Strengthening MTSS for Behavior (MTSS-B) to Promote Racial Equity

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Abstract

Despite widespread implementation of multi-tiered systems of support for behavior (MTSS-B), evidence of racial discipline disproportionality persists. We argue MTSS-B must prioritize racial equity and healing in schools. We first discuss how discipline has centered Whiteness, providing a brief history of relevant events and sociopolitical forces that have maintained a reliance on exclusionary discipline practices with a primary focus on out-of-school suspension to oppress youth of color, specifically Black students. Then, we describe the harm exclusionary discipline has caused the Black community by synthesizing counter-storytelling. Finally, we propose ways to strengthen MTSS-B to promote racial equity with a primary focus on supports to adults in the systems in which oppression is maintained. We propose school psychologists can (a) empower students, families, and communities to engage in authentic partnerships, (b) advocate to educational leaders, (c) coordinate transformative staff professional development, and (d) support teachers to create inclusive and healing classroom communities. We frame these suggestions within an ecological-behavioral paradigm that considers root conditions of harm.

Keywords: discipline, racial equity, behavior supports, MTSS

Impact Statement: Discipline in U.S. public schools has long been rooted in White centrality, and exclusionary practices (e.g., out-of-school suspension) have caused harm to individuals, particularly in the Black community. School psychologists are poised to strengthen the design and delivery of behavior supports provided in schools to center racial equity and address this sustained harm. School psychologists must focus on providing supports to adults (e.g., educators) in the systems in which oppression is maintained to propel change.

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Multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) frameworks are founded in an ecological-behavioral model informed by research in public health and prevention science (Arora et al., 2019). A problem-solving team typically leads MTSS efforts to collaboratively coordinate the implementation of universal (Tier 1) prevention to all students and supplemental supports (Tiers 2, 3) to students determined to need additional assistance to achieve positive outcomes (Sugai & Horner, 2020). With an MTSS framework, school psychologists can coordinate comprehensive care to support the whole child (e.g., academic growth, emotional wellness, physical health). In this paper, we focus on the impact of MTSS to support students' social behavior (MTSS-B), with an emphasis on its potential to disrupt the use of harmful exclusionary discipline (specifically out-of-school suspension) and promote educational access and racial equity.

We argue that school psychologists should take a leadership role in creating inclusive[1], supportive educational spaces for all students, specifically Black youth who are among those who have been systematically oppressed and excluded from school settings. We begin with a rationale for why school psychologists must prioritize racial equity. This is further explored in three sections. The first includes a brief history of school discipline with an emphasis on the role White supremacy and racism[2] have played in its construction. The second section offers a succinct description of the impact exclusionary school discipline (specifically out-of-school suspension) has had on the Black community with a summary of counter-storytelling. The third synthesizes research to propose how school psychologists might lead the charge to strengthen MTSS-B

[1] We define "inclusive" to refer broadly to the implementation of policies, systems, and practices that recognize and respect students' inherent dignity, worth, intersecting identities and the impact of those identities on their lived experience to ensure all students have access to high quality education that is both individualized to meet their needs and integrated into the wider school community to the greatest extent possible through the use of least restrictive procedures.

[2] For definitions of terms used herein such as racism, oppression, and privilege, please see the National Association of School Psychologists' (NASP; 2019) position statement on racism and Proctor et al. (2017).

implementation to support students' behavioral health and promote racial equity. We focus specifically on general recommendations for the work school psychologists can do with adults in the systems in which oppression has been maintained.

We acknowledge our positionality, including who we are and what we value, as shaping the lens through which we view this work. The first author identifies as a White woman. The second author identifies as a Cape Verdean American woman. The third author identifies as a Japanese American male. As we collectively represent dominant and marginalized identities, we vary in our personal experience with racism, oppression, and injustice. We do, however, share a commitment to racial and social justice in how we approach behavioral supports in schools. This is acknowledged as it informs what and how we describe the content included herein.

The Rationale to Prioritize Racial Equity

Over the past 30 years, MTSS-B (specifically Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports [PBIS]) has evolved as a proactive, systemic alternative to the use of exclusionary discipline (Sugai & Horner, 2020). When implementing MTSS-B, educators prioritize prevention by actively teaching, expecting, and acknowledging prosocial behavior in school so that fewer students experience challenging behavior and school climate improves. In recent years, the number of schools implementing MTSS-B has increased (Sugai & Horner, 2020), and the use of exclusionary discipline in schools has declined (Musu et al., 2019). However, Black youth remain more likely to be referred to the office, suspended, and expelled from school (e.g., Ksinan et al., 2019), even in schools implementing MTSS-B (see McIntosh et al., 2018). The most recent data from Office for Civil Rights indicate that in the 2015-2016 school year, Black students (8.0%) were twice as likely as White students (3.8%) to receive an out-of-school suspension, and about one in every eight Black secondary school student was suspended (Harper et al., 2019).

We argue that the reason for this is because the field has not yet centered anti-racism in the design and delivery of MTSS-B. Although critical research to address discipline disproportionality has emerged in the past decade (e.g., Gregory et al., 2017; McIntosh et al., 2020), a commitment to anti-racism (and disrupting anti-Blackness in particular) has yet to be centered in school-based MTSS-B. To conceptualize this problem more completely, we describe five criticisms of MTSS-B. These criticisms must be explored if racial inequities in school disciplinary practice are to be eradicated, particularly for Black students.

First, MTSS-B is rooted in behaviorism which has been critiqued for being race-neutral (Bal, 2018) and focused on "fixing" individuals through behavior management techniques (Holland, 1978). Although MTSS-B is also grounded in an ecological paradigm with attention to the school environment, it has been criticized for largely failing to consider the historical, sociopolitical and institutional factors that have sustained the oppression of Black students for centuries (Sabnis et al., 2019). Simply, it has not addressed structural and institutional racism by confronting White supremacy in schools directly (Bornstein, 2017). This may be because most educational research and policy is largely silent on matters of racism and oppression (Galloway et al., 2019). In the next section, we offer a brief review of some of the historical and sociopolitical forces that shape the current landscape to help guide our recommendations for transformation.

Second, and relatedly, implementation of MTSS-B has not consistently identified and addressed the root causes of discipline disparities (Gregory et al., 2017). Cook and colleagues (2019) synthesized research related to root causes of discipline disproportionality including (a) historical racial oppression, (b) teacher-student racial mismatch, (c) teachers' implicit bias, (d) teachers' use of reactive classroom management, (e) lack of effective teacher professional development, (f) lack of teachers' multicultural awareness, and (g) poor discipline policy, among others. Consideration of these root causes are not expressly included in guidance from researchers

or policymakers about how to conceptualize and implement MTSS-B to support behavior (Briesch et al., 2020; Eagle et al., 2015). For instance, policy emphasizes engaging in systematic screening procedures to identify students "at risk", but policymakers do not typically offer guidance about how to identify the systemic inequities that may contribute to a student's "risk" status (e.g., Briesch et al., 2020). This lack of guidance has perpetuated inequities, causing harm to Black youth. We describe these harms in the second section of this paper.

Third, MTSS-B has been conceptualized as an alternative to criminalized school social control[3], but critics argue it may instead be an extension of it (Ramey, 2018). Irby (2014) described educators and administrators (who are predominately White; Hussar et al., 2020) make and enforce rules to discipline and manage students, creating school spaces "shaped by the institutionalization of racialized and gendered ideologies about what constitutes appropriate school behavior" (p. 517). Within the context of MTSS-B, educators and administrators often make judgements about student behavior based on the policies they have constructed, informed by their own worldview (Banks & Obiakor, 2015). Students, families, and community members are not typically involved in the design or implementation of such systems (Bal, 2018). We synthesize research below about the events that have led many Black caregivers to mistrust educators and administrators (both based on their own experience in school as well as the experience of their ancestors; Gibson et al., 2014). Without authentic collaboration across home and school environments grounded in trust, disparities in treatment at school are likely to perpetuate the deleterious effects of exclusionary discipline for Black students (Girvan et al., 2017). In the third section of this paper, we encourage explicit interrogation of racism and bias in schools through the

[3] Criminalized school social control refers to the use of criminal justice mechanisms such as surveillance (e.g., metal detectors, random searches), supervision (e.g., school resource officers), and deterrence (zero-tolerance policies, exclusionary discipline) measures in schools (Ramey, 2018).

design and delivery of comprehensive supports to staff, and call on school psychologists to prioritize the development of authentic partnerships with families and community members.

Fourth, within its design and implementation, MTSS-B may fail to leverage factors that have been identified as promotive (universally beneficial) and protective (supportive in the presence of adverse conditions) in youth developmental research (Jones & Neblett, 2017). This may be especially critical for Black students due to the established relationship between racial discrimination and negative developmental outcomes (Neblett et al., 2012). Researchers have identified a variety of protective factors educators might leverage to support youth including (a) promoting and affirming racial identity and an African-centered worldview, (b) teaching students to cope (and resist) racial stress and trauma, (c) fostering a student's sense of belongingness and connection to the school community, as well as (d) helping youth build supportive relationships with adults (Anyon et al., 2018). Relationships are influenced by social, cultural, and policy conditions, and promote success in school and the community (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). A focus on these broader ecological (e.g., societal, community) factors to design systems in which school, family and community stakeholders provide comprehensive support to youth may require transformative change. We suggest steps toward this change in the last section.

Finally, scholars have called for MTSS-B to be culturally responsive and center equity, but it may be seen as an additional or optional consideration and not necessarily integrated into its conceptualization (Gregory et al., 2017). This impacts outcomes. In a recent study, Heidelburg et al. (2021) did not detect a relationship between higher levels of MTSS-B implementation and fewer incidences of exclusionary discipline for Black elementary and secondary students. As some commonly used MTSS-B implementation fidelity inventories (e.g., Benchmarks of Quality; Childs et al., 2011) have a limited focus on culturally responsive practice, it may seem as though a school

is implementing MTSS-B fully (based on fidelity scores) but supports provided are not relevant nor reflective of students' culture, rendering it ineffective.

Scholars argue that cultural responsiveness should be foundational to MTSS-B to see change (Heidelburg et al., 2021; McIntosh et al., 2018). We expand this to call for MTSS-B to be expressly anti-racist. Galloway and colleagues (2019) describe how teachers conceptualized cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2002) and cultural relevance (Ladson-Billings, 1995) as being pertinent to representing students' culture in the curriculum, building affirming teacher-student relationships, and creating connection between home and school, but not necessarily about interrogating or critiquing injustice unless race and oppression were explicitly named (e.g., anti-racism, anti-oppression). We discuss the importance of culturally relevant and responsive supports below, but with the acknowledgement that it is critical to talk about race, racism, White supremacy and privilege in building a foundation for the design and implementation of MTSS-B.

Considering these five critiques, we argue MTSS-B can be a framework conceptualized as race- and culture-conscious, and integrative of supports for both youth and staff behavior (Sullivan et al., 2020). Bornstein (2017) asked if MTSS-B can build justice versus simply restore order. We believe it can. In this paper, we propose how MTSS-B might be strengthened to disrupt anti-Blackness by infusing anti-racism, with considerations derived from cross-disciplinary research on promoting access, equity and healing. First, we look at the history of school discipline and its roots in White supremacy.

Section I: A History of School Discipline Rooted in White Supremacy

In the following account, we use a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens (Crenshaw et al., 1995) to describe how school discipline has evolved and centered Whiteness. There is an extensive literature describing the core tenets of CRT, but succinctly, it proposes that race is a social construct, racism is endemic and institutionalized, and that sociohistorical context must be

interrogated to analyze and address issues concerning race (Simson, 2013). To preface our account below, we also offer two considerations. First, we cannot provide an exhaustive account of the systemically racist and oppressive policies and actions that have indirectly or directly impacted school discipline practices (e.g., criminal justice policy, access to affordable housing, neighborhood zoning rules, redlining, banking practices; Bailey et al, 2017). Page limits do not allow for this. Instead, our succinct account is intended to briefly provide context for the current landscape (as others have done in their analyses; e.g., Bal, 2018; Noltemeyer & Fenning, 2013).

Second, although Crenshaw (1989) first termed intersectionality to acknowledge systematic violence against Black women rooted in both racism and sexism, many now use the term to refer to a lens through which we see the discrimination a person encounters or the privilege a person holds as being informed by multiple, interconnected facets of identity (e.g., gender, sex, race, class, sexuality, religion, disability; Proctor et al., 2017). Below, we focus primarily on race, but emphasize the importance of all parts of a person's identity (e.g., gender, disability) to understand the historical and sociopolitical context of school discipline and injustice.

Beginning of Colonization

Colonization of the U.S. was (and continues to be) exploitive and oppressive (Acuña, 2019).[4] In the 17th century, the first public school was founded in Boston by Puritan settlers with instruction grounded in White Protestant virtues of family, religion, and community to provide moral education (McClellan, 1999). In the 18th century, students who attended school learned literacy and numeracy, but educational opportunities in the colonies varied greatly by location, race, gender and class (Rury, 2019). Education of enslaved Africans was discouraged and illegal

[4] We begin our brief account nearly four centuries ago, acknowledging that this is not the only place to start. Also, in our brevity, it is not our intention to imply there was a single, unitary colonial culture (Rury, 2019).

in several states (Anderson, 2010). Yet Black educators existed long before it was legal, as many held school secretly during enslavement (Alston, 2005).

Impact of Industrialization

After the American Revolution, economic opportunity led White men to gain employment in the community, leaving White women to raise and teach children at home (Fairchild, 2006). This redefined gendered educational responsibility which subsequently shaped public education. By 1890, 80% of the public elementary teaching force was White and female (Welter, 1971).[5] In the mid 19th century, White policymakers in northern states began to pass compulsory school attendance laws as manufacturing, immigration, and urbanization surged (Rury, 2019). With more youth attending school outside of the home, school discipline was considered critical to maintain order with a few adults overseeing many children. Youth were expected to be deferential and obedient, and discipline was thought to be particularly imperative for the "urban poor" in need of "character education" to prepare for work in the system of industrial capitalism (Kaestle, 1978).

Dreeban (1968) characterized school values of the mid-1800s as centered on independence, self-reliance, and impersonality; teacher-student relationships were deemed unimportant. Teachers were to instill in children the self-restraint needed for the success of a democracy (Kaestle, 1978). By 1901, waves of immigration were perceived as a threat to the "survival of the Anglo-Saxon race" (Banks, 2002, p. 9). Some argued for *cultural democracy* but several congressional acts in the late 19th and early 20th Century halted mass immigration, cementing societal values of nativism and forced assimilation to preserve White supremacy (Haney-López, 2006).

Post-Civil War and Reconstruction

[5] Today, due to structural racism and resistance to the rise of Black education from Reconstruction to Desegregation (described later in this paper), teacher demographics look remarkably similar to 1890 (Hussar et al., 2020).

After the Civil War, during the time of Reconstruction in the South, "Black schooling and Black learning flourished" as schools were created and filled with students "to overflowing" (Butchart, 2010, p. 34). Racial solidarity was critical to building schools that were pillars of the community and free from White dominance (Fairclough, 2004). Although the segregated Black community was an "imposed circumstance," it turned into a functional system (Irvine & Irvine, 1983, p. 417) and education was a means of liberation (Walker, 2000). Black schools were Black-controlled, and principals and teachers were considered extensions of the Black community (Fairclough, 2004).

Teacher-student relationships were the foundation of Black student achievement, as teachers set high expectations for learning and behavior, as well as promoted the idea of student self-worth (often addressing students as *miss* or *mister*; Irvine & Irvine, 1983). Schools had a "rich educational heritage" (Walker, 2000, p. 261) and served as the conduit of intellectual growth, advancement, and independence (Green, 2010). Parents were engrained in the fabric of the school community and taught their children to respect teachers and school authority, often disciplining their children at home for classroom disruptions (Walker, 2000). A former student of the first all-Black high school in Mobile, Alabama (opened in 1887) offered a succinct description of school discipline: "If there was ever any kind of trouble with a pupil, it would be dealt with that day with the parents' involvement" (Green, 2010, p. 218). Irvine and Irvine (1983) reflected "there is, as it were, a collective stake in the educational process of the youth in the community" and that it is important to understand the Black community's "collective aspirations for its young" (p. 419).

The potential for Black communities to thrive threatened the worldview of many White people, and Butchart (2010) described in detail the efforts taken to "salvage slavery's legacy: White supremacy" (p. 50). Specifically, in the decades that immediately followed the Civil War, educators in Black schools were ostracized, harassed, threatened, and, in some cases, terrorized or

killed (Butchart, 2010). Countless Black schools (and Black churches that housed schools) were burned to the ground. The Black schools that survived were systematically and intentionally underfunded (as some White schools received 30 times more funding per child than Black schools), leading to underpaid staff, inadequate materials, overcrowded conditions and often crumbling infrastructure (Butchart, 2010). This embodiment of structural racism created steep barriers. By the mid-20th century, there were calls for school desegregation (Wells & Crain, 1994).

Desegregation Era

In the context of desegregation, schools educating Black students were most often the schools that were dismantled (Irvine & Irvine, 1983). Black teachers and administrators were dismissed, demoted or reassigned. In the South, the number of Black principals decreased 90% between 1964 and 1973 (Fairclough, 2004). Schools in which Black students remained the numerical majority were taught largely by White teachers who were often not familiar with Black culture, did not always support students' educational goals, or were outright racist (Irvine & Irvine, 1983). Black children were no longer assured that "those who taught or administered them would represent their best interest" (Irvine & Irvine, 1983, p. 418).

In the mid-1960s, White school administrators began rationalizing the use of out-of-school suspension as an "efficient" disciplinary approach that would protect the academic achievement and safety of the broader student body (Adams, 2000, p. 144). Yet, researchers argued early on that suspension was illogical and ineffective, stating (a) students did not see it as a deterrent (particularly for behaviors such as truancy), (b) families saw it as educators abdicating its responsibility to youth, and (c) law enforcement noticed more interaction with students who were left unsupervised by suspension (Mizell, 1978). Researchers also described suspensions as disproportionately affecting Black students in particular (a trend that persists today; Gage et al., 2019), arguing "students are often suspended for trivial violations of the hidden curriculum,"

citing racial prejudice and institutional racism (Yudof, 1975, p. 380). Yudof (1975) said suspending and expelling Black students from public schools was *academic capital punishment*.

In the late 1970s, alternatives to out-of-school suspension began to emerge, including Saturday detention and in-school suspension (Frith et al., 1980). Yet, data from the decade to follow indicated disparities remained. For instance, White students were more likely to be given in-school suspension whereas Black students continued to be systematically suspended out-of-school or expelled (McFadden et al., 1992). These trends were exacerbated by the passing of *zero-tolerance policies* which introduced an era of criminalized social control (e.g., security cameras, metal detectors, school police). Legislation such as the Drug-Free Schools Act of 1986 and the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 were instrumental in establishing and maintaining the *preschool to prison pipeline* by systematically targeting and excluding Black children from school and increasing their contact with the criminal justice system (Mallett, 2015). Between 1970 and 2010, suspension rates doubled, and racial discipline disparities persisted (Morris & Perry, 2016).

After the passing of No Child Left Behind in 2001, the interaction of zero-tolerance policies and high stakes testing led to the *push-out phenomenon*[6] (Simson, 2013). With federal funding linked to student performance on tests, legal and civil rights scholars argued educators and administrators viewed exclusionary discipline as being in their best financial interest to meet annual yearly progress (AYP) goals (Advancement Project, 2005) rather than exploring the root causes of classroom disruption. Around the same time, MTSS-B frameworks were gaining traction, encouraged by federal legislation. This included the amendments made to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997, which called for "positive behavioral

[6] The *push-out phenomenon* refers to removing students displaying "problem" behavior from the classroom or school, leading to loss of instruction, decreased sense of belongingness, and increased risk of dropout (Simson, 2013). Federal policies financially incentivize school staff to exclude or create punishing environments to motivate the self-removal of "problem students" (coded language for Black students) from school. Without a high school diploma, students have less economic and social mobility, perpetuating cycles of poverty and oppression (Fine, 2004).

interventions, strategies, and supports," to address student behavior when it "impede[d] his or her learning or that of others" (Sec. 300.324 (a) (2), p. 50).

Although MTSS-B (e.g., PBIS) and other frameworks (e.g., restorative justice; Karp & Breslin, 2001) have been implemented for decades, the deleterious effects of exclusionary discipline (specifically out-of-school suspension) remains a significant concern, particularly for Black students. Salazar (2018) argued that this is because the modern U.S. educational system is a "powerful mechanism for producing, reproducing, and fortifying White supremacy and racial inequality" (p. 463). Sociologists call this *reproduction theory*, theorizing administrators, educators and staff reproduce and exacerbate racial, class and gender inequalities to maintain White centrality in schools (Morris, 2005). Irby (2014) argued specifically that the *White-supremacist patriarchy*[7] "reproduces normative Whiteness through the continual surveillance, punishment, distancing, and removal of primarily heteronormative Black male[s]" from school (p. 783). Scholars argue educators pathologize and punish students instead of confronting the underlying pathology: White supremacy (Ladson-Billings, 2004). The overuse of exclusionary discipline has deep and long-lasting consequences, being particularly harmful to communities of color. We focus next on the stories of its impact on Black students, families, and the community.

Section II: The Impact of Exclusionary Discipline

Racial disparities in exclusionary school discipline have been linked to inequities in academic achievement, which impact long-term outcomes related to physical health, employment, and incarceration (Morris & Perry, 2016). Understanding the sociopolitical context that created and sustains exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools is important, but equally critical is consideration of the personal narratives of those impacted by these practices. Scholars have begun

[7]Irby (2014) describes *White-supremacist patriarchy* as the intersection of identity (race, gender) "to produce forms of domination and oppression that keep many ethnic, racial, and gender groups "in their places". White supremacist patriarchy requires the production of a normative White feminine subject that in the United States has been produced vis-à-vis the dangerous Black masculine subject. The imagined and real Black masculine subject perpetually threatens the reproduction of Whiteness" (p. 786).

to uncover how exclusionary discipline not only harms, but also is a source of collective trauma experienced by families, and the community as a whole (Powell, 2020).

Storytelling has been a highly valued tool for the communication of knowledge in many cultures including Black communities for centuries (Collins, 1990). Telling the story of one's lived experience, as counter-narrative, can be a tool to expose, analyze, and challenge majoritarian[8] stories of racial privilege. Feminist scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (2003) once wrote, "I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you" (p. 169). We succinctly synthesize counter-storytelling related to school discipline below.

Impact on Youth

There are not many published accounts of youth's experience with suspension in the canon. One recent study by Bell (2020) included interviews with 30 Black students and parents. Themes from their accounts included students feeling targeted at school and that the punishment for Black students often far outweighed the "infraction." One student said,

> "I feel I am [targeted] and a group I be with cause we always get suspended for little little stuff. Like one time in the lunch room, you know how like you sit down and your pants come up and my pants was down and they was under my heels and I didn't want to step on them so I got up to pull them up and I got suspended for that because we was supposed to sit down but I needed to pull my pants up" (p. 7)."

Students talked about feeling unseen and unheard. Another student described his experience with suspension: "They should have just let us talk cause they didn't let us say nothing they just suspended us. They aint let us tell the story or nothing. Maybe if they let us tell the story I wouldn't have gotten suspended" (Bell, 2020, p. 5).

[8]Majoritarian implies normative narratives that promote or perpetuate racist outcomes (Mitchell, 2013)

Coles and Powell (2020) provided an analysis in which they "historicize school discipline through Black suffering" (p. 115) and presented writings from high school youth who were asked to "explore their experiences with discipline, particularly as it relates to Black children being disproportionately suspended" (p. 120). Faith, a Black female in Grade 11 wrote, "Suspensions have a negative impact on Black youth's social identity by making them believe they are a bad person. It makes them believe the stereotypes that all minorities are bad and consistently get into trouble. It also makes others view them as bad kids" (p. 123).

Students highlighted how suspension negatively impacts their relationships with their peers, their sense of belongingness at school, and their long-term academic trajectories (Haight et al., 2014). In the book *Prelude to Prison* (Weissman, 2015), students described how they were silenced in "investigations," the context of the situation was ignored, and they were labeled as "bad kids." Students overwhelmingly described an erosion of their faith in justice and a sense of inevitability of poor life outcomes. They described a sense of violation during intrusive interventions (e.g., pat downs) and how a single story of their greatest mistake constructed their entire identity within a school system. In their research on the experience of Black girls and school discipline, Hines and Wilmot (2018) wrote school discipline "has been used as an instrument for spirit-murdering Black girls, and it is the intentional death of the Black spirit that can result in a lifelong imprisonment of the mind and soul even when there are no visual bars present" (p. 63).

Impact on Families and Communities

Black parents' narratives reflect similar themes. Even prior to experiencing a suspension, Black parents reported being aware of the threat of use and their children's vulnerability in schools (Gibson & Haight, 2013; Powell & Coles, 2021). Black mothers whose children had been suspended as young as two years old reported that educators were afraid of their toddlers (Powell & Coles, 2021). Relatedly, results from research suggest that White teachers incorrectly identified

the facial expressions of Black boys and girls as angry more often than White youth (Halberstadt et al., 2018). This implies that Black children are at increased risk of discipline for behaviors that would be considered developmentally appropriate in White children. In Powell and Coles (2021), Black mothers also reported being aware that educators perceive their babies as older and less innocent, evidencing adultification bias (see Epstein et al., 2017). They described being hypervigilant with educators, concerned with how teachers are monitoring them and their children (Powell & Coles, 2021). Black parents described calling out the punishment of their children for acting in self-defense, understanding their child's actions as the natural by-product of the school's failure to protect them and keep them safe (Gibson & Haight, 2013).

Black communities have long valued education as a critical mechanism for social and financial mobility (Diamond & Gomez, 2004). At the same time, there may be a lack of parity and trust in developing authentic school partnerships, marred by school personnel frequently viewing minoritized youth from a deficit perspective (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Black parents are constantly negotiating barriers to their children accessing quality education. With this juxtaposition in mind, Gibson and Haight (2013) highlighted that suspension is an "emotionally ladened event" (p. 268) triggering embarrassment, frustration, fear, anger, disgust, and resentment in Black families. Powell (2020) described the impact of suspension as scars, feelings of powerlessness, loss of self, loss of communality, and having to engage in resistance toward a system that failed their child.

In many ways, the ripple effects of exclusionary discipline are unquantifiable. Parents must take off work to interact with the school, often forego income while accruing costs associated with alternative childcare plans (Mowen, 2017). Students lose valuable time in the classroom and risk disconnection with learning and the social capital gained in educational spaces (Milner & Tenore, 2010). From this perspective, exclusionary school discipline policies (e.g., zero-tolerance) and

practices (e.g., out-of-school suspension) are complicit in supporting cycles of structural violence[9] in our society. Thus, they may represent a crucial access point where these systems can be disrupted and dismantled, changing student trajectories. We argue that strengthening MTSS-B to effectively support *all* students can be leveraged toward this aim.

Section III: Strengthening MTSS-B to Promote Access, Equity and Healing

Strengthening MTSS-B starts with acknowledging that systemic racism has contributed to toxic stress, intergenerational trauma, and harm to social, emotional, and physical wellness in Black communities (Chatmon & Watson, 2018). Exclusionary discipline, specifically out-of-school suspension, has caused harmed. Although MTSS-B evolved to prevent outcomes like suspension and support students' behavior proactively, there is an opportunity to strengthen its impact to promote educational access as well as racial healing and equity.

Design and implementation of MTSS-B must be considerate of (a) the historical, sociopolitical and institutional factors associated with racism and involve (b) detecting and addressing root causes of discipline disparities, (c) dismantling policies perpetuating racism and White supremacy, (e) incorporating promotive and protective factors into practices to support Black youth, and (f) both affirming cultures and interrogating injustices to be fully culturally responsive and relevant. We argue it is imperative to co-create spaces for students, families, and community members to not merely cope with racism but heal; not merely survive but thrive (French et al., 2020).

We call on school psychologists to lead collaborative teams to challenge policy that perpetuates systemic racism, unlearn racist practices, and co-construct an educational environment that shifts social control to social engagement. These affirming, inclusive spaces can lift up stories

[9] Johan Galtung termed *structural violence* to describe the economic, sociopolitical, legal, and cultural structures that harm specific individuals and groups within a society and impede their ability to achieve their full potential. Examples include disparate treatment in education, health care, and legal systems (Farmer et al., 2006).

of resistance and success of Black education as starting places for transforming MTSS-B. It can be a place in which strong relationships and racial healing are the norm, rather than focusing on modifying, managing, or controlling behavior in schools.

For the school psychologist, there are many avenues for action. This includes (a) working collaboratively with families and community partners, (b) advocating to educational leaders and policymakers for systemic change, and (c) strengthening supports for educators and, consequently, students. Below, we propose considerations for the school psychologist's role in strengthening MTSS-B within an ecological framework and summarize these recommendations in Figure 1.

Family and Community Partnerships

To promote equity and healing, school psychologists can facilitate partnerships between educators, caregivers, and community members with the aim of fostering reciprocal trust. This is critical to truly engaging implementation of MTSS-B in an ecological paradigm. It is with community support, students and family members can resist oppressive conditions and succeed as systemic and structural inequalities are dismantled (Yosso, 2005). When developing these partnerships, LeChasseur (2014) encouraged reflecting on the question *Who is the community?* - drawing attention to the implicit division between educators (many of whom do not reside near the school) and families in the neighborhood. LeChasseur (2014) also said, "educators frequently expect parents and [community members] to enter the school not on their own terms, but with behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs that fit into White, middle class culture" (p. 307). This must be acknowledged and addressed as partnerships are developed.

School psychologists must also reflect on the ways in which power and privilege inform partnerships. They can support educators to shift their thinking from viewing family members as peripheral to students' learning and instead realize families' cultural assets and the empowering nature of community involvement (Bryan & Henry, 2008). Montoya-Ávila and colleagues (2018)

recommend that making partnerships with families and the community a priority includes advocating for the resources (e.g., time, administrator attention, financial capital) to support the success of these collaborations. These partnerships might be coordinated by a committee of school, family and community members working toward both school- and community-based interests. This committee might also oversee efforts to address common barriers to authentic partnerships (e.g., maximize participation with flexible meeting times and modalities to support working parents, offer translated materials and meetings, provide childcare to maximize family participation, pay teachers for their time engaging in work outside of school hours).

The process of establishing and sustaining dynamic partnerships should be strength-based, democratic, and infuse racial and social justice into goal-setting and determining outcomes (see Bryan & Henry, 2008). Vera and Speight (2007) emphasize the importance of listening deeply. School psychologists can structure partnerships in which they make space for intentional listening, trust-building is a priority, and shared expectations for adults and youth are developed. Community leaders can support workshops to teach strategies and align systems of support across home, school and community contexts (Fallon & Mueller, 2017). Educators can also involve community members in providing additional support for students through mentorship experiences and/or affinity groups. These efforts are discussed in greater detail below.

Advocating for Systemic Change

As change agents for social justice, school psychologists must be able to advocate effectively for policy change to dismantle oppressive systems. As previously described, this starts with school psychologists seeking to understand the concerns of the community and those harmed. School psychologists can then use their privilege to advocate for change by creating space to share this knowledge with school leaders and educators. School psychologists can then build buy-in to center anti-racism in MTSS-B efforts by leveraging their understanding of implementation

science, specifically competency, organization, and leadership drivers[10] (Eagle et al., 2015) in what Kingdon (2003) described as three advocacy streams: problem, policy, and politics.

Problem Stream. The first, the problem stream, involves advocating to decisionmakers (leadership driver) that a problem exists. This builds individuals' knowledge (competency driver) and garnishes stakeholder support. School psychologists might use data, foundational to MTSS-B (organizational driver), to support advocacy in this context. These data may be qualitative. For example, school psychologists could convey why exclusionary discipline is ineffective and use youth counter-storytelling to convey the harm inflicted by ineffective systems and exclusionary discipline practices (Moyer et al., 2020). Data may also be quantitative. School psychologists can provide leaders with evidence of inequities through data sharing (e.g., disseminating disciplinary equity reports) and model data literacy skills by actively interpretating data critically with educators and decisionmakers to set goals and take action toward change (McIntosh et al., 2020). Qualitative and qualitative data might be paired together as both data sources can answer different questions and provide a more complete analysis of areas of concern. Motivation for subsequent action could be framed within the context of targeted universalism (or the notion that when we center the needs of those neglected or ostracized, we serve the needs of all; Chatmon & Watson, 2018).

Policy Stream. Once leaders acknowledge a problem exists and recognize the need for action, the policy stream involves co-developing solutions. These actions have the potential to promote healing through addressing root causes (Vera & Speight, 2007). School psychologists can work with school leaders, educators, families, and community organizations to determine ways in

[10] Implementation drivers refer to the core components needed for successful systems change effort. Competency drivers refer to the knowledge staff need to drive change. Organizational drivers refer to the structures (policy, practices) and data useful toward driving and monitoring change. Leadership drivers refer to administrators and other decision-makers prioritizing and guiding change efforts. See Eagle and colleagues (2015) for a complete description of implementation drivers.

which MTSS-B might be organized and strengthened to incorporate practices that disrupt the dominant culture discourse and center justice rather than maintaining order (Bornstein, 2017). One possibility could be to integrate features of restorative practices. This might include expanding Tier 1 supports to include teaching conflict resolution schoolwide or using proactive circles to foster relationships and community belonging in the classroom (Garnett et al., 2020). Although equity-focused restorative practices have been conceptualized within an MTSS-B framework (see Gregory et al., 2020), we encourage seeking a deep understanding of the tenets of restorative justice before considering if and how to integrate individual practices within MTSS-B.

Other possibilities include advocating for dismantling zero-tolerance or other racist disciplinary policies, hiring more Black teachers and administrators, supporting efforts to retain and support Black staff, and designing high-quality professional development (described below). From research in implementation science, we know administrators must be involved actively in change efforts; their enthusiasm toward selecting, financing, and supporting action is critical for responding to barriers and promoting a climate conducive to change (Sugai & Horner, 2020).

Politics Stream. Relatedly, the politics stream refers to leveraging motivation for change and available resources to actually work toward systemic reform. Kingdon (2003) described a policy window may open a bit wider when a change in administration or ideology occurs, particularly after critical events. In the wake of the devastation and inequities perpetuated by COVID-19, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd in 2020 (as well as many before and after), and a broadened public discourse on racial justice, the policy window is open. That is, there is an opportunity to reimagine educational environments as transformative healing spaces in which students' intersectional identities are represented, seen and heard.

Strengthening Supports for Educators

Aligned with the conceptualization of an MTSS-B framework for students, we conceptualize supports to educators to include foundational (i.e., Tier 1) practices and supplemental (i.e., advanced tier) supports, depending on the needs of staff.

Foundational Supports. First, Carter and colleagues (2020) recommended the development of a comprehensive plan for professional development addressing issues related to racism. This may include supporting educators to understand how racism is embedded within schools, and how White supremacy has maintained racist school practices, policies, and structures. Ideally, a trained facilitator will guide staff, conveying that learning opportunities in which staff experience discomfort is expected and part of the process of growth and community healing. Training opportunities should match the organization's unique desired outcomes, and endeavor to "plant seeds that inspire sustained learning" (Carter et al., 2020, p. 58).

Training may be most effective when trainees are taught a few concrete strategies to disrupt their bias. For instance, McIntosh et al. (2014) proposed the *vulnerable decision points model*, which identify the conditions under which racial bias is likely to influence discipline decisions in school. Educators can be trained to identify these decision points and strategize about how to respond with a *neutralizing routine*, or a planned response, instead of sending the student out of the classroom. This might involve talking with the student privately during the next instructional break to determine what might be causing disengagement in the classroom and allow the teacher and student to work together to address it.

Professional development and training might also consider the ways in which teacher stress and burnout impact teachers' openness to change in perception and practice. Depending on the unique needs of the school community and the comprehensive professional development plan developed, this may occur before, alongside or after training targeting anti-bias and anti-racism. Teachers who experience chronic high levels of stress in school (e.g., due to structural barriers

such as a lack of administrator support, funding) may be less likely to (a) develop and maintain relationships with students, (b) effectively provide high-quality instruction, and more likely to be (c) absent, creating instructional gaps and (d) irritable in interactions (see Sanetti et al., 2020).

Providing support to ameliorate teacher stress in schools may be foundational to addressing root causes of discipline disparities and cultivating safe, supportive, healing spaces for youth. This can be accomplished by working with school leadership to address sources of teacher stress systematically and comprehensively through teacher-focused intervention (e.g., stress management, relaxation techniques) and removing structural barriers to educators providing high-quality instruction and effective support (e.g., provide more time for planning, offer access to training and resources, facilitate connection with families).

At a systems-level, trained facilitators can offer training in which they raise awareness about the experience and impact of oppression and harm. However, moving beyond didactic training to include the opportunity to learn strategies to manage bias (as described above) might be coupled with the opportunity for educators to engage in critical self-reflection and dialogue. Although research in this area is emerging (e.g., Fallon et al., 2018; McIntosh et al., 2014), it appears critical that motivating action requires changing attitudes.

To that end, high-quality professional development might be informed by data related to teacher beliefs and practices to be maximally relevant and effective. One instrument, the *Assessment of Culturally and Contextually Relevant Supports* (ACCReS, ω_h = .77- .86) includes 35 items and can provide data pertaining to the (a) use of classroom practices to promote equitable access to learning opportunities, (b) effort toward explicitly considering students' culture and the community context in the classroom, (c) and access to relevant information and support to promote culturally responsive practice (Fallon et al., 2018). Alternatively, the *Double Check Self-Reflection Tool* (α = .65), targets teachers' consideration of students' culture in instruction and

efforts to establish supportive relationships with students (Hershfeldt et al., 2009). Although social desirability bias might threaten the validity of data collected via teacher self-report (and additional research is needed to address measurement concerns related to teacher self-assessment of culturally responsive practice), such assessment data may reflect teachers' perceptions of relative strengths and weaknesses. This can support decision-making about how to structure professional development, highlighting topics for which staff respond as needing more support.

Although schoolwide professional development toward comprehensive and sustained change can include specific strategy instruction, it truly requires educators to dive deeper in to understanding how White centrality and privilege has been embedded within education policies, curriculum, and systems level practice. This will likely require support to some educators via consultation beyond what is offered in professional development to all staff (Fabiano et al., 2018, Gregory et al., 2016).

Additional Assistance. School psychologists might engage in consultation to support educators requiring more assistance to engage in reflective and culturally responsive practice in the classroom (Fallon et al., 2018). Consultation may occur in small groups, teams, or with individuals, and be used to guide educators to explore root causes for "disruption" in the classroom (e.g., poor relationships between staff and students, inadequate academic instruction) and support educators to take concrete steps toward creating inclusive, healing classroom community spaces. Determining root causes can be done through a formal root cause analysis (see Osher et al., 2015 for a step-by-step guide). Actions to address root causes might involve training and encouraging educators to (a) listen actively to students concerns and validate their personal narratives, learning histories, and experiences (Coles & Powell, 2020), (b) affirm and sustain students' culture in the classroom and the curriculum (Paris & Alim, 2014), (c) use representative materials and instructional examples (Gay, 2002), and (c) set high expectations for learning and

achievement (Cartledge & Lo, 2006). School psychologists can support educators to teach about structural racism (Brown & Brown, 2010) and encourage staff to employ an asset-based views about students' cultural wealth, helping to leverage students' cultural assets to foster success (Yosso, 2005). These conversations might be incorporated into existing teacher coaching programs (e.g., *My Teaching Partner*; Gregory et al., 2016) or consultation (e.g., via the *Classroom Strategies Assessment Syste*m; Fabiano et al., 2018).

Strengthening Supports for Students

Tier 1 behavioral supports for students involves defining and teaching expectations, acknowledging prosocial behavior, and offering fair, consistent responses to concerning behavior (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Below, we provide considerations for centering racial equity within these basic tenets, acknowledging that the research base evaluating these considerations is emerging.

Foundational Supports. To strengthen the basic tenets of MTSS-B to support student behavior and promote equity, school psychologists might encourage staff to (a) collaboratively define with students and their families behavioral expectations for a shared, productive, safe educational space (Milner & Tenore, 2010), (b) explicitly teach students how to meet shared expectations using principles of culturally responsive instruction (Bondy et al., 2007), (c) ask students about their preferences for praise and acknowledgement for meeting shared expectations (Fefer et al., 2016), and (d) use an instructional (rather than a punitive or exclusionary) response to behavior that interferes with meeting shared expectations. This contributes to intentionally designed school environments that foster engagement and transformative social-emotional learning (see Jagers et al., 2019). School psychologists might empower youth to co-lead these efforts through a variety of youth-centered organizational tactics (e.g., youth-led planning, youth advisory boards, youth participatory action research, youth organizing; Ozer et al., 2020).

Centering student voice, particularly students who are and have been oppressed, in the design of foundational MTSS-B supports can promote educational access, racial healing, and equity.

Additional Assistance. When data reflect youth disengagement in the classroom (e.g., repeated conflict with peers or adult, poor attendance, numerous counselor or nurse visits), educators can provide additional supports via a targeted (Tier 2) or individualized (Tier 3) intervention (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Researchers have modified or adapted well-researched interventions to be more culturally responsive or relevant by incorporating promotive and protective factors into its design. For instance, Toms et al. (2018) described a Check-in/Check-out procedure in which three Black males in Grade 9 identified with emotional and behavioral disorders received social skill instruction and academic planning with a Black male staff mentor. The mentor focused explicitly on relationship building and helped the student navigate any conflict faced by "positively affirming the student," increasing displays of classroom engagement (Toms et al., 2018; p. 286). Collins et al. (2018) adapted an interdependent group contingency intervention (called *Behavior Bingo*) to be culturally relevant by emphasizing opportunity for student choice and using peer models to promote attention to academic tasks.

In addition to adapted interventions, there are strength-based interventions which may also promote promotive and protective factors for Black youth. *Sisters of Nia* (Aston & Graves, 2016) and *Brother of Ujima* (Graves & Aston, 2018), created for Black girls and boys, respectively, aim to encourage engagement by focusing on promoting racial identity and resiliency. These multi-week curricula are designed to be delivered in a small group format and are based on Afrocentric worldview principles to increase cultural values and beliefs. *Sisters of Nia* has demonstrated effectiveness at promoting students' perceptions of their own strength, identity, worth and scholastic competence (Aston & Graves, 2016). Students receiving *Brother of Ujima* have had similar outcomes, in addition to improved social resiliency (Graves & Aston, 2018).

Supports provided in the context of a Tier 2 or 3 intervention might again draw from the tenets of restorative justice to teach mediation strategies or resolve interpersonal conflicts. One example is *Real Talk 4 Girls* (Featherston, 2014) which teaches social problem-solving skills and prosocial behavior using a restorative circle process to create psychological safety. Students and staff endeavor to build and repair trusting relationships and connection. Wilson (2015) proposed the integration of acceptance and mindfulness-based approaches into MTSS-B to challenge current cultural norms (e.g., healthy normality) of behavior support. The goal is to acknowledge the experience of suffering, teach adaptive coping skills, and promote anti-racist practices in schools.

Conclusion

School discipline is rooted in White supremacy and has caused harm to students and families from many marginalized groups, particularly Black individuals. Ultimately, the goal of strengthening support for behavior within the context of MTSS-B is not only to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline (specifically out-of-school suspension), but also to foster safe, inclusive, healing spaces to promote educational access, equity, connectedness and engagement. The work to achieve these outcomes must start with adults to promote racial equity in the design and delivery of MTSS-B supports. School psychologists are poised to establish constructive, reciprocal family and community partnerships, advocate effectively to school and policy decisionmakers, and coordinate transformative professional development for staff to better support students. Future research targeting the systematic development and evaluation of interventions across tiers (and the impact of the model) toward achieving greater racial equity is needed. Efforts toward these aims must be prioritized now.

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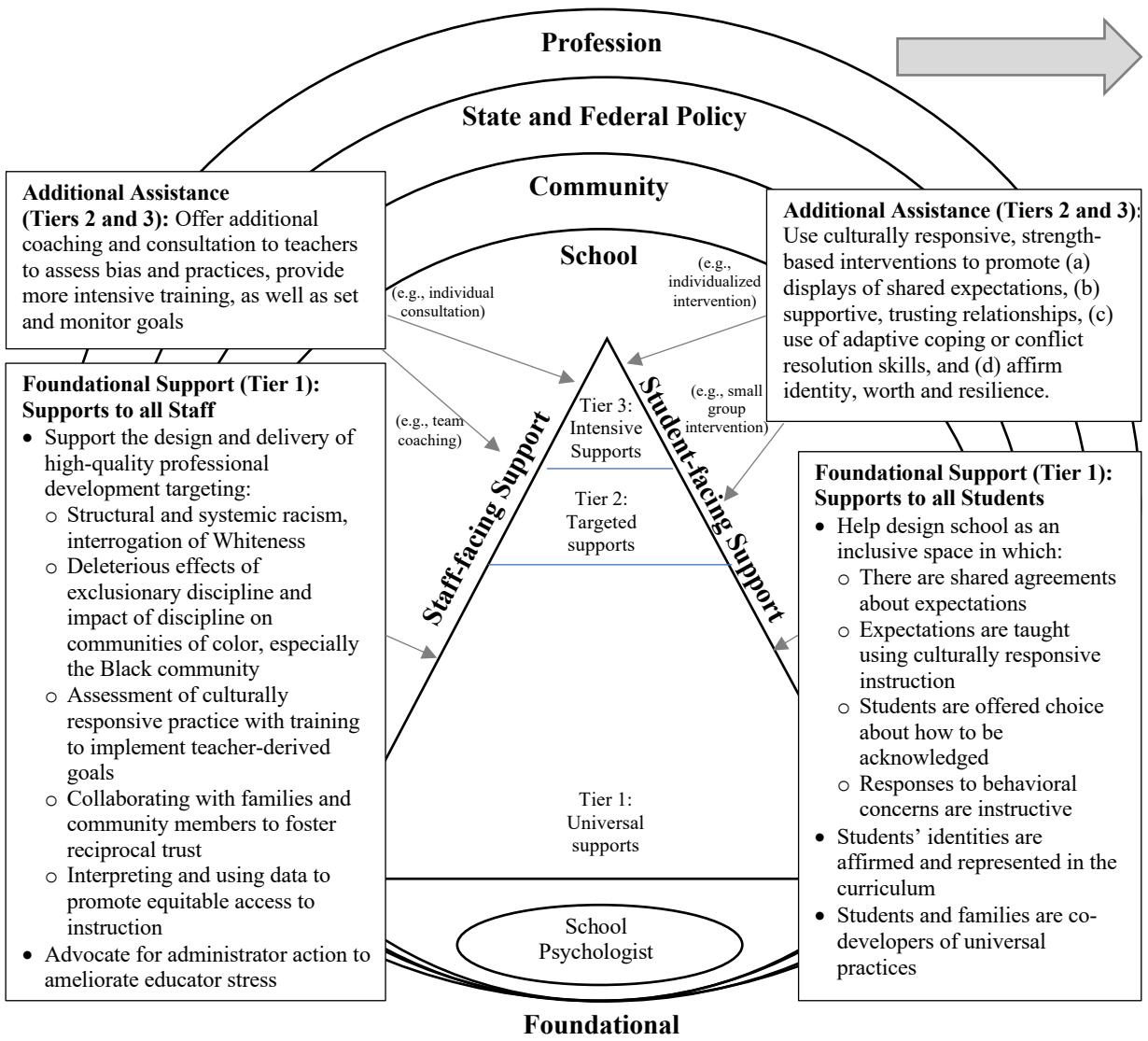
Figure 1

Conceptualizing the School Psychologist's Role in Strengthening MTSS-B for Racial Equity



Profession
- Advocate for the field
  - to center racial healing and dismantle White supremacy
  - eradicate unjust discipline policy and practices
  - advance academic success for all youth until equity is achieved
- Lead efforts for change in professional communities and organizations

State and Federal Policy
- Advocate to state and federal policymakers to
  - eliminate racist policy
  - fund schools equitably
  - create policies that promote safe, inclusive, supportive schools

Community
- Engage with
  - community leaders & cultural brokers in action (e.g., mentorship) to support youth
  - community members to listen deeply to strengths and concerns
  - district leaders to create racially just policy

School
- Empower youth to co-design racially just school environments
- Engage in data practices grounded in promotion of equity
- Advocate to school leaders about how and why to take action toward change
- Provide behavior supports that center racial healing
- Develop reciprocal partnerships with families

Foundational
- Commit to
  - societal racial justice movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter)
  - interrogating White centrality (e.g., individualism) and systems that maintain White privilege
  - equitable access to education
  - recognizing racial trauma and repairing harm

Note. The school psychologist's role is presented via an ecological lens in which a commitment to racial justice is foundational to all work. Actions are proposed in the context of school and community settings, as well as to affect change in state and federal policy, and the profession.