

Actions Against Racism:

Bringing Together Trauma-Informed Practices, Social-Emotional Learning, and Racial Socialization to Combat Racism in Schools

Danielle R. Hatchimonji, PhD,¹ Kira Branch, PsyD,^{1,2} Danika Perry, PsyD,^{1,2} and Tia N. Barnes, PhD³

1. Nemours Children's Health
2. Sidney Kimmel Medical College, Thomas Jefferson University
3. University of Delaware

Abstract

Racism is a social determinant of health with dire consequences for the health, education, and mental health of students of color. Thus, there is an urgent need to develop and test evidence-based strategies to combat racism in schools. In response to this need, our team has developed a multi-tiered school-based intervention to build capacity for combatting racism in educators, students, and families. The “Actions Against Racism” intervention synthesizes three evidence-based practices: trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning (SEL), and racial socialization. The multiple tiers of intervention aim to cultivate skills for combatting individual and structural racism in educators, families, and students across the school ecology. In this paper, we present the rationale for this intervention and provide an overview of the “Actions Against Racism” components.

Introduction

Racism is a social determinant of health, negatively impacting education, physical, and mental health outcomes of students of color.¹ Experiences of racial discrimination are associated with poorer mental health² and physical health³ for children and adolescents of color, with impacts lasting through adulthood.⁴ In schools, students of color are disciplined more harshly,⁵ are more likely to be identified as needing special education services,⁶ less likely to be identified as needing gifted services,⁷ and less likely to have access to a quality education.⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has caused further disproportionate harm to students of color and disconnected students from mental health and school support services.⁹ Thus, there is an urgent need for evidence-based strategies to address racism in schools toward promoting the social, emotional, and behavioral wellness of all children. In response to this need, we have developed “Actions Against Racism,” a multi-tiered school-based intervention to build capacity for combatting racism in educators, students, and families. The intervention is innovative because it brings together three evidence-based practices—trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning (SEL), and racial socialization—to cultivate skills for combatting racism in individuals from diverse backgrounds. In this paper, we present the rationale for this intervention and provide an overview of the “Actions Against Racism” components.

The Urgency of Combatting Racism in Education

Racism operates at structural and individual levels to create and maintain inequity in education, health, and mental health.¹ At the structural level, racism is produced and reproduced by laws,

rules, and practices that are sanctioned and implemented by various levels of government and embedded in the economic system and in cultural and societal norms.¹⁰ Over hundreds of years, structural racism has organized the structure of American society by race, resulting in unequal access to resources and opportunities.¹¹ At the individual interpersonal level, racial microaggressions cause psychological harm to students of color.¹² Experiences of microaggressions, overt discrimination, and other forms of racial maltreatment are associated with anxiety, stress, and trauma symptoms.¹³ Racial trauma, specifically, is a traumatic response to accumulated exposure to race-based stress.¹⁴ Racial stress and trauma are thought to contribute to racial mental health disparities, such as higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for Black and African Americans compared to other racial groups.¹⁵ Thus, there is an urgent need to combat racism at both individual and structural levels. Yet, despite the unequivocal dire effects of racism, most efforts to address racial inequity focus on isolated indicators of structural racism (e.g., achievement gap), rather than identifying racism itself as the root cause of inequity.¹⁶ At the same time, the disproportionate harm of COVID-19 on communities of color and the highly visible killings of people of color have changed public consciousness and discourse about challenging racism. Researchers and practitioners are at an inflection point that allows for a reconceptualization of what can be done to combat racism in schools.

Existing Promising Practices to Combat Racism in Schools

Currently, schools employ multiple, often disconnected, strategies to address racial inequity.¹⁷ Few of these efforts aim to cultivate actionable skills for combatting racism directly.¹⁸ Although there are no evidence-based interventions that directly target racism in schools, three distinct practices have shown promise for promoting mental health in the context of racial stress and trauma: trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning (SEL), and racial socialization. For students and staff impacted by racial stress and trauma, trauma-focused interventions offer specific strategies to support coping and healing.¹⁹ SEL practices build student and educator competencies that are essential for combatting racism, like assertive communication, empathy, and emotion regulation.²⁰ Racial socialization can increase awareness about messages related to culture and racism, increase student and educator competence in having discussions about these topics, and create cultural pride and unity in the school setting.¹⁸ Bringing together trauma-informed intervention, SEL, and racial socialization to build skills for combatting racism can create schools where educators, students, and families are more confident about discussing race and are prepared to disrupt racism at individual and structural levels.

Trauma-Informed Practices

Although trauma-informed interventions are rarely designed to specifically address racism or racial stress and trauma, the trauma-informed lens is useful because it guides practitioners to view students who demonstrate challenging behaviors with compassion and to provide them opportunities to heal.²¹ School-based trauma-informed programs have been created over the past two decades in response to growing recognition of the harmful effects of toxic stress, trauma, and adversity on child development.²² Trauma-informed approaches emphasize strengthening existing supports and building skills for coping in the face of ongoing or previous exposure to trauma or adversity.¹⁹ Trauma-informed approaches include classroom and school-wide approaches to support students with trauma histories. School-wide approaches serve students with a range of social, emotional, or behavioral needs through multiple tiers of intervention.²¹ Specific psychological treatments for post-traumatic stress symptoms also fall broadly under the

trauma-informed practices umbrella (e.g., Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools).²³ These individual and group-based interventions have demonstrated some effectiveness in addressing trauma symptoms.¹⁹ Unfortunately, as currently implemented, trauma-informed practices often pathologize Black and Brown youth for their responses to unjust conditions created and maintained by structural racism.²⁴ There is a need to leverage the strengths of trauma-informed practices to specifically support coping and healing from racial stress and trauma, while simultaneously addressing the pathologizing of Black and Brown youth and working to dismantle structural racism.

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

SEL approaches provide a whole school structure for systematically and explicitly supporting the development of social-emotional skills and positive relationships. SEL skills allow students to “integrate cognition, affect, and behaviors, to achieve specified social tasks and positive developmental outcomes.”²⁵ Competencies in the social-emotional domain support positive mental health²⁰ and promote a positive school climate.²⁶ SEL initiatives often include explicit instruction by classroom teachers through manualized programs. Meta-analytic findings suggest that these programs lead to gains in social-emotional skills, mental health, and academic achievement.^{20,27} However, these interventions have not been adequately examined from the perspective of race/ethnicity, socioeconomic, disability, and sexual and gender identity considerations.²⁸ In recent years, the SEL field has introduced the concept of “transformative SEL” which speaks to the potential of SEL to ameliorate the educational, social, and economic inequities resulting from structural racism.²⁹ A key approach to transformative SEL is incorporating culturally responsive practices. However, as with many curricula, the expectation remains that teachers will proactively incorporate culturally responsive practices. Particularly for White teachers (a majority of the teaching workforce), integrating culturally responsive pedagogy into SEL requires significant support.³⁰ The transformative SEL approach has the potential to support efforts to combat racism by building key skills for identity exploration, cultural humility, collaborative problem-solving, and multicultural competence. There is a need to support educators, parents, and students in building these social-emotional skills to empower them in identifying, disrupting, and dismantling racism within the education system.

Racial Socialization

Racial socialization, or messages about race and racism, can promote adaptive social, emotional, and academic functioning for children of color.³¹ Racial socialization is most often studied in the context of parents teaching children about culture, race, and identity, and preparing children to deal with racism. Racial socialization by parents in families of color supports positive mental health³² and academic functioning.³³ Coping responses supported by racial socialization are unique from general coping strategies, thereby necessitating attention to racial socialization, particularly for students of color.³¹ In contrast to parents and families of color, White teachers and parents are less likely to engage in racial socialization practices that promote disruption of racism.³⁴ Thus, schools aiming to combat racism must specifically build racial socialization skills in White members of the school community. In doing so, schools will be able to increase constructive interracial interactions and promote constructive racial socialization in the school environment.¹⁸ Infusing racial socialization practices into social-emotional learning (SEL) and trauma-informed practices holds great potential for building educator skills to combat racism in their classrooms and school communities.

Actions Against Racism

The Actions Against Racism intervention was originally conceived as a parent-child group intervention by Kira Branch and colleagues³⁵ at Nemours Children’s Health after the events surrounding the murder of George Floyd in May 2020. It was developed to address an urgent need to provide skills for coping, healing, and disrupting and dismantling racism. The adaptation of “Actions Against Racism” to the school context began in Spring 2021 in partnership with educators throughout Delaware. The school-based adaptation of Actions Against Racism incorporates evidence-based practices from racial socialization research,³⁶ trauma-focused cognitive behavior therapy,³⁷ and transformative social-emotional learning.²⁹ Actions Against Racism builds capacity for combatting racism in K-8 schools through three universal (Tier 1) components (school staff trainings, caregiver workshops, classroom conversations) and a small group component for students with social, emotional, or behavioral concerns (Tier 2/3).

1. School staff trainings. Promotes racial socialization as well as recognizing and combatting racial bias in staff-staff, staff-student, and student-student interactions (Seven 90-minute workshops).
2. Caregiver workshops. Promotes caregiver racial socialization skills (Seven 90-minute workshops).
3. Universal classroom. Classroom conversations to promote constructive dialogue around racism and build inclusive and responsive classroom and school climate (At least weekly as part of existing classroom conversation structures).
4. Small group. Students build coping and action plans for experiencing or witnessing racism (Fourteen 40-minute sessions).

All four components target five actions broadly relevant to adults and young people from all backgrounds: Talking about Racism, Recognizing Racism, Disrupting Racism, Coping with Racism, and Healing from/Repairing Harm from Racism.

The series of workshops or group sessions culminate in either individual action plans (caregiver/school staff) or group projects (small group/classroom) to act against racism. The student social action projects use a problem-based learning approach to combat racism at the structural level. Table 1 summarizes how racial socialization skills, trauma-informed practices, and SEL skills align with the five actions against racism.

Table 1. Actions Against Racism Theoretical Underpinnings

Actions Against Racism	Developmental Framework for Trauma-Informed Care^a	SEL Skill (CASEL 5 framework^b)	Racial Socialization Skill
Action 1: Talking about Racism	Trauma Aware <i>Awareness of prevalence of trauma and need for trauma - informed care</i>	Identity Reflection <i>(Self-Awareness)</i>	Racial & Cultural Pride
		Perspective Taking <i>(Social Awareness)</i>	Understanding Harm from Racism
		Active Listening <i>(Relationship Skills)</i>	Cultural Humility

Action 2: Recognizing Racism	Trauma Aware <i>Explain and advocate for trauma-informed care</i>	Verbal and nonverbal communication <i>(Social Awareness)</i>	Reading Racial Situations
		Self-Reflection <i>(Self-Awareness)</i>	Recognizing own bias
Action 3: Disrupting Racism	Trauma Sensitive <i>Create readiness for change</i>	Assertive Communication <i>(Relationship Skills)</i>	Disarming microaggressions
		Social Problem Solving <i>(Responsible Decision Making)</i>	Building and Empowering Upstander Community
Action 4: Coping with Racism	Trauma Responsive <i>Changes in behaviors and practices to be more trauma-informed</i>	Emotion Identification <i>(Self-Awareness)</i>	Impact of racism on self
		Emotion Regulation <i>(Self-Management)</i>	Social, emotional, behavioral, and cognitive coping strategies
Action 5: Healing and Repairing Harm from Racism	Trauma Informed <i>Continuous improvement and leadership to be trauma-informed</i>	Goal setting and planning <i>(Responsible decision making)</i>	Strengthening Identity as Upstander/Leader /Ally
		Social Problem solving <i>(Responsible decision making)</i>	Fostering Collective Healing, Repair, and Growth
		Ethical Decision Making <i>(Responsible decision making)</i>	Advocating for Change

Note. a: Family Services Cabinet Council, 2020³⁸ b: CASEL (2020)³⁹

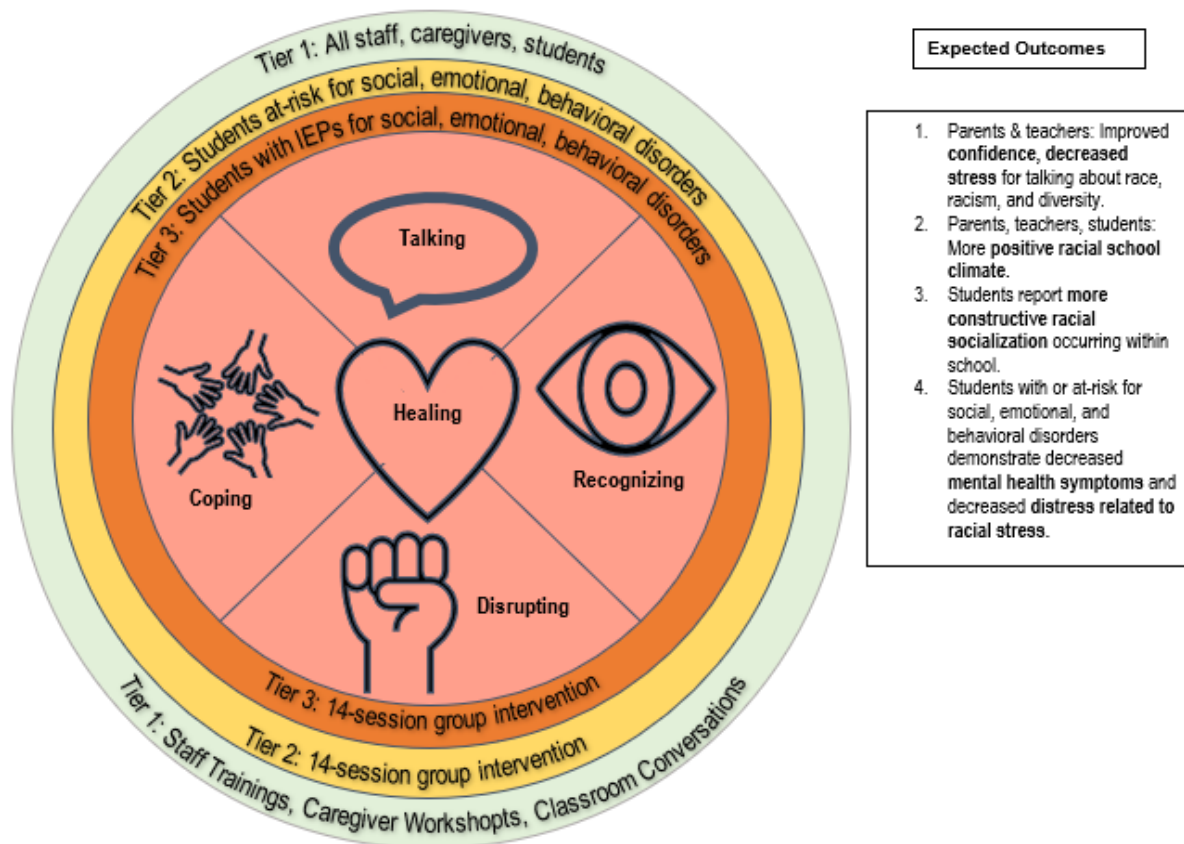
Theory of Change

Through five target “Actions,” the intervention builds social-emotional and behavioral skills for addressing racism in teachers, caregivers, and staff of all racial/ethnic backgrounds (Figure 1).

Through the small group intervention component, students develop active problem solving and coping skills that lead to improvements in mental health and distress related to racism.

Cultivating the five actions through the three universal components of the intervention (staff, caregivers, classroom) aims to increase staff and caregiver confidence in engaging in racial socialization practices and support a more inclusive school racial climate across staff, caregivers, and students. In turn, these changes in racial school climate will support the social, emotional, and behavioral functioning of all students, including those with specific concerns. Ultimately, the long-term impact of the intervention is expected to manifest in improvements in academic functioning for all students and reduction in racial disparities in mental health and education outcomes.

Figure 1. Actions Against Racism Intervention Model



Unique Features of Actions Against Racism

The simultaneous focus on healing while also building skills and practicing actions against racism sets this intervention apart from other school-based interventions. In addition, the intervention materials are designed for all racial/ethnic groups and ability levels, which is particularly useful for the school environment. Many interventions related to racism emphasize the African American experience or have only been tested on African American youth.³⁶ Thus, the fact that Actions Against Racism addresses the varied needs of students, caregivers, and staff from diverse backgrounds with one intervention will help build a more cohesive classroom and school climate. The modifications available for ability levels is also a unique and valuable feature. The Actions Against Racism intervention was developed by pediatric clinical psychologists who routinely treat a wide range of psychological disorders seen in schools, including autism, intellectual disability, ADHD, disruptive behavior disorders, anxiety, and depression. Intervention materials include adaptations for simplifying content and using concrete learning strategies to meet the needs of a range of learners.

Next Steps

The Actions Against Racism intervention is in early stages of development and refinement. Over the next few years, we expect to further refine the intervention in partnership with schools and families throughout Delaware. After refining, piloting, and testing each intervention component,

we anticipate conducting larger scale trials and ultimately training and disseminating throughout Delaware and beyond.

Conclusion

In the wake of COVID-19's disruptions to our schools and communities we are well-positioned to re-evaluate and facilitate necessary changes to support equitable education, physical, and mental health outcomes for all students. Without acceptable and feasible strategies to change the ongoing harm from racism, schools will perpetuate racism with dire impacts on students of color's physical and mental health. Moreover, educators without sufficient awareness, knowledge, or skills will promote race-based harm at a micro and macro level, perpetuating the school-to-prison pipeline and overcriminalization of unmanaged social, emotional, and behavioral health needs.

Pulling from the positive aspects of existing interventions, we have created and are in the process of testing the Actions Against Racism intervention for use in Delaware and beyond. This intervention will support school communities in:

1. Recognizing the harm of racism and racial stress/trauma;
2. Building transformative social-emotional competencies using culturally responsive pedagogy while recognizing that members of privileged groups may need significant support in engaging in this process;
3. Uplifting historically marginalized voices and empowering the school community to co-create caring and inclusive schools; and
4. Working together to take anti-racist action through service learning, problem-based learning, and social action projects for classrooms, after school groups, and whole school and district communities.

We look forward to the continued evolution of this work as we partner with administrators, educators, parents, and students to support equitable outcomes in Delaware schools and beyond.

Dr. Hatchimonji may be contacted at Danielle.hatchimonji@nemours.org.

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