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Book Review: Interrupting Racism: Equity and Social Justice in School Counseling

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Book Review:

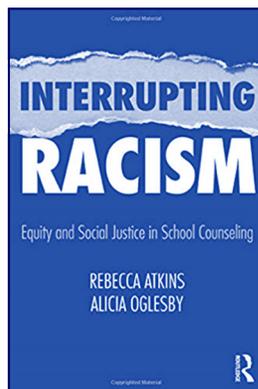
Interrupting Racism: Equity and Social Justice in School Counseling



Reviewed by
Diana Camilo (*The University of Mississippi*)

Thanks to a social media book release announcement I was introduced to Rebecca Atkins and Alicia Oglesby's book *Interrupting Racism: Equity and Social Justice in School Counseling*. As a former school counselor and instructor at a social justice focused graduate program, I took notice of the post. Once I finally dove into the book, I was eager to finish it and immediately knew it would be a required text in my future courses.

Throughout the book, Atkins and Oglesby call for a paradigm shift of school counselors from advocates to fundamental change agents in their schools. In other words, school counselors play a key role in dismantling practices that focus on minoritized students acculturating to educational practices within a Westernized school system; as can be noted in the expectation of minoritized students to fit into school-centric policies and standards. The authors also highlight, though not directly, the pertinent role of a culturally responsive framework as a way to provide equitable services to students. The authors identify how through self-reflection; a core component of culturally responsive practices, schools can



identify how their practices and policies have, and continue to contribute to achievement disparities among students today. As the authors state “when we do not professionally reflect in order to change systems that do not work for students of color, we are complicit in normalizing racism for all students and all faculty (p.105).” Self-reflection can also help schools identify needed professional

development that is student and community centered as well as “offers counselors an opportunity to detail, examine, and question their life experiences in a way that helps shape their understanding of social justice perspectives (p. 57).” Most importantly, the authors provide an introductory discourse on the ugly history of our educational system and

I think chapter two and three will help unmask content generally excluded in many pre-service programs.

Chapter five and seven, as well as appendix A and B, include suggestions regarding how to apply concepts and do the work. I can see how the added suggestions can be helpful for novice and seasoned school counselors. However, it's the authors' personal stories and perspectives on how to handle difficult situations that added context to the activities

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presented. It's worth noting the shared reflections include transparent and honest recounts on the times the authors felt they did not fully live up to their own expectations to act in the best interest of students, and hence, further influencing their passion for social justice reform in school counseling.

In chapter nine, the authors unpack the six principles of systemic change from *Systems Change: A Guide to What it is and How to Do It* (Abercrombie, Harries, & Wharton, 2015). While the six principles highlight the use of data, collaboration, advocacy, and resource mapping, the authors also embed culturally responsive practices as key to systemic change. The section *Agenda: Problem Solving for Equity* (p. 146) is also a helpful guide for those whom will lead a school level or leadership team, or are members of an advisory council that will review data in order to make decisions about resources, interventions, and/or solutions to equity gaps in schools.

Given my experience as a school counselor, district administrator, and higher ed instructor, I can certainly see the usefulness of this book at each level. For practicing school counselors, the book can provide a sense of solidarity; especially when they may feel alone in the battle to dismantle systemic issues at their schools. The resources and references shared can serve as guides to scaffold the use of advocacy strategies for those early in the profession. Seasoned counselors can use the book as a reference for how to continue their development and be

courageous in leading the efforts for systemic change in their schools. For district level administrators, I can certainly imagine the book serving as a tool to outline a professional development map. The authors also highlight the urgency for school counseling graduate programs to teach students to fundamentally understand and use data as a tool for systemic change, even beyond eliminating opportunity gaps. More so, the authors should encourage the academy to reflect as to whether graduate programs and courses are truly equipping graduate students to address equity issues and systemic oppression within the districts they will work in. The book can also encourage graduate students to practice social justice advocacy and leadership as well as reflect on the development of their multicultural professional identity.

Personally, I feel this book should not be read alone as there is much to digest and process. For many readers, I can assume the book may bring up feelings about their own experienced oppression in the K-12 system and a book club or reading guide would allow readers to reflect and unpack concepts that require further discussion. For example, a reading guide can be useful in the implementation of the previously mentioned *Agenda: Problem Solving for Equity* section (p. 145). The authors do offer a discussion guide designed for school-wide professional learning communities, and is available at counselorup.com/book-discussion-guide.html.

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I would have also appreciated if the authors provided a critique as to whether the ASCA model may or may not support school counselors as social justice change agents. For example, looking only at disparities between white students and minoritized students within the data in order to minimize the opportunity gap, inadvertently, is simply suggesting minoritized students continue to assimilate to Westernized academic standards. While there are tips and guides, most are student-focused, and although advocacy strategies and the call to challenge systemic issues are discussed throughout the book, an appendix outlining the two would have been helpful.

Atkins and Oglesby courageously highlight the need to address the systemic issues that persist in schools today that need to be “interrupted” in order to close the opportunity gap. They also remind readers to refrain from adhering to a meritocratic perspective toward student achievement because in essence, the support of educators, parents, communities, and stakeholders, as well as non-discriminatory policies and practices significantly contribute to their success. The authors are also honest about the difficulty of such work, as can be noted in the continuous efforts needed to address white privilege and the lack of culturally conscious practices in schools today. Although I consider myself a seasoned and passionate school counselor and educator, the authors re-inspired my drive to continue to advocate for minoritized students.

It is my hope that administrators or those whom oversee school counselors read the book and take notice on how school counselors can be leaders in their schools, and perhaps redistribute their time or duties in order to truly change school-centric practices that can yield positive academic outcomes for students. While eliminating racism in order to provide students equitable services is hard work, Atkins and Oglesby remind readers that at the very least, interrupting racism can lead to systemic changes in how students are serviced and supported. 