FACING RACISM IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SCHOOLS: PRACTITIONER INQUIRY AS A TOOL FOR LEADERS WORKING TO CREATE A MORE POSITIVE RACIAL CLIMATE IN THEIR SCHOOLS

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Abstract

By taking an inquiry stance toward their practice, school leaders can develop a systematic approach for investigating their school's racial climate, and in doing so, can generate localized knowledge in order to inform and inspire change. This paper highlights the practitioner inquiries of three school leaders who made efforts to better understand their students' perspectives about race and experiences with racism in their schools; in doing so, this paper illustrates the ways in which school leaders can learn from students when they take the time to deeply and authentically listen. This paper, which is framed by the university faculty member who supported each of the school leaders with their inquiries, illustrates the ways in which practitioner inquiry can be a powerful learning tool for school leaders, while simultaneously creating opportunities for developing a more positive racial climate in their schools.

Keywords: Practitioner inquiry; School leadership; School racial climate; Racism; Critical Race Theory; Student voice; Action research.

Introduction

A negative racial climate can be detrimental to all students, but particularly to students of color, both academically and socially, in public and private schools alike (Byrd & Chavous, 2011; Datnow & Cooper, 1997; DeCuir-Gunby, et al., 2011; Hall & Stevenson, 2007; Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). A school's racial climate consists of the personal relationships and practices that are shaped by the school's racialized norms and values (Green, Adams, Turner, 1988), and it is easily influenced by social, cultural and political elements outside of the school (Modica, 2015). Student, faculty and staff perceptions of racial fairness and experiences with racism, which may come through student-teacher interactions, school curricula, administrative policies, peer relationships and other cultural aspects of a school, are all elements of a school's racial climate (DeCuir-Gunby, et al., 2011; Mattison & Aber, 2007; Watkins & Aber, 2009). In other words, racial climate is complex and fluid, and a systematic approach is needed in order to begin to understand its complexity in order to create change (Mansfield & Jean-Marie, 2015). This paper argues that practitioner inquiry, or the intentional and systematic investigation of one's practice within the context of their broader milieu (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Menter et al, 2011; Zeichner & Nofke, 2001), can be a powerful tool for uncovering and highlighting stories and experiences that would have otherwise been buried and distorted (Heidegger, 1996/1953), so that a school leader can better understand the complexities of their school's racial climate. Additionally, we argue that when student experience is placed at the center of that systematic investigation, school leaders are better positioned to create meaningful change in service of their students.

Far too often, students are not included in the conversation about school change in any meaningful way (Brasof, 2015; Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012; Nieto, 1994; Yonezawa & Jones, 2007). However, students can offer important and unique insights about school climate, and listening to their perspectives can open the doors to new, creative, and arguably more effective changes in our schools (Brasof, 2011; Mitra, 2009; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001); this is particularly the case when it comes to improving a school's racial climate (Fisher, et al., 2014; Mansfield, 2015).

Calls for listening to and learning from student voice are not new. In fact, Dewey (1916) strongly advocates for incorporating student perspective into the design of school curriculum. However, throughout the literature, the term "student voice" is often under-conceptualized, rarely defined, and its use is not sufficiently questioned or complicated (Silva & Rubin, 2003). While some scholars suggest that student voice is an act of speaking, writing, or in some way sharing one's perspective, Mitra (2009) claims that student voice is about involving students in "decisions that will shape their lives" (p. 312), and Cook-Sather (2006) emphasizes that student voice is ultimately about presence, power and agency. Giroux (1986) criticizes "radical educators" for failing to "engage the politics of voice and representation" (p. 48), and he calls for a "discourse of lived culture", a "spirit of critique" and a "language of possibility" to bring out and incorporate the lived experiences of students, and encourage more democratic and radical school reform. Ultimately, school leaders must go beyond simply creating platforms for students to speak; leaders must deeply, critically and authentically listen to the voices and experiences of their students, especially the stories that are hard to hear, the stories that go against the majoritarian narrative about the school's culture. As Giroux argues,

authentic engagement with student voice can shift the power dynamics within a school in truly productive ways.

On top of the significant benefits to the school more broadly, showing students that their knowledge and experience are valued can increase students' confidence, efficacy, leadership skills, academic skills, understanding of local and national issues, and commitment to their school (Crane, 2001; Kincheloe, 2007; Morrell, 2007, 2008; Pekrul & Levin, 2007). It is important to note, however, that the work of including student voice in conversations about school change is inherently complex. For example, there is a concern that adults often "use" student voice in surface-level ways, involving students peripherally, in adult-generated discussion about school improvement (Fielding, 2004; Mansfield, Welton, & Halx, 2012; Rudduck, 2007). Terms such as "empowerment" or "giving voice" are often used to describe this work, but we must constantly question and push back against this kind of language, as it arguably undermines the knowledge and power that students already hold, and can unfortunately reinforce power dynamics that student voice advocates often seek to challenge (Ellsworth, 1992).

Critiques related to voice and power are particularly salient when race, class, gender, sexual identity, language, and ability are taken into account (Lac & Mansfield, 2017; Mansfield, Weton, & Halx, 2012). As Rubin & Silva (2003) point out, every single voice cannot be heard when we listen to students, so it is important to consider who is being left out, and why. Rudduck (2007) echoes this concern, reminding us it is often easiest to hear the voices of certain "representatives" who may have been put in positions of leadership by adults and already "speak the language of the school" (p. 606). As such, school leaders must be intentional in finding ways to better understand the experience of their marginalized students. Counter-storytelling, or sharing the stories, experiences and realities of marginalized people, can be useful for highlighting the complexities of an environment (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). For example, counter-storytelling can be useful for making microaggressions more visible. Microaggressions, or subtle and often unintentional forms of racism, are omnipresent and can become internalized, leading to decreased motivation, higher levels of stress, and increased fear, all of which can adversely impact academic achievement for marginalized students (Gates, 2009; Kohli & Solórzano, 2012). Ultimately, by putting race and racism at the forefront, the counterstory becomes "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

In this paper, we argue that practitioner inquiry can be a useful tool for school leaders to learn from the stories and experiences of all students, but particularly marginalized students, in order to create a more positive racial climate in their school. While there is significant literature that highlights the benefits of practitioner inquiry for teachers (Anderson, Herr & Nihlen, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001; Freeman, 1998; Mertler, 2016; Rust, 2009; Souto-Manning, 2012; Zeichner & Noffke, 2001), there is substantially less literature that highlights the benefits of practitioner inquiry for school leaders (Ravitch, 2014; Zambo & Riskus, 2009). Similarly, while there is scholarship that creates connections between teacher inquiry and student voice literature (Campbell, & Groundwater-Smith, 2007; Mockler, 2014), there is a dearth of scholarship that makes the connection between leadership inquiry and student voice. In taking a step towards filling that gap, this paper highlights the learnings of three school leaders, all of whom are co-authors of this article, and all of whom used

practitioner inquiry as a tool for learning from their students in order to create more positive racial climates at their schools.

The inquiries highlighted here are not presented in their entirety, but rather in summary, as reflection. This is done in order to illustrate what and how these leaders learned by taking an inquiry stance toward their practice, by deeply and authentically listening to the experiences of marginalized students in their schools. The three leaders conducted their inquiries in separate contexts, they were guided by distinct inquiry questions, and each leader utilized their own data collection and analysis strategies; each leader was also guided by their own (ever-evolving) conceptual frameworks, and each inquiry resulted in its own unique findings and subsequent changes at each school. The threads that connect these leaders are that (1) they were all students together in a yearlong master's in school leadership program; (2) each of their inquiries were focused on the racial climate at their schools, and (3) each of the leaders hold an affinity with various marginalized identities, and their own personal experiences deepened their commitment to creating equitable learning environments for the students in their schools. The first case presented here comes from the inquiry of a lower school dean of students at a K-8 urban independent Quaker school with nearly 300 students; the second case comes from the inquiry of a principal at a K-8 urban public school with nearly 600 students, in a neighborhood that has recently experienced significant gentrification; and the third case comes from an inquiry of the assistant director for the middle school in an urban preK-12 independent Quaker school with nearly a thousand students overall. In each inquiry, the school leaders observed dissonance between student experience and the espoused school mission; however, by listening deeply and authentically to their students, they were able to challenge the dominant narrative around race and privilege in their schools and create better supports for their students, particularly the Students of Color, in their schools.

Inquiry #1: Middle School Racial Experiences at Lynnville School
A Reflection from the Second Author

Background & Context

Like many Quaker and independent schools, Lynnville School prides itself on diversity and seeks to demonstrate racial equality and justice. However, while many independent schools include becoming a diverse community in their mission statements, they often fail to address how they can achieve this goal (Hall & Stevenson, 2007). At Lynnville, though we have an increasingly diverse student population, our faculty is still mostly White, and as a member of the school community, I wondered if we were truly living up to our mission. I've witnessed a wide variety of conversations about race at my school, and I've heard students and teachers discuss current events related to race in starkly contrasting, and not always productive, ways. I began wondering what impact this was having on the students in our school, particularly our Students of Color. Although independent schools can increase the quality of education for Students of Color, it can also leave them feeling isolated from their peers, caught between two cultures and double marginalized (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Hall & Stevenson, 2007). Students of Color can also inadvertently become a victim of tokenism if they are brought into the community, but treated as a symbol, possibly of diversity, rather than as an individual (Hall & Stevenson, 2007).

My inquiry was designed to better understand the racial experience of students in our middle school, with the ultimate goal of changing curricular and instructional practices, as well as broader policy at our school. As a Black woman, I am often reminded of my race in the school. Although my gender identity puts me in the majority, it is particularly clear that I stand out as a Person of Color. Additionally, of the People of Color who do work at Lynnville, most are support staff and not faculty. The student population is, however, relatively diverse: 53% of the students are Caucasian and 47% are Students of Color. And so, as I designed my inquiry, I was intrigued by this racial dissonance and I focused my inquiry on students' racialized experiences at our school, particularly in regards to their relationships with the faculty and their peers.

Methods

In order to better understand student experience, I triangulated the results of an online survey, focus groups, and artifact analysis. I began with a survey to gauge student experiences with and perceptions of racism at our school. The survey provided an overall picture of the racial climate at Lynnville, and after conducting the survey, I moved toward artifact analysis. I primarily used student writing samples after conversations we had as a school community about the recent police shootings of Black males and subsequent protests that occurred throughout the country. Finally, I conducted two affinity focus groups about our school's racial climate, one with Black students and the other with White students.

I faced some challenges as I collected and analyzed the data. For example, I had hoped to survey the entire middle school grades 6-8, which consists of 85 students. However, the 8th grade students chose to boycott the survey, saying they were tired of talking about race and only two eighth graders participated. A meeting was held with these students to address their concerns and resolved by explaining the importance of the work, while honoring their choice not to complete the survey. This obviously limited the results. My next challenge was with the focus groups. I had a student in the Black affinity focus group who self-identified as Black/ African-American, but ultimately felt uncomfortable in the group because of their biracial identity. For the future, it would be wise to have more focus groups to account for different racial affinity groups. Another challenge I faced was with the White affinity focus group, as I feared that the White students would not feel comfortable having a conversation about race with a Black facilitator. I ultimately asked a trusted White colleague to facilitate the White affinity focus group instead of myself. In total, each of these challenges underscored the complexity of this work; creating spaces for student voices to be heard can be challenging regardless, but it is particularly difficult to do this work around issues of race. Despite the challenges, the overall process was productive. The surveys provided a broad overview and helped me to craft more probing focus group questions. The analysis of student writing allowed me to further dive into perceptions of racism, and also provided talking points for the focus groups. Finally, the focus groups allowed me to create conversations among students about their perspectives on race and experiences with racism in our school, and more broadly in our country and local communities as well.

Findings

First, the survey revealed some interesting findings. 75% of the students felt the school to be welcoming and secure to all, regardless of race. And of the students surveyed, 92.2% have close friends of different races. These data suggest a positive racial climate, but this can be misleading. For example, although 88.5% of the students agreed that all students receive academic support regardless of race, only 57.7% of students feel that all students receive equal attention from faculty regardless of race. Additionally, only 61.5% agreed that all students receive equal discipline regardless of race, and 59.6% of the students reported having experienced racism at the school. Lastly, only 48.1% of the students surveyed agreed that they felt comfortable to ask people who use discriminatory language or behaviors to stop. Of the 52 students surveyed, 46.2% self-identified as African American/Black, 44.2% self-identified as White/Caucasian not Hispanic, 3.8% self-identified as Hispanic, and 9.6% self-identified as Other.

While the survey showed that many students had close friendships with peers of different races, in the focus groups, the students revealed that the vast majority of their friends, particularly the ones they felt closest with, are people of the same race. This aligns with the literature, as middle school is a time period where same-race peer groups become more prevalent as racial identity becomes amplified (Watkins & Aber, 2009). The focus groups also highlighted the prevalence of microaggressions as students in both focus groups discussed racially-charged jokes, stereotypes, and other subtle forms of racism. The difficulty of discussing race was highlighted in the focus groups as well. Stevenson (2014) notes that students, teachers, and parents often have a fear of offending friends and colleagues, therefore refusing to deeply discuss racial matters, and these feelings of racial stress were confirmed in both focus groups. This was particularly the case for the students in the Black affinity focus group, as they reported feeling especially uncomfortable talking to White teachers about racial issues. As mentioned earlier, the majority of our school's faculty is White. Finally, both the Black and White affinity groups shared concerns about racially biased discipline policies at Lynnville School.

The student writings revealed a great deal of complexity related to perspectives on race and racism. For example, while some students argued that we live in a post-racial society, other students explained that, because of their race, they feel unsafe in our country. Similarly, while some student writing samples illustrated a critical awareness of racial problems in our broader society, and expressed concern about the lack of conversations about race and racism, other students questioned the importance of the Black Lives Matter movement, and made comments that Sue, et. al. (2007) would categorize as microinsults. It became clear that despite our attempts to create a racially inclusive culture, many students were simply echoing the words and phrases they heard from their parents and in the media. While we cannot keep the outside from seeping in, we are working to develop students' critical thinking skills so they can see the outside world through windows and mirrors; in other words, some will see their personal experiences mirrored in aspects of society, while others will look through a window and observe something they had never experienced firsthand. In either case, we want them to be able to draw on critical thinking skills as they analyze their own experiences and perspectives, as well as the experiences and perspectives of others.

From the data I collected, it is apparent that many middle school students at Lynnville understand the importance of discussing matters of race and equity. However, the data also illustrate that these conversations are either not happening at all, or else not happening deeply and productively. Students were very willing to share their reasons as to why they think this is the case: a school culture in which talking about race is not the norm, segregated peer groups, and a school faculty that is not sufficiently diverse. If these things do not change, Students of Color will continue to be subject to microaggressions and other forms of racism and White students will lose the opportunity to learn how to talk about race and how to support their marginalized peers. I share the hope of Stevenson (2014) that "all schools will take off the racial blinders and give students, parents, teachers, colleagues, and patrons safe opportunities to express their voices about racial conflict; to tell stories and to sing and to dance to a different racial rhythm than avoidance and denial" (p.24). Stevenson argues that the main way to do this is by developing "racial literacy", or anti-racist socialization in which people of all races can learn to identify and resolve racial stress.

Outcomes & Actions

Lynnville School must take a few key steps in order to improve the racial climate and more fully realize their mission of promoting racial equity and justice. For one, we need to recruit and hire more Teachers of Color. Until this is addressed, we will continue to send a negative message of racial dissonance within the school community. The research shows that racial balance among the teaching staff is integral to student achievement (Watkins & Aber, 2009, Mattison & Aber, 2007). Additionally, our school needs to better prepare and support our teachers and create spaces for racial storytelling. Racial storytelling can come in the form of actual personal stories from our students, faculty and staff, and can also include texts that are weaved into the curriculum that tell the stories of People of Color beyond our school community. These narratives are a way to "make the invisible, visible" (Sue, et. al., 2009). This cannot happen, however, without sufficient training and support for the teachers so that they are prepared to facilitate difficult conversations about race.

Today, Lynnville School is making efforts to better live out its mission of equity and use the findings from my practitioner inquiry to further its mission in a more tangible way. The school now has racial affinity groups for grades 5-8, with a set curriculum and schedule to meet and talk about racial issues and current events. Our school also recently had its first diversity inspired conference. Students are excited about the work and teachers are also invested. Ten faculty members recently attended the Race Institute at a nearby university and more are scheduled to attend in the future. Additionally, our school is committed to attracting Faculty of Color through the hiring process, partnering with Historically Black Colleges/Universities, and recruiting at job fairs for People of Color. Lastly, because community is at the heart of Lynnville School, the parents are also involved in the work. A parent organization called PA-CARES (Parents Association Committee for Advancing Racial Equity in our School) was formed and meets regularly to discuss raising children to be racially conscious. My inquiry was, and will continue to be, a tool to further change Lynnville School as it moves toward being an anti-racist school.

Inquiry #2: Talking About Race at Marshall Public K-8
A Reflection from the Third Author

Background & Context

Rapid development, bustling restaurants, and rising property values make the neighborhood surrounding Marshall public school a highly desired area for young families to buy a new home. The neighborhood is rapidly gentrifying, and so too is Marshall public school, where I am currently the principal. Marshall has become one of the highest achieving K-8 schools in the district, and is now one of the key assets of the neighborhood; we recently had to cap our kindergarten classes because we no longer have enough space to support the influx of new families with young children.

Interestingly, while our early years classrooms are becoming visibly more White, our middle years classrooms continue to be filled with students from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. This is because our neighborhood does not have an equally successful high school, so many affluent White families leave before or during the middle school years so their children can attend more highly achieving high schools. To fill the vacancies at our school, the school district sends students from other schools across the city who applied for the school selection process. The school selection process allows some students the opportunity to change schools if they are not satisfied with the performance of their neighborhood school, and the students who come to Marshall through this process are typically Students of Color from less privileged community schools; as such, these students bring racial and socioeconomic diversity to our remaining population.

As a former middle years social studies teacher, I have recognized that this creates challenging dynamics around race and class at our school. For example, two years ago we encountered an incident where students were arguing over social media about the validity of reverse racism. What transpired was an unfortunate foray into racial slurs and derogatory language, and the fallout from the incident made its way into our school. The students refused to speak to each other in school, requested new seats in the classroom, and began sitting in racially segregated groups at lunchtime. This was the most open racial segregation that we had ever seen amongst the students. After this incident, we conducted a series of investigations into the data from the respective students' social media accounts, collected students' personal statements, and conducted interviews. Though I was a teacher at the time of the incident, I am now the school's principal and have committed to the difficult task of building a healthier racial climate at our school.

During that process two years ago, there were many incidents that made me ponder whether the school's response was appropriate, whether our teachers had somehow incited this, or how the current presidential campaign was impacting our students. And to be honest, I grew increasingly frustrated with my students. How was it possible for them to engage in this type of behavior when we had recently discussed issues related to race? At the time of this incident we had just read an excerpt from "Twelve Years a Slave" and analyzed the horrors of the Second Middle Passage. We had just debated the ethics behind the Flint water crisis. I felt like I was addressing the needs of my students by enhancing the curriculum with a more comprehensive look at our history. Clearly that was not enough. The disconnect led me to want

to gain deeper insight into how students at our school discuss and perceive race. The work presented here is a result of that inquiry.

Tatum and Sekaquaptewa (2009) found that differences in power and status arise from discussion about race, creating tension amongst groups. In other words, it can be incredibly challenging to participate in and/or facilitate conversations about race. And in many classrooms, teachers are uncomfortable leading such conversations, particularly if they are White and their students are not. This presents a significant problem, however, as Howard & Denning del Rosario (2000) note that the teaching force in American schools is predominantly female and White, and the student population is fast approaching a majority of Students of Color. Michael (2015) also illustrates that teachers are on various levels of an inquiry spectrum regarding their understanding of race and the development of their own identity regarding race. Michael refers to this phenomenon as the "Inquiry Impasse" and argues that raising questions of race in the context of our schools requires a deep and lengthy process whereby teachers themselves not only examine their classroom practices but also their own racial identity. Though some teachers at my school engage in this work on a sporadic or ongoing basis, many do not at all, and historically there have not been any structures to support this work systemically.

Methods

In order to gain an understanding of student exposure to and experiences with discussion of race at Marshall, I utilized four primary methods: document analysis, classroom observation, teacher interviews, and student surveys. This inquiry was a cyclical process beginning with survey that I administered to the middle school students. I followed that with a text analysis of documents such as student journals, parent e-mails, and student e-mails. Following the text analysis, I conducted classroom observations in classes where students were specifically discussing race, such as the class where students were discussing the young adult novel "Monster." Finally, I conducted semi-structured interviews with teachers to compare with the classroom observations. I constantly moved back and forth among the various sources of data, using one source of data to help me as I collected the other sources. I triangulated the data across these various sources in order to create deeper complexity around students' perspectives and experiences (Menter et. al., 2011).

Findings

I found that the students at my school hold a variety of perspectives about the ways we do or do not talk about race at school, and also about the concept of race more broadly. For example, student responses ranged from describing race as a scientific fact to a social construct, and collectively their responses showed that race is something that is a challenge for middle school students to grasp. Additionally, students clearly voiced that they brought perspectives from the outside world into the classroom. For example, some students who took a colorblind stance in class explained that this was something they derived from their parents. Similarly, in some instances, students indicated that teachers perpetuated their colorblind ideologies through lessons that had themes such as "we are all human" and "hard work pays off for all." These

themes fail to acknowledge White privilege and the disadvantages that People of Color have faced historically and continue to face on a daily basis.

Although almost all students reported that we rarely talk about race at school, students explained that when conversations about race do happen, they tend to only occur in Social Studies and English classes. Because of the racial makeup of our faculty, that means that my students tend to only talk about race in classes with White female teachers. Students also noted that the surrounding political climate (the 2016 Presidential campaign) led to increased conversations about race at school, but that the racial diversity within the classrooms made them feel uncomfortable when discussing race. In fact, only 13% of the students said they felt comfortable discussing race at school. Finally, it is important to note that I received pushback from White lower SES male students who were frustrated by the conversations about race because they felt that their realities were oversimplified. This made me realize that we needed to address intersectionality as we continue discuss the complexity of privilege at our school.

My inquiry has increased my understanding of how we talk about race at Marshall, as well as how we might improve the fragile climate that has been growing amongst our students. Like Modica (2015), I understand that the events occurring in our school are directly impacted by what happens in our racialized society. And I agree with Banerjee & Risman (2013) that children need to talk about race and be aware of race in an effort to create change. However, through my inquiry, it has become clear that we have not provided our teachers with enough support to facilitate these challenging conversations around race.

Outcomes and Actions

This inquiry led our leadership team to make a number of changes at Marshall. We focused on solutions geared towards better supporting our teachers, our students, and our broader community. For the teachers, we began providing professional development opportunities through the National Seed Project, an organization committed to diversity and equity that supports leadership development and building institutional capacity in service of creating personal, organizational and social change. We have only just begun this work, but it has thus far been positively received by our community. We will also soon begin working with a faculty member from a nearby university to enhance our efforts in providing greater supports and structures for our faculty's ongoing learning. For our students, we began a "Social Health" class that allows students an opportunity to address issues of race, class, and gender while discussing current topics. The class also aims to support students as they navigate their own racial identities while they learn how to interact with their peers that come from differing backgrounds. In the first year of implementation, the social health class has provided a structured and safer academic space for students to receive guidance and support while discussing topics that involve racial bias and stereotypes. Thus far, the students have responded positively to this addition to our curricular programing.

The work with our students and faculty is ongoing and of paramount importance. However, one of the things I learned through this inquiry process is that we cannot simply stay in our school bubble as we engage in this anti-racist work. If we truly want to be affecting change, we need to be thinking beyond our school walls. And so, as the school principal, I have begun an anti-racist discussion group that is open to the public. We hold monthly meetings to discuss identity, privilege, and how to talk to children about race. The meetings are largely

attended by White parents looking to find ways to support their children as they discover the nuances of race in America. As I sit through these meetings, it has become clear that many of the parents have begun engaging in the work themselves. People eagerly share their experiences of discomfort, like the first time their child called another child "brown" on the playground. Others have shared that their upbringing lead them to unknowingly discriminate towards People of Color. Conversations have also emerged about what it is like to have family members that are racist. This year, we are continuing our anti-racist discussion groups, but have also added parent workshops that will further the work we begin in the discussion groups. We also developed a series of story hours for families that will feature diverse literature. Ultimately, these discussions with parents have solidified my commitment to a three-pronged approach: in order to develop an anti-racist school environment, we must simultaneously be supporting our students, their parents and our teachers.

Inquiry #3: The Experiences of Students of Color at Dayville
A Reflection from the Fourth Author

Background & Context

The Dayville School is an urban PreK-12 private Quaker school in the Northeast United States. Quaker values are at the heart of how we teach and support our diverse community of nearly 1000 students. Diversity is one of our priorities at Dayville, as is evident by the increased number of students of color in attendance at our school in recent years: in the 2001-2002 academic year, 16% of our students in attendance were Students of Color and in the 2016-2017 academic year, 34% of our students were Students of Color. While diversifying our student body is an important step, we cannot simply stop there.

Stevenson (2014) speaks to the inherent pressures that Students of Color can face while attending elite private schools, where the population is predominately White. As he explains, Students of Color often feel additional pressures because they need to justify to themselves and others that they belong in these educational environments. On top of this, because elite private schools are predominantly White, Students of Color can feel marginalized and are more likely to experience racism (Martic, Decuir-Gundby, & Cooper 2011). This can ultimately impact their chances of academic success, as students who feel a sense of belonging in their school community have better chances of succeeding academically (Booker, 2007; Siren et al, 2004; Arrington, Stevenson, & Hall, 2003). While few studies have explored the ways schools can promote positive academic and social identities for Students of Color, this is important work that needs to happen.

Similar to many researchers focusing on this topic, our school community is constantly looking for and creating ways to better support our Students of Color. In recent years, we have hired a diversity director to oversee each of our division's diversity needs. We also have various programs that have been formed by students and teachers alike, which give our students the opportunity to connect to a group. For example, our upper school Students of Color have mentored younger students to share their experiences at Dayville, hoping to guide mentees towards comfort and success in their school experience. Additionally, in our lower, middle, and upper divisions, there are diversity clubs and more specific affinity groups, such as the middle school students of color affinity group. Each of these groups, activities, or clubs are

formed for our Students of Color to support them through their journey, as well as to help them find a place of comfort and belonging. The ultimate goal of these groups is to help students achieve both personal and academic success. While our school was making efforts to create a more diverse and welcoming community, I was curious to know how our Students of Color were actually experiencing school at Dayville. As such, I designed a practitioner inquiry to better understand the school experience from the perspective of the students. By listening to Students of Color about the different factors that affect their school experiences, I hope to continue to identify ways that we can help support them in our school community.

Importantly, my inquiry is also inspired by my own educational experience and personal background. I am a Biracial male who was adopted by a White family. I grew up in a predominately White town and attended a school that had a very low student of color population. My experiences at school included identity struggles, times where I felt alone, situations where I encountered discriminatory acts, and times where I had difficulty connecting with my teachers and peers. My personal experiences played a significant role in leading me to specifically look at the experiences of Students of Colors at Dayville to help them avoid, work through, and gain coping strategies for some of the same situations that I encountered during my own educational journey.

Methods

In order to better understand the experiences of Students of Color at Dayville, I began my inquiry with student focus groups. I conducted one with a diverse range of Students of Color, including different ages, genders, and races; and a second with Students of Color who were new to our Dayville middle school community. In the past, we have struggled to transition new Students of Color into our community, especially students coming from different types of schools (e.g. from public schools in low socioeconomic areas) so my hope was to use the findings to inform how we transition Students of Color into our community. After I conducted the two student focus groups, I conducted an additional focus group with various faculty members who closely support Students of Color. The student focus groups consisted of six to eight students each. The faculty focus group consisted of three teachers.

In addition to the focus groups, I also invited every student who identified as being a Person of Color to complete a twelve question survey. Ultimately, 43 out of 46 students completed the survey. Finally, I am the facilitator of our male Students of Color affinity group, so I also conducted participant observations of those group meetings. As a facilitator of the group, I meet biweekly with all the male Students of Color from our middle school in grades 6th-8th. I triangulated the results of the focus groups, surveys, and observations to help me to better understand the experiences of middle school Students of Color at Dayville.

Findings

Through my inquiry, I was able to better understand the causes of racial stress for the Students of Color at Dayville, as well as the supports they draw on to help them move through the stress. I found that microaggressions were a primary source of racial stress, and that there is an added layer of anxiety because of the pressure they feel to educate their White peers and because they feel their voices are not heard in the school more broadly. I also found that many

of the Students of Color have sought out ways to help themselves to cope with the stress and burden they feel. Primarily, the majority of Students of Color have found an activity (a club, sport, etc.) at the school to be involved in, and that this has helped them to feel connected to the school more broadly and/or provided them with a mentoring relationship to help them navigate their school experience. When it comes to connections with peers, however, the findings were not as promising. While the survey showed that 72% felt connected to at least one peer, only 60% felt connected to a peer group, and only about half of the Students of Color surveyed felt that the school was an inclusive community.

In addition to the racial stress that students noted in the survey around their relationships with their peers, I discovered similar information from the students in the focus and affinity groups. These groups revealed that many Students of Color do not feel comfortable with many of their White teachers. This is a significant challenge, as our middle school currently only has one African-American teacher: myself. They also felt that, at times, teachers would ignore/avoid negative racial stereotypes, which makes it hard for the students to engage in their classes. For example, if a class were engaging in a book with some sort of racial context, the teacher would not directly confront the conversation, but rather move past it without any real depth. In the moment and over time, this is harmful to our Students of Color. Steele (2003) found that a disconnect between Students of Color and their White teachers can have not only a psychological impact on students, but can negatively impact academic performance.

Ultimately, my inquiry revealed that negative racial experiences are a commonplace at our school. About half of the students surveyed indicated that they felt uncomfortable about their race, and every member of the students of color affinity group shared stories of negative racial interactions that they had experienced. In terms of coping strategies, the affinity groups seem to be the main source of support for the Students of Color at our school.

Outcomes & Actions

By taking the time to listen to our Students of Color, I learned a great deal about their experiences in our school and gained insight into how we can better support them in having a positive social and academic school experience. As the current assistant director of our middle school, one of my main goals now is to continue to grow our affinity groups to give students a place to feel heard, as part of a trusting group. This is not enough, however. In order to build a more positive racial climate at our school, the work has to begin with us, the faculty and staff. We all have biases that we carry with us, so one of my goals is to implement more targeted training for faculty and staff at the school. I would also like to extend this inquiry to look more closely at how faculty and staff think and talk about race so that we can create more powerful professional learning opportunities, and I would like to better understand the efforts that people are already making to support Students of Color at our school. The burden cannot fall on the students to find coping strategies; rather, we need to do the work first to create a safer school community for our Students of Color so that they can develop more positive racial identities and have greater opportunities for success at our school.

Conclusion

It is incumbent on school leaders to ensure a positive school climate so that all students are able to succeed. We argued in this paper that understanding student experience is a key first step towards creating positive change, and that practitioner inquiry can be a powerful tool to help leaders learn from their students in order to do so. For example, by listening to the experiences of tudents of Color, school leaders can help to expose some of the root causes of the "achievement" or opportunity gap that Students of Color face, in order to create greater equity in our schools (Carter & Welner, 2013; Love, 2004; Mattison & Aber, 2007). As this paper illustrates, however, improving a school's racial climate can be a challenging task for a variety of reasons: (1) the broader social and political climate surrounding the school easily shapes what happens within a school; (2) the teacher population is not diversifying as fast as the student population is; (3) significant experience and training is required in order to facilitate productive conversations about race; and (4) oftentimes, elements of a school's racial climate can go unseen. However, by taking a systematic approach to investigating their school's racial climates from the perspectives of their students, each of these school leaders were able to better understand the nuances of their students' experiences, ultimately allowing them to make more informed decisions as leaders. As the examples here illustrate, school leaders can use practitioner inquiry as a tool for deeply and authentically listening to student voice in a systematic and productive way. These leaders, in particular, learned that, even though their schools prioritize diversity, there is still much work to be done in order to develop a more positive racial climate in their schools. Primarily, they learned that more work needs to be done at their schools with faculty development and faculty recruitment. Schools need to prioritize creating a diverse faculty so that Students of Color have teachers and mentors who can relate to their racialized experience. Students across each of these schools made this clear, and their perspectives are supported by the broader literature as well (Johnson-Bailey, 2012). Additionally, these leaders' inquiries emphasized that all teachers, regardless of their race, and regardless of their content area, need support and training around racial literacy (Stevenson, 2014; Michael, 2015).

In addition to the faculty support, additional steps need to be taken to directly support students as well. Specifically, racial affinity groups and clubs can assist students with their racial development, and can support Students of Color to process racist experiences (Martin et al., 2012). Mentors, whether through peer mentoring or through a partnership with an outside mentoring program, can also be an important source of support for students. Additionally, student counternarratives must be listened to and honored. By listening deeply to students' stories, particularly the stories that are hard to hear, school leaders can learn a great deal about the complexities of their students' lives and ultimately make more informed decisions; counternarratives can also allow students to support each other through community storytelling and validation of their experiences (Harper, 2009, 2015; Kirshner & Pozzoboni, 2011; Stovall, 2006; Sue et. al., 2009).

When leaders take the time and effort to stop and listen to students, they open up incredible possibilities for creating positive change. However, engaging with student voice is not an unproblematic conceptual or practical tool, and it is certainly not a quick fix. Power dynamics are ever-present, continuously shaping the voices that are heard, as well as how those voices are used; as such, this work must be engaged in with a critical eye. Cook-Sather (2007)

provides a useful framework of 'translation' as she describes the process of listening to and drawing on student voice; as she explains, translation is "a never finished process of change that enables something—a text, an experience, a lesson, a setting, a person, or a group—to be newly accessible to comprehension and communication" (p. 830). By taking an inquiry stance toward their practice, the leaders who shared their experiences in this article have only begun the act of translation; but through the process of inquiry, of continuously asking questions of themselves, their students, and their broader surroundings, they will inevitably be perpetually translating as they work to create more positive racial climates at their respective schools.

Ultimately, this act of translation is leading the leaders to a new way of knowing (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). Specifically, each of the leaders was able develop a *knowledge-of-practice* by investigating their own personal and professional knowledge, their students' knowledge, and the academic knowledge that has been generated in the field more broadly. In other words, they were able to put theory and practice in conversation with each other in order to better understand their distinct contexts, including the nuances of their school's unique racial climates. Doing so not only allowed them to make more informed decisions, but also allowed them to develop and grow as professionals. One area of challenge for each of these leaders, however, is that they were doing the bulk of this work individually. In an ideal world, because of the complexity of this work, these inquiries should happen collaboratively, and moving forward, each of these leaders hopes to be able to develop a culture of inquiry at their schools so that this kind of work becomes part of the fabric of their school, turning their schools into communities where everyone is collaboratively and continuously 'translating' together.

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