

RESEARCH BRIEF

Addressing the Needs of Black Students Returning to In-Person Instruction



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Introduction: 2020, COVID, and Black Lives Matter

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing quarantine brought about economic strife both at the national level and in homes across the country with unemployment rates jumping from below four percent in February of 2020 to fifteen percent in April (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). By the end of April, 62,000 Americans died from COVID-19 (Center for Disease Control, 2021). Then, in May 2020, following the spread of footage taken from the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police while in custody in public view, a new issue was brought into the spotlight of American media: Black lives and police injustice. The previously established Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement gained the attention of the media during the resulting protests which took place in 286 cities nationwide (Dave, 2020).

Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) experienced these events in different ways. Those deemed essential workers were disproportionately Black and Latinx (Rho & Brown, 2020), and although data is not available for every state, over half of the essential workers in New York and California are Black and Latinx Americans (New York Comptroller, 2020; Thomason & Bernhardt, 2020). It is estimated that 30% of Whites had the ability to work from home during the pandemic, but only 20% of Black populations had the same options. Working in these professions during the pandemic put these groups at

greater risk of contracting the COVID-19 virus (New York Comptroller, 2020), as did travel to these jobs; nationally Black populations are 20% more likely to use public transportation than Whites (Tai et al., 2021), further exposing them to the virus. This exposure, when paired with inadequate healthcare (Jean, 2020), has contributed to the higher COVID-19 death rates in the Black community. Though infection rates were similar between Whites and Blacks, by April 2020 the death rates related to COVID-19 for Black populations were almost double that of Whites and the numbers did not match those in the White community until September 2020.

Throughout this time, the growing momentum of the BLM movement was potentially adding to social stress for some in the Black community. Being involved in BLM protests that included some form of violence has become a predictor of depression (Morman et al., 2020). Experiencing the movement through social media outlets, such as Facebook, exposed users to a plethora of opinions, with White users more likely to post critical comments about BLM protests and support of police in general, while Black users were more likely to discuss the murders of Black individuals during 2020 as only the most recent example of racial injustice and to discuss the emotional toll that the injustices cause (Dixon & Dundes, 2020). Some began cultural exploration and sought to understand their racism, relying on

Black contacts to help them discover what to do to be more supportive of the movement. This reliance on Black friends to act as guides inadvertently added stress, created trauma, and made this moment in history more difficult (Wilson, 2020).

Trends in Black Student Education Pre-2020

It is important for those working in education, and specifically for school counselors, to understand the experiences of young people before this time and during this time. A critical examination can help understand how groups may need different types of support in making the transition back to in-person schooling. Research has shown historical disparities in academic achievement by race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES) (Paschall et al., 2018; Henry et al., 2020). Several education laws have been enacted through the U.S. Department of Education over the years – the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA, 1965), the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) – as a means to address the disparities within our educational system. Though there has been a decline in achievement gaps by race/ethnicity, knowledge of the differences between SES has been unclear (Paschall et al., 2018). While income gaps have been found to explain academic gaps between Black-White and White-Hispanic students, little is known of the effect within racial/ethnic groups.

Furthermore, Black-White achievement gaps have been linked to parental educational levels as well (Henry et al., 2020; Shores et al., 2020), with systemic inequality perpetuating educational inequities.

As inequities continue to be prevalent across educational levels, underserved students, Black students in particular, often remain at a disadvantage, regardless of family income (Mayes, et al., 2019). Students of color account for lower benchmarks in college-career readiness (e.g. graduation rates, being identified as gifted and talented, and enrollment in advanced placement), grade retention, and discipline trends (Dameron et al., 2019; Dept of Education, 2011; Mayes, et al., 2019; Mayes et al., 2020; Shores et al., 2020).

Trends in Black Student Education Throughout the Pandemic

Black students have been found to be suspended from school and referred to alternative learning settings for discipline more often than their counterparts (Dameron, et al., 2019; Shores et al., 2020; Walker and Hutchenson, 2020). Supports can be withheld due to misidentification of twice exceptional students, with Black students being more likely to be identified for special needs and overlooked for their giftedness (Mayes, et al., 2019; Mayes, 2020).

Black students are also more likely to be placed in remedial special education programs than any other racial/ethnic group combined and three times more than White Students (McGee, & Pearman, 2014). Standardized testing can further exacerbate the misidentification of Black students' needs (Mayes, 2020), as Black students have historically received lower scores on standardized testing (Walker & Hutchinson, 2020).

The science of child development tells us that the brain develops over time, it is vulnerable not only to genetic factors but environmental stressors (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Stress can have a negative lasting effect on children's growth mindset, personal well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance (KyoungHwang & Lee, 2018; Sotardi, 2016). For children, school is frequently reported as a large contributor to general stress (Kulakow, Raufelder, & Hoferichter, 2021). While schools are fundamental in providing students with everything from academic instruction to reliable nutrition and mental health

services (Pattison, Hoke Schaefer, Alter, & Sekhar, 2021). Sotardi (2016) found that students reported each day having a mildly stressful experience at school that is associated with feelings of frustration and fatigue in the everyday learning process. Excessive educational stress can affect a student's working memory, learning, behavior, attention, and mental health (Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

As the United States becomes increasingly immersed in the competitive nature of global education, addressing an educational system fraught with inequalities is pertinent for the success of BIPOC students and the future of the United States in times of crisis (Bondy, Peguero, & Johnson, 2017). Students who identify as Black or African American may face the additional stress of navigating coursework that emphasizes the Western framework that is embedded in the works of White theorists, often ignoring the contributions of people of color (Bayne, & Branco, 2018). With the prevalent unequal ground, Black students begin to internalize these messages of lower performance, competence, and achievement (Burnett et al., 2020; St. Mary, et al., 2018). This was further perpetuated in the spring of 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the widespread K-12 school closures (Kaden, 2020). This worldwide closure of physical school buildings and the ending of traditional, in-person instruction caused an unprecedented disruption; impacting at least 124,000 public and private schools in the United States (Pattison et al., 2021). This increased the use of online schooling and digital learning, with varying forms of supplemental programs (Corry, Dardick, & Stella, 2016). Despite the attempt to meet the needs of students and conversion to online education, academic inequities among students remained and disproportionately affected Black students (Pattison et al., 2021; Wright & Merritt, 2020).

For many Black students being confined at-home, virtual learning offered the needed space to rest from emotional and cognitive energy regularly used to navigate spaces that historically did not support them (Miller, 2021). In an interview conducted by Miller (2021) for the National Public Radio (NPR), regarding being in the brick and mortar school setting, a student spoke to their experience within unsupported spaces:

"You're always on alert, you're always on, you're always deflecting, so you would be exhausted at the end of the day on top of growing." Being in a virtual setting provided the needed opportunity for some Black students to breathe and thrive. Black students resiliently found spaces that felt safe for them, while they encountered broader societal issues, including major economic downturn, job losses, the tangible health threat of COVID-19, and the widespread protests over racial injustice (Kuhfeld et al., 2020). The pandemic unearthed several racial injustices across the United States, particularly regarding social distancing guidelines, mask requirements, health care stigma, and socioeconomic status (Blake et al., 2021). The effects of witnessing structural racism and health discrepancies are not moderated by age (Egede & Walker, 2020). Black students not only had to meet educational expectations, but they were also witnessing the ensuing civic unrest that likely will or has created additional turmoil and trauma (Kuhfeld, et al., 2020).

Implications and Solutions Promoting a competent climate

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed the intersection of structural racism, social risk factors, and discrepancies in health care in the United States (Egede & Walker, 2020). The educational system has emulated this structure by enabling a similar hierarchy that emphasizes the needs of students of the dominant culture before those of BIPOC student populations (Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). To create school environments that address equity issues among Black students, a shift in focus is needed to understand social injustice in schools and examine why students of marginalized populations may be treated unjustly (Gretter, Yadav, Sands, & Hambrusch, 2019).

School counselors are ideal in initiating conversations that address internalized racism in education by providing cultural sensitivity training to support organizational change in school environments (Egede & Walker, 2020). They are ideally positioned in schools to advocate for the needs of students, while also having dedicated education in multicultural competence training (ASCA, 2019). Multicultural competence training has prepared school counselors to work and advocate for diverse populations (Chao, 2013).



Creating a cultural sensitivity training program for the school environment could significantly improve the method in which school administrators, teachers, and staff members address the needs of Black students (Govere & Govere, 2016). Cultural sensitivity training reinforces the focus of understanding issues of fair access to education while exploring new ideas and models for building more inclusive learning environments (Pattison, 2021; Kaden, 2020). It provides an opportunity to understand how cultural identity influences patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting among students (Baumeler, 2019). Providing school professions with cultural sensitivity training teaches them to recognize multifaceted forms of oppression and barriers faced by Black students (D'Souza, 2016). This can help school environments holistically to develop awareness and recognize the social injustice faced by Black student populations (Dari, Chan, & Re, 2021).

As schools begin to reopen, school counselors need to be vocal about tolerance and acceptance to maintain realistic expectations about student performance both academically and behaviorally. Many of the press conferences and meetings between policymakers about when to reopen schools typically do not address the question of how to open schools while addressing the mental and physical health of our students during the transition back to in-person instruction (Christakis, 2020). An element of addressing mental health is to understand that school detachment and disengagement that occurred over this time away from school buildings may have affected communities that lacked the technology or resources to engage remotely (World Bank Group Education, 2020).

School counselors are in a unique situation to address issues regarding school connectedness with students. Providing evidence-based school counseling interventions such as groups that focus on school connectedness and career planning for select groups of students that may be finding difficulties in rejoining in-person instruction. It is recommended that best practices be

followed and a school-wide needs assessment be used to identify groups that need these interventions and that data related to attendance and academic achievement be used (ASCA, 2019). It is important to remember that academic achievement over the last year may have been significantly impacted by the pandemic, remote learning, and the resources available to students, and using achievement data from the year prior may help assess a student's academic trajectory more accurately, especially if the student lacked resources needed to be successful in their remote setting.

Educators should actively acknowledge the experiences of our society during this time have not been wasted on our youth. They too have felt the trauma, stress, anxiety, depression, increased mental health needs, and fear of many around the world (Golberstein et al., 2020; Son et al., 2020; Thakur, 2020; Treda, 2020). Three components of mindfulness can help school counselors and fellow educators navigate the needed journey – as it is not a quick fix – of supporting students as we begin to transition post-pandemic schooling.

Attention should be paid to what is occurring at present. Support students in observing thoughts, feelings, and sensations as they arise and create space for processing (Perry & Cleveland, 2021). This can occur in a variety of ways. One suggestion is to set aside dedicated time within the school day to allow students to process the events around them. For instance, before starting a lesson have a “Let’s Talk” moment and genuinely ask how students are doing, what do they need, and how can you support them. Build rapport with students and provide an environment in which they feel safe, seen, and heard. CASEL’s SEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook (2019) is an excellent resource available to help educators support social and emotional learning (SEL), which is “the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish

and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (p.2).

Intentionally cultivating awareness and making it a consistent and constant practice is another component of mindfully navigating this journey. As aforementioned, this work is not a quick fix. Educational disparities, racism, discrimination, inequalities are longstanding systemic constructs. Maintaining intentionality in awareness of the experiences of students and the effects of these constructs cultivates an environment of healing and change. Lastly, one’s *attitude* within these spaces is key. Students need understanding and support that stem from non-judgmental and kind entities. Furthermore, the families of these students need support. Schools can continue the reach by cultivating spaces for families as well, remembering students who experience inequities are from families who experience inequities.

Conclusion

We have stressed the systemic divide within our society and its disproportionate effects on Black students, in particular. However, we would be remiss to not also acknowledge that all students, across culture, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and age, need support. “No one is free until we are all free.” The infamous words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. ring so loudly today. Equality for all cannot exist until inequality and inequities are eradicated. Ladson-Billings (1995) speaks of culturally relevant pedagogy with a unique focus on the trifecta of student learning, cultural competence, and sociopolitical/critical consciousness. Students’ academic growth, progression, and understanding must also include acknowledgment of cultural influence and critique of norms that perpetuate inequities. As we enter this period beyond the aftermath of the recent year, we must not have the mindset of returning to normal, overlooking the blatant needs of students and the effects of a changing society.



