


Introduction to the Special Issue on School Counselors Addressing Education, Health, Wellness, and Trauma Disparities

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Abstract

This special issue is on school counselors addressing education, health, wellness, and trauma disparities. The focus is on current and former school counselors' collective experiences to contextualize the impact of the pandemic(s) on the lives and work of school counselors and the disruption to the lives of the students and families served. The collection of nine articles provides a window into the experiences of school counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords

COVID-19, social determinants of health, trauma, wellness, school counselors

This special issue on school counselors addressing education, health, wellness, and trauma disparities in *Professional School Counseling* draws on current and former school counselors' collective experiences to contextualize the impact of the pandemic(s) on the lives and work of school counselors and the disruption to the lives of the students and families served. This collection of articles also serves as a resource for school counselors seeking to understand innovative ways in which they can address social determinants of health (SDOH) challenges, which include unequal access to quality education, food insecurity, unstable housing, discrimination, adverse childhood experiences, lack of leisure activities, and other circumstances caused by unequal access to power, privilege, and resources (Bambra et al., 2010; Sederer, 2016). Social determinants of health challenges existed within the walls of the school prior to the pandemic; however, the pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, causing widening disparities in health and education (Sharma et al., 2020). For example, during the COVID-19 school shutdowns, up to 42% of households had limited digital access, impacting students' ability to access education (Ong, 2020); the nearly 30 million school children who depend on the National School Lunch program for low-cost or free lunches were at an increased risk of food insecurity (Toossi, 2022); and more than 10 million people in 2021 reported being behind in rent and struggling with housing insecurity (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021). COVID-19 adversely impacted every domain of SDOH, leading to increased awareness of disparities but limited action toward addressing those same disparities. The gap between awareness and action further permeates educational systems, increasing collective trauma.

Trauma

Childhood trauma occurs “when a child experiences an actual or threatened negative event, series of events, or set of circumstances that cause emotional pain and overwhelm the child's ability to cope” (Bartlett & Steber, 2019). Well-documented research has shown that youth who experience trauma during childhood, commonly referred to as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), may continue to present physical and psychological symptoms for years to come, ultimately affecting their overall wellness (Felitti et al., 1998; Felitti, 2002). Specifically, trauma negatively impacts brain development, cognitive development, learning, physical health, emotional development and regulation, mental health, and relationship development. ACEs and trauma impede daily executive functioning, and thus impact educational development.

The original study (Felitti et al., 1998) characterized ACEs as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; physical and emotional neglect; exposure to adult incarceration, mental illness, substance abuse, or violence in the household; and parental separation or divorce. Newer research expanded the definition of ACEs by adding poverty, bullying, exposure to community and

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school violence and discrimination, natural and man-made disasters, major accidents, medical procedures, and war/terrorist attacks (Cronholm et al., 2015; Finkelhor et al., 2015). Given the extensive list of childhood trauma among the SDOH domains, a reasonable conclusion is that a large number of students across the country might be experiencing co-occurring ACEs, depending on the child's home and educational context, and specifically regarding community responses to COVID-19. Considering the disparities across a number of intersecting identities, research shows that Black and brown youth and those who live in underresourced areas are potentially experiencing ACEs and trauma at higher rates (Whiteside-Mansell et al., 2019).

This special issue focuses on SDOH, wellness, and trauma disparities, but we must also examine the phrase *collective trauma*. This term refers to the psychological reactions to a traumatic event that affect an entire society (Hirschberger, 2018). When referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, descriptions include toxic stress, burnout, uncertainty, isolation, grief, and loss—in other words, trauma. The term is rarely used to describe today's experiences despite mental health experts' suggestions. In reality we are all, adults and kids alike, potentially experiencing collective trauma in some way from the impact of the pandemic. However, as noted, current living and educational conditions and intersecting identities impact the ways in which a person is experiencing the collective trauma. In short, not all collective trauma is experienced at the same intensity for ourselves, educators, and all students and their communities. Therefore, the responses to these disparities require a contextual, systemic response.

Growing Forward

School counselors are professionally qualified to recognize and respond to the various manifestations of SDOH. They play a pivotal role in navigating students in their process of healing and being successful across all areas of development (ASCA, 2021; Johnson & Brookover, 2021). However, school counselors and, broadly, the profession face barriers influencing our ability to appropriately respond. Language related to SDOH is presented differently, which limits school counselors in their awareness and response. Johnson and Brookover (2021) shared that the school counseling profession often emphasizes related topics and interventions such as multitiered systems of support and social/emotional learning and encourages an understanding of cultural differences. However, a dearth of school counseling research directly names SDOH, which would provide a framework to describe the social-political realities influencing the development of youth. As a result, the scope of school counseling prevention/intervention responses rest on adjusting students to navigate volatile circumstances instead of preparing school counselors to disrupt the systemic issues that cause the adverse environments.

School counselors also face internal and external barriers of bias and lack of professional training to understand certain manifestations of SDOH that adversely impact youth and their families. For example, race-based trauma (i.e., psychological

harm caused by racism) is often overlooked or belittled due either to disbelief that racial oppression exists or to beliefs limiting the extent to which racism causes emotional distress (Carter & Pieterse, 2020; Hemmings & Evans, 2018; Johnson & Brookover, 2021). The 2021 death by suicide of Isabella “Izzy” Tichenor in Utah illustrates the tragic ramifications of a system's failure to respond to identity-based bullying, which often results in the one being bullied experiencing trauma (Galán et al., 2021; Joseph, 2021). Reports show that Izzy was harassed because of her race and autism spectrum disorder and despite being alerted, the school responded inadequately (Joseph, 2021). Therefore, school counselors need to learn more about the complexities of SDOH through an intersectional lens and their role in influencing change in responses at the systemic level.

School counselors' degree of awareness and efficacy to intentionally infuse this knowledge varies across the profession due to differences in training about SDOH (Gantt et al., 2021; Hemmings & Evans, 2018; Henfield et al., 2019; Johnson & Brookover, 2021). As the scholarship highlighting the depth and breadth of the implications of SDOH on the development of youth across their lifespan continues to grow, so should our urgency to respond (Henfield et al., 2019). Symptoms that manifest from SDOH like those addressed in this special issue (i.e., trauma, racial oppression, and educational disruptions) are often subtle, go overlooked, and remain unaddressed (Abma et al., 2020; Carter & Pieterse, 2020). It is important that school counselors are aware of SDOH and actively use this knowledge as a lens to guide prevention and intervention activities within their comprehensive school counseling programs.

Special Issue Articles

To support school counselors in crafting their systemic approach, this special issue includes a collection of nine articles that provide a window into the experiences of school counselors during the COVID-19 pandemic. The articles are separated into three sections. The first section, School Counselor Experiences Supporting Students During and in the Aftermath of COVID-19, includes two articles that speak to the extraordinary lengths to which school counselors go to ensure that they are meeting the academic and social/emotional needs of their students. In the qualitative article, “‘We are the heartbeat of the school’: How School Counselors Supported Student Mental Health During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Alexander et al. (2022) use an organizational role theory framework to explore school counselors' perceptions of their role delivering mental health support during the pandemic. Similarly, “Exploring the Induced Disparities of Implementing School Counseling Services During COVID-19” (Limberg et al., 2022), is a mixed-methods study that investigates how school counselors adapted their approach to address K–12 students' academic, career, and social/emotional development needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. These articles collectively provide insight into how school counselors adjusted and managed their comprehensive school counseling program in the midst of a global crisis.

The next section, Addressing Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) and COVID-19, includes four articles that describe

school counselor interventions. In the qualitative article “Saving the Class of 2021: Utilizing Multitiered Systems of Support to Support Seniors’ Graduation Plans,” Tillery et al. (2022) use case study methodology to tell the story of a high school counseling department goal and method for ensuring that their high school students graduated despite the many challenges faced during the 2020–2021 school year. The next article, “Applications of Intersectionality Theory to Career Interventions for School Counselors in Response to COVID-19” (Wright & Chan, 2022), is a conceptual article that provides a foundation as it relates to intersectionality theory and practical steps for how school counselors can engage the tenets of intersectionality to advance their career counseling interventions with historically marginalized students. The third article in this section, “Addressing the Social Determinants of Health in Refugee Students: Application of the Refugee Well-Being Project Intervention to School Counselors and Interns” (Harrichand et al., 2022), is a conceptual article that details how school counselors can use the Refugee Well-Being Project intervention to provide culturally responsive and inclusive mental health care to the students they serve. The final article, “Parentification and COVID-19: Implication for School Counselors” (Higdon et al., 2022), is a conceptual article that delineates how parentification adversely impacts the well-being of children and offers detailed strategies and interventions for supporting these students. The four articles in this section provide practical guidance for school counselors interested in using theory-based interventions to address and intervene on academic and well-being disparities.

The three articles in the final section, the Impact of COVID-19 on Students and Families, delve into the ways the pandemic has adversely affected students and provide future directions for practice. The first article in this section, “The Impact of Racial Trauma on the College and Career Outcomes of Black Students: An Antiracist Approach” (Edwin & Daniels, 2022), is a conceptual article that provides a thorough literature review on the ways in which COVID-19, SDOH, and racial trauma collude to cause adversity within the lives of Black students. The article concludes with antiracist recommendations for responding to racial trauma. In the second article, “The Trauma of COVID-19–Fueled Discrimination: Posttraumatic Stress in Asian American Adolescents,” Ermis-Demirtas et al. (2022) take a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between pandemic-related online and offline discrimination and PTSD symptoms in a sample of East and Southeast Asian American high school students. The concluding article, “The Impact of COVID-19–Related Educational Disruption on Early Elementary Students and Their Families” (Randolph & Wirth, 2022), is a conceptual article that employs a case example to highlight the pandemic difficulties endured by one school counselor and the families they work with. Combined, the articles elucidate the varied yet shared experiences of trauma as a result of the pandemic.

In summary, considering the pervasive ways SDOH influence the psychological and physiological health of children

across their lifespan, this special issue presents a mere primer on the topic and the ways we can disrupt the negative impact on students’ academic and social/emotional development. It is our hope that this special issue increases school counselors’ awareness of the SDOH domains to identify the systemic ways they influence the development of youth. This is a starting point for school counselors to engage.

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