Pursuing Racial Equity in Suburban High Schools: How Informal School Leaders Rise to the Challenge of Addressing Racial Inequity

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines the experiences of three informal teacher leaders in diversifying suburban high schools as they developed strategies to address racial inequity at their schools. Each participant in this study represented a distinct racial identity (Asian-American, Latino, white) with varying degrees of personal and professional race consciousness and positionality at their schools. Our study is framed by Banks (2014) theory of multicultural education, which suggests that schools must attend to five elements of school culture and practice in order to practice authentic multicultural education. With support from university faculty, the teacher leaders identified culturally responsive pedagogy and inclusive curriculum strategies to address the problem of inequitable learning conditions in their schools. We found that informal leaders in schools represent an often untapped resource who can energize and guide colleagues in targeted equity strategies that support broader macro-level diversity, equity and inclusion programs. This study explores the steps that three diversifying suburban schools took to demonstrate a commitment toward racial equity for BIPOC students, and how informal teacher leaders navigated the work with administration, colleagues, students, and community. We hope in this study to shed light on the commitments, policies, and practices that schools might develop to reflect a more democratic, inclusive learning environment for all students but

particularly for BIPOC students and especially in places where they represent the minority in the school and do not feel that their voices are heard.

Keywords: Racial equity, multicultural education, equity pedagogy, inclusive curriculum

Introduction

An essential purpose of public education in America is to prepare students for active participation in democracy. A society's grip on democracy is tenuous and relies upon an informed and tenacious citizenry cognizant of rights and willing to act in the interests of the common good while holding its political leaders accountable. The task of preparing to build and sustain democracy is a heavy yet important lift for schools. It is a responsibility, however, that has been abdicated over the past 40 years as schools have bowed to the neoliberal agenda in deference to technical knowledge that prepares for standardized learning and standardized assessments instead of democracy. This orientation has squeezed quality civic education out of the curricular equation. It was not until the last decade that civics mounted a resurgence. The State of Illinois, for example, passed laws requiring that all middle and high school students participate in civic education instruction. Dunson (2020), Levinson (2013), and Kahne (2009) argue, however, that purposeful civic education <u>and</u> equity in civic education opportunities are crucial in order to fully re-establish the historic mission of public schools to prepare informed and tenacious citizens for the challenges of democracy. Preparing students for democracy is more than classroom-based civic education, however. It demands a whole school response.

Illinois schools have been invited into an effort to #BringCivicsBack and create more inclusive learning environments through the [Democracy Schools Initiative](). Currently 77 members strong, the Democracy Schools Initiative (DSI) seeks to promote, strengthen, and expand democratic learning opportunities for middle and high school students across the state. It also advances the proposition that schools must be thoughtful about school climate, student voice, vision and leadership, teacher hiring and development, and school-community partnerships in order to truly live into the civic mission and purpose of schools to prepare students for democracy. Similarly, Banks (2014) argued that schools serious about racial equity for all students must tend to internal policies and practices by examining and working toward equitable curricular and pedagogical strategies, integrating multicultural perspectives across the curriculum, building and sustaining empowering school culture, working to deconstruct harmful racial attitudes, and interrogating cultural assumptions in existing epistemological systems.

In 2019, DSI members (city and suburban) in Illinois were invited to form the Equity Cohort Initiative (ECI) to explore how to generate and sustain more racially and culturally inclusive learning environments for students as part of its commitment to building skills and dispositions for democratic participation. This research study focuses on the experiences of the suburban high school teachers who played lead roles in the Equity Cohort Initiative. This work is especially salient as some suburban schools are no longer majority white, some are recognizing that the negative experiences of BIPOC students need attention, and that communities used to predominantly white racial contexts are beginning to push back at equity efforts (Herold, 2021).

Our research question for this study was: *How do informal teacher leaders navigate racial equity work in diversifying suburban high schools*? We define *informal teacher leaders* as teachers who are not officially positioned by the school administratively to lead equity work but identify important opportunities to work towards racial equity goals as grassroots leaders. In this case, the three teachers in this study volunteered to lead the Democracy Schools Initiative (DSI) at their schools and applied for support from DSI through its Equity Cohort Initiative to engage in racial equity work, the work of redressing racial disparities to create optimal learning environments for student learning, interaction, and maturation (Equality and Equity Group, 2021). Our university was asked to partner with five public schools for the work. This study focuses on the work in three diversifying suburban high schools. Each of the teachers worked in a school where equity work was officially on the agenda, and they saw DSI and the ECI as opportunities to advance this work. The informal teacher leaders in our study sought to build specific and actionable strands of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) work within the school or school district's broader attention to equity work.

The work of racial inclusion is challenging, personally and professionally. The process for formal school leaders is complex and replete with self-doubt, set-backs, and significant challenges (Irby, Drame, Clough, & Croom, 2019; Lac & Baxley, 2019). The process, we surmised, would not be a simple one and would challenge informal teacher leaders who were committed to change in contexts that might not be looking for or open to change. Three teacher leaders stepped into this challenging context. They consulted with school faculty, staff and administration, gathered insights from students, and deliberated with our team to identify and implement one or more ways to move toward the goal of creating a more racially inclusive school environment. We present here information about what teachers worked to accomplish,

and how they experienced the process of working toward greater inclusion and equity and by extension better preparation for democratic participation.

When discussing students, we use BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) in our discourse as person-first language that differentiates groups by name and recognizes the particular histories and legacies that each group has been subject to within a country characterized by white supremacy. Further, we have intentionally chosen to use lower case "w" when referring to white people as an act of resistance against systems of supremacy.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework: Multicultural Education

The Equity Cohort Initiative of DSI worked from the assumption that all students deserve equitable access to what they need for a rich educational experience in order to develop civic capacities. Inasmuch as a democracy needs to be open, inclusive, and accessible to citizens, so too, we argue, should schools generate inclusive, democratic approaches and practices in order to build the capacity for deep democratic participation by citizens. Banks' (2014) five dimensions of multicultural education provides a useful theoretical framework for this study. As we developed our study and contemporaneously engaged schools in racial equity work, Banks' multicultural education framework elements were all in play as possible strategies for implementation: 1) Prejudice reduction work that names and addresses school cultural norms and practices that advance deficit thinking and discrimination of certain groups; 2) school structures that create spaces where students, particularly historically marginalized student groups, find spaces, structures, and opportunities for voice and identity development; 3) pedagogy that is focused on equity and seeks to generate teaching approaches that are culturally sustaining; 4) curriculum that thoughtfully and substantially includes the stories, narratives, and perspectives of all groups that are part of the American story and are not simply added, minimized or portrayed as victims; and 5) epistemology that is constructivist in nature and recognizes that knowing and extracting meaning is a constant, dynamic process that includes students and their experiences. Banks' framework of multicultural education then reflected the dimensions of racial equity work in schools and provided a possible roadmap for action among participating schools.

Multicultural Education and Anti-Racism

Banks' multicultural education framework and emerging anti-racist pedagogical practices stand in contrast to assimilation, integration and cultural pluralism models in education that have dominated over the past decades. Curriculum and pedagogy have historically been used as tools to maintain racial hierarchy within schools (Kohli & Soloranzo, 2012). Sayles-Hannon (2009) cautioned against additive cultural pluralism that can erase important social identity distinctions and intentionally or unintentionally promote assimilation. An additive approach may simply include groups absent from curriculum (BIPOC, women, communities economically marginalized, LGBTQ+) rather than challenge and interrogate the existing knowledge framework that ultimately justifies and perpetuates omission. The urgent call for anti-racist pedagogy and curriculum seeks to build new teaching and learning practices that foster the development and success of BIPOC students. Blakeney (2005) argued that antiracist pedagogy is "a paradigm…to explain and counteract the persistence and impact of racism using praxis as its focus to promote social justice for the creation of a democratic society…" (p. 119). Antiracist pedagogy blends strands of multicultural education with critical pedagogy. Multicultural and anti-racist frames interrogate the foundations of curriculum and lead to an understanding and interrogation of whiteness of curriculum (Sayles-Hannon, 2009).

Ladson-Billings (1995) and Paris (2012) called for a pedagogical approach (Culturally Responsive and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy) that "not only addresses student achievement but helps students accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools perpetuate" (Ladson-Billings, p. 469). CRP and CSP provide students with the tools to achieve cultural and academic competence and develop sociopolitical consciousness. Similarly, Banks and McGee-Banks (1995) argue that pedagogical approaches that **"**merely prepare students to fit into society… characterized by pernicious class divisions and racial, ethnic, and gender stratification" are not constructive to the development and success of a student (p. 152). In other words, BIPOC students will struggle to succeed academically within racialized standards of achievement, thus equity-oriented and anti-racist pedagogies that interrupt systems of power are fundamental to the growth of students from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups (Banks et al., 1995; Muhammad, 2018).

Rather than functioning as a mechanism of socialization to the norms and practices of white upper-class ideals, multicultural education is rooted in equity and seeks to foster learning

environments conducive to the growth and achievement of students from diverse cultural, social, and racial groups. It is also a process through which educators engage diversity in their classrooms, including the lived experiences of students, that is reflective of the larger society (Banks et al., 1995). Multicultural education is not *only* the integration of new perspectives; it is also an "ideology of social change…a change in the very fabric of society" (Sleeter et al., 1988, p. 158). Developing the capacity for social critique among students deepens efforts toward social justice and anti-racism in schools by centering learning as a means toward liberation (Rombalski, 2020).

Teaching and Learning

Emerging scholarship that explores teaching and learning practices supports multicultural education goals. Muhammad's (2018) pedagogical framework provides insights for teaching and learning in diverse contexts as it "honors and represents the multiplicity of students' histories, identities, literacies, and languages (HILL)" (p. 138). The HILL framework seeks to engage the rich, lived experiences of diverse students and focuses on student outcomes of identity development, skill building, criticality, and intellectualism. Muhammad's framework interrupts harmful teaching practices by connecting learning to sociopolitical conscious, encouraging students to "name and critique injustice and ultimately have the agency to build a better world" by tapping into their cultural knowledge (Muhammad, 2018, p. 138).

Asset-based approaches to education position students as co-generators of knowledge that hold the information necessary to build non-oppressive systems. As opposed to viewing the "languages, literacies, and cultural ways [of students] as deficits to overcome in learning", an asset-based pedagogical approach views the lived experiences and cultural and linguistic practices of students as strengths worth exploration and recognition (Paris, 2012, p. 93). As a result, students are empowered to recognize themselves as powerful, transforming the ways in which they engage with school and larger systems. Students are acknowledged as "seekers and producers of knowledge" who are critically conscious and capable of transforming their conditions (Rombalski, 2020, p. 49).

Race-conscious and antiracist curriculum can have important positive impacts on all students (Ambrosia, Henzell & Williams, 2021; Howard, 2003; Inoue, 2020; Tyson, Darrity & Castellino, 2005). Howard (2001) found that effective teachers engaged the cultural capital of

their students, directly referenced and included their ethnic group experience, and created a caring learning environment that was not at odds with their home environment. Students reported that classrooms focused on academic growth and belief in the abilities of students to achieve growth was critical to classroom success. Howard (2001) also found that teachers who displayed caring bonds and attitudes, established community, family-oriented classroom environments, and made learning fun resonated more deeply with African-American students. While culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy offer teaching strategies that hold promise for BIPOC students who are school dependent, these insights suggest a pedagogical project that interrogates whiteness, values and includes all students, builds successful relationships, generates critical thinking, and offers opportunities to apply learning toward social action are important features of a classroom that can engage all students and particularly BIPOC students. Ambrosia et al. (2021) further articulated specific antiracist instructional strategies such as mapping identities to systems of oppression, generating curriculum that reflects student lived experiences and encourages contextual meaning-making, and building connections across racial groups to promote understanding to develop antiracist intellectual approaches. Indeed, "antiracist and inclusive teaching is not one more thing; it is the foundation on which all other practices should be built" (p. 169).

Teacher Preparation

Teacher preparation programs consistently fall short in attempts to prepare teachers for antiracist education (Berchini, 2018; Lee & Lee, 2020; Ohito, 2016; Sleeter, 1993). Sleeter (1993) posited that white teachers can bring unexamined assumptions about the historic, political, economic and social conditions of their BIPOC students. Without appropriate attention and training, teachers may, implicitly or explicitly, take bias, prejudice and racism into their classrooms. Lee et al. (2020), Ohito (2016), and Sleeter (1993) argued that while teachers are occasionally encouraged to engage in introspective work on their own social identities, without a structural analysis of systemic racism (Critical Race Theory), teachers are not sufficiently prepared and risk reinscribing the racism embedded in our systems. Moreover, when teacher preparation does address these questions, the fragile emotions of white teacher candidates are often tended to (Diangelo, 2018; Ohito, 2016) rather than allowing discomfort to be present in learning situations. Berchini (2018) concurred that most preparation of teachers begins and ends

with acknowledgement of racial privilege, but effective practice must analyze discourse and discursive strategies in order to deconstruct white approaches to curriculum.

BIPOC Student Perceptions

BIPOC students experience and respond to racism within schools in a myriad of ways. While "subtle" racial microaggressions may seem insignificant in relation to institutionalized forms of oppression, they continue to maintain forms of racial hierarchy and inferiority (Kohli et al., 2012). Mispronunciation of names, for example, may seem insignificant but reflects the "inability or unwillingness to correctly pronounce their name" (Kohli et al, 2012, p. 443), which reinforces power dynamics. Students begin to internalize the validity of a racial hierarchy, either consciously or subconsciously, and "the beliefs, values, and worldviews of the dominant culture" (Kohil et al., 2012, p. 443). Thus, students begin to associate school as a place that does not fully accept them, which impacts their ability to engage and learn.

Chapman (2014) described how students in a Predominantly-White Institution setting felt disrespected because of their skin color and reported that teachers would "talk down to them" (p. 317). They also believed that white students "received preferential treatment" and were often given "verbal or no discipline, while BIPOC students [were] more likely to receive a formal written note, be removed from class, or even be suspended" (p. 318). In addition, students believed that white teachers and counselors in particular set "low expectations for their academic success", limiting their ability to grow and advance (Chapman, 2014, p. 312). BIPOC students' adverse interactions with school staff and faculty negatively impacted their educational experiences.

Martell (2016) found that while both white and BIPOC students reported an awareness of race and discrimination in US history, BIPOC students provided specific examples of racism today. Most white students believed racism to have diminished and belonged to the past. Martell's study illuminates the positive impact a race-conscious and critical social studies classroom can have on all students and may support the deconstruction of barriers teachers may contend with in helping white students understand their roles in a system that privileges them because of their skin color. Our own surveys and focus groups in race-affiliated focus group sessions with students confirmed Martell's findings.

Almarza and Fehn (1998) found that Latinx middle school students developed and harbored resentment towards their teacher because the curriculum failed to present an inclusive curriculum that engaged student experience and explored a multi-perspectival approach to history. Almarza et al. (1998) argued that educators should re-think approaches to similar historical texts and work to acknowledge and capitalize on students' cultural and ethnic identities and experiences, push beyond reliance on textbook approaches, and interrogate how whiteness is not a neutral construct but benefits some and targets others. Findings from Almarza et al. suggest that racialized identities, prior knowledge, and cultural background significantly impacted student motivation for studying and learning history. Teachers should help students understand that "white" is not a racially or culturally neutral category, but rather "white" has complicated and powerful meanings for white and BIPOC students.

In the absence of affirming classroom experiences in predominantly white settings, BIPOC students may form peer-based identity-affirming spaces within schools to counteract their experiences of racism they encounter and foster supportive academic environments (Carter, 2007; Tatum, 2003). Carter demonstrated how Black students in predominantly white urban schools created formal and informal spaces in order to serve "as a positive resistance strategy" in school environments that did not construct supportive spaces for students. Research participants described these spaces as part of a "positive coping strategy", which allowed them to " maintain a strong racial sense of self, while maintaining school success in a racially hostile environment" (Carter, 2007, p. 543). The author described student informal and formal gathering spaces as "fictive kinship where students align themselves as brothers and sisters not by blood, but through a relationship that bonds them on a social, cultural, and/or economic foundation" (p. 547). Students in these spaces engaged deeply with the meaning and socio-political context of their racial identity and developed their visions for how to disrupt oppression they faced.

Organizational Change

Our work with schools was a response to recognition by informal school leaders that their diversifying suburban high schools were not responding sufficiently to the presenting needs of historically marginalized BIPOC students. This recognition reflected an understanding that school-based norms and practices needed to change in order to reflect a multicultural education approach. Organizational change is a challenging undertaking particularly for schools that are

embedded in multiple layers of administration and bureaucracy and subject to social and political forces at community, state, and national levels.

School principals are crucial actors in school change processes (Blaum & Tobin 2019; Crum & Sherman 2008; Lortie 2009). Khalifa, Gooden & Davis (2016) identified four aspects of anti-oppressive, anti-racist school leadership that include developing self-awareness, sustaining culturally responsive practices, building inclusive school environments, and engaging students and parents in community contexts. Warren & Grice (2017) argued that school leaders and educators must work to build communities that reflect care and trust, emphasize communal responsibility, and focus on racial uplift. Further, Evans and Teddlie (1995) identified three types of principal leader facilitation styles: Initiators, managers, and responders. Effective schools typically had initiators as school leaders whereas ineffective schools had principals who facilitated through responding. Jacobs, Beck, and Crowell (2014) found that healthy school climates characterized by openness to experimentation, inclusive leadership, collegiality, and open communication can be places where "teacher leadership can flourish in the presence of supportive cultural contexts where trust is present, supportive structures that promote teacher dialog and reflection are in place, and supportive leadership is exhibited" (p. 578).

Asking teachers to be part of the change process, and in particular change toward racial equity in a school, is a promising and harrowing prospect. Promising in that teachers as a principal stakeholder group in education should be included in discussions and planning about school improvement, as they bring important insight and experience. Harrowing in that asking teachers to lead among peers around a highly charged issue can create anxiety. Many educational issues are rife with controversy and can lead at times to unproductive debate. Some teachers resist the process of change, while others resist the outcomes and requirements of change. In the face of change, some teachers are comfortable following directions that change-makers develop. Few teachers step into the void and provide leadership around complex issues with uncertain outcomes. Stepping forward to lead change, particularly on an issue as complex, historically- and institutionally-shaped, discomfiting, and controversial as racial equity, is a step few are willing to take. However, "teacher leaders can be key change agents in developing more equitable schools" (Jacobs et al., 2014, p. 576).

Teacher leaders in equity work play a variety of roles that include building relationships, organizing peers, naming issues, facilitating process, identifying and mobilizing resources, and

advocating on behalf of students as they work toward change (Lieberman & Friedrich, 2010; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Jacobs et al. (2014) found that when teachers felt a sense of collegiality, support from the principal, and had access to structured professional learning, they felt a growing sense of empowerment and were able to facilitate effective dialogue and inquiry. Without a supportive school climate for change, the self-efficacy of teacher leaders diminished, and equity efforts were placed on hold. Below, we articulate the journeys of these teachers and the kinds of school-based supports they received. As the teachers in this study navigated context, content, relationships, history, and organizational process, they each worked toward the fulfillment of specific elements of Banks' theory of multicultural education, not as a comprehensive approach (as that was beyond their control) but as a grassroots, strategic intervention to begin or further the process of becoming a school more inclusive of diverse cultural, ethnic and racial groups.

Banks' multicultural education framework encourages us to take the whole school into consideration. It encourages us to ask questions of how BIPOC students are experiencing schools: Whose story is being told in curriculum, and how is that story being told? Are teachers approaching pedagogy that seeks to sustain diverse cultures and meanings? What are the cultural values and practices of the school that reflect explicit or implicit prejudice or racism? To what extent do BIPOC students have access to participation in school decision-making processes?

Methodology

The Democracy Schools Initiative invited five public high schools (city and suburban) to form the Equity Cohort Initiative (ECI) to explore how to generate and sustain more racially inclusive learning environments for students. From this cohort of five high schools, the three suburban teacher project leads were invited by the research team to participate in the contemporaneous study beginning in the spring of 2020. The research team then launched a qualitative inquiry into the experiences of informal school leaders in suburban schools as they worked to build equity and advance inclusion in their respective schools.

We conducted a hybrid study including elements of phenomenology and instrumental case study. We explored how teachers applied elements of Banks' multicultural education framework in their school, and how they experienced the process. Semi-structured interviews

were used to gather data. Our interview subjects were male of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds. Participants were given consent forms to participate and be recorded. Interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom due to the COVID pandemic. Participants were interviewed twice for a total of six interviews over the course of nine months and were subsequently brought together for a focus group interview at the culmination of the first year of implementation to gain collective insights about their experience with equity work in their own classrooms and the school community. The individual and focus group interviews were transcribed and then coded using Nvivo qualitative software to identify themes and patterns related to experiences and practices of equity work within the schools. Coding trees were derived from individual and focus group interviews and further narrowed by the most salient themes presented among the interviewees. The interviewees received an honorarium to support their cohort work but did not receive an additional stipend for participation in the research. Pseudonyms are used throughout this study to protect the privacy of research participants and their schools.

Participants

Three informal teacher leaders, described below, were asked to participate in this study by the research team. Each teacher had volunteered at their diversifying suburban schools to lead the Democracy School Initiative and its Equity Cohort Initiative. The research team decided to invite only the three suburban teachers into the study because of the unique position of their institutions as diversifying schools. (The two urban schools had, on the other hand, experienced student diversification over the past five to six decades.) All participants in this study identified as male. Two participants are BIPOC first generation immigrants, and one is white.

North High School (Michael)

Michael has been teaching for more than ten years and recently began his tenure at North High School. Michael is an active member of his school beyond instructional and departmental leadership responsibilities serving on school-based instructional and equity teams, regional equity task forces, and liaising with parents for his department. Michael was raised in a working class Latino household. Michael identifies with the immigrant experience of struggling to become American without losing a sense of his own cultural identity as he received mixed messages about acceptance into society: "I learned as a person who grew up in a mostly white

community how to fit into that community. But then struggling with how do I not lose my own culture? How do I not sacrifice my own culture and then fit into that dominant culture that I had to go into every day?" Michael, therefore, sees many social experiences through the lens of race and ethnicity.

North High is a predominantly white though diversifying school with a growing presence of low SES students and approximately 5% Emerging Bilinguals (EB). North serves a mostly affluent white population and finds itself sometimes at odds with those who do not fit this description. While white students report that the climate and culture is "fine", BIPOC students believe that the school does not fully represent them. Interview data suggested that BIPOC students seek opportunities for engagement outside of the school because of these feelings. The school experiences a lack of diversity in clubs, activities and events in the school and a lack of racial and ethnic diversity in classrooms. The school is, however, seeking to establish equity among students in developing skill sets necessary for postsecondary success among its BIPOC students and has begun equity work on forming inclusive student groups. Measures have also been taken to build cultural awareness through diversity group training for teachers and staff. Racial tension among students led to the administration's interest in racial equity initiatives. Administrators have begun informal student voice initiatives to respond to the diversifying student body. Although the district continues to seek ways to engage staff and teachers in equity work, the limits placed on school-wide professional development training seem to result in slow buy-in from staff to initiate equity work schoolwide.

East High School (Antoine)

Antoine has taught at East High for ten years and currently chairs the social studies department, a new role for him through which he oversees curriculum, evaluates teachers, and promotes Board initiatives. He is the son of Asian immigrants who raised their family in a racially diverse, low SES community: "I grew up in a very diverse area...very blue collar; very poor but so rich in so many other aspects and that richness of storytelling and that richness of experiences and those are the things that I value so much." Like Michael, Antoine has been involved beyond his classroom in district race equity work: "People know me as kind of a racial equity leader. I am one of the very few staff of color in my building so many teachers see me as an ally for our students of color."

East High is located in an affluent suburb where student demographics have been shifting toward greater diversity over the past two decades. Despite changing student demographics, however, faculty have remained mostly white. East has a reputation as a high-achieving school. It is ranked in the top 10% of schools in the state in terms of academic achievement. There is strong support for the school from the community, and alumni are active supporters of the school, frequently attending major school events such as homecoming activities. Because of this record of success, teachers and administrators have not seen a strong need to devote major efforts to improving the school for BIPOC students. However, according to Antoine, BIPOC students report not feeling a sense of belongingness to the school community. Additionally, in our survey of students enrolled in US History and APUSH courses, Black and Asian students reported a lack of positive representation in the curriculum.

East High is in the early stages of doing diversity work. The school's administrative district is moving towards more culturally responsive teaching. In coming years, teachers will receive extensive professional development in culturally responsive teaching and how to hold challenging conversations about systemic oppression. The district has commissioned a major overhaul of the district curriculum, which will provide space for both district high schools to revise and update social studies curriculum. Antoine reported that while some teachers are conceptually on-board others are resistant or express concern about how to engage in the work at the classroom level.

South High School (Andrew)

Andrew is white and has been teaching at South High for more than 15 years and currently serves as chair of the social studies department. Like Michael and Antoine, Andrew leads his school's Democracy Schools Initiative. South High is located in a small, suburban community and has a strong reputation throughout the district. Over the past 20 years, South has experienced changing student demographics with significant growth among Latinx students. With a student population becoming more diverse, Andrew, the district's superintendent and school principal hoped to shift teaching practice to be more responsive to the needs of the diversifying student body. Driven by the district superintendent's vision of what it means to be a

"well-rounded student and well-rounded global citizen," South High embraced the opportunity to work with our team.

Disaggregated student survey and focus group data revealed that white students and BIPOC students perceived racial tension and opportunities for student voice quite differently. While white students tended to dismiss racial tension among students, Latinx students expressed concern about racist comments and microaggressions, and reported they did not feel their voices were being heard. They also pointed to a lack of representation in the curriculum. One student stated: "Latinx students don't show up in US History until 1920 and then they get deported quickly thereafter. If you're a Latinx student in that class, you're not learning about you and where you fit in." The absence of Latinx representation was evidenced across disciplines. Students expressed difficulty making personal connections to characters in their English curriculum, for example, because the characters were mostly Caucasian. Another student stated: "I can't see any Hispanics in the books I'm reading or a main character that I can relate to."

Furthermore, Andrew identified the lack of racial and ethnic representation among adults in the building: "Students [of color] only see themselves in the school if they're looking at the custodial staff, or they are looking for lunch ladies." He was inspired to create opportunities and systems for BIPOC students to feel a sense of connection and belongingness to the school. "If they're just passing through our class and then they go onto the next class and that's it...they don't have the opportunity to grow, well, we didn't do a good enough job of giving them the opportunity to grow or give them a connection to the school or give them another positive adult to connect with, then we failed as a system." South High expressed a desire to prepare teachers for culturally relevant pedagogical work. The equity work school was supported by top level district and school administrators and among the teaching staff. Teacher buy-in was buoyed by student voice data that reflected the importance of the work. The ECI cohort enabled teachers, school leaders, and administrators to learn and grow with and from each other, an important element of any school initiative if it is to take hold over time.

Findings

Trends in School Engagement

Each participating school faced challenges in doing race equity work. First, while BIPOC student enrollment has increased in recent years at each of the schools, a race and class discontinuity remains between teachers and students. Changing student demographics have outpaced each school's ability to develop a diverse teaching force. Each school in this study has a faculty that is more than 90% white. Furthermore, each school also values traditions, which may not reflect the lived experience of BIPOC or low SES students. Secondly, each school is situated in a district that has identified equity work as a priority to meet the needs of a diversifying student body. A consistent narrative, however, was the perceptible lack of school-level supports to enact change effectively. Resistance to major curricular changes was presented by conservative parents wary of change and veteran teachers tied to more traditional teaching methods. Third, teaching faculty identified barriers to doing curricular revision including time, availability of suitable textbooks and other curricular resources, and understanding white privilege and how to address it.

Each high school also had demonstrative assets to engage this work. District leadership at each school had crafted plans to grow teachers' knowledge and capacity for engaging in culturally responsive teaching, including facilitating dialogue on systemic oppression. In one school research had begun on equity and inclusion in AP courses. Another school facilitates an annual multicultural event that included student panel discussions on equity issues in the school and community. A third school had strong support from the administrative team for equity work.

Michael, Antoine, and Andrew all lead social studies departments at their schools and have also been involved as leaders in the Democracy Schools Initiative. They, with administrative support, chose to sign up for the Equity Cohort Initiative that would ostensibly engage their schools and teaching faculty in equity work. They entered this work as informal school leaders. This created promise as a grassroots teacher-led response to this important work and presented challenges as the durability and sustainability of this work needs institutional buy-in and commitment. Leaders grew cognizant of the slow pace of buy-in, noting that change is not instant as one leader stated: "I was eager to get going on this work and to move fast, and I've learned that things don't change so quickly."

Our approach in this work was not to present an equity plan to schools, but to engage in conversations with students, teachers, staff, and administrators to uncover salient issues and concerns and determine appropriate responses together. Each participating school enacted a unique strategy that aligned with Banks' multicultural education framework. South High School worked on equity pedagogy by building a teacher cohort for culturally relevant teaching and East High worked toward building a more inclusive curriculum US History curriculum. North High, unfortunately, dropped out of the project. (The two urban schools engaged student voice and restorative justice respectively.)

The experiences of Michael, Antoine, and Andrew reflect the challenges and the opportunities that are present in race equity work. Michael, as noted above, dropped out of the project after the first year with no discernable progress through ECI. Antoine focused the work in an area that he believed he could control. As the chair of the social studies department and as one of the very few faculty of color at the school, Antoine hoped to guide a substantial curriculum revision for the school's US history courses in an effort to "change the fabric and culture" of East High's Social Studies department. Andrew, as the only white teacher in the group and the only informal leader who had clear, demonstrative support from the school's white principal, was able to push beyond his department and include a broader group of teachers in a 10-part professional development series focused on culturally responsive pedagogical practices led by our team. We identified the following themes as the teachers in this study navigated this critical work in their schools: Racial identity; institutional positionality; scope/scale of work; pace of work; navigating tension and resistance.

Racial Identity

During interviews, each of the teachers reflected on their racial identity and its salience for the work of racial equity. Their identities clearly impacted how they approached the work and what they were able to accomplish in the work. For Michael and Antoine, experiences as men of color had deep significance for their drive to do equity work. Antoine stated: "...my grandfather was an educator, my mom was an educator, and they were immigrants….We grew up in poverty." Michael added: "There are stories that are the stories I grew up with of how they [students] experienced different parts of becoming an American. At times how they felt they were being welcomed and at times how they felt like they weren't." This work was deeply

reflective of their lived experiences. Andrew's approach to the work appeared to be more out of deep commitments to social justice and equity work than about the personal salience of his racial identity. This is not to suggest that Andrew's approach to the work is less valid; it comes from a different place.

Antoine understands teaching and learning through a cultural or even critical race lens. Within the group, he had the most experience, personally and professionally, in race-consciousness work. He understood race equity work to be a critical part of his racial and professional identity. He articulated a deep understanding of the impact a curriculum that is not racially inclusive can have on BIPOC students. There was a sense of urgency in his approach to the work. He had, in some ways, been waiting for the opportunity to do this work from a position of leadership where he could now enact his deeply personal convictions around racial justice and equity in the school and not only in his classrooms.

Michael articulated a growing and deepening understanding of his racial identity. As a "lighter skinned Latino male", Michael had been able to "pass" in different social settings and was now beginning to more deeply contemplate the complex meanings of his intersecting social identities. Like Antoine, Michael had experienced various forms of racial oppression including consistent microaggressions in his personal and professional life. He saw this work as personal and connected to deeper convictions of racial justice.

Andrew acknowledged that he is developing race-consciousness around pedagogy and curriculum. Andrew consistently expressed an openness and willingness to engage in this work. He was driven by personal connection to students who didn't have access to role models or other opportunities at the school. Prior to this work, he imagined change might be accomplished through adjustments to the curriculum as opposed to an in-depth and lengthy process that included social identity introspection and other forms of discernment. He came to verbalize the complexities of doing racial equity work: "I thought a few curricular changes, and we were good." However, through the culturally responsive pedagogy study group, he began deconstructing how his race and his background impacts how he teaches and what he teaches. This realization made a lasting impression upon him for this work.

Inasmuch as their racial identities inform their approaches to the work, their identities positioned them to do the work. All three study participants served as department chairs at their schools. Andrew, who is white, was able to organize a professional development strategy for

fellow teachers on culturally relevant pedagogy. He expanded beyond his fellow social studies teachers to include a broader spectrum of the teaching faculty and staff in the work. Of the three study participants, he was the only leader able to engage his principal in the work consistently. He had principal and district support for his efforts in building capacity among fellow teachers for culturally relevant pedagogy. Again, we cannot claim that his whiteness granted him a privilege not available to teachers of color or that his commitment to racial equity was somehow less significant because of his racial identity.

Antoine positioned the equity work at his school in a space over which he had control as department chair. He opted to stay within the purview of the social studies department, focusing on a particular course team to interrogate their current US history curriculum and work towards developing a curriculum that was more inclusive and representative. The work moved forward over the life of the project but not at the tempo and fluidity he had hoped. Finally, Michael, as a new department chair and teacher of color in an all-white social studies department, was able to make very limited progress. Michael left the ECI toward the end of the first year after repeated efforts to develop and lead racial inclusion work were stymied.

Institutional Positionality

We propose that tenure in a school setting impacts the ability of a teacher to lead peers and to lead toward concrete outcomes. Andrew was the longest tenured of the three teachers at his school. He also clearly had the ear of and support from the principal to lead in this work. As a newer teacher and still finding his way as department chair at North High, Michael appeared to struggle with establishing and sustaining the support of the principal and other school leaders. Antoine, on the other hand, had almost ten years of experience at his school and recently had been named chair of the social studies department. By virtue of his institutional positionality, he was able to advance work around redesigning social studies curriculum. He did, however, either intentionally or unintentionally circumscribe the reach of the work by narrowing the scope to his department where he held some power within the school. Andrew's work ended up moving forward most quickly and had the broadest reach. With tenure of 20 years at the school, strong relationship with the principal and as chair of the social studies department, he was positioned well within the institution to advance this critical work.

Leading change is complex terrain and attempting to locate the cause for progress is equally complex. Leaders come with a range of experiences and skills including lived experiences, racial identity, years of service, commitment to the work, relationships, institutional positionality, social intelligence, and organizational skills. We cannot, of course, separate out any one of these variables in assessing progress toward organizational change. We must name, however, Andrew's status as a white teacher, and that it may have increased his ability to lead change. Certainly his status as a veteran teacher and department chair contributed. We also must ask whether the work that Antoine was able to do was circumscribed by his being one of the few faculty of color in the building. We presume, of course, that his shorter tenure at the school and as a school leader also may have contributed. We also raise the question here of whether Antoine self-imposed limitations on the scope of his work or if limitations were externally imposed upon him. Michael's status as a fairly new teacher and department chair at the school along with the fact that he is one of a small handful of faculty of color at the school may have ultimately led to him dropping out of the project after one year. It is challenging to disentangle how each factor contributes to each teacher's ability or marginalized ability to lead this work, but the question is beyond the scope of this research study.

Scope/Scale of Work

The teachers went into this school-based racial equity work with a sense of agency and purpose, particularly given the opportunity presented by existing equity work taking place in their schools and the new partnership with our university. They also approached this work with a sense of urgency. They soon discovered that what they would be able to accomplish within a limited time frame and from their positionality would cause them to scale back the scope of their goals. As urgent as each teacher was about addressing the school climate and curriculum issues at their schools, they both came to understand that their staff were on "different paths" and "different journeys," so time would have to be devoted to gaining trust with staff, teachers, and students to accomplish the goal of creating inclusive school communities. Andrew informed us that he didn't understand "the depth of which this work needed to be done" and the many layers that existed within the work of racial inclusion via race-consciousness and cultural awareness. Each teacher became mindful that they would have to first attend to *why* racial equity work was

important within their schools before they could attend to *what* needed to be done to instill race-consciousness and cultural awareness in their schools.

Subsequently, in and through conversations with staff and our team, each teacher was able to identify a specific intervention that reflected at least one goal embedded in Banks' framework of multicultural education. Antoine's work sought to include the voices and experiences of people of color in the US History curriculum and chose to capitalize on an imminent opportunity to redesign curriculum in the social studies department that he chaired. While he might have identified a variety of approaches to building racial equity consciousness and approaches in his school, he chose an approach over which he had significant control but not complete authority. In retrospect we see this as a wise choice, as he was a fairly new leader within his department. As one of the few teachers of color in the building, he may have also felt that his ability to extend beyond his locus of control would have been met with resistance or have been too time-consuming to generate support. His aspirations for racial equity work at his school certainly extended beyond a redesign of the US History curriculum, as he strongly considers himself an ally of student voice for BIPOC students who feel that administration does not listen to them, but it was certainly a good place to start given his positionality and tenure at the school. His desire to create "spaces where students can really voice concern, discomfort, where they trust people in a school setting" such as East cemented him in this work even more.

Andrew sought to build a pedagogical approach among teachers that was focused on equity to generate teaching approaches that were culturally responsive. In our conversations with Andrew, we suggested a first round of CRP professional development with a smaller cohort of teachers who would volunteer to participate. We suggested that a first volunteer cohort of teachers would likely bring energy and focus to the process and be more willing to experiment with CRP approaches in their classrooms. These experiences could then be shared with larger groups of teachers in subsequent years. Too often a mandated and institutionalized approach that doesn't take the time to develop teachers and earn their buy-in, can instead generate resistance. While seeking to avoid this dynamic in this approach, we also realized that the work would take more time to achieve scale.

Pace of Work

The teachers in this study learned over the course of the process that change in schools is slower and more methodical than they had anticipated. Antoine moved fairly quickly during the project to analyze the existing US History curriculum. He knew from experience that the curriculum was centered in whiteness, however, he sought the confirmation of an analytical study that would confirm his claim statistically. Indeed, results of student and teacher surveys revealed what he had suspected: BIPOC students were less likely to see themselves in the curriculum in substantive ways, and teachers reported clear differences in instructional approaches between AP and regular instruction, which appeared to further disadvantage BIPOC students. Pivoting from these critical data points to action, Antoine embarked on a curriculum redesign process that would more accurately reflect the stories and experiences of people of color. Our team supported this effort by developing theme-based curricular units. The anticipated curriculum design timing slowed to a standstill later in the school year and is still planned.

Similarly, Andrew worked with our team to facilitate a 10-session professional development series on culturally relevant curriculum. A total of 11 faculty members joined the sessions and demonstrated enthusiasm for the content as they navigated CRP for the first time. The sessions were spread over eight months in one-hour increments over Zoom due to the pandemic and other commitments of teachers in the school building. By the end of a year of training sessions, teachers were ready to take the first steps toward including CRP strategies in their classrooms. Andrew continued to exert appropriate levels of support and challenge with the teachers but in the process came to recognize the pace of change in school settings is a lot more complicated than originally thought.

Navigating Tension and Resistance

Tension came from different places over the course of this project: fellow teachers, administrators, district officials, and parents. While generally eager to engage, South was presented with challenges and concerns in their equity work initiative. One concern was teacher buy-in and the fear of "doing equity work wrong." Concerns were also present among teachers regarding conservative parents who might be offended at the shift in curriculum or, alternatively, those parents who might perceive South High's efforts as inadequate. Some teachers at East High suggested that schools with larger BIPOC and working-class student populations would

benefit more from a diverse, inclusive curriculum. Some colleagues, according to Antoine, seemed nervous about his desire to be more proactive in meeting the needs of BIPOC students.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) racial protests during summer of 2020 opened some new windows but also made tensions more profound. The informal school leaders in this study were faced with another challenge to navigate as they received negative emails from families reluctant to support the George Floyd protests and address students' concerns about racialized tensions in the larger community. Antoine noticed that the tension of the protest created a polarizing effect in the community at East High. Some families were even spurred by President Trump's response to BLM and characterization of its motives.

BLM protests also acted as a catalyst for informal leaders' efforts to push forward their work in racial equity. Michael stated that the summer protests encouraged more substantial conversations about events taking place. Likewise, Antoine stated that the summer protests "created opportunities for more staff to seek out spaces to talk [and] more confident in resisting and pushing back" on those resistant to change. Andrew also reported that the dynamics of his school had changed as parents were taking the opportunity to "push back about the Eurocentricness" of the world history curriculum in efforts to make the curriculum more inclusive of groups who have been historically marginalized.

Conclusions

Each of the teachers in this study stepped into a challenging and critical space of the racial equity work that we believe schools need to do across the country. Diversifying suburban schools, in particular, represent a unique, and we would argue urgent context for doing equity work. Unlike their urban counterparts where, due to a wide variety of government and school laws, policies, and actions, schools saw their student populations shift dramatically from white to BIPOC in the 1960s and 1970s, suburban school populations, particularly in more affluent areas, have experienced a slower demographic transition. But that transition has been accelerating over the past decade. Current teacher demographics, however, continue to represent a discontinuity for students and an ongoing challenge for BIPOC students. The three schools in this study have been taking beginning steps to engage this work, which has in part been led by informal teacher leaders.

The literature suggests that this work, even when principals with organizational authority lead, is challenging and takes time. Informal teacher leaders who step into this work bring a unique, grassroots perspective that can energize and move racial equity work forward, but they also may be limited in what they can accomplish without institutional supports. Through our engagement with these teachers and their teams along with our interview and focus group process, we witnessed deep commitments to this work from each of the three teachers. Antoine and Michael brought deep personal commitments to racial equity work based on their lived experiences. They presented a sense of urgency and purpose that, we believe, was borne of deeply personal experiences. Though each brought these personal commitments and hope-filled vision to the process, we also surmise that their ability to move this work forward may have been limited by a combination of factors including their racial identity, institutional positionality, years of service, and organizational context. Antoine and Michael were in school and district contexts where race equity work was beginning (voluntary diversity training), but clear goals and action plans were not yet in place. The ECI provided an opportunity for school leaders to identify one or more areas to focus their equity work. Antoine is still in the process of taking the data developed in US history course surveys and content frameworks that we developed and translating that into a revised curriculum. Michael, as we have suggested earlier, never gained the support of school administrators to identify a target area for development. We feel this was a missed opportunity to support and uplift a teacher of color.

Andrew, on the other hand, came to this work less from lived, racialized experiences and more from his observations of how students in the building were reporting and experiencing disconnections and discontinuities in their daily lives at school. Unlike Antoine and Michael, Andrew appeared to have a fully supportive principal who made time to attend meetings and professional development sessions along with a visionary superintendent who was working toward racial equity. We do not definitively argue that racial identity was important in moving the work forward here, but we also cannot ignore its presence among the leaders in this work.

As issues of equity and inclusion are raised by teachers, students, parents or community members or are present in available data, the reality that schools have to change in multiple ways—curriculum, pedagogy, culture, prejudice reduction, student empowerment, and epistemological understandings—may and does incur resistance. White students may not notice the problem of existing prejudice and racism or worse exacerbate the problem. White teachers

may not be open and willing to change long-standing practices. Administrators may not see the importance or understand the deep institutional investment that needs to be made to sustain change over time. Principals may not be positioned personally, professionally, or contextually to facilitate change effectively. And parents may push back with grievances about proposed changes as the school seeks to be more open to and inclusive of BIPOC students.

What can be accomplished in diversifying suburban schools around racial equity when informal teachers choose to lead? Banks' multicultural education framework provides an excellent roadmap to consider strategic entry points within a broader framing that helps us understand the breadth and complexity of the work. The teachers in our sample, for the most part, were able to identify a specific area of engagement to move racial equity work forward. As they did so, they received varying levels of support from fellow teachers and administrators. Teachers moving a chunk of the work forward represents, we believe, a promising grassroots strategy that can demonstrate to the school community how racial equity can move forward; however, school and district level administrators have to play an important role in offering educators and students learning communities that foster healthy learning. This work highlights how tending to the social-emotional aspect of schooling for students is the responsibility of all within the teaching and learning process.

For each of the schools, a broader commitment to diversity work was present. We believe that this was a helpful framing and source of support for teachers as they engaged the work. The broader commitment to the work did not always appear to be at odds with a narrower strategic focus on the work, however, we surmise that North High School severed ties with the project at least in part because formal school and district leaders were not comfortable having external partners in the work at the level of strategic intervention. At South High School, on the other hand, the grassroots equity work was welcomed as an important contribution to the work with the university bringing needed expertise.

Literature suggests that in curriculum redesign efforts, developers should address an overabundance of "whiteness" in the curriculum. These efforts should challenge existing knowledge frameworks instead of simply adding representation, engage a critical race and race-conscious treatment of social studies, lessen reliance on traditional textbook approaches to social studies instruction, analyze discourse and discursive strategies that reinforce white norms, invite student funds of knowledge and experience in the classroom, and develop relational approaches

to curriculum that consider intersecting identities. And as schools and schools of education prepare teachers for more inclusive curriculum, they must engage teacher candidates in social identity work and privilege acknowledgement but also move toward interrogating how whiteness is produced and shapes racist classroom practice. It is critical to prepare and support teachers to deconstruct curricular and pedagogical approaches where standards and practices steeped in whiteness are in place and instead deliver more inclusive approaches.

As diversifying schools think about equity-focused, culturally sustaining pedagogies, it is important to recognize that considering representation in curriculum and providing training in pedagogy is not sufficient, particularly in spaces where there is a racial or cultural discontinuity between teachers and students. Professional development must include social identity, cultural construction, privilege, and deconstructing whiteness work as part of teacher development. As we conducted our CRP work with teachers, we were consistently reminded that most teachers were experiencing culturally responsive pedagogy for the first time. Without engaging social identity, the realities of racism, the layers of deep culture operative in buildings, and unearned privilege and whiteness, we risk offering a fix to schools that does not acknowledge the hard work of deconstructing white supremacy. We also risk essentializing BIPOC students who more often than not represent the minority of students in most classrooms.

Many predominantly white suburban schools are experiencing growing diversity in their buildings and in their communities. They can, of course, choose to proceed as normal hoping that their BIPOC students assimilate into the existing culture of the school. By taking the risk, however, to assess current practices, reflect on what needs to change, and act towards greater racial and cultural inclusion for all students, they can create learning environments that welcome and engage all students. Teachers who take the lead in this work are taking a personal and professional risk. But stepping into the gap to take on this work, they are providing energy, vision, purpose, and grassroots leadership that can support broader school goals and generate authentic and thoughtful participation among colleagues.

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