

Chapter 2

WOKE:

Advocacy for African American Students

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ABSTRACT

Social justice advocacy is a term commonly utilized to describe action steps initiated to remove obstacles to success for underrepresented students. This chapter challenges school counselors and educators to adopt a “Woke” perspective (which integrates action and awareness) on behalf of African American students. Furthermore, these professionals should be equipped with culturally responsive tools to support African American students and engage in systemic advocacy on their behalf. Drawing from Critical Race Theory, this chapter will examine the historical and contemporary context of discriminatory practices, as well as the current impact on African American students. This chapter will also address specific strategies to inform professional practice and advocacy work, as well as implications for training programs.

INTRODUCTION

Social justice advocacy is a term commonly utilized to describe action steps initiated to remove obstacles to success for underrepresented students (Goodman et al., 2018). A more recent term “Woke”, has been defined as being “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues related to racial and social justice” (Merriam-Webster, n.d). This chapter challenges school-based leaders and other educators to adopt a Woke perspective (which integrates action and awareness) on behalf of **African American** students.

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Research indicates that significant gaps exist for **African American** students at disproportionate rates in areas such as retention, discipline, gifted/talented identification, special education, and advanced placement (Bruce et al., 2009; Davis et al., 2013; Gibson, 2020b; National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017a; NCES, 2017b). While **African American** students face unique societal challenges that may contribute to these gaps, it is imperative that school-based leaders actively work to remove barriers to student success (Goodman et al., 2018). A Woke perspective calls for school-based leaders (i.e. school counselors and administrators) to engage in culturally responsive practices by recognizing the diverse struggles of **African American** students and the impact of their lived experiences on their wellness. Furthermore, these leaders should be equipped with culturally responsive tools to support **African American** students and engage in **systemic advocacy** on their behalf.

Drawing from **Critical race theory**, this chapter will examine the historical and contemporary context of discriminatory practices to highlight **African American** students' lived experiences, as well as the current impact on **African American** students. Also, this chapter will seek to help school-based leaders recognize inequities and systemic racism in education and challenge oppressive ideologies that hinder the success of **African American** students. In addition, the authors will provide recommendations that support socially just outcomes designed to inform professional practice and advocacy work for counselors and school leaders. Implications for professional training programs will also be presented. While any student of color would benefit from social justice efforts, this chapter will specifically focus on **African American** students.

BACKGROUND

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework that researchers use to explore racism, privilege, oppression, and power that marginalized populations face through socio-political and institutional processes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This framework is comprised of five core tenets as outlined below:

- racism and systemic oppression are embedded in American culture; CRT explores the intersectionality of race and racism with other forms of oppression (i.e. classism, heterosexism, and ableism)
- challenge dominant, deficit grounded ideologies of meritocracy and colorblindness that illustrate a just society with equitable access and opportunities
- centrality of experiential knowledge which highlights the critical need for **African American** people to voice their lived experiences
- explore race and racism from an interdisciplinary approach, considering both historical and contemporary contexts
- commitment to social justice action

The tenets of CRT require school-based leaders to recognize and challenge racism and oppressive ideologies. Although overt forms of oppression, such as enslavement and segregation, are now illegal within the United States, covert systems of oppression continue to exist for this population, especially within the education system (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011). For example, research indicates that **African American** students often experience **adultification**, which is a phenomenon in which they are perceived to be older and need less nurturing and protection (Finley, 2017). Consequently, they are disciplined more and supported less. **African American** students also experience racial **microaggressions** on a consistent

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