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## School Counselors Involvement and Opportunities to Advocate Against Racialized Punitive Practices

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## **School Counselors Involvement and Opportunities to Advocate Against Racialized Punitive Practices**

Edwin Hernandez, Enrique Espinoza, Jewel Patterson

This phenomenological study draws on semi-structured interviews with thirteen school counselors to explore their experiences in advocating towards more equitable practices, specifically as it pertains to the removal of school police and school resource officers that contribute to the psychological and physical harm of many Black, Indigenous, and Students of Color. We draw on theories of racialized organizations and organizational routines to better understand school counselors' knowledge of their involvement in maintaining or disrupting the racialized punitive practices that dehumanize and criminalize youth of color. Findings from this study revealed two themes: 1) school counselors' support and reliance on school resource officers' punitive measures and 2) school counselors' advocacy against racialized punitive practices. This study offers some implications for professional school counseling organizations, counselor educators, and school counselors to inform their anti-racist pedagogy to dismantle racialized punitive practices in schools.

*Keywords:* school counselors, organizational routines, school discipline

Recent events have only reinforced the pressing need to increase the presence of school counselors to support the well-being of youth of Color, with the mass uprisings against police brutality over the murders of Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Rayshard Brooks, Andres Guardado, Dijon Kizzee, and many others. The historical systemic racism and racial inequalities many youth of Color face in their communities is mirrored within the U.S. education system as well (Annamma, 2018; Love, 2018; Shedd, 2015). These racial injustices coupled with the harmful racialized punitive practices in schools, which include a larger presence of school police or school resource officers (SROs) than school counselors, underscore the reproduction and reinforcement of racism that is manifested in schools that enroll predominantly Black and Latinx youth (Serrano, 2020; Shedd, 2015; Whitaker et al., 2019). Recent data reveals that almost 60% of schools in California reported having no school counselors employed at their campus (California Association for School Counselors [CASC], 2019). Another report recently released by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) documented that approximately 400,000 students in California attend a school with a school police officer on campus but

not a school counselor (Whitaker et al., 2019). Research has consistently shown how the presence of school police on campuses and their excessive use of force results in physical and psychological harm for many Black and Latinx youth (Annamma, 2018; Shedd, 2015; Whitaker et al., 2019). Consequently, many school districts across the nation have been urged to remove school police and direct those funds to hire more support staff at schools, especially school-based mental health professionals who will attend to the care of youth of Color (Serrano, 2020; Whitaker et al., 2019).

The policing and criminalization on youth of Color, specifically in the lives of Black and Latinx youth, is connected to a larger phenomenon that has shown how carceral practices are ingrained within the education system. This includes but is not limited to the overuse of metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and the presence of school police for practices of punishment and displacement of youth of Color (Annamma, 2018; Serrano, 2020; Shedd, 2015). Shedd (2015) notes that "certain "routines and rituals" compete with academic pursuits, putting some students squarely on the path to a heightened perception of criminal injustice and/or greater police contact" (p. 82). This

demonstrates how institutions have and continue to employ prisonlike practices, and with the increase of school police, it has only exacerbated the process to criminalize and remove youth of Color from the classroom and schools (Annamma, 2018; Shedd, 2015). Several studies have documented how institutions have and continue to employ prisonlike practices, and with the increase of school police, it has only exacerbated the process to further reproduce and reinforce inequitable educational opportunities, as youth of Color have been punished, criminalized, and pushed out of school (Annamma, 2018; Huerta & Rios-Aguilar, 2018; Morris, 2016; Rios, 2011; Shedd, 2015). Hence, in this study we argue that schools not only need more school counselors and other school-based mental health professionals but also need to completely remove harm from schools, starting with the removal of school police and SROs that contribute to the psychological and physical harm of many Black and Latinx youth.

This study aims to bring greater attention to the experiences of school counselors and their role in advocating toward more equitable practices, with a particular focus on how they perceive the need to remove harm from schools and invest in school-based mental health professionals. School counselors play an important role in schools as they can help mitigate and attend to the psychological and societal issues that impact Black and Latinx youths' socio-emotional and academic development (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). In many cases, school counselors are typically the first school-based mental health providers youth of Color encounter when experiencing heightened levels of trauma (CASC, 2019). Thus, it is important to explore their experiences and how they make sense of the need to divest from harmful practices. While school counselors are called on to take a stance against racism and harsh disciplinary actions, very little concrete guidance is provided on how to be advocates against racialized disciplinary policies and practices in schools. In fact, the American School Counseling Association (ASCA, 2019a) in *The School Counselor and Discipline* position statement recommends that school counselors should be a "neutral and resourceful consultant, mediator, and student advocate" (p. 26). In

response, we argue in this paper that school counselors should not be "neutral" when punitive policies and practices are directly impacting the wellness of youth of Color. Rather, we are guided by the work of Bettina Love (2018) who argues that anti-racist educators

must criticize the systems that perpetuate injustice, such as the educational survival complex, while pushing for equitable communities, schools, and classrooms. Antiracist education also works to undo these systems while working to create new ones built upon the collective vision and knowledge of dark folk (p. 55).

This study helps inform and bring greater attention to how school counselors employ anti-racist practices, specifically in taking a clear stance toward dismantling punitive practices that further reproduce harm for Black and Brown youth in schools. By gaining a greater understanding, this can inform the anti-racist practices of school counselors and professional school counseling organizations to collectively develop more critically conscious school counselors to attend to the needs of youth of Color by advocating against racialized disciplinary practices in schools, specifically as it relates to the removal of school-based police and SROs. For this qualitative study, we examine the narratives of 13 school counselors employed at various public schools in Southern California to understand their role in challenging inequitable punitive practices that contribute to the policing and criminalization of youth of Color. The following research question guided this inquiry: In what ways, if any, do school counselors advocate against the racialized punitive practices that impact youth of Color?

### **Racialized School Discipline Policies and Practices on Youth of Color**

School counselors are situated within a school context that has various structural constraints with significant implications on their role; one inequity of prime concern is the racial disproportionality in school discipline that has been well documented in public schools (Annamma, 2018; Love, 2018; Morris, 2016). Educational literature has shown how youth of Color are more likely to be targeted

through the use of suspension and expulsion in schools compared with their White counterparts (Annamma, 2018; Love, 2018; Morris, 2016). In particular, research has shown how these inequitable punitive practices and policies that remove youth of Color from the classrooms contribute tremendously to students' lower academic achievement and their departure from school (Annamma, 2018; Love, 2018; Morris, 2016). Furthermore, many youth of Color who are removed from the classroom and excluded through inequitable practices are also more likely to be labeled with a range of dis/abilities (Annamma, 2018). Consequently, pushing students out of school also excludes them from having access to critically essential support services to aid students with their socio-emotional, academic, and other pressing needs.

Without the presence of a school-based mental health professional such as a school counselor, students face disciplinary actions through the use of suspensions and expulsions, which are exacerbated by inequitable disciplinary practices and the installment of environmental security and law enforcement (Annamma, 2018). The correlation between school discipline and policing from school police officers, SROs, or other forms of security has shown to have a greater likelihood of harming students rather than helping them (Whitaker et al., 2019). Several studies have been challenging this correlation and highlighting the negative impact it has on students (Ochi et al., 2020; Whitaker et al., 2019). An ACLU report demonstrates the disparities that some of the most vulnerable student populations face when schools invest in larger law enforcement presence on campus (Whitaker et al., 2019). Hiring security officers can be costly, and in a report published by youth members of Pomona Students Union along with Gente Organizada, Public Advocates, and the ACLU Foundations of California, revealed how some school districts were found to be allocating financial resources away from high-needs students to fund security and law enforcement (Ochi et al., 2020). The likelihood that youth of Color with disabilities is high, which means that the probability of them being disproportionately affected by harsh disciplinary actions is too. These reports show that the connection between law enforcement and

disciplinary action is clear (Ochi et al., 2020; Whitaker et al., 2019). More police presence on school campuses leads to disproportionate consequences for some of our most vulnerable student populations. Previous scholarship has concluded that the employment of school counselors helps reduce the overall disciplinary referrals at schools. This is especially true among minoritized student groups (Carrell & Carrell, 2006). Moreover, hiring more school counselors helps reduce the counselor to student ratio that ASCA argues should be 1:250. Lower caseloads were found to help improve both students' behaviors (reduced disciplinary incidents) and students' academic performance (Carrell & Carrell, 2006; Carrell & Hoekstra, 2014).

### **School Counselors Social Advocacy in School Discipline**

In recent years, schools have been striving to move away from punitive discipline action. One such way is through the implementation of Multi-tiered Systems of Support, which also includes Restorative Practices (RP), that shifts away from immediate office referrals and works to combat the school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately targets students of Color (Goodman-Scott, et al., 2015; Payne & Welch, 2015). RP requires all educators to be involved in addressing misconduct and work in restoring damaged relationships among peers (McCluskey et al., 2008). Though RP is a growing body of literature, little attention has been aimed on understanding the role of school counselors with RP to reduce punitive school discipline. Given how school discipline policies and practices impact youth of Color, school counselors should be actively engaged in RP practices as a means of not being neutral with these punitive disciplinary practices.

Furthermore, it is vital to examine school counselors' social advocacy at the individual and systemic levels to collaborate with students to address issues that are disproportionately impacting youth of Color (Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). School counselors are trained to become knowledgeable on not only how psychological and societal issues affect the development of youth of Color but also how they can use their social advocacy to intervene and support students in various levels (see

Holcomb-McCoy, 2004). For example, school counselors are trained to examine school discipline data and provide interventions as they relate to the disproportionality of youth of Color being suspended and expelled from schools (ASCA, 2020), yet not much research has explored how school counselors advocate against racialized disciplinary practices at the individual and systemic level. ASCA's (2019b) *Standards for School Counselor Preparation Programs* states that school counselors should know their role as an advocate and be able to demonstrate it on behalf of students and the school counseling profession. While this is a national expectation of school counselors, many understand and demonstrate advocacy differently depending on school site expectations. While school counselors are responsible for student academics and social emotional learning (SEL), some schools also expect counselors to play the role of disciplinarian. ASCA's (2020) *The School Counselor and Discipline* position statement stresses the importance of school counselors not enforcing discipline, yet it has been limited in providing concrete steps of how school counselors can advocate in various spaces to dismantle racialized disciplinary practices impacting youth of Color. In fact, a majority of the recommendations focus on addressing student behavior related to school discipline, as ASCA highlights that school counselors should be a "significant contributor to the development of the prevention and intervention programs through which problem behaviors are managed and positive behaviors are nurtured" (p. 26). Again, we bring to attention how ASCA's position statement on *The School Counselor and Discipline* is limited as it focuses on the student and their behavior, rather than centering and advocating for change against the punitive racialized policies and practices that are hindering Black and Brown youth. Therefore, the connection of school counselors and their social advocacy against racialized disciplinary practice is still largely unclear, hence, this study aims to provide insight into how school counselors understand their role and attempt to address racialized disciplinary practices impacting youth of Color.

### Theories of Racialized Organizations and Organizational Routines

We draw on theories of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) and organizational routines (Pentland & Feldman, 2005) to understand how school counselors and professional organizations exercise their advocacy to dismantle racialized practices that dehumanize and criminalize youth of Color in schools.

Ray's (2019) theory of racialized organizations guides this study as we focus on schools and school counseling professional organizations as racialized organizations. Ray (2019) defines *racialized organizations* as follows:

Meso-level social structures that limit the personal agency and collective efficacy of subordinate racial groups while magnifying the agency of the dominant racial group. The ability to act upon the world, to create, to learn, to express emotion—indeed, one's full humanity—is constrained (or enabled) by racialized organizations. (p. 11)

Moreover, an individual's social position or role within a racialized organization also influences their agency. In this case, the agency of school counselors is mediated by their social status within schools, which is directly connected to how administrators perceive the role of school counselors. Therefore, the location of school counselors within racialized schooling spaces and relationships with their administrators directly influences the amount of control they have on how to use their time. In addition, Ray (2019) emphasized that racialized organizations legitimize the unequal distribution of resources. At the institutional level, segregation implies that educational institutions with a high enrollment of youth of Color will be significantly underresourced in comparison with institutions that serve a high concentration of White students (Ray, 2019). Consequently, in many schools that enroll a high proportion of Black and Brown youth, research shows that institutions overinvest their resources in school police to criminalize youth of Color while underinvesting in counselors and other mental health professionals to meet student needs (Whitaker et al., 2019). Thus, the concept of racialized organizations helps us understand how

institutions help or hinder the agency of school counselors.

We also draw on the theory of organizational routines, which shows how it is an essential element of many organizations, including schools, to bring stability, flexibility, learning, and change (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). The critical elements of an organization routine, as described by Pentland and Feldman (2005), include the ostensive, performative, and artifacts aspects. The ostensive aspects of a routine are abstract or generalized patterns of the organizational routine in how they address issues of school discipline. Ostensive aspects of a routine are the way something is done within an organization and is done based on what individuals know and how things work. For example, school counselors draw on the ostensive aspects of a routine based on what they know to make informed decisions in their practice related to school discipline. The performances are specific actions by school counselors at particular times when they are engaging in what they believe as an organizational routine. Therefore, the performances can be the specific actions taken by school counselors to disrupt or contribute to issues of school discipline. However, what school counselors know about their role in school discipline will guide their action in an organizational routine that disproportionately disciplines students of Color. In addition, organizational routines in schools may be codified or prescribed by various artifacts. Artifacts can consist of written rules, procedures, or forms that can serve “as a proxy for the ostensive aspect of a routine” (Pentland & Feldman, 2005, p. 796). In this study, artifacts could be the ASCA position statements, as these scripts inform and influence the practice of school counselors. Thus, drawing on organizational routines informs this study by unpacking routines to better understand what drives school counselors to enact certain routines in school discipline.

### **Method**

This qualitative study employs a phenomenological research approach to capture the experiences of anti-racist pedagogies of school counselors in dismantling racialized school discipline practices, specifically as it pertains to the growing presence of police and SROs in schools

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a phenomenological approach allows for the exploring and explaining of school counselor experiences around routines of school discipline and the meanings they have constructed from their collective experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon explored in this study centers on how 13 school counselors make meaning of their role in advocating toward more equitable practices, specifically as it relates to the racialized punitive practices that involve school police and SROs on campus.

### **School Counselor Participants**

To understand the phenomenon of this study, interview data were drawn from 13 school counselors employed at multiple urban schools in Southern California that serve predominantly youth of Color. We selected 13 school counselors because of convenience sampling, as we selected and recruited through purposive, snowball, and network procedures within Southern California (Merriam, 2009). This study focuses on school counselors in Southern California not only because of our location but also because of the collaborative efforts between the ACLU and the CASC, who have been advocating against punitive practices and policies, specifically the removal of school-based police in California’s schools (CASC, 2019). Given that, we center our research in conversation with many of the existing efforts in California. Of the 13 school counselors in this study, 12 reported coming from urban schools with a student population of at least 50% or more students of Color—mostly of Latinx descent. Eleven reported that their schools were receiving Title 1 funds. We selected school counselors in Southern California to seek-in depth information regarding how they understand the organizational routines of school discipline, specifically their meaning making of the heavy presence of school police and SROs within their racialized organization. The school counselors’ demographics consisted of 11 women and 2 men (Table 1). For this study, the self-identified ethnic background of participants included 1 Asian, 1 Black, 7 Latina/o/x, and 5 White school counselors. Majority of the school counselors in this study are school counselors of Color, which is something that we know is not reflected of the national

Table 1.

*School Counselor Demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Ethnicity	Years of Experience	Grade Level
Monica	F	White	7	High School
Maria	F	Latina	13	High School
Suzan	F	White	16	High School
Sasha	F	White	14	High School
Selena	F	Latina	11	High School
Ester	F	Asian	5	High School
Mateo	M	Latino	5	High School
Ashley	F	White	10	High School
Tiffany	F	Black	13	High School
Mireya	F	Latina	5	Middle School
Ana	F	Latina	5	High School
Nancy	F	Latina	6	High School
David	M	Latino	14	High School

exploring their thoughts about issues of school discipline at their site and the presence of school police at their campus. Some of the semistructured interview questions included the following: What’s your perspective of the use of discipline policies at your school? What are some of the inequities you have observed? What does it mean to you to have more police/school resource

demographics of school counselors across the nation in a field that is predominantly White. In addition, the sample reflected 5 to 16 years of professional experience as a school counselor.

**Data Collection**

Data collection for this study took place during the 2019-2020 academic school year. The institutional review board (IRB) approved the study, and pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all participants. Data was collected before COVID-19. All semistructured interviews with school counselors took place via Zoom, phone, or in-person, interviews based on the preference of the school counselor. School counselors were selected and recruited through purposive, snowball, and network sampling procedures (Merriam, 2009). We reached out via email to various school counselors in multiple school districts and disseminated a recruitment flyer and script that provided further details of study. The requirement needed to participate in this study consisted of being a school counselor in Southern California with more than 2 years of experience in the field. Thirteen interviews were conducted with school counselors. The length of the interviews ranged from 40 to 120 minutes. The purpose of the semistructured interviews focused on understanding the experiences of school counselors at their school sites, specifically

officers than counselors in schools? In what ways do you think this impacts your work as a counselor? What messages have you received from school leadership regarding discipline policies at your school? As a counselor, how do you engage with students who have been targeted by school discipline policies? In your role, do you use any specific strategies and practices to tackle issues of school discipline to support your students?

**Data Analysis**

We draw on Moustaka’s (1994) phenomenological research approach to analyze the data, which includes a step-by-step process to analyze the 13 interviews with school counselors in this study. The data analysis process for this research study consisted of having all recorded interviews transcribed and hand coded by the researchers. While we intended to do member check-in with the participants, COVID-19 prevented us from engaging in this process. To ensure trustworthiness, bracketing was conducted throughout the study as another form to demonstrate validity in the phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). Giorgi (2009) notes that bracketing is done not to forget our own previous experiences with the phenomenon of study but to not let previous knowledge determine how participants make

meaning of the phenomenon of study. Recognizing this, we employed bracketing in various forms from constantly engaging in reflexivity to identify any potential bias, developing and asking open-ended questions, and analyzing to understand the common or shared experiences of school counselors and their experiences with school discipline. In the data analysis process, we read all interviews and called attention to particular statements that demonstrate how school counselors describe their perspectives of the racialized disciplinary practices at their school and their role in the organization routines of school discipline (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). In this process from identifying salient statements, themes were constructed of how school counselors approach and engage with the racialized disciplinary practices in schools, specifically their meaning making of the presence of school police and SROs in schools. The themes constructed have also been informed by the literature presented earlier and the theories of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) and organizational routines (Pentland & Feldman, 2005). Data analysis revealed two themes: (a) school counselors' support and reliance on school resource officers' punitive measures and (b) school counselors' advocacy against racialized punitive practices. As recommended by Moustaka (1994), researchers write and reflect on their own experiences within the context. In the next section, we present our positionalities as it relates to the phenomena of study.

### **Positionalities**

As counselor educators and school counselors in California, we reflected and discussed our own positionalities as scholars and school counselors of Color in carrying out a phenomenological research study. As counselor educators and former and current school counselors of Color, we have been directly impacted or have observed the punitive practices in schools, specifically the impact of the heavy presence of school police and SROs in schools that serve predominantly youth of Color. In addition, for this study, a majority of the school counselors we interviewed were in communities where we grew up and attended schools or worked. Thus, we understand our positionality and how our own personal and professional experiences

contributed toward the exploration of the phenomenon of study. We are guided by the framework of Milner (2007) who "rejects practices in which researchers detach themselves from the research process" (p. 388). In this process, we reflect on our racial and cultural awareness and positionalities, as Milner (2007) notes that when scholars of Color engage in research with deep personal connections to the communities, they bring in a unique "cultural way of knowing" and understanding to the experiences of the groups in a way that might be similar to ours (p. 388). Recognizing this, we identify and understand our own individual and collective experiences with the phenomenon of study, thus, we reflect on our experiences and roles in connection to the communities and individuals involved in this study to acknowledge our different roles, identities, positionalities, and positions in connection to the school counselors in this research process (Milner, 2007).

### **Findings**

The critical role of school counselors is important given the racial injustices coupled with the inequitable state of schools with the harmful racialized disciplinary practices that impact many Black and Latinx youth. The first theme of this study revealed the lack of understanding of some school counselors in how they can engage in school discipline, which results in their reliance on racialized punitive measures, as they default to needing more SROs in schools. The second theme of our study documented the critical consciousness of some school counselors in their student-centered and advocacy approaches to disrupt the racialized school disciplinary practices that disenfranchised youth of Color.

#### **School Counselors' Support and Reliance on School Resource Officers Punitive Measures**

School counselors were asked to reflect on their thoughts and ways of engagement with their institutions' discipline policies and practices. The data showed that 4 of the 13 participants were okay with more school resource officers on campus. This theme reflected on how some school counselors felt indifferent or had no critique about the racialized school disciplinary practices, which resulted in their

reliance on SROs in punitive measures. School counselors demonstrated the ways in which they were complicit to the racial disciplinary practices that harm Black and Latinx youth, perpetuating inequities and reinforcing these similar harmful practices. Some school counselors alluded to supporting disciplinary policies and practices, specifically as a way to maintain order and control at their school sites. One school counselor in our study, Ashley, a White woman, expressed her support and reliance of school resource officers at her site despite their use of excessive physical force toward youth of Color, as she shared:

We've had issues in the past where a security will go hands-on with a kid because they have to. But then, the school district pays for that because parents will come back and argue that they put their hands on their kids, and so now, our district is backing down from all of that kind of stuff. Like security is forbidden to put hands on kids, which, you know, I get it, but I feel like if they need to then that's what they need to do. So, I think probably for certain situations, but they definitely are kind of standing back more often than not because they don't want to hear it from their superiors. In fact, Ashley's statement demonstrates her values and beliefs that school resource officers are needed at school, even if they physically harm youth of Color. Ashley dismisses the agency of parents to share their concerns with the school and district when these actions are exhibited by school resource officers toward youth of Color. Thus, this begs the question, as a school counselor, who is Ashley advocating for and for what reasons? Although, Ashley shared that her institution is "standing back" on the ways school resource officers engage with youth of Color, no critique was provided, but her statement demonstrated her support and reliance on SROs that further reproduce harmful punitive practices.

Similarly, Monica, a White school counselor with more than 7 years of experience, was asked about her perspective on the use of discipline policies at her school, she responded:

That's a tough one because I think a lot of times I think our admins' hands are a little bit tied because so much is coming down from the state in terms of, you know, they don't want to see as many suspensions, and they have all these things that are almost tying their hands but at the same time there has to be discipline. Luckily, I will say our admin is pretty good about not making counselors do discipline. And you know that really should not be a counseling priority so our admin is pretty good. We have a program specialist that works on our campus specifically for discipline. So luckily, I don't have too much to deal with discipline, but I do know that our admin, program specialist, and our campus security officers they all work together.

In this excerpt above, Monica shared that she is not involved in school discipline, yet she makes it clear that there needs to be discipline at the school, regardless of initiatives that have called on institutions to lower their suspension rates. Thus, this is a missed opportunity for Monica given the skills of school counselors to consult and collaborate with other educators to advocate for students, specifically Black and Brown youth who are often times punished. Given some of the school counselors' lack of understanding in their involvement, several expressed their support and reliance on SROs. When asked about her thoughts on the presence of SROs on campus and how some institutions have more SROs than school counselors, Ester, an Asian women high school counselor responded:

Having an SRO is very helpful because it just goes to speak to about the students' safety. And we just always want to ensure that the kids are safe on campus. They're not a danger to themselves or anyone else. And so, sometimes, it gets to a level where it's not just enough for the school counselor and for the administrator to be here. To meet with these students about that particular thing that is happening with them. We have found it, at this school, very necessary to have an SRO. I don't think we should have more of them than counselors. I think counselors are the perfect people to have on campus for students to come to when there

is a need. I don't think they should go straight to a police officer. But having one on campus has created more of a safer environment for everybody.

Ester's reflections demonstrate her perspective that SROs contribute to the safety of students. While Ester shares that the institutional goal is to ensure that all students are safe and healthy on campus, her follow-up statements demonstrate concern for how students are viewed as a "danger to themselves or anyone else." Thus, Esther situates the student as the problem and as a threat to the school, which reinforces the need for SROs in schools. While Ester describes that SROs are needed in schools, she makes it clear that schools should have more counselors than SROs on campus. Overall, the reflections of some of the school counselors demonstrate their support and reliance on SROs given their lack of understanding of how they can be involved to advocate against racialized disciplinary practices, thus, they default to have more SROs.

### **School Counselors' Advocacy Against Racialized Punitive Practices**

More than half of the school counselors voiced their clear stance and different ways in which they exercise their advocacy to address the racialized punitive practices that directly impact Black and Latinx youth at their school sites. We present three subthemes in this section that demonstrate the various forms of advocacy against racialized punitive practices employed by school counselors.

#### *School Counselors' Concerns of Psychological and Physical Harm on Youth of Color*

Several school counselors were clear about their role as advocates against racialized school discipline practices at their campus. As previously mentioned, some school counselors had mixed emotions or strongly supported the presence of SROs in schools. However, others expressed their concerns, as David, a Latino male shared the following when asked about having more cops in schools: "I think that's a problem. What message is the district sending when there is more police on

campus. It seems like they might be targeting things on the back end instead of being more proactive."

David was anything but neutral, as he was clear in his stance by expressing his concerns of the message and impact it has on the students and community he serves when they prioritize and invest more in police on campuses. Furthermore, David was asked to reflect on what impact this would have on his role as a school counselor with an increase of more police on campus:

I think if there was more police on campus, I think maybe anxiety would go up of students. I think we might be seeing more students. But I think it's more like students won't feel as comfortable coming to school. School is supposed to be a safe space, and when you bring in more police officers than counselors, I think you might be sending the wrong message.

David's reflection described the impact of police on campus and how their presence on campus will contribute to the psychological and physical harm of students, as it will contribute to the anxiety of students. Similar to David, Nancy, a Latina high school counselor, shared the following in regard to the heavy presence of school police and SROs on campuses: "It makes me feel like there is more danger to address rather than stress the wellness. ... It feels like more kids are going to get arrested; you know there's going to be more consequences instead of students being taken care of."

Nancy's reflection centers on the wellness of her students; however, she is aware that the presence of school police creates danger and consequences for her students. Furthermore, when asked to elaborate the impact on her role when institutions employ more school police and SROs, Nancy responded: "It contradicts my work as a school counselor. It makes me feel like the work that I'm putting in to help students with mental health and to help students with trust and safety is being taken away with the uniforms."

Nancy's interview demonstrated her own experiences of how school police and SROs are not supporting her efforts, but in fact, they contradict her work, and most importantly, they contribute to the harm that is being caused on her students. The presence of school police and SROs does not contribute to the care of students and the mental

health efforts that school counselors and other school-based mental health professionals employ at her school. As Nancy, David, and other school counselors have shared their concerns about institutions that hire more police officers than school counselors, they offer their honest critiques and strong opinions about the harm that it contributes to youth of Color.

*School Counselors' Efforts to Support Youth of Color Against Punitive Practices*

School counselors shared how they engage in efforts at their institution to support youth of Color against the punitive school discipline policies and practices. For example, some demonstrated the ways in which they intentionally pushed back against school suspension, and others discussed the ways in which they educate and empower youth of Color in schools. Furthermore, some school counselors focused on their students when disrupting school discipline practices as it pertains to the involvement of SROs on campus. Suzan, a White woman shared a detailed event that occurred at her school:

They [cops] worked with admin, and one day they would come out. They had a whole team of officers, undercover officers too. And during lunchtime they would go after these kids that were suspected gang members. They caught them. Handcuffed them in front of the entire school. ... Because I knew this was happening, and one of my kids was being targeted. ... I had seen the security book. The campus security book and his picture was on there. And, so, what I did, I took the kid when I knew this was going to happen. I got him out of class, like the whole period before, and I wouldn't let him leave. I was just making stuff up ... talking to him for third period, fourth period. I kept him in through lunch so he didn't get caught up in that whole thing because they were gonna go after him.

Suzan shared an instance of how her institution collaborated with cops to target and criminalize youth of Color. Although Suzan shared one event, we recognize that this is an ongoing harmful practice that her institution implements through

their racialized school discipline practices. However, in this instance, we learn from Suzan's advocacy efforts at her school site as youth of Color were being targeted by cops and administrators. In this excerpt, Suzan recognizes various harmful practices as cops arrest students during lunchtime in front of the entire campus community. Moreover, the SROs have a book with the names and images of students who are suspected gang members, which concerns Suzan that the school has a database to target and criminalize suspected gang-involved youth.

Similar to Suzan, another school counselor, Tiffany, a Black woman, shared her experience of advocating for her students to disrupt these racialized disciplinary practices that are harmful toward youth of Color. In the interview, Tiffany shared an event that occurred at her school site in which an SRO physically harmed a youth of Color:

I heard this student down the hall, and he was you know, going at it with a security officer. And I was like, what the heck? I recognize that voice, you know. So I ran down the hall, and they were like, Miss! You know, he was grabbing and doing this and that and whatever. You know, it was uncalled for all that. And I was like what?! Oh, heck no! I don't care who you are! [laughs] So I was like: what did you say he did? Honestly, he grabbed my arm or whatever. So I was like, Did you just say he used force? I was like, I'm coming to the dean's office with you. So they were working. I'm just like, oh, like, I'm right here with you. I don't care. You know the code of ethics is first and foremost, do no harm. So when it comes to discipline or excessive force, I'm like, I'm here. I'm an advocate first. You know, having your back. Whatever that was.

In both events, Suzan and Tiffany were aware of their students being targeted and harassed by SROs at their school site either during lunch or in the hallways of the school. In Tiffany's encounter, she disclosed an event that occurred in the hallway in which an SRO was physically putting hands on a student. When asked to further reflect on her stance, Tiffany stated the following: "I'm like, okay, I might get in trouble for this, but let me tell you about your rights. Or you know, what your options

are. So just do what you can to educate and empower them.”

Tiffany was unapologetic, and her stance was clear in serving as a student advocate. As she informed her students that I am “having your back,” she had a conversation with her students informing them about their rights to educate and empower them. Tiffany’s narrative demonstrates that her positionality was clear regardless of the events that had unfolded in the hallways; an SRO should not use excessive force to physically harm students. Tiffany’s stance also presents a different approach that is rooted in student advocacy and is student centered.

### *School Counselors’ Advocacy Against the Hiring of More SROs*

In addition to having a critique about the presence of school police and SROs in campuses, some school counselors were clear about the need to remove harm and hire more school counselors. Similar to David and Nancy, Mireya, a Latina middle school counselor, described her advocacy efforts at the school district by pushing against the hiring of more SROs:

We had to advocate against that [hiring more security/police for their campus]. You are dealing with kinder through eighth grade. So, we had to advocate against that, because even the superintendent wanted to have, like, a sheriff on call. Or someone who we hired. So we had to advocate for that role, because he wanted to have somebody who was more of in the police realm of it to deal with our situations. And to me, I feel like that’s a more reactive approach. You are not solving the issue. You’re just being reactive. And you’re reacting to the behavior that are streaming from trauma and the environment. So we literally, it happened last year. We actually got two more counselors to be approved by the board. And literally, a month ago, we got our third counselor instead of a, I think, she wanted to do a contract with the sheriff department.

In her interview, Mireya discussed the ongoing battles with her administrators at her school site alongside her advocacy efforts to ensure her students’ needs were being met. Eventually, Mireya

demonstrated that through their advocacy, they were able to bring additional school counselors to support youth of Color, rather than the institution bringing in additional school police and SROs. Therefore, the findings and analysis depict the experiences of school counselors, unpacking their role in the organizational routines of school discipline, as some advocated against the harmful racialized disciplinary practices that affect youth of Color.

### **Discussion**

This study contributes to the literature through the lens of school counselors, as it draws attention to their experiences and approaches to social advocacy to maintain or disrupt the racialized disciplinary practices impacting youth of Color. Extensive research has documented the impact of racialized disciplinary practices on youth of Color (Annamma, 2018; Love, 2018; Morris, 2016), yet missing from the literature has been how school counselors interpret the implications of such policies and practices and how they respond to either further perpetuate inequitable practices or activate their agency to disrupt these harmful practices. While school counselors are positioned to mitigate these practices because of their professional training, this study reveals that school counselors need more explicit guidance on social advocacy in issues of racialized school discipline. More specifically, the findings reveal that some school counselors have little understanding about their important role in school discipline; as a result, they rely on SROs. In contrast, other school counselors had an understanding of the punitive practices and demonstrated various forms of advocacy at the institutional and district level.

The theories of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) and organizational routines (Pentland & Feldman, 2005) guided the study as it provided insight into how school counselors understand how to engage in the racialized disciplinary practices that dehumanize and criminalize youth of Color in schools. Findings from this study demonstrate that school counselors are not “neutral” in their work as they further perpetuate harm due to their lack of understanding of their role in school discipline and overreliance on SROs, while other school counselors were clear and direct about their actions

and advocacy to disrupt disciplinary punitive practices that harm youth of Color. Theories of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019) and organizational routines (Pentland & Feldman, 2005) inform the findings of this study in how school counselors understand their complicated role in the routines of school discipline. The first theme demonstrated how some school counselors have limited understanding of their role in the organizational routines of school discipline. As a result, they rely on and reinforce harmful practices that contribute to the criminalization of youth of Color. School counselors' lack of understanding in the ways they mitigate their role to advocate against school discipline policies is of great concern, thus, the theory of organizational routines provides the lens to revisit the knowledge and dispositions that school counselors receive in graduate programs and from school counseling professional organizations. By looking at the ways in which some school counselors struggle to make sense of their involvement in school discipline requires further attention to their experiences and what dispositions are needed to develop critical conscious school counselors that can engage in anti-racist practices to dismantle punitive practices within schools. To foster the critical conscious of school counselors, as other scholars have noted, it is important that school counselors listen and learn directly from the needs of Black and Brown youth and support their demands to remove harmful punitive practices, specifically the removal of school police and reinvest in mental health-based professionals (Serrano, 2020; Whitaker et al., 2019).

Our findings demonstrate that school counselors are not neutral in their practice and engagement in school discipline within a racialized organization. While some of them demonstrated their support and reliance on school police and SROs due to their lack of understanding their role in school discipline, other school counselors articulated their clear role in advocating against racialized punitive practices. This form of not being neutral and advocating against the increasing number of school police and SROs is an example of how school counselors demonstrated an awareness of standing against racialized punitive practices. As recent studies have shown that approximately 400,000 students enrolled

in California's public schools are at an institution with a police office, but not a school counselor (Whitaker et al., 2019). Thus, our second theme provided some examples of how school counselors engaged in advocacy efforts at the institutional and school district level. These forms of advocacy are a starting point to envision the knowledge and dispositions that are required for school counselors to support the efforts of youth and communities of Color in removing harm from schools.

Not surprisingly, it was evident in the interviews with some of the school counselors in how they also observed the excessive force of school police to physically and psychologically harm youth of Color (Annamma, 2018; Whitaker et al., 2019). In some cases, school counselors intervened during the hallways and lunchtime to protect students from being targeted by the SROs on campus. While these harmful practices are nothing new, this shows how school counselors can engage and support youth of Color targeted by SROs in schools. Furthermore, school counselors also demonstrated a critical consciousness in exercising their social advocacy by expressing their support to hire more school counselors rather than SROs in schools. As more school districts across the nation are being called to remove school police and redirect those funds to school counselors and other mental health-based professionals (Serrano, 2020; Whitaker et al., 2019), it is important to note how school counselors advocate to support the needs of those directly being impacted in the community. School counselors are aware of how many institutions operate prisonlike practices (Shedd, 2015), as the findings from this study demonstrated how SROs at an institution had a database to target and criminalize youth of Color during school. Thus, it is important that school counselors engage more directly and support the efforts of the community by centering the wellness of Black and Brown youth and advocating against the racialized punitive practices, specifically the overreliance and presence of school police and SROs in schools.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study has several limitations as it only focuses on the perspectives of school counselors in one geographic region of southern California. Our

research findings cannot be generalized to other geographic regions, however, they do bring attention to generate more action and research to understand the ways school counselors engage in social advocacy. All interviews with school counselors were only conducted once before COVID-19, therefore we did not get an opportunity to do a member check-in and follow-up to ask for clarification or follow-up questions. In addition, we understand that the majority of the participants were school counselors at the high school sector, thus, the experiences of elementary and middle school counselors were not fully captured. Although our study has several limitations, more questions emerged from this study that guide our future directions for research as we intend to explore this work with preservice school counselors in graduate programs to understand how they are introduced to their role in social advocacy in addressing issues of racialized disciplinary practices and current movements. This includes examining their perspectives of current national debates regarding social movements across the nation to invest more in counselors than cops. Therefore, how are school counselors interpreting and defining their role and stance in social advocacy? Again, school counselors cannot be neutral in these efforts, therefore, how are school counselors complicating their role and centering the needs of the students and communities they serve?

### **Implications for Anti-Racist Practices for School Counselors and Counselor Education**

In revisiting the work of Bettina Love (2018), anti-racist educators are not neutral in their work, as they are clear in their position to dismantle the systems and advocate for equitable practices and policies. This paper offers implications that schools not only need to hire more school counselors and mental health-based professionals but also must remove the harm from schools, starting with school police and SROs. This study offers some recommendations for school counselors and counselor education programs to dismantle racialized disciplinary practices harming youth of Color. School counselors can learn from the experiences shared in this study as it offers insight into their involvement and opportunities to engage in anti-racist practices to advocate against racialized

punitive practices that harm youth of Color. Although some of the school counselors described their lack of understanding in their role in school discipline, which contributed to their reliance in school resource officers, this warrants attention and raises further questions. School counselors can contribute and further elicit harm, thus, this requires further reflection and action for them to understand and listen to Black and Brown youth who have constantly advocated for the removal of school police and SROs. Some school counselors demonstrated awareness and support for the removal of harm from schools, which can inform the practice of school counselors at the institutional and school district level of how they can advocate for change in their local contexts.

This study raises additional questions for the professional field of school counseling and what is necessary to develop critical conscious school counselors who have a deep understanding of their role toward racial justice. The work of school counselors is guided by the organizational routines, which are informed by the policies and position statements developed by ASCA. Yet, this study revealed that school counselors are not neutral in their work as they either reinforce harmful practices or they engage in anti-racist practices to remove harm from school, specifically the removal of school police and SROs. With that, school counseling professional organizations need to revisit their policies and position statements to account for how they are contributing to the experiences and dispositions of school counselors and how they can foster coalitions with youth and community-based organizations to support and join the fight toward equitable practices in schools.

Each moment is a missed opportunity to demonstrate to Black and Brown youth that school counselors are there to truly serve and be their advocates, yet much work is needed as we recognize that many school counselors do not know what they don't know about their important role in advocating against punitive practices. As scholars and school counselors, we do not have all the answers, but we invite everyone within the school counseling profession, from school counselors in-training, professional school counselors, counselor educators, local, state, and national school counseling organizations, to reflect and engage in

dialogue and action about the possibilities of removing harm from schools and engaging with the social movement of “counselors not cops.” It also requires collective action from the teaching and supervision that occurs in school counseling graduate programs to provide curriculum that fosters the necessary experiences and dispositions required to develop critical conscious school counselors who are equipped to advocate against racist practices in schools. Overall, we hope this study has brought greater attention to the role of school counselors and anti-racist practices to join the fight for racial justice, with particular attention to the efforts to remove school police and SROs who contribute to the psychological and physical harm of many Black and Latinx youth.

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