

Antiracism Work in Schools: Using Dialectical Behavioral Therapy Skills to Empower South Texas Educators

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“It is important for me to get the tools needed to be an effective training facilitator. The work that I do, the potential impact I may have on faculty and students that look like me, are the driving force to continue this very important work of an antiracist educator.”

– Train-the-Trainer Workshop Participant

In 2019, the American Academy of Pediatrics declared racism a core social determinant of health.¹ Exposure to the chronic stress of racism during childhood results in higher rates of depression, anxiety, conduct problems, and low self-esteem.² Children and adolescents experience racism nearly everywhere including the education system where Black students are more likely to receive a negative behavioral assessment than White students, especially if the assessment is from a White teacher.³ Teachers often underestimate Black and Hispanic students’ academic abilities, reducing students’ confidence in and expectations for their own achievements.⁴ Black and Hispanic students are expelled from school at greater rates, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline and diminishing opportunities for future scholastic and economic success.⁵ The use of over-policing and harsh punishments in under-resourced schools with high numbers of Black and Latino children increases the risk of legal system involvement, another system affected by racism.⁶

Reduce the stresses of racism, however, and these outcomes can change. Students of color who attend schools perceived as having a good racial climate do better academically, experience fewer disciplinary actions, and have better cardiometabolic health than those whose schools have a negative racial climate.⁷ Therefore, creating antiracist learning environments is essential in reducing health and educational inequities.

Data from Project Implicit’s Black-White Implicit Associations Test (IAT) suggest that subconscious implicit biases are a significant factor in racial educational disparities.⁸ Tools that improve self-awareness have emerged as mechanisms to reduce implicit bias. Dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), which uses mindfulness as a foundational tool and is classically used to treat borderline personality disorder, has emerged as a potential tool to manage a wide range of behaviors, mental health conditions, and even parenting.^{9,10} Through a community partnership with the school system, we aimed to empower educators in their antiracism work by providing an antiracism training that incorporated the 4 major skills of DBT: mindfulness, distress tolerance, interpersonal effectiveness, and emotion regulation.

Understanding dialectics—the ability to accept that a difficult reality exists and yet, one must find meaningful options to engage in this work and preserve one’s own wellness—is also core to antiracism work. Mindfulness helps increase individuals’ awareness of and response to implicit bias and is often used in implicit bias trainings among health care workers.¹¹ Distress tolerance boosts the effects of mindfulness training and may help educators deal with the difficult emotions inherent in antiracism work.¹² Finally, navigating antiracism interventions requires high levels of interpersonal effectiveness.¹³

For our DBT-based antiracism workshop, we had 2 goals:

1. Provide South Texas educators with antiracism tools and training to empower them to create and lead antiracism programs at their school.
2. Pilot the use of DBT skills to promote antiracism work in schools.

Community Collaboration

Upon request of the Education Service Center Region 20 (ESC-20), our team at the UT Health San Antonio Long School of Medicine collaborated with the University of Texas at San Antonio's (UTSA) Multicultural Student Center for Equity and Justice to create an antiracism workshop. ESC-20 is an organization established by the Texas State Board of Education to provide educational support such as curricular programs and social services to South Texas public schools and serves almost half a million students in 56 school districts. ESC-20 recruited 12 South Texas educators to participate in this pilot study. This project was determined Quality Improvement "Not Regulated Research" by the Institutional Review Board UT Health San Antonio. The results of our project may not be generalizable outside the project setting.

Empowering our Participants With Antiracism and DBT Tools

Participants received the following tools:

1. Antiracism toolkit

The toolkit was designed to be concise and informative with sections covering the history of racism, the impact of racism on students, books and media resources, classroom resources, and DBT and self-care information. Each section of the toolkit contains no more than 10 resources. **Click here to see the toolkit.**

2. Train-the-trainer workshop

The 2-day virtual workshop took place in November 2020 over Zoom and consisted of 2 sessions that were 1.5-hours. The workshop integrated DBT skills

to develop trainers' ability to promote the understanding of racism, reflect as antiracism facilitators, and role-play scenarios.

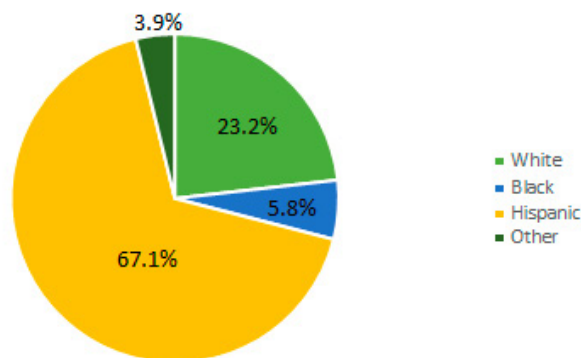
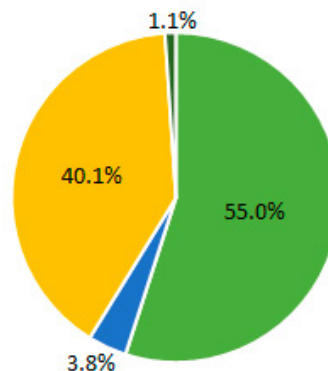
3. Antiracism books

After the workshop, participants selected 3 of 5 antiracism books to take home. (They also had the option of requesting resources not on the list).

Who was Interested in Attending the Workshop?

Twelve educators representing 4 unique districts and 4 unique schools completed the application for the workshop. Of the 12 applicants, 7 were White, 1 was Black, 3 were Hispanic, and one was biracial (Black and Hispanic). The applicants had been educators for an average of 17 years (range: 5 to 31 years). Seven applicants work at a school district as a counselor or a similar position. Five applicants work at individual schools. Ten applicants had previously attended an antiracism workshop. Only two applicants' schools had engaged in formal antiracism programs. Participants were asked to estimate the amount of racism among their students and their colleagues on a 5-point scale: "none at all," "a little," "a moderate amount," "a lot," and "a great deal." Nine (75%) of the applicants said that there is "a lot" or "a moderate amount" of racism among their students while 7 (58%) said the same about racism among their colleagues.

The applicants were asked to estimate the racial composition of the students (Figure 1A) and the teachers (Figure 1B) at their schools. There was a perceived racial and ethnic disparity, with applicants estimating, on average, that 67% of students are Hispanic and 55% of teachers are White, despite South Texas's status as a "Minority-Majority" area (69% Hispanic vs 25% White).¹⁴ While the perceived racial distribution of the staff and students may not reflect the true racial distribution at their schools, this disparity is especially significant because minority students who have teachers that share their racial identity tend to feel happier in school and do better academically.¹⁵ Asian, American Indian, and Multiracial students/teachers accounted for less than

Figure 1. Applicants' Estimates of Racial Distribution (N = 12)**A. Perceived Student Demographics****B. Perceived Teacher Demographics**

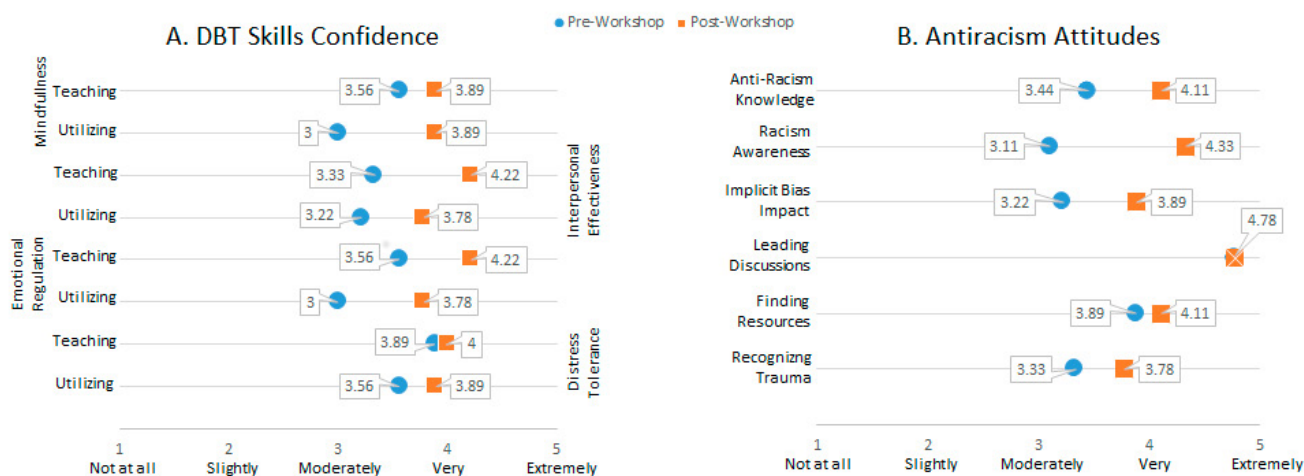
2% of each perceived demographic and represents the “other” category in Figure 1A and 1B.

How Effective Was the Workshop?

Nine participants attended the workshop and completed a pre-survey on antiracism attitudes and DBT skills. Eight participants took the optional pre-survey Black-White IAT (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/selectatest.html>). Prior to taking the IAT, 5 participants were “very aware” and 3 were “moderately aware” of their personal implicit bias. After taking the IAT, 4 participants were “moderately surprised”, “very surprised”, or “extremely

surprised” at their results while 4 participants were “not at all surprised.” Four of the workshop participants had taken the IAT before; however, there was no association between previous test taking and level of surprise.

After the workshop, participants took a post-survey with the identical DBT skills confidence (Figure 2A) and antiracism attitude questions (Figure 2B). Participants’ confidence in teaching and utilizing DBT skills increased in all categories (Figure 2A). Among teaching skills, their confidence grew most in teaching interpersonal effectiveness (27%), which is consistent with the workshop structure to emphasize these skills. When it came to

Figure 2. Results From the Antiracism Train-the-Trainer Workshop (N = 9)

Note: DBT = dialectical behavioral therapy

using DBT, participants' confidence improved most in practicing mindfulness (30% growth). Confidence in both teaching and utilizing emotion regulation increased by 19% and 26% respectively.

The participants' confidence in their antiracism knowledge and ability to teach antiracism concepts also improved in most categories (Figure 2B). The sole exception was in participants' confidence in leading antiracism discussions, which remained at the same high level (4.78 out of 5) as before the workshop. Of the 6 measured attitudes, confidence in antiracism awareness grew the most (39% growth). All participants found the workshop important and helpful and would recommend it to their colleagues.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Our DBT-centered antiracism train-the-trainer workshop improved participating educators' DBT skills and antiracism attitudes. The small sample size of our pilot study limits any generalizations of our results; however, it is an important first step to setting the foundation of utilizing DBT as a method of promoting antiracism work. Several next steps are in play to expand our antiracism training program. First, we plan to do 6-month qualitative interviews with the trainers to assess their progress in antiracism work. Second, we aim to continue to offer trainings and have recruited 12 educators for our next cohort. Third, we hope to continue to explore the effectiveness of DBT skills in promoting antiracism by working with the other stakeholders in education, such as students and administrators. We hope that our Train-the-Trainer model will trickle into communities and promote a safe and inclusive environment for all students in South Texas. One challenge to our project was building community in a virtual format. While the virtual format opened accessibility to educators across the region, having a safe space was especially important in our workshop to promote non-judgmental sharing and interpersonal growth. Additionally, practice of DBT skills in an on-going team or group approach is important to maximize their benefits. Finally, we urge the readers to support antiracism work among your local educators, whether with a DBT model or otherwise.

Take Home Summary

Antiracism work in education is critical for the health and academic success for all youth. The use of dialectical behavioral therapy in an antiracism Train-the-Trainer workshop improved antiracism skills and perceptions in educators.

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