



EFFECTIVE TO GREAT EDUCATION

Counselors and Cultural (in)Competence: How D.C. Public Schools Impair the Academic Self-Concepts of Black Youth

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August, 2023

Abstract: This paper assesses the efficacy of school counseling in Washington, D.C. to further explicate how racism is embedded into public education. Consistent racial achievement gaps between Black and white high schoolers in the district demonstrate how Black students, already historically marginalized, are underserved by counselors. The insufficient number of counselors in D.C. public schools – 1 for every 444 students – compound racial achievement gaps by depleting their relationships with students and inciting their implicit biases. Counselors frequently have lower academic standards for Black high-schoolers and withhold them from Advanced Placement classes. Similarly, D.C. public schools continue to neglect and oppress Black students as Black students experience higher disciplinary rates – at the hands of School Resource Officers (SROs) nonetheless. This paper concludes with recommendations for public schools and counselors, identifying culturally responsive education as a theoretical framework critical to enhancing curricula and challenging subconscious biases. Contributing to advocacy for Social Emotional Learning and wellness-oriented education, this research implores counselors to engage as change-agents to repair the relationship between Black students and Washington, D.C.'s public education system.

Introduction

Today Black youth are confronted with anti-Black stereotypes and racial oppression during the most formative years of their lives. The brutal murders of African-Americans by law enforcement are perhaps the most prominent, yet jarring, examples of racism in modern society, demonstrating the undue criminalization of the racial group. Black children in urban communities are also exposed to economic inequalities that further perpetuate oppressive cycles. Ultimately, these same injustices persist in public education; although schools are supposed to ensure the safety and wellbeing of students. For instance, the school-to-prison pipeline contributes to the criminalization of Black adolescents.

School police officers, formally known as School Resource Officers (SROs), are also linked to increased student discipline and trigger marginalized students on school campuses (Lindsay, 2018; Weisburst, 2019). Finally, schools are funded by their districts, so high-poverty areas have underfunded schools with scarce resources. While racial trauma itself may be difficult to quantify, it is undoubtedly reflected in these students' academic performances.

Key stakeholders, parents, and educators have acknowledged long standing racial achievement gaps – even developing theories to better understand and combat these inequalities (*Kappan Online*, 2019; Lindsay, 2011). In early education, fewer Black students are meeting or exceeding expectations in math and English Language Arts (ELA), and the racial achievement gaps observed in D.C. elementary schools are especially concerning. Although all students are performing worse in math than ELA, only nine percent of Black elementary-school students were meeting or exceeding expectations in math (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). This is in comparison to 70 percent of white students (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). Unfortunately, these trends reverberate throughout the rest of the United States, following students to high school and their pursuit of higher education.

Black students trail behind white students for both high-school graduation rates and postsecondary enrollment. The four-year high school graduation rate for Black students was 74 percent at the end of the 2021-22 academic year (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). However, the corresponding rates for white students exceeded Black students by 21 percent (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). Disparities in grades and graduation rates explicitly establish that Black students, already historically marginalized, are underserved by educators. Utilizing a broader range of data suggests that this disservice is so detrimental that it influences their academic self-concepts and identities. For instance, the amount of Black students in D.C. pursuing higher education immediately after high school decreased from 52 percent in 2019 and 2020 to 49 percent in 2021 (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). Across Black, Latino, and white students in D.C. public schools, white students were the only population to experience a positive change: 75 percent in 2019, which decreased to 72 percent in 2020 but ultimately rebounded post-pandemic, increasing to 76 percent in 2021 (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). Therefore, the public education system in Washington D.C. does not encourage academic growth for all students. Black students do not see the value of investing in education, likely believing that academic success is unattainable given their socioeconomic status and access to resources.

Thus, this paper further explicates how racism is embedded into public education and proposes solutions for educators. Instead of prioritizing quantitative improvement from Black students, focusing on counseling curriculums reveals how education can be reformed to appropriately balance intrapersonal development with academic achievement. Repairing students' academic self-concepts is a key solution identified by education news outlets and refers to how well an individual feels they can learn (NSW Department of Education, 2023). One's academic self-concept relies on assessing their unique characteristics and strengths. Additionally, it is an image constructed by the individual and others. National standards for counselors uniquely note the link between self-confidence and academic proficiency. A key objective for school counselors is encouraging "the belief in development of [the] whole self, including a healthy balance of mental, social/emotional and physical well-being" (American School Counselor Association, n.d.). Similarly, they should instill students' "self-confidence in [their] ability to succeed" (American School Counselor Association, n.d.). Thus, plans for educational reform must span beyond the traditional classroom.

The main critique of counseling programs is simply that there are not enough professionals employed. The recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1, but D.C. public schools have a ratio of 444:1 (American School Counselor Association, 2023). This paper concludes that the lack of counselors limits their effectiveness, allowing implicit biases to stifle the potential of Black students. Furthermore, it leaves students – all students, but specifically Black youth – feeling unsupported. A key indicator of this student disengagement is chronic absence increasing between middle and high school, which correlates to the more quantitative statistics above.

Considering this paper's focus on dismantling anti-Black stereotypes in public education, addressing counseling also requires an assessment of School Resource Officers (SROs). Parents, scholars, and school resource officers themselves all acknowledge that SROs are polarizing figures. Although they objectively keep schools safer, they are anxiety-inducing for Black students; they are simultaneously law enforcement officers and counseling figures with behavioral training. Nevertheless, D.C.'s legislature and a neighboring county, Montgomery County in Maryland, are considering phasing out these officers to increase mental health resources and counseling figures. Using Montgomery County as a model identifies the pros and cons of SROs, providing clear solutions for D.C. public schools.

Research today suggests that District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) counselors are key contributors to the academic withdrawal of its Black constituents, inflicting racial trauma onto these students by stifling their academic progress and diminishing their academic self-concepts. Furthermore, counselor underperformance coincides with the presence of school law enforcement to create a harmful disciplinary culture in D.C. schools; one that targets and criminalizes Black youth. Thus, reforming counseling programs to incorporate culturally responsive, anti-racist frameworks can effectively repair the relationship between Black students and Washington D.C.'s public education system.

The History of School Counselors: The Disconnect between ASCA Standards and a Counselor's Day-to-Day Tasks.

School counseling curriculums have been in flux since the job's inception over a century ago. The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) released a national model to standardize school counseling programs in 2003 and provides resources for counselors today, particularly defining their professional and ethical responsibilities. ASCA notes the evolution of the profession from strictly vocational guidance to including counseling for personal adjustment circa the 1920s. Although this specific adjustment occurred long before the job's maturation, it posits how the position has consistently been influenced by cultural movements: the "mental hygiene, psychometric and child study movements" of the 1920s resulted in "a more clinically oriented approach" (Gysbers, 2020). Likewise, twenty-first century counselors are described as change-agents and advocates, both by the ASCA and District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), reflecting pursuits for educational equity and culturally-affirming schooling. ASCA acknowledges the ongoing debates concerning the nature of counseling – whether their focus should be educational, vocational, or social and emotional – but, based on the increase of mental health resources and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculums in schools, counseling programs should be evaluated and modulated to consider these advancements.

Thus, school personnel should be maintaining close relationships with students to ensure their academic success, self-confidence, and mental wellbeing. However, the disconnect between the ASCA's framework and actual counseling programs reveals misconceptions about counselors; even when providing solely vocational and academic advice. Scholar Mary Blake published counselor anecdotes where these school professionals reported feeling like clerks,

carrying out clerical tasks that prioritize the administration's best interests (2020). Although counselors must meet with students in order to encourage postsecondary planning, such as attending college, their effectiveness is still measured by the data they can present: how many students actually graduate and attend colleges; how many students participated in advanced classes to demonstrate college-readiness. Ultimately, "measurable and immediate tasks, such as emails, planning events, class scheduling, coordination of high-stakes testing, and creating a master schedule of courses for the school" took up more than 50 percent of these counselors' time (Blake, 2020). Conversely, the ASCA reinforces that clerical tasks fall outside of a counselor's job responsibilities, suggesting that 80 percent of their time should be devoted to servicing students directly (2019). Still, counselors in the study claimed they only spent five to fifteen minutes with each student per year – an approach they called "mass processing" (Blake, 2020).

Furthermore, the Brown Center for Education Policy at the *Brookings Institute* reported that counselors throughout the United States varied in how they perceived their position, ranging from being a "school support official" to "compliance officer" (2023). Those that identified counseling with being more "support-oriented" were more likely to be engaged and encouraging, acting as a liaison between schools and parents and informing families about scholarship opportunities.

Whether counselors should provide emotional support for students may be debatable, but they undoubtedly need to know students beyond transcripts and first impressions to adequately do their jobs; that is the main purpose of the ASCA's recommended ratio. They also have extensive educational backgrounds, priming them for one-on-one and group counseling sessions and leaving them eager to liken their day-to-day activities to that of school social workers (Blake, 2020). *Brookings Institute's* findings articulate that there is a certain kind of support needed from counselors that can only be enriched by personal interactions with students, parents, and teachers. Support and counseling do not translate to therapizing students, as there are behavioral specialists and other mental health positions in schools. However, active engagement is integral to supplying academic and professional advice.

Ultimately, elucidating the discrepancies between counselor job expectations and realities adds nuance to the ongoing counselor scarcity crisis as even the professionals in schools are unable to fulfill their duties. Further examining counseling programs today, specifically District

of Columbia Public School programs, reveals that the disconnect between counselors and students disproportionately harms historically marginalized – Black, low-income – students.

The National Scarcity in School Counselors, Including Disparities between Black students and Counselors.

Stakeholders in the education sector have shown ongoing concern about a national scarcity in counselors. The ASCA recommends schools follow a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, and D.C. Public schools do, at the surface, value providing effective counseling for students. Counseling is mandated for all grades, and middle and high schools must have an additional career counselor on staff as well.

Washington D.C. had a student-counselor ratio of 444:1 for the 2021-22 school year with 200 school counselors (ASCA, 2023). However, data is limited and does not report how each school, or even each ward within the district, compares. D.C. public schools can be quite large: the largest public high school, Woodrow Wilson High School, has 1,951 students; and the Columbia Heights Education Campus has 1,477 enrolled middle and elementary schoolers. The average public school has approximately 377 students, with public high schools having a higher average by about 100 students.

Similarly, statistics like 200 school counselors do not specify how many counselors have full-time positions with one school community; according to *U.S. News*, there are only 67 full-time counselors for the district (n.d.). The Board of Education also does not clarify if part-time counselors satisfy their mandates, and counseling programs are funded entirely by the district, likely mirroring socioeconomic disparities and further marginalizing already disadvantaged students. Therefore, schools with a large number of low-income students are likely unable to staff an adequate number of counselors, overextending the counselors they do have, and ultimately mitigating their ability to personally connect with students.

Another aspect of counselor scarcity affecting their ability to connect with students is the disproportionate number of Black students to professionals. *Brookings Institute* reported that, nationally, “76 [percent] of ASCA members are white compared with 51 percent of school-aged children,” and there is a small gap between Black counselors and students; Black students are 14 percent of the population compared to Black counselors comprising 11 percent of the profession (2023). This disparity is likely far worse in a racially and ethnically diverse city like Washington

D.C. where 65 percent of students were Black and 13 percent were white during the 2021-22 school year (D.C. Policy Center, 2023).

Additionally, the D.C. Policy Center, a local organization, publishes substantial amounts of quantitative data regarding the state of D.C. schools and students. Their attention to a large portion of disadvantaged students — categorized as “at-risk” students — reiterates the large number of Black students with financially and emotionally unstable households. “At-risk” students are those that receive certain public benefits, experience homelessness, are over-age in schools, and/or are in the foster care system. 49 percent of students during the 2021-22 school year were designated at-risk, an increase from 2020-21. D.C. Policy Center also notes that a majority of at-risk students are from Wards 7 and 8, majority Black districts, so these demographics overlap. Contextualizing the socioeconomic landscape of the D.C. Metro area means acknowledging that students frequently carry heavy burdens. Counseling and guiding these students through adversity is not easy; school may not be a priority for these students and their at-home communities may not encourage them to invest in their (academic) futures. District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) acknowledges the needs of its diverse student population by recommending culturally responsive counseling for its public schools, but still, counseling’s effectiveness is challenged by consistently disengaged students.

Chronic Absence and Black Students in D.C. Schools

Chronic absenteeism refers to a student missing more than 10 percent of the school year, and it is useful to measure and monitor academic disengagement in older students attending D.C. public schools. 39 percent of Black students and 48 percent of designated “at-risk” students were chronically absent during the 2020-21 school year. These rates are in comparison to just six percent of white students (D.C. Policy Center, 2022). The statistics from the 2020-21 school year, while not the most recent, are the only data set that presents chronic absenteeism rates for each grade band. Observing by grade band reveals a sharp uptick in chronic absenteeism from middle to high school. For example, the 29 percent of Black middle schoolers increases to 40 percent in Black high schoolers, and this trend is consistent across all demographics. Students in urban areas are frequently responsible for their school commutes during adolescence, so lower attendance could be reflective of their autonomy and that they do not feel served by schools.

While these statistics reflect student attendance during virtual and hybrid learning, chronic absenteeism continued when schools returned to in-person learning, soaring to 48

percent of all students in 2021-22 and 59 percent of all Black students (D.C. Policy Center, 2023).

Considering that older students – whose academic progress is geared toward college preparation than basic development – are showing higher rates of chronic absence, it is plausible that they especially suffer from impaired academic self-concepts. Experiences with both teachers and counselors contribute to academic disengagement, but this phenomenon ultimately ties back to a counselor’s academic and postsecondary guidance responsibilities.

Although D.C.’s Board of Education acknowledges the importance of culturally responsive programs and counseling spaces for D.C. students, its unbalanced student:counselor ratio simply spreads available staff too thin. Instilling a culturally responsive environment requires extra attention and care from staff. Instead, with 444 students for every counselor, marginalized students likely have superficial relationships with their counselors – they experience mass-processing. One of inadequate counseling’s negative consequences is the lower attendance rates DCPS are experiencing. However, this inequity also results in counselors making superficial, uniformed judgments about students, leaving Black and Brown students susceptible victims to counselors’ implicit biases.

Implicit Biases in Counselors: Black Youth, Gifted and Talented Education (GATE), and Advanced Placement (AP)

High schools with high Black and Latinx enrollment historically have less access to high-rigor courses (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). On a national level, high-rigor courses refer to both Advanced Placement (AP) classes and specific coursework, such as higher-level STEM classes like calculus and physics. However, the D.C. Policy Center measures academic rigor entirely through participation in AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs – one public charter high school in D.C. offers an IB program (2023). Advanced Placement in particular, which also provides students with the opportunity to receive college credit, reveals educational inequality based on race and economic status with consequences that follow students into postsecondary life. AP classes are described as a “critical part of the pathway to college” and the pursuit of four-year degrees (*Kappan Online*, 2017).

Thus, DCPS’s investment in AP curriculums shows they are conscious of the link between college preparation and access to rigorous coursework. DCPS high schools must offer at

least eight AP courses with at least one course for each core subject. D.C. high schools offer, on average, 10 AP courses (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). However, this average includes public charter schools in the district, which typically feature more college-preparation than traditional schools but do not have the same AP requirements. Ultimately, the data tracing AP accessibility in Washington D.C. continues to be vague and incongruous.

Despite requirements to offer AP courses, there are still large racial and socioeconomic disparities in participation. At the end of the 2021-22 academic year, 53 percent of Black students and 45 percent of at-risk students participated in at least one AP or IB class during their high school careers; compared to 93 percent of white students (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). These statistics challenge the efficacy of DCPS's requirements altogether. White students are simultaneously a minority in the DCPS population but a majority in these classes. Thus, the majority of students – Black and at-risk students – are excluded from these academic spaces and marginalized to make room for white students.

Furthermore, these statistics do not even account for the amount of students that pass the end-of-year AP exams. Black students are also underperforming on AP exams, meaning that even though they participated in the class, many are not retaining the content and receiving college credit (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). Additionally, the report does not reveal when students typically enroll in AP classes and how many courses students take on average. Taking more AP classes, and taking them earlier in one's high school career, is more impressive for college admission. It also provides better preparation for postsecondary education and more opportunities to receive high scores on the end-of-year exam. Considering that Black students in D.C. are not pursuing postsecondary education at the same rates as their racial counterparts, it is likely that they are also not taking AP courses consistently throughout high school.

Finally, economic resources also affect a student's access to, and ability to succeed in, AP classes. Schools with larger budgets will have more AP classes, which further contributes to the socioeconomic demographics of these classes. Additionally, students must pay to take AP exams.

Ultimately, students with D.C. public schools are victims of racialized tracking. Education researchers and even AP's administrator, College Board, "has acknowledged that significant numbers of Black and Hispanic students who have the potential to succeed in AP never take those classes, either because their schools don't offer them or because they aren't placed into them" (*Kappan Online*, 2017). Students have to be recommended for these classes, causing schools to categorize them based on perceived ability, so Black students participating at

half the rate of the national average is a reflection of limited access based on accessibility and – more importantly – school faculty (*Kappan Online*, 2017). Black and at-risk students in D.C. specifically are not performing at half the rate of the average – 60 percent of all students participated in AP (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). However, they are participating at approximately half the rate of their racial counterparts. Therefore, the superficial relationship between counselors and students has detrimental, potentially lifelong, consequences for Black students throughout the country.

In fact, studies show that Black students, specifically Black girls, are less likely to be recommended for AP classes (Francis et al., 2019). Francis et al. pursued previous research theories that suggested even qualified Black students were withheld from AP and designed a study to expose counselor bias. The subjects, school counselors, examined a series of transcripts with behavioral and academic profiles. There were four transcript profile types: strong academic, strong behavioral (SASB); borderline academic, strong behavioral (BASB); strong academic, borderline behavioral (SABB); and borderline academic, borderline behavioral (BABB). Transcripts also included the same, generic comments on the student’s academic potential and behavior but each featured either “white or Black-sounding names, and male or female-sounding names,” or no-name (the control) transcript. Respondents recommended the strongest profile, SASB, 100 percent of the time for all except the Black female profile, which was only recommended 79 percent of the time. Similarly, for the weakest profile, the Black female transcript was recommended 50 percent of the time, while the no-name profile was recommended 79 percent of the time.

Similar to the categorization of students noted in the *Kappan Online* article, Francis et al. notes a phenomenon in schools called racialized tracking where advanced placement classes are typically filled by white students when in highly segregated schools – according to student testimonials. Interestingly, the study revealed that white men were less likely to be recommended for AP calculus than Black boys and white girls, showing that counselors are considering cultural nuances and attempting to remedy inequalities. However, Francis et al. claims this is likely because counselors hold white men to higher academic standards (Gershenson, Holt, and Papegeorge 2016; Harber et al. 2012; van den Bergh et al. 2010, as cited in Francis et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the gap between Black girls and boys also supports gender biases that ultimately withhold female students from STEM fields.

The experimental design of Francis et al.'s study closely resembles the procedures of overextended counselors: counselors review transcripts without knowing students and their goals and instead use scant details, letter grades, and their judgment for academic placement. Although counselors are not the sole gatekeepers for these classes, withholding Black students likely still discourages them and diminishes their confidence. In fact, research claims that Black students – and potentially Black girls more than their gender counterparts – value school counseling more than other demographics; Black and female students are more likely to seek out advice from counselors (Bryan et al., 2009, as cited in Francis et al., 2019). Therefore, counselor's subconscious biases perpetuate racial trauma in Black (female) students, contributing to their impaired academic self-concepts and disengaging them from school.

Increased Discipline Rates for Black students.

In addition to schooling and counseling diminishing Black student's academic self-concepts, disproportionate suspension rates, starting as early as preschool, contribute to the criminalization of Black youth. Nationally, Black preschoolers accounted for 18.2 percent of enrollment but received 43.3 percent of one or more out of school suspensions during the 2018-19 school year; they were also expelled at rates more than twice their share of total preschool enrollment (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

These disparities follow Black students from preschool into their K-12 education. Black students were expelled at rates more than twice their share of total student enrollment: they accounted for 15.1 percent of students but received 38.8 percent of expulsions with educational services and 33.3 percent of expulsions without educational services. During this same school year, Black girls were the only female demographic in Pk-12 education with disparate enrollment and suspension rates (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). While most ethnic minorities are subject to school discipline at higher rates than white students, Black students are primarily targeted by educators and excluded from the classroom.

Exclusionary discipline effectively stops students from developing into adults with prospective futures. These students are more likely to be arrested on days they are suspended from school (Epstein et al., 2019). Suspensions are also connected to higher dropout rates and increased risk of contact with the juvenile justice system (Epstein et al., 2019). This behavior suggests that Black youth feel hopeless following exclusionary discipline, succumbing to the

racial stereotypes perpetuated by the education system. In fact, schools can even refer students to law enforcement.

Black students are 2.2 times as likely to receive a referral to law enforcement (U.S. Education Department, 2016). Exclusionary discipline is especially harmful to developing youth because it physically disconnects them from educational spaces, frequently leaving them without educational services to keep them on track to graduate. Referring students to law enforcement is especially jarring because it reveals how educators handle student misconduct for Black students. Racial disparities here show that Black students are deprived of mentorship. Schools criminalize Black youth instead of providing care from behavioral specialists and mental health professionals. Additionally, counselors are supposed to service students with disciplinary problems, working to repair the relationships between disorderly students and principals and/or teachers (American School Counselor Association, n.d.).

D.C. Public Schools have updated discipline policies prohibiting most out-of-school suspensions, decreasing the rate of out-of-school suspensions from six percent during the 2018-2019 school year to four percent during the 2021-22 school year. Nevertheless, Black and at-risk students still experienced some of the highest rates from 2021 to 2022; 6.1 percent and 6.4 percent respectively. Whereas, only 0.4 percent of white students were suspended (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). (Students with disabilities had the highest rate of out-of-school suspensions.)

However, D.C. police are heavily involved with school discipline, suggesting that students are still unduly referred to law enforcement. The *Washington Post* has published a series of opinion pieces assessing whether law enforcement should be a part of public schooling. They, along with other local news outlets, report that the number of school resources officers are decreasing. Nevertheless, “1,709 calls for service were made to the D.C. police during the last full school year, including 300 related to weapons” (*Washington Post*, 2023). Therefore, law enforcement is still involved with a large number of incidents that do not involve weapons and could have been resolved by school personnel; approximately 1,409 incidents within one year. This report concerned Paul Kihn, the deputy mayor for education, and ultimately reiterates that D.C. school’s still contribute to the criminalization of its – predominantly Black – populace.

The racialization of school discipline is further reinforced by rates for subjective infractions. Subjective infractions are determined entirely at the discretion of teachers and include nonviolent offenses like disobedience, disruptive behavior, and other minor violations (dress code violations, inappropriate cell phone use, and loitering are listed by Epstein et al.

(2019)). Black girls are three times more likely to be disciplined for disruptive behavior than white girls; two times more likely for minor violations, and 2.5 times more likely for disobedience (Epstein et al., 2019). Therefore, subjective infractions allow a broader range of students to be disciplined and temporarily removed from the classroom and, thus, are particularly damaging to the self-concept.

A recent study published by Georgetown Law's Center on Poverty and Inequality, titled *Girlhood Interrupted*, links the disproportionate discipline of Black students for subjective infractions to a phenomenon researchers call "adultification." Their study revealed that subconscious biases lead adults to perceive Black girls as "less innocent and more adult-like than white girls of the same age" during almost all stages of childhood. *Girlhood Interrupted* specifically seeks to fill gaps in research by comparing the differential treatment of Black girls to their racial counterparts instead of Black boys. Black girls were perceived as older-looking and more culpable for their actions, and adults ultimately "reduce[d] or remove[d] consideration of childhood as a mediating factor in Black youth's behavior." Research has reached similar conclusions for Black boys (Goff et al., 2008; Goff et al., 2014, as cited in Epstein et al., 2019).

Ultimately, schools are becoming exclusionary places for Black children, undermining and stifling their academic potential while simultaneously characterizing them as disobedient and disruptive. The racialized tracking of Black students decreases an academically-qualified student's chance of pursuing postsecondary education, and even the students academically struggling are immediately disciplined rather than supported and nurtured. In fact, the differential treatment of Black students counters the framework of culturally responsive teaching altogether. Even the Black students indirectly affected – students witnessing these injustices – will feel as though academic spaces are designed to endanger and belittle them.

The implicit biases projected onto Black students by school personnel ultimately diminish their academic self-concepts. Investing in more counselors will restore the confidence of marginalized students because closer, personal ties between students and faculty aid in dismantling these biases. Culturally responsive training for counselors also encourages them to unlearn racial prejudices altogether. Furthermore, districts in the DMV area, specifically D.C. and Montgomery County, Maryland, are also considering phasing out School Resource Officers (SROs) to further combat increased discipline rates and acknowledge the power dynamics between police and Black people. The policies proposed thus far, Bill 25-0234 (2023) in D.C. and Bill 46-20 (2020) in Maryland, are examples of culturally responsive advancements in

education intended to combat the undue criminalization of Black youth. Additionally, advocates for this specific approach are proposing that (more) counselors, mental health professionals, and behavioral specialists supplement SROs (Washington Post, 2023).

The History of School Resource Officers (SROs) and Their Expansion.

School Resource Officers (SRO) are consistently linked to protecting and monitoring students from urban areas as the first SRO – in the 1950s – was hired in Flint, Michigan. The National Association of School Resource Officers was later founded in 1991 as a response to high-profile shootings in schools and growing concerns for school safety. SROs were also stationed in urban districts to combat additional issues like drug usage and gang violence. Over the next 25 years, the National Association of School Resource Officers largely expanded police presence in schools. By 2014, 42 percent of all secondary schools and 51 percent of secondary schools with high Black and Latino enrollment had sworn law enforcement officers (SLEOs) stationed on campus.

Washington D.C.'s SRO program was founded in 2004 following the death of a student shot inside Ballou High School, and like the rest of the country, its SRO program expanded remarkably. Using statistics from the U.S. Department of Education's 2015-16 Civil Rights Collection Data (CRDC), there was an estimated SRO-to-counselor ratio of 89:100 in D.C. public schools during the 2015-16 school year. In comparison, Montgomery County only had a ratio of 14:100 and local policymakers are still attempting to phase out SROs due to their adverse effects. However, the number of SROs in schools has likely decreased dramatically since 2016. D.C.'s Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety pushed for police-free schools, installing a plan to decrease the number of SROs from 80 in 2021 to 40 by the end of 2023 (D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, 2021; *DCist*, 2023). Still, it is unclear how many SROs there are currently because concerns from parents and administrators about school safety have halted plans to phase out officers.

Finally, studies have also found that a larger police force is linked to lower academic performance in ethnically diverse school districts (Weisburst, 2019; Lindsay, 2018). Therefore, the disproportionate discipline of Black students extends beyond the spawning of emotional trauma and is also reflected in their academic performance.

Researchers are even suggesting that investments in school police are intended to be punitive for students. Noting the increase in suspensions and expulsions from 2000-14, scholar Emily Weisburst suggests that:

“The timing of investments in police may also be a function of changes in discipline and student behavior (Owens, 2017). If school districts choose to hire police when they experience an increase in negative student behaviors, then not only is discipline a function of policing but policing is also a function of discipline.”

Similarly, research has also found that school police are more involved with “arrests for disorderly conduct” and are conducting fewer arrests for serious violent charges like “assaults and weapon charges” (Lindsay, 2018). This is corroborated by the total number of calls made by schools to the D.C. police, 1,709, versus the number of calls related to weapons, 300 (*Washington Post*, 2023). Furthermore, oral testimonies from Black young adults confirm that over-policing through surveillance by law enforcement was especially triggering for them (Lee & Robinson, 2019).

Lee & Robinson conducted a series of interviews with 40 young Black male participants, narrativizing their racial trauma (2019). While some remarked having positive interactions with law enforcement, these individuals acknowledged that positive experiences were rare and most interviewees experienced law enforcement abusing their power. The men repeatedly noted that they felt powerless and unable to protect themselves after interactions with police. Although the participants mostly referenced violent interactions and assaults at the hands of police officers, similar feelings of powerlessness could be triggered by school discipline. This is especially true when Black students are disciplined, by law enforcement, for subjective and non-serious offenses like disorderly conduct.

Solutions

Transitioning SROs to Community Resource Officers

Several parents, policymakers, and students in the DMV area are requesting schools phase out School Resource Officers for these reasons. However, there are still concerns for school safety, and police, preferably officers with behavioral training for adolescents, must be available in case of an emergency. Montgomery County provides a model that is potentially useful for DCPS, suggesting that school resource officers transition to community resource officers while school

safety and crime are monitored. Additionally, the decreased SRO presence will create additional room for mental health professionals and counselors.

Community resource officers may be particularly useful for DCPS since the D.C. Policy Center claimed its most important finding for the 2021-22 school year was that students wanted to feel safe in their communities and at school (2023). Eight percent of high-school students reported not going to school because of safety concerns at school or on their commutes, which could also contribute to this demographic's chronic absence (D.C. Policy Center, 2023). Parents also voiced similar concerns. Community resource officers would allow law enforcement to maintain a presence in the surrounding community while continuing their access to behavioral assessment training; in Montgomery County, this training includes de-escalation, disability awareness, maintaining a positive school climate, constructive interactions with students, implicit bias, and disability and diversity awareness (Maryland Center for School Safety, 2022).

Ensuring Close Counseling Relationships for Low-Income Students

Furthermore, key stakeholders are also requesting more counselors and mental health professionals in schools if the presence of SROs decreases. Scholars generally advocate for more counselors in schools with a large number of socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Creating a stronger counselor presence will restore the academic confidence of historically marginalized and Black students and prevent future generations from being academically disengaged. Ideally, quality counseling will help this demographic cultivate their interests, assess their skills and readiness, and explain financial options for college; providing them with resources that their families and communities typically are not familiar with (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2015).

Culturally Responsive Teaching to Encourage Anti-Racist Practices in Counselors

The District of Columbia Public Schools website claims its counselors “are certified professional educators who improve student success for ALL students by implementing a comprehensive school counseling program.” An element of these “comprehensive” programs are “inclusive, and culturally responsive” curricula, still with a strong academic integrity that intertwines “social/emotional growth, and college/career readiness.”

An immediate response to gaps between Black students and counselors could be diversifying staff to reflect student demographics, but an alternative that utilizes current counselors and improves their job performance is culturally responsive training. The George Lucas Educational Foundation's website, *Edutopia*, provides a framework to diminish cultural gaps between white educators and students of color. Making educators aware of the "sociopolitical contexts schools operate in" and encouraging them to challenge the status quo, including their own biases, can strengthen student-teacher relationships and diminish racial achievement gaps. Although the *Edutopia* article specifically references student-teacher dynamics, ASCA utilized this terminology in its 2022 revision of the "ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors" and its guide to anti-racist practices (2022).

Edutopia specifically encourages educators to consider cultural nuances such as why certain student-teacher relationships "break down;" why certain students may not feel comfortable making eye-contact while speaking to staff. For instance, students of color experience higher rates of discipline, starting as early as preschool, often making classrooms unsafe spaces for them and establishing oppressive power dynamics between them and educators. Scholars even suggest that these students receive less attention, nurturing, and support through behavioral issues (Epstein et al., 2019). Thus, culturally responsive educators would identify aloofness and/or detachment – or poor behavior altogether – in Black and Brown youth and cite a potential aversion to white authoritative figures or school as an institution, rather than dismissing them as bad students or lost causes.

Additional studies are working to identify how racial trauma manifests in Black youth, naming decreased school engagement and impaired academic self-concepts as symptoms that coincide with lower academic performance (*Kappan Online*, 2019). Navigating a racist society stresses children and adults alike, and studies are even linking racial trauma to the psychological disorder PTSD (*Kappan Online*, 2019; Lee and Robinson, 2019). Research and policies often focus on standardized test scores and elementary skills like reading comprehension to assess academic engagement, but attendance rates – or lack thereof – are another indicator of racial trauma and academic disengagement. Ultimately, considering chronic absenteeism has added nuance to the academic disengagement occurring in D.C. public schools.

Continuing to encourage mental health awareness and bridging racial disparities in mental health screenings.

Thus far, DCPS has made efforts to destigmatize mental illness and increase access to mental health resources for its students. According to the D.C. Policy Center, a majority of D.C. schools had a nurse or allied health professional during the 2019-20 school year, the lowest percentage of schools being in Ward 6 (85 percent) (2021). Similarly, during that same year, there was “on average, one mental health professional for every 206 pre-kindergarten to grade 12 [students] across the city.” These efforts continued through the 2021-22 school year when addressing the vacant mental and behavioral health clinical positions in high schools by starting a Youth Mental Health Ambassador program. There were additional online resources as well, such as the DC Educator Wellness Center for faculty. However, local organizations should continue to collect data and student testimonials to gauge the impact of these resources.

Additionally, when Montgomery County council members Jawando and Riemer proposed Bill 46-20, which would prohibit its police department from deploying SROs in schools, they found that Black students are 85 percent less likely to be referred for Screening and Assessment Services for Children and Adolescents (SASCA) Diversion Programs for substance abuse and mental health screenings (2020). Culturally responsive training would encourage counselors and teachers to attend to Black students’ behaviors and refer them for appropriate screenings.

Bridging Gaps with Technology

Digital resources in particular make culturally-responsive, wellness-oriented curriculums accessible for all schools, also allowing educators to nurture their relationships with students. As previously mentioned, social programs are being integrated into D.C. schools, and Effective to Great Education contributes to these resources with its Mindfulness Labs. Effective to Great Education, which was founded in Washington, D.C., has crafted “hundreds of culturally responsive, trauma-informed activities, lesson plans, professional development, and well-being resources” (2023). Schools without anti-implicit bias training and culturally responsive training would greatly benefit from these pre-crafted lessons. Progressive and culturally-responsive education encourages professionals to assess student behavior, and digital resources enrich the CRT framework by effectively integrating these concepts into educational spaces. In fact, these pre-made lesson plans and activities would allow schools to immediately address student needs. This ultimately facilitates more free-time for educators and is a cost-conscious alternative to social programs, which typically require federal or local funding.

Redefining “Qualified” Counselors

Finally, another useful concept to improve counseling services is expanding the definition of qualified counselors. Typically, datasets track years of work experience to reveal that schools with more low-income students commonly have less-experienced teachers. However, scholars and policymakers do not track the relationship between where counselors have previously practiced – or received internship experience during their graduate studies – and are currently working. Counselors with DCPS must successfully complete at least 300-hours of supervised school-based field, practicum, or internship experience while pursuing their degree. Similar to a counselor’s race and whether they have received culturally responsive training, previous experience in a high-poverty or ethnically diverse school provides them with valuable cultural competency.

Conclusion

Public Schools in Washington D.C. are attempting to dismantle its harmful disciplinary culture by decreasing the number of School Resource Officers stationed in schools, suggesting that counselors and mental health clinicians supplement these officers. Nevertheless, improving the quality and efficacy of school counseling should be a primary concern within D.C. public schools. The district has consistently struggled with academic engagement and attendance. Assessing local statistics illustrates how educators subject Black students to a racial track, which ultimately dissolves the students’ academic-self concepts. Thus, Black youth are withdrawing from the classroom, and D.C. schools must implement culturally-responsive training and curricula for Black students to develop holistically.

This paper posits how these solutions specifically suit Black students, but incorporating a culturally-responsive framework into school counseling ultimately benefits all ethnically marginalized youth. Scholars and education news outlets note that racial achievement gaps also persist between Latinx and white students (D.C. Policy Center, 2023; *Edutopia*, 2019). Latinx students have unique cultural experiences that alter how they learn, specifically as they navigate predominantly English-speaking classrooms. Thus, these students – along with their parents – need additional support, compassion, and understanding from counselors and teachers. Although

the solutions proposed will positively impact Latinx students in D.C., some of their needs differ from Black students, and additional research is needed to specifically address this community.

Similarly, there should be cultural representation for Asian students in D.C. public schools moving forward because the demographic is currently unrepresented by local statistics. This is because Asian youth make up a small portion of D.C. public school students. D.C. Policy Center claims that 5 percent of its students are other races and/or ethnicities than Black, white, and Latino (2023). Likewise, *U.S. News* approximates that 2 percent of D.C. students are Asian (n.d.). Future research should consider this racial demographic, and DCPS must identify and assess the needs of all demographics – no matter how small – to truly be progressive and culturally responsive.

The local jurisdiction, burgeoning network of social programs, and developing technological resources at Effective to Great Education signify promising futures for Black students in Washington, D.C. District of Columbia Public Schools and local committees, specifically D.C.'s Committee on the Judiciary and Public Safety, have taken the first step toward racial equity in education by acknowledging that public schools can perpetuate systemic racism. In the coming years, it is crucial for the district to increase counselor presence and invest in culturally-responsive, wellness-oriented education to heal racial trauma in its Black students.

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