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Re-Centering School Counseling: A Call for the Future

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Abstract

The author highlights possible ways to improve the praxis of and training in professional school counseling. Calling for a strategic merger of social justice, mental health support, and leadership, school counselors need to re-center their work around essential social justice-informed counseling services and coping skill training for students to address current and future mental health crises.

Keywords: School counseling, social justice, mental health in schools, trauma

This paper uses a social justice and trauma-centered lens, considering both professional literature and lived experience, to understand the current youth mental health situation in the US. We present possible systemic responses by school counselors and the school counseling profession to remind us of the impact we can have with students when we maintain a focus on the counseling roots of the profession.

Current Mental Health Crisis in Schools

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; 2023), youth are experiencing mental health issues in increasing numbers. In 2021, more than 4 in 10 (42%) students felt persistently sad or hopeless, and nearly one-third (29%) experienced poor mental health (CDC, 2023). Furthermore, over 22% of students seriously considered attempting suicide, and 10% attempted suicide. When disaggregated, these data are more concerning for certain groups. For example, in 2023 almost 53% of female students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness during the past year and nearly 21% made a suicide plan (CDC, 2023, p. 56-62). For

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LGBTQ+ students, almost 65% experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, with 32% attempting suicide during the past year (pp. 56-62). While patterns between racial/cultural groups are harder to discern, suicide rates for Black male adolescents increased by 47% from 2013 to 2019 (Ramchand et al., 2021).

According to CNN (Matthews et al., 2024), there were more than 80 school shootings in the US in 2024, 56 of which were on K-12 school grounds and 27 on college campuses. In these shootings 38 people died and 116 people were injured (Matthews et al., 2024). Records were set for the highest number of shootings in 2021, 2022, 2023, and 2024 - an alarming trend. It is a very public barometer of the level of mental health needs among young people in our K-16 educational institutions; therefore, it is not surprising that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), SchoolSafety.gov, Youth.gov, the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), the National Institute of Health (NIH), the Suicide Prevention Resource Center, the World Health Organization (WHO), the National Education Association, and the Boys & Girls Clubs of America, among others, have all developed important documents examining the mental health needs of children and youth.

High rates of mental distress are also the current reality for educators. According to the 2024 State of the Teacher Project (Doan et al., 2024), teachers' well-being has fallen in recent years: compared with similar working adults, twice as many teachers experienced frequent job-related stress or burnout. Teachers reported working an average of 53 hours per week, compared to 44 hours of the average worker; similarly, only 36% of teachers considered their base pay adequate, unlike the 51% of comparable working adults in this study (Doan et al., 2024).

The Social Determinants of Health model (SDOH; Healthy People 2030, n.d.) identifies several systemic and cultural factors that can support health. Schools are one of the five foundational factors, which include economic stability, education access and quality, health care access and quality,

neighborhood and built environment, and social and community context. Additional research has documented the connections between education and Social Determinants of Mental Health (SDMH):

Since poor mental health can be the invisible hand that suppresses life chances, including both how long we live and the quality of years lived, improving population mental health by designing effective prevention strategies that intervene on modifiable social risk factors should be seen as a central issue of social justice. (Kirkbride et al., 2024, p. 58)

In the SDMH model, cultural and systemic challenges to mental health include socioeconomic disadvantages (education, finance, occupation, living standards) that result from social stratification; early life and childhood adversity; migration; ethno-racial discrimination including interpersonal racism and micro-macroaggression, labor market dynamics and racism, and increased carceral monitoring; LGBTQ+ oppression including prejudice, stigma, discrimination, and violence; gender-based inequalities in the prevalence and manifestation of mental health issues; and loneliness and social isolation (Kirkbride et al., 2024). As cited by Kirkbride et al. (2024), some potentially beneficial school-based mental health programs that target SDMH factors include social justice advocacy, mental health literacy, coping skill training, mindfulness training, suicide prevention, and loneliness prevention. Further, when staff and faculty are included in those social justice and mental health programs, everyone in the school environment benefits (Molina et al., 2022). In order for all of our youth to thrive, we need schools and the adults working in them to be functioning well, with related health and mental health supports as well as social justice advocacy efforts that address inequities (Lenz & Lemberger-Truelove, 2023). Schools, mental health, and social justice are interconnected, and “counselors must have a functional understanding of the role that the SDMH play in the influence, maintenance, and mitigation of mental health and mental illness so that responsive interventions can be implemented” (Lenz & Lemberger-Truelove, 2023, p. 376).

Systemic Responses

School-based social justice-informed mental health supports are essential to address the current level of hopelessness, helplessness, and burnout among students and staff. There are multiple professional groups that provide aspects of this mental health support for students: school psychologists (National Association of School Psychologists, n.d.), school social workers (School Social Work Association of America, n.d.), and school counselors (American School Counselor Association, n.d.-c). When examining availability, school counselors are more common and numerous in schools than the other two professions, and school counselors are uniquely qualified to offer mental health support to both adults and youth in the building (Lambie et al., 2019). Using data available from the National Center for Education Statistics, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) calculated an average student/school counselor ratio of 737:1 for PreK-8 school counselors and 232:1 for grades 9-12 school counselors (ASCA, n.d.-c). If school counselors do not respond to this mental health and social justice crisis in schools, other professions will step in, and school counselors risk becoming professionally obsolete.

As the most visible school professional associated with social justice-oriented mental health support, school counselors should be leading social justice and mental health efforts for students and staff. This work includes advocacy for marginalized and minoritized staff, students, and students' families; challenging and removing racist practices that limit the potential of children and communities; ensuring that educational opportunities and resources are abundant for all students and staff but especially for students and staff from underserved communities; and extending meaningful inclusion and encouragement to students and staff from marginalized communities (Atkins & Oglesby, 2018; ASCA, n.d.-b; Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2024; Mayes & Byrd, 2022; Mayes, Edirmanasinghe, et al., 2022; Mayes, Pianta, et al., 2022; Molina et al., 2022).

Defining a school counselor's role in mental health support, Lenz and Lemberger-Truelove (2023) state:

[T]he practice of counseling is the establishment of the prior conditions of indivisible wellness. At a personal level, counseling dialogue ... is less concerned with mentalizing personal pathology but rather cultivating the most relevant and constructive opportunities for growth... as potential trajectories that can be affected and put on a different course assuming some contribution, which might include personal counseling, program development, or social justice advocacy. (p. 376)

One structure to conceptualize the contribution referenced above is found within a multitiered system of support (MTSS) context. For students, Level 1 mental health prevention efforts could be whole-school and classroom activities that provide mental health literacy, mindfulness, coping strategies, and suicide assessment and education; Level 2 mental health supports could include individual and group counseling for short-term emotional distress; and Level 3 mental health work could involve facilitating referrals to community or district resources for long-term or intensive counseling work involving mental health diagnoses (Goodman-Scott & Ziomek-Daigle, 2022). While MTSS is typically used to structure student interventions, it is possible to conceptualize support for staff in a similar structure (Goodman-Scott & Ziomek-Daigle, 2022): for example, Tier 1 prevention could include professional development in stress management and health education; Tier 2 could target those experiencing distress by teaching emotional regulation and biofeedback for teachers (Bornemann et al., 2019); and Tier 3 could involve targeted intervention with highly distressed educators through direct consultation and referrals to community mental health providers (Marsh & Mathur, 2020; Molina et al., 2022). It is essential to note that all counseling work needs to be contextualized in a social justice framework, infusing that counseling work with dialogic systemic awareness and compassion (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2024). Social justice and equity work involves

both the individual and their community in the fight against systemic oppression. In this way, counseling work and social justice work support each other.

Clarifying School Counselor Role and Identity

Due to identity confusion, role confusion, and/or administrative interference, some school counselors eschew the role of mental health counselor (Lambie, et al., 2019; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021; Levy et al., 2024). For many, quasi-administrative roles such as test administration and master scheduling take priority. Identity confusion and role confusion are often exacerbated by overwhelming conflicting demands and expectations, and can result in reactive, fragmented, and poorly defined or non-existent school counseling programs. ASCA itself escalates this role confusion: in the Executive Summary of the 4th edition of the ASCA National Model, ASCA states “School counselors are certified/licensed *educators...*” (emphasis added; ASCA, 2019a, p. 1). This minimizes the role and identity as a *counselor*, reducing the emphasis on addressing mental health that *counselors* can provide for youth and adults in schools. Another challenge to effective school counseling practice is state, district, and/or building administrative interference that can directly contribute to school counselors being intimidated into silence or inactivity relative to social justice and mental health (Goodman-Scott et al., 2021). To counter these influences, a nondual, “both-and” identity is needed (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021), where *counseling* takes place in the context of school and the “school counselor identity is *always both* educator and counselor” (emphasis added; p. 2).

In the first three iterations of the National Model, ASCA called out the importance of courageous leadership for systemic change through a clearly labeled frame for the Model, but that frame is not visible in the fourth edition (ASCA, 2019b). However, calls for school counselor leadership have not diminished over time; if anything, they have become more numerous (Young & Dollarhide, 2017), especially when considering the oppressive structure of education and the recognition that social injustice is a social determinant of mental health and a source of trauma for

members of marginalized communities. Without school counselor leadership that moves us toward social justice, abolition, and liberation (Mayes, Edirmanasinghe, et al., 2022), school counseling as a profession risks becoming a tool for colonization, systemic oppression, and dehumanization, threatening its integrity and existence (Drake et al., 2024).

Recommendations for the Future and a Call to Action

In order to address these issues, I would like to offer a series of recommendations as a member of the school counseling community for over 30 years.

For School Counseling Practitioners:

1. It is time to even more thoroughly embrace social justice and work to remove systemic barriers to student success. Social justice efforts address educational and social inequities that confound and thwart robust thriving for staff, students, their families, and their communities and powerfully impact the Social Determinants of Mental Health (Kirkbride et al., 2024). Providing social justice education and support in schools can interrupt the cycle of racism, homophobia, genderism, linguicism, etc., that dehumanize and traumatize members of marginalized communities (Mayes & Byrd, 2022). We must recognize that the impact of social injustice is trauma, and we must include trauma-informed and systemic dialogic praxis – counseling that identifies systemic and not just individual aspects of mental health – for all our students. As an integral part of social justice work, we must partner with families and various communities whose students attend our schools to form lasting community connections that are culturally meaningful (Atkins & Oglesby, 2018; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). We need to engage in advocacy for social justice, including legislative advocacy and political advocacy. We need to walk the walk and not just talk the talk (Lenz & Lemberger-Truelove, 2023), even when it's hard or the political climate doesn't support us.

2. It is time to renew our collective commitment to trauma-informed mental health. It is time to educate ourselves on diagnostic terminology and implications so that we can converse with other professionals about the impact and manifestations of trauma and mental health conditions. It is time to destigmatize our thinking around trauma and mental health, and embrace MTSS as a means of organizing school counseling program responses to the reality of mental health issues for students and staff in our schools (Goodman-Scott & Ziomek-Daigle, 2022; Vetter et al., 2024). It is critical that school counselors view their work relative to mental health to include essential prevention-focused mental health education; an increased focus on individual wellness; increased focus on collective social justice, compassion, and acceptance of difference; and an awareness of social-emotional development (Desrochers, 2014; Pincus et al., 2021). We must partner with our families and communities around our schools to advance social justice through the lived environment around the school, addressing issues of poverty through supporting meaningful jobs, parks, libraries, and the arts (Compton & Shim, 2015). It is time to partner effectively with mental health resources in the district and community to meet students' and colleagues' mental health needs through understanding Social Determinants of Mental Health, integrating "the social determinants of mental health (SDMH) into key activities including clinical assessment, case conceptualization, treatment planning, prevention programming, education and training, and scientific inquiry" (Lenz & Lemberger-Truelove, 2023, p. 375).
3. It is time to step up and lead in our schools (Young & Dollarhide, 2017). It is time to hold all educational leaders accountable for the social justice and mental health policies and practices that need to be established to create a thriving educational community for ALL our children (Shields et al., 2017) and all members of the school community. New practices need to be enacted that foster thriving (for example, Black Joy) and are culturally grounded and culturally

informed in ways that include families and community members (Mayes, Edirmanasinghe, et al., 2022).

4. It is time to accept that we must use data to capture and account for our work for social justice and mental health. It is time to be able to put data to work to help our students, our families, and our communities (Lemberger-Truelove & Molina, 2023). Data is needed to understand the experiences of students and adults in our educational system; these data can then inform school counselor efforts through documentation of social justice and mental health needs and outcomes (Bowers & Lemberger, 2016). There are a number of ways to collect data within a social justice framework using methodologies designed to elevate youth voice and agency relative to their experience in schools; for example, youth participatory action research (YPAR; Cook & Levy, 2024; Levy et al., 2023) and photovoice (Haugen et al., 2019) have documented efficacy in providing students with ways to inform systemic change. Data generated from such research efforts are both actionable within the school context and publishable.

For School Counselor Educators:

1. It is time to renew our commitment to lead for social justice and for mental health. This means that school counselors need to be trained to be leaders, social justice advocates, and mental health school practitioners. First, in terms of **leadership** and **social justice advocacy**, school counselor educators need to counter the “nice counselor syndrome” (Bemak & Chung, 2008), directly teaching skills and fostering competencies for leadership (Mason et al., 2023) and advocacy (for example, those highlighted by the American Counseling Association [n.d.] and ASCA [n.d.-a]). School counselor training needs to prioritize the *why and how* of social justice; field experiences must focus on how social justice efforts are engaged in a school context. Field supervisors must be trained in social justice

praxis and chosen based on their ability to mentor this work in future school counselors.

Further, school counselor training and supervision needs to include **mental health school praxis**, including trauma-informed practice and diagnostic information so that our graduates can converse with students, families, and colleagues about the educational implications of various diagnoses. Willful ignorance of mental health issues is not acceptable; it shames and stigmatizes students, families, and staff. For students, families, and staff who are members of marginalized and underserved communities, this erodes their willingness to seek help and further escalates trauma and mental health issues. For a robust discussion of school counseling training implications for a fully integrated educator-counselor identity, see the Special Issue of *Teaching and Supervision in Counseling* (Levy et al., 2024).

2. Supervision is critical to foster and deepen graduate students' skills in mental health, abolitionist, and liberatory school counseling leadership and practice (Dollarhide et al., 2021). We must seek, train, and support university and field supervisors who are passionate about both social justice and mental health counseling work in schools, and we need to foster their leadership skills so that they can lead in these areas (Dollarhide et al., 2021; Shields et al., 2017).
3. As school counselor educators and role models for students, supervisees, and the academic community, we need to extend our work toward liberation with our counseling students and marginalized communities at local, state, and national levels. We need to decolonize ourselves through examining our own oppressive narratives, and decolonize counselor education (Haskins et al., 2023; Middleton et al., 2023) through examining narratives embedded in the white hegemony of the counseling profession and in Western educational traditions (Okun, n.d.). This mandates counselor educators to provide professional advocacy, service, research, and publication to continue the professional discourse about leadership, social justice, mental

health in schools, and the impact of social determinants of mental health on school culture and climate.

For School Counseling Leaders:

1. School counseling leaders at district, state, and national levels must engage colleagues in discussing social justice and mental health in our schools. We must encourage and develop the next generation of professional school counselors to embrace their *counseling identity*, their *social justice identity*, and their *leadership identity*. This needs to be addressed at the national level especially; school counselors and school counselor educators look to the national association for guidance in these identity issues. We cannot remain silent or convey mixed messages about who we are and what we do.
2. We must be at the forefront of national discussions about repressive policies and legislation that target members of oppressed communities. As one example, policies around immigration as evidenced by the use of pejorative terms like “illegals” convey dehumanization and must be countered at every opportunity. Other issues such as climate justice, wars around the globe, and extreme agendas such as mandatory Bibles in classrooms (see Bushard, 2024) need to be addressed clearly as a profession.

Conclusion

These issues will not be resolved in our lifetimes. But as a profession, school counseling is positioned to interrupt the cycle of oppression by addressing social justice and mental health issues now, today. It is encouraging to know that many school counselors, school counselor educators, and local/state/national school counselor leaders are already engaged in this work, and already designing new programs, new policies, and new approaches to bring greater social justice and mental health support to their schools. I applaud these professionals, as I know that challenging the system does not come without risk. But as I look forward to retirement in the coming months, I am confident

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that this new generation will continue to move the profession forward toward greater efficacy in addressing these complex and interconnected youth needs, resulting in greater life success for our students, staff, families, and communities.

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