



*[Image description: Five adults of varying ethnic/ racial backgrounds, and of varying gender expressions, positioned in a circle, looking down at the camera smiling.]*

## **Equity by Design:**

A Critical Examination of the Profession of School Counseling: Moving Towards Equity-Oriented Leadership

Erin K. Sanborn

# A Critical Examination of the Profession of Counseling: Moving Towards Equity-Oriented Leadership

## Purpose of this Brief

Historically, education research has been applied widely to the examination of curriculum ([Banks, 2007](#)), teacher education ([Sleeter, 2008](#)), in-service teacher practices and beliefs ([Douglas et al., 2008](#); [Hyland, 2005](#)), educational leadership ([Gooden & Dantley, 2012](#); [Parker & Villalpando, 2007](#)) and educational policy ([Henry, Lingard et al., 2013](#); [Sutton & Levinson, 2001](#)). In doing so, these components have been leveraged towards educational equity ([Skelton & Kyser, 2015](#)) including the development of culturally responsive and sustaining ([Paris, 2012](#)) schooling environments. Relatedly, critical research has demonstrated and provided tools for the transformation of schools that act as “sites of cultural and social reproduction” ([Oyler, 2011](#), p. 205) by favoring norms associated with white, middle-class, non-disabled, cisgender, heterosexual, and Protestant identity ([Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012](#)) and exclude and cause harm to those who do not fit such norms.

Creating equitable PK-12 schooling environments requires that educators reflect and act with intentionality, especially those with dominant identities who are able, via power and privilege, to execute explicit and implicit biases ([Staats & Patton, 2013](#)) through pedagogy, policy, and practice. Educators must act to “disrupt and dismantle historical legacies of normative assumptions, beliefs, and practices about

individual characteristics and cultural identities that marginalize and disenfranchise people and groups of people” ([Great Lakes Equity Center, 2011](#)). Much of the body of critical education research centers on teaching and student learning with a close focus on acts and beliefs of district leaders, building administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community stakeholders.

Less common within critical education research is a focus on the role of the school counselor as related to reproducing, disrupting, and transforming educational environments. Yet, school counselors play integral roles within a school community; they liaise between students, caregivers, community members, teachers, administrators, and district leaders and have a pulse on authentic feelings across multiple stakeholders regarding school culture, climate, and equity ([Atkins & Olgesby, 2019](#)). With appropriate professional development and support school counselors can serve as an equity-centered leaders who challenge oppressive policies and practices that marginalize students at multiple and diverse identity intersections ([Mthethwa Sommers, 2014](#)). At the same time the ongoing shift of the profession within a capitalist, production-based U.S. society ([Wingfield et al., 2010](#); [Murray, 1995](#)) paired with inadequate preparation for modern-day school counselors to address an increasingly diverse student body ([Crowell et al., 2017](#)),

may prevent counselors from critical leadership roles.

This brief is written for those who are currently school counselors, who are considering the profession, or who engage in counselor preparation and professional development in order to provide a critical lens through which the profession might be examined. Through a brief historical overview of the positioning of school counselors, an analysis of the development and implementation of professional counseling standards amongst school counseling training programs, and an interrogation of multicultural counseling courses I argue that we are intentionally preparing counselors to maintain a status quo that privileges a certain student body while marginalizing others.

### Author's Note

Important to note is that my identity and lived experiences shape my perspective in writing this piece, but also in forming my thoughts, feelings, values, and beliefs surrounding public PK-12 schooling and the roles educators play within these spaces. I identify as a white, cis-gender, heterosexual, non-disabled, woman who has worked as a middle school teacher and school counselor within public school districts of Philadelphia and Indianapolis. I earned my master's degree in school counseling from a Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) accredited, nationally ranked program within the Midwest. Currently, I serve as a doctoral research assistant for the Great Lakes Equity Center, while completing my Ph.D. in Urban Education Studies with an emphasis on teacher education and teacher identity.

## The Positioning of the School Counselor: The Benevolent Superhero

My first year as a school counselor in an urban district I received a mug for Counselor Appreciation Week that read, "I'm a school counselor, what is your superpower." This innocent mug represents a kind gesture to most, however, opportunities are missed when we ignore the subtle, but frequent ways professions, such as the school counselor, are positioned in comparison to the students they serve. Comparing a school counselor to a superhero could be perceived as a catchy slogan representing the many hats worn by modern day school counselors. However, as continually stated, schooling contexts are increasingly more racially diverse, specifically in urban contexts which are overwhelmingly housed by students and families of Color while



*[Image description: profile view of a person sitting on the edge of a building wearing a cape and eye mask, reading a book. A semi-dark and cloudy cityscape can be seen in the background]*

comparatively, most school counselors are



white (81%) and female (85%) (American School Counseling Association, 2018).

Thereby, this positioning benefits white females within roles such as the school counselor in a multitude of ways.

Within helping professions such as teaching, special education, and counseling white women entering schooling environments are often characterized as good, strong, extraordinary, or as my mug states: superheroes (Thorius, 2016; 2019). Additionally, school counselors are granted power to develop a narrative of mental wellness and normativity based on how they perceive themselves in comparison to students and families who remain unwilling or unable to conform to white, middle-class, non-disabled, hetero-patriarchal norms of being. Here these populations are often labeled as abnormal, dysfunctional, and lacking appropriate care (Graham & Coomer, 2016). This can most clearly be recognized within the current surge of districts co-opting trauma informed care (Hanson & Lang, 2016) and social emotional learning (Hoffman, 2009) to address the myriad of ways disenfranchised communities experience trauma at higher rates than their white, middle-class counterparts. However, initiatives such as these are often co-opted in problematic ways which miss opportunities to address the root cause of said trauma. First, trauma is systemically cultivated and placed upon students and families within these communities to secure superior status for some students and families while maintaining inferior status for others, and second, in many ways PK-12 schooling acts as sites of trauma for those possessing marginalized identities (Graham & Coomer, 2016). Moreover, when we miss

opportunities to see how educators intentionally and unintentionally place trauma onto marginalized students and families, we see a perpetuation of the counselor as a haven of normativity. Normativity here can be measured via academic achievement, emotional regulation, and conforming speech and thought to ensure alignment with the dominant norm of what it means to be a good, successful student. Meanwhile when operating this way see a reproduction of marginalizing tropes where certain students need to be fixed, and the white school counselor is the savior to do so (Atkins & Olgesby, 2019).

### **Historical Context of the Professionalization of the School Counselor**

Roles of school counselors as gatekeepers of normativity (Erickson & Shultz, 1981) and stewards for the socialization (Sensory & DiAngelo, 2012) of children into dominant societal standards (Mthethwa-Sommers, 2014) have a historical legacy that begins with the development of the hundred-year-old profession. School counseling has a confusing history due to being refocused over time to fit societal needs and push national capitalistic agendas (Schimmel, 2008) of productivity and global competition, as well as a lack of universal tasks assigned to the role of the counselor (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Counseling has transitioned from a profession of guidance, where educators might provide "...an early focus on career and moral development" (Paisley & McMahon, 2001, p. 106) to one within which counselors juggle "academic and

occupational planning” (Whiston, 2002, p. 2) and “attend...to the school environment and within the general social context” (Whiston, 2002, p. 2) within a “comprehensive, developmental, and collaborative” (Paisley & McMahon, 2001, p. 106) space.



*[Image description: The word “history” etched into wood]*

School counseling emerged during the Industrial Revolution, when counseling was used to sort and filter students in connection to “vocational education” (Paisley & Borders, 1995, p. 151). Here, teachers were appointed into guidance roles by taking on additional duties beyond the requirements of teaching (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Counselors, at this time, built rapport with students, assessed their skills, provided advisement on available career programs, and prescribed professional avenues. Because any educator could take on these roles, there was no additional pay associated with these duties, nor universal parameters for what such duties entailed.

Throughout the 20th century counselors took on tasks that would either benefit their principles or align to larger societal needs

(Norman & Henderson, 2001). For example, during the late 1950’s and early 1960’s, as the United States felt global pressure to compete with Russia to be the first to the moon, those entering the profession tripled. At this time counselors were positioned to steer students to STEM professions (onlinecounselingprograms.com, 2017), teach “socially appropriate behaviors,” (Schimmel, 2008, para. 4) and “promote character development” (Schimmel, 2008, para. 4) while tracking attendance and assisting failing students to move towards graduation. In 1965, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act was inspired to fight the War on Poverty with “equal access to quality education” (onlinecounselingprograms.com, 2017, para. 6). At the forefront of legislation was increased federal funding for counselor preparation programs and professional development and instructional resources that provided professional structures to those training school counselors and for those entering the field.

### **A Critique of Standards Regarding the Preparation of School Counselors**

Shifting socio-political contexts and growth in the profession led to the development of National Standards for Counseling. These professional standards, now defined by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), determined required areas of study that included human growth development, theory, individual and group counseling, social and cultural foundations, testing appraisal, research and program evaluation, professional orientation, career development, and finally a practicum and

internship. To this day, these standards inform curricula within modern counseling education programs to ensure school counselors obtain the appropriate "... knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to develop a comprehensive school counseling program" (ASCA School Counseling Competencies, 2012, p. 1).

ASCA's current school counseling standards are divided into four subsections which include: "Ethical Standards," "School Counselor Professional Standards & Competencies," "Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success," and "ASCA School Counselor Preparation Program Standards" (ASCA, 2019). In this brief, I focus solely on the "ASCA School Counselor Preparation Program Standards" to deeply analyze ways in which counseling programs might strengthen their curriculum to appropriately train candidates to center equity and social justice within their roles and schooling spaces. Within this particular set of standards, school counseling programs are encouraged to produce candidates who not only recognize the social, political, and cultural history of the profession, but also using "core theories and concepts," "instructional and school counseling interventions," and "ethical practice" to increase equity, access, and inclusion. However, while language indicates some focus on multiculturalism, equity, and social justice, these do not necessarily translate to meaningful ways ASCA's current standards directly and intentionally guide and hold counseling programs accountable for the intense, interwoven, deeply embedded training required of future counselors to engage in mindset analysis, a centering equity, and advocacy for social justice.

It is the responsibility of counseling programs to actively develop curricula that prepares critical, equity-oriented counselors



*[Image description: Two people. Photographed from the neck down, sitting at a desk with an open book and various office supplies.]*

to question, challenge, and disrupt pre-conceived mindsets, behaviors, language, and practices that actively perpetuate a status quo and position the profession to inadvertently push larger, national agendas that do not necessarily benefit all students and families. However, currently, even within the most reputable counseling programs (those nationally ranked and accredited via the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) (2015) future counselors are often exposed, at most, to one multicultural counseling course. This is despite CACREP requiring counseling programs to address the current projected needs of the counseling profession with a "multicultural and pluralistic society" (p. 11) where students are prepared to work with "diverse groups nationally and internationally" (p. 11). This includes, but is not limited to, "theories and models of

multicultural counseling, cultural identity development, and social justice and advocacy” (p. 11), an analysis of the impact of individual “attitudes, beliefs, understandings” (p. 11), the “effects of power and privilege for counselors and clients,” (p. 11) and “strategies for identifying and eliminating barriers, prejudices, and process of intentional and unintentional oppression and discrimination.”

Furthermore in 1991, the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (AMCD) presented 31 additional standards to directly address and problematize the “monocultural nature of training” (Sue et al., 1992, p. 68) where counseling programs only offer isolated multicultural courses and resisted incorporating a deep analysis of how each of us function within “race, culture, and ethnicity” (Sue et al., 1992, p. 68). AMCD, previously named the Association for Non-White Concerns (ANWC), offered this suggestion from the perspective of a 46-year historical legacy encouraging an emphasis on recognizing human diversity and multiculturalism, eliminating marginalizing conditions, and centering interests of those marginalized (Multicultural Counseling Development, 2019). AMCD believed without change the profession of school counseling would continue to be referred to as “the handmaiden of the status quo” (as cited in Sue et al., 1992) with counselors refusing to consider how their individual values and beliefs impact their interpretation of normal regarding thinking, acting, and being. When counselors are not pushed to think through bias, and privilege they rely on marginalizing counseling techniques (Sue et al., 1992) reproducing dominant notions of whiteness (Rothman et al., 2011) where there are higher percentages of students

who are white or conform to white standards meeting standards of success based on test scores, graduation rates, and acceptance to college. If meant to actively increase access, equity, inclusivity, and safety, future counselors deserve programs offering an interwoven training process where they can question, challenge, and disrupt their bias, privilege, assumptions, values, and beliefs through all coursework, practicums, and internships. Here counselors are pushed to consider “...the intersection of identities and the dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression that influence the counseling relationship” (Ratts et al., 2015, p. 3) via an antiracist thread of multicultural counseling throughout the fabric of a program instead of treating the topic as a siloed specialty.

### **Developing School Counselors as Equity-Centered Liaisons**

School counselors are positioned and position themselves to play specific roles within PK-12 schooling contexts, which can be problematic. My experience as a counselor was an interesting space where I felt released from stringent accountability structures which place pressures on administrators and teachers. This could be because of a stripping of the professional significance of school counselors within urban contexts, a conclusion supported by data showing the four largest urban school districts in the United States employ more security officers than school counselors (Barnum, 2017). However, as an individual with a variety of privileged identities, mainly my birth into the white race, I continued (and continue) to recognize and acknowledge the many ways in which my biases, assumptions, beliefs, and values (Tatum,

1995) infiltrate the way in which I position myself and am positioned. Simultaneously, I consider the discourse I use and actions I take in working with students and families possessing a variety of different identity markers, both similar and often different than my own. I acknowledge that by being white, heterosexual, non-disabled, and subscribing to middle class standards the invisible norms defined by the dominant narrative within the United States are my norms of being and directly align with a status quo that has maintained my status as privileged. Important to note, I did not gain this skillset that includes ongoing critical reflection on my practice via my counseling masters, and the single required multicultural counseling course which sifted through siloed identities I might come upon as a school counselor. Rather, my first year as a school counselor marked my second year in an urban education doctoral program specifically aimed at preparing students to act as agents of change to challenge, question, disrupt, and dismantle marginalizing systems, policies, and practices. The critical readings, coursework, and discourse of this program ignited an ongoing interrogation of myself and the identities I hold within urban education contexts as well as directly impacted my approach to my school counseling role and how I work with stakeholders such as students, caregivers, community members, teachers, building and district leaders. However, not everyone has the privilege, desire, time, money, or energy to seek out and continue education via doctoral programs.

I end with this narrative not to center my well-intentioned whiteness (Castagno, 2014) or present as if I have arrived at an

antiracist (Bonnett, 2005), social justice (Adams & Bell, 2016), equity-centered persona. Rather, my aim is to communicate my recognition that school counselors, specifically those who are white, have been positioned and position themselves in problematic ways. However, as advocated for over the course of 30 years, counseling programs must push new counselors to intensively analyze their racial identity and how whiteness infiltrates their discourse and actions (Moss & Singh, 2015). If trained appropriately counselors have the unique ability to take on a role as equity-centered liaisons. By centering equity counselors can center the perspectives of students and caregivers, build rapport, and strengthen relationships. The counselor, then, has the unique ability to liaise between students, caregivers, teachers,



***[Image description: Six fists knitted to represent different skin colors, lined up against a stone background.]***

building leaders, and district leaders to appropriately disrupt further infliction of trauma and marginalizing language, policies, and practices in educational settings.

## About the Author

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Erin K. Sanborn is a Doctoral Research Assistant for the Great Lakes Equity Center and the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center. She is also a Visiting Lecturer in the Urban Elementary Education Program in the IUPUI School of Education. She is pursuing a Ph.D. in Urban Education Studies, at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), concentrating on the areas of Critical Whiteness Studies and Teacher Education.

Her research interests take a socio-cultural approach to analyze the interaction of whiteness within teacher identity and teacher learning in equity-focused initiatives; specifically, analyzing how individual positionality, bias, power, and privilege drive pedagogy language and curriculum. Prior to working at the Equity Centers, Erin served as a middle-years English and Social Studies teacher, as well as a middle-years School Counselor, within the public school districts of Indianapolis, IN and Philadelphia, PA.

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## **About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center**

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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