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Change-Makers: A Grassroots Approach to Culturally Responsive Leadership and Teaching

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Abstract

While achievement and opportunity gaps and systemic racism exist in the majority of school districts across the United States, not every school district authentically acknowledges and addresses these issues. In this case study, researchers examine a PreK–12 school district situated in a racially and economically diverse mid-Atlantic city in which race- and class-based discrimination have been well documented and recent episodes of extreme racial violence have affected the community. The school district, which employs 1,300 teachers and serves over 14,000 students, developed and implemented a grassroots approach by forming a district-wide culturally responsive leadership team. Through interviews with 10 culturally responsive leadership team members, including school district officials, school-level administrators, and teachers, researchers explicate collaborative relationships that promote district-wide change practices. Findings detailing the creation and enactment of this culturally responsive program include (a) culturally responsive school leadership; (b) engaging in culturally responsive district-wide practices, and (c) encouraging program participants to engage in critical self-reflection.

Keywords: culturally responsive pedagogy, culturally responsive school leadership, equitable educational access, community racism, grassroots school district leadership

The tempestuous forces of the nation's racially-charged past cast shadows that have gravely impacted children's educational experiences for decades. Burdened by the oppressive lack of resources and access to school, racial and class-based discrimination, and even outright violence, educational access has suffered greatly, leaving communities full of children who have been underserved. Positioned in a mid-Atlantic state recently devastated by explosive White supremacy actions fueled by generational prejudice, this case study examines the essential work of a school district determined to champion equity for students of color. The case study empirically explores how leaders in a mid-Atlantic K-12 school district of over 1,300 teachers, through a grassroots approach, sought to address institutional racism and discriminatory practices that intensified years of opportunity and achievement gaps among students who have been traditionally excluded. The research presented in this case was guided by the following research question: How do school district officials, school-level administrators, and teacher leaders engage in collaborative leadership to promote district-wide change through the creation and implementation of a culturally responsive program?

The student population of the United States is becoming increasingly diverse. According to the United States Census Bureau, in 2012, over 50% of all children under the age of one were of color. The United States Department of Education (2014) similarly reported historic shifts in the racial make-up of public school students, noting that by 2022, over 54.7% of students will be of color (i.e., African American/Black, Hispanic/Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and two or more races/ethnicities).

Although students of color are projected to be the new majority in public schools, the teacher/student racial gap remains wide, with over 80% of teachers identifying as White and middle-class (Feistritzer, Griffin, & Linnajarvi, 2011). Furthermore, the content in most school

curricula continues to reflect the experiences of the White middle-class (Banks & Banks, 2013). Scholars (Gay, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995) assert it is the combination of differences in race, culture, and socioeconomic status between teachers and students, coupled with school curricula that is not representative of the experiences of students from diverse backgrounds, that leads to a disconnect between teachers and students. Consequently, scholars argue that these disconnects contribute to the cultural mismatch in the classroom, which can potentially interfere with students' academic and social outcomes (Banks & Banks, 2013; Delpit, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Researchers (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Milner, 2011; Paris & Alim, 2017) agree that centering issues of equity, justice, and inclusion can help mitigate the educational inequities that students of color experience. This approach must be taken at each level of the school system, as siloed attempts often fall short of solving systemic educational problems. Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016), which is informed by transformative leadership (Dantley & Tillman, 2010), and social justice leadership (Bogotch, 2002; Theoharis, 2007), is a framework that has been developed to guide school leaders' and support teachers' practices at the administration level. In the context of school public relations, researchers have used CRSL to conceptualize and operationalize what it means to lead schools and districts in equitable ways.

A Review of the Literature on Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Scholars addressed the dismal schooling experiences students of color endure for several decades (Brown & Land, 2005). Ladson-Billings'(1995) culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) framework and Gay's (2010) culturally responsive teaching (CRT) framework both developed for teaching students of color, have advocated for addressing the cultural mismatch between

teachers and students. Furthermore, these frameworks challenged teachers to use students'
culture as a catalyst to improve their academic and social experiences. Corroborated by similar
research, they asserted that educators could reduce the negative social and academic outcomes of
students of color if they ascribed to the tenets of CRT or CRP in their teaching (Banks, 2009;
Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2009) defined this pedagogy as an
educational approach that "empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and
politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes" (p. 20).

Ladson-Billings (1998) grounded her work in critical race theory because she believed
researchers must explore race and racism if they sought to analyze and understand the
unfavorable schooling experiences of Black students. To this, she argued that racism is not a
series of isolated events; rather, it has been normalized and entrenched in all aspects of our daily
lives. Also, she asserted that the dominant group has used race and racism to organize society
into hierarchical structures that maintain their power, ideologies, and benefit their day-to-day
activities. Furthermore, she maintained that the dominant group has used colorblindness and
meritocracy as a mask behind which they foster their self-interests and address racism only if
they benefit from the results (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Ladson-
Billings (1995) presented three tenets for culturally relevant pedagogy: "(a) students must
experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence;
and (c) students must develop critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo
of the current social order" (p. 160).

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy and Student Outcomes

In a recent literature review, Aronson & Laughter (2016) synthesized research focused on
instruction connected to the cultures of students of color and how it influences their academic

and social outcomes. They organized the findings of their study by content area (e.g., mathematics, science, history/social studies, English/language arts, and English as a second language).   Aronson & Laughter (2016) found that although the majority of findings showed a connection between enactment of culturally relevant education and increases in affective domains (e.g., increases in student motivation, student interest in content, student ability to engage content area discourse, student perception of themselves as capable learners, student confidence when taking standardized tests), only a few studies showed a connection between enactment of culturally relevant education and increases in students' scores on teacher created tests. For example, in a study of a high school social studies class with English Language Learners, Choi (2013) found that as the teacher, using CRP as a framework for teaching increased students' engagement, motivation, self-perception (through cultural competency), and belief in success, which raised test scores. Civil & Kahn (2001) found similar results when one teacher's students were more engaged and motivated and scored higher on formal assessments than previous students who were in the class because the math lessons were connected to CLD students' background experiences in gardening. Similar results were found on a larger scale in a quantitative study of 1,575 students in a racially and ethnically diverse high school when Froiland & Worrell (2016) found that motivation is positively associated with engagement and achievement through measurement of overall GPA.

Teachers can misunderstand motivation in CLD students, but research shows how culturally responsive practices can increase motivation. Bartell, Novak, & Parker (2017), in a study of 13 teachers, found that teachers misinterpret CLD students as having low motivation while struggling to understand broader societal and cultural contexts. However, motivation has been easier to identify when teachers employ culturally responsive practices. For example,

Huburt (2013) conducted a study in which 37 African American students were given math intervention embedded with principles of CRT. Not only did students' scores rise, but their motivation did as well. In four of the five students interviewed, Huburt (2013) found confidence also increased. Christianakis's (2011) findings further supported the connection between CSP practices and motivation when he showed that CLD students' motivation improved when students were allowed to choose how they presented their work in their English class. Ginsberg (2005) created a Motivational Framework for Culturally Responsive Teaching and found four classroom conditions that supported students' motivation: inclusion, attitude, meaning, and competence. The examples show there are many ways for teachers to support motivation and engagement in CLD students.

For the majority of the studies, culturally relevant education "most often looked like the engagement of critical reflection and cultural competence" (Aronson & Laughter, 2016, p. 35) and focused less on how academic content was taught in culturally relevant ways. Also, fewer studies from the synthesis explored how teachers educate their students to be critically conscious. Out of the 37 studies in the Aronson & Laughter review, only one quantitative dissertation (Caballero, 2010) examined the influences a teacher's dispositions, beliefs, and expectations have on their students and their practice of culturally relevant education.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) frames the education leadership reform efforts that privilege the needs and values of traditionally underserved students in urban contexts. In paralleling culturally responsive pedagogies (Gay, 1994), these leadership behaviors are an articulation of the practices, programs, and policies that school leaders at varying levels enact to develop and sustain inclusive educational milieus for students, families, and

colleagues. Culturally responsive leadership can be operationalized at the school district official (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008; Mattingly, 2003), the school-site administrator (Johnson, 2006), and the classroom teacher-leader (Villegas & Lucas, 2002) levels. At any given iteration of planning and implementation, CRSL is aimed at deeply influencing students' improved educational performance by providing access to instruction that can readily "understand, respond, incorporate, accommodate, and ultimately celebrate" the diversity of their backgrounds "including their languages and literacies, spiritual universes, cultures, racial proclivities, behaviors, knowledges, critical thought, and appearances (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Among the many tasks that they complete in their efforts to achieve the goals of CRSL, educational administrators shape inclusive school environments, engage with stakeholders using respect and inclusiveness, and actively reflective on their work and what influences their actions.

Creating Inclusive School Environments

The range of methods that administrators use to accomplish the aims of CRSL is well-documented in educational leadership literature. One highly prioritized approach involves establishing school environments in which culturally responsive pedagogies are welcomed, developed, and implemented with the support of school leaders. Tillman (2005) explores the role principals play in establishing culturally responsive school contexts through the mentoring of early career teachers, and offers strategies to facilitate leader and teacher relationships in ways that promote shared vision. These methods include developing professional mentorships that enhance competence, communicate contextualized educational culture, and transform schools through guided leadership.

Similarly, Leithwood, Harris, & Hopkins (2008) suggests that learning environments are effectively influenced to be culturally responsive when leadership teams that hold similar social

justice-oriented dispositions are formed and granted the agency to do the work in their spheres of influence. Likewise, scholars contend the importance of responding to schools' needs by building inclusive relationships within schools (Madhlangobe & Gordon, 2012). Empirical evidence chronicling school leaders also offers great insight into the specific actions that can be taken to establish and sustain culturally responsive schools.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership Behaviors

Research suggests steps that leaders can take to create and nurture culturally responsive schools that reflect the needs of their respective communities (Ishimaru, 2013). In particular, efforts that highlight the essentiality of equity on behalf of students from historically oppressed backgrounds and communities have proven to be influential. Studies report how leaders who integrate or prioritize cultural responsiveness in the professional development of their school staff are effectively able to employ theory-based practices more easily (Voltz, Brazil, & Scott, 2003). Further, leaders who encourage discursive exploration of the research centering the effects of historicized racism and other forms of oppression on students they serve promote advocacy on behalf of traditionally underserved communities (Singleton, 2012). Singleton and colleagues (Gardiner & Enomoto, 2006) suggest the importance of collaboration, within school communities and across school districts, that unites people who are committed to centering social justice in their work to address academic and opportunity gaps. The ability to meaningfully collaborate is often enhanced by team members' abilities reflect on their own perspectives and contribute from dispositions informed by their own honest personal reflections.

Critical Self-Awareness

Of the many recommendations that researchers offer as effective strategies of educational leadership, one of the most commonly employed across culturally responsive pedagogy is the

practice of critical self-reflection. Scholars have relayed the paramount impact that this practice

has on educators at every level, including school staff (cite), building-level leaders (Branson,

2007), and district administrators (Hyle, Ivory, & McClellan, 2010). Critical self-reflection

requires the act of closely examining the experiences and exposures that have influenced the way

educators view their students' ability. Likewise, it can be used by leaders to examine their

current leadership practices to determine how they affect students, families, and colleagues. In

exploring one's perceptions and behaviors, as well as the personal, historical, and systemic

causes for those outlooks, critical self-reflection can lead to vulnerability and eventually

transformation.

Method

Research Context

The participants in this study were district-level officials, school-level administrators, and

teacher leaders in Shadow County Public Schools (SCPS). Located in the Mid-Atlantic region of

the United States, the school district serves just over 14,000 K-12 students from rural, suburban

and urban communities. Of this population, 64 % are White, 13% are Latinx, 11% are Black, 5%

are Asian, and 6% are two or more races/ethnicities. Approximately 10% of students are English

Language Learners with 74 home language spoken by students. Thirty percent are considered

economically disadvantaged. There are just over 1,300 teachers.

Participants

Ten members of the SCS Equity Leadership Team (ELT) participated in the study. Of the

ten, six identified as women and four identified as men. Six identified as Black, two identified as

White, one identified at Latina, and one identified as mixed-raced. Four of the participants were

district-level officials, three were building level administrators, and three were teacher leaders. Participants years of experience in teaching ranged from six years to 35 years.

Description of County's Culturally Responsive Programs

Shadow County Public Schools formed the Department for Community Engagement in 2006 to close the achievement gap and attempt to prepare teachers to implement culturally responsive practices because of the country's changing racial and ethnic demographics. A teacher from each school was appointed as a Diversity Research Teacher (DRT), and it was their responsibility to share resources and facilitate opportunities for staff to learn more about teaching and supporting diverse learners and their families. In 2009, all SCPS DRTs read Gay's (2010) *Culturally Responsive Teaching* and identified three tenets they felt were most relevant to the decision to close the achievement gap.

In 2015, a certification process for use within the district was developed by the Department for Community Engagement. Certification was based on tenets of Gay's (2010) *Culturally Responsive Teaching* and models inspired by the National Board Certification process and the Cultural Linguistic and Ability Diversity (CLAD). Since every school in the district participated in professional learning communities (PLCs), the certification process utilized a cohort model to facilitate collaboration. Coaches also worked with each teacher and administrator enrolled. To receive certification, each participant had to produce a portfolio showing their growth and achievement as well as their students' growth and achievement as it related to culturally responsive practices.

Data Collection

Data collection and analyses were undertaken by the two emerging scholars as well as the graduate research assistant who had an interest in culturally relevant pedagogy and were all also

former classroom teachers. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to collect data on participants' experiences and perspectives and they reviewed documents on the school district's culturally responsive program (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). The interview protocol was grounded in the theoretical framework and the literature on culturally responsive teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). One of the researchers attended one of the district-based Equity Leadership Team (ELT) meetings and explained the scope of the research project and solicited participants. The ELT members who were interested in participating in the study were then interviewed one-on-one and face-to-face at a time that was convenient for them. Interviews lasted 35 to 50 minutes. In order to gather a full picture of participants experiences on the ELT, participants were asked follow-up questions or asked to elaborate on their answers.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The researchers independently read of all the transcribed interviews line-by-line multiple times to look for initial themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). If there were areas in the transcribed interviews that were not clear, the researchers listened to the audio recorded interviews to pull the nuances in the participant's voices. The researchers also used an inductive and deductive qualitative data analysis approach and managed the coding in two rounds. During the first round of coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), the researchers engaged in deductive coding by developing a priori codes based on the theoretical framework and literature and inductive coding by creating additional in vivo codes developed after the initial readings of the transcriptions. Each researcher took analytic memos during initial reading and had discussions between the researchers to address disagreements in the initial codes. Once the initial coding meeting was set to settle any

disagreements in the codes, the researchers engaged in the second round of coding during which they collapsed codes that were similar. The researchers coded the remaining transcripts independently.

The researchers that examined the most commonly applied codes reread the other transcripts to ensure these themes were evident across the participants. Here the researchers sought phrases in participants' interviews that demonstrated the codes to be used in the findings. During this phase, they also sought disconfirming evidence or instances in which a participant's explanation of an event differed from the larger consensus of the team. To address the disconfirming evidence, they held discussions to extrapolate the context and nuances in the participant's explanations. To ensure trustworthiness of this study, they also engaged in member checking by sharing findings with the leadership team to confirm their words and ideas. They also held the discussion with all the authors who served as auditors of the themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

The findings presented here endeavor to answer this study's primary research question: How do school district officials, school-level administrators, and teacher leaders engage in collaborative leadership to promote district-wide change through the creation and implementation of a culturally responsive program? Through thematic analysis, the following themes emerged when a culturally responsive school leadership framework was employed: (a) establishing and sustaining systems and structures; (b) developing and training equity leadership teams; (c) hiring equity specialists, and (d) recruiting and hiring leaders of colors. The operationalization of this framework in the study's educational context demonstrated how leaders, informed by a disposition that privileges the needs of historically underserved

communities, enact programming that furthers students' progress. The thematic analysis revealed school district leadership practices which helped principals and teachers engage in culturally responsive pedagogy. These identified practices included: (a) reviewing culturally responsive teaching and school leadership research as a school team; (b) translating newly-acquired knowledge into actions; (c) addressing institutional racism, and (d) eliminating opportunity and achievement gaps. Within the practices that the school leaders utilized, the most influential was critical self-reflection. Using this tool, school leaders were able to facilitate the following meaningful work with each other: (a) self-reflection; (b) addressing biases, and (c) reducing gaps in student learning.

Culturally Responsive School Leadership

Systems and Structures

The culturally responsive school leadership team is composed of school district leaders, school-building administrators, teachers, and instructional coaches. In addition, two equity specialists were hired by the school district to support the work and provide professional guidance for teachers. A common theme in the interviews was that members of the leadership team appreciated the diversity in roles because of the varying perspectives. One participant elaborated on the importance of having leaders on the team who worked in the district's schools in order to implement changes. He explained

> With equity specialists, you're literally asking two people to do the work of 25 different buildings with different contexts, cultures, and experiences. So, the equity specialists can provide the professional development piece, but at the end of the day, what they don't have is the authority to say, "We are doing this."

The culturally responsive school leadership team placed all of its members in a leadership role in some context and were cognizant of the hierarchies and politics that existed in schools. For example, teachers on the team lead professional development, designed with the culturally

responsive school leadership team, at their school, instead of equity specialists or coaches, with the support of their building-level administrator. While the teachers who lead professional development were crucial to spreading the initiatives of the leadership team, they did not have authority over other teachers with regards to the implementation of initiatives. This type of structure promoted intentional collaboration focused on school inclusiveness at every level.

Equity Leadership Teams

As mentioned earlier, the equity leadership team was composed of district officials, equity specialists, teachers, and instructional coaches who volunteered to serve on the team. Every member on the team understood the common vision and purpose of the team, which was to close the achievement and opportunity gaps within the district and address the systemic racism within the district. One participant noted, "We all have the same vision in mind. Choosing a diverse team was a conscious decision to ensure a variety of experiences and perspectives." Another participant offered, "I think because everybody comes with all those different perspectives, that's what really moves it forward." With the composition of the team, there were members who understood how school systems functioned and others whose expertise lied within leading schools or classrooms. While the composition of this team was effective for implementing changes at the school level, the team members acknowledge one challenge they had to address was improving systemic racism. One participant described, "It doesn't include the whole system in the conversation and it doesn't look at what are the systemic racism structures that don't allow these practices to flow through some schools." One approach the school district used to address this issue was the recruiting and professionally developing educators of color.

Leaders of Color

Shadow County Public Schools has consistently recruited teachers of color over the years. However, the district, in what was similar to national trends, struggled to recruit and retain teachers of color. Many teachers of color had been hired through a local organization that mentors African American teachers. A concerted effort was made by the district to also place more educators of color in leadership roles, as seven teachers of color became school-based administrators and district-level officials in the past two years. Leaders in the district were working to continue this trend. One participant explained, "Our current superintendent said there was going to be a focus on equity and from the action that I've seen take place, I feel like there is a decision to move forward and to try to put that energy in the right place."

Culturally Responsive Programming and Practices

Review of Research as a Team

Findings indicated that several teachers and administrators collaboratively reviewed research in culturally responsive leadership and teaching. In doing so, the team considered how to translate their new knowledge into practice to eliminate gaps while addressing institutional racism in the district. Members of the leadership team acknowledged that this work was a collective effort and that while members of the leadership team had different roles throughout the school district, they were all invested in addressing the gaps and inequities. Team members also recognized how the diversity within their group would be an asset. As one participant noted

> When we all come together, we all bring those perspectives to the table and we all have the same vision in mind. So, then it becomes this collaboration of thoughts, ideas, and perspectives to understand from each level what we need to do in order to work and play our own position in that area.

A challenge the team faced when using the research was finding research that was representative of their district 's demographics. Since SCPS had unique demographics across schools, where some schools had a predominantly White population, while other schools were

more racially and ethnically diverse, it was challenging to locate literature grounded in a district with similar demographics. One participant elaborated, "Most of the literature you find on CRT is in urban settings with majority urban settings, with majority-minority populations." In reviewing the literature, the leadership team sought to find ways to make the available research applicable to the specific needs of their district. One participant noted, "I look at the context and the setting of which that research occurred. It needs to be transferable to our context." Leaders were committed to helping school staff use what they read to inform their classroom strategies in meaningful and effective ways.

Translating Knowledge into Practice

The leadership team, based on their diverse role and experiences, considered practices that needed improvement and the unique needs of schools across the district. This included personalized supports, such as organizing a book study at one rural elementary school as well as providing resources for family engagement at two suburban elementary schools. One member of the leadership team focused on family engagement during their master's program, which proved to be an asset that informed their ability to lead family engagement opportunities. Recognizing the differences between schools within the same district was important to the leadership team. One participant described, "I think every school is different because   all have their own little culture of how they feel comfortable."

A driving factor for the leadership team was dispelling the notion of giving attention to students of color with exceptional outcomes. One participant noted, "I actually talked with the superintendent about the fact that he will find kids who have made it in spite of what we do to them, in spite of how we treat them and put them out in front as if some kind of magic got them there. But we need models." The models, the leadership team theorized, would prevent the

tokenizing of a select few minoritized students. Using Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain* as a framework, the leadership team worked to integrate her work into all learning and professional development opportunities.

While personal experiences may have helped frame how the leadership team conceptualized culturally responsive teaching and leadership, it was important to the team that any professional development and learning opportunities were grounded in research. As one participant noted

> When we go in front of people - because we plan professional development for the whole district - we come with our own perspectives and our own experiences, but we like to back them in things that have been proven research. So we try to stay abreast with the current research and best practices around the work that we're doing so that we are able to justify and provide resources for other people in terms of where we're getting our knowledge from.

Eliminating Achievement and Opportunity Gaps

As a result of the nascent nature of this initiative, it was too early to see significant changes across gap groups. There was, however, a concerted effort to close achievement and opportunity gaps beyond performances on standardized assessments. One participant explained

> Every day, I am intentionally doing various things, various strategies, using curriculum outside my resources. I think about who I'm teaching in order to reach my students' needs to grow them from dependent learners into independent learning today. But it's extremely intentional and it's a lot of effort. It's not extra effort, but it's definitely a lot of effort.

The district has seen an influx of educators embracing the certification process. Educators completing the culturally responsive certification has grown from three in 2017 to 30 in 2019.

This process of aiming to eliminate gaps has also helped the leadership team members reflect on their past practices in perpetuating achievement and opportunity gaps to be more cognizant of their own behaviors, beliefs, and biases in the future. One participant admitted, "I was ignoring students who were non-minority marginalized students. I was not giving them the

full attention that I thought I was giving them." This participant realized through reflection that they were able to "recognize places where I was making a lot of assumptions" to better meet needs in marginalized students.

Addressing Institutional Racism

The leadership team continually discussed finding new ways to address the institutional racism present in their district. Recognizing their ability to change was an important first step. One participant believed "I think I have a part in dismantling the institution of racism by how I choose to work within the system that already exists." Another participant echoed those thoughts when proclaiming, "I have the express power to change that and so I do." This participant noted their role as a gatekeeper for opening new opportunities for minoritized students, including access to more rigorous curriculum and extension opportunities.

The team also has a deep understanding of how the curriculum worked and the importance of providing students of color who have been minoritized with opportunities to access more appropriate and rigorous curriculum. One participant excitedly expressed, in relation to helping students of color access more rigorous curriculum, "It is changing their life trajectory!" Having knowledge of and access to programs was an important part of addressing institutional racism. One middle school offered a summer bridge program that allowed students achieving at a high level of math in a 6th-grade standard class to take Algebra I in eighth grade, which was typically taken in ninth grade.

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The Use of Critical Self-Reflection as a Tool

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Self-Reflection to Interrogate Gaps in Student Learning

Engaging in critical self-reflection is a fundamental process of culturally responsive school leadership (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). In this study's analysis, self-reflection

emerged as a major theme in the data. The majority of the leaders in the sample used it as a tool

to reflect on their backgrounds, assess their backgrounds in relation to the experiences of

students of color, and examine their leadership practices and the extent to which they supported

or hindered the experiences of students of color. In an interview, one school-level administrator

reflected on how his self-reflection practices helped him assess the ways his leadership practices

affected his students' progress. He explained

> I think, like with anything you're trying to do, it starts with how [I] as an individual and my role as an administrator, either perpetuate or goes against things that make achievement gap even occur.

Here, the administrator not only used critical self-reflection as a CRSL engagement tool, but he

also used it to interrogate the extent to which his personal practices were contributing the

outcomes of students of color in school. However, he did not stop there, as, through his position

as a school-level leader, he encouraged his staff to reflect on the extent to which the historical

context of the county in which their school was located contributed to this problem. His

reflection prompted him to engage his staff in activities that helped them see the schooling

experiences of Black students from a historical context and how that context was shaping their

current experiences. In an interview he shared

> For example, many of our teachers didn't know the history of race within Shadow County Public Schools. And so, if we're going to go after addressing the lack of achievement in our Black students then we need to know how we got to this point. And so, it is that professional awareness piece. And so, we brought in a local videographer that traced the history of integration and segregation in Shadow County that just rose that awareness to show this problem is historical and that until we recognize that historical context we can't address what we have today.

Another participant admitted that, prior to joining the leadership team, they often did not spend

as much time helping non-minority marginalized students due to assumptions that they had

stronger support at home. This process of self-reflection raised educators' awareness about the problems in the past and how their practices could change or disrupt the current status quo.

Self-Reflection to Address Biases

Other participants expressed similar sentiments about the importance self-reflections played in their roles as culturally responsive leaders and how it informed their work. One teacher leader shared how critical self-reflection was a challenging task to engage in, however, she saw the process as an opportunity for her to take risks and to share that vulnerability with her peers who were doing the same work. She shared

> There's a lot of focus on yourself and the way to do any work is to first go inward in whatever we're trying to accomplish, to change - so definitely being able to be vulnerable to myself [and] the things that I don't necessarily always want to acknowledge myself. But also, being vulnerable with other people who are trying to do this work as best as they can.

The two different perspectives regarding how critical self-reflection was enacted were telling indications of the benefits of prioritizing the tool. This process of being vulnerable, surrendering one 's own beliefs and allowing others' perspectives to challenge their own was not only helpful for individuals, but also in the process of partnering with colleagues to learn from them. It was helpful for participants and their colleagues to understand how others interpreted success and growth and how it manifested in cultures that differed from their own. In this study's data, we found that this vulnerability allowed some of the leaders to examine their biases based on their background and race as they interpreted children's needs. In one example, a teacher-leader shared how critical reflection allowed her to challenge her assumptions about the achievement gap and her expectations regarding what her White students needed. She reflected

> So, in my personal life, the achievement gap was not necessarily among young Black people who are not achieving. That gap actually, I was able to close very quickly. My gap was I was ignoring a lot of students and I didn't realize I was doing that. I was ignoring students who were non-minority marginalized students. I was not giving them the full

attention that I thought I was giving them. I thought all this time I was giving them the same amount of or support. So, my practice has actually taught me to recognize places where I was making a lot of assumptions.

This school-level leader's example supported the notion that engaging in critical reflection opened the opportunity for leaders to assess the extent to which their cultural identity could perpetuate blinders and create biases when they interpreted the experiences of children who were from backgrounds that were different from their own. One teacher leader shared a similar sentiment about critical self-reflection when he described how his reflective practices directly influenced what he did in the classroom. In this situation, he described

It's like isolating my core beliefs [and] understandings - being able to identify my own biases and my triggers. It made a difference in being able to address them in classrooms. So, first it was just acknowledging that they exist and that I have them, and then once I was able to do that, taking the time to then think about how could I be proactive and plan for them when they would come up in practice with students.

The notion of having space to reflect race and culture individually and collectively carried through all the interviews with the participants. Particularly with teacher leaders, they all shared how these reflective practices challenged them to make changes in their classroom and see their students from a different lens. One participant remarked

I think that from the beginning, having access and open space to address race and culture with other people in a community has pushed my thinking about my own biases and how they play out in my classroom….Really it pushed my thinking about how I saw my students and how I interacted with them and how much really I believed that they could succeed....We ended up creating an ethnic studies course at Shadow County High School to address a lot of the biases that were happening in school and to present a course curriculum to students who wanted to know more. It was only students of color who took that class in the first two years. It was only students of color. It wasn't [until] the third year of ethnic studies class that White student actually took a class.

Strengths and Limitations

There are several strengths and some limitations to this study. The participants interviewed for this study offered unique perspectives on what it meant for them to create

culturally responsive teaching and leadership programs from a grassroots approach. This allowed the researchers to obtain a firsthand account of the commitment and perseverance that was employed by a group of leaders, most of whom were Black or of color, to take the initiative to create this program. Furthermore, the researchers were able to member-check the results of this study with participants which strengthens the conclusions of the findings.

The limitations of this study are also relevant. First, the researchers acknowledge that this is a qualitative study and thus the findings are descriptive accounts of the participants and therefore not generalizable to larger populations. However, the context of this school district is representative of others in the U.S. and the structure created by the participants offers an important programmatic approach that can be transferred to contexts of readers.

Discussion

SCPS is a school district that both acknowledges and is addressing the achievement and opportunity gaps, as well as the systemic racism, present in their community. Without the desire and dedication to authentically address these issues, the formation of a culturally responsive leadership team would be in vain. The empirical investigation conducted in this case study builds upon and extends research that champions the purpose and effects of culturally responsive school leadership. This work broadens possibilities in the field by highlighting the effectiveness of a grassroots program that centers equity in the professional development of district officials, school administrators, and teacher leaders.

When building a culturally responsive leadership team, the immediate goals of the team, to close the achievement and opportunity gap and address systemic racism present within the school district, were critical to establishing a clear vision for all participants. Also, because there are variations of culturally responsive teaching as research continues to evolve, a common text,

Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain, was chosen to eliminate any confusion amongst team members and to give them and their future trainees a common language when discussing culturally responsive practices. However, members still discussed other relevant research related to culturally responsive practices to determine the best practices that were presented in professional development training. The intentional focus on research corroborates the value and paramount usefulness of integrating research into school practices.

As shown through participant interviews, building a culturally responsive leadership team of school district officials, school building administrators, and teacher leaders, all who volunteered to be on the team, is important for the diversity of experiences and ideas. While everyone on the team had an equal voice, different members of the leadership team had different responsibilities based on their roles when it came to implementing culturally responsive training at various sites. Members were also encouraged and embraced self-reflection, and honestly shared their personal biases and how they were addressed. Findings also suggest that while leadership members were able to implement and see changes within their immediate environment, systemic change is slow and will not happen quickly. This suggests implications for future research that longitudinally explores how districts can generate and sustain long-term impacts.

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