

Researchers seek to advance anti-racist school counseling, offer guidelines

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Dismantling inequality in U.S. educational systems requires ongoing, active, intentional participation in anti-racist practices by not only teachers but also school counselors, according to a College of Education

faculty member.

"A critically conscious anti-racist school counselor is always working on themselves while trying to help people outside of themselves," said Janice Byrd, assistant professor of education (counselor education).

Byrd and Renae Mayes, an associate professor in the University of Arizona's College of Education, provide guidelines for school counselors to develop anti-racist approaches in their work in a conceptual paper, "An Antiracist Framework for Evidence-Informed School Counseling Practice." In the paper, Byrd and Mayes discuss the sociohistorical landscape that shapes the current context of K–12 schools; outline critical lenses and theory that serve as a foundation for antiracist practice; and discuss an evidence-informed process of engaging in antiracist school counseling practice.

School counselors are positioned to play a pivotal role in anti-racist education, Byrd said, adding that as permanent fixtures in the U.S. school system, they "were trained to be social justice warriors and change agents before there was such a thing as anti-racist school counseling." While racism has always been entrenched in educational systems, she said that anti-racist theory emerged relatively recently for school counselors. Anti-racist practices became a call among school counselors after the filmed murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by then-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin in April 2020.

"Now that we have (anti-racist theory), there is a more systematic approach—let's elevate the way we do this work," said Byrd.

School counselors are in a unique position to attend to students' social/emotional needs in the aftermath of racial trauma, Byrd said, as well as influence an understanding of difference among the student body. Counselors play a key role in students' social, academic and career

development.

"All of those things help to empower students individually and collectively which still falls into a systematic approach to anti-racism," said Byrd.

Byrd and Mayes offer several recommendations for school counselors and counselor educators to consider if committing themselves to being antiracist. Their first recommendation is to "actively engage in ongoing self-reflective work to challenge conscious and unconscious racist attitudes, beliefs and biases."

"We walk in the same fog of bias," said Byrd. "Everyone, including people who hold a marginalized identity, can be prejudiced, discriminatory and can contribute to harmful practices that disproportionately harm Black and brown students. However, those who hold power contribute to maintaining the systems of oppression students navigate."

The researchers' second recommendation for building an anti-racist school counseling framework is for educators to commit to culturally responsive approaches that "center the narratives of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color) children and celebrate their cultural differences."

Byrd recommends a holistic approach in implementing anti-racist frameworks that involves students' families and the wider community. She advises counselors to have ongoing conversations with parents on what is going on at school and to work with invested community members to create new support systems. In her own community, Byrd is practicing what she is preaching. She has been working with Seria Chatters, adjunct associate teaching professor of education (counseling education) and director of equity and inclusivity in the State College

Area School District, to create affinity groups for Black students at the elementary and high schools. Affinity groups are based on the concept of "homeplace," developed by the late feminist author and activist bell hooks, that is intended to be a place of "joyful resistance" where Black people can be unapologetically Black.

"They have this space where they can come together and potentially talk about some of the stressors they experience," said Byrd. "But more often they experience a space where they have joy and not have to explain everything about their (shared) cultural experiences."

The third component of Byrd's and Mayes' anti-racist school counseling framework is building comprehensive school counseling programs that are foundationally anti-racist. Many schools use multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) to give targeted support to struggling students. In their paper, the researchers suggest that school counselors can infuse antiracist school counseling practices as a part of MTSS programs.

"This requires critical reflection and dismantling the ways current programs and curriculum center whiteness and 'other' Black and brown students," said Byrd.

As a counselor educator, Byrd is doing her part to ensure that her students are trained to implement anti-racist curricula and programming. In simulated classroom activities that she leads in her classes at Penn State, her students critically examine student data, such as report card grades, to identify racial opportunity gaps.

"If you're a school counselor, how can you gather more data so you can best meet the students in that space? How can you collaborate with parents, teachers and administrators to support your efforts?" Byrd asks.

Proponents of anti-racist school counseling face a number of barriers,

Byrd said. Among the challenges is a resistance to race-based affinity groups across the nation. While the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) provides some guidance, there are few state-level regulations that support anti-racism and continuing education on racial issues in schools.

"Barriers could include, but are not limited to, if you are not a school counselor who continues to explore/challenge your own racist ideologies and not immersed in a professional community devoted to combating racial issues, you could do harm trying to implement (affinity groups)," she said.

More research is needed in anti-racist counseling and the creation of homeplace for Black students, according to Byrd. She was recently awarded a grant from the King Family Impact Endowment to support a project, "Kaleidoscopes: Affinity Spaces for Black Adolescent Girls to Promote Growth, Empowerment and Resistance." The project will create a space where Black girls can engage in critical conversations, radical healing and empowerment to navigate/combat bias-based bullying. In addition, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the Anti-racist School Counseling Collective housed at American University under the leadership of Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, dean of American University's School of Education and a former school counselor educator, has developed trainings, webinars and briefs dedicated to anti-racism.

"It's imperative [school](#) counseling efforts moving forward center anti-racist practice and hold systems of oppression accountable," said Byrd. "Otherwise, not much will be sustained or effective."

More information: Renae D. Mayes et al, An Antiracist Framework for Evidence-Informed School Counseling Practice, *Professional School Counseling* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/2156759X221086740](https://doi.org/10.1177/2156759X221086740)

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