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## A Phenomenological Investigation of School Counselor Antiracist Social Justice Practices

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**A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF SCHOOL COUNSELOR  
ANTIRACIST SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICES**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF SCHOOL COUNSELOR ANTIRACIST SOCIAL JUSTICE PRACTICES**

Stephanie Deonca Smith-Durkin  
Old Dominion University, 2022  
Chair: Dr. Emily Goodman-Scott

Decades after the landmark United States Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, the push continues to make schools a safe and welcoming environment for Black and Brown students. Black students in particular are continuing to be oppressed and marginalized in PK-12 educational settings. Accounting for approximately 15% of public PK-12 students, Black students comprise 13.7% of all students who receive out-of-school suspensions in 2017, are 16% of the special education student population, and are more likely to attend a school with less resources (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2021; Ramsey, n.d.). In addition, Black students are less likely than their white peers to graduate high school - 79% compared to 89% (NCES, 2021).

School counselors, because of their close proximity to students and their role within schools, are in one of the best positions to be systemic change agents and combat institutional racism and inherently biased policies that prevent the academic success, and social-emotional well-being of students of color (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). Limited literature exists, however, of school counselors discussing antiracist social justice practices they implement in PreK-12 schools. The purpose of this study was to explore how school counselors can advocate and promote equitable change in K-12 schools. This study utilized phenomenological methodology and semi-structured interviews with school counselors (N=10) to form descriptive themes of their lived experiences carrying out antiracist social justice practices.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF TABLES.....	ix
LIST OF FIGURES.....	x
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	
Statement of the Problem .....	2
Purpose and Research Question.....	3
Research Design .....	3
Limitation and Future Research.....	3
Definition of Terms.....	4
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	
Review of the Literature.....	7
Critical Race Theory.....	9
Inequities in PK-12 Education.....	12
Social Justice .....	15
Antiracism .....	17
Summary.....	18
School Counseling Roles.....	19
Comprehensive School Counseling Programs.....	19
School Counseling and Social Justice.....	21
School Counseling and Antiracism.....	23
Summary.....	26
Research Question.....	26
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	
Introduction.....	28
Research Question.....	28
Researcher Reflexivity.....	28
Philosophical Assumptions.....	30
Researcher Paradigm .....	31
Summary .....	32
Rationale for Methodology.....	32
Qualitative Phenomenological Investigation.....	32
Study Design and Protocol.....	33
Participants and Recruitment.....	33
Participant Confidentiality and Safety.....	36
Data Collection Methods.....	37
Data Management.....	37
Participant Demographics.....	38
Individual Interviews.....	39
Data Analysis.....	40

Trustworthiness Strategies .....	40
Credibility .....	41
Transferability .....	42
Dependability .....	42
Confirmability .....	43
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS	
Introduction.....	44
Themes and Subthemes .....	45
Theme 1: Advocacy.....	45
Theme 2: Courage .....	46
Theme 3: Challenges .....	50
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION	
Summary of Findings in the Context of Existing Literature .....	54
Theme 1: Advocacy .....	55
Theme 2: Courage .....	56
Theme 3: Challenges .....	58
Implications .....	60
Implications for Practice .....	60
Implications for School Counselor Preparation .....	61
Implications for Policy .....	62
Recommendations for Future Research .....	62
Research Limitations .....	63
Summary and Conclusion .....	65
CHAPTER 6: MANUSCRIPT	
Abstract .....	67
Theoretical Framework .....	68
Inequities in PK-12 Education .....	69
Social Justice .....	72
Antiracism .....	73
School Counseling Roles .....	74
Comprehensive School Counseling Programs .....	75
School Counseling and Social Justice .....	77
School Counseling and Antiracism .....	79
Purpose and Research Question .....	81
Method .....	82
Reflexivity Statement .....	82
Participants .....	83
Data Collection Procedures .....	84
Data Analysis .....	87
Strategies for Trustworthiness .....	88
Findings .....	90
Theme 1: Advocacy .....	90
Theme 2: Courage .....	91

Theme 3: Challenges .....	95
Discussion .....	98
Theme 1: Advocacy .....	100
Theme 2: Courage .....	101
Theme 3: Challenges .....	102
Implications .....	104
Implications for Practice .....	104
Implications for Preparation .....	105
Implications for Policy .....	106
Recommendations for Future Research .....	106
Research Limitations .....	107
Summary and Conclusion .....	109
REFERENCES .....	110
APPENDICES	
Appendix A: IRB Approval .....	125
Appendix B: Sample Recruitment Email .....	126
Appendix C: Informed Consent .....	127
Appendix D: Google Form Demographic Survey .....	131
Appendix E: Interview Protocol .....	133
VITA .....	136

**LIST OF TABLES**

Table	Page
1. Participant Demographics .....	39

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure	Page
1. Tenets of Critical Race Theory .....	11
2. Themes of Critical Race Theory in Education .....	12

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As the demographics of our country become more and more diverse, it is important now more than ever for school counselors to address educational inequities and identify resources to increase student access. Through the use of advocacy skills and culturally sustaining comprehensive school counseling programs, social, political, and educational systems are challenged and changed to ensure the academic and life successes of all PK-12 students.

As school counselors understand and analyze just and equitable practices, a critical race theory lens can be used. Race is a socially constructed concept that was developed as a means to control a certain portion of the population (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Yet, race remains present in every sphere of our lives and is especially present in the U.S. education system. The focus of critical race theory (CRT) is the theoretical unraveling of race and racism ingrained in American society (Creswell, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). CRT is an important tool to: (a) deconstruct oppressive structures, (b) reconstruct human agency, and (c) construct equitable and socially just power structures (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

CRT can unmask and expose racism in the educational system (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). A large majority of educators, school counselors included, are white, middle-class women who could be using their positions to push white behaviors and expectations as a default (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). In their statement on critical race theory, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2021) explains how racism presents itself in educational policies through suspension rates, special education referrals, graduation rates, and advanced course placement for students of color. The school counselor's role in combating racial injustice in schools is to create a welcoming school

environment for all as well as directly addressing policies, procedures, and processes that cause inequitable outcomes for students of color (ASCA, 2021). It is the responsibility of school counselors and other school staff to identify their own biases and understand how racism and racist practices limit students of color from obtaining educational success (ASCA, 2021).

### **Statement of the Problem**

Student discipline and academic statistics disaggregated by race paint a vivid picture of the equity work that needs to be done to close opportunity, information, and achievement gaps between student socioeconomic and cultural lines (ASCA, 2018; Ratts et. al., 2007). Black students, accounting for approximately 15% of all PK-12 students, are 1.1 times more likely to be placed in special education programs, 3.4 times more likely than their white peers to be suspended, and 2.3 times less likely to take an Advanced Placement course (Ladson-Billings, 2021; NCES, 2021; Shores et al., 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). School counselors are in the position to close those discipline, graduation, achievement, and opportunity gaps (ASCA, 2019; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). As classrooms across the country continue to fill with students from different races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic levels, school counselors have a responsibility to confront inequitable practices, whether disciplinary or educational. The following literature review provides insight into public school student and teacher demographics, disproportionalities currently existing within the educational system, and where social justice, antiracist, and advocacy work can begin for school counselors.

Literature exists examining how school counselor preparation programs can incorporate social justice and antiracist practices into school counseling courses (e.g., Ieva et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2021), as well as burgeoning literature on school counselor antiracist competencies (Haugen et al., 2021), an antiracist framework for school counselors (Mayes & Byrd, 2022), and

multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) from an antiracist lens (Better-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., under review). However, there is little to no research available on studying how school counselors implement antiracist social justice practices into their comprehensive school counseling programs. This phenomenological investigation sought to address this subject through the use of semi-structured interviews, to garner school counselors' lived experience implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools in the U.S.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

School counselors play an important role in the abolishment of racist and biased school policies. Through their advocacy efforts, school counselors can implement practices to remove barriers that prevent Black and Brown students from having the same academic, career, and social-emotional success as their white peers. The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of school counselors who implemented antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools. As a result of the study, I aim for current and future school counselors to gain a better understanding of antiracist social justice practices in school counseling, including possible strengths, recommendations, and challenges.

### **Research Question**

This study sought to answer the following research question: What are school counselors' lived experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools?

### **Research Design**

A qualitative, transcendental phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of school counselors (N=10) who work with PK-12 students and implement antiracist social justice practices. A phenomenological research design preserved the voice of the school counselors (those who have practiced as a school counselor in the last 3 years) and shared

their experiences from the field to promote knowledge and awareness (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). This methodology assisted in the discovery and understanding of how participants experience the phenomena of antiracist social justice practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This study followed the guidelines of a traditional phenomenology as described by Moustakas (1994). My role as the researcher was one of study instrument and observer (Moustakas, 1994). Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 10 participants, who were obtained through purposive sampling. Participants were school counselors who worked to integrate antiracist social justice practices in their schools. Deliberate recruitment efforts took place, identifying participants from local, regional, and national conference and webinar presentations on topics related to antiracist social justice practices and multicultural competence. In order to be a part of this study, participants were (a) located within the United States, (b) were a school counselor within the last three years, (c) and identified as conducting antiracist social justice practices, based on the definitions provided (please see the definitions at the conclusion of this chapter). Trustworthiness strategies were used to promote credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Lincoln & Guba, 1995).

### **Limitation and Future Research**

Over the last two year, schools and school counselors have dealt with challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, including remote learning and virtual school counseling (Dorn et al., 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). There has also been a push for racial and social justice that has spilled over from the streets and into classrooms (Haugen et al., 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022). In some cities, counties, and states, however,

this move for change is being met with strong resistance with critical race theory becoming the villain. As the world continues to adapt to this ‘new normal,’ these issues can cause limitations in the research data collection process. More information on this study’s limitations is available in Chapter 3.

In regard to future research, the results of this study can also have a lasting impact on the field of school counseling and lead to a line of research surrounding the topics of school counselor antiracist social justice practices. This can include studies on how school counselor preparation programs can infuse antiracist social justice practices into their courses, including experiential learning opportunities. The development of an instrument to assess antiracist practices could be helpful to address educational barriers and inequities in PK-12 schools as well as counselor preparation programs.

### **Definition of Terms**

#### **Antiracist Practices**

Educational antiracism can be best defined as “the critical examination and interrogation of systems in education and the greater society that begin from the point of acknowledgement that all systems of oppression are impacted by White privilege and White supremacy” (American University, n.d.).

#### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory was originally developed as a framework or lens that sought to examine the role race and racism played in the judicial system (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Since its inception in the 1970s, it has spread to other institutions of oppression, such as education.

**Social Justice**

Social justice advocacy in education is a practice or action provoked by student inequalities and inequities that are related to social, cultural, and economic factors of power and privilege (Singh et al., 2010).

**Phenomenology**

A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**School Counselor**

School counselors are educational and counseling professionals who collaborate with families, school staff, and other stakeholders to establish a school environment that supports the educational and mental wellbeing of every student in PK-12 education (ASCA, 2017).

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Recent events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the high profile murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police, the resulting civil unrest, and the push to end political and systemically unjust policies are making the terms *social justice*, *advocacy*, *equity*, *antiracism* and *competence* important topics of conversation in the halls of academia and PK-12 schools. Through these events, many people are becoming increasingly aware of the disparities and inequities existing within our nation's health care, justice, and educational systems.

The United States education system is rooted in White supremacy. For centuries, African people and their descendants were enslaved and thus viewed as property and not considered equal to White citizens (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In turn, government policymakers created laws to protect the rights of the *property owner* and not the *property* (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Systemic barriers were put into place to remind Black people of their position within society, and this included education. Centuries passed before enslaved Black people were able to learn to read or write without fear of violence or death (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). To this day, school policies, educational practices, grade level curriculum, and disciplinary procedures are structured in favor of certain racial groups and against Black and Indigenous students of color (BISOC). From zero tolerance discipline practices to the over-surveillance of Black and Brown students in schools by police officers renamed as School Resource Officers, school counselors bear witness to the school to prison pipeline that exists within traditional PK-12 schools. Black children are approximately 18% of all students enrolled in preschool, however, they also account for nearly 48% of all out of school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014 as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2021). Black

bodies and Black minds, regardless of how young, are continuously feared, mistrusted, and underestimated.

School counselors, although only one or one of a few in a school building, must work diligently to understand the cultural norms and values of their students, as well as the systemic barriers (such as oppression, racism, family income, and health disparities) that are preventing high academic achievement for all students (Mayorga et. al., 2013). Inequities in graduation rates and special education programs as well as access to advanced courses continues to place students of color steps behind their White peers (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). Through the implementation of culturally sustaining comprehensive school counseling programs that include antiracist social justice practices, school counselors work diligently to close achievement, opportunity, and information gaps that may exist for students of color (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2015, 2018, 2021a, 2021b; Grothaus et al., 2020; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). To understand and analyze antiracist social justice practices, a critical race theory lens is needed to fully understand the role race plays in the suppression of Black excellence in education. Race, a socially constructed concept developed to control a certain portion of the population, remains present in every sphere of our lives and is especially present in the U.S. education system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

School counseling literature on antiracist practices is just emerging. In existing literature surrounding antiracist school counseling, scholars discuss resources and activities school counselor preparation programs can incorporate into their courses to increase awareness of social justice and antiracist practices (Ieva et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2021), as well as antiracist school counseling competencies (Haugen et al., 2021), school counseling antiracist frameworks (Mayes & Byrd, 2022), and MTSS from an antiracist lens (Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et

al., under review). While scholarship exists on pre-service school counselors' preparation, there is little to no literature examining the lived experiences of practicing school counselors applying antiracist social justice practices. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a review of professional literature related to school counselor antiracist social justice practices, contextualized within inequities in PK-12 education and critical race theory's role in education. Thus, in this literature review, I will (a) provide a description of critical race theory generally, and as the foundation for my literature review; (b) describe inequities in PK-12 education, including an examination of United States demographic data on teachers and students, trends in school discipline practices, attendance and policies, as well as information on the history of social justice and antiracism and the needs within PK-12 education; and (c) outline the roles of the school counselors and the importance of culturally sustaining comprehensive school counseling programs to create inclusive school environments, including information on social justice and antiracist school counseling. Finally, I will outline the current study.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Originating in the 1970s by a group of legal scholars and activists, critical race theory (CRT) was developed as a response to Critical Legal Studies' failure to specifically address the role race plays in the United States judicial system (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Utilizing the five tenets - counter-storytelling, the permanence of racism, Whiteness as property, interest convergence, and critique of liberalism (see figure 1) - CRT calls for advocacy, action, and the deconstruction of White supremacist systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The first tenet, *Counter storytelling*, elevates the voices and experiences of those from historically marginalized populations, combating the dominant White voices that have long controlled the narrative of this country and

its systems (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). *Permanence of racism*, or the acknowledgment of racism in every sphere of society, can also be seen in unfair and inequitable school discipline practices. Another tenet of critical race theory is *Whiteness as property*. In America, White people are provided many opportunities and advancements due to the purposeful oppression of people of color. When Black and Brown students are not seen as equal, it makes it that much easier for their White peers to excel. Going a step further, the tenet of *interest convergence* describes how White society will only allow Black people to advance if their interests align with those of White individuals. In education, this can mirror the forced assimilation of BISOC by dress code policies, school-wide behavioral expectations, and White educator created (and Black and Brown voice suppressed) course curriculum. Lastly, *critique of liberalism* is the false sense of hope and success those in society feel when they ignore racist systems and inequities.

Since its creation, CRT and its tenets have extended their reach for racial equity from the justice system to all institutions of oppression, including education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Educational critical race theorists, including Daniel Solorzano and Tara Yosso, are recognizing more and more how racism is ingrained into PK-12 education through inequitable discipline practices, White-washed curriculum, and racist weaponry of achievement testing (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Solorzano and Yosso (2001) identified five themes of critical race theory in education: *the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination, the challenge to dominant ideology, the commitment to social justice, the centrality of experiential knowledge, and the transdisciplinary perspective* (see figure 2). CRT, specifically how it has been adapted to apply to education, will

be used as the foundation for the proposed study, and its tenets and themes are woven throughout the literature review, and also reflected in the method and remainder of the study.

### Figure 1

#### *Tenets of Critical Race Theory*

## Tenets of Critical Race Theory

Counter-Storytelling	Permanence of Racism	Whiteness as Property	Interest Convergence	Critique of Liberalism
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Elevate voices &amp; experiences of historically marginalized people</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Acknowledging racism is interwoven into the fabric of society and within institutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advantages provided to white people due to the oppression of people of color</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>People of color can only advance within institutions if their interests align with those of white people's</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The false success of liberal practices</li> </ul>

Adapted from DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998;

Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995

**Figure 2***Themes of Critical Race Theory in Education*

## Themes of Critical Race Theory in Education

The centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination

The challenge to dominant ideology

The commitment to social justice

The centrality of experiential knowledge

The transdisciplinary perspective

Adapted from Solorzano & Yosso (2001)

### **Inequities in PK-12 education**

Education, public or private, has long been accused of inequitable, unethical, and biased policies that are harmful to certain student demographic groups (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Discriminatory and culturally biased practices in standardized testing, resource availability, student discipline, course content, and course selection have long plagued schools (ASCA, 2015, 2018; Gibson, 2019; Ratts et al., 2007). Specifically, as America's schools become more diverse, the need to create safe and welcoming PK-12 school environments for all students has increased, in order to meet more complex and varied needs across a more diverse population of students.

Once the majority, the number of White children enrolled in K-12 public schools in the United States decreased from 61% to 48% from 2000 to 2017, while the number of Latinx/Latine children increased from 16% to 27% during the same time frame (NCES, 2020). During the

same timeframe, the number of Black students decreased, dropping from 17% to 15%. There was a slight increase in the number of Asian/Pacific Islander students, from 4% to 6% of the public school population. Students of two or more races increased from 1 to 4% while American Indian/Alaska Native students stayed consistent at 1% from fall 2000 to fall 2017 (NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

America's PK-12 students are not only becoming more racially diverse, but they are also coming from economically disadvantaged households. In 2018, nearly 32% of Black children were living in homes with incomes below the federal poverty level, well above the national average of 18% (NCES, 2020; Ullucci & Howard, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The poverty rate for American Indian/Alaska Native children was 31%, 25% for Latinx/Latine children, and 25% for Pacific Islander children in 2018, all which are nearly double the national average. In comparison, only 10% of White students were living in poverty in 2018 (NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Children who live in poverty, regardless of the percentage, are coming to school steps behind their peers academically, socially, and emotionally. Economically disadvantaged children are more likely to struggle with mental health issues, be chronically absent from school, struggle academically, and have classroom behavioral concerns (McKenzie, 2019; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Black students are more likely to be diagnosed with an emotional disturbance, resulting in special education services (NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). During the 2018-2019 school year, Black students accounted for 16% of all students in special education whereas White students comprised 14% of students in special education. Only 79% of Black students graduated high school in 2017-2018 and of that percentage, two-thirds graduated high school with a regular high school diploma (NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

As PK-12 public schools increase their enrollment of Black, Brown, and economically disadvantaged students, most public school teachers and administrators remain White, middle class women (NCES, 2020). Thus, White females comprised 79% of the population of public school teachers in 2017-2018, and 7% of public school teachers and 11% of principals identify as Black. This means Black students are less likely than their White peers to have a teacher of the same race, which is directly related to cultural and racial acceptance in schools (Fergus, 2019). As such, the increased diversity in students combined with the lack of diversity in teachers can lead to a disregard of student cultural backgrounds, a push to normalize White middle class behaviors, and the stigmatization of Black student behaviors.

Black children accounted for 13.7% of out-of-school suspensions, higher than any other racial or ethnic group, and had a 58% chance of attending a school with a higher minority student population, which are traditionally known to have higher teacher turnover rates and lower standardized test scores (NCES, 2020). The discrepancies in school discipline practices can be a result of school personnel viewing student culture, race, and socioeconomic status as unacceptable in schools (Fergus, 2019; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). For example, in their study Santiago-Rosario and colleagues (2021) found that simply being Black made a student more likely to have an office disciplinary referral, even when controlling for gender, enrollment in special education, and socio-economic status. Black students received nearly 3 more office disciplinary referrals than their White peers (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). The lack of diversity in teacher populations as well as the pathologizing of diverse student culture contribute to inequities in discipline practices of students of color as well as their low enrollment in more challenging courses and an overrepresentation in special education programs (Fergus, 2019).

Fergus (2019) found that nearly one-third of teachers surveyed were of the opinion that the beliefs and values of students from disadvantaged neighborhoods conflicted with school values and beliefs about what makes a good education. Further, nearly one-sixth of surveyed teachers believe students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the abilities to be successful in school (Fergus, 2019; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). Teacher and school staff bias in discipline practices resulting in suspensions means these students will have less in-person instruction as well as less time around their peers, impacting social-emotional development. To help combat subjective discipline infractions and bias practices, schools must implement socially just practices.

### **Social Justice**

‘Social justice’ is a term that predates the Industrial Revolution yet does not have one definitive definition (Grothaus et al., 2010b; Ornstein, 2017). The concept of social justice, however, is one researchers agree on: equity, fairness, and change (Grothaus et al., 2010b; Ornstein, 2017). In the 1960s, during the rise of the Civil Rights movement, social justice and its many definitions connected with Black Americans and their allies as they fought for racial justice and equal opportunities (Ornstein, 2017). The push for school funding, integration, and the equal treatment of students of color was also a part of this fight. Furthermore, Rawls (1971, as cited in Crethar et al., 2008) detailed two tenets of social justice: (a) equal rights and fundamental liberties, which he defines as ‘*individual liberties*’, and (b) ‘*distributive justice*’ or the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources for those who need them most.

The pursuit of equitable treatment of students of color in schools continues well after the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 (Ramsey, n.d.). After the decision, many states and school boards chose to close schools rather than allow Black students

to share classrooms with their White peers (Ramsey, n.d.). Schools in Black communities closed due to decreased funding, Black teachers lost their jobs, and course curriculums in White schools did not change to include Black stories and histories (Ramsey, n.d.). As a result, Black students attended, and still attend, schools with less resources. In 2017, only one in three White students (31.3%) attended an economically segregated school, whereas in comparison seven out of 10 Black students (72.4%) attended a school with low funding and resources (García, 2020). Educational advocates continue the work of expanding educational opportunities for students from diverse racial and class backgrounds (Ramsey, n.d.). Although the Supreme Court ruled America's schools were required to integrate approximately 67 years ago, Black and Brown students are still trying to adjust to learning in predominantly White environments.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also placed a spotlight on the educational inequities Black and Brown students face. As schools shut down to prevent the spread of this contagious virus, students lost whatever sense of community they had (Dorn et al., 2021). The shuttering of schools also prohibited many students from getting the education they need to be successful, although Black and Brown students were already steps behind their White peers (Dorn et al., 2021). Statistics show students of color are an additional three to five months behind academically as a result of the pandemic (Dorn et al., 2021). These educational gaps are compounded by opportunity gaps - student lack of resources, internet, devices, and teachers (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). As we consider social justice and what it means for education, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a vivid example of how America's PK-12 schools continuously fail students of color. Social justice advocacy in PK-12 education is a practice or action provoked by student inequalities and inequities that are related to social, cultural, and economic factors of power and privilege (Singh et al., 2010). Social justice also means speaking out against

discriminatory practices (i.e., grading, discipline, referrals to gifted programs), confronting school staff about their biases and holding them accountable. For these reasons and many more, PK-12 schools and school districts must increase their advocacy efforts to include intentional social justice practices that address anti-Black racism and White supremacist policies that unfairly harm students.

### **Antiracism**

The idea of antiracism exploded after the racial uprising resulting from the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. After Mr. Floyd's death was streamed internationally during the spring and summer of 2020, advocates and allies cried out for the dismantlement of systems of oppression. These systems of oppression include PK-12 schools and the U.S. educational system as a whole. Educational antiracism can be best defined as "the critical examination and interrogation of systems in education and the greater society that begin from the point of acknowledgement that all systems of oppression are impacted by White privilege and White supremacy" (American University, n.d.). The implementation of antiracist practices helps to break the cycle of oppression and forces Black and Brown students to be viewed and treated as equal citizens.

Antiracism and abolitionist work go hand in hand - both call for the liberation of Black and Brown youth from racist educational and discipline systems (Edirmanasinghe et al., under review; Love, 2019). To combat racial injustice in schools, staff members must be self-aware and acknowledge racism exists and White supremacy is real (Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Simmons, 2019). They must also have a true knowledge and understanding of America's complicated history and the barriers that have been put into place to prevent the advancement of those from historically marginalized groups. Antiracist educators must also be comfortable

talking about race and how it impacts and influences the lives of the students they are working with and working for. Being an antiracist means being an advocate and ally - using one's voice and privilege to stand up to injustice and by addressing the practices and policies hindering the success and well-being for all students and those that cause inequitable outcomes for students of color (ASCA, 2021).

Relationships with family and community stakeholders is also a necessary component in the creation of antiracist social justice practices. Truly inclusive school environments represent, affirm, and connect with family and community stakeholders (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022). School counselors can work with other school leaders to encourage linguistic diversity and ensure all communication from school is available in a variety of languages to prevent any information or opportunity gaps (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022). Going further, schools should also partner with families from all ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds to examine school policies and procedures to determine which are preventing student power and liberation (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Love, 2019).

### **Summary**

Racism and White supremacy are weaved into the very fabric of the United States, including in PK-12 education. School districts employ White teachers at a rate much higher than teachers of color, although student populations progressively become more culturally and economically diverse (NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021.) This leaves BISOC without teachers and administrators with whom they can relate and can result in the overrepresentation of students of color in special education classrooms and Black high school dropouts. To combat these gaps in access and opportunity, school counselors, as members of most PK-12 school staffs, can engage in antiracist social justice advocacy to challenge school

and community barriers preventing student success (Feldwisch & Whiston, 2015; Haskins & Singh, 2017; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Singh et al., 2010).

### **School Counseling Roles**

School counselors are educational and counseling professionals who collaborate with families, school staff, and other stakeholders to establish a school environment that supports the educational and mental wellbeing of every student in PK-12 education (ASCA, 2017). School counselors have a responsibility to implement comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs) that not only align with school academic goals but also promote social/emotional and career success for all students, regardless of race, culture, home language, or family income (ASCA, 2017). To make their programs culturally sustaining, school counselors identify any potential bias and inequity within their school as well as encourage students and families to see school as an extension of their home and a place to maintain their cultural practices (Grothaus et al., 2020).

### **Comprehensive School Counseling Programs**

The ASCA National Model, a framework for school counseling programs, gives school counselors a “how-to guide” with resources to help with the implementation of impactful and culturally sustaining programs supporting the academic, career, social/emotional health and wellbeing of all students enrolled in PK-12 schools (ASCA, 2019; Grothaus et al., 2020; Gysbers, 2010). The model is divided into four components: *define*, *manage*, *deliver*, and *assess*. Each quadrant contains resources to support program development as well as outline the role of a professional school counselor.

The *define* quadrant includes school counselor and student standards that detail the expectations for the school counseling profession (ASCA, 2019). These standards assist new and

current school counselors to “develop, implement, and assess school counseling programs to improve student outcomes” (ASCA, 2019, p. xiii). In their book, *Culturally Sustaining School Counseling*, Drs. Grothaus, Johnson, and Edirmanasinghe (2020) encourage school counselors to reflect on how the ASCA standards are the foundation for a school counseling curriculum, however, school counselors must also consider student culture and identify any barriers hindering full implementation of a culturally sustaining program.

As school counselors *manage* their programs, they focus and plan a framework which can assist in the delivery of effective and impactful school counseling programs benefiting all students (ASCA, 2019). This includes the development of inclusive program vision and mission statements that place an emphasis on equitable outcomes for all students. To make programs more culturally sustaining, counselors use their school’s data summary to identify outcomes for students from historically marginalized backgrounds and ensure outcome goals are equitable. Based on the data collected, school counselors create school action plans addressing how to close opportunity, achievement, information, and attainment gaps for all students.

The *delivery* of developmentally and culturally appropriate activities and services directly and indirectly affecting student achievement and other outcomes is at the forefront of school counselors’ minds as they develop programs. Lastly, school counselors regularly assess program goals and outcomes to ensure comprehensive school counseling programs benefit all students as well as self-assess for their own bias and inequitable practices (ASCA, 2019; Grothaus et al., 2020).

School counselors play an important role in the creation of inclusive PK-12 school environments that welcome students from all cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. The ASCA Position Statement on student equity (2018) encourages school counselors to promote the

equitable treatment of all students, including the enrollment of students from all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds into rigorous courses as well as the development of plans to tackle the overrepresentation of specific races in special education programs. Related to equity, social justice advocacy calls for school counselors to increase access and improve outcomes for all students as well as creating equitable access to services and opportunities, regardless of a student's culture (Ceasar, 2011; Ratts et. al., 2007). To help combat subjective discipline infractions and bias practices, many school counselors are intentionally implementing antiracist and racially just practices and moving from 'student deficit' to system changing approaches (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). But how are school counselors implementing social and racial justice practices into their programs?

### **School Counseling and Social Justice**

Just like teachers, school counseling positions are largely occupied by White, middle class women (Francis et al., 2019; Mason et al., 2021). Approximately 10% of high school counselors identify as Black (Francis et al., 2019). And, similar to teachers, school counselors can exhibit racial bias in their interactions with students (Francis et al., 2019). Dania Francis and colleagues conducted a study in 2019 with a sample of school counselors to investigate how they recommend students for advanced level STEM courses in high school (Francis et al., 2019). School counselors were given identical academic transcripts but the names on the transcripts were changed to show stereotypical White and Black sounding names for males and females (Francis et al., 2019). The study found that school counselors demonstrated lower academic expectations for Black female students, compared to their White male peers (Francis et al., 2019). National statistics on advanced and Advanced Placement course enrollment corroborate the results of this study. In 2013, only 6% of Black students were taking high level math courses

like calculus, whereas 45% of Asians and 18% of White students were enrolled in such classes. Although the number of students of color enrolled in public schools is increasing above those of White students, White students continue to graduate from public high schools at higher rates than all other races (NCES, 2020).

In their article, Ratts, DeKruyf, and Chen-Hayes (2007) discussed a framework utilizing the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies for school counselor social justice advocates to increase access and equity in PK-12 schools. Using these competencies, in conjunction with the ASCA National Model, Ratts and colleagues lay out how school counselors can be social justice advocates on behalf of all students (Ratts et al., 2007). As social justice advocates, school counselors empower students and parents to speak up for themselves when they encounter educational injustice, such as inappropriate referral for special education services or being overlooked for advanced courses (Ratts et al., 2007). School counselors also advocate for students by using their voice to increase school staff awareness of systemic inequities faced by students from low income families and students of color (Ratts et al., 2007). Students from historically marginalized communities are more likely to reach their full academic and social-emotional potential if they have access to high quality teachers, courses, and curriculum (Ratt & Greenleaf, 2017). Serving as social justice advocates, school counselors work as allies for students, promote systemic change, and provide opportunities for advancement for all students.

A qualitative study conducted by Singh and colleagues (2010) involving 16 school counselors who identified as social justice advocates, uncovered seven strategies school counselors can implement to create social change for all students. These strategies included: political savviness to navigate existing power structures; developing awareness of unfair and

inequitable practices; initiating and participating in difficult conversations with stakeholders; creating intentional relationships to benefit students; teaching K-12 students how to advocate for themselves; using appropriate school data (i.e. discipline referrals, student absences, test scores) to navigate appropriate change; and lastly, providing information to others about how school counselors can advocate for underrepresented students (Singh et al., 2010). The data uncovered in this study is helpful for current school counselors in providing strategies to advocate for students at the school, local, and national level. Although it is imperative for school counselors to advocate for appropriate social justice practices, they must move beyond advocating to implementing social justice *and* antiracist practices.

### **School Counseling and Antiracism**

Antiracism, while not a new concept, is gaining traction in the world of school counseling. It can also be explained as an action-oriented commitment to dismantlement of racist systems in society while affirming the wholeness and humanness of students, families, and communities (Holcomb-McCoy, 2020, 2022; Hughey, 2007; Love, 2020; Mayes, 2021). Dr. Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, a leading voice in school counselor preparation and practice, defined antiracist school counseling as “school counselors’ active approach to dismantling racist practices, racial hatred, systemic racism, and oppression of historically oppressed racial groups within educational systems” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022, p. 7). Likewise, in their article, Mayes and Byrd (2022) describes antiracist school counseling as:

Ongoing process of (a) believing that racism is ever-present and plagues all systems of society, (b) unlearning colonial ways of being, (c ) learning about the roots of racism and how all oppression is intersectional, (d) consistently addressing one’s own racist behaviors or internalized oppression, (e) challenging ways of thinking and doing that may

feel normal, (f) using critical theories to develop and sharpen a lens to identify oppression, and (g) actively engaging in rooting out oppressive beliefs and policies wherever you find them, even within yourself. (Mayes & Byrd, 2022, p. 21)

The field of school counseling needs leaders and advocates who are willing to recognize their own biases. They must work to eliminate barriers and disrupt any systems preventing students, specifically those from historically marginalized backgrounds, from achieving academic, career, and social-emotional greatness. School counseling antiracist work involves more than recognizing oppressive systems; it is the active removal of oppressive systems that unfairly target Black and Brown children (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022).

ASCA (2021) describes the school counselor's role in antiracist practices as one of awareness, knowledge, and action to end racism and bias in education. Antiracist school counselor advocates identify systemic barriers and inequities that prevent students from achieving while also creating new systems and policies that exclude racism and bias (Betters-Bubon et al., 2022). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, teachers and school counselors are mostly White women who may expect students and families who enter schools to exhibit behaviors similar to the White middle class (Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Haugen et al., 2021). To prevent such bias and culturally ignorant assumptions from entering schools, educators can partner with families, including linguistically diverse families, to ensure the learning environment is accepting of and representative of everyone. Antiracist school counselor advocates do not hesitate to call out injustice and systems of oppression while also promoting access, equity, and healing (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022).

In their article, Mason and colleagues (2021), provided a number of assignments school counselor educators could include in their courses to enhance the antiracist knowledge of school

counselors in training. In their writing, they suggested the incorporation of activities, such as resource mapping and policy investigation, in graduate internship courses (Mason et al., 2021). These activities provide school counselors in training with experience in critiquing and removing systems of oppression. The problem, however, is that school counseling interns are not in the place to make sustainable change in schools over time. This is due to the short amount of time they are at their site (i.e., one academic semester). The same can be said for an article written by Ieva and colleagues (2021). In their conceptual publication, the authors share examples of how school counselors can implement antiracist healing-centered groups (Ieva et al., 2021). This work, however, did not include practicing school counselors who are doing the work in the school buildings.

Antiracist literature in school counseling is in its infancy. While there are some recent conceptual publications on school counseling and antiracism (Better-Bubon et al., 2022; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022), an article on school counselor preparation from an antiracist lens (Mason et al., 2021), and another conceptual article on school counseling antiracist healing-centered groups (Ieva et al., 2021), as well as scholarship on school counselors' social justice practices (Singh et al., 2010), there exists a dearth of research on school counselors' practices that promote both antiracism *and* social justice. A recent publication by Haugen and colleagues (2021), discussed a framework of antiracist school counseling competencies. Although this Delphi study included school counselors' input, the participants were counselor educators and directors. Also, this study did not include school counselor social justice practices. Thus, to date, school counselors' voices have not been heard to empirically describe antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 education.

### **Summary and Research Question**

As our nation continues to become more diverse, it is vital for school counselors to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to work with diverse student populations and ensure schools are a place where all students can be successful. School counselors have a responsibility to implement comprehensive school counseling programs that are not only aligned with school academic goals but also promote the academic, social/emotional and career success for all students, regardless of family income (ASCA, 2017, 2019). Research shows, however, that not all students are treated fairly in the halls of education, and thus the need for antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools, including in school counseling.

Currently, literature exists investigating how school counselor preparation programs can incorporate antiracist practices into school counseling courses (e.g. Ieva et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2021), antiracist school counseling competencies (Haugen et al., 2021), school counseling antiracist frameworks (Mayes & Byrd, 2022), and MTSS from an antiracist lens (Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., under review). However, with the exception of Haugen and colleagues (2021), these publications are conceptual, and prior to this study there was no available research examining how school counselors implement antiracist social justice practices into their comprehensive school counseling programs. Due to the gaps in the literature, the following research question guided this study: “What are school counselors’ lived experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools?”

Gaining a greater understanding of school counselors’ antiracist social justice practices will help the profession understand the culture of PK-12 education, which is especially important in light of the continued inequities, discrimination, racism, and oppression existing in our educational systems and greater society. With this study, light was shed on how exactly school

counselors are implementing such practices. Are school counselors calling for the removal of policies and practices that criminalize Black culture? Are they working to dismantle and disrupt such policies? Are they advocating against zero tolerance discipline practices and dress code policies that target Black and Brown boys and sexualize Black girls? Are they calling for the removal of School Resource Officers, which in turn disrupts the school to prison pipeline? Are antiracist school counselors opposing discipline consequences that leave students out of classrooms? Are they implementing restorative and healing practices to build and restore relationships between students and teachers? How are school counselors working to dismantle oppressive educational structures and programs? And are school counselors broaching social and racial justice with their students, staff, and other stakeholders? In this study, I aimed to provide a clear understanding of school counselors' experience as they interrupt educational disparities in schools as well as lay the foundation for the creation of strategies to assist new and current school counselors to implement their own antiracist social justice practices.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to explore the antiracist social justice practices of school counselors. Thus, through this study, I hoped to also gain a better understanding of how school counselors navigate PK-12 school policies that are inherently anti-Black or anti-Brown toward creating safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environments. Furthermore, understanding school counselors' experience as they work to disrupt and dismantle unjust and inequitable practices in schools can lead to the creation of strategies to assist new and current school counselors to implement their own antiracist social justice practices. This chapter includes the following information on the study: (a) the research question, (b) researcher reflexivity, (c) rationale for methodology, (d) methodology and design, (e) data collection methods, (f) data analysis, (g) trustworthiness strategies, (h) limitation, and (i) future research.

#### **Research Question**

This study examined the following research question: What are school counselors' lived experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools?

#### **Researcher Reflexivity**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument through which a phenomenon is explored (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). For this reason, it is imperative the researcher takes intentional steps to remove personal bias and beliefs from the research process. One such step is to self-reflect through a reflexivity statement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hayes & Singh, 2012). I, the primary researcher, work full-time as a high school counselor and identify as a Black, cisgender female in my late 30s. As a mother of two Black boys and a school counselor who witnesses

firsthand how the PK-12 U.S. educational system treats Black and Brown children, my work and research surrounds how best to remove economic, educational, and opportunity barriers for kids like my sons. Black and Brown children who look like my own fill classrooms in record numbers but do not see themselves or their ancestry reflected in their courses or in their teachers' faces. School disciplinary practices disproportionately and unjustly target Black boys and girls and there are a large number of these same Brown faces enrolled in special education programs who simply don't belong there (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). I believe America's non-White students often wonder where they belong and where they can get their needs met.

As a school counselor, I work daily to ensure all students feel supported, appreciated, and connected to their school communities. I see students/kids as experts in their own lives and make sure they feel heard and understood. As of late, there has been an ongoing call for school counselors to engage in antiracist practices including equitable discipline practices and the inclusion of diverse voices in the educational curriculum. Although I identify as a Black, liberal-leaning feminist, I also understand that my children, spouse, and I have certain privileges that the students I work with and advocate for do not. These privileges - including our access to education, a two-parent home, multiple streams of income, family support, and other opportunities - can cause blind spots in my own advocacy and educational reformation efforts. My experiences and identities (parent, spouse, doctoral student, school counselor) can also be seen as limitations. Throughout this study, I implemented trustworthiness strategies to manage my subjectivity. These strategies will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

## **Philosophical Assumptions**

As a researcher, philosophical assumptions, including ontology, epistemology, axiology, rhetoric, and methodology, led the exploratory effort and provided further rationale for strategic decisions I made regarding the selection of research methodology, data collection methods, participant sample, and data analysis (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). My *ontological assumption*, or the claim researchers make regarding knowledge, is the belief that there are multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). For me, there is no absolute truth, rather multiple truths that depend on how phenomenon is understood and interpreted (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012).

My *epistemological assumption* is inductive. As a qualitative researcher, my work focuses more on discovery rather than proof (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). I believe that people construct their own realities and knowledge from their interactions with the world and with others. Therefore, I relate most to a social constructivist perspective (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). Furthermore, my support for constructivism is evident in the study's purpose in which school counselors created and made meaning through their own social constructions (Lincoln & Guba, 1984).

My *axiological assumption*, or my values and assumptions, were more objective in that I did not disclose to study participants my personal views or opinions as they related to the phenomena I was researching (Hays & Singh, 2012). This is also why it was important for me to bracket my assumptions and engage in other strategies of trustworthiness so as not to interfere with the data collection or analysis (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). Engaging in bracketing helped me to emphasize the worldview of the participants in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012).

Throughout the data collection and presentation process, my *rhetoric* remained one in which the data was presented in the first person, emphasizing me (the researcher) as the instrument that was used to collect the study data (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). The voice of the participant, through the use of direct quotes, was used in data presentation to ensure descriptions of their lived experiences were thick and rich (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). Taking my philosophical assumptions into consideration, my *methodology* for this study was inductive in nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). This required the creation of broad or general research questions that allowed the school counselor participants to share their own experiences without influence from me (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012).

### **Researcher Paradigm**

This research study was not only guided by philosophical assumptions, but my beliefs and alignment with critical race theory (CRT). CRT was originally developed as a framework or lens that sought to examine the role race and racism played in the judicial system (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Since its inception in the 1970s, it has spread to other institutions of oppression, such as education. Race and racism play significant roles in existing institutions, including education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). This is especially seen in the way teachers interact with students and the educational opportunities that are made available to Black and Indigenous Students of Color (BISOC) (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Viewing the research study and participant data from a CRT lens allowed me to explore

schools as an institution, educational discrimination, and recognize the inequities that exist within education.

### **Summary**

It is my belief that an individual's experiences and interactions with others help to shape and develop their view of the world. I also recognize the role which race and racism play in coloring one's worldview. For these reasons qualitative research, and phenomenology in particular, was an ideal fit to guide the methodology of this particular study.

### **Rationale for Methodology**

Currently, literature exists sharing ideas on how school counselor preparation programs can incorporate antiracist and social justice practices into school counseling courses (e.g., Ieva et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2021). There is also literature regarding antiracist school counseling competencies (Haugen et al., 2021), school counseling antiracist frameworks (Mayes & Byrd, 2022), and MTSS from an antiracist lens (Better-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., under review). However, prior to this study there was no available research examining how school counselors implement antiracist social justice practices into their comprehensive school counseling programs. As a result of gaps in literature related to school counselor antiracist social justice practices, there is a need for exploratory research including practicing school counselors. This study aimed to explore school counselors' lived experiences in implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools.

### **Qualitative Phenomenological Investigation**

Qualitative research is often used for exploratory research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, qualitative researchers investigate the lived experiences of participants in their natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Further, qualitative research uses the researcher as the main

instrument in the data collection and analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this reason, qualitative research closely resembles the counseling process and encourages truthful disclosure of participant perspectives, thoughts, and lived experiences as they relate to a phenomenon (Hays & Singh, 2012).

To truly expose myself to school counselors' first-hand accounts of their experiences implementing antiracist social justice practices, I conducted a phenomenological investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). With a phenomenological study, the researcher's goal is to develop "descriptions of the essence of [participant] experiences, not explanations or analyses" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 75). Transcendental phenomenology is generated from the belief that people are experts in their own lives and experiences and thus participants share their worldview with the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012). Aligned with my philosophical assumptions, I believe there is no universal truth but rather multiple realities and hence, phenomenology lends itself to supporting this notion (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). As such, study participants were the experts in their own experiences and applying both an ontological and phenomenological approach in this study supported this viewpoint (Wachter Morris & Wester, 2018). In this study, I aimed to describe school counselors' first-hand perspectives of implementing antiracist social justice practices while bracketing my assumptions and experiences, to decrease or set-aside my own interpretations (Davidsen, 2013).

## **Study Design and Protocol**

### **Participants and Recruitment**

For this study, as is recommended for phenomenological studies, I recruited 10 participants (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). Participant inclusion criteria included those

who self-identify as: engaged in antiracist social justice school counseling practices as a practicing school counselor in PK-12 education, in the United States, within the last 3 years, according to the terminology bulleted below:

- Social justice: advocate to increase access and equity in PK-12 schools (Ratts et al., 2007), such as engaging in examples similar to the following:
  - Increase school staff awareness of systemic inequities faced by students from low income families and students of color (Ratts et al., 2007)
  - Work as allies for students, promote systemic change, and provide opportunities for advancement for all students
  - Political savviness to navigate existing power structures
  - Developing awareness of unfair and inequitable practices; initiating and participating in difficult conversations with stakeholders
  - Creating intentional relationships to benefit students
  - Teaching K-12 students how to advocate for themselves
  - Using appropriate school data (i.e., discipline referrals, student absences, test scores) to navigate appropriate change
  - Providing information to others about how school counselors can advocate for underrepresented students (Singh et al., 2010)
- Antiracism: “school counselors’ active approach to dismantling racist practices, racial hatred, systemic racism, and oppression of historically oppressed racial groups within educational systems” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022, p.7), such as engaging in examples similar to several of the following:

- Advocating against zero tolerance discipline practices and dress code policies that target Black and Brown boys and sexualize Black girls (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)
- Calling for the removal of School Resource Officers
- Opposing discipline consequences that leave students out of classrooms
- Implementing restorative and healing practices to build and restore relationships between students and teachers (Ieva et al., 2021)

Prior to conducting interviews with participants, I obtained approval from the Old Dominion University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once approval was received, I began to reach out to individuals via email to request participation in this study. The participants were purposefully selected and invited to share their experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices. Participants of all gender identities and racial and ethnic backgrounds were invited to participate and were not restricted based on experience or qualifications. Purposeful and purposive sampling was used to ensure trustworthiness and data transferability (Hays & Singh, 2012).

To recruit participants, I first contacted individuals who were listed as practicing school counselors who had (a) presented (i.e., national, state, or regional webinars and conferences) or (b) written literature on topics related: to social justice, equity, and multicultural counseling. Those identified were sent recruitment information, (e.g., email) that included information found in Appendix A. Snowball sampling, or asking for participant suggestions from others, was utilized to solicit participation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012).

Once selected for participation, individuals receive an informed consent (e.g., located in Appendix B), as well as a demographic questionnaire (e.g., Appendix C), such as indicating their

age, gender, ethnicity, educational level, years of experience and preferred pseudonym prior to interviews.

### **Participant Confidentiality and Safety**

Participants were informed of their rights, limits to confidentiality, and purpose of the study prior to the interview in the informed consent (Appendix B) and demographic Google Form (Appendix C). These items were emailed to participants when confirming the interview date and time to ensure completion. The informed consent and demographic Google form were also shared again during the member checking process. All participants were reminded of their rights and the limits to confidentiality at the beginning of the interview to determine if they had any questions and to ensure they were aware of their participation in the study (Appendix D).

To ensure participant and data confidentiality, I eliminated all identifying information from transcripts immediately after creation and before other members of the research team reviewed the transcripts, and kept all identifying information used to communicate with participants located on a Google Form separate from interview data. Also, interview data (e.g., recordings and transcripts) remained confidential and were stored within my password protected Google Drive and Zoom accounts. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym at the time of the interview, one which they chose themselves, as to not disclose any identifying information. All audio and video recordings were destroyed immediately upon data analysis, and all data files will be destroyed after five years, in alignment with ethical research protocol. To ensure accuracy and promote data trustworthiness, all participants were given a copy of the transcript of their interview and asked to review it through member checking. Member checking was also completed throughout the interviews by asking participants for clarification or paraphrasing their comments.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data collection for this research study occurred through interviews designed to explore the lived experiences of school counselors who implement antiracist social justice practices. Through the use of a semi-structured interview, participants were asked to share their experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). This interview approach allowed the researcher flexibility to adapt follow-up probing questions based on the participants' responses (Moustakas, 1994), and promote member checking of data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). These interview questions can be found later in Appendix D. The use of a semi-structured interview also provided for a continuous flow of conversation, which I believe led to richer data regarding the phenomena.

Each participant attended one, 60 minute interview session (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). A choice of times was available to allow flexibility in participant scheduling. Evening and weekend interview times were also an option. Interviews with participants were conducted on Zoom, a video-conferencing platform that is safe, secure, and password protected. Due to its live transcription capabilities, Zoom also provided an opportunity for potential participants with hearing impairments to contribute to the study. Another reason for using Zoom to conduct the interviews was to limit contact with participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of video-conferencing also permitted flexibility in scheduling and location, allowing me to interview participants from a range of locations.

### **Data Management**

All collected data was stored in Google Drive, a safe, password protected medium. All data was collected and communicated with the use of participant pseudonyms. There were no

known risks to this study and participants were not compensated for their involvement. Data will be stored for five years, after which it will be destroyed.

Transcription of participant responses was provided using a secure transcription service. After transcription, I reviewed the transcripts several times, immersing myself in the data and examining for initial themes. While examining the data, I utilized a reflexive journal as a tool to bracket any bias I had regarding the study or my interactions with participants. I also utilized a second coder to produce a rich analysis of the data. The use of an additional coder provided consensus in the coding as well as data trustworthiness. Additional trustworthiness strategies are discussed in more detail later in this chapter. Analysis of transcripts took place, where I looked for themes and subthemes from direct participant quotes (Hays & Singh, 2012). All data was organized in a codebook, saved to a secure and password protected platform.

### **Participant Demographics**

Participants shared demographic information through the use of a Google form (Appendix C). Any identifying information shared was stored in my password protected Google Drive. The demographic information was stored in a location separately from participant interview data so it cannot be connected to any participants. Each participant was also assigned a pseudonym at the time of the interview, as to not disclose any identifying information.

Participants of all gender identities and racial and ethnic backgrounds were invited to participate and were not restricted based on experience or qualifications. As a result, the research sample included one male (10%;  $n = 1$ ) and nine female participants (90%;  $n = 9$ ) who ranged in age from 21-50 years old. This age range provided a blend of both demographic and professional experience. Three participants identified as Black or African American (30%;  $n = 3$ ), four participants identified as white (40%;  $n = 4$ ), one participant identified as multiracial (10%;  $n =$

1), another identified as Black and Hispanic/Latinx (10%; n = 1), and another participant identified as South Asian/Pakistani descent (10%; n = 1). The demographic breakdown of this sample is more diverse than the national demographics of school counselors (ASCA, 2020). In addition, one participant's most recent school counseling experience was in an elementary school (10%; n = 1), four participants worked in a middle school (40%; n = 4), and five participants worked in high schools as school counselors (50%; n = 5) (see table 1).

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of School Counselor Participants*

*Demographic Characteristics of School Counselor Participants*

	n	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	1	10.0
Female	9	90.0
Nonbinary	0	0.0
Total	10	100.0
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White	4	40.0
Black	3	30.0
Multiracial	1	10.0
Black & Hispanic	1	10.0
South Asian/Pakistani	1	10.0
<i>Grade Level</i>		
Elementary	1	10.0
Middle	4	40.0
High	5	50.0
Total	10	100.0

**Individual Interviews**

The semi-structured individual participant interviews were conducted via Zoom. This video-conferencing platform is safe, secure, and password protected, which helps to maintain

participant confidentiality. This study's semi-structured interview protocol is located in Appendix D.

### **Data Analysis**

For data analysis, I followed Moustakas's (1994) approach, which included the following steps: (a) bracketing, (b) horizontalization, (c) clustering horizons, (d) textural and structural descriptions, and (e) a resulting essence. These steps are explained in more detail below.

First, to analyze data collected from the semi-structured interviews with school counselors, it is imperative that I, as the researcher, truly immerse myself in the data by repeatedly reading over the material (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). As such, I read through all transcripts multiple times, noting my observations and reflections on the content. Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I *bracketed* my own biases related to antiracism and social justice through the use of a reflexivity journal, field notes, and engaging in peer-debriefing during research meetings (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Moustakas, 1994). Second, while reading participant transcripts, I engaged in *horizontalization*- coding or assigning meaning to units or phrases (Moustakas, 1994). Next, I *clustered horizons* or codes into themes, eliminating repeat statements (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Moustakas, 1994). Once clustering was complete, I organized themes into *textural* and *structural descriptions* (Moustakas, 1994). *Textural descriptions* are the 'what' of participant experiences whereas *structural descriptions* are the 'how' (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Moustakas, 1994). The textural and structural descriptions were then used to uncover the common experience, or *essence*, of the school counselor participants (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Trustworthiness Strategies**

Qualitative research utilizes the researcher as the instrument throughout a study (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). To ensure researcher personal thoughts, feelings, and biases are not interfering in the research process, to best attempt to glean the participants' lived experiences, and to increase the rigor of my study, I used a number of trustworthiness strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). These strategies ensured research credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012).

### **Credibility**

Credibility is the basis of *accuracy*- confirming that the results reflect participants' meaning/lived experiences (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In other words, credibility is what makes a study's findings believable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Throughout the research process, I adopted a number of trustworthiness strategies to bracket my own assumptions and continuously reflected on my own biases and assumptions as they related to antiracism and social justice. This took place through reflexive journaling and memos before, after, and during participant interviews and data analysis (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). Furthermore, participants were asked to review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and promote data trustworthiness in a process called member checking (Hays & Singh, 2012). Member checking occurred throughout the data collection process to ensure descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validation of the research findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Specifically, when asked to provide feedback on their transcripts, participants confirmed accuracy of their statements and provided additional information on concepts they shared during interviews. This information was added to their transcripts for data analysis. Last, to ensure

credibility, I engaged in researcher triangulation, which I did through consensus coding with a peer debriefer. Specifically, I utilized a peer debriefer in this study through all steps of data collection and data analysis. Both verbally and in written form, they reviewed all coded data and transcripts (for consensus coding), as well as iterations of the code book and findings- providing feedback on my data analysis.

### **Transferability**

According to concepts of transferability, strategies were put into place to ensure the research process was described in depth so the reader could identify similarities in this study and their own setting (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). This was done by communicating the data analysis steps and findings through thick, rich descriptions (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Throughout the data presentation, I detailed participant descriptions and direct quotes regarding their lived experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices. This allowed the participant's voice to shine. Similarly, the use of an audit trail also allows readers to understand the nuances of the process and procedures, thus bolstering transferability.

### **Dependability**

To ensure the study and its findings demonstrated dependability and the findings were thus consistent, I enlisted the help of a separate external auditor to examine the audit trail, including the data collection and analysis processes, as well as attempts to bracket researcher biases (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). The use of the external auditor ensured researcher biases and assumptions were bracketed and interfered as minimally as possible in the data analysis process (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). Specifically, I provided the external auditor with an audit trail, such as notes from my

meetings with a peer debriefer, my codebook, a sample of participant transcripts, and drafts of both my methodology and results. The external auditor provided feedback on collapsing a theme due to a lack of supportive codes. As a result, I collapsed the theme and adjusted my codebook to reflect the change.

### **Confirmability**

The last criteria of trustworthiness, confirmability, addresses researcher neutrality- ensuring that the findings are rooted in the data rather than the researchers' biases or perspectives (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). Through reflexivity and audit trails, I, the researcher, removed myself and my feelings, emotions, and thoughts from the research study as much as possible. This ensured the participants' lived experiences were shared and remained at the core of the research process.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate school counselors' antiracist social justice practices. Currently, literature exists sharing ideas on how school counselor preparation programs can incorporate antiracist and social justice practices into school counseling courses (e.g., Ieva et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2021). There is also literature regarding antiracist school counseling competencies (Haugen et al., 2021), school counseling antiracist frameworks (Mayes & Byrd, 2022), and MTSS from an antiracist lens (Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., under review). However, prior to this study there was no available research examining how school counselors implement antiracist social justice practices into their comprehensive school counseling programs.

This phenomenological study utilized semi-structured interviews with current school counselors to understand how they incorporated antiracist social justice practices into PK-12 schools in the U.S. Through this study, I hoped to also gain a better understanding of how school counselors navigated PK-12 school policies that are inherently anti-Black toward creating safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environments. Furthermore, understanding school counselors' experience as they work to disrupt and dismantle unjust and inequitable practices in schools can lead to the creation of strategies to assist new and current school counselors to implement their own antiracist social justice practices.

The results are a culmination of the participants' voices and lived experiences. To study how school counselors implemented antiracist social justice practices, I established my research framework based on the following research question: What are school counselors' lived experiences implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools? This chapter

presents findings from data collected through semi-structured interviews with a sample of 10 school counselor participants. The interview protocol used provided space for a rich representation of how school counselors experience and implement antiracist social justice practices. Through using Moustakas' data analysis steps for a phenomenological investigation, I uncovered three themes and 12 subthemes emerged from the data. Specifically, the themes were (a) advocacy, (b) courage, and (c) challenges.

## **Themes**

### **Theme I: Advocacy**

The first theme, *advocacy*, demonstrated the significant role school counselors play in the dismantling of oppressive systems while also protecting Black and Brown lives. The essence of this theme related to how school counselors used their own privilege and position of authority to combat injustices happening in PK-12 schools, including the empowerment of students. Nearly every participant in this study discussed the important role advocacy plays in the implementation of antiracist social justice practices in schools. As a result of data analysis, two subthemes emerged: (a) use of privilege to address inequities, and (b) empowering students to make systemic change.

#### ***Subtheme: Use of Privilege to Address Inequities***

Participants shared examples of how they used their position in PK-12 schools to address the harm being done to Black and Brown students within the halls of education. For example, Participant #9 mentioned they used their privilege through, "realizing the systems are set up to fail certain people, and we have to actively keep working or doing our little piece, chipping our little piece, and hopefully, by role modeling behavior in your schools." Participant #5 said, "we have this unique position of trying to work against the system while within the system."

Similarly, Participant #7 stated, “it’s being that brave person, not afraid to put myself on the line.”

***Subtheme: Empowering Students to Make Systemic Change***

Another subtheme of *advocacy* was how school counselors empowered their students to make systemic change. Participant #10 shared “put your students at the center of what you're trying to do with your program.” The same participant also discussed that when they implement antiracist social justice practices, they are “really loving and affirming Black students every day.” Participant #1 discussed a similar experience,

Oh, I'd say that was one of the key things as we had to hear students' voices... 'Cause you know, you got students of all different backgrounds that this impacted. I think being aware of how heavy it is for students and that they need a place to process too.

**Theme 2: Courage**

Another theme that emerged during data analysis was *courage*. Participants described ways in which they were intentional and proactive during their experiences implementing antiracist social justice practices. This was the difference between being an accidental ally and implementing practices with purpose. This theme included the following subthemes: (a) use of data, (b) elimination of barriers, (c) dismantling systems, (d) navigating difficult conversations, (e) having hope, and (f) stakeholder partnership: prioritizing equity work.

***Subtheme: Use of Data***

Participants talked about ways in which they had the courage to utilize data to evaluate school policies and address inequities. Participant #8, for example, stated, "here's the data, I'm showing you, I'm seeing a problem. And then it's gonna take a lot of us to come together to fix that." Participant #1 remarked on their experience reviewing his school’s data and mentioned

how they “look[ed] at the data through that antiracist lens.” In a similar vein, Participant #2 stated, “what is the purpose of our school rules, policies, and procedures? I think we have to examine who they're helping and who they're hurting. And I don't think any policy should remain in place if it's disproportionately harming our students of color.”

***Subtheme: Elimination of Barriers***

Another subtheme of *courage* that was identified during data analysis was the elimination of barriers. School counselor participants shared examples of how they implemented practices to close opportunity gaps for students and families. Participant #4 talked of how they helped their students with postsecondary plans, “helping them, specifically our students of color, walking them through the FAFSA, sitting down with them and doing college applications, and not just saying, ‘Here are the applications, go do it.’” Participant #9, when discussing working with their English learner families and ensuring access to information, said, “making sure before we're sending a financial aid night, we're having a translator [to] translate.”

Knowing the role school staff play in providing access or creating barriers, participants provided examples of how they work with others to eliminate barriers. When working directly with staff to address student access to advanced level courses, Participant #7 described, “ensuring the professional development of our staff to ensure that those biases aren't present in the classroom, to ensure that every single student has access to AP classes.”

***Subtheme: Dismantling Systems***

A third subtheme of *courage* was the dismantling of systems. The essence of this subtheme addressed how school counselor participants actively worked to remove policies and procedures that purposely prohibit the educational advancement of BISOC. Participant #10 stated, “counselors who are trying to implement social justice or antiracist practices in their

school counseling programs, they're questioning, they're not just going with the status quo, they're asking questions, they're trying to change systems.” Similarly, Participant #2 said, “to me with anti-racism and social justice, it's looking at the system.” Participant #6 also shared, “this thing, the system's not working. It wasn't made for me and it's harmful. It's hurting me, it's hurting my people, it's hurting my community. And so it's interesting to see who's willing to sort of dismantle something that their people created that's now affecting my community.” Participant #5 discussed the intentionality behind dismantling systems,

I work with this one kid and I'm breaking down barriers for you just because that's the right thing to do, but if I'm not being intentional about it, then I'm not doing in a systemic way, that means that the next kid gets the same level of support, or hopefully eventually no kid would need that because the system itself has been altered by the work of the school counselors. . . So, you know it's sort of like if racism is a system, and you know that if we are not fighting against the system, then we're not being antiracist. You might think we're being good people, we might be helping kids, but we're not being antiracist because there is a systemic component to that, it's not something that happens in one-offs or individual moments, it's something that's systemic and perpetuated sort of without you having to do anything, it's gonna keep happening. So if you don't have intentionality to fight it, there's just no way for you, if you're not being systemic then you're not touching on racism.

***Subtheme: Navigating Difficult Conversations***

The fourth subtheme of *courage* was how the participants navigated having difficult conversations with stakeholders while working to implement antiracist social justice practices in their schools. Participant #1 described how their antiracist work encouraged them to have

conversations with other educators, “it really pushed me to do more conversations, hold spaces for educators to talk and dialogue because I’d have colleagues, who’d be like, ‘Oh, like, I really don’t know what to say or how to say this or whatever.’” Participant #6 spoke of,

Having frank conversations about bias that could be lingering and how that impacts how you even see and respond and hear students and make space for students to feel the way they feel and just show up and be who they are, whether it’s quirky, whether it’s fun and animated, etcetera. And so having those conversations about relationship building.

Similarly, Participant #4 said,

Having conversations with administrators surrounding the social-emotional needs of our students and trauma and what they’re experiencing, and how their traditional ways or their ways of trying to raise the graduation rate wasn’t working or wasn’t realistic, and that they’re missing the point, that they’re missing some key things to helping the students.

***Subtheme: Having Hope***

Another subtheme of *courage* is having hope: hope for the future of school counseling, hope for change, and hope for students. Participant #2 stated, “I do believe that there is power at school counselors as change agents in terms of looking at policies and practices and procedures.” Participant #9 also shared, “but I think being a school counselor means that we can chip away where we can.”

This sentiment was echoed by Participant #5 when they said, “when you work in a school, you can really impact the way that school does things. I think counselors have such a unique position to do that because unlike any other position in the school, they’re able to see things globally and really make changes globally.” In sharing their hope for the future of school

counseling, Participant #10 simply stated, “when you say school counseling, it should just be inherently antiracist, that's where I really hope that we get to.”

***Subtheme: Stakeholder Partnership: Prioritizing Equity Work***

The last subtheme that emerged during data analysis was *stakeholder partnership: prioritizing equity work*. Here, school counselors identified partners (i.e., administration, parents/families, community members, teachers) who assisted in the implementation of antiracist social justice practices. Participant #10 talked of partnering with their administrators, “I'm really thankful for my admin. I feel very comfortable bringing to them different concerns, differences like, ‘Hey, why don't we try this?’ Or, “What can we do to make sure that our students have access?”” Participant #9 also said, “building those relationships in the community and with our family is definitely very important.”

**Theme 3: Challenges**

The last theme surfacing during data analysis were the *challenges* participants experienced while implementing antiracist social justice practices in schools. This includes situations, people, places that challenged (or can challenge) full implementation of practices. Within this theme, four subthemes were discovered: (a) the COVID-19 pandemic, (b) stakeholder resistance, (c) the current political climate, and (d) the sustainability of antiracist social justice practices. Each subtheme is discussed in more detail below.

***Subtheme: COVID-19 Pandemic***

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a number of challenges, especially in education. During this time, many of the school counselor participants were forced to adjust their focus from implementing antiracist social justice practices to helping their students and their school cope. For example, when speaking of their challenges during the pandemic, Participant #8 said,

“we can't let this go. I know we're busy with COVID, but this is extremely important and impacts every single school, every single student, whether they're White, Black, whatever color, it all impacts them.” Participant #4 also shared how they are attempting to implement a tiered approach to antiracist social justice practices: “there are, like a few Tier 1 opportunities throughout the year, where it's tricky with the pandemic because we can't.” Participant #6 talked about the struggle of school counselors as they have to confront multiple crises during the pandemic, “and then as school counselors when we're dealing with a current crisis, mental health crisis, there's a public health crisis.”

***Subtheme: Stakeholder Resistance***

Another subtheme of the *challenges* faced by school counselors as they attempt to implement antiracist social justice practices is school administrator resistance. It is difficult for school counselors to work in silos when they are a part of the larger school community. For many, it caused internal conflict between their beliefs and that of their school districts. For example, Participant #9 stated, “I work in a district where in a board meeting, it was flat out said that racism doesn't exist in our district.” Participant #2 discussed stakeholder resistance in their school, “I think sometimes there's like eye-rolls of like, ‘[they’re] bringing up race again,’ or like, ‘[they’re] talking about this policy.’” Participant #1 also shared, “it is personal because I knew that if our school wasn't ready to talk about it, and it kept happening.” Similarly, Participant #8 talked about their loss of hope due to resistance, “Do I have resources? Do I have administrators who support that? I don't know if I can make that difference.”

For some participants, there was so much resistance, they had to ‘disguise’ their goals and objectives to combating racial injustices in schools, “so even for example, like, I wouldn't be able to call it antiracism here, I would have to call it DEI” (Participant #3). Some others

expressed concern for position/job if they addressed racist school and district practices and policies,

As many folks in schools are, I had some things that made me worried about being blacklisted or being fired, and so I... Even though I pushed the envelope, there were, you know, some underlying fears that I had that I think held me back  
(Participant #4)

***Subtheme: Current Political Climate***

Antiracist work has been demonized by right-wing pundits, political activists, parents, and school staff, creating fear surrounding conversations about race, racial equity, discrimination, and injustice. As a result, school counselors who are doing the work are forced into the middle of this battle. This led to the identification of another subtheme of *challenge: current political climate*. Participant #1 shared, “in the current culture we are in that cancel culture real, nobody wants to be called a Karen [laughter] you know. And so, I think it makes it hard to take the risk.” Participant #7 stated, “it's so hard and this divisive world that we're in, we're more divided than we've ever been and moving the needle is such a hard thing.”

Participant #3, talking about their experiences, expressed, “I still have to be very careful and very intentional to keep in mind the environment in which I'm placed, which takes kind of a delicate dance.” Likewise, Participant #4 said, “I do think that a lot of the things that are going on and all of the political piece is gonna make things harder for us who want to engage in that work.”

***Subtheme: Sustainability of Antiracist Social Justice Practices***

The last subtheme to emerge was the struggle the school counselor participants faced when working to sustain antiracist social justice practices in their schools. How do they keep up

the work when faced with so much resistance from all sides? What happens to the students and families in the process? Is there support or resistance from their school system, state, and national organizations? Participant #8 shared,

The big thing for me has been consistency. I get frustrated and I'm frustrated currently where I don't see it being consistent, it's like we did this one training, check the box, and that's not what this is about. It can never be about that; it needs to be ongoing.

Participant #7 discussed how change can be an uphill battle, especially for the students, “we were asking them to change 400 years of racist practice that even the adults don't know how to change.” Along those same lines, Participant #9 said,

It's ongoing. It's learning, it's un-learning so many things that I have learned, unlearned so many things and never really truly saying that I've got this . . . It feels like people who are in power are gonna keep it that way for certain populations to not get what they should.

The work of implementing antiracist social justice practices is not easy, but it is necessary,

It's really looking at how do I continue to feed and fuel into things that continue to harm Black and Brown bodies, and how can I make some different decisions, how can I change the culture of certain spaces I'm in? How can we stop talking about stuff and start doing things? (Participant #6).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DISCUSSION

In this phenomenological study I investigated the lived experiences of school counselors who implement antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools. The researcher's goal was to better understand how school counselors disrupt and dismantle inequitable policies and practices that harm Black and Brown youth while also being a part of the very system they are attempting to change. Thus, in this phenomenological study, through the use of semi-structured interviews on Zoom, I captured the lived experiences of 10 professional school counselors who work in different levels (i.e. elementary, middle, or high school) from the Northern, Southern, and Midwestern regions of the United States. Through data analysis, three themes and 12 subthemes were uncovered. In this chapter, I will provide the following: (a) a summary of the research findings in the context of the existing literature, (b) a discussion of implications for practice, preparation, policy, and research.

#### **Summary of Findings in the Context of Existing Literature**

America's PK-12 schools repeatedly ignore the academic advancement as well as the social-emotional well-being of students of color. For decades, school data has illustrated the work needed to ensure Black and Brown students are meeting the same academic expectations as their White peers. Although demographics show a shift from White students being the majority-48% of all students (NCES, 2020) - school curriculum and school policies continuously and intentionally favor this group. It is also important to note that as the student population diversifies, the teacher population remains overly saturated with White women (NCES, 2020).

White teachers and other school staff continue the cycle of oppression of Black and Indigenous students of color's (BISOC) minds and bodies, whether consciously or

unconsciously. As the calls for institutional racial justice and equity ring louder, there is a push for school counselors to make an intentional effort to put into place comprehensive school counseling programs that include antiracist social justice practices. Due to their proximity within the educational system and with the students they are tasked with protecting, school counselors can play a significant role in dismantling oppressive systems. This present study was developed to answer the following research questions: What are school counselors' lived experiences implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools?

There have been a number of studies researching the lived experiences of school counselors' social justice practices (e.g., Ratts et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2010), however, there is limited research surrounding school counselor antiracist social justice practices. Researchers have also detailed ways in which school counselor preparation programs can prepare future school counselors to be antiracist (i.e. Mason et al., 2021), but such research misses the voices of practicing school counselors. Prior to the current study, there was conceptual literature regarding school counselor antiracist work (e.g., Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022) and a Delphi study in the early stages of antiracist school counseling competencies development (e.g., Haugen et al., 2021). However, my study is the first known investigation to empirically examine school counselor antiracist social justice practices by interviewing practicing school counselors to uncover their lived experiences.

### **Theme I: Advocacy**

The first theme in this study is advocacy including the use of privilege to address inequities, and empowering students to make systemic change. In previous literature related to advocacy, particularly advocacy centering students, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) outlined the role of a school counselor as a leader in schools who assists students with

their academic, career, and social/emotional wellbeing (ASCA, 2015, 2018, 2021a, 2021b; Grothaus et al., 2020). School counselors also have a responsibility to acknowledge unjust practices and policies which unintentionally harm students of color and advocate for policies that ensure equity for all (ASCA 2021a; Grothaus et al., 2020). Previous research has also shown school counselors as social justice advocates (i.e. Ratts et al., 2007). School counselors are encouraged to empower students and their families to confront school officials if they encounter educational injustice and to also use their own voices to inform school staff of systemic inequities (Ratts et al., 2007). This information parallels the data which emerged from the current study in which school counselors shared how they use their privilege to evoke change while also empowering their students. True advocacy is not solely speaking up for others, but rather bringing others to the table to speak for themselves. School counseling advocacy is done with students, not just on behalf of them. Thus, the present study parallels previous research on the importance of school counseling advocacy, but emphasizes it within an antiracist social justice framework, providing novel insight to school counselors' antiracist social justice experiences.

### **Theme 2: Courage**

The second theme uncovered in this study was courage, which specified: use of data, elimination of barriers, dismantling systems, navigating difficult conversations, having hope, and stakeholder partnership: prioritizing equity work. In particular, these findings called for intentionality and proactiveness- as antiracist social justice practices were developed and implemented with purpose. In her keynote address at the 2022 Evidence-based School Counseling Conference, Dr. Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy called on school counselors to be brave enough to stand up for Black and Brown students, even if they are standing alone. Haugen and colleagues (2021) also found a similar theme in their Delphi study, in which members of their

expert panel demonstrated bravery when engaging in antiracist work. In the current study, school counselors were provided space to share their lived experiences and defined how they show courage through the intentional use of data, elimination of barriers to student success, dismantling of oppressive systems, navigating difficult conversations, having hope, and stakeholder partnerships. Previous research discussed school counselors utilizing school data and systemic change to navigate change and decrease student barriers as well (ASCA, 2019; Grothaus et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2010). As such, participants in the present study shared how they used school data to point out inequities in student access to advanced coursework and discipline referrals. The ASCA “The School Counselor and Equity for All Students” position statement (2018) also instructs school counselors to access school data to identify gaps in student achievement and opportunity.

The findings from this study also demonstrated the courage required and impact school counselors can make when they regularly partnered with their administrators and other school stakeholders. The school counseling literature base is ripe with research on school counselors collaborating with school administration and other stakeholders (ASCA, 2019; Grothaus et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2010). Thus, school counselors are part of a larger school environment and cannot work in silos to make sustainable change. For this reason, partnering with school administrators is essential to creating a culture of inclusion and assists with full implementation of antiracist social justice practices.

Working alongside administrators to implement such practices, however, could be challenging and required the participants in the present study to have difficult conversations. Collaboration was key but was not always easy. Relatedly, school counselors are encouraged to use their voices to increase school staff awareness of systemic inequities faced by students from

low income families and students of color (Ratts et al., 2007; Singh et al, 2010). This previous literature is similar to the accounts of participants in the present study, even as they felt uncomfortable having these conversations. Hence, the school counselors in the present investigation knew that challenging conversations were necessary to address school and staff anti-Black and anti-Brown bias- providing insight into school counselors' courage required to increase school staff awareness of systemic inequities.

Successfully navigating difficult conversations also filled some study participants with hope - hope for change and hope for the future. School counselors are in a unique position in schools in which they are able to make significant change in the lives of students, families, and school stakeholders (ASCA, 2019). And as literature on school counselor antiracist social justice practices continues to emerge (i.e., Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., under review; Haugen et al., 2021; Ieva et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2021; Mayes & Byrd, 2022), school counselors will have the frameworks, competencies, and support needed to implement antiracist social justice practices within their comprehensive school counseling programs. Hence, the present study adds empirical evidence to a largely conceptual literature base on school counselor antiracist social justice efforts, including the courage needed to do this work.

### **Theme 3: Challenges**

The third theme, challenges, included: the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholder resistance, the current political climate, and the sustainability of antiracist social justice practices. To start with, the COVID-19 pandemic sent the entire world into a head spin. Schools closed their doors, leaving students to learn through camera screens instead of in classrooms with their peers (Dorn et al., 2021). As schools began to open and things slowly returned to normal, Black and Brown students re-entering the halls of education were coming back an additional three to five months

behind their White peers academically (Dorn et al., 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). The antiracist social justice work many school counselors began before the pandemic took a back seat to make room for student learning loss and the influx of student (and staff) mental health concerns (Dorn et al., 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022) This shift in focus also created a shift in many school counselor -stakeholder relationships. Although stakeholders can be helpful in dismantling oppressive systems, as noted in the second theme, they can also be a challenge to implementing effective antiracist social justice practices. Fergus (2019) spoke of the role teacher and staff bias plays in student discipline referrals for subjective behaviors, such as disruption, disrespect, and disobedience - leading to the overrepresentation of Black and Brown students receiving discipline referrals. In a similar vein, Francis and colleagues (2019) demonstrated how school counselor bias essentially created barriers to student educational advancement when they were less likely to recommend Black female students for advanced courses. The findings of each of these studies align with the experiences of the participants of the current study. Hence, the biases described by Fergus (2019) and Francis et al. (2019) are echoed in the current findings- within the context of school counselors' antiracist social justice practices. As such, this present study extends the current research base on race-based biases in PK-12 education, providing context through school counselors' thick, rich descriptions in this phenomenological investigation.

In a similar vein, in the present study, there were stakeholders, school officials and parents alike, who simply rejected the notion of implementing antiracist social justice practices because it involved talk of race and attributed such conversations to political rhetoric. This resistance could also be due to their own personal discomfort addressing race or a result of the current political climate politicizing the concept of racism and school-based equity work

(Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). Fearmongering surrounding terms such as critical race theory and social emotional learning has led to a number of legislative bills and laws preventing open discussions about institutional racism and even the teaching of accurate history (ASCA, 2021b; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). Participants in the current study described how criticisms such as these have them struggling to figure out how they can sustain the antiracist social justice policies they have implemented.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Practice**

This phenomenological research study focused on the lived experiences of the 10 school counselor participants who were interviewed, and the findings are best understood through the context of those 10 individuals. Transferability can be determined through considering the detailed descriptions specific to these practicing school counselors, their locations, and their individual situations. To implement effective antiracist social justice practices, professional school counselors are called to (a) work diligently to *assess* school data, (b) *acknowledge* racist and other harmful practices, (c) *address* the discrepancies in data with administrators and other school stakeholders, (d) *advocate* for change, and (e) *abolish* discriminatory practices, policies, and people from schools (ASCA 2021a, 2021b; Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., under review; Haugen et al., 2021; Love, 2019; Mayes & Byrd, 2022). In addition, strong school counselor - administrator relationships may be the key to ensuring practices and policies are equitable for all. School counselors should become comfortable with having courageous conversations with stakeholders, especially when students' lives are on the line, because they are (Haugen et al., 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). These conversations could be as informal as a

hallway chat or as formal as a school-based training on implicit bias in grading and discipline practices.

However, many school counselors do not know where to start, which is why continuing education is so important. Local, state, and national organizations, such as ASCA and state counseling organizations, must ensure there are opportunities for school counselors to access the latest literature surrounding antiracist social justice practices and provide guidance on how to appropriately implement them in schools. School counselors could also create networks of support, including other school counselors and community partners as well as supervision, with whom they could share resources, strategies, and emotional support.

### **Implications for School Counselor Preparation**

School counselor preparation programs have an important job to prepare future school counselors to do the hard work of dismantling the racially biased institution of education. The ASCA specifically asks school counselor preparation programs to facilitate learning and training for future school counselors “...ensuring equitable access to resources” (ASCA, 2014, p. 62) and “...using advocacy and data-informed school counseling practices to close the achievement/opportunity gap” (ASCA, 2014, p. 62). What is not specified, however, is how counselor education programs should teach these theories and strategies and why it is important given the country’s changing demographics. In their work, Mason and colleagues (2021) provided examples of how to ingrain antiracist work into school counselor preparation classes. This included experiential learning activities and classroom assignments, such as resource mapping (Mason et al., 2021). Preparation programs could also effectively train school counselors on how to collect, analyze, and utilize school data to make equitable change. Lastly, school counselor educators could actively partner with neighboring schools and districts to

provide training for practicing school counselors on how to identify inequitable policies and how to dismantle them.

### **Implications for Policy**

This study and its findings identified a number of challenges school counselors face when implementing antiracist social justice practices, including the sustainability of antiracist social justice practices. School counselors are in unique positions of leadership in which they could work side-by-side with school administration to abolish inequitable practices and policies that harm BISOC (Edirmanasinghe et al., under review; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Love, 2019). This could include removal of dress codes that unfairly target Black and Brown boys and oversexualizes Black girls or discipline that does not include restorative practices (Ieva et al., 2021).

On the state and national level, school counseling organizations could lobby for the removal of culturally and racially biased high-stakes standardized testing to create an educational system that ensures collective freedom and works for everyone, not just the few. School counseling organizations could also lobby for lower school counselor - student ratios and the elimination of non-school counselor related duties to ensure school counselors have the time to implement antiracist social justice practices thoroughly. Lastly, state and national organizations could lobby for equitable funding for schools and districts with high populations of Black and Brown students, as these schools are historically underfunded and lack resources (Garcia, 2020).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

My hope is that school counselor antiracist social justice practices and antiracism work will not end with this study. As change agents, practicing school counselors have so much more to add to the conversation of equitable school practices and procedures. It is my hope that the

results of this study lead to continuing a line of research surrounding antiracist social justice school counseling practices and interventions.

Additional phenomenological investigations can provide opportunities for practicing school counselors to continue to share their lived experiences involving antiracist social justice practices- perhaps with a different sample, as well as a grounded theory– to generate a theory surrounding school counselors’ antiracist social justice practices. A qualitative study can also be conducted using BISOC as participants to provide an opportunity for historically marginalized students to share their experiences surviving the oppressive institution of education. A study such as this could be incredibly eye-opening for school stakeholders and invoke sustainable change.

Using the results of this study, a Delphi study may also be conducted in the future, to develop a list of antiracist social justice competencies. Building upon that, researchers in the future may consider creating a validated instrument in which school counselors and school districts determine school counselors’ antiracist social justice practices. The potential instrument can assist school counselors guiding their schools to be more welcoming and inclusive, and also assist in identifying existing barriers preventing BISOC from attaining academic success and emotional well-being. Haugen and colleagues (2021) have begun the work of developing similar competencies to assist school counselors with identifying inequitable and racist policies in schools.

### **Research Limitations**

All research studies have limitations, and this study was no exception. First, due to my job as a professional school counselor and a mother of two Black boys, I see daily the challenges faced by Black and Brown students and their families (including my own) as they attempt to navigate the inherently racist public school system. To bracket my own biases, I implemented a

number of trustworthiness strategies, including the use of a reflexivity journal, an additional coder, and an external auditor. However, there is still the possibility of my own biases seeping through the data collection and analysis process.

Next, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be ignored. This virus has impacted every arena including education. This study explored the lived experiences of 10 school counselors, each who were school counselors before and during the pandemic. They bore witness to the failures of remote learning, limited resources for students, and the resulting mental health concerns of extended isolation (Dorn et al., 2021). The disconnect from school communities combined with school personnel's hyperfocus on student learning loss could have effects on how antiracist social justice practices were implemented in their schools.

Additionally, the country has been a witness to the calls and actions surrounding racial justice for those from historically minoritized groups. The repeated murder of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people by police officers, or aggression shown by school resource officers, which can be usually witnessed through social media, could influence what school counselors do in daily practice. Many may have felt a sense of urgency to implement antiracist social justice practices to remove barriers and provide equitable access to resources for students. Thus, the context of the data collection time period was relevant and may have likely impacted the results of this study.

Lastly, the term 'Critical Race Theory' has taken on a life of its own. Splashed across social media and cable news shows, those three words have invoked fear and anger in many, although they may not understand the definition. In some schools, districts, and states stakeholders have banned the use of 'Critical Race Theory' and any other terms they may think are related. This includes terms such as social emotional learning, diversity, equity, and

inclusion. This can place school counselors in a tough spot - causing internal conflict. They may be hesitant to implement antiracist social justice practices due to concern surrounding job security and reputation. On the other hand, school counselors, especially those who have moved from school to district leadership positions, may feel a sense of freedom with implementation and sharing of resources with their school counseling colleagues.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Education, public or private, has long been accused of inequitable, unethical, and biased procedures that are harmful to select student populations. Discriminatory and culturally biased practices in standardized testing, resource availability, student discipline, course content, and course selection have long plagued schools. School counselor leaders who implement antiracist social justice practices into their comprehensive school counseling programs actively work to identify and address barriers to student academic success, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development. Through the careful examination of data and courageous conversations with stakeholders, school counselors who implement such practices develop plans for changing the broken educational system and create equitable spaces for learning and advancement. The participants of this study shared their stories and experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices. Through advocacy, courage, and navigating challenges, they continuously place students as a priority as they intentionally disrupt and dismantle racially inequitable practices. But school counselors must not be afraid to do the work alone, if necessary. Because we are in this for the long haul, or as Dr. Ladson-Billings (2022) stated, we're here for the hard re-set.

**CHAPTER SIX**  
**MANUSCRIPT**

A Phenomenological Investigation of School Counselor Antiracist Social Justice Practices

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### **Abstract**

Decades after the landmark United States Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, the push continues to make schools a safe and welcoming environment for Black and Brown students. Black students in particular are continuing to be oppressed and marginalized in PK-12 educational settings. School counselors, because of their close proximity to students and their role within schools, are in one of the best positions to be systemic change agents and combat institutional racism and inherently biased policies that prevent the academic success, and social-emotional well-being of students of color. Limited literature exists, however, of school counselors discussing antiracist social justice practices they implement in PreK-12 schools. The purpose of this study was to explore how school counselors can advocate and promote equitable change in K-12 schools. This study utilized phenomenological methodology and semi-structured interviews with school counselors (N=10) to form descriptive themes of their lived experiences carrying out antiracist social justice practices.

*Keywords:* school counselor, antiracism, social justice, equity, phenomenology

## **A Phenomenological Investigation of School Counselor Antiracist Social Justice Practices**

As the demographics of our country become more and more diverse, it is important now more than ever for school counselors to address educational inequities and identify resources to increase student access. Through the use of advocacy skills and culturally sustaining comprehensive school counseling programs, social, political, and educational systems are challenged and changed to ensure the academic and life successes of all PK-12 students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

As school counselors understand and analyze just and equitable practices, a critical race theory lens can be used. Race is a socially constructed concept that was developed as a means to control a certain portion of the population (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Yet, race remains present in every sphere of our lives and is especially present in the U.S. education system. The focus of critical race theory (CRT) is the theoretical unraveling of race and racism ingrained in American society (Creswell, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Tate, 1997). CRT is an important tool to: (a) deconstruct oppressive structures, (b) reconstruct human agency, and (c) construct equitable and socially just power structures (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

CRT can unmask and expose racism in the educational system (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). A large majority of educators, school counselors included, are white, middle-class women who could be using their positions to push white behaviors and expectations as a default (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021). In their statement on critical race theory, the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2021) explains how racism presents itself in educational policies through suspension rates, special education referrals, graduation rates, and advanced course placement for students of color. The school counselor's role in combating racial injustice in schools is to create a welcoming school

environment for all as well as directly addressing policies, procedures, and processes that cause inequitable outcomes for students of color (ASCA, 2021). It is the responsibility of school counselors and other school staff to identify their own biases and understand how racism and racist practices limit students of color from obtaining educational success (ASCA, 2021).

### **Inequities in PK-12 Education**

Education, public or private, has long been accused of inequitable, unethical, and biased policies that are harmful to certain student demographic groups (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Discriminatory and culturally biased practices in standardized testing, resource availability, student discipline, course content, and course selection have long plagued schools (ASCA, 2015, 2018; Gibson, 2019; Ratts et al., 2007). Specifically, as America's schools become more diverse, the need to create safe and welcoming PK-12 school environments for all students has increased, in order to meet more complex and varied needs across a more diverse population of students.

Once the majority, the number of White children enrolled in K-12 public schools in the United States decreased from 61% to 48% from 2000 to 2017, while the number of Latinx/Latine children increased from 16% to 27% during the same time frame (NCES, 2020). During the same timeframe, the number of Black students decreased, dropping from 17% to 15%. There was a slight increase in the number of Asian/Pacific Islander students, from 4% to 6% of the public school population. Students of two or more races increased from 1% to 4% while American Indian/Alaska Native students stayed consistent at 1% from fall 2000 to fall 2017 (NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

America's PK-12 students are not only becoming more racially diverse, but they are also coming from economically disadvantaged households. In 2018, nearly 32% of Black children

were living in homes with incomes below the federal poverty level, well above the national average of 18% (NCES, 2020; Ullucci & Howard, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The poverty rate for American Indian/Alaska Native children was 31%, 25% for Latinx/Latine children, and 25% for Pacific Islander children in 2018, all which are nearly double the national average. In comparison, only 10% of White students were living in poverty in 2018 (NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Children who live in poverty, regardless of the percentage, are coming to school steps behind their peers academically, socially, and emotionally. Economically disadvantaged children are more likely to struggle with mental health issues, be chronically absent from school, struggle academically, and have classroom behavioral concerns (McKenzie, 2019; Ullucci & Howard, 2015). Black students are more likely to be diagnosed with an emotional disturbance, resulting in special education services (NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). During the 2018-2019 school year, Black students accounted for 16% of all students in special education whereas White students comprised 14% of students in special education. Only 79% of Black students graduated high school in 2017-2018 and of that percentage, two-thirds graduated high school with a regular high school diploma (NCES, 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

As PK-12 public schools increase their enrollment of Black, Brown, and economically disadvantaged students, most public school teachers and administrators remain White, middle class women (NCES, 2020). Thus, White females comprised 79% of the population of public school teachers in 2017-2018, and 7% of public school teachers and 11% of principals identify as Black. This means Black students are less likely than their White peers to have a teacher of the same race, which is directly related to cultural and racial acceptance in schools (Fergus, 2019). As such, the increased diversity in students combined with the lack of diversity in teachers can

lead to a disregard of student cultural backgrounds, a push to normalize White middle class behaviors, and the stigmatization of Black student behaviors.

Black children accounted for 13.7% of out-of-school suspensions, higher than any other racial or ethnic group, and had a 58% chance of attending a school with a higher minority student population, which are traditionally known to have higher teacher turnover rates and lower standardized test scores (NCES, 2020). The discrepancies in school discipline practices can be a result of school personnel viewing student culture, race, and socioeconomic status as unacceptable in schools (Fergus, 2019; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). For example, in their study Santiago-Rosario and colleagues (2021) found that simply being Black made a student more likely to have an office disciplinary referral, even when controlling for gender, enrollment in special education, and socio-economic status. Black students received nearly 3 more office disciplinary referrals than their White peers (Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). The lack of diversity in teacher populations as well as the pathologizing of diverse student culture contribute to inequities in discipline practices of students of color as well as their low enrollment in more challenging courses and an overrepresentation in special education programs (Fergus, 2019).

Fergus (2019) found that nearly one-third of teachers surveyed were of the opinion that the beliefs and values of students from disadvantaged neighborhoods conflicted with school values and beliefs about what makes a good education. Further, nearly one-sixth of surveyed teachers believe students from disadvantaged backgrounds do not have the abilities to be successful in school (Fergus, 2019; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). Teacher and school staff bias in discipline practices resulting in suspensions means these students will have less in-person instruction as well as less time around their peers, impacting social-emotional development. To

help combat subjective discipline infractions and bias practices, schools must implement socially just practices.

### **Social Justice**

‘Social justice’ is a term that predates the Industrial Revolution yet does not have one definitive definition (Grothaus et al., 2010b; Ornstein, 2017). The concept of social justice, however, is one researchers agree on: equity, fairness, and change (Grothaus et al., 2010b; Ornstein, 2017). In the 1960s, during the rise of the Civil Rights movement, social justice and its many definitions connected with Black Americans and their allies as they fought for racial justice and equal opportunities (Ornstein, 2017). The push for school funding, integration, and the equal treatment of students of color was also a part of this fight. Furthermore, Rawls (1971, as cited in Crethar et al., 2008) detailed two tenets of social justice: (a) equal rights and fundamental liberties, which he defines as ‘*individual liberties*’, and (b) ‘*distributive justice*’ or the equitable distribution of opportunities and resources for those who need them most.

The pursuit of equitable treatment of students of color in schools continues well after the landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954 (Ramsey, n.d.). After the decision, many states and school boards chose to close schools rather than allow Black students to share classrooms with their White peers (Ramsey, n.d.). Schools in Black communities closed due to decreased funding, Black teachers lost their jobs, and course curriculums in White schools did not change to include Black stories and histories (Ramsey, n.d.). As a result, Black students attended, and still attend, schools with less resources. In 2017, only one in three White students (31.3%) attended an economically segregated school, whereas in comparison seven out of 10 Black students (72.4%) attended a school with low funding and resources (García, 2020). Educational advocates continue the work of expanding educational opportunities for students

from diverse racial and class backgrounds (Ramsey, n.d.). Although the Supreme Court ruled America's schools were required to integrate approximately 67 years ago, Black and Brown students are still trying to adjust to learning in predominantly White environments.

Social justice advocacy in PK-12 education is a practice or action provoked by student inequalities and inequities that are related to social, cultural, and economic factors of power and privilege (Singh et al., 2010). Social justice also means speaking out against discriminatory practices (i.e. grading, discipline, referrals to gifted programs), confronting school staff about their biases and holding them accountable. For these reasons and many more, PK-12 schools and school districts must increase their advocacy efforts to include intentional social justice practices that address anti-Black racism and white supremacist policies that unfairly harm students.

### **Antiracism**

The idea of antiracism exploded after the racial uprising resulting from the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. After Mr. Floyd's death was streamed internationally during the spring and summer of 2020, advocates and allies cried out for the dismantlement of systems of oppression. These systems of oppression include PK-12 schools and the U.S. educational system as a whole. Educational antiracism can be best defined as “the critical examination and interrogation of systems in education and the greater society that begin from the point of acknowledgement that all systems of oppression are impacted by White privilege and White supremacy” (American University, n.d.). The implementation of antiracist practices helps to break the cycle of oppression and forces Black and Brown students to be viewed and treated as equal citizens.

To combat racial injustice in schools, staff members must be self-aware and acknowledge racism exists and White supremacy is real (Better-Bubon et al., 2022; Simmons, 2019). They

must also have a true knowledge and understanding of America's complicated history and the barriers that have been put into place to prevent the advancement of those from historically marginalized groups. Antiracist educators must also be comfortable talking about race and how it impacts and influences the lives of the students they are working with and working for. Being an antiracist means being an advocate and ally - using one's voice and privilege to stand up to injustice and by addressing the practices and policies hindering the success and well-being for all students and those that cause inequitable outcomes for students of color (ASCA, 2021).

Relationships with family and community stakeholders is also a necessary component in the creation of antiracist social justice practices. Truly inclusive school environments represent, affirm, and connect with family and community stakeholders (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022). School counselors can work with other school leaders to encourage linguistic diversity and ensure all communication from school is available in a variety of languages to prevent any information or opportunity gaps (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022). Going further, schools should also partner with families from all ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds to examine school policies and procedures to determine which are preventing student power and liberation (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Love, 2019).

### **School Counseling Roles**

School counselors are educational and counseling professionals who collaborate with families, school staff, and other stakeholders to establish a school environment that supports the educational and mental wellbeing of every student in PK-12 education (ASCA, 2017). School counselors have a responsibility to implement comprehensive school counseling programs (CSCPs) that not only align with school academic goals but also promote social/emotional and career success for all students, regardless of race, culture, home language, or family income

(ASCA, 2017). To make their programs culturally sustaining, school counselors identify any potential bias and inequity within their school as well as encourage students and families to see school as an extension of their home and a place to maintain their cultural practices (Grothaus et al., 2020).

### **Comprehensive School Counseling Programs**

The ASCA National Model, a framework for school counseling programs, gives school counselors a “how-to guide” with resources to help with the implementation of impactful and culturally sustaining programs supporting the academic, career, social/emotional health and well-being of all students enrolled in PK-12 schools (ASCA, 2019; Grothaus et al., 2020; Gysbers, 2010). The model is divided into four components: *define, manage, deliver, and assess*. Each quadrant contains resources to support program development as well as outline the role of a professional school counselor.

The *define* quadrant includes school counselor and student standards that detail the expectations for the school counseling profession (ASCA, 2019). These standards assist new and current school counselors to “develop, implement, and assess school counseling programs to improve student outcomes” (ASCA, 2019, p. xiii). In their book, *Culturally Sustaining School Counseling*, Drs. Grothaus, Johnson, and Edirmanasinghe (2020) encourage school counselors to reflect on how the ASCA standards are the foundation for a school counseling curriculum, however, school counselors must also consider student culture and identify any barriers hindering full implementation of a culturally sustaining program.

As school counselors *manage* their programs, they focus and plan a framework which can assist in the delivery of effective and impactful school counseling programs benefiting all students (ASCA, 2019). This includes the development of inclusive program vision and mission

statements that place an emphasis on equitable outcomes for all students. To make programs more culturally sustaining, counselors use their school's data summary to identify outcomes for students from historically marginalized backgrounds and ensure outcome goals are equitable. Based on the data collected, school counselors create school action plans addressing how to close opportunity, achievement, information, and attainment gaps for all students.

The *delivery* of developmentally and culturally appropriate activities and services directly and indirectly affecting student achievement and other outcomes is at the forefront of school counselors' minds as they develop programs. Lastly, school counselors regularly assess program goals and outcomes to ensure comprehensive school counseling programs benefit all students as well as self-assess for their own bias and inequitable practices (ASCA, 2019; Grothaus et al., 2020).

School counselors play an important role in the creation of inclusive PK-12 school environments that welcome students from all cultural, racial, and linguistic backgrounds. The ASCA Position Statement on student equity (2018) encourages school counselors to promote the equitable treatment of all students, including the enrollment of students from all racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds into rigorous courses as well as the development of plans to tackle the overrepresentation of specific races in special education programs. Related to equity, social justice advocacy calls for school counselors to increase access and improve outcomes for all students as well as creating equitable access to services and opportunities, regardless of a student's culture (Ceasar, 2011; Ratts et al., 2007). To help combat subjective discipline infractions and biased practices, many school counselors are intentionally implementing antiracist and racially just practices and moving from 'student deficit' to system changing

approaches (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). But how are school counselors implementing social and racial justice practices into their programs?

### **School Counseling and Social Justice**

Just like teachers, school counseling positions are largely occupied by White, middle class women (Francis et al., 2019; Mason et al., 2021). Approximately only 10% of high school counselors identify as Black (Francis et al., 2019). And, similar to teachers, school counselors can exhibit racial bias in their interactions with students (Francis et al., 2019). Dania Francis and colleagues conducted a study in 2019 with a sample of school counselors to investigate how they recommend students for advanced level STEM courses in high school (Francis et al., 2019). School counselors were given identical academic transcripts but the names on the transcripts were changed to show stereotypical White and Black sounding names for males and females (Francis et al., 2019). The study found that school counselors demonstrated lower academic expectations for Black female students, compared to their White male peers (Francis et al., 2019). National statistics on advanced and Advanced Placement course enrollment corroborate the results of this study. In 2013, only 6% of Black students were taking high level math courses like calculus, whereas 45% of Asians and 18% of White students were enrolled in such classes. Although the number of students of color enrolled in public schools is increasing above those of White students, White students continue to graduate from public high schools at higher rates than all other races (NCES, 2020).

In their article, Ratts, DeKruyf, and Chen-Hayes (2007) discussed a framework utilizing the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies for school counselor social justice advocates to increase access and equity in PK-12 schools. Using these competencies, in conjunction with the ASCA National Model, Ratts and colleagues lay out how

school counselors can be social justice advocates on behalf of all students (Ratts et al., 2007). As social justice advocates, school counselors empower students and parents to speak up for themselves when they encounter educational injustice, such as inappropriate referral for special education services or being overlooked for advanced courses (Ratts et al., 2007). School counselors also advocate for students by using their voice to increase school staff awareness of systemic inequities faced by students from low income families and students of color (Ratts et al., 2007). Students from historically marginalized communities are more likely to reach their full academic and social-emotional potential if they have access to high quality teachers, courses, and curriculum (Ratt & Greenleaf, 2017). Serving as social justice advocates, school counselors work as allies for students, promote systemic change, and provide opportunities for advancement for all students.

A qualitative study conducted by Singh and colleagues (2010) involving 16 school counselors who identified as social justice advocates, uncovered seven strategies school counselors can implement to create social change for all students. These strategies included: political savviness to navigate existing power structures; developing awareness of unfair and inequitable practices; initiating and participating in difficult conversations with stakeholders; creating intentional relationships to benefit students; teaching K-12 students how to advocate for themselves; using appropriate school data (i.e., discipline referrals, student absences, test scores) to navigate appropriate change; and lastly, providing information to others about how school counselors can advocate for underrepresented students (Singh et al., 2010). The data uncovered in this study is helpful for current school counselors in providing strategies to advocate for students at the school, local, and national level. Although it is imperative for school counselors to

advocate for appropriate social justice practices, they must move beyond to implement social justice *and* antiracist practices.

### **School Counseling and Antiracism**

Antiracism, while not a new concept, is gaining traction in the world of school counseling. It can also be explained as an action-oriented commitment to dismantlement of racist systems in society while affirming the wholeness and humanness of students, families, and communities (Holcomb-McCoy, 2020, 2022; Hughey, 2007; Love, 2020; Mayes, 2021). Dr. Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy, a leading voice in school counselor preparation and practice, defined antiracist school counseling as “school counselors’ active approach to dismantling racist practices, racial hatred, systemic racism, and oppression of historically oppressed racial groups within educational systems” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022, p.7). Likewise, in their article, Mayes and Byrd (2022) describes antiracist school counseling as:

Ongoing process of (a) believing that racism is ever-present and plagues all systems of society, (b) unlearning colonial ways of being, (c ) learning about the roots of racism and how all oppression is intersectional, (d) consistently addressing one’s own racist behaviors or internalized oppression, (e) challenging ways of thinking and doing that may feel normal, (f) using critical theories to develop and sharpen a lens to identify oppression, and (g) actively engaging in rooting out oppressive beliefs and policies wherever you find them, even within yourself. (Mayes & Byrd, 2022, p. 21)

The field of school counseling needs leaders and advocates who are willing to recognize their own biases. They must work to eliminate barriers and disrupt any systems preventing students, specifically those from historically marginalized backgrounds, from achieving academic, career, and social-emotional greatness. School counseling antiracist work involves more than

recognizing oppressive systems; it is the active removal of oppressive systems that unfairly target Black and Brown children (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022).

ASCA (2021) describes the school counselor's role in antiracist practices as one of awareness, knowledge, and action to end racism and bias in education. Antiracist school counselor advocates identify systemic barriers and inequities that prevent students from achieving while also creating new systems and policies that exclude racism and bias (Better-Bubon et al., 2022). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, teachers and school counselors are mostly White women who may expect students and families to enter schools exhibit behaviors similar to the White middle class (Better-Bubon et al., 2022; Haugen et al., 2021). To prevent such bias and culturally ignorant assumptions from entering schools, educators can partner with families, including linguistically diverse families, to ensure the learning environment is accepting of everyone. Antiracist school counselor advocates do not hesitate to call out injustice and systems of oppression while also promoting access, equity, and healing (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022).

In their article, Mason and colleagues (2021), provided a number of assignments school counselor educators could include in their courses to enhance the antiracist knowledge of school counselors in training. In their writing, they suggested the incorporation of activities, such as resource mapping and policy investigation, in graduate internship courses (Mason et al., 2021). These activities provide school counselors in training with experience in critiquing and removing systems of oppression. The problem, however, is that school counseling interns are not in the place to make sustainable change in schools over time. This is due to the short amount of time they are at their site (i.e., one academic semester). The same can be said for an article written by Ieva and colleagues (2021). In their conceptual publication, the authors share examples of how

school counselors can implement antiracist healing-centered groups (Ieva et al., 2021). This work, however, did not include practicing school counselors who are doing the work in the school buildings.

Antiracist literature is in its infancy. While there are some recent conceptual publications on school counseling and antiracism (Better-Bubon et al., 2022; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022), as well as an article on school counselor preparation from an antiracist lens (Mason et al., 2021) that have been published recently, and scholarship on school counselors' social justice practices (Singh et al., 2010), there exists a dearth of research on school counselors' practices that promote both antiracism *and* social justice. A recent publication by Haugen and colleagues (2021), discussed a framework of antiracist school counseling competencies. Although this Delphi study included school counselors' input, the participants also included counselor educators and directors. Also, this study did not include school counselor social justice practices. Thus, to date, school counselors' voices have not been heard to describe antiracist social justice and antiracist practices in PK-12 education.

### **Purpose and Research Question**

School counselors play an important role in the abolishment of racist and biased school policies. Through their advocacy efforts, school counselors can implement practices to remove barriers that prevent Black and Brown students from having the same academic, career, and social-emotional success as their white peers. The purpose of the study was to investigate the experiences of school counselors who implemented antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools. As a result of the study, I aim for current and future school counselors to gain a better understanding of antiracist social justice practices in school counseling, including possible strengths, recommendations, and challenges. This study sought to answer the following research

question: What are school counselors' lived experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools?

### **Method**

Qualitative research is often used for exploratory research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, qualitative researchers investigate the lived experiences of participants in their natural setting. Further, qualitative research uses the researcher as the main instrument in the data collection and analysis process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this reason, qualitative research closely resembles the counseling process and encourages truthful disclosure of participant perspectives, thoughts, and lived experiences as they relate to a phenomena (Hays & Singh, 2012).

### **Reflexivity Statement**

In qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument of which a phenomenon is explored (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). For this reason, it is imperative the researcher takes intentional steps to remove personal bias and beliefs from the research process. One such step is to self-reflect through a reflexivity statement (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hayes & Singh, 2012). I, the primary researcher, work full-time as a high school counselor and identify as a Black, cisgender female in my late 30s. As a mother of two Black boys and a school counselor who witnesses firsthand how the PK-12 U.S. educational system treats Black and Brown children, my work and research surrounds how best to remove economic, educational, and opportunity barriers for kids like my sons. Black and Brown children who look like my own fill classrooms in record numbers but do not see themselves or their ancestry reflected in their courses or in their teachers' faces. School disciplinary practices disproportionately and unjustly target the Black boys and girls and

there are a large number of these same Brown faces enrolled in special education programs who simply don't belong there (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2021; U.S. Department of Education, 2021). I believe America's non-White students often wonder where they belong and where they can get their needs met.

As a school counselor, I work daily to ensure all students feel supported, appreciated, and connected to their school communities. I see students/kids as experts in their own lives and make sure they feel heard and understood. As of late, there has been an ongoing call for school counselors to engage in antiracist practices including equitable discipline practices and the inclusion of diverse voices in the educational curriculum. Although I identify as a Black, liberal-leaning feminist, I also understand that my children, spouse, and I have certain privileges that the students I work with and advocate for do not. These privileges - including our access to education, a two-parent home, multiple streams of income, family support, and other opportunities - can cause blind spots in my own advocacy and educational reformation efforts. My experiences and identities (parent, spouse, doctoral student, school counselor) can also be seen as limitations. Throughout this study, I implemented trustworthiness strategies to manage my subjectivity.

### **Participants**

Participants of all gender identities and racial and ethnic backgrounds were invited to participate and were not restricted based on experience or qualifications. As a result, the research sample included one male (10%;  $n = 1$ ) and nine female participants (90%;  $n = 9$ ) who ranged in age from 21-50 years old. This age range provided a blend of both demographic and professional experience. Three participants identified as Black or African American (30%;  $n = 3$ ), four participants identified as white (40%;  $n = 4$ ), one participant identified as multiracial (10%;  $n =$

1), another identified as Black and Hispanic/Latinx (10%;  $n = 1$ ), and another participant identified as South Asian/Pakistani descent (10%;  $n = 1$ ). The demographic breakdown of this sample is similar to the national demographics of school counselors (ASCA, 2020). In addition, one participant's most recent school counseling experience was in an elementary school (10%;  $n = 1$ ), four participants worked in a middle school (40%;  $n = 4$ ), and five participants worked in high schools as school counselors (50%;  $n = 5$ ) (see Table 1)

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of School Counselor Participants*

*Demographic Characteristics of School Counselor Participants*

	n	Percent
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	1	10.0
Female	9	90.0
Nonbinary	0	0.0
Total	10	100.0
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White	4	40.0
Black	3	30.0
Multiracial	1	10.0
Black & Hispanic	1	10.0
South Asian/Pakistani	1	10.0
<i>Grade Level</i>		
Elementary	1	10.0
Middle	4	40.0
High	5	50.0
Total	10	100.0

**Data Collection Procedures**

Prior to conducting interviews with participants, I obtained approval from the Old Dominion University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once approval was received, I began to reach out to individuals via email to request participation in this study. The participants were

purposefully selected and invited to share their experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices. Purposeful and purposive sampling were used to ensure trustworthiness and data transferability (Hays & Singh, 2012).

For this study, as is recommended for phenomenological studies, I recruited 10 participants (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). Participant inclusion criteria included those who self-identify as: engaged in antiracist social justice school counseling practices as a practicing school counselor in PK-12 education, in the United States, within last 3 years, according to the terminology bulleted below:

- Social justice: advocate to increase access and equity in PK-12 schools (Ratts et al., 2007), such as engaging in examples similar to several of the following:
  - Increase school staff awareness of systemic inequities faced by students from low income families and students of color (Ratts et al., 2007)
  - Work as allies for students, promote systemic change, and provide opportunities for advancement for all students
  - Political savviness to navigate existing power structures
  - Developing awareness of unfair and inequitable practices; initiating and participating in difficult conversations with stakeholders
  - Creating intentional relationships to benefit students
  - Teaching K-12 students how to advocate for themselves
  - Using appropriate school data (i.e. discipline referrals, student absences, test scores) to navigate appropriate change
  - Providing information to others about how school counselors can advocate for underrepresented students (Singh et al., 2010)

- Antiracism: “school counselors’ active approach to dismantling racist practices, racial hatred, systemic racism, and oppression of historically oppressed racial groups within educational systems” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022, p. 7) such as engaging in examples similar to several of the following:
  - Advocating against zero tolerance discipline practices and dress code policies that target Black and Brown boys and sexualize Black girls (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)
  - Calling for the removal of School Resource Officers
  - Opposing discipline consequences that leave students out of classrooms
  - Implementing restorative and healing practices to build and restore relationships between students and teachers (Ieva et al., 2021)

Data collection for this research study occurred through interviews designed to explore the lived experiences of school counselors who implement antiracist social justice practices. Through the use of a semi-structured interview, participants were asked to share their experiences and perceptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). This interview approach allowed the researcher flexibility to adapt follow-up probing questions based on the participants’ responses (Moustakas, 1994), and promote member checking of data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). These interview questions can be found later in Appendix D. The use of a semi-structured interview also provided for a continuous flow of conversation, which I believe led to richer data regarding the phenomena.

Each participant attended one, 60 minute interview session (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). A choice of times was available to allow flexibility in participant scheduling. Evening

and weekend interview times were also an option. Interviews with participants were conducted on Zoom, a video-conferencing platform that is safe, secure, and password protected. Due to its live transcription capabilities, Zoom also provided an opportunity for potential participants with hearing impairments to contribute to the study. Another reason for using Zoom to conduct the interviews was to limit contact with participants due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of video-conferencing also permitted flexibility in scheduling and location, allowing me to interview participants from a range of locations.

### **Data Analysis**

For data analysis, I followed Moustakas' (1994) approach, which included the following steps: (a) bracketing (b) horizontalization, (c) clustering horizons, (d) textural and structural descriptions, and (e) essence. These steps are explained in more detail below.

First, to analyze data collected from the semi-structured interviews with school counselors, it is imperative that I, as the researcher, truly immersed myself in the data by repeatedly reading over the material (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Moustakas, 1994). As such, I read through all transcripts multiple times, noting my observations and reflections on the content. Throughout the collection and analysis process, I bracketed my own biases related to social justice and antiracism through the use of a reflexivity journal, field notes, and engaging in peer-debriefing during research meetings (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Moustakas, 1994).

Second, while reading participant transcripts, I engaged in horizontalization-coding or assigning meaning to units or phrases (Moustakas, 1994). Next, I clustered horizons or codes into themes, eliminating repeat statements along the way (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Moustakas, 1994). Once clustering was complete, themes were organized into textural and

structural descriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Textural descriptions are the ‘what’ of participant experiences whereas structural descriptions are the ‘how’ (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Moustakas, 1994). The textural and structural descriptions were then used to uncover the common experience, or essence, of the school counselor participants (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Moustakas, 1994).

### **Strategies for Trustworthiness**

Qualitative research utilizes the researcher as the instrument throughout a study (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). To ensure researcher personal thoughts, feelings, and biases are not interfering in the research process; to best attempt to glean the participants’ lived experiences; and to increase the rigor of my study, I used a number of trustworthiness strategies (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). These strategies ensured research credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012).

Throughout the research process, I adopted a number of trustworthiness strategies to bracket my own assumptions and continuously reflected on my own biases and assumptions as they related to antiracism and social justice. This took place through reflexive journaling and memos before, after, and during participant interviews and data analysis (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). Furthermore, participants were asked to review their interview transcripts to ensure accuracy and promote data trustworthiness in a process called member checking (Hays & Singh, 2012). Member checking occurred throughout the data collection process to ensure descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validation of the research findings (Hays & Singh, 2012). Specifically, when asked to provide feedback on their

transcripts, participants confirmed accuracy of their statements and shared additional information on concepts they shared during interviews. This information was added to their transcripts for data analysis. Last, to ensure credibility, I engaged in researcher triangulation, which I did through consensus coding with a peer debriefer. Specifically, I utilized a peer debriefer in this study through all steps of data collection and data analysis. Both verbally and in written form, they reviewed all coded data and transcripts (for consensus coding), as well as iterations of the code book and findings- providing feedback on my data analysis.

Transferability strategies were put into place to ensure the research process was described in depth so the reader could identify similarities in this study and their own setting (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press). This was done by communicating the data analysis steps and findings through thick, rich descriptions (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Detailed participant descriptions and direct quotes regarding their lived experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices were used throughout the data presentation. This allowed the participant's voice to shine. Similarly, the use of an audit trail also allows readers to understand the nuances of the process and procedures, thus bolstering transferability.

To ensure the study and its findings demonstrated dependability and the findings were thus consistent, I enlisted the help of an external auditor to examine the audit trail, including the data collection and analysis processes, as well as attempts to bracket researcher biases (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). The use of the external auditor ensured researcher biases and assumptions were bracketed and interfered as minimally as possible in the data analysis process (Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press; Hays & Singh, 2012). Specifically, I provided the external auditor with an audit trail, such as notes from my

meetings with a peer debriefer, my codebook, a sample of participant transcripts, and drafts of both my methodology and results chapters. The external auditor provided feedback, such as collapsing a theme due to a lack of supportive codes. As a result, I collapsed the theme and adjusted my codebook to reflect the change. Through reflexivity and audit trails, I, the researcher, removed myself and my feelings, emotions, and thoughts from the research study as much as possible. This ensured the participants' lived experiences were shared and remained at the core of the research process.

### **Findings**

The results of this study are a culmination of the participants' voices and lived experiences. Through using Moustakas' data analysis steps for a phenomenological investigation, I uncovered three themes and 12 subthemes emerged from the data. Specifically, the themes were (a) advocacy, (b) courage, and (c) challenges.

#### **Theme I: Advocacy**

The first theme, *advocacy*, demonstrated the significant role school counselors play in the dismantling of oppressive systems while also protecting Black and Brown lives. The essence of this theme related to how school counselors used their own privilege and position of authority to combat injustices happening in PK-12 schools, including the empowerment of students. Nearly every participant in this study discussed the important role advocacy plays in the implementation of antiracist social justice practices in schools. As a result of data analysis, two subthemes emerged: (a) use of privilege to address inequities, and (b) empowering students to make systemic change.

**Subtheme: Use of Privilege to Address Inequities.** Participants shared examples of how they used their position in PK-12 schools to address the harm being done to Black and Brown

students within the halls of education. For example, Participant #9 mentioned they used their privilege through, “realizing the systems are set up to fail certain people, and we have to actively keep working or doing our little piece, chipping our little piece, and hopefully, by role modeling behavior in your schools.” Participant #5 said, “we have this unique position of trying to work against the system while within the system.” Similarly, Participant #7 stated, “it’s being that brave person, not afraid to put myself on the line.”

**Subtheme: Empowering Students to Make Systemic Change.** Another subtheme of *advocacy* was how school counselors empowered their students to make systemic change. Participant #10 shared “put your students at the center of what you're trying to do with your program.” The same participant also discussed that when they implement antiracist social justice practices, they are “really loving and affirming black students every day.” Participant #1 discussed a similar experience,

Oh, I'd say that was one of the key things as we had to hear students' voices... 'Cause you know, you got students of all different backgrounds that this impacted. I think being aware of how heavy it is for students and that they need a place to process too.

## **Theme 2: Courage**

Another theme that emerged during data analysis was *courage*. Participants described ways in which they were intentional and proactive during their experiences implementing antiracist social justice practices. This was the difference between being an accidental ally and implementing practices with purpose. This theme included the following subthemes: (a) use of data, (b) elimination of barriers, (c) dismantling systems, (d) navigating difficult conversations, (e) having hope, and (f) stakeholder partnership: prioritizing equity work.

**Subtheme: Use of Data.** Participants talked about ways in which they had the courage to utilize data to evaluate school policies and address inequities. Participant #8, for example, stated, "here's the data, I'm showing you, I'm seeing a problem. And then it's gonna take a lot of us to come together to fix that." Participant #1 remarked on their experience reviewing his school's data and mentioned how they "look[ed] at the data through that antiracist lens." In a similar vein, Participant #2 stated, "what is the purpose of our school rules, policies, and procedures? I think we have to examine who they're helping and who they're hurting. And I don't think any policy should remain in place if it's disproportionately harming our students of color."

**Subtheme: Elimination of Barriers.** Another subtheme of *courage* that was identified during data analysis was the elimination of barriers. School counselor participants shared examples of how they implemented practices to close opportunity gaps for students and families. Participant #4 talked of how they helped their students with postsecondary plans, "helping them, specifically our students of color, walking them through the FAFSA, sitting down with them and doing college applications, and not just saying, 'Here are the applications, go do it.'" Participant #9, when discussing working with their English learner families and ensuring access to information, said, "making sure before we're sending a financial aid night, we're having a translator [to] translate."

Knowing the role school staff play in providing access or creating barriers, participants provided examples of how they work with others to eliminate barriers. When working directly with staff to address student access to advanced level course, Participant #7 described, "ensuring the professional development of our staff to ensure that those biases aren't present in the classroom, to ensure that every single student has access to AP classes."

**Subtheme: Dismantling Systems.** A third subtheme of *courage* was the dismantling of systems.

The essence of this subtheme addressed how school counselor participants actively worked to remove policies and procedures that purposely prohibit the educational advancement of BISOC. Participant #10 stated, “counselors who are trying to implement social justice or antiracist practices in their school counseling programs, they're questioning, they're not just going with the status quo, they're asking questions, they're trying to change systems.” Similarly, Participant #2 said, “to me with anti-racism and social justice, it's looking at the system.” Participant #6 also shared, “this thing, the system's not working. It wasn't made for me and it's harmful. It's hurting me, it's hurting my people, it's hurting my community. And so it's interesting to see who's willing to sort of dismantle something that their people created that's now affecting my community.” Participant #5 discussed the intentionality behind dismantling systems,

I work with this one kid and I'm breaking down barriers for you just because that's the right thing to do, but if I'm not being intentional about it, then I'm not doing in a systemic way, that means that the next kid gets the same level of support, or hopefully eventually no kid would need that because the system itself has been altered by the work of the school counselors. . . So, you know it's sort of like if racism is a system, and you know that if we are not fighting against the system, then we're not being antiracist. You might think we're being good people, we might be helping kids, but we're not being antiracist because there is a systemic component to that, it's not something that happens in one-offs or individual moments, it's something that's systemic and perpetuated sort of without you having to do anything, it's gonna keep happening. So, if you don't have intentionality to fight it, there's just no way for you, if you're not being systemic then you're not touching on racism.

**Subtheme: Navigating Difficult Conversations.** The fourth subtheme of *courage* was how the participants navigated having difficult conversations with stakeholders while working to implement antiracist social justice practices in their schools. Participant #1 described how their antiracist work encouraged them to have conversations with other educators, “It really pushed me to do more conversations, hold spaces for educators to talk and dialogue because I’d have colleagues, who’d be like, ‘Oh, like, I really don’t know what to say or how to say this or whatever.’” Participant #6 spoke of,

Having frank conversations about bias that could be lingering and how that impacts how you even see and respond and hear students and make space for students to feel the way they feel and just show up and be who they are, whether it’s quirky, whether it’s fun and animated, etcetera. And so having those conversations about relationship building.

Similarly, Participant #4 said,

Having conversations with administrators surrounding the social-emotional needs of our students and trauma and what they’re experiencing, and how their traditional ways or their ways of trying to raise the graduation rate wasn’t working or wasn’t realistic, and that they’re missing the point, that they’re missing some key things to helping the students.

**Subtheme: Having Hope.** Another subtheme of *courage* is having hope: hope for the future of school counseling, hope for change, and hope for students. Participant #2 stated, “I do believe that there is power at school counselors as change agents in terms of looking at policies and practices and procedures.” Participant #9 also shared, “but I think being a school counselor means that we can chip away where we can.”

This sentiment was echoed by Participant #5 when they said, “when you work in a school, you can really impact the way that school does things. I think counselors have such a unique position to do that because unlike any other position in the school, they're able to see things globally and really make changes globally.” In sharing their hope for the future of school counseling, Participant #10 simply stated, “when you say school counseling, it should just be inherently antiracist, that's where I really hope that we get to.”

**Subtheme: Stakeholder Partnership: Prioritizing Equity Work.** The last subtheme that emerged during data analysis was *stakeholder partnership: prioritizing equity work*. Here, school counselors identified partners (i.e., administration, parents/families, community members, teachers) who assisted in the implementation of antiracist social justice practices. Participant #10 talked of partnering with their administrators, “I'm really thankful for my admin. I feel very comfortable bringing to them different concerns, differences like, ‘Hey, why don't we try this?’ Or, “What can we do to make sure that our students have access?.” Participant #9 also said, “building those relationships in the community and with our family is definitely very important”.

### **Theme 3: Challenges**

The last theme surfacing during data analysis were the *challenges* participants experienced while implementing antiracist social justice practices in schools. This includes situations, people, places that challenged (or can challenge) full implementation of practices. Within this theme, four subthemes were discovered: (a) the COVID-19 pandemic, (b) stakeholder resistance, (c) the current political climate, and (d) the sustainability of antiracist social justice practices. Each subtheme is discussed in more detail below.

**Subtheme: COVID-19 Pandemic.** The COVID-19 pandemic has presented a number of challenges, especially in education. During this time, many of the school counselor participants

were forced to adjust their focus from implementing antiracist social justice practices to helping their students and their school cope. For example, when speaking of their challenges during the pandemic, Participant #8 said, “we can't let this go. I know we're busy with COVID, but this is extremely important and impacts every single school, every single student, whether they're White, Black, whatever color, it all impacts them.” Participant #4 also shared how they are attempting to implement a tiered approach to antiracist social justice practices: “there are, like a few Tier 1 opportunities throughout the year, where it's tricky with the pandemic because we can't.” Participant #6 “talked about the struggle of school counselors as they have to confront multiple crises during the pandemic, “and then as school counselors when we're dealing with a current crisis, mental health crisis, there's a public health crisis.”

**Subtheme: Stakeholder Resistance.** Another subtheme of the *challenges* faced by school counselors as they attempt to implement antiracist social justice practices is school administrator resistance. It is difficult for school counselors to work in silos when they are a part of the larger school community. For many, it caused internal conflict between their beliefs and that of their school districts. For example, Participant #9 stated, “I work in a district where in a board meeting, it was flat out said that racism doesn't exist in our district.” Participant #2 discussed stakeholder resistance in their school, “I think sometimes there's like eye-rolls of like, ‘[they’re] bringing up race again,’ or like, ‘[they’re] talking about this policy.’” Participant #1 also shared, “it is personal because I knew that if our school wasn't ready to talk about it, and it kept happening.” Similarly, Participant #8 talked about their loss of hope due to resistance, “Do I have resources? Do I have administrators who support that? I don't know if I can make that difference.”

For some participants, there was so much resistance, they had to ‘disguise’ their goals and objectives to combating racial injustices in schools, “so even for example, like, I wouldn't be able to call it antiracism here, I would have to call it DEI” (Participant #3). Some others expressed concern for position/job if they addressed racist school and district practices and policies,

As many folks in schools are, I had some things that made me worried about being blacklisted or being fired, and so I... Even though I pushed the envelope, there were, you know, some underlying fears that I had that I think held me back (Participant #4)

**Subtheme: Current Political Climate.** Antiracist work has been demonized by right-wing pundits, political activists, parents, and school staff, creating fear surrounding conversations about racial, racial equity, discrimination, and injustice. As a result, school counselors who are doing the work are forced into the middle of this battle. This led to the identification of another subtheme of *challenge: current political climate*. Participant #1 shared, “in the current culture we are in that cancel culture real, nobody wants to be called a Karen [laughter] you know. And so, I think it makes it hard to take the risk.” Participant #7 stated, “it's so hard and this divisive world that we're in, we're more divided than we've ever been and moving the needle is such a hard thing.”

Participant #3, talking about their experiences, expressed, “I still have to be very careful and very intentional to keep in mind the environment in which I'm placed, which takes kind of a delicate dance.” Likewise, Participant #4 said, “I do think that a lot of the things that are going on and all of the political piece is gonna make things harder for us who want to engage in that work.”

**Subtheme: Sustainability of Antiracist Social Justice Practices.** The last subtheme to emerge was the struggle the school counselor participants faced when working to sustain antiracist social justice practices in their schools. How do they keep up the work when faced with so much resistance from all sides? What happens to the students and families in the process? Is there support or resistance from their school system, state, and national organizations? Participant #8 shared,

The big thing for me has been consistency. I get frustrated and I'm frustrated currently where I don't see it being consistent, it's like we did this one training, check the box, and that's not what this is about. It can never be about that; it needs to be ongoing.

Participant #7 discussed how change can be an uphill battle, especially for the students, “we were asking them to change 400 years of racist practice that even the adults don't know how to change.” Along those same lines, Participant #9 said,

It's ongoing. It's learning, it's un-learning so many things that I have learned, unlearned so many things and never really truly saying that I've got this . . . It feels like people who are in power are gonna keep it that way for certain populations to not get what they should.

The work of implementing antiracist social justice practices is not easy, but it is necessary,

It's really looking at how do I continue to feed and fuel into things that continue to harm Black and Brown bodies, and how can I make some different decisions, how can I change the culture of certain spaces I'm in? How can we stop talking about stuff and start doing things? (Participant #6).

## **Discussion**

America's PK-12 schools repeatedly ignore the academic advancement as well as the social-emotional well-being of students of color. For decades, school data has illustrated the work needed to ensure Black and Brown students are meeting the same academic expectations as their White peers. Although demographics show a shift from White students being the majority-48% of all students (NCES, 2020) - school curriculum and school policies continuously and intentionally favor this group. It is also important to note that as the student population diversifies, the teacher population remains overly saturated with White women (NCES, 2020).

White teachers and other school staff continue the cycle of oppression of Black and Indigenous students of color (BISOC) minds and bodies, whether consciously or unconsciously. As the calls for institutional racial justice and equity ring louder, there is a push for school counselors to make an intentional effort to put into place comprehensive school counseling programs that include antiracist social justice practices. Due to their proximity within the educational system and with the students they are tasked with protecting, school counselors can play a significant role in dismantling oppressive systems. This study was developed to answer the following research questions: What are school counselors' lived experiences implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools?

There have been a number of studies researching the lived experiences of school counselors' social justice practices (i.e., Ratts et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2010), however, there is limited research surrounding school counselor antiracist social justice practices. Researchers have also detailed ways in which school counselor preparation programs can prepare future school counselors to be antiracist (i.e., Mason et al., 2021), but such research misses the voices of practicing school counselors. Prior to the current study, there was conceptual literature regarding school counselor antiracist work (i.e., Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Mayes & Byrd,

2022) and a Delphi study in the early stages of antiracist school counseling competencies development (i.e. Haugen et al., 2021). However, this study is the first known study to empirically examine school counselor antiracist social justice practices by interviewing practicing school counselors to uncover their lived experiences.

### **Theme I: Advocacy**

The first theme in this study is advocacy including the use of privilege to address inequities, and empowering students to make systemic change. In previous literature related to advocacy, particularly advocacy centering students, ASCA outlined the role of a school counselor as a leader in schools who assists students with their academic, career, and social/emotional wellbeing (ASCA, 2015, 2018, 2021a, 2021b; Grothaus et al., 2020). School counselors also have a responsibility to acknowledge unjust practices and policies which unintentionally harm students of color and advocate for policies that ensure equity for all (ASCA 2021a; Grothaus et al., 2020). Previous research has also shown school counselors as social justice advocates (i.e. Ratts et al., 2007). School counselors are encouraged to empower students and their families to confront school officials if they encounter educational injustice and to also use their own voices to inform school staff of systemic inequities (Ratts et al., 2007). This information parallels the data which emerged from the current study in which school counselors shared how they use their privilege to evoke change while also empowering their students. True advocacy is not solely speaking up for others, but rather bringing others to the table to speak for themselves. School counseling advocacy is done with students, not just on behalf of them. Thus, the present study parallels previous research on the importance of school counseling advocacy, but emphasizes it within an antiracist social justice framework, providing novel insight into school counselors' antiracist social justice experiences.

## **Theme 2: Courage**

The second theme uncovered in this study was courage, which specified: use of data, elimination of barriers, dismantling systems, navigating difficult conversations, having hope, and stakeholder partnership: prioritizing equity work. In particular, these findings called for intentionality and proactiveness- so antiracist social justice practices were developed and implemented with purpose. In her keynote address at the 2022 Evidence-based School Counseling Conference, Dr. Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy called on school counselors to be brave enough to stand up for Black and Brown students, even if they are standing alone. Haugen and colleagues (2021) also found a similar theme in their Delphi study, in which members of their expert panel demonstrated bravery when engaging in antiracist work. In the current study, school counselors were provided space to share their lived experiences and defined how they show courage through the intentional use of data, elimination of barriers to student success, dismantling of oppressive systems, navigating difficult conversations, having hope, and stakeholder partnerships. Previous research discussed school counselors utilizing school data and systemic change to navigate change and decrease student barriers as well (ASCA, 2019; Grothaus et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2010). As such, participants of the present study shared how they used school data to point out inequities in student access to advanced coursework and discipline referrals. The ASCA “The School Counselor and Equity for All Students” position statement (2018) also instructs school counselors to access school data to identify gaps in student achievement and opportunity.

The findings from this study also demonstrated the courage required and impact school counselors can make when they regularly partnered with their administrators and other school stakeholders. The school counseling literature base is ripe with literature on school counselors

collaborating with school administration and other stakeholders (ASCA, 2019; Grothaus et al., 2020; Singh et al., 2010). School counselors are part of a larger school environment and cannot work in silos and expect to make sustainable change. For this reason, partnering with school administrators is essential to creating a culture of inclusion and assists with full implementation of antiracist social justice practices.

Working alongside administrators to implement such practices, however, could be challenging and required having difficult conversations. Collaboration was key but was not always easy. School counselors are encouraged to use their voices to increase school staff awareness of systemic inequities faced by students from low income families and students of color (Ratts et al., 2007; Singh et al, 2010). This is similar to what participants of this study stated they do regularly, even if they are uncomfortable having these conversations. However, they know the conversations are necessary to address school and staff anti-Black and anti-Brown bias.

Successfully navigating difficult conversations also filled some study participants with hope - hope for change and hope for the future. School counselors are in a unique position in schools in which they are able to make significant change in the lives of students, families, and school stakeholders (ASCA, 2019). And as literature on school counselor antiracist social justice practices continues to emerge (i.e., Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., under review; Haugen et al., 2021; Ieva et al., 2021; Mason et al., 2021; Mayes & Byrd, 2022), school counselors will have the frameworks, competencies, and support needed to implement antiracist social justice practices within their comprehensive school counseling programs.

### **Theme 3: Challenges**

The third theme, challenges, included: the COVID-19 pandemic, stakeholder resistance, the current political climate, and the sustainability of antiracist social justice practices. To start with, the COVID-19 pandemic sent the entire world into a head spin. Schools closed their doors, leaving students to learn through camera screens instead of in classrooms with their peers (Dorn et al., 2021). As schools began to open and things slowly returned to normal, Black and Brown students re-entering the halls of education were coming back an additional three to five months behind their White peers academically (Dorn et al., 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). The antiracist social justice work many school counselors began before the pandemic took a back seat to make room for student learning loss and the influx of student (and staff) mental health concerns (Dorn et al., 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Mayes & Byrd, 2022) This shift in focus also created a shift in many school counselor -stakeholder relationships. Although stakeholders can be helpful in dismantling oppressive systems, as noted in the second theme, they can also be a challenge to implementing effective antiracist social justice practices. Fergus (2019) spoke of the role teacher and staff bias plays in student discipline referrals for subjective behaviors, such as disruption, disrespect, and disobedience - leading to the overrepresentation of Black and Brown students receiving discipline referrals. In a similar vein, Francis and colleagues (2019) demonstrated how school counselor bias essentially created barriers to student educational advancement when they were less likely to recommend Black female students for advanced courses. The findings of each of these studies align with the experiences of the participants of the current study. Hence, the biases described by Fergus (2019) and Francis et al. (2019) are echoed in the current findings- within the context of school counselors' antiracist social justice practices. As such, this present study extends the current research base on race-based biases in PK-12

education, providing context through school counselors' thick, rich descriptions in this phenomenological investigation.

In a similar vein, in the present study, there were stakeholders, school officials and parents alike, who simply rejected the notion of implementing antiracist social justice practices because it involved talk of race and attributed such conversations to political rhetoric. This resistance could also be due to their own personal discomfort addressing race or a result of the current political climate politicizing the concept of racism and school-based equity work (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). Fearmongering surrounding terms such as critical race theory and social emotional learning has led to a number of legislative bills and laws preventing open discussions about institutional racism and even the teaching of accurate history (ASCA, 2021b; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). Participants in the current study described how criticisms such as these have them struggling to figure out how they can sustain the antiracist social justice policies they have implemented.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Practice**

To implement effective antiracist social justice practices, professional school counselors are called to (a) work diligently to *assess* school data, (b) *acknowledge* racist and other harmful practices, (c) *address* the discrepancies in data with administrators and other school stakeholders, (d) *advocate* for change, and (e) *abolish* discriminatory practices, policies, and people from schools (ASCA 2021a, 2021b; Betters-Bubon et al., 2022; Edirmanasinghe et al., under review; Haugen et al., 2021; Love, 2019; Mayes & Byrd, 2022). In addition, strong school counselor - administrator relationships may be the key to ensuring practices and policies are equitable for all. School counselors should become comfortable with having courageous conversations with

stakeholders, especially when students' lives are on the line, because they are (Haugen et al., 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022). These conversations could be as informal as a hallway chat or as formal as a school-based training on implicit bias in grading and discipline practices.

However, many school counselors do not know where to start, which is why continuing education is so important. Local, state, and national organizations, such as ASCA and state counseling organizations, must ensure there are opportunities for school counselors to access the latest literature surrounding antiracist social justice practices and provide guidance on how to appropriately implement them in schools. School counselors could also create networks of support, including other school counselors and community partners as well as supervision, with whom they could share resources, strategies, and emotional support.

### **Implications for Preparation**

School counselor preparation programs have an important job to prepare future school counselors to do the hard work of dismantling the racially biased institution of education. The American School Counselor Association specifically asks school counselor preparation programs to facilitate learning and training for future school counselors "...ensuring equitable access to resources" (ASCA, 2014, p. 62) and "...using advocacy and data-informed school counseling practices to close the achievement/opportunity gap" (ASCA, 2014, p. 62). What is not specified, however, is how counselor education programs should teach these theories and strategies and why it is important given the country's changing demographics. In their work, Mason and colleagues (2021) provided examples of how to ingrain antiracist work into school counselor preparation classes. This included experiential learning activities and classroom assignments, such as resource mapping (Mason et al., 2021). Preparation programs could also effectively train school counselors on how to collect, analyze, and utilize school data to make

equitable change. Lastly, school counselor educators could actively partner with neighboring schools and districts to provide training for practicing school counselors on how to identify inequitable policies and how to dismantle them.

### **Implications for Policy**

This study and its findings identified a number of challenges school counselors face when implementing antiracist social justice practices, including the sustainability of antiracist social justice practices. School counselors are in unique positions of leadership in which they could work side-by-side with school administration to abolish inequitable practices and policies that harm BISOC (Edirmanasinghe et al., under review; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Love, 2019). This could include removal of dress codes that unfairly target Black and Brown boys and oversexualizes Black girls or discipline that does not include restorative practices (Ieva et al., 2021).

On the state and national level, school counseling organizations could lobby for the removal of culturally and racially biased high-stakes standardized testing to create an educational system that ensures collective freedom and works for everyone, not just the few. School counseling organizations could also lobby for lower school counselor - student ratios and the elimination of non-school counselor related duties to ensure school counselors have the time to implement antiracist social justice practices thoroughly. Lastly, state and national organizations could lobby for equitable funding for schools and districts with high populations of Black and Brown students, as these schools are historically underfunded and lack resources (Garcia, 2020).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

My hope is that school counselor antiracist social justice practices and antiracism work will not end with this study. As change agents, practicing school counselors have so much more

to add to the conversation of equitable school practices and procedures. It is my hope that the results of this study lead to continuing a line of research surrounding antiracist social justice school counseling practices and interventions.

Additional phenomenological investigations can provide opportunities for practicing school counselors to continue to share their lived experiences involving antiracist social justice practices, or a grounded theory– to generate a theory surrounding school counselors’ antiracist social justice practices. A qualitative study can also be conducted using BISOC as participants to provide an opportunity for historically marginalized students to share their experiences surviving the oppressive institution of education. A study such as this could be incredibly eye-opening for school stakeholders and invoke sustainable change.

Using the results of this study, a Delphi study may also be conducted in the future, to develop a list of antiracist social justice competencies. Building upon that, researchers in the future may consider creating a validated instrument in which school counselors and school districts determine school counselors’ antiracist social justice practices. The potential instrument can assist school counselors in guiding their schools to be more welcoming and inclusive, and also assist in identifying existing barriers preventing BISOC from attaining academic success and emotional well-being. Haugen and colleagues (2021) have begun the work of developing similar competencies to assist school counselors with identifying inequitable and racist policies in schools.

### **Research Limitations**

All research studies have limitations, and this study was no exception. First, due to my job as a professional school counselor and a mother of two Black boys, I see daily the challenges faced by Black and Brown students and their families (including my own) as they attempt to

navigate the inherently racist public school system. To bracket my own biases, I implemented a number of trustworthiness strategies, including the use of a reflexivity journal, an additional coder, and an external auditor. However, there is still the possibility of my own biases seeping through the data collection and analysis process.

Next, the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic cannot be ignored. This virus has impacted every arena including education. This study explored the lived experiences of 10 school counselors, each who were school counselors before and during the pandemic. They bore witness to the failures of remote learning, limited resources for students, and the resulting mental health concerns of extended isolation (Dorn et al., 2021). The disconnect from school communities combined with school personnel's hyperfocus on student learning loss could have effects on how antiracist social justice practices were implemented in their schools.

Additionally, the country has been a witness to the calls and actions surrounding racial justice for those from historically minoritized groups. The repeated murder of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people by police officers, or aggression shown by school resource officers, which can be usually witnessed through social media, could influence what school counselors do in daily practice. Many may have felt a sense of urgency to implement antiracist social justice practices to remove barriers and provide equitable access to resources for students. Thus, the context of the data collection time period was relevant and may have likely impacted the results of this study.

Lastly, the term 'Critical Race Theory' has taken on a life of its own. Splashed across social media and cable news shows, those three words have invoked fear and anger in many, although they may not understand the definition. In some schools, districts, and states stakeholders have banned the use of 'Critical Race Theory' and any other terms they may think

are related. This includes terms such as social emotional learning, diversity, equity, and inclusion. This can place school counselors in a tough spot - causing internal conflict. They may be hesitant to implement antiracist social justice practices due to concern surrounding job security and reputation. On the other hand, school counselors, especially those who have moved from school to district leadership positions, may feel a sense of freedom with implementation and sharing of resources with their school counseling colleagues.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

Education, public or private, has long been accused of inequitable, unethical, and biased procedures that are harmful to select student populations. Discriminatory and culturally biased practices in standardized testing, resource availability, student discipline, course content, and course selection have long plagued schools. School counselor leaders who implement antiracist social justice practices into their comprehensive school counseling programs actively work to identify and address barriers to student academic success, college and career readiness, and social/emotional development. Through the careful examination of data and courageous conversations with stakeholders, school counselors who implement such practices develop plans for changing the broken educational system and create equitable spaces for learning and advancement. The participants of this study shared their stories and experiences with implementing antiracist social justice practices. Through advocacy, courage, and navigating challenges, they continuously place students as a priority as they intentionally disrupt and dismantle racially inequitable practices. But school counselors must not be afraid to do the work alone, if necessary. Because we are in this for the long haul, or as Dr. Ladson-Billings (2022) stated, we're here for the hard re-set.

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## APPENDIX A

### IRB Approval



#### OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT FOR RESEARCH



#### Physical Address

4111 Monarch Way, Suite 203  
Norfolk, Virginia 23508

#### Mailing Address

Office of Research  
1 Old Dominion University  
Norfolk, Virginia 23529  
Phone(757) 683-3460  
Fax(757) 683-5902

DATE: January 3, 2022

TO: Emily Goodman-Scott, PhD

FROM: Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee

PROJECT TITLE: [1845652-1] A phenomenological investigation of school counselor social justice antiracist practices

REFERENCE #:

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE:

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category #2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this project. The Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee has determined this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

We will retain a copy of this correspondence within our records.

If you have any questions, please contact John Baaki at (757) 683-5491 or jbaaki@odu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Old Dominion University Education Human Subjects Review Committee's records.

## APPENDIX B

### Sample Recruitment Email

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Stephanie Smith-Durkin, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision program at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, VA. Under the supervision of Dr. Emily Goodman-Scott, an associate professor at ODU, I am conducting a research study to explore the experiences of school counselors implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools. Your participation in this study could inform school counseling practices, professional development efforts, and further research surrounding the topics of social justice and antiracism. Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time without consequence or penalty. Also, there is no compensation for participation.

**Eligibility:** To be considered as a participant, you must meet the following criteria:

(a) self-identify as a professional school counselor, having held a position in the United States within the last three years and (b) engage in antiracist social justice school counseling practices according to our definitions (please see the end of this email).

**Time:** The total maximum amount of time it will take to participate in this study is approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes (15 minutes to complete the onboarding process [informed consent and demographic information Google Form, email], 60 minutes to engage in the interview, 15-30 minutes to check the interview transcript).

**Participation Requirements:** You will be asked to complete the following:

1. Complete the Google demographic and consent form: [insert link]
2. Complete a 1-hour individual interview in early spring 2022 via Zoom (time and date based on availability) where you will be asked a series of semi-structured questions pertaining to your experience as a school counselor engaging in antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools. The interview will be audio and video recorded, and transcribed.
3. Review the interview transcript for accuracy.

**Confidentiality:** Any information you provide will remain anonymous and confidential within the confines of the law. To best protect your identity, your name, school, and state will not be displayed on the final report. Instead, pseudonyms will be used. All interview audio and video recordings will be destroyed upon completion of the study. Please see attached informed consent for full confidentiality disclosure.

---

Please let me know if you have any questions about the study or your participation. I can be reached via email at [ssmit125@odu.edu](mailto:ssmit125@odu.edu) or phone 757-563-4877. Thank you for your consideration.

Best regards,  
Stephanie Smith-Durkin

**APPENDIX C**  
**Consent Agreement for Research Study Involving Human Subjects**

**Title:** A phenomenological investigation of school counselor antiracist social justice practices

**Investigators:**

Emily Goodman-Scott  
[egscott@odu.edu](mailto:egscott@odu.edu)  
757-683-3326

Stephanie Smith-Durkin  
[ssmit125@odu.edu](mailto:ssmit125@odu.edu)  
757-563-4877

**Description**

School counselors are invited to participate in this study exploring their experiences implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools. The following research focus guides this study: Exploring the experiences of school counselors implementing antiracist social justice practices in PK-12 schools. The purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of school counselors engaging in antiracist social justice practices, including the support, strengths, and barriers.

This study includes a brief screening survey to determine participation eligibility, demographics, and availability, which should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete. In the future, an individual interview will take place over Zoom, a web-based conference system, which should take approximately 60-minutes. Lastly, participants will be emailed a copy of the interview transcript to review for accuracy, which should take approximately 15-30 minutes. Overall, the approximate time it should take to participate in this study is a maximum total of 1 hour and 45 minutes. Please be assured that your responses will be kept completely confidential within the scope of the law.

The criteria for inclusion in this study includes: (a) self-identify as a professional school counselor, having held a position in the United States within the last three years and (b) engaging in antiracist social justice school counseling practices (please see the definition at the end of this document).

All participants selected for qualitative interviews will be given informed consent information prior to the interview. At the beginning of each interview, the researcher will verbally confirm that the participant received and fully understands the informed consent, will review confidentiality, and answer any questions. Participation in this study is voluntary and participants may opt out of the interview at any time.

**Researcher Risks:**

Data collection will occur via Zoom, a web-based video conference platform. The researcher conducting the interview will remain in a confidential setting; however, they cannot control for participants' settings. Therefore, participants are responsible for the confidentiality of their own

setting during the interview. As far as researchers can anticipate, there are no social, legal, emotional, mental, or physical risks from participating in this study.

**Research Benefits:**

Participants may benefit from reflecting on their experiences implementing antiracist social justice practices. This may assist with recognizing barriers that currently exist within their school or district, thus increasing self-awareness and advocacy efforts.

**Special Populations:**

N/A

**Time, Commitment, and Payment:**

Approximately 15 minutes for the Google Form (eligibility, demographics, and availability), 60 minutes for the interview, and 15-30 minutes for the transcript review. There is no penalty for participating in this study and there is no compensation.

**Safeguarding the Identity of Participants:**

The researchers are taking steps to ensure participant interview responses are anonymous. All information obtained about participants is confidential unless disclosure is required by law. Only the

researcher conducting the study and the transcriptionist will have access to the raw survey data. Participants' identifying information (e.g., participant names, district names, etc.) will be removed from transcripts, to protect their identities, and pseudonyms will be assigned. The anonymous data will be kept on researchers' password protected accounts (Google and Zoom). The anonymous results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, and publications.

**Permission to Audio and Video Record:**

During participation in this research study, participants will be audio and video recorded. By completing the Google Form and noting your agreement with the consent, participants are giving researchers permission to use the recording(s) for the additional purposes of publication beyond the immediate needs of data transcription for this study. These recordings will be destroyed after data analysis.

**Consent for Future Use of Data:**

The data collected in this study will not be used in any future research by researchers in this study, or by others. The data will be kept for five years after the completion of the study and then destroyed.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Participation is voluntary and participants may opt out of the study at any time. They may choose to not answer interview questions.

**IRB Approval:**

This study has been reviewed and approved by Old Dominion University College of Education and Professional Studies Human Subjects Review Board. The Review Board has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you

have questions or concerns regarding this study, please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the Old Dominion University College of Education and Professional Studies Human Subjects Review Board Administrator.

**Principal Investigator:**

Dr. Emily Goodman-Scott  
Counseling and Human Services  
New Education Building  
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**Investigator:**

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**DCEPS Human Subjects Committee Chair:**

Dr. John Baaki  
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**Statement of Consent:**

By clicking the button below, you acknowledge that your participation in the study is voluntary, you are 18 years of age, and that you are aware that you may choose to terminate your participation in the study at any time and for any reason. In addition, you acknowledge that by completing the online demographic survey and interview, you agree to participate in the study as described above.

**Yes, I agree to participate**

**No, I decline to participate**

## **Definitions:**

### **Social Justice:**

Advocate to increase access and equity in PK-12 schools (Ratts et al., 2007), such as engaging is examples similar to several of the following:

- Increase school staff awareness of systemic inequities faced by students from low income families and students of color (Ratts et al., 2007)
  - Work as allies for students, promote systemic change, and provide opportunities for advancement for all students
  - Political savviness to navigate existing power structures
  - Developing awareness of unfair and inequitable practices; initiating and participating in difficult conversations with stakeholders
  - Creating intentional relationships to benefit students
  - Teaching K-12 students how to advocate for themselves
  - Using appropriate school data (i.e. discipline referrals, student absences, test scores) to navigate appropriate change
- Providing information to others about how school counselors can advocate for underrepresented students (Singh et al., 2010)

### **Antiracism:**

“School counselors’ active approach to dismantling racist practices, racial hatred, systemic racism, and oppression of historically oppressed racial groups within educational systems” (Holcomb-McCoy, p. 7), such as engaging is examples similar to several of the following:

- Advocating against zero tolerance discipline practices and dress code policies that target Black and brown boys and sexualize Black girls (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995)
- Calling for the removal of School Resource Officers
- Opposing discipline consequences that leave students out of classrooms
- Implementing restorative and healing practices to build and restore relationships between students and teachers (Ieva et al., 2021)

**APPENDIX D**  
**Google Form Online Demographic Survey**

**Description and Consent (included at the start of the Google Form Survey)**

See consent form: Appendix A

**Name:** First and last

**Email Address:**

**Please check which of the following are true about you:**

I am currently employed as a school counselor

I have been employed as a school counselor within the last 3 years

I have engaged in antiracist social justice work as a school counselor in the last 3 years

**We define social justice school counseling as advocating to increase access and equity in PK-12 schools, including the following examples: increasing school staff awareness of systemic inequities faced by students from low income families and students of color; work as allies for students, promote systemic change, and provide opportunities for advancement for all students.**

**Can you please briefly list a few examples of your social justice school counseling work in the last 3 years:**

**We define antiracist school counseling as an active approach to dismantling racist practices, racial hatred, systemic racism, and oppression of historically oppressed racial groups within educational systems (Holcomb-McCoy, in press as cited in Mason et al., 2021), including the following examples: advocating against zero tolerance discipline practices and dress code policies that target Black and Brown boys and sexualize Black girls; implementing restorative and healing practices to build and restore relationships between students and teachers.**

**Can you please briefly list a few examples of your antiracist school counseling work in the last 3 years:**

**How many years have you been employed by your current school?**

**How many years have you been employed as a school counselor?**

**School Name:**

**District Name:**

**Please select the grade level you were responsible for providing school counseling services to during the 2021-2022 school year (please click all that apply):**

Elementary

Middle

High

Other: [open ended]

**Please check the gender you identify with:**

Female  
 Male  
 Non-binary  
 Pangender  
 Agender  
 Other  
 Prefer not to answer

**Please check your age range:**

18-30      31-40      41-50      51-60      61 and above

**Please check the race you identify with (check all that apply):**

Hispanic or Latin/a/x      Asian      American Indian or Alaskan Native  
 Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander      Black or African American      White  
 Mixed Races      Prefer not to Answer      Other:

**Availability**

The next section includes questions about your availability for a 60-minute individual interview via Zoom (a web-based video conferencing platform).

**Please mark the following dates/times that you are available to participate in a 60 minute interview (check all that times you are available):**

Insert  
 Insert  
 Insert

**Final Message**

Thank you for taking part in this survey! We will be in touch within the next few weeks to finalize participation in an individual interview.

Sincerely,  
 Dr. Emily Goodman-Scott (egscott@odu.edu)  
 Stephanie Smith-Durkin (ssmit125@odu.edu)

## APPENDIX E

### Interview Protocol

(adapted from Goodman-Scott Interview Protocol (2019b))

(Goodman-Scott & Cholewa, in press)

Interviewer's name:

Participant's pseudonym:

Participants' assigned ID:

Interview date:

Interview start and stop time:

Interview location/type (e.g., phone, in-person, video web-conferencing, etc.):

Interviewer completed field notes (to describe facts, context, logistics, etc.):

Interview completed reflexive journal (to describe reactions/biases/experiences):

Date of interview transcription:

Date(s) transcription sent to participant (initial and reminder):

Date participant confirmed member checking:

Follow up questions needed for subsequent interview:

### Interview Protocol

#### **Introduction**

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me about school counselor antiracist social justice practices. I imagine you are extremely busy, and I appreciate you taking the time to talk to me today.

Before we get started, I would like to confirm that you are comfortable with the informed consent document you signed, and to see if you have any questions [field participant questions and remind participant of key points, from informed consent].

The interview should last about 60 minutes and will be recorded for later transcription. If at any time you wish to stop the interview or to not answer a question, you are completely free to do so

without penalty. I will take all necessary precautions to protect your anonymity, the anonymity of your school district, school, and students. After the interview is transcribed, I will blind any identifying information and email the transcribed interview back to you to see if you would like to change, clarify, or add anything.

Also, participants often use a pseudonym, such as a favorite name, that I can use during our interview. Is this something you'd like to use?

Before I hit the record button and we begin the interview do you have any questions?

### **Qualitative Interview Questions**

#### **Interview Questions**

Opening: Please tell me about your background, experience, and personal journey to becoming a school counselor.

1. Using your own words, what exemplifies antiracist social justice in school counseling?
  - a. Follow-up probing question: Please tell me how you approach antiracist social justice practices in your work as a school counselor?
  - b. Tell me about a specific time in which you engaged in antiracist social justice practices as a school counselor.
  - c. If I were to watch you engaging in antiracist social justice school counseling practices, what would I see?
  - d. Probe for feelings (e.g. How did it feel when you . . .)

Conclusion: Is there anything else you would like to add regarding antiracist social justice school counseling practices?

#### **After asking all interview questions:**

Thank you again for helping me to better understand school counselor antiracist social justice practices. This interview will be transcribed over the next several weeks and I will email it back to you, in case you would like to change, clarify, or add any information. Also, if I have any additional questions at a later time would you be willing to have a brief conversation?

Turn off the recording device when the call ends.

Reserve 30 minutes to do the following:

- I save both audio files (primary and back-up), send the audio file for transcription

- Complete field notes
- Complete reflexive journal
- Complete any additional steps noted on this Interview Protocol sheet

## **STEPHANIE SMITH-DURKIN**

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757 377-5023 ▪ smithdurkin@gmail.com

### **EDUCATION**

***Ph.D. in Counselor Education and Supervision***

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia May 2022  
Dissertation: A Phenomenological Investigation of School Counselor Antiracist Social Justice Practices

***M.S. Ed. in Counseling***

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia May 2018

***BS in Psychology***

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia Dec 2007

### **COUNSELING EXPERIENCE**

***School Counselor***

Ocean Lakes High School, Virginia Beach, Virginia May 2018 – current

***School Counselor Internship Experience***

Malibu Elementary School, Virginia Beach, Virginia Jan 2018 – Apr 2018

***School Counselor Internship Experience***

Corporate Landing Middle School, Virginia Beach, Virginia Aug 2017 – Dec 2017

***School Counselor Practicum Experience***

Bayside Sixth Grade Campus, Virginia Beach, Virginia Mar 2017 – May 2017

***School Counselor Observation***

Blair Middle School, Norfolk, Virginia Oct 2016 – Dec 2016

### **RELATED WORK EXPERIENCE**

***Family Involvement Specialist***

YMCA of South Hampton Roads, Virginia Beach, Virginia Oct 2008 – Aug 2010

***Title I Family Engagement Specialist***

Hampton City Schools, Hampton, Virginia Aug 2010 – Jun 2015

### **ACADEMIC TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

***Practicum, Instructor of Record***

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia Spring 2022

<b><i>School Counseling Internship, Instructor of Record</i></b> Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia	Fall 2021
<b><i>School Counseling Program Development, Guest Lecturer</i></b> Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia	Summer 2021
<b><i>Counseling for Lifespan Development, Co-teacher</i></b> Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia	Summer 2021
<b><i>Counseling Children and Adolescents, Co-teacher</i></b> Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia	Summer 2021
<b><i>School Counseling Program Development course, Co-teacher</i></b> Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia	Summer 2020

### **SUPERVISION EXPERIENCE**

<b><i>Group/University Supervisor</i></b> Mental Health and School Counseling Practicum Students (n= 7)	Spring 2022
<b><i>Individual/Triadic Supervisor</i></b> Practicum students (n = 3)	Spring 2022
<b><i>Group/University Supervisor</i></b> School Counseling Interns (n= 7)	Fall 2021
<b><i>Site Supervisor</i></b> School Counseling Intern (n = 1)	Fall 2021
<b><i>Individual Supervisor</i></b> Practicum student (n = 1)	Fall 2021
<b><i>Individual Supervisor</i></b> Practicum students (n = 2)	Summer 2021

### **LEADERSHIP EXPERIENCE**

<b><i>Counselors for Social Justice</i></b> School Counseling Task Force Intern	Jan 2021 - current Jan 2021 – Aug 2021
<b><i>Association of Child and Adolescent Counseling (ACAC)</i></b> Board Member, Graduate Student Representative Antiracist Committee Member Graduate Student Committee member	Aug 2020 – current Aug 2020 – current June 2018 – Oct 2018

***Chi Sigma Iota, Omega Delta chapter***

Past President

Aug 2020 – Aug 2021

President

Aug 2019 – Jul 2020

President-elect

Aug 2018 – Jul 2019

Events chair

Aug 2016 – Jul 2017

**PUBLICATIONS**

Goodman-Scott, E., McMahon, H. G., Kalkbrenner, M., **Smith-Durkin, S.**, Patel, S., Czack, A. & Weeks, N. (2021). An ex post facto study examining implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports across school and community variables from an inclusive innovation perspective. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/10983007211013784>

Bettters-Bubon, J., Kortemeier, H. & **Smith-Durkin, S.** (2019, June). Culturally responsive MTSS: Advocating for equity for every student. In E. Goodman-Scott, J. Bettters-Bubon & P. Donohue (Eds.), *The school counselor's guide to multi-tiered systems of support*.

Burgess, M., Goodman-Scott, E., & **Smith-Durkin, S.** (In data analysis). Transitioning from graduate student to school counselor: Strategies for school counselor educators.

**PRESENTATIONS**

**Smith-Durkin, S.** & Goodman-Scott, E. (2022). *MTSS from an antiracist lens*. To be presented at the American School Counselor Association Conference in July 2022.

Edirmanasinghe, N., Goodman-Scott, E., **Smith-Durkin, S.** & Tarver, S. (2022, March). *Support all students: Multi-tiered systems of support from an antiracist lens*. Evidence-based School Counseling Online Conference 2022.

Goodman-Scott, E. & **Smith-Durkin, S.** (2021, December). *Supporting student mental health with MTSS lens*. [Invited presentation for Portsmouth Public Schools].

Counselors for Social Justice School Counseling Task Force, School Leadership for Social Justice, & Jill Cook (2021, April). *Decentering whiteness: A schoolwide approach*. Counselors for Social Justice ACA Virtual Conference 2021.

**Smith-Durkin, S.** (2021, March). *The juggle is real! Tips to survive (and thrive) as a new school counselor*. Virginia School Counseling Association Conference.

Goodman-Scott, E. & **Smith-Durkin, S.** (2020, August). *Going back to school: Strategies for school counselors to utilize SEL, Trauma-Informed Practices, and Technology*. [Invited presentation for the Norfolk Public Schools].

Burgess, M. & **Smith-Durkin, S.** (2018, October). *Infusing the ASCA National Model and data-driven practices into school counseling internship*. Presented at the Southern Association of Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, Myrtle Beach, SC.

Burgess, M., Goodman-Scott, E., Carlisle, R. & **Smith-Durkin, S.** (2018, September). *Using single subject design to strengthen pre-service counselors*. Presented at the Association for Assessment and Research in Counseling, Richmond, VA.

Burgess, M., Boulden, R., **Smith-Durkin, S.**, & Wilson, G. (2018, March). *An empirical state of mind: Evidence-based practices in the supervision of future school counselors*. Presented at the Evidence-Based School Counseling conference, New York, NY.

Burgess, M. & **Smith-Durkin, S.** (2018, February). *Infusing the ASCA National Model and data-driven practices into school counseling internship*. Presented at the Virginia Association of Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, Lynchburg, Virginia.

Cholewa, B., Goodman-Scott, E. & **Smith-Durkin, S.** (2017, October). *Lead well with teacher consultation: Tips and tools you can use*. Presented at the Annual Virginia School Counselor Association Conference, Hampton, Virginia.

Burgess, M., Wilson, G., & **Smith-Durkin, S.** (2017, October). *Transitioning from graduate student to school counselor: Strategies for school counselor educators*. Presented at the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Conference, Chicago, IL.

### AWARDS

2021 National School Counselor Advocate Award–Association for Child & Adolescent Counseling (Apr 2021)

Outstanding Master’s Student–Chi Sigma Iota Counseling Honor Society–Omega Delta Chapter (Dec 2017)

Outstanding Counseling Master’s Student – Old Dominion University (April 2017)

VSCA 2016 Graduate Student of the Year - Virginia School Counseling Association (October 2016)

### LICENSES/CERTIFICATIONS

School Counselor PreK-12 (Virginia)  
Effective to June 30, 2031

License Number: PPS-0607382

National Certified Counselor (NCC)  
Effective to July 31, 2023

ID: 1034950