA) model, much like classroom teachers. At times, our lessons will be with individuals, and other times our lessons with groups. We accept the responsibility of providing our students with the resources and tools they need to be successful in school, post-secondary education, and in their own communities. We do this by teaching them strategies to manage and rationalize their feelings, establish and sustain healthy relationships, further their educational goals and/or obtain employment, and achieve personal success(es).

Lastly, we must be constant in our use of assessments and outcome data to hold our programs and ourselves accountable. Assessments allow us to continuously reevaluate our students’, school’s, and the community’s needs. The data informs us of the effectiveness in our work with an ever-evolving student and professional population. We should, in turn, use this data to shape our work. As professionals, we must always be reflective. We are responsible for ensuring that we meet the changing needs of our students. We are no good to our students or our school if our services are not effective. Erford (2015) reminds us that we must stay relevant and ensure that our programs “equitably meet the academic, personal/social and college and career needs of all students” (p. 91).

Erford (2015) adds the following 10 roles to school counselors’ repertoire: (1) professional, (2) agent of diversity and multicultural sensitivity, (3) leader and advocate for academic and social justice, (4) developmental classroom guidance specialist (5) provider of individual and group counseling services (6) career development and educational planning specialist, (7) school and community agency consultations/collaboration specialist, (8) school reform and accountability expert, (9) safe schools, violence prevention, at-risk specialist, and

(10) advocate for students with special needs. Each of these of these roles is critical to develop in our journey of becoming effective school counselors.

Several assignments in my studies helped make readings and subsequent classroom discussions come to life. It was extremely beneficial having the opportunity to conduct an interview with a present-day professional school counselor, looking at the job through experienced eyes. Oftentimes, what is in print is not always as it is in real life. Sharing our experiences and being able to learn from classmates' interviews offered me unique perspectives. Again, the role of the professional school counselor was further expanded and the interviews reinforced that the school counseling profession is not a one-size-fits-all job. The responsibilities vary, and probably always will. It seems all too often that non-counseling duties sneak their way in and make it difficult for counselors to be as effective as possible. Furthermore, it takes a certain level of vulnerability to succeed in relating to students and the challenges that they're faced with on a daily basis. It takes a creative mind to generate solutions and alternatives to change behaviors. It also requires patience and ambition at the same time. We, as counselors, must meet the students where they are and offer them something different from what they're used to.

I was also given the opportunity to explore several professional organizations that would benefit and support us in working with students who are deaf or hard of hearing. Each of these organizations offers unique resources to support the working professional's continuous learning and personal growth, and there are two that appeal to me: the American Counseling Association (ACA), and the National Association of Multicultural Education (NAME).

The ACA appeals to me because its mission statement clearly states that the profession of counseling should be used to promote diversity and human dignity (About ACA, n.d.). The ACA's emphasis on developing and empowering a well-rounded counselor is something I relate to. Having the chance to attend the ACA's annual conference and workshops they offer would be a great opportunity to network with other professionals and learn from our trailblazers.

There were several things that caught my eye about NAME. The first was NAME's connection to the word *Sankofa*, which meaning is often symbolized by a mythical bird running forward as its head looks backward, gently carrying an egg in its mouth. The Sankofa bird represents our journey forward in life, while remembering, appreciating, learning, growing, understanding, and remaining connected with our roots/past. The egg in the bird's mouth represents our future. Each time, I hear the word *Sankofa* or see an image of the Sankofa bird, I am reminded of its powerful message and how our daily experiences constantly mold us, challenge our way of thinking, and shape our personal and professional identities. It is imperative that I continue to explore my history, learn and grow from it, and be constructive as I inspire others and myself on my exhilarating walk forward.

NAME's six main goals go hand-in-hand with school counselors' role of being social justice change agents. Each valuable goal not only applies in the field, but I can also directly relate them to aspects in my everyday life. According to the *Definitions of Multicultural Education* page on the NAME website, in order to "achieve these goals, multicultural education in schools needs school staff that is culturally aware and diverse." This statement holds personal meaning. I have worked in several schools where the majority of the students was of one ethnicity and the majority of the staff was of another ethnicity. Children need to be able to see themselves in the people who lead them. There needs to be more of an emphasis/training on multiculturalism in education. As counselors, we will work both as individuals, and as members of interdisciplinary teams. The team that makes the biggest impact is the one where each

member shares the same vision and works together to meet and exceed the team's goal(s). I plan to become a NAME member and attend its annual conference to further educate myself on how to advance multicultural education, equity, and social justice.

While we must remain patient and realize that change takes time, we must also be reminded that change begins with us. As we learn more, experience more, and continue our efforts to make social change a reality, we will feel more and more empowered. We must educate, share our knowledge and experiences, and ensure that other educators understand they, too, are responsible for making social justice and valuing multiculturalism a priority. Legislation must understand that inequality on any level, against any population is wrong and must be addressed as well.

I have established four action plans to further expand my professional identity. First and foremost, I need to continue to expose and immerse myself in Deaf culture. I need to remain an active participant within the Deaf community. In my future role as a professional school counselor, the ability to communicate and relate to my students is vital in building and sustaining trusting relationships. Immersion will not only help me to become proficient in ASL, but also expand my knowledge of Deaf culture and becoming an ally to the Deaf community.

In order to develop cultural competence, I plan to increase my self-awareness by discovering my family history, values and experiences. I recently started reading *White Like Me: Reflections on Race from a Privileged Son* by Tim Wise and have come to realize that I, too, have roots, and my story, like his and many others, did not begin on the day that I was born. Wise (2011) suggests that "when we first draw breath outside the womb, we inhale tiny particles of all that came before, both literally and figuratively" (p. 1). I intend to have meaningful dialogue with my grandparents and other family members to create my own family tree. As Erford (2015) recommends, I will also expand my knowledge of white privilege in order to reduce the potential impact it may have on my ability to relate to and help others. Uncovering and learning from my past will help me to become a more culturally competent ally and professional school counselor.

I will also continuously expand my knowledge by joining ACA and NAME and attending conferences and workshops focused on multiculturalism, diversity, inclusion, breaking stereotypes, oppression, and empowerment. I also hope that this exposure and knowledge will instill the confidence necessary to become a leader and advocate in the field.

My last action plan requires some soul searching. It will involve me taking a look at who I am, my core beliefs, my worldview, and the type of counselor that I wish to become. Currently my knowledge and understanding of the theories of psychotherapy is very limited. As I read and learn more about each of the theories, I plan to blend my knowledge with my experiences and values to select the theory that best fits the truths inside me in order to guide my future work as a professional school counselor.

My vision for my future as a professional school counselor involves embracing the title of agent for social change. Although I would prefer to work at a school for Deaf students, I am also confident in my ability to make an impact and advocate for Deaf/Hard of Hearing students mainstreamed into a public school setting. I see myself empowering various minority students (Deaf/Hard of Hearing, severe disabilities, special needs, LGBTQIA, and other marginalized populations) to feel validated and fulfilled as they develop their own identities. Growing up as a gay child myself, I recall feelings of isolations and questioning who I was and where I belonged throughout my school years.

I currently work with students who are Deaf/Hard of Hearing and many of whom have additional disabilities (physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively). I see and feel a need for understanding, empathy, education, patience, inclusion, and acceptance in the overall educational systems. I am dedicated to these principles, and want to assist the educational community by becoming a loyal and devoted culturally competent school counselor. I plan to serve all students through individual counseling, small and large group counseling, mentoring, promoting involvement in social interactions, advocating, teaching them how to advocate for themselves, being an ally, and assisting in the intricacies of planning for post-secondary education/career opportunities.

My most important responsibility will be to meet my students where they are. If for any reason I am unable to meet their needs, I am committed to finding someone who can. As a school leader, I intend to involve myself in community activities, leadership activities, and extracurricular activities within the school in order to stay visible, embrace the school culture, and advocate for what is best to develop our students into thriving citizens. I expect to help each of these students find the appropriate social/emotional balance necessary to achieve their own individual success.

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