

Evidence-Based School Counseling: Embracing Challenges/Changes to the Existing Paradigm

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Abstract

This special edition of *Professional School Counseling* presents some of the key proceedings from the ninth annual Evidence-Based School Counseling Conference. This article offers both an overview of the content of this issue and—in this complex world context we now inhabit—new ideas for ways to use evidence-based school counseling (EBSC) to support the emotional well-being and future success of our students, families, and school colleagues. We include some possible ways to do antiracist and social justice-focused school counseling from an EBSC lens and offer several suggestions for updates to the EBSC lens itself.

Keywords

evidence-based school counseling, antiracist school counseling, school counseling, social justice

Students in our schools are currently facing myriad unprecedented and often intertwining challenges. In 2020 and 2021, students experienced vast periods of isolation and interrupted learning environments created by differing levels of quarantine in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools that had historically conducted their learning environments entirely face-to-face transitioned suddenly to either fully virtual or hybrid learning environments, with complex and often deleterious social/emotional and academic effects for their students. Although the research continues to emerge, we have already gained important insights into the impact of the pandemic on the more than 1.58 billion students from 200 countries that were affected by school closures (Acosta et al., 2021).

During the pandemic, learning environments were negatively impacted in multiple ways, including but not limited to remote instruction, parents as teachers, lack of materials, extended amount of time on computers, lack of arts instruction and activities, and limited peer connection (Fontenelle-Tereschuk, 2020). The shift to distance learning also exposed the inequity of access to technology required for learning (Bansak & Starr, 2021), with low-income and rural families and communities hurt disproportionately. The initial consequences of these lost academic opportunities have been documented already, showing less skill development in reading and math for most students, and more loss for those without the necessary technology access compared to prepandemic times (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

In addition to academic impacts, student mental health also has been negatively affected for many reasons (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021; Deighton et al., 2019; Henderson, 2020; Marques de Miranda et al., 2020). Many

adults have also experienced increases in acute stress, anxiety, depression, fear, posttraumatic stress disorder, tension, and suicidal ideation during the pandemic (Baba, 2020; Panchal et al., 2021; Vindegaard & Benros, 2020), with concomitant implications for youth, who are both generally more susceptible to mental health issues than adults and significantly impacted by the struggles of their parents, teachers, and caregivers (Deighton et al., 2019). Students may experience anxiety about members of their family or their friends getting sick with COVID-19, family financial insecurity, or no longer having basic needs met in the household (Bhagal et al., 2021; Deighton et al., 2019). Compared to adults, youth seem more likely to experience moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety and depression (Murata et al., 2020). Voices from the students themselves demonstrate this powerfully: A survey conducted during the pandemic with more than 300,000 students in grades 3–12 across multiple states found that participants identified anxiety and depression as the fastest growing and primary obstacle to their educational success (YouthTruth Survey, 2021).

During the pandemic, many students have been grappling with racial trauma either through direct experience or that they witness through media. For Black students, witnessing the perpetuation of the consistent historical oppression and violence

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experienced by Black populations can be retraumatizing (Jackson, 2021) and terrifying. For White students who are actively grappling with the racism in our culture in the United States, acknowledging the reality of this violence and their related privilege can be profoundly disturbing and difficult to come to terms with (Francis & Mason, 2022).

Data indicates that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted minoritized, immigrant, and low-SES populations both globally and in the United States (Bhagal et al., 2021; Czeisler et al., 2020; Sneed et al., 2020), exposing existing inequalities related to healthcare services such as testing and medical access, insurance, treatment options, and resources (Marques de Miranda et al., 2020; Penner et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2021). Potential race, class, language, and gender bias in treatment and hospital protocols or decisions is another factor in the equation (Snowden & Graaf, 2021).

Evidence-Based School Counseling: Embracing Challenges/Changes to the Existing Paradigm

In the context of 2020 and 2021, what contributions might evidence-based school counseling (EBSC) make to the success of our fatigued, often anxious and distressed students, families, and school staff? The answer to this question is likely rooted in the ways we understand and apply EBSC. If we approach EBSC as a way to use data to identify student deficits, for which we can apply manualized interventions to gain specific academic outcomes, then, indeed, we may not find much utility for its use to support students as they persist through current educational and social contexts.

Alternatively, we propose that a more accurate definition of EBSC is an exploration of the nature of the situation we hope to impact, investigation into what is known about how best to create change in that situation, and then thoughtfully assessing to determine if change has occurred (Dimmitt et al., 2007; Gambrill, 2019; Zyromski & Mariani, 2016). With the latter definition in mind, the EBSC approach can be used to address widespread, systemic barriers to student holistic life success that may be due to the pandemic, the profound negative impacts of institutionalized racism, or the multiple mental health difficulties that students are experiencing. Ideally, when the EBSC approach is applied in a multilayered and theoretically intentional manner (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2020), it can identify barriers at multiple levels and potential ways to address systemic issues, while also investing in students personally and tracking the results of those efforts, all at the same time. We explore this way of working in more depth later in this article.

Indeed, the question of how to best address these complex and overwhelming challenges, among others, is at the forefront of our minds as we share insights into the most recent national Evidence-Based School Counseling Conference (EBSCC; <http://www.ebscc.org>) in this special issue of the *Professional School Counseling* journal. The EBSCC is a forum in which

school counseling practitioners and scholars are encouraged to advance our understanding of ways that EBSC can address the foremost challenges facing our students today. Due to the pandemic, the 2021 conference was held online March 14–15, with a research day preceding the conference on March 13. Attendees from almost all 50 states attended the online conference, with 472 school counselors, school counselor educators, school counselors in training, and other educational leaders attending three panel presentations, 19 poster presentations, 16 round-table presentations, 55 fifty-minute presentations, and three double sessions. Since the inception of the EBSCC in 2013 (see Zyromski and Dimmitt (2019) for a brief history), the conference has focused on equipping school counselors with the skills to conceptualize problems or practice through an evidence-based school counseling lens so that interventions are data informed, likely to meet the identified needs of students, and able to be evaluated. Strands within the conference include exploration of data-based decision making, interventions with efficacy for student outcomes, conceptual arguments for challenging or expanding the EBSC approach, and counselor education approaches for training the next generation of school counselors. The EBSC also offers a strand dedicated to anti-racist and social justice EBSC approaches. We consider the application of EBSC to address systemic educational inequities created by the historical and current marginalization of people of color as a primary focus of the EBSCC, and also an opportunity for evolving our ideas about EBSC to be an ever-more effective model for creating change.

For this special issue, all presenters were invited to submit a brief, five-page manuscript proposal for possible inclusion. Based on those proposals, we then invited a smaller group to develop full manuscripts for submission. The full manuscripts navigated a blind review process before being chosen for publication. The collaborative EBSCC special issue was led by Angela Hickman of the American School Counselor Association, with an editorial team of Carey Dimmitt, Natalie Edirmanasinghe, Jennifer Betters-Bubon, and Brett Zyromski. A peer reviewer team was integral to the blind review process and was composed of school counselors and school counselor educators (alphabetically by last name): Jenna Alvarez, Carleton Brown, Sarah Geiger, Emily Goodman-Scott, Tameka Grimes, Melissa Mariani, Renae Mayes, Taryne Mingo, Ian Martin, Cory Notestine, Sam Steen, Julia Taylor, and Amy Upton. The accepted articles were then moved through the publication process by Angela Hickman and the editorial team.

Overview of the Special Edition Articles

In the lead article of this special edition, Mayes and Byrd valuably structure the conversation about an antiracist foundation to evidence-based school counseling practice through historical, political, theoretical, and critical frameworks. Their accompanying visual model of this way of practicing elegantly demonstrates what they suggest: using a critical consciousness framework to provide love and protection for students, while

dismantling harmful systems and simultaneously building new (evidence-informed) ways of supporting student development across multiple domains. This ongoing cycle of love/protect, dismantle, and build takes consciousness and intentionality on our part, and this article also has several concrete suggestions for practitioners and counselor educators as we move forward in this work.

The next three articles all focus on particular aspects of doing school counseling with an antiracist, social justice, culturally competent, and/or equity focus. Betters-Bubon, Pianta, Sweeney, and Goodman-Scott suggest numerous ways we can engage in critical self-reflection to increase our awareness and to build our cultural proficiency to more effectively engage in antiracist school counseling. They use the structure of multitiered systems of support (MTSS) as an organizer, with multiple concrete suggestions for both increasing self-awareness and imagining systemic change. These authors suggest an interrogation of our own experiences with oppression and privileges, and of our biases and assumptions, as a starting point. They also call for and provide examples of ways to reflect on our multiple social contexts and how they shape our school counseling work. This intersection of added awareness and concomitant systemic change efforts supports both proactive antiracist school counseling and effective MTSS, with goals of creating transformative learning, school counselors working as coconspirators, and meaningful engagement with all educational stakeholders.

In the next article, Chae, Backer, Mullen, and Cakmak integrate detailed information about how to be critical consumers of quantitative research with a culturally sensitive and antiracist perspective as part of the critical lens. Addressing each component of quantitative research articles in turn, these authors have elegantly articulated how to read research articles with a discerning perspective—thinking about the research that was done, but also about the cultural competency and racial awareness (or lack thereof) demonstrated in the writing. Both aspects of this work are vital, and integrating them in this way provides the field with a key future resource for readers, writers, and producers of research.

Placeres, Davis, Williams, Shodiya-Zeumault, Aiello, Pention, and Mason explore the complex relationship among the complementary constructs of self-reported multicultural competence, social issues awareness, cultural humility, and cultural comfort in a study with school counselors. Their explanation of how multicultural and social justice awareness may or may not lead to related antiracist actions is a valuable contribution to greater understanding of the myriad ways school counselors can develop our own thinking, intentionality, and related efforts to be effective advocates for all students and for systemic change.

The next two articles provide resources and research-based ideas for creating change in K–12 schools. Alvarez, Saunders, Neubauer, and Brown articulate an integration of a trauma-informed approach and evidence-based school counseling that can provide targeted, research-based interventions for the increasing numbers of students who have experienced trauma. They suggest an integration of multitiered systems of support

with the structures of a comprehensive school counseling program to ensure that any student in need of services is identified and that, at a minimum, Tier 1 supports are put into place. Their helpful ideas for specific actions to take at each level of intervention, and their advocacy and collaboration suggestions, provide actionable ways to take on this challenging problem.

Providing counseling services in a group format is one of the most effective and efficient way to serve multiple students. Steen, Melfie, Carro, and Shi provide a helpful literature review of K–12 group counseling interventions, with a focus on academic outcomes and therapeutic factors. This kind of review provides an incredibly valuable resource for school counselors seeking group-based interventions that have evidence of efficacy and the possibility of application in multiple settings. The authors summarize the research done to date, making useful suggestions for future research and for school counselor practice.

Both articles that focus on elementary school counseling concern advocacy. Berger, Blalock, Goodman-Scott, and Brown describe a phenomenological qualitative study of 13 professionals who successfully advocated for new elementary positions, the maintenance of existing elementary school positions in jeopardy of elimination, or changes to elementary school counselor role and function to better serve students. These inspirational school counseling professionals provided three general themes to their work: critical reflection to develop advocacy skills, working with stakeholders, and using data. Filled with firsthand narratives, this article provides an in-depth examination of the ways that systemic changes happen through effective advocacy. The authors provide multiple concrete examples and related suggestions for how to develop these skills and engage in this work.

Targeting the same issues from a different approach, Brown, Gruman, and Purgason provide a compelling case study about how a Washington state school counselor (the first author) used data about the mental health challenges of her elementary students to create statewide change. This article is an excellent example of how we can use evidence-based school counseling tools at the local, district, and state levels to get needed services for our students. Once the school counselor realized the dramatic increases in mental health difficulties for her schools' students, she collaborated with her state-level association, peers, and local counselor educators to conduct a statewide survey of school counselors. This article reports on the data used and on the advocacy process, offering ideas for others hoping to raise awareness of the critical role elementary school counselors can have in addressing student mental health needs.

Taking up the ongoing discussion about the impact of ratios, Domina, Akos, Bastain, and Godwin examined school counselor-to-student ratios in a large sample of students in Grades 4–8 over 6 years, finding that more services were related better mathematics scores and fewer absences, but not to attendance data or student suspensions. These authors thoughtfully unpack the myriad confounding factors that impact

research on ratios and contribute to our increasing evidence for the added value of school counseling services for younger students.

Impressively, given current contexts, Molina, Lemberger-Truelove, and Zieher conducted a randomized controlled trial study of the impact of a school counselor-led consultation intervention. The study involved middle and high school teachers and the intervention focused on mindfulness, reducing teacher stress, and student–teacher relationships. With thoughtful and thorough descriptions of their theoretical frames, intervention constructs and content, and research process, these authors offer useful suggestions for school counselors who want to provide targeted teacher consultation that supports teachers and also improves student educational experiences. Because one of our goals as school counselors is to provide students with safe and effective learning environments, supporting teacher well-being through consultation and education is an excellent systemic approach to consider.

The final article in this special edition also addresses school counseling services at the high school level. Ohrt, Guest, Deaton, and Gonzales write about the development and factor analysis of the *School Counselor Noncognitive Skills Scale* (SCNSS), which assesses students' perceptions of school counseling programs' impact on their noncognitive skills. Because it uses student feedback rather than school counselor self-analysis, the SCNSS provides a valuable data set that can guide program and intervention decisions while serving as an informal evaluation of key school counseling services. The factors identified in SCNSS were Values and Decision Making, Social/Emotional Skills, and Future Planning—all critical skills for our students to develop as a result of our programs.

Understanding EBSC as a Series of Opportunities for Creating Multilevel Change

How a person uses the term evidence-based practice, or, in this case, evidence-based school counseling, is important. In a recent article (Dimmitt & Zyromski, 2020), we suggested that interpreting the construct of EBSC as the search for evidence-based interventions is limiting. Evidence-based interventions often reflect manualized programs that can be helpful when addressing an identified student-level issue, as long as that intervention has been validated with similar populations (see Mason and Trezek [2020] for a useful guide for this process). Gambrill (2019) pointed out that many programs vary in their rigor and encouraged practitioners to be thoughtful about ensuring that programs they choose have evidence of their effectiveness with their specific populations. Gordon and Conaway (2020) went further in warning that many lists or databases of evidence-based practices reflect manualized programs created by vendors and suggested that practitioners need to consider not just how good an intervention might be, but how effective it will be compared to other alternatives. These types of questions, among others (see Gambrill [2019] for a useful guide

of critical questions) are important and inherent to the process of choosing evidence-based interventions, but when the focus is only on choosing evidence-based interventions, we can miss the vital, larger ecological issues that are creating the student-level challenges we are attempting to address with our interventions in the first place.

Earlier in this article we asked, “In the context of 2020 and 2021, what contributions might evidence-based school counseling have on the success of our fatigued, often traumatized students, families, and school staff?” Focusing our efforts solely on evidence-based interventions can limit our impact on enhancing holistic success of our students in future—perhaps not yet known—national crises, and our support for their resilience in addressing ongoing racism and the multiple types of prejudice they may experience. If, however, EBSC is applied as an approach to practice that demands the practitioner apply root cause analysis to better understand the nature of the problem, work transparently and in collaboration during the investigation into what is known about how best to address the problem, and then use culturally informed assessments to measure success, then EBSC may have a much broader impact on our educational systems and students' lives (Gambrill, 2019).

Although considering addressing the pervasive inequity and injustice created by structural racism and exacerbated by a global health pandemic may seem overwhelming, school counselors are ideally situated to implement preventative and developmental interventions that increase wellness and social justice outcomes (Henry & Bryan, 2021; Holcomb-McCoy, 2022; Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021; J. L. Moore et al., 2021). The question is not if the issues exist, or if they are within our purview as school counselors to address (Henry & Bryan, 2021; Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021; J. L. Moore et al., 2021), but rather whether we are defining these issues as the problems of practice to which we give our time and expertise. This can be informed by the first step in the evidence-based school counseling approach, namely, asking “What are the issues that are keeping our students from being successful?”

Using the First Step of EBSC as an Opportunity

Considering their own identity and potential biases is critical for users of the EBSC approach when applying the three steps in the cycle (Gambrill, 2019). What we define as the purpose or goals for the process will either constrict or expand the amount and types of data we examine in our efforts to identify what needs to be addressed (see Gambrill [2019] for a further exploration of critical thinking steps necessary for this process). Although our situatedness in schools can be an asset to this work (Levy & Lemberger-Truelove, 2021), it can also infuse the work with harmful political and historically oppressive priorities built around the achievement focus of the K–12 educational system (Love, 2019; Polk et al., 2022). School counselors, or any educational leaders, may find difficulty engaging in data-based

decision making that goes beyond simply fulfilling administrators' expectations or national educational policy demands (for a deeper historical review of politically driven data use in K–12 environments, see Zyromski et al., [2021]). The EBSC approach asks that school counselors be aware of the political demands for a data-informed lens that prioritizes the data categories espoused by historical political national interests, school administrators, national associations, and even our training programs. If we, in fact, focus solely on data such as high-stakes test scores to identify student issues to address or to measure our effectiveness, we contribute to and reinforce the racist policies and systems that created and continually reinforce inequities for our students of color (Love, 2019). Instead, we suggest prioritizing data collection that provides a comprehensive view of the academic and social/emotional outcomes of our students, while also providing an accurate, ecologically coherent picture of the root causes of both the struggles and the inherent strengths of our students and their immediate systems. Doing so will better inform the practices of the school counseling program in order to produce outcomes that support the holistic development of our students.

Again, this may seem ambiguous or vague at this point, perhaps even intimidating. It need not be if one conceptualizes the first step of the EBSC model as a multilayered process for identifying strengths and challenges at the systemic and at the individual level to create the desired changes that will successfully address an identified problem. Naming resources and barriers at both the systemic and student levels acknowledges the complexities of schools and reminds us to address how multidetermined—especially in complex institutions like schools—human experiences really are. It also reminds us to take a step back and make sure our schools or programs are not holding students accountable for a situation they did not create and that they do not have the institutional power to shift.

One needs only a minimal understanding of the national and historical research to understand the pervasive and persistent oppression of youth of color (Bryan et al., 2012; Carter & Welner, 2013; Graves, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Skiba et al., 2011; Yeager et al., 2017) and how that oppression manifests in unequal opportunities leading to disproportionality in behavior referrals, special education referrals, graduation rates, academic and career readiness, and other predictors of school success. Because we know this is the case, an initial layer of data that school counselors should be examining are data that illustrate these symptoms of the inequitable system, such as academic achievement variables (e.g., reading levels, grade point average, D and F grades, credits earned, retention rates, enrollment in gifted and talented classes, and enrollment in AP or IB courses), inequitable discipline reflected in data (e.g., discipline data, in- and out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to alternate school settings), and data around college and career readiness indicators and attendance. The purpose and goal of this stage of data collection is to gather enough of the data pieces indicating inequities in the system to inform our critical thinking around the context factors that may

be creating barriers to success for our students (Gambrill, 2019). To be proactively antiracist, and to effectively increase equity, access, and opportunities for any marginalized, disenfranchised, or oppressed students, more than one way of creating change will be necessary (Holcomb-McCoy, 2022).

A second layer of data that needs to be collected in the initial phase of the EBSC process could include additional ecological issues, mental health issues, and areas of strength for our students. Johnson and Brookover (2021) pointed out that school counselors can assess students' social determinants of health (SDOH), which include economic stability, early childhood education, social and community context, levels of health and access to health care, and the quality and safety of student neighborhoods and housing. These authors argue that challenges in an area of SDOH (e.g., socioeconomic status or access to healthcare) will directly impact students' ability to be successful. Further, as schools begin to collect data around SDOH, they also may be using universal mental health screeners and suicide screeners. Examining the purpose and goals of these screeners is important, for although many students do receive valuable mental health services at school, students of color, youth with learning disabilities, and youth whose parents had fewer years of education are more likely to be separated from their classmates to receive mental health services, or even placed in a separate school to receive mental health support (Green et al., 2020). This disproportionality of removing students of color from learning environments more often than their White peers was expounded upon by Green et al. (2020), who pointed out that Black and Latino youth were more likely to

be placed *initially* [emphasis original] in a separate classroom or school setting than their white peers. This finding raises questions about whether school staff provide racial/ethnic minority students a continuum of supports, in general education settings, before providing them services in settings in which they are separated from their peers. (p. 398)

These inequities identify prime areas for intervention in the next stage of the EBSC process.

As school counselors get ready to move from the first stage of the EBSC process (data collection to uncover an issue), a vital step is ensuring that students' assets and resources are also assessed. Protective factors—children's developmental support and opportunities that decrease the likelihood of negative outcomes and often bolster resilience (Naglieri et al., 2013; O'Connell et al., 2009)—can literally buffer the negative impacts of trauma. We need to build upon students' protective factors and related strengths as we intervene on their behalf at multiple levels, and while pushing back on racist systems. As Svetaz et al. (2020) pointed out, racism is perpetuated at multiple points—within national and state policy, educational systems, school buildings, and at the individual level—therefore, our data collection must include multiple layers (to the extent possible), and our change efforts as well. Fortunately, we can collect information from our students that provides

insight into valuable assets and protective factors that they possess such as hope, friendships, family connections, community, noncognitive factors (e.g., executive functioning, motivation, and self-regulation), contextual assets (e.g., Black history knowledge; Chapman-Hilliard & Adams-Bass, 2016) or positive racial identity (Griffin et al., 2020). Although we must not hold students accountable for systemic problems, we can still bolster their success in those systems by supporting their use of individual, family, and community strengths. Once school counselors have collected data that illustrates the issue of concern, dug deeper to identify ecological and systemic contributors to that issue, and gathered the strengths and assets of their students, then it is appropriate to move to the second phase of the EBSC process. An important sidenote: Each of the protective factors or noncognitive issues detailed above can be assessed using free instruments in most cases (e.g., see Bardhoshi et al., [2019] or Logan-McKibben and Alvarez [2021], or conduct a Google Scholar search).

Using the Second Step of EBSC as a Further Opportunity

Imagine for a moment that the data you collected in the previous step on an academic indicator during the pandemic showed that a racial inequity exists—that a disproportionate number of D and F grades earned over the last 3 months of school were by your Black students. Upon further data collection, you find that office referrals during this time were much higher for Black students, and when you work with your district-level data expert, you discover relationships between low grades, office referrals, and lower levels of feelings of school belonging, less hope, less feelings of being safe at school, more indicators of trauma, and greater feelings of anxiety. At this point, you are well-primed with information that allows you to address the issues with a multilayered approach! The second step in the EBSC approach is to explore the question: “What do we know works to address these issues?” It is vital that the purpose of the approach at all three stages of EBSC is to address systemic issues while investing in and expanding student capacities to support their success in the face of persistent adversity (Lemberger-Truelove & Bowers, 2019).

It may be helpful for school counselors to realize that systemic issues take time to change but that change is possible. Creating any type of real change requires ongoing, persistent, manageable steps (several articles in this special edition describe just this sort of work). We might have a large goal in mind, but change happens in the details and adds up over time. It may also be encouraging to realize that whenever possible, it behooves us to use evidence-based or research-supported activities because they save us time and have been shown to be effective (if validated with the same population with which we are working). Our job, then, is to choose interventions (if available) that research studies have shown are effective with student populations similar to our own. We can then base our decisions on the best possible research knowledge about the issue at the time we are making the decision. And even if no intervention has perfect fit, it is more efficient to

modify materials that are already strong than to create interventions from scratch.

In our hypothetical example, starting at the individual level, we have some relevant evidence-based interventions to choose from. Zyromski et al. (2022) have created a list of evidence-based programs that have empirical support for bolstering student protective factors. Feelings of belonging is one such factor. An example of an intervention on the resource list that research suggests can positively increase Black students’ feelings of school belonging is the Student Success Skills program (<https://studentsuccessskills.com/>; Lemberger & Clemens, 2012; Webb et al., 2019). To ameliorate feelings of anxiety, school counselors could implement Tier 1 interventions such as classroom lessons on anxiety to support all students in the school, and provide additional Tier 2 interventions using Coping Cat or The C.A.T. Project (Beidas et al., 2010). Interventions like these help alleviate specific student-level issues, but it is also valuable to implement interventions that foster protective factors more broadly that can more systemically address identified student needs.

In addition to manualized interventions that appear on lists of evidence-based programming, research-supported interventions also exist that would benefit students with these identified needs. For example, Griffin et al. (2020) pointed out that traditional social/emotional learning (SEL) interventions often are used to control students of color; to counter that destructive tendency, the author offered equity-elaborated SEL competencies that bolster Black adolescents’ coping responses to race-related stress at school and that lead to increased valuing of racial identity. These changes affected factors related to school adjustment, such as school belonging, school valuing, and the application of cognitive strategies for coping. This important study highlighted how the White historical lens of education can co-opt practices originally built for the benefit of Black students to control the behavior of Black students.

The original developer of social/emotional learning (SEL), Dr James P. Comer, founded a program in 1968 in schools with the lowest income levels and achievement levels, with primarily Black populations. In response to his research around ways that racist systems impact child development (Comer, 1969; Comer, 1971; Comer & Hill, 1985), Comer created a whole-school social/emotional response in which student and parent governance was key, a mental health program and team were implemented, and staff development was prioritized. The collaborative relationships between families, teachers, and schools reinforced positive racial identity within the school, and the educational setting and academic outcomes were transformed (Bowman et al., 2018; Comer, 1985). As a result, we have research that illustrates the power of shared governance and the power of reinforcing positive racial identity within our schools. School counselors can work with school leaders to assess these types of factors to track the impact of systemic changes in shared governance and curriculum shifts that emphasize strong positive Black racial identity on feelings of school belonging in Black students.

Finally, we have research-supported practices designed to impact the system-level challenges faced by Black students in our original hypothetical scenario that focus on student assets and on building student-level protective factors. Henry and Bryan (2021) offered the results of a school–family–community partnership called Just Love, which was delivered in an urban, high-poverty, Title I school in the southeastern United States. The Just Love program worked with the school and a local church using an equity-focused partnership process model (Bryan et al., 2020; Bryan & Henry, 2008). The school counselor built the partnership, used a needs assessment to identify students' needs and strengths, and coordinated a program that had three components: (a) school-wide student incentives and parent engagement, (b) classroom adoption by church volunteers, and c) a school-based mentoring program. Students reported many positive outcomes related to participating in the program, including increases in feelings of positive relationships with mentors, appreciation and thankfulness for the mentors, feelings of connectedness with their role models (mentors), and improvements in classroom and school climate, among others (Henry & Bryan, 2021). This community partnership intervention changed the systems and increased students' protective factors, such as positive relationships with adults and peers. The assessment of the increases in students' protective factors because of the Just Love partnership illustrates the value of the final step in the EBSC process.

Using the Third Step of EBSC as Another Further Opportunity

The final step of the EBSC approach is an opportunity for school counselors to assess the impact of their multitiered activities and interventions on the variables identified in the first stage of the process. If school counselors give priority to addressing student-identified needs—such as anxiety, feelings of belonging, feeling safe at school, indicators of trauma, and levels of hope—prior to focusing on the outcome variables, improvements in the outcome variables (i.e., behavior referrals and academic achievement) are likely to soon follow. Being able to articulate the relationship between these levels of change is an important skill for school counselors to have in advocating for systemic change and additional school counseling services (Zyromski & Mariani, 2019). In the example above, school counselors could evaluate the impact of building a school–family–community partnership imitating the Just Love program (Henry & Bryan, 2021) with the intention of buffering the impact of trauma while increasing specific protective factors such as positive relationships with adults and peers and related positive feelings of school belonging. These changes could be tracked using an instrument measuring “feelings of school belonging” or a school climate measure. Most schools in the United States already have instruments that measure feelings of school safety, and these measures could be applied before and after interventions. For example, the *Children's Hope Scale* is a free, 6-

item instrument to assess changes in hope over time (Snyder et al., 1997), and other hope scales are available for children and adolescents. Numerous anxiety scales measuring different types of anxiety (e.g., social anxiety and testing anxiety) are also available, yet it is not necessary to measure every construct from beginning to end. If we know what we are trying to impact, and we articulate our awareness that when hope increases then feelings of anxiety may decrease, and if we find that our interventions impact some part of the situation (whether at the level of student, classroom, or school), we can suggest that other unmeasured student outcomes also are likely to have changed. However, if anxiety seems to be persistent, then it would be important to assess anxiety levels and bring in additional clinical resources as needed to support students. The key is thinking systemically and focusing on what we are trying to do—what student outcomes or context factors do we want to change? Finally, school counselors can take the powerful step of exploring the relationships of increases in feelings of school belonging, in school safety, and in hope—and the investment of protective factors—on the academic achievement and behavior of our students. Sharing the results of this work will increase political capital for school counselors, often resulting in additional freedom to further enhance this type of school counseling programming.

Although increases in academic achievement from interventions are likely (Lemberger-Truelove et al., 2020), more valuable in the long run is better overall health as the outcome of increased engagement (Liu et al., 2020), increased feelings of belonging (Davis et al., 2019), and increased feelings of safety (K. A. Moore & Ramirez, 2016). School counselors have the opportunity to illustrate that investing in students' resiliency, their protective factors, and their noncognitive assets benefits schools' academic priorities while also positively impacting students' mental health (Cohrdes & Mauz, 2020) by reducing feelings of anxiety, depression, and feelings of distress (Beutel et al., 2017; Poole et al., 2017a, 2017b). These primary obstacles to learning have been consistently and powerfully identified by students during the COVID-19 pandemic—and school counselors are on that front line to provide the needed support.

Conclusion

Although 2020 and 2021 have been incredibly challenging, in this article, we encourage our profession to use this current set of situations as an opportunity to reconsider, restructure, and reconnect to the overall goals and value of school counseling services and programs. We are charged with supporting students in their journeys and helping them to be successful in multiple ways—now, and in their whole lives. This is a huge task that can only be accomplished in collaboration and in community. The authors of the articles from the 2021 Evidence-Based School Counseling Conference offer us several different tools and methods to do this work. Each provides suggestions for creating systemic changes, for using evidence-based school counseling as a roadmap, and for remembering to love and honor ourselves

and our students along the way. All are valuable, all are needed, and all will help us move forward toward the light of the future.

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