
Structural Racism in Schools: A View through the Lens of the National School Social Work Practice Model

Jandel Crutchfield, Kate L. Phillippo, and Andy Frey

Structural racism—implicitly discriminatory practices and policies that have negative consequences for individuals and groups of color—is a powerful force in contemporary American society, including in our public education system. This article explores the potential for school social workers (SSWs) to address structural racism through the use of the national school social work (SSW) practice model as a tool to guide systemic, ecologically oriented intervention within schools and educational policy spaces. In this article, the authors review data on racial disparities in educational attainment, placement, opportunity, and discipline practices that have led to increased attention to structural racism in schools. They then discuss and describe the national SSW practice model and its suitability for the structural interventions in response to structural racism in schools. Finally, they provide recommendations for how SSWs can respond effectively to this pressing social problem. These recommendations include a list of resources for addressing structural racism.

KEY WORDS: *institutionalized racism; national school social work practice model; school climate; school social work; structural racism*

The role of school social workers (SSWs) has garnered significant research and advocacy efforts since Lela Costin's (1969) study of SSWs, which identified an overemphasis on practice focused on intervention with individual students rather than on systemic, ecological efforts to address school, home, and community factors that place students at risk for educational failure. These patterns within school social work (SSW) have persisted for decades, as national surveys have repeatedly demonstrated (Kelly et al., 2010; Kelly et al., 2016).

Compelling evidence of structural racism in schools and of its effects on students' educational experiences exacerbates existing concerns about SSW's focus on individual intervention and highlights an opportunity for leadership among SSWs. Fueled by a long history of racism in American society, structural racism (also called institutionalized racism) is present within many education policies and practices. Bailey and colleagues (2017) described these discriminatory practices and policies' insidious structural effects in explaining that they "do not explicitly mention 'race' but bear racist intent or consequences, or both" (p. 1454). A large,

interconnected system of discriminatory practices both within and between institutions, including schools, makes structural racism detrimental to individuals of color (Bailey et al., 2017; Metzler & Roberts, 2014; Ulmer, Harris, & Steffensmeier, 2012). In this article, we briefly highlight some of the evidence that has compelled federal and local agencies to address structural racism in schools. We then consider the national SSW practice model's suitability for the structural interventions that are needed and provide recommendations for how SSWs can engage in structural intervention, using the national model as a guide.

SOCIAL WORK PROFESSION AND STRUCTURAL RACISM

Although social work as a profession has always concerned itself with the plight of marginalized populations, it is only within the last 40 years that the profession took initiative to challenge racism at all levels of society, including within institutions (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Renewed calls continue to come from within the profession, most recently in 2005 when leading social work organizations including the National Association of Deans and

Directors, the National Association of Social Workers, and the Council on Social Work Education convened and again called for the social work profession to address racism at individual, agency, and institutional levels (Social Work Policy Institute, 2014). Broadly defined, *structural racism* is the systematic creation and implementation of policies, resources, and practices that are “designed to benefit some groups significantly more than others, while simultaneously denying the existence of racism as a variable, except in the most extreme forms” (Craig de Silva et al., 2007, p. 3).

Within the social work profession there are many examples of the manifestation of structural racism that scholars, practitioners, and educators have attempted to develop action steps to combat. A few common instances of structural racism within the field social work are individual social work practitioners’ and agencies’ support for policies without regard to racial implications for clients, predominantly White leadership and management structures in social service agencies, the lack of race-focused training for social workers, and the limited focus on institutional factors as opposed to individual factors that contribute to client problems (Craig de Silva et al., 2007). Although efforts have been made to address structural racism within social work, these efforts appear infrequently, in the work of stand-alone programs and individual scholars, and have not yet systematically reached school-based practitioners. The state of structural racism in P–12 schools makes it clear that SSWers must be well prepared to respond skillfully to structural racism.

STRUCTURAL RACISM IN TODAY’S SCHOOLS

Several enduring patterns of disproportionality for children of color in public schools exemplify the social problem of structural racism. No pattern of disproportionality has been as persistent as the Black–White and White–Latinx academic achievement gaps in reading and math. These persistent gaps, which can be detected from early childhood onward, have been tracked since the 1970s by analysis of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Musu-Gillette et al., 2017). Recent evidence (McFarland et al., 2018) indicates that by the end of fourth grade, Latinx and Black children are two years behind their White peers. This gap expands to three and four years by grades 8 and 12, respectively. Although these gaps have fluctuated

over the years and have been declining since the 1990s (Center for Education Policy Analysis, 2019), they remain substantial, striking, and troubling.

Another manifestation of structural racism involves referrals to lower and remedial academic tracks. Specifically, Black and Latinx students are three times as likely to be referred to special education as are White students (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Ju, & Roberts, 2014; U.S. Department of Education [ED], 2016). In addition, they are far more likely to be put on track for an alternative to a high school diploma, such as a certificate (Felton, 2017). Furthermore, Black and Latinx students are underscreened and underselected for gifted programs when compared with their White and Asian peers (McFarland et al., 2018; Scialabba, 2017).

Structural racism is also implicated in school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement, which are found to increase young people’s likelihood of involvement with the justice system or dropout (Skiba et al., 2011; ED, 2016). African American students are three times more likely to be expelled or suspended than their White counterparts (Losen, 2014; Office for Civil Rights, n.d.), and Black girls are suspended at higher rates than girls of any other race or ethnicity and most boys. In addition, African American and Latinx students represent 40 percent of public school students, but over 50 percent of students referred to law enforcement (Fabelo et al., 2012; Office for Civil Rights, n.d.). These practices contribute to the persistent school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon, in which student of color are pushed out of schools and into the criminal justice system (ED, 2016).

Students of color also encounter teacher implicit racial bias—racialized, subconscious assessments that shape teacher expectations, student performance, and school discipline (Kang, 2012; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Scott, Gage, Him, & Han, 2018). With a predominantly White educator workforce and the presence of other discriminatory practices in schools and school districts, implicit bias appears in schools as teachers’ favorable interactions with White students as compared with their interactions with students of color. Peterson, Rubie-Davies, Osborne, and Sibley (2016) found that students benefited academically when their teachers’ measured implicit biases favored students’ own identity groups. In addition, teacher race has been linked to the race of students selected for and enrolled in gifted classes when teachers shared the same identity

with students, with Black children three times more likely to be referred to gifted programs if they have a Black teacher (Scialabba, 2017).

Intervention to address structural racism is long overdue. No educational support personnel are more suited to address this persistent social problem than SSWers. The national SSW practice model (Frey et al., 2013), provides an organizational structure to support SSW involvement in efforts to combat structural racism in schools.

NATIONAL SSW PRACTICE MODEL

The national SSW practice model was created to inform professional preparation programs, improve the quality of professional standards, guide development efforts for preservice education programs, and influence SSW practice (Frey et al., 2013). The model highlights an ecological orientation across school, family, and community, and prioritizes the use of data to organize evidence-based practices within a tiered prevention model.

Key Constructs

The national model encourages SSWers to engage in high-quality intervention and impels practitioners to think broadly about what causes the social problems that place students at risk for school failure, and how to best address them, as indicated by its key constructs: home-school-community linkages, ethical guidelines and educational policy, educational rights and advocacy, and data-based decision making. Although the national model does not explicitly identify structural racism (or any other forms of identity-based discrimination) as a problem in schools, its constructs can easily be mapped onto the issue of structural racism and SSWers' options for responding.

A national model-informed approach to structural racism in schools involves not only individualized intervention on behalf of students of color experiencing situations such as academic challenges, strained relationships with teachers, or peer conflict, but also attention to the school and surrounding milieu that engages both people and policy. The model's support of home-school-community linkages might see SSWers exploring how parent conference structures and hours could promote engagement for a diverse group of parents (Sparks, 2015; Teaching Tolerance, 2019). Its emphasis on ethical guidelines and educational policy might lead SSWers to review school bullying policies to iden-

tify how they apply to students of color and how they might connect to racial discipline disparities (Berlowitz, Frye, & Jette, 2017). The model's educational rights and advocacy construct resonates clearly with structural racism and its call to address systemic inequities. This section reads,

School social workers address the ways in which structural inequalities and school processes affect school quality and educational outcomes. School social work practitioners are expected to raise issues of diversity and social and economic justice that lead to school failure and educational disparities. (Frey et al., 2013, p. 4)

Finally, the model's emphasis on data-based decision making motivates SSWers to locate and analyze school and district data regarding suspension rates, advanced course placement, special education eligibility, and college entrance exam enrollment by racial and linguistic subgroups.

School Climate and Culture Conducive to Student Learning and Teaching Excellence

The national model includes three practice features that encourage SSWers to (1) provide evidence-based education, behavior, and mental health services; (2) promote a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence; and (3) maximize access to school-based and community-based resources. The second feature is particularly relevant to SSWers' obligation and efforts to address structural racism in schools.

SSWers stand in a position to promote an environment that fosters academic engagement and achievement. The national model asserts that school environments are conducive to learning and teaching when they have (a) policies and procedures that produce safe and orderly environments; (b) capacity-building efforts to promote effective practices; and (c) supportive relationships within and between students, families, school staff, and community partners. *School climate*—the “quality and character of school life” (National School Climate Center, n.d.)—substantially concerns race as evidence mounts of racially disproportionate punitive discipline in schools (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017), teacher implicit racial bias (Peterson et al., 2016), and hostile school climate experiences

of teachers and parents of color (Kohli, 2018; Posey-Maddox, 2017).

One example of school policy and procedures that promote an improved racial climate is found in Denver Public Schools' (DPS) efforts to interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. In an effort to reduce the incidence of and racial disparities in punitive discipline actions, DPS made changes to its discipline policies. DPS revised its discipline codes, introduced restorative justice practices, and removed school-based police officers' authority to arrest students or write citations (Asmar, 2019; Klein, 2015). Racial discipline disparities have not disappeared altogether, but student participants in restorative interventions showed lower odds of subsequent discipline referrals and suspensions, across racial subgroups (Anyon et al., 2016), and DPS's number of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions dropped dramatically (Klein, 2015), all during a time of district enrollment growth (Reyes, 2016). These policy changes made substantial impact on the practices used by educators—and encountered by students—in an area long marked by racial disparities. This approach to reducing disparities not only diverts students from the school-to-prison pipeline, but enhances relationships among students, families, school, and community.

School personnel capacity to promote an improved racial climate is another area where SSWers stand to exert influence. The University of Maryland School of Social Work's Positive Schools Center leads the School Climate Learning Collaborative, in which a school climate coach works with educators, principals, and other school personnel to develop their skills in trauma-responsive educational practices, racial equity promotion, and classroom community building (Baltimore Justice Report, 2019; Positive Schools Center, n.d.) School climate improvement through teacher learning is also a result of Cappella and colleagues' (2012) intervention, in which school and community mental health professionals coached educators of Black and Latinx students to increase teachers' emotional support of their students. This coaching intervention resulted in measurable observed teacher support of students, improved student academic self-concept, and reduced peer victimization, suggesting its potential to promote a positive school and racial climate along multiple dimensions.

SSWer involvement in youth, parent, and community organizing presents yet another angle to

improve school climate, through the support of meaningful engagement among involved actors. Organizing approaches—which stress empowerment and collective advocacy rather than school approaches that attempt to remedy perceived student or family deficits—have gained popularity as a means for engaging school stakeholders in meaningful change on behalf of students and communities of color (Fuentes, 2012; Syeed, 2018; Warren, 2011). Kim, Fletcher, and Bryan (2017) described an intervention in which school counselors support a parent organizing approach by assisting parent leaders with outreach to other parents, providing education for parents about school systems and policies, and serving as a liaison between parent groups and school staff. Professional support of parent organizing efforts culminated in improved student performance and parent proposals for additional English as a second language teachers and expanded communication efforts with Spanish-speaking families.

Although the national model draws heavily on a macro practice perspective, the educational rights and advocacy key construct highlights structural inequalities, diversity and social and economic justice. It can be argued that the role of structural racism is not central to the national model as it was originally created, as evidenced by the practice model illustration. Rather than embed attention to structural racism within a key construct, we recommend updating the model, adding “attention to structural inequalities” as a new, stand-alone key construct.

Implications and Resources

When we consider, side-by-side, the painful results of structural racism for U.S. students and the kinds of intervention that the national model stresses, we are concerned but also encouraged. We believe that structural racism can and should serve as the impetus—so detrimental to children and communities that we cannot turn away from it—for SSWers to break with decades of hesitancy to engage in systemic, structurally oriented intervention. Efforts to address structural racism demand an ecologically oriented, systems-facing approach that requires SSWers to engage in all four key constructs (home-school-community linkages, ethical guidelines and educational policy, educational rights and advocacy, and data-based decision making) and to dedicate acute attention to the second practice feature of the

national model (to promote a school climate and culture conducive to student learning and teaching excellence). Individualized interventions not only are insufficient, but they stand to perpetuate structural racism within the school setting by inaccurately conveying to children of color, their parents, and educators that it is the individual characteristics of the students who are overrepresented in lower academic tracks and among those subject to punitive discipline—rather than environs that include policies and practices—that elevate their risk for school failure. Fortunately, our profession, reinforced by the national model, is prepared to engage in interventions that respond to structural racism, as we have discussed.

As such, we offer several key resources to SSWers to encourage their substantive engagement in interventions to address the existence and impact of structural racism in schools. First, we offer several examples of what SSWers' efforts to address structural racism would look like for SSWers at individual growth and structural intervention levels (Craig de Silva et al., 2007).

Social workers attempting to engage in this type of practice will likely encounter resistance from colleagues and leadership within the school and the larger school district, particularly if the school district is not already oriented toward evaluating racism within its own policies and practices. In addition, social workers who engage in efforts to increase their own knowledge may have to challenge their own personal resistance to addressing structural racism in practice, whether it relates to their own personal biases, workload issues, expectations of school leadership, or school culture and climate.

Other tools may also help SSWers to identify and address structural racism in schools. First, SSWers can use the national practice model to advocate for involvement in addressing this social problem. Whether for creating new SSW positions or restructuring existing ones, the model is a valuable advocacy resource. The practice model graphic, brochure, and PowerPoint presentation can be accessed from the School Social Work Association of America Web site (<https://www.sswaa.org/copy-of-school-social-worker-evalua-1>). Second, we encourage SSWers to use Office for Civil Rights data (publicly available at <https://ocrdata.ed.gov/DistrictSchoolSearch>), or state or local district level data, to explore and demonstrate existing disproportionality in school practices such as

academic placement and disciplinary actions. The federal Office for Civil Rights (n.d.) has tracked disproportionality in key educational areas like discipline and disability designation since 1968 and has communicated to states and districts issues with disproportionality that must be addressed. As such, states and districts themselves are currently identifying initiatives to address structural issues. A SSWer interested in addressing structural racism could begin by identifying both district- and state-level initiatives and then developing a proposal for local school-level implementation.

Next, the What Works Clearinghouse (<https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/>) is an invaluable resource for identifying interventions that address climate and culture issues. This online resource reviews existing research on different programs, products, practices, and policies in education and provides educators with the information they need to make evidence-based decisions. In addition, the School Social Work Network (SSWN) (<https://schoolsocialworkers.mn.co/>) is an online space where practicing SSWers can connect with other practitioners and researchers. Issues of both systemic intervention and structural racism are two topics that the network has already begun to address. The SSWN also provides Practice Briefs, succinct reviews of evidence-based practices, and opportunities to network and problem solve with SSWers nationally. Finally, we provide a list of additional resources in the Appendix. These resources could support practitioners or university social work faculty in their efforts to increase attention provided to structural racism in professional preparation programs.

CONCLUSION

The evidence of structural racism is overwhelmingly potent in contemporary American society, including our education system. This situation, although unacceptable, creates a ripe environment for SSWers to heed researchers' and practitioners' decades-old call to use systemic practices that address the environmental and policy issues that shape students' experiences and well-being. This systemic, ecological orientation differentiates SSWers from education support personnel representing other disciplines (Costin, 1969; Frey et al., 2013; Kelly et al., 2016) and is consistent with social work's overall person-in-environment orientation. Much scholarship has been devoted to SSW practice at varying tiers of school-based intervention, and education

using ecological systemic models has primed SSWers to understand and respond to the need for this work. The imperative to combat structural racism pushes us to activate and expand our existing knowledge and skills, using the national practice model as a highly relevant tool to advocate for tangible racial justice for the students, schools, districts, and communities we serve. **CS**

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APPENDIX: ADDITIONAL RESOURCES FOR ADDRESSING STRUCTURAL RACISM

- The National Education Association (<http://www.nea.org/home/69183.htm>) has a pledge all staff in a building can sign to communicate that they are committed to standing up for students.
- NPR podcast, *Angela Watson's Truth for Teachers*, has an episode titled “Ten Things Every White Teacher Should Know When Talking about Race,” can be used for a brief professional development activity (<https://play.acast.com/s/angelawatsonstruthforteachers/s5ep07-ten-things-every-white-teacher-should-know-when-talking-about-race>).
- Black Lives Matter at School offers a resource tool kit to assist teachers who would like to address the Black Lives Matters movement (https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ou2lkNO_1jCJDfmasAG8mx_7hvv1cHKmobhtcVLak/edit).
- Disrupting Implicit Racial Bias PowerPoint presentation could be used (as is, and giving credit to the author) for professional development (<https://sites.ed.gov/whieea/files/2016/10/Disrupting-Implicit-Bias-FINAL.pdf>).
- Rick Wormeli’s “Let’s Talk about Racism in Schools,” published in *Educational Leadership*, provides guidance for how to facilitate conversations about racism in schools (<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/nov16/vol74/num03/Let’s-Talk-about-Racism-in-Schools.aspx>).
- Two parts of “Racial Inequities: What Schools Can Do,” published in *Education World*, could also be used for professional development:
 - <https://www.educationworld.com/admin/eliminating-systemic-racial-inequities-part1.shtml>
 - <https://www.educationworld.com/admin/eliminating-systemic-racial-inequities-part2.shtml>