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Facing Race: A Project for Talking about Race in a Classroom Setting

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by

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DEDICATION

To my students from whom I have learned so much, you are the reason I find courage for this work, you inspire me. Thank you to my family, friends, and colleagues for humoring the hours of verbal processing it took for my ideas to fully form. Thank you to my partner, Austin, who supported my need to hide from the toddler and write. A special thank you to my capstone committee and reviewers, Erin Burns for your amazing insight, and my mother-in-law, Dr. Karen Rainford for your keen APA formatting eye. Finally, thank you to all of the revolutionary Black and Brown students, activists, leaders, and educators past and present who demand justice with every word, I have learned so much from you.

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Introduction

Educators play a key role in social change. We are the gatekeepers whether we want to be or not. Teachers have been failing students in our complacency to be moderate teachers. Moderate teachers acknowledge that there are inequities and gaps in education, but allow those systems of power to control students' learning, which reinforces white systems of oppression and perpetuates the system of white power. As I write this, our Black and Brown students' protests are sweeping around the world calling for social justice reforms in policing and education. Student voices are finally being heard. School boards are severing ties to police departments in recognition of the criminalization of our students in school. Teachers are looking for resources to bring culturally responsive pedagogy into their classrooms and diversify their content. But this isn't enough.

Anti-racism is an active way of being that requires one to constantly analyze how we are all contributing to on-going racism and learning how to take action to work against it (Singleton & Linton, 2006). To truly do anti-racist work and to truly do our students justice, we need to learn how to talk about race in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2018; McManimon, 2019; Rector-Aranda, 2016; Singleton & Linton, 2006). We need to authentically approach racism and internal biases with our colleagues, administrators, families, and students (Gillborn, 2019; Love, 2019; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Rector-Aranda 2016). We need to empower ourselves and our students to challenge the status quo and have the courage to feel, to hurt, to heal, and to change (Baldwin, 1962; Fantuzzo, 2018; Pirette 2020; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Weissglass, 2001). Social

justice has long used dialogue as a way to promote understanding and empathy across differences. In fact, in 1903 W.E.B. DuBois (1996) said,

> I am a person, and you are a person. Whatever belongs to me as well belongs to you. If I reveal my soul, you will recognize it, for it is the common bond, shared by all who lay claim to membership in the human race. (p. viii)

To reveal your soul is to lay bare what you know and what you do not know. It is to be vulnerable, to seek to understand, and to empathize with others, to be human. We must be willing to unlearn in order to learn, so we can see injustice and have the courage to act. This is the work we need to do, but how can educators engage in authentic dialogue about race to advance racial justice for our students?

This capstone examines this important question and is inspired by my experiences as a teacher within a school and district that has begun exploring issues of inequity within our district culture, policies, teaching practices, and professional development. In this chapter, I will share my personal reflection of the urgency of educational justice for students, the work of becoming an anti-racist teacher in the classroom, the role white educators play in dismantling systemic inequities, and the importance of empathy, story-telling, and fostering courageous conversations about race in classroom settings.

Personal Reflection

Before I begin telling my story, it is important to know the privileges I am bringing to this capstone. I am a white, female, middle class educator who has benefited from many of the institutions I will be discussing in this paper. I am constantly learning, unlearning, and evolving my understanding of race, injustice, and privilege and am

working to use my privilege to further the work that must be done by white people to advance racial justice. My journey of discovering whiteness began in college and from that point on, I have been attending trainings, professional development workshops, and expanding my knowledge and research around marginalized communities. It has become a passion of mine to work for those whose voices have been stifled by antiquated and oppressive institutions. I make this distinction because I do not wish to speak for people of color or communities of color, but wish to engage white folks in important conversations that we have been traditionally so good at avoiding. But it is that avoidance that must be addressed if we are to authentically take steps towards racial justice.

I also want to make a special recognition of my choice of language and capitalization that I use throughout this paper. In my 6th grade classroom, I speak about how language has power whether we realize it or not, and according to Mukhopadhyay "language is one of the most systematic, subtle, and significant vehicles for transmitting racial ideology" (Pollock, 2008, p.12). My students learn to examine language closely for connotation, denotation, mood, tone, and marginalization. Because white people have for centuries used their power to belittle and dehumanize people of color, I intentionally do not capitalize "white" when I refer to white populations; however, I do intentionally capitalize Black and Brown populations as my way of trying to add linguistic power to those who historically were allowed none. I mention this here, because many formatting guides would specifically call for all racial groups to be capitalized, an erasure of a linguistic power imbalance, when the reality is, there is no such current equality.

In the following sections, I discuss the call of social justice to do better for our students of color, the role white folks play in that journey, and what we must do if we are to be anti-racist teachers.

Our Students can't Breathe

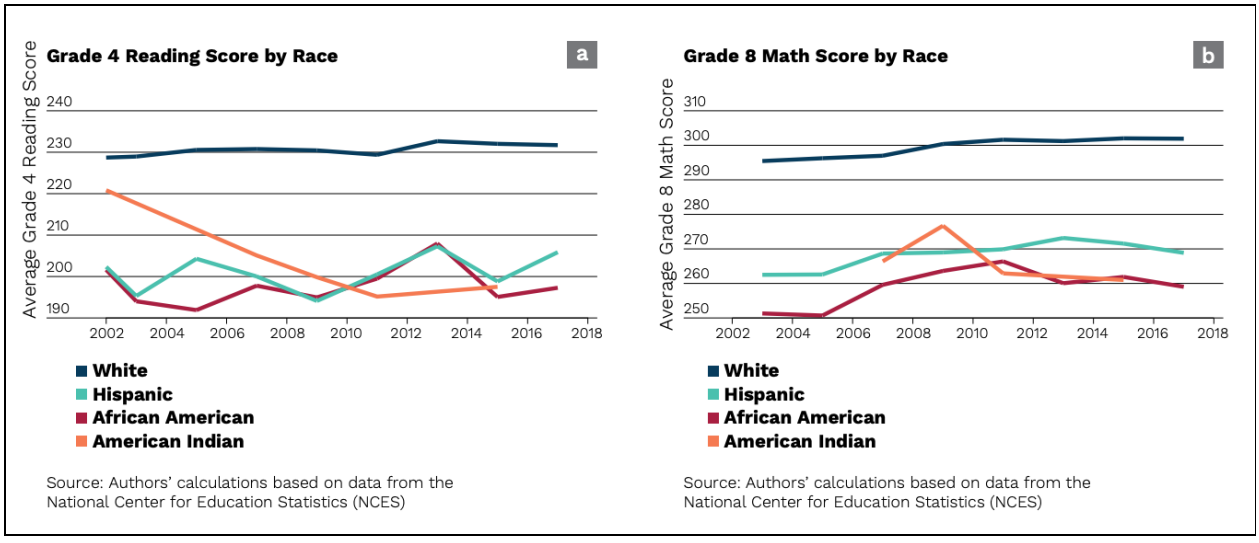
The true nature of race in America was brutally brought to the mainstream in the wake of George Floyd's death at the hands of a white police officer in Minneapolis (Hill, et al., 2020). Too long have white Americans been telling themselves that racism and white supremacy died in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, when it has been festering and going unchecked for decades. Our Black and Brown communities have been crying out to us about injustices in our society for years, from mothers literally crying out injustice in losing yet another son, daughter, husband, or wife at the hands of police (Code Switch, 2020), to data screaming to us that there are drastic gaps in education that leads to opportunity gaps in jobs, wealth, housing, and more in our communities of color (Rosalsky, 2020). But it seems that we (white Americans) are just now opening our eyes to the devastating reality that white supremacy is alive and well in America.

The words "I can't breathe," have been burned into the skin of our nation and have ignited a long overdue transformational movement across the country. But our students in schools across the nation have been showing educators that they can't breathe for decades through the numbers. Minnesota state test scores highlight the dramatic achievement gap between students of color and their peers with students of color scoring about 30 points lower than white students on reading tests, and almost 40 points lower

than white students on math tests as indicated in Figure 1 (Grunewald & Nath, 2019); data also show the disproportionate number of students of color who are suspended or expelled in school with the enrollment of Black students in Minnesota being 10.7% yet, 32.9% of disciplinary actions were for Black students (Cherry, 2018, pp. 6-7); absenteeism also shows us that our communities of color need help, in particular of the 13% of enrolled students who were chronically absent from school in 2016, 38% of those were American Indian, and 19% were Black (Minnesota Department of Education, 2019). Numbers don't lie. There are dramatic inequities within our educational system that not only stifles and snuffs out the success of our Black and Brown students, but it also perpetuates a system of power and white supremacy that emboldens the status quo and creates a subclass of citizens within our country. We have not erased racism in America, we have hidden behind the veil of colorblindness and the education system is at the heart of the problem.

Figure 1

Achievement Gap Reading and Math Scores by Race



Note. There is a dramatic difference in student performance based on race in both reading and math over time (Grunewald & Nath, 2019).

There have been countless measures, programs, and curriculums designed to respond to the achievement gap, yet we see little improvement in student testing data. According to the Walton Family Foundation (2017), the achievement gap has been getting marginally smaller, in 1965, Black 12th grade students were on average 3.03 years behind white students in math and 2.93 years behind white students in reading; in 2015 Black 12th grade students were slightly better off, yet still 2.67 years behind white students in math and 2.14 years behind in reading. Economics also plays a role in how students perform in academic testing, but still doesn't explain why Black and Brown students consistently perform at lower levels than their white peers (Grunewald & Nath, 2019). Singleton and Linton (2006) suspect the achievement gap persists so strongly because of institutionalized racism, which they define as "the unexamined and unchallenged system of racial biases and residual white advantage that persist in [our] institutions of learning" (p. 33). Schools that have undertaken the challenge of talking about race and the impacts of institutionalized racism within the education system have seen profound growth in their students' achievement. One case study of a school district in North Carolina found significant improvement in achievement for students of color after completing two years of a program called "Courageous Conversations" (Singleton, 2006) which helps educators discuss issues of race and examine how it affects the education of their students. Before this program only four schools were meeting the federal Average Yearly Progress goals, but after two years of the program, 14 out of 15

schools were meeting the national goals (Singleton, 2006, p. 32). Clearly, having authentic conversations about race with teachers and administration can lead to significant outcomes for our students.

A White Teacher's Responsibility

As our country continues to diversify and grow, the numbers of Black and Brown students in our classrooms nationally are increasing steadily, from 39% in 2000 to 52% in 2017, with projections for 2029 for 54% students of color (Hussar et.al. 2020). However, 82% of those entering the teaching profession are white (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The adults in our schools are not reflecting the reality of our student populations, but are the primary caregivers who are the product of white privilege. Because of this, it is up to white educators to take responsibility for the system of white privilege that is subversively infecting our education system. Educators cannot rely on social justice organizations like Black Lives Matter to eradicate racism in our schools. We also cannot put ourselves in the role of the "white savior" (Cole, 2012) and act as though we are students' only hope in navigating systems of privilege. Rather, we (white educators) need to use the institutionalized power given to us to teach our students how to think critically, value their contributions to learning, and empower them to challenge the status quo.

Educators need to be able to take risks, be okay with being wrong, and be willing to listen — we need to be students again. We need to unlearn institutionalized whiteness by learning about the gaps in our own education. In the very least, we need educators who are willing to engage in conversations about critical thinking and analysis of issues like race, not changing the subject or ignoring it when it inevitably comes up in school.

We need educators to not actively stand in the way of change, but embrace the idea that learning and transformational change can happen at any age and it can happen to them. If white educators don't step up to the challenge of confronting race in our schools, we are doomed to continue churning out two unequal classes of citizens.

The Work of Becoming an Anti-Racist

The work of learning to talk about race is not fun. It is uncomfortable and it is essential. However, uncovering systems of privilege and understanding your own biases can be freeing. For me it was like unlocking a secret door that was hiding a part of the world, it was the beginning of becoming an anti-racist and understanding how I could use my privilege and power to influence and empower students in their learning. As a white woman who benefited from the systems of privilege in place, and as someone who is continually struggling and working towards anti-racism, it is my duty to continually speak up and speak out against inequity in the educational system. In my first three years of teaching in a diverse urban school, I challenged and changed the curriculum I taught, facilitated difficult conversations with students, and built close relationships with them.

I teach 6th grade language arts and I love the energy and kookiness students bring into the classroom. The first novel study of the year was always *Crash* by Jerry Spinelli, an older novel published in 1996 about a 7th grade football star who bullies a nice Quaker boy, but in the end the football star does a good deed and shows character change. It was a cute book, but didn't reflect any lived experiences, cultures, or ideas that my students brought to the classroom. As a first year teacher, I wasn't sure how much power I had to change curriculum, so I worked with what I had. In reading and discussing the

book, I had students look beyond the words on the page and asked them to translate it into their lives. What comparisons could they draw? What would be different in today's schools? What would you do if you had a friend who was bullying other people? In this way, at least we had conversations about what it meant to be a bully, why people become bullies, and how to be an upstander and do the right thing if you see bullying at our school. My problem is not in the message of this book, but in how it in no way reflected the diversity or experiences of our students in our actual classrooms.

At first I felt odd questioning the curriculum, after all I was a first year teacher and I had never done this before, I wanted to keep my job and not make huge waves in the language arts department, but there are thousands of amazing books that teach the same learning targets of theme, symbolism, plot structure, and character development. Why not pick a novel that is more culturally relevant to our students? Fortunately, I was met with enthusiasm from my colleagues. We have a reading literacy coach in our building that strongly supports weaving in multicultural texts and has been building up a multicultural library for smaller literature circles. I worked with librarians, co-teachers, and the literacy coach to try to bring in choice and diversity to our class novel selections. While I still taught *Crash* to stay in alignment with my colleagues, we added literature circles to our curriculum, which allows us to be nimble in choices and our selections can change from year to year depending on topics and new titles. This was the first time I felt empowered to make changes in how we approach content in relation to our diverse population of students.

Since that first year, I have taken a more diverse approach with novel study selections and have seen great success when novels reflect the real and lived experiences of my students, including texts that directly talk about race, current events, and social justice. For example, this year, with online distance learning in full swing, I found my students disengaging with our purchased curriculum. After one quarter of trying to engage students with little success, I decided to move to a class novel study and journaling unit with a novel of our classes' choice. We previewed three novels and had the class vote to see which we would study together. The class chose *Count Me In* by Varsha Bajaj (2019), a present-day novel told in two perspectives about an Indian American family and their experiences with a hate crime. The perspectives were that of a young Indian American girl, and the white boy who lived next door to her. These perspectives allowed our class to see and talk about how race can impact our experiences with the world, and what it means for white people to be co-conspirators for their friends of color. Not only did we have ample opportunity to talk about race, but because the novel takes place in the present, we also discussed how social media can be both a source of power and healing and a way to generate fear and hate. Each day students were expected to complete a five minute reflection journal tied to a prompt that included a learning target. Each week, students would select two of their journal entries showing their mastery of the week's learning targets to submit for feedback. Our classes revolved around shared reading, discussing and analyzing text, sharing personal connections, asking questions, and writing in our journals.

My class attendance shot up. Students who had not participated or turned in work, started talking and sharing their thoughts, they started to turn in their journals. Students who were not doing well in other classes were excelling in mine. I was getting parent emails about how their student was loving class and asking what book we were reading so they could buy a copy and read with their student. I was getting true engagement!

For all of the success I had with this unit, I did have one family reach out and express their anger for directly talking about race with their child. This was in response to a structured class day, where I asked the school counselor to come to our class and help us process the hate crime that had just happened in the book. The parent of the child had overheard some of the conversation that was taking place and was not pleased with how race was defined or how we talked about historical power imbalances and how they still exist today. I was able to work with my administrative team, the counselor, and my co-teachers to arrange a listening session with the family to hear their concerns. It was one of the most challenging conversations I have had as a teacher, as someone who is working towards anti-racism. It was hard for me to hear a family attacking my morals as a teacher, but it fueled my rationale for teaching the book even more. While it was monumentally uncomfortable to have this conversation and hear their justifications, that family had to verbalize their understanding of race, while also listening to ours. They had to talk about race with us, and their child. No matter how they felt about me as a teacher, they had to have a conversation about race, and perhaps, some part of our conversation opened a door for change. I believe it is this kind of parent backlash that prevents many teachers from directly engaging in conversations about race in the classroom. However, it

is critical that we remember, we do have a duty to amplify the experiences and voices of our Black and Brown students in a system of white privilege, even if that means having challenging conversations with families. Our personal discomfort does not matter if we are doing what is best for our students.

Students are hungry to talk about history, oppression, activism, social justice, and change. I embrace these opportunities to weave in background knowledge from our past and current struggles towards a more just and equitable world. They relish the opportunity to study change makers and dream of becoming one. We need to foster our students' fiery curiosity and embrace difficult conversations of our oppressive past and present, it is how we learn from our mistakes, move forward, and make change for the future. However, I am just one 6th grade language arts teacher out of many, and I know they are not teaching this novel or anything like it. What about other classes with different teachers? Do they have the opportunity to critically engage with their content in a way that talks about race and oppression?

Critically engaging in content is an important part of learning to talk about race in a classroom, but we also need to critically engage our students and bring their lives into our classrooms. I find that by being authentic, genuine, and transparent with students, talking plainly about my critiques of novels, current events, and student actions, I am able to build students' trust and gain their respect in the classroom. I invite students to share their own opinions and critiques about what we were doing in class or not doing in class. I invite them to be co-creators of their learning experiences and through this I am able to foster genuine relationships with my students. I know not all content areas are as flexible

in their content, but I do think it is possible to allow students into the process of creating their own learning and in doing so, building trusting relationships between teachers and students that can set the stage for critical conversations that lead to racial justice.

Summary: Our Call to Action

The common thread of anti-racist work is continuous dialogue and critique of the world around you. My journey is constantly evolving as I learn more and more about my own biases, the bias in curriculum, and the bias with which we see each other in the classroom setting. It is not enough to just not be racist, but in order to dismantle the engrained systems of oppression within our education system, all teachers need to be actively anti-racist. This does not mean that they find all the answers to oppression in one training; rather, it means teachers are involved in the learning process just as much as their students, and are constantly learning how they can do better, how they can spot bias, address it, and take action on it. They are constantly seeking out ways to involve themselves in anti-racist work because they know they bear the responsibility of dismantling it from within. We need not wait for district trainings or administrators to get the "go ahead" to become an anti-racist. We can look to our own teachers, our own staff, who have already started the work and encourage each other to experiment, learn, fail, and work towards educational justice. We don't need to be experts, we just need to have courage to speak up and give our Black and Brown students the opportunities, the education they deserve.

The Roadmap Ahead

In chapter two, I will briefly review a selection of the research and literature on education's quest for educational equity by analyzing new perspectives on the academic achievement gap, which will allow us to better see and understand how racism fuels injustice in education. I will then explore literature on how educators can resist institutionalized racism by enlisting courage and love, and end the review by exploring the concept of everyday anti-racism. In chapter three, I will describe the project implemented in my school. And in chapter four, I will share my reflections and connections back to the literature, and suggest next steps to continue anti-racist work and continuing to engage in respectful dialogue about race in the classroom setting.

CHAPTER TWO

"Just because something is impossible does not mean it is not worth doing."
-Derrick Bell, 1994

Literature Review: The Quest for True Equity

American beliefs of the myth of meritocracy, or if you work hard you can achieve regardless of your racial/cultural background, fuels the American Dream (McIntosh, 1988). Education has long been used as a means for upward mobility. However, education has not been (and arguably, is still not) equal to all citizens. Black and Brown people in the United States continue to struggle for racial equality in education more than 50 years after the passing of the Civil Rights Act. The achievement gap has seen little change in the 50 years we have been studying it, and racial tensions are highlighting the historical, economic, sociopolitical, and moral debts that have been accumulating for centuries and are still contributing to unequal access to life and liberty for people of color. If we are to truly address racial inequity in our education system, we need to look beyond the achievement gap and instead look at how the systems that created the achievement gap continue to influence our students' ability to thrive in school. In order to do this work we need to engage in critical conversations with students, with other staff, and with our communities, but first we need to ask ourselves, "How can educators engage in authentic dialogue about race to advance racial justice for students?"

This area of research is continually expanding and evolving, so this literature review is a small selection and aims to provide context and grounding to address how educators can work to engage in authentic dialogue about race. This brief literature review first analyzes the quest for true equity by looking at the achievement gap through

a race critical lens by exploring alternative understandings of the achievement gap. Then the review discusses the importance of acknowledging and truly seeing racism in education as part of the quest for equity by trying to decipher how educational systems in place fund ongoing racism, including an analysis of the effects of white privilege, and attempts at including multiculturalism as mechanisms that continue to inadvertently fund racism. Next the review continues the quest for equity by exploring how educators can use courage and love to resist funding racism and start the work of dismantling racism. The review of the literature concludes by examining how to enlist an anti-racist mindset and become anti-racist teachers who intentionally use authentic dialogue to work towards racial justice for our Black and Brown students. All of this work helps to clarify the question for equity and answer the question, "How can educators engage in authentic dialogue about race to advance racial justice for students?"

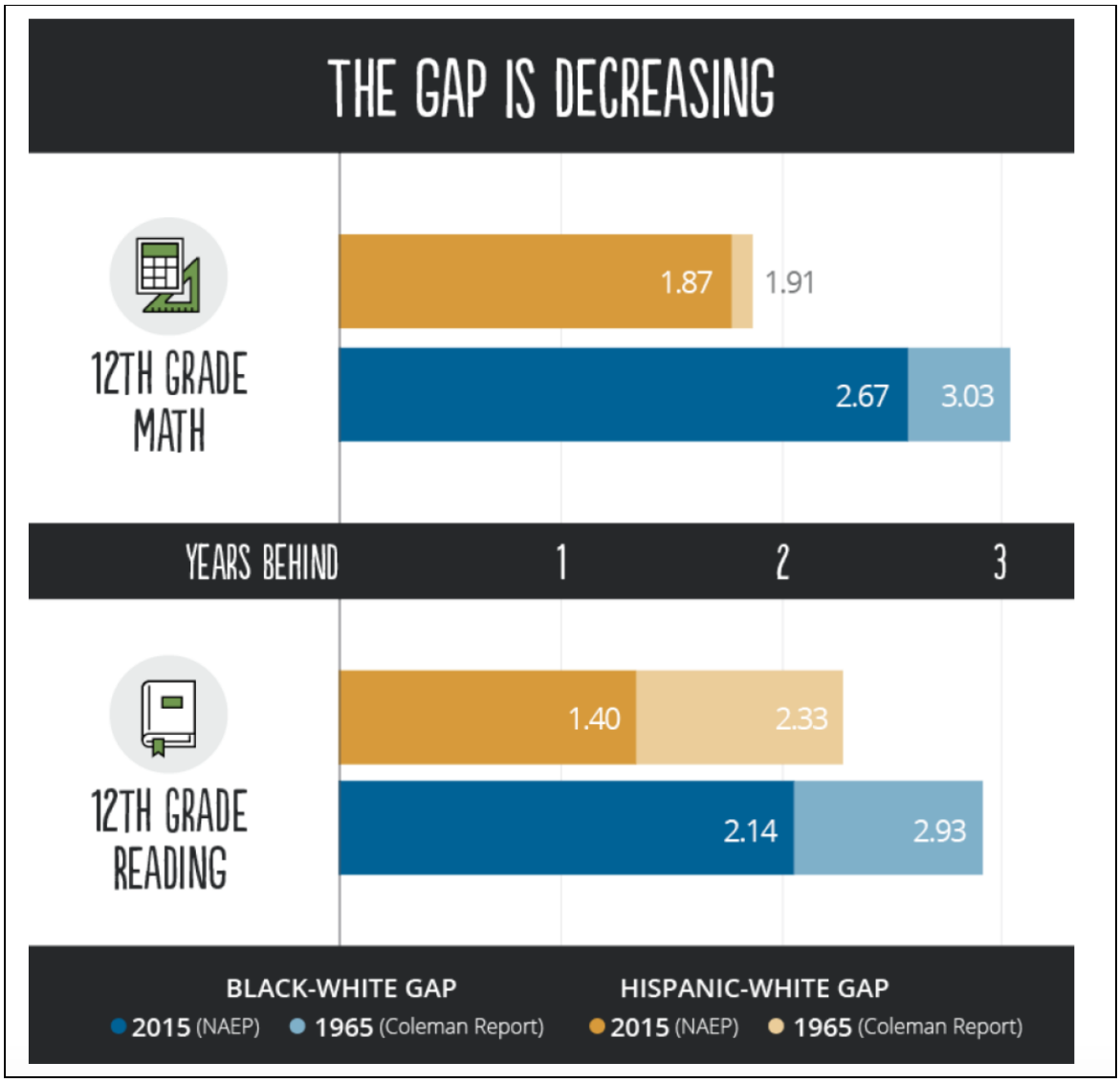
Achievement Gap vs. Education Debt

Education focuses heavily on standardized tests and the achievement gap to measure the success of schools and teachers. The achievement gap, the difference in academic achievement between students of color and white students, has become the report card of how our nation's schools are providing an equal educational opportunity for all students and it seems according to the numbers, we are failing our students of color and have been for quite some time. The metric has been used to measure differences in students' academic achievements since the 1960s, as part of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In the Coleman Report, the first report of the academic achievement gap in 1966, researchers found that large gaps persisted between white students and students of color,

with 12th grade Black students measuring almost 3 years behind white peers in reading and math; and Latinx students almost 2 years behind in math and 2.5 years behind in reading (Walton Family Foundation, 2017). Now, over 50 years later, those gaps have decreased slightly, but still show Black students are 2 years behind in reading and 2.5 years behind in math; and Latinx students 1.5 years behind in reading and 1.9 years behind in math compared to white students today (Walton Family Foundation, 2017). Figure 2 shows the minimal decrease in the achievement gap between 1965 and 2015.

Figure 2

The Achievement Gap is Decreasing



Note. Figure 2 shows the little decrease in the achievement gap of reading and math between 1965 and 2015. (Walton family foundation, 2017)

The Coleman report suggested that family circumstances, communities, and peer to peer interactions were the main contributing factors leading to the dramatic differences between students of color and their white peers. In other words, the cultures of Black and

Brown students didn't provide the same framework for academic success as white students. Ladson-Billings (1996, 2006, 2018), Love (2019), and Chandler and McKnight (2009) argue that this kind of interpretation of the achievement gap, a focus on cultural deficit theory (suggesting that lifestyles of students of color hinder their ability to learn), integrated classrooms, family backgrounds, stereotype threat, curriculum, and pedagogy, are all pieces that contribute to a basic understanding of the achievement gap, but move educators towards short-term solutions and initiatives that ultimately do not address the underlying problem of systemic racism and oppression in the history of education.

Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that "we do not have an achievement gap; we have an education debt" (p. 5). An education debt is the accumulation of years of racism, oppression, and state-sanctioned denial of education and opportunities to people of color that have hindered their ability to achieve social, economic, and educational equality with their white peers with a centuries long legacy that persists to this day. The education debt consists of historical debt, economic debt, sociopolitical debt, and moral debt.

The historical debt refers to the racist policies endorsed by historical figures like Thomas Jefferson and George Washington (both owned slaves and had interest in maintaining slavery), supreme court rulings such as Plessy vs. Ferguson in 1896 proclaiming segregation legal, the Jim Crow laws (separate but equal), to inequity in schools today. Ladson-Billings (2006) explains the historical implications for African Americans specifically:

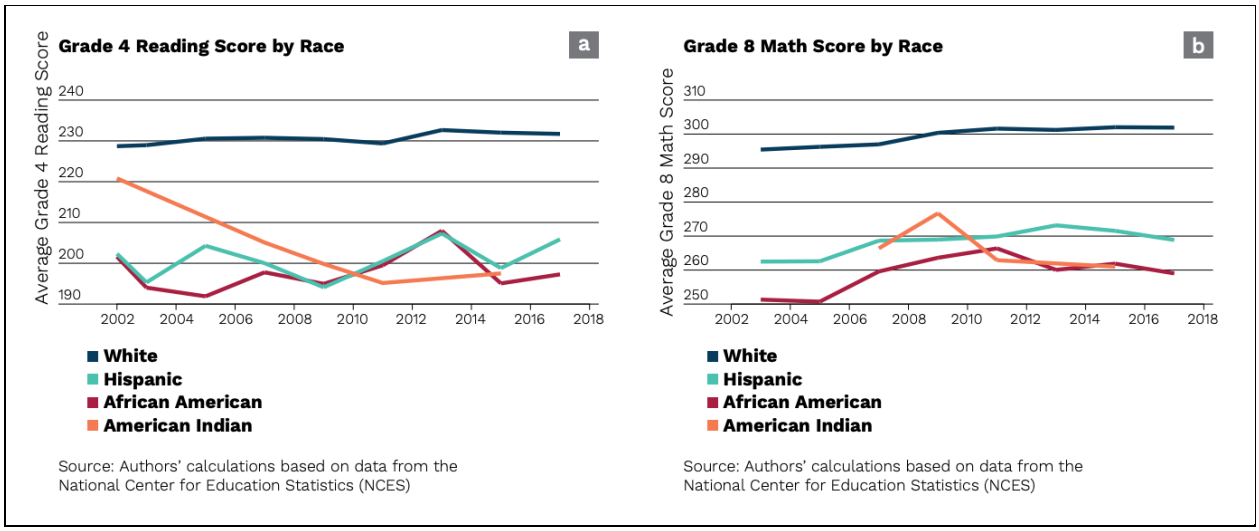
> In the case of African Americans education was initially forbidden during the period of enslavement. After emancipation we saw the development of

> Freedmen's schools whose purpose was the maintenance of a servant class. During the long period of legal apartheid, African Americans attended schools where they received cast-off textbooks and materials from white schools. In the South, the need for farm labor meant that the typical school year for rural Black students was about 4 months long. Indeed, Black students in the South did not experience universal secondary schooling until 1968. Why, then, would we not expect there to be an achievement gap? (p. 5)

This historical debt is extended further to Native Americans. In 1864, Congress passed a law that made it illegal for American Indians to be taught in their native language, effectively "spirit murdering," them as a people (Love, 2019). American Indians were forcibly removed from their homelands multiple times and sent to Indian boarding schools where their language and culture was erased in order to control and assimilate indigenous people into white society (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019). The effects of this trauma are still seen today with our indigenous students and families and the dying of their native languages, pillage of their native lands (in recent memory Standing Rock (Noisecat, 2020), and the dramatic academic achievement gap between Native American and white students. In Minnesota alone, there were almost 40 points difference between 8th grade Native American students and white students in reading and math scores in 2018 (Grunewald & Nath, 2019). Figure 1 shows the dramatic difference in reading and math scores between white students and Native American students.

Figure 1

Achievement Gap Reading and Math Scores by Race



Note. There is a dramatic difference in student performance based on race in both reading and math over time (Grunewald & Nath, 2019).

Education has long been tied to upward economic mobility, but because of the historical debt it is clear that there is also an economic debt for people of color because of the lack of educational opportunities. Job earnings are directly related to years of schooling and there is a giant earnings gap between people of color and white folks. The average earnings for a Black man in 1940 was about 48% less than that of a white man (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In 1980, that number went up to 61%, and in 1993, it was 74% (Ladson-Billings, 2006). With each passing decade, the wealth gap between people of color and white folks is increasing. Earnings disparities then translate to funding disparities in education. Since schools are funded by their local communities, communities with lower incomes drive fewer dollars into their schools, thus expanding

the funding gap of schools and repeating the cycle of economic debt in communities of color.

Communities of color have also been historically excluded from the civics process creating a sociopolitical debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Voting was suppressed for many communities, particularly those in the South until the Voting Rights Act of 1965, directly impacting the voices of people of color in governance and policies directly affecting them. And even with waves made in the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, there were still limited, if any, opportunities for people of color to serve in governing bodies like the PTA, school boards, or community organizations; or to serve in teaching and administrative positions within schools—again stifling the opportunity for voice and representation in institutions that directly affect families and communities of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Lack of educational opportunities also meant a lack of lawyers and legislators of color who could advance an agenda that fought for the needs of Black and Brown folks. Few voices from people of color in decision making bodies, directly impacts the educational debt of the nation.

Finally there is a moral debt that is tied to education. The moral debt is the disparity between what we know is right versus what we actually do as a nation (Ladson-Billings, 2006). We know that it is right for kids of all backgrounds to get a public education, but is that education equal for our students? Are they really learning skills that will afford them the opportunity to achieve their American Dream? Yes, there is outrage every time new standardized test data is available and showing minimal (if any) improvement in the achievement gap, but are the people in power willing to act to

address the underlying systemic inequities that contribute to the struggles of Black and Brown children? All of these questions point to the need to have active, authentic discussions about race in order to truly examine the how and why of the achievement gap.

We must address the education debt if we are to truly address the achievement gap. But how do we address the education debt? Both the achievement gap and the education debt is rooted in institutionalized racism across the systems of our country—including the education system, the justice system, and our social system. In the next section I will discuss the research suggesting that we as educators who want to improve schools for our students of color, need to address racism and surface level equity as the driving forces of inequality in learning in our schools.

Truly Seeing Racism

> *"You must accept them and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope. They are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that Black men are inferior to white men."*
> *- James Baldwin, A letter to my nephew, 1965*

As Baldwin so eloquently said in the quote above, educators must work to learn and understand the history and oppression of institutionalized racism in order to be released from it. In doing so, teachers can begin truly seeing racism. This section of the literature review focuses on how racism is continuously funded by mechanisms that are often unintentional and insidious, yet effective in maintaining white supremacy in our society. First the review examines what "funding race" means, then moves to examine how white privilege is meant to remain hidden in its role of funding race, while also

requiring white educators to take ownership of that privilege to lessen the effects of it in education. Finally this section analyzes how educational attempts at incorporating multiculturalism actually contributes to the funding of race and maintaining the status quo.

Funding Race

Reading and literacy is a concept that is fully funded by our society. Citizens put money into programs that support literacy and educators focus on literacy across school grades. Ladson-Billings (2018) argued that race is also fully funded by society, whether intentionally or not. Language is racially coded and funded, for example politically correct language erases race from conversations like “inner-city” as a replacement for poor and Black or “urban” as a representation of Blackness as undesirable traits. Social interactions are racially coded and funded, for example, a white woman clutching her purse and averting her gaze as a Black man enters an elevator. Education is racially coded and funded, for example, a disproportionate amount of Black students are placed in intervention programs or denied access to gifted programs, while also disproportionately being kicked out of classrooms for behavior. Every system we have in place is racially coded and funded, placing the emphasis on maintaining white, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, compliance and ideals. When those programmed institutional ideals get out of sync, the system takes over and tries to maintain white power, which results in social reprimands when using “impolite” language in conversation; white people calling the police simply because a Black person is in their view; and maintaining or increasing the

educational disparities between white and Black students which ensures that people of color have a more difficult time accessing the power that comes with education.

Weissglass (2001) defined racism as "the systematic mistreatment of certain groups of people (often referred to as people of color) on the basis of skin color or other physical characteristics. The mistreatment is carried out by societal institutions, or by people who have been conditioned by society to act, consciously or unconsciously, in harmful ways towards people of color" (p. 266). It is likely most educators are not consciously aware of perpetuating racism in their classes, but the unconscious funding of race in the classroom has a dramatic impact not only on their students' academic performance, but on students' emotional health as well. So, how is race funded in our schools?

Funding race in the classroom manifests in stereotype threat. Stereotype threat is when students perform at the level with which they are expected to perform based on stereotypes. For example, stereotypes that boys are better at science and math than girls. If a teacher reinforces these kinds of stereotypes, students will only rise to the expectations given to them. Students of color experience stereotype threat or low expectations based on their race for academic, social, and economic outcomes (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2018). Low expectations can seep into the classroom through teachers not examining their own biases and allowing stereotypes to influence how they expect students to achieve. Many studies have shown that students will achieve based on the support and encouragement of the teacher, but with students of color experiencing

less authentic support, they are not being held up to the same expectations of their white peers (Delpit, 2012).

Funding race in the classroom also manifests in the transfer and internalization of racism for Black and Brown students. Students of color internalize racism by taking the implicit and explicit messages they receive about their racial identity and start to believe them to be true (Weissglass, 2001). An example of this could be a person of color starting to embody and act on the idea that darkness is akin to inferiority and use racist words or actions against other people of color. An example could be a group of white girls at recess invites a student of color to play, and that student of color starts to intentionally exclude other people of color and embrace a sense of superiority over those not in the recess group.

Racism is also funded in education by omitting the discussion of race as a social construct (Gannon, 2016) from our larger society, from our curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Ladson-Billings, 2018). For example, our coded language allows policy makers to discuss “urban” schools without ever uttering one word about race (Ladson-Billings, 2018; Mayorga & Picower, 2018). Our curriculum is often Eurocentric and has structured absences of information that minimize the importance of Black and Brown folks in the building of American history (Ladson-Billings, 2018). Or perhaps we expand knowledge to the curriculum by adding on work by Black and Brown folks without ever addressing why they needed to be added in the first place (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2018; Rector-Aranda, 2016).

Teacher instruction funds race by not engaging students in discussion about their own racialized experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2018; Rector-Aranda, 2016). How teachers use discipline in the classroom and how they interact with students and expectations contributes to the funding of race. Standardized tests and IQ testing continuously marginalizes students of color without considering the racialized system that characterizes society.

Society (not just teachers) funds race by holding dark children accountable for the achievement gap instead of the educational system (Ladson-Billings, 1996; Love, 2019). Teachers fund race by transferring racist messages to students who then internalize those messages and start to believe that they are not valued, not important enough to be heard, not powerful, not white (Ladson-Billings, 2018, 1996; Weissglass, 2001). Even well-meaning teachers can be caught up in perpetuating institutionalized racism.

> Rarely is intentional discrimination the central problem in the teacher-student relationship; rather, the discrimination includes unquestioned assumptions on the part of the institution within which these interactions take place. These assumptions—such as Asian students are better at math, Latino parents don't support their kids in school, or AP classes are too difficult for Black students—are at the heart of the racial achievement gap. (Singleton & Linton, 2006 p. 42)

As Singleton & Linton pointed out, racism does not require intent on behalf of teachers. Rather the implicit assumptions and prejudice of whiteness as normal, average, powerful, and ideal perpetuates institutionalized racism (McIntosh, 1988).

The next section interrogates the idea of white privilege in education, how it funds race, and the responsibility of white folks to use their privilege to lessen the effects of white privilege.

White Privilege in Education

White privilege upholds and funds racial dominance through invisible systems that are meant to remain invisible for the sake of maintaining white supremacy. Feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh (1988) describes white privilege as "an invisible package of unearned assets that [white people] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [white people] were "meant" to remain oblivious" (p. 1). For example, white students know they can go to school and see themselves represented in the teaching staff and administration of the school building, in the books available at the library, and in their peers in the hallways. Similarly, white families, should they need to move, can be sure they will find communities in which they will be welcomed. White citizens if needing help, can call on police officers to assist them without being profiled as a perpetrator. These are all examples of invisible systems that uphold and value whiteness as normal, whiteness as average, and whiteness as ideal, upholding the power that comes with being white.

The problem with whiteness is that it is so ingrained in our culture that white folks don't seem to see the problem. White folks don't realize that they have been raised in communities built on the fear and hate of dark people and that they have been groomed to see whiteness as ideal (Love, 2019; McIntosh, 1988). Instead they adopt a lens of "colorblindness" and claim to treat all people the same. However, the invasive nature of

white privilege in all systems of society doesn't allow the ability to be truly colorblind. Gillborn (2019) argues that colorblindness "has become an argument to ignore race inequality and silence critical discussions of racism in all but its most crude and obvious forms" and instead prefers the term "color evasion," which is the avoidance of talking about race as a way to intentionally ignore the experiences of people of color (para. 7). Color evasion is the active refusal to engage in racial justice for the sake of protecting white privilege.

Educators are attempting to be "colorblind" but are instead practicing color evasion, which perpetuates the perception that race does not matter in the context of our schools or our students' lived experiences. In erasing talk of race and racial injustice in our classrooms, we are placing the educational debt and failure of the education system squarely on the shoulders of our Black and Brown students, instead of questioning and evaluating the educational systems themselves (Chandler & McKnight, 2009). We are asking students to believe in the myth of meritocracy and to achieve despite the enormous systems set up to ensure their failure (McIntosh, 1988).

Teachers need to shatter their rose colored glasses and evaluate their privilege, along with their understanding of meritocracy and its place in education. McIntosh (1988) points out that the very act of describing white privilege "makes one newly accountable" and asks "Having described it [white privilege], what will I do to lessen or end it?" (p. 2). As of 2016, over 80% of teachers, administrators, and school board members were white, so they have a particularly important role and responsibility to

reform education for racial justice (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Singleton & Linton (2006) argued,

> If white people are the primary guardians and recipients of racial privilege, they also bear significant responsibility for the perpetuation of racial inequality or racism...sustainable reform will occur only when white people individually and collectively embrace and encourage change. At the very least, white educators must allow change to happen. Without their active participation in this way, racial injustices will continue to be viewed by white people as a primary concern only for people of color. (pp. 27-28)

Other researchers (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Gillborn, 2019; Lauter, 2015; Love, 2019; Mayorga & Picower, 2017; McIntosh, 1988; McManimon, 2019; Palmer, 2017; Rector-Aranda, 2016; Weissglass, 2001) also call upon the responsibility of white folks to address the historical and current institutionalized racism in our schools and to become critically conscious.

For educators to be critically conscious, they need to be able to see the complex intersectionalities of identity that contribute to discrimination and power dynamics within classrooms (Love, 2019). Nearly all of the literature cited the importance of self-reflection (Fantuzzo, 2018; Gillborn, 2019; McManimon, 2019), interrogation (Chandler & McKnight, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2018, 2006), and reckoning with and about whiteness (Love, 2019; McIntosh, 1988; Rector-Aranda, 2016) as the first step to addressing racial injustice in the classroom. While the research stressed that much of this work is examination of the self, it also stressed the importance of doing so within a larger

learning community. However, schools are not directly facilitating critical dialogue of staff racial identity or how it contributes to institutionalized racism (or if they are, it is not sufficient); instead, schools are focusing their efforts on bringing multiculturalism and cultural competency to the classroom. This does not address the question, "How can educators engage in authentic dialogue about race to advance racial justice for students?" They are focusing on the wrong end of the problem.

The next section of the literature review will discuss the problem with multiculturalism as an answer to building equitable practices in school and will redirect the importance to addressing how educators can bring in authentic dialogue to work towards racial justice and equitable outcomes.

The Problem with Multiculturalism

Many districts attempt to address inequality and inequity within their schools by providing their teachers with professional development on character education, multiculturalism, and diversifying curriculum, but these approaches themselves harbor racialized undertones that subvert their intent to address inequity and instead reinforce institutionalized racism.

Love (2019) has argued character education that focuses on teaching Black and Brown students determination and "grit" or feel-good slogans like "no excuses" or "choose optimism" are born out of a need to control and track student behavior to redirect them to be task-oriented, and to get work done quietly, quickly, and without protest. Such pedagogy reinforces and normalizes the expectations of students of color to assimilate and fundamentally change their ways of being to fit within white normalcy that

dominates education—or more bluntly, reinforces white supremacy. This concept reinforces the idea that Lauter (2015) identified in Gillen's book *Educating for Insurgency*, that the purpose of schools is not necessarily student learning, but for "...accepting particular forms of authority and power, accepting (even with rage) particular and limited stations in life, most of all accepting that it is your [the student's] own limitations and not a system of hierarchy and privilege that defines your life choices" (p. 54). Redirecting the focus of racial justice onto the kids and requiring them to fit into a broken system without protest is just another way to practice color evasion and intentionally ignore and feed white supremacy in education.

Another quick fix solution to address equity in education is the idea of incorporating multiculturalism. On the surface, more professional development around trauma, poverty, and diversity, and adapting curriculum to depict more people of color is a promising idea of working towards equity. However, these trainings and adaptations are often one-off, add-ons that fail to provide staff the time, resources, and introspective space that is required to facilitate true equitable change (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2018; Love, 2019; Singleton & Linton, 2006). This surface level approach to equity leaves staff with a feeling of understanding their students of color, but in reality maintains white privilege and does not address and interrogate racial oppression in their classrooms (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2018; Love, 2019; Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Ladson-Billings (2018) has addressed how teachers use multiculturalism within their curriculum matters. Well-intentioned teachers may distort student learning with

white privilege depending on their level of cultural competence and willingness to interrogate whiteness. Ladson-Billings (2018) has outlined four levels of how white privilege distorts curriculum from most to least:

1) Structured absence of information - pieces missing from the historical narrative, omitting contributions of various people of color in our collective history.
2) Marginalizing knowledge - selecting some multicultural content, but is whitewashed, and distorts the reality of lived experiences. For example, "we're all immigrants," while only telling the European immigrant story. Or teaching other culture's travesties like the holocaust, but not learning about historical injustice within our own country.
3) Expanding knowledge - adding canons representing people of color without questioning why they needed to be added in the first place.
4) Deciphering knowledge - talking about race and institutional beliefs and how they help inform and construct a better understanding of literature, school texts, and other media.

The idea of adding diverse texts to curriculum sends a message that race is peripherally important to the "real" narrative; and furthermore, when teachers are pressed for time, these add-on activities are the first to be removed for the sake of teaching to standardized tests (Chandler & McKnight, 2009). Ladson-Billings (2018), Rector-Aranda (2016), and Chandler and McKnight (2009) have argued that educators should not waste their time trying to "add" more diverse content to curriculum, instead, scholars have said that

teachers should be working to decipher knowledge and talk about how race and institutional beliefs construct the content in front of us. It is likely most teachers fall within the first three levels, but not intentionally. Again, white privilege demonstrates how it is an invisible force that works to maintain white supremacy and requires educators to take an active role in interrogating their own beliefs and how they approach content in their subject area. Curricular or pedagogical interventions will do nothing for our students, unless teachers are willing to become actively dedicated to dismantling oppression and racism within their classrooms (Love, 2019).

Multiculturalism itself is not without merit, it is the approach to multiculturalism of which educators need to be critical. These token responses to address inequities in education, like character education, multiculturalism, and diversifying content, continue to reward students who achieve within a broken system, and further punish those students who fail to meet those achievement goals, namely Black and Brown students (Rector-Aranda, 2016). When reframing the problem of the achievement gap and inequity through this lens, it is clear these multicultural measures will never truly uplift our students of color, instead, we need to radically rethink education, and to do that we need to talk about race.

In summarizing the section of truly understanding race, the literature review reveals that truly understanding racism is an important factor in learning how to approach discussions about race in the classroom setting. Educators need to know how race is funded through various aspects of our everyday interactions with students and the implicit and explicit messages they receive because of that funding. Educators need to see

how white privilege acts to uphold white supremacy, even when educators are not consciously aware of it, and need to start to dismantle white privilege or at least start to lessen it. Then educators need to see where multiculturalism falls short of intentions and see how "quick fixes" to solve niche "problems" actually exacerbate white privilege in our schools. Finally, educators need to see that in order to truly see racism, we need to talk about race.

Resistance through Courage and Love

Love (2019) has called school a "battlefield" in which students of color are fighting to survive (p. 49). Through a review of the literature thus far, it is clear that teachers need to be leading the charge to fight racism in our schools, and teachers need to urgently adopt an anti-racist mindset if they are to help students of color to thrive. "Anti-racism is a deep, personal, and on-going analysis of how each and every one of us perpetuates injustice and prejudice toward those who are not members of the dominant race" (Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. 45). In this portion of the literature review, resistance to racism and oppression are analyzed through a framework of working through the struggle, through the "battlefield" with courage and love. To win this battle, educators need to fight racism within themselves, within their classrooms, and within their community, and it all involves talking about race.

It is important to note that some feel "talking" is not a real solution to achieving racial justice. Indeed some scholars (Love, 2019; Mayorga & Picower, 2017; Singleton & Linton, 2006) have noted that simply saying the right thing is not the equivalent to practicing anti-racism. The kind of talking that is transformational, that is anti-racist, is

authentic dialogue. Freire and Shor (1987) have discussed how dialogue is more than talking:

> Dialogue is not a mere technique to achieve some cognitive results; dialogue is a means to transform social relations in the classroom, and to raise awareness about relations in society at large. Dialogue is a way to recreate knowledge as well as the way we learn (Freire and Shor, 1987 [Abstract]).

Transformation and raising awareness is precisely what needs to happen to work towards racial justice and is why it is so important that participants in dialogue bring an authentic passion, persistence, and dedication to talking about race.

In the next section, love is examined as a vital tool to invite authentic dialogue about race and promote advancement on the quest for true equity and racial justice in schools.

Enlisting Love to Talk About Race

The weight of change falls on teachers and that burden can be overwhelming. Singleton & Linton (2006) said that any educator who wants to do better for students needs to have passion to push past inevitable resistance to change and fuel their ability to face challenges every day. Love (2019) said educators need to learn to love Blackness and "to demand the impossible...refusing injustice and the disposability of dark children" (p. 7). This passion needs to be fueled by a true love of students and their endless potential. James Baldwin (1965) described the kind of love educators need to tap into as:

> something active, something more like a fire, like wind, something which can change you. I mean energy. I mean a passionate belief, a passionate knowledge of

> what a human being can do, and become, and what a human being can do to change the world in which he finds himself (p. 388).

Students need their teachers to be people who actively advocate for them and actively love them, and help them, push them, to achieve their dreams.

Teachers need to be willing to be vulnerable and real with students in a way that fosters relationships. Fantuzzo (2018) explored the idea that love goes beyond acknowledging oppression, it seeks to bring attention to vulnerability, emotion, and realness. Love requires teachers to look beyond power struggles in their classrooms and instead see the human and their complexity. It requires teachers to face and expose the realities of racism, power, and ignorance to begin the possibility of transforming the world (Fantuzzo, 2018).

Teachers need to cultivate loving spaces where students feel a true connection that inspires them to be their authentic selves and to exceed beyond expectations. Such spaces are more than classrooms, they are what bell hooks called, homeplaces (Love, 2019). A homeplace is more than a safe classroom environment, it is "the space where Black students truly matter to each other, where souls are nurtured, comforted, and fed. Homeplace is a community...where white power and the damages done by it are healed by loving Blackness and restoring dignity" (Love, 2019, p. 63). In these homeplaces, teachers explicitly talk about race.

Teachers use authentic dialogue to build communities that can heal racial injustice, build student empowerment, and learn to critically analyze the world and injustice. Weissglass (2001) called these spaces "healing communities" where students

and teachers intentionally talk about race and learn how to truly listen to one another and give attention to racial healing. According to Weissglass (2001), healing communities are:

a. Spaces that are safe where the invisible is made visible through dialogue.
b. Spaces where people of color can talk about their ancestors and their experiences with racism.
c. Spaces where white people listen.
d. Spaces where white people can share how they have seen prejudice in action and how it affects them.
e. Spaces where the community can use dialogue and other people's stories as active resistance to racial injustice.

In the homeplace or healing community, the most important priority is adults caring about students and their learning, which requires talking about race in a way that decenters whiteness and empowers student voice (Weissglass, 2001). Talking about race is key in advancing racial justice for students, but educators need to have the courage to do so.

The next section discusses the need for educators, as carriers of power and privilege, to have courage to speak up and out against oppression in all settings.

Having the Courage to Talk About Race

Learning to talk about race starts with the courage "to question the piece of the oppressor that lives in all of us" (Love, 2019, p. 122). It requires teachers to recognize their racial consciousness, or how their own racial identity influences their assumptions about racial groups (Singleton & Linton, 2006). It requires teachers to get personal and to

address their own racial attitudes and how those attitudes can influence student achievement. Teachers need to resist the urge to decenter race, while recognizing that other social factors (like family, socioeconomic status, language, etc.) are important, but are separate from analyzing the role of race and achievement (Singleton & Linton, 2006). Learning to talk about race requires embracing different perspectives, and understanding that racial meaning is learned and passed on from generation to generation (Love, 2019; Singleton & Linton, 2006). It also requires an introspection on how white privilege functions to place whiteness as morally normal and ideal, and how those with such privilege must do what they can to minimize its effects in society (Love, 2019, McIntosh, 1988).

The following recounts a study showing that having courage to talk about race can be transformational for schools.

A study in courage and empowerment. Talking about race is not easy, but it is an easy solution to building a culture of equity within schools. A qualitative study by Palmer (2017) found that building up teachers' cultural competency can have positive impacts on student achievement. In interviews with teachers who attended the training, participants reported feeling empowered to build stronger relationships with students and to recognize where institutionalized racism was getting in the way of learning for students of color (Palmer, 2017, p. 18).

In the equity trainings, staff learned how they could make individual change within their classrooms instead of being paralyzed by the complexity of structural change. By focusing on how they individually brought bias or white privilege into

classrooms, teachers were able to interrogate their own belief structures, learn new information that helped them critically discuss the achievement gap and institutionalized racism with colleagues, and gave them the courage to try new things in the classroom, including how they assessed students, and how they engaged in the curriculum with students.

All of this created a schoolwide culture of high expectations, a culture of courage, and a culture of continual learning for students and staff. Administrators showed their commitment to the journey of equity work by providing on-going training throughout the year and committed to establishing and maintaining Equity Teams for each building that would continue to offer spaces and opportunities to collaborate and reflect on equitable teaching practices between formal trainings. Palmer (2017) found the combination of administrative support, on-going equity trainings aimed at changing belief structures, and Equity Teams working together with staff to create equitable strategies in the classroom allowed for positive outcomes for students.

In summary, this portion of the literature review found using courage and love to resist institutional racism are ways in which teachers can have an immediate impact on the racial trauma Black and Brown students face every day. Love (2019) said “Racism is traumatic because it is a loss of protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance—all things children need to be educated” (p. 38). Teachers can ignite their passion and love for students to transform their classrooms into homeplaces and healing communities that decenter whiteness, give voice and power to students of color, and aim to heal and restore their humanity while resisting racial injustice. With courage, educators can hold

themselves and colleagues accountable for working towards racial justice, and can work to expand school communities that are equity driven. All of this work requires active dialogue with students, teachers, and communities. Talking about race is how educators become anti-racist teachers.

In the, final section of the literature review, talking about race is evaluated as an anti-racist tool all teachers can and should implement as a means to advance the quest for true equity and racial justice.

Anti-Racist Teaching

Anti-racist teaching is embracing race and talking about race for the purpose of promoting true equity. According to Pollock (2008), racism in education is "any act that, even unwittingly, tolerates, accepts, or reinforces racially unequal opportunities for children to learn and thrive; allows racial inequalities in opportunity as if they are normal and acceptable; or treats people of color as less worthy or less complex than "white" people" (p. xvii). Anti-racism work in education, then, is the everyday work that educators devote to help overcome inequities and inequalities in their classrooms and beyond. Pollock (2008) urged the importance of everyday anti-racism and emphasized that everyday microaggressions can harm children in our classrooms and that it is vital that educators routinely address and assess racism in school experiences (p. xviii). Love (2019) furthered the conversation and suggested educators need to do more than just become anti-racists, but they need to become abolitionist teachers, which she defined as "the practice of working in solidarity with communities of color while drawing on the imagination, creativity, refusal, (re)membering, visionary thinking, healing, rebellious

spirit, boldness, determination, and subversiveness of abolitionists to eradicate injustice in and outside of schools" (p. 2). There is a common theme in any anti-racist teaching, educators must balance between the need to treat all students as human beings rather than racialized groups, but also be able to recognize the real lived experiences and realities of students being a part of a racialized group (Delpit, 2019; Pollock, 2008; Singleton, 2006). It is a delicate balance of contradiction, but one that we must navigate if we are to truly do the work our students need us to do—take action to dismantle institutionalized racism within schools and provide all students with the tools they need to succeed in a racialized world. In the next section is a discussion about how educators can practice anti-racism every day to promote racial justice.

Everyday Anti-Racism

All teachers need to be anti-racist. The tools of an anti-racist educator are not particularly special, but they are mighty, and all of the tools are centered around talking about race. Anti-racist teachers understand that talking about race is a form of resistence to the status quo (Chandler & McKnight, 2009), and that "teacher educators have to talk about race not to re-inscribe it and give it even more power, but rather to take control of it and expose it for the lie it is" (Ladson-Billings, 2018, para. 59). By talking about race with students, colleagues, and communities, anti-racist teachers can transform the way schools approach equity and redirect the larger culture of the school to one that is more inclusive, and closer to a healing community (Weissglass, 2001) or homeplace (Love, 2019) where restoring humanity, dignity, and learning are the main priority, not biased test scores.

In talking about race and engaging critical conversations in the classroom, anti-racist teachers can practice what Derrick Bell (Higgins, 1992) described as the theory of racial realism, where one understands that true equality is an unattainable goal and that we will never truly be rid of racism, but that hope and progress can be found in the struggle to resist oppression. As part of social justice work and advancing racial justice, anti-racist teachers need to act in solidarity with communities of color, and are "under an obligation of moving from analysis to practical action for change" (Mayorga & Picower, 2017, p. 220). Anti-racist teachers can do real things that will facilitate that progress through struggle by talking about race.

Anti-racist teachers can make meaningful change by engaging in realistic classroom dialogue about race, including critical alternative points of view in discussion, grounding learning in realistic research that emphasizes varied human experiences and point of view over objectivity, and using stories of resistance to further critique content and the arc of society's evolution (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Rector-Aranda, 2016). Anti-racist teachers can focus on creating authentic assessments that place value on growth over achievement (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Rector-Aranda, 2016). Anti-racist teachers can recognize barriers for community members to participate in school democracy and governance and can work to find ways to include voices of students, staff, and families in decisions that affect them (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Rector-Aranda, 2016). Anti-racist teachers can hold each other accountable for their words and actions and be willing to have the courage to speak out when a colleague is acting on bias or racism (Love, 2019; Singleton & Linton, 2006). Anti-racist teachers can

hold their administration accountable for their policies and practices by having courage to bring up inequities with principals and school board members (Love, 2019; Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Anti-racist teaching is something that involves constant engagement, triage, and experimentation. Chandler & McKnight (2009) quote Gilborn (2000) about practicing anti-racism:

> There is no blueprint for successful anti-racism, no one "correct" way. What succeeds at one time, or in one context, may not be appropriate at a later date or in another context. Racism changes; it works differently through different processes...and changes with particular institutional contexts. Anti-racism must recognize and adapt to this complexity (p. 486).

Anti-racist teachers need to be constantly dreaming and re-imagining how education and school operates in order to respond to the needs of Black and Brown students living in a traumatic, racialized world. Freedom dreaming, as Love (2019) called it, is required to sustain meaningful change because racist forces are constantly working against teachers who dream of a world where students are free from oppression in all forms. Teachers need to adapt to new challenges, and embrace and learn from failure, to be able to rise again and keep fighting for racial justice to keep fighting for students' freedom.

Most importantly, teachers need to place the highest priority on ensuring Black and Brown students are loved and given a homeplace that provides refuge from racism so they can share their experiences and start to heal, and restore their dignity so that students can learn and thrive in school (Fantuzzo, 2018; Love, 2019; Weissglass, 2001). All of this

is done by recognizing the privilege and power in voice, in storytelling, in sharing experiences, in openly, directly, courageously talking about race.

One teacher cannot fix institutionalized racism, but anti-racist teachers who work together can make transformational change. There is more than one way to complete this work, and anti-racist teachers can have a more powerful impact if they band together to offer a village of support for students of color. Teachers do not need to do all of the things individually, but collectively they could do so much to further racial justice for all students, including holding high expectations of all students (Delpit, 2012), continuing to learn and seek to understand multiple perspectives and histories of oppression (Ladson-Billings, 2006), unlearning systems of white supremacy and holding yourself accountable (McIntosh, 1988), creating safe homespaces where students truly matter and restore their dignity (Love, 2019) and choosing to engage and talk about race (Singleton & Linton, 2006). There are many other ways to practice anti-racism and fight for progress on behalf of our students, but the most important piece is to just start doing it.

In conclusion, anti-racist teaching is active. It is ever-evolving and must adapt to new challenges, experiences, and opportunities, and include the building of villages and networks to support that work. Those villages require a multifaceted approach to transformational change. Individually teachers can start the work by learning how to engage in authentic dialogue with their students, colleagues, and communities to advance the quest for true equity and racial justice.

Summary

This limited review of the literature surrounding race and education aimed to focus the attention on what educators can do to promote true equity and advance racial justice through authentic dialogue. It first exposed a clearer understanding of how to read the achievement gap through a race critical historical lens, which unmasked a host of social, economic, and educational debts that have been set against Black and Brown communities for centuries and partially explains the drastic differences in achievement and opportunities between white students and students of color. This highlights the need for educators to engage in authentic dialogue to unmask historical oppression and to validate the experiences of people of color.

With this clearer understanding of historical oppression in education and society, the research then focused on how to use that information to expose how race operates specifically in education. That research found that American society actively funds racism through language, social norms, and education, among many other institutions, but remains largely unchecked, and unchallenged because of white privilege. In education, multiculturalism taps into white privilege and adds the illusion of equity in schools. Exposing the systems of oppression and how exactly race operates within classrooms and schools requires educators to interrogate their own privilege, their classrooms, their policies and practices—all of which requires authentic dialogue around race.

The literature also revealed how love and courage can be used as a form of resistance of racial oppression and pointed to ways in which educators can find their

passion for social and racial justice. Centering around the idea that the needs of students to be loved for their humanity and brilliance should be placed above all else provides the inspiration for courage. This is important because nearly all of the research pointed to the need for educators to have the courage to speak up and out in interpersonal settings, but also to have the courage to speak up in their schools and communities and demand the justice and access of education students and families of color deserve. Teachers need to have the love and courage to have authentic dialogue about race.

Finally, the literature review shared ways in which teachers can adopt and embody an anti-racist teaching practice to bring about transformational change everyday. These findings include working individually, but also in partnership with other anti-racist teachers to create a village that can surround students of color with the support, resources, and love they need to thrive. All of these practices involve talking about race and creating spaces where authentic dialogue can take place.

After this initial review, it is clear that the quest for equity will never be complete. As Bell (1994) said "Just because something is impossible does not mean it is not worth doing" (p. 9). This should be the guiding mantra of anti-racist educators everywhere. The literature surrounding education and racism continues to grow and attempts to guide teachers towards a place where school provides academic freedom and justice for all students of color. One thing is for certain in all of the literature, teachers must talk about race to advance racial justice. In talking about race, teachers can open the eyes of educators, schools, communities and beyond and invite them to the cause of love and social change.

In chapter three, I will describe how I will use these findings to adapt a unit of study to include authentic opportunities for dialogue about oppression and racial injustice in a classroom setting. I will identify the audience, the context, and the methodologies I will use to conduct my project. I will also include information about the theoretical framework, and my plan for implementing my project in an academic setting.

CHAPTER THREE

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the project I completed that addresses and demonstrates one way of answering my research question, "How can educators engage in authentic dialogue about race to advance racial justice for our students?"

First I will provide a brief overview of the project, then explain the research rationale I used to inform my project. Next I explain my choice of method for the project. Then I will provide some background about the setting and the intended audiences for this project. I will conclude this chapter with a detailed project description and project timeline.

Overview of the Project

This capstone project is based on a unit of study that I lead students through prior to reading a historical novel called *The Birchbark House* (Erdrich, 1999). The novel takes place in Minnesota in the mid 1800s and is centered around an Ojibwa family and their joys and struggles to survive in a changing world. I selected this unit of study because it is an opportunity to talk about the racism indigenous people have faced and continue to face in our world. Often, indigenous peoples' stories are told from a single perspective, a single history, and they are often only referred to in the past tense, as if they no longer exist in our world. For my students, the experiences they have with indigenous people or culture is only in a social studies classroom, or pop culture, both of which focus on stereotypes and misrepresentations of Native Americans. The novel that is part of the curriculum also focuses on Native stories from the past. In this project, I want to talk

about the silent racism Native Americans have been facing for centuries and continue to face today. Yes, they are still here.

In preparation for reading the novel, I typically spend two weeks building background knowledge about the historical and social context for the novel in order to tap student interest, and to increase student engagement in discussions throughout the novel. I have also worked with the social studies teacher to make sure we make connections between what students are learning in social studies to what we are reading in language arts in an effort to strengthen student learning and to provide students with multiple opportunities to interact with content in different settings. This has been one of my favorite units to teach, and students have historically also enjoyed this unit.

The capstone project takes this unit of study and intentionally alters some of the learning activities to add opportunities for critical conversations and reflections about race and making connections to present day social justice. In the past, I have focused on simply giving historical context for the novel, but in this project I will focus on bringing in personal reflection of joy and struggle and making connections to the historical joy and struggle of indigenous people. In doing so, we collectively shared knowledge and worked to build deeper learning and engagement, while also empowering student voice and experiences that led to a stronger classroom homeplace. By scaffolding conversations about race in the classroom for this pre-novel study unit, it helped prepare students to have authentic discussions about race throughout the novel study and beyond.

For this project, I revisited curriculum design, development, and assessments to alter the existing curriculum to include opportunities for authentic conversations about

race. I identified some changes, including focusing on the theme of joy and struggle to balance the racial and historical trauma in the book with indigenous joy. Because of this shift in mindset, I plan to bring in some additional resources that focus on indigenous joy and pride that I have not used in the past, including a picture book called *We are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom, 2020), videos from indigenous influencers on social media, and land acknowledgement art and poetry, among others. I added a personal digital journal to track and expand on reflections of the activities that helped to ground student conversations about race and help them evolve their own understanding of privilege and how it contributes to this idea of joy and struggle. I have used journals once already this year, in a similar fashion, so my students were well equipped to return to journaling.

In the next section of this chapter, I will discuss the research rationale and theories used to help inform the "why" and "how" of the project.

Research Rationale

Nearly all of my research called for educators to take initiative and to have courage (Singleton & Linton, 2006) in bringing authentic conversations about race into the classroom (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 1996; Love, 2019; Mayorga & Picower, 2017). To do so educators need to have an understanding of white privilege (McIntosh, 1988) and how it can manipulate how educators interact with or engage with content (Chandler & McKnight, 2009; Ladson-Billings, 2018). The research pointed out that many attempts at bringing race into conversations in the classroom, like adding multiracial or multicultural content are actually cursory add ons that only

exacerbate racial inequities in the classroom rather than address them (Ladson-Billings, 2018; Rector-Aranda, 2016; Weissglass, 2001).

Instead, scholars Chandler & McKnight (2009), Ladson-Billings (2018), and Rector-Aranda (2016), suggested that educators not waste their time trying to add more to their current curriculum, but rather, focus on discussions and questions about how race and privilege inform what they are teaching in the classroom. These rich discussions can help students decipher how privilege and power manifests in learning and allows them to begin critiquing and questioning their learning, and become active participants in their learning. This invites white students to analyze their own privilege and empower them to begin to recognize structural racism (Fantuzzo, 2018), while Black and Brown students and their day to day experiences are made visible, validated, and integrated into our everyday classroom discussions (Love, 2019).

I drew on the work of Ladson-Billings (2018) and Singleton (2006) to inform how I integrated authentic conversations about race to my current curriculum, by adding a race critical lens to guide students to think critically about the content with which they interacted. In this way, I used Ladson-Billings (2018) "deciphering knowledge" approach to curriculum, where the goal of learning is to question absent narratives and what that says about what is valued in learning. This approach introduced and strengthened the skill of critical thinking that can be applied to all content across the board, and provided an opportunity for students to apply race critical thinking skills in all of their classes. As McIntosh (1988) said in her essay, once you are aware of privilege, you can't become unaware. Hopefully this awakening to privilege in learning, about what is taught or not

taught, will invite students to continue to be active participants in their education and will facilitate more conversations about race in other parts of the school day.

The following section will discuss the method I have chosen to complete this project.

Choice of method

I have chosen to reevaluate a unit of study already in the language arts curriculum. I will reframe the unit to focus on the method of "deciphering knowledge" which came up as a best practice method for integrating discussions about race in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 2018). Instead of adding new curriculum, or adopting multiracial readings, I will instead focus on a critical examination of what I already have access to with some minor changes.

One of the changes I made was to incorporate the themes of indigenous struggle and indigenous joy. I wanted to be sure to share the history of oppression and genocide of indigenous peoples in what is now called the United States, but also share with students the beauty and joy that is being reclaimed by indigenous people today. This is an intentional choice to demonstrate that historical trauma is important to acknowledge, but it is just as important to see the resiliency of oppressed peoples. Social media has played a large role in elevating indigenous voices and pride after hundreds of years of erasure and oppression. Influencers and activists use social media to educate, reclaim their language, culture, and power, and celebrate their traditions with the world. In incorporating these themes of indigenous struggle and joy, students were able to discuss and reflect on the historical significance of the novel with the oppressive historical

reality, but also were able to recognize the indigenous joy the characters experience even through various struggles. By using modern day examples in social media, we can connect to the past and see how actively addressing inequity and oppression can lead to social change.

Another change I added was a digital journaling component to empower student voices. Reflective writing gave students an opportunity to digest discussions and explore further ideas and questions in writing. The journals provided a place for students to safely explore their own ideas, synthesize information, and reflect on their own experiences with race with the option of sharing those insights with the larger classroom community. It also served as an assessment tool that can was used to demonstrate students' critical thinking, reflection, and growth and used as a tool for feedback for how discussions are progressing.

The advantage to these approaches is the fact that students were collaboratively creating knowledge with each other and using their own knowledge to build an understanding of oppression, injustice, and activism, while building trust to talk about race. I provided some of the material on which students reflected and discussed, but it is their active dialogue and critical thinking and reflection with each other that created the foundation on which we were able to talk about race in our class novel.

In the following section, I will outline the intended audiences and setting for the project.

Setting/Audience

The setting for this capstone project is in a 6th grade language arts classroom in a diverse school in the Twin Cities. The intended audiences are students who are enrolled in the language arts classes I teach. The size of my classes will vary depending on the mode of learning (in-person, hybrid, or distance learning), but should be between 10-35 students in each class.

I am also hopeful to share the results of this unit with my colleagues and other teachers in the building who are interested in facilitating more conversations about race in their classrooms and need ideas for how to do so.

Student/School Population and Background

The student population of the school is quite diverse. Our community is unique in that the school draws students from both affluent communities and from some of our poorest communities. According to the Minnesota Department of Education Minnesota Report Card for the 20-21 school year, of the students enrolled at my school, 49% receive free and reduced price lunch and approximately 20% of students have 504s or IEPs. The racial makeup of the school is also quite diverse with 54% students of color of which 34% identifies as Latinx, and 46% identify as white (Minnesota Department of Education, 2021).

The diversity of the school is one of the reasons I love teaching there. However, the majority of teachers, administration, and staff in the building (and district) are white. As a staff, we have had several “misunderstandings” about race in the building/classrooms that have led to teachers going on leave. There is a clear need for staff development on learning about bias and talking about race in a safe,

transformational way that adds to our students' connection with school. The district had not offered on-going equity training until the 2019-2020 school year, and because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 4th of 4 sessions was cut. The district is planning to continue to offer equity training via "strands" where educators can select the topics they want to attend on professional development (PD) days throughout the year, however, the research shows (Singleton & Linton, 2006; Palmer, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2018; Schwartz, 2019; Rector-Aranda, 2016; Mayorga & Picower, 2017; Love, 2019; Weissglass, 2001; Gillborn, 2019; McManimon, 2019; Chandler & McKnight, 2009) that while it is a good step to take PD courses on diversity, it is not as effective (transformative) as engaging in authentic on-going dialogue about race and bias.

I am excited to say that my school district is currently taking steps to add equity supports for our entire school community. The district, this year, rewrote their mission to focus on addressing inequity and race in our schools. The district also committed to creating an equity committee that will include teachers, students, administrators, and family and community members to work with the school board on issues of inequity within the district. These are all great strides as a district, but we are just beginning. There is much work to be done district wide, but we also need to be addressing racism in each of our school buildings. In my school there is a clear need for teachers to start addressing race in a way that is empowering, healing, and transformative for our students.

I plan to do my part to further the new mission of our district and start addressing inequity and racism in my classroom. Using Ladson-Billings (2018) "deciphering knowledge" approach to curriculum, and Singleton & Linton's (2006) approach to

facilitating critical conversations about race, I plan to incorporate authentic dialogue about race in my classroom. In the next section, I will explain in detail, how I planed to accomplish this goal.

Project description

Through this project, my goal was to address my research question, "How can educators engage in authentic dialogue about race to advance racial justice for our students?" and use the research I gathered in chapter two to demonstrate one way in which educators can engage students in dialogue about race in the classroom.

The capstone project takes an existing unit of study in the 6th grade language arts curriculum and alters it to include intentional conversations about race. The unit will focus on the themes of indigenous struggle and joy and how we can make connections from our past to our present. The topic of indigenous struggle included a brief overview of historical oppression and attempted genocide of indigenous people in the United States. The topic of indigenous joy included how indigneous people are using the social tools of today to reclaim and connect with their language, culture, and power and to validate their lived experiences. Each day had a topic and information related to indigenous joy and/or struggle and included an opportunity to discuss the topic with peers, and finish with a written reflection in student journals. The emphasis of learning was the reflection and discussion of how specific groups have been historically oppressed in different ways and the connections to today or connections students have with the discussions brought up in class.

The project started from the unit that is already in place, and I reviewed the content to see where adjustments, refinements, and discussions and student reflections about race fit best. After I reviewed the content, and identified places for improvements or additional activities, I created the discussion questions and activities that helped facilitate discussion and critical reflection of the topic. Once the activities and questions were created, I imported them to our digital learning management system so students could access documents, articles, videos online (which was particularly important because it needed to happen over distance learning). The next step was implementation and facilitation of the unit. And finally, I reviewed student journals and reflected on how the unit went with my classes.

There are many challenges to consider in this project, including:

a. Creating a safe place for discussion. For my purposes, we have been building a safe and trusting learning community since the beginning of the school year, which paid off handsomely in the honest and caring discussions we were able to have.
b. Time. This is only a two week unit, so moving discussion along, while also validating students' opinions and ideas was challenging. Allowing time for journaling so that students can participate even if they don't "talk."
c. Distance Learning or Hybrid Learning. How can I facilitate discussion and conversation via distance or when only some students are in the classroom? There were opportunities to use breakout rooms, anonymous

idea gathering via online tools like Menitmeter or Padlet. Everything must be online in order to reach all students regardless of learning model.

d. Different conversations in different classes. I had to be okay with fluid conversations that were not on the same topic across classes, and I had to recognize closure may not be possible on some topics.
e. This year's schedule did not allow for cross-curricular work with the social studies teacher, and I needed to provide more background information than usual.

In the last section of this chapter I will provide a timeline of the work that needs to be completed.

Timeline

I taught this unit in February in preparation for a novel study unit. I was able to quickly complete a review of the current unit as a first step, followed by the creation of discussion questions and activities that helped facilitate critical conversations about race, history, and joy. I then added these activities to the learning management system for student access, implemented and facilitated the unit study, and finally reviewed the results and feedback from students.

I planned to learn alongside my students as we implemented the new unit, by sharing discussion, personal connections, and journal reflections as a means to model and encourage active discussion about race. We ended this short pre-reading unit with a self-reflection where students used metacognitive skills to think critically about the unit

and how they could take those ideas with them as we start our novel study of *The Birchbark House*.

Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the goals of the project, the research rationale of the project, the methods in which I will carry out the project, and identified the setting and audience, and outlined a detailed project plan and timeline.

In the next chapter I will reflect on the process of facilitating and implementing this project and will report back my own personal reflections as well as student feedback on how they reacted to conversations about race in the classroom.

CHAPTER FOUR

"We cannot discover a solution to a challenge if we have not been able to talk about it."
- Singleton & Linton, 2006

Introduction

In this chapter, I will review and reflect on the learning experience of trying to understand and answer the question "How can educators engage in authentic dialogue about race to advance racial justice for our students?" First I will review the actual project and student results from the project. Then I will provide reflections on the surprises I had, the creation of a stronger classroom homeplace, the research and learning process, the limitations of the project and literature review. Finally I will outline my next steps and how I plan to share the results and findings of my project.

Reviewing the Project

The goal of this curriculum project was to intentionally scaffold discussions and learning experiences to invite students to have an authentic conversation about race. The project was a short unit that provided a race critical lens through which they could interact with the novel, *The Birchbark House.* In this unit, I employed Ladson-Billings (2018) deciphering knowledge approach to curriculum; meaning, I did not change the curriculum I had to teach; instead, I invited students to explore what was missing from the dominant narrative. I also included a practice called collective knowledge creation (Due East Educational Equity Collaborative, 2021) which refers to the process of students sharing their own experiences and knowledge as a source of learning for the whole. In using both of these approaches, students were centered at the core of this unit allowing them to be the driving force behind the learning and unlearning of racism

around indigneous people and beyond. While this project focused on preparing students to think critically about the lived racism indigenous people did and still do face today, this project has also built a solid foundation on which my students can continue to talk about race beyond our novel study.

Storytelling as a Way to Talk about Race

I began the unit of study focusing on storytelling and the power of storytelling throughout history. By framing the unit through storytelling, I was able to ensure that student voices and experiences would be valued as powerful reflections of their individual experiences with race. We started by reading a picture book called *We are Water Protectors* (Lindstrom, 2020), which tells a powerful story of how Native Americans have always fought to protect the earth and water, and how they are still here and continue that work today. This lesson focused on answering the question, what did this storyteller want me to know? Students worked in small groups to talk about their own answers and to share their knowledge with each other. This is the start to incorporating more student voices at the center of the learning experience.

The following lesson students were asked to become storytellers themselves and share a piece of their own knowledge with their classmates through an online video posting platform. The purpose of this exercise was to show students that their stories, family stories, personal stories, are valued and valid and deserve to be told. I gave students several examples of what that could look like, an old tale passed down to you from a family member, how-to video, or just retelling a story. Students were then able to view each others' stories online and share their knowledge with all of their classmates. I

also provided time for students to share their stories live in each class if they chose. Again, this lesson centered students as the sources of knowledge, building that foundation that various student stories and experiences are important to our learning community.

After these two carefully scaffolded lessons centered on the power of stories, we shifted towards how sometimes, stories can become dangerous. In this two-day lesson, students watched a TedEd video called “The Danger of a Single Story” by Adichie (2009). This speech focused on the power of single stories to do damage and set people up for stereotypes, prejudice, and racism, regardless of intention. Single stories come from stereotypes built into our society through schooling, books, family, friends, or entertainment, among others. Adichie’s powerful, yet simple examples of her own assumptions and prejudice, made talking about “single stories” and racism accessible, especially for my 6th grade students. I had students watch this 18 minute video through an EdPuzzle, meaning the video was chunked in blocks of 5-7 minutes, and each block had reflection questions on which students could write. While students did watch the video independently, I did gather their reflections and responses and used them to scaffold our conversation about the video for the following day.

The conversation about “the danger” of “single stories” was powerful. One of the reflection questions was “Can you think of any times in your own life when you found yourself sucked into a "single story" understanding of someone else? Or a group of people? Explain the single story you thought of.” This question generated many examples of honest, reflective realizations of when students have used single stories without knowing it. Here are several students’ anonymous responses:

> When I was younger, I thought that everyone had the same living situations. I was blinded by the fact I hadn't seen anyone poor. The only "poor stories" I heard were of after a storm, like a hurricane.
>
> Yes like that is the exact thing like my parents tell me to eat all my food because African kids or most African kids don't have enough food so when I see that that's what I think of them I guess.
>
> I have been before and the story was that all Indians were poor and didn't have much.

The stories students highlighted focused on race, wealth, privilege, stereotypes that they experienced themselves, either through their own understanding of the world, or by being told these stories from others. Students silently read through dozens of these responses. After reading these anonymous stories, we discussed how these could be dangerous stories that lead to injustice and racism. The conversation was led by students and they continually addressed each others' stories, built off of each others' responses, and ultimately came up with strategies for how to stop single stories from being told.

As a group, they decided that the first step to stop single stories was to become aware of single stories. Then they said they needed to learn more, ask questions, and seek more perspectives of the story. The last strategy was to know that learning is never done, and you cannot just "know" the whole story, because stories are so varied and constantly changing. These were conclusions that all of my classes came to. I was astonished. By letting students take the reigns in our discussion about single stories, they were able to

create powerful knowledge together, and openly and honestly talk about racism in their lives.

The lessons that followed this were focused on step one that the students identified—becoming aware of the single stories we may have about indigneous people. We started by anonymously sharing single stories we had about Native Americans, and identified many of the damaging narratives that exist about indigenous people. For example, “they all live in tipis”, or “they all work at casinos”, or “they are violent and have bows and arrows”. We did this to show that there are many stories out there and that it is important that we recognize them so we can learn more about why we hear these stories. Students then were given a chance to work on strategy number two: learning more, and asking questions. They were assigned a “tic-tac-toe” board which featured nine videos of varying topics including language, land acknowledgement, dream catchers, teachings indigenous culture and traditional dress, and residential/boarding schools, and commonly Googled questions about indigenous people. Students needed to select at least three videos to watch and complete an exit ticket reflection. Many students watched all nine videos.

Once again, their reflections were powerful and showed an eagerness to learn more about a community that some didn’t even know was still here. Because of their reflections, we extended this lesson to a second day and I provided more resources that attempted to help them research more of their questions. Some of the student generated questions were: why were Native Americans removed from their homelands, why did Native Americans lose their culture, what is the purpose of dream catchers, where do

Native Americans live now, what are some indigenous stories, what are some indigenous customs, and whose land am I on? Students again had more time to learn, and ask even more questions.

All of these questions led us to lessons talking about land acknowledgement and reclaiming language and culture, which brought us full circle to an entry point to our novel study. *The Birchbark House* is full of Ojibwe language and can often be challenging for 6th grade students to tackle. Many times, students (and teachers) will skip over the Ojibwe vocabulary or not attempt to pronounce it correctly. This is an act of literary erasure of the Ojibwe language. By reframing the language as something to be honored, preserved, and practiced we show students of all language speaking backgrounds, that all language is important, and that it is an important part of culture. We watched a video showing the local Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe efforts to revitalize the language and we "attended" a language class from Sault College to learn traditional greetings, and explored online resources so we could learn how to properly pronounce vocabulary. Exploring the language helped students to practice vocabulary skills, such as looking words up in a dictionary, using pronunciation guides, finding images, and practicing words out loud. Now as students see Ojibwe words in the novel study, they are confident in their ability to say the words and understand what they mean, and they do so with pride in honoring the language.

The end of the unit asked students to reflect on their growth over the course of the unit, from where they started to where they ended and to think about how storytelling shapes us all, for good, or for bad. Overwhelmingly, students reported that they felt more

confident in identifying single stories about communities, and felt they could speak up against single stories in their everyday lives. They also expressed how much they enjoyed exploring questions about other cultures and felt more empowered to use the tools available to them to do their own research. One final question I asked students to reflect on was if I should teach this unit again, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. These students are so much more ready for these kinds of challenging conversations about race than we give them credit for. It is the teachers who need to catch up with the students and offer the space for these conversations about race to happen, in a safe, loving, and respectful community.

Reflections

This learning experience was a highly reflective process. From self-reflection during the literature review, to reflection of my own curriculum, to student reflection. There was a lot of intentional, thoughtful learning exercises for all audiences that resulted in deeper evaluation of how we address and talk about race in the classroom setting. In the following sections, I'll share my reflections on the surprises, how this process created a stronger classroom homeplace, my reflections on the research and learning process, and limitations.

Surprises

As I reflect on teaching this unit with my 6th grade students, I am floored by the number of surprises that came out of this experience. First I was surprised at how well students adapted to having courageous conversations digitally. This whole unit was taught online in a distance format, with most students not turning on their camera, and

yet, the discussions we had were overwhelmingly personal, honest, reflective, and respectful. There were diverse voices represented in each class through microphone and through the chat feature.

Another surprise I had was that students who had been "ghosting" (appearing online, but not really there), started actively participating, and students who had not attended class in some time started to show up. Students were talking about what we were doing in class with their classmates, and that encouraged them to actually come back to class. Not only were they coming to class, they were now turning in assignments and responding to emails from the teacher! I had one student, who had not said a single word all year, suddenly become the most active participant in our class. She shared her family background and explained her story as a Native American in the foster care system and became alive sharing her story and how she's trying to rediscover her culture with her auntie and siblings. I had another student share that she had attended an Ojibwe immersion school as an elementary student and she was able to share her expertise in the language with her classmates.

I was surprised by the white students who were openly and honestly discussing times where they had acted upon assumptions or admitted that they were "trapped" in single stories of different people at different moments in their lives. This dialogue allowed students to reflect and make realizations in real time as the class shared their unique experiences dealing with racism. Students wrote in their reflections that they would have never thought differently if not for some of our conversations, they would have been "trapped" in a single story of a group of people. Some white students were

more vocal about their realizations, but it had a profound impact on others which I saw in their written reflections. Talking about race was opening new perspectives and opportunities for student curiosity and exploration that were not visible before. All of these conversations were not forced, but flowed with true wondering, curiosity, and learning.

The students surprised me with their absolute bravery and unwavering ability to talk about race in a respectful, honest, caring, and passionate way. As we continued to have conversations about prejudice, stereotypes, and racism we have all seen or experienced, it became clear to me that these students don't need help talking about race. They are already having these conversations with their friends and families outside of school. They are more than ready, hungry to talk about racial injustice. It's the teachers who need to catch up and get to the same level of urgency and understanding as the students.

Stronger Classroom Homeplace

This unit has taught me that whenever I can integrate conversations about race that center student experiences, that gives them power, I can show students that my classroom really is a place of love and healing, of learning and respect, and of truly honoring every single person in the room. This unit gave students the common language and vocabulary to revisit discussions about race in a way that focused on learning better to be better for our communities.

Just a few weeks after I taught this unit, the shooting and killing of eight people at Georgia spas, of whom six victims were Asian American, sparked another nationwide

discussion about how racism continues to affect communities of color in the United States. The foundation we had laid in that unit about seeking out different stories and perspectives to better understand and work against racism paid off. We held a classwide discussion exploring the background of how anti-Asian rhetoric has been a part of our history, but particularly so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Again, the students were engaged, curious, and asking questions of me, of each other and of our society. They were critically analyzing the situation and brainstorming how they might stand against bias or hate if they see it at school. Students brought in other sources they had seen with family members, and referred back to the unit's readings and lessons about the "danger of single stories." Because all of the students have this common experience in talking about race, it has allowed us to explore additional conversations about race with little preparation or anxiety. Students know that in this class space, it is safe to talk about race, and it is expected that people are open to learning and most importantly, listening to those new stories.

The Research and Learning Process

The process of researching the question "QUESTION" has been an empowering experience. As a white female educator, I feel I have taken on the responsibility of my white privilege and am starting the work of dismantling the parts of racism that I can control. The start of this project was overwhelming. There is just so much connected to racism in our country, from its very founding, to laws and policies, to language and learning, to housing and governance, to culture and expression and beyond. It felt like too much for one person to tackle. However, by limiting my scope to focus on things that

educators CAN control I was able to find research that empowers teachers to talk about race in effective ways that not only promote learning, but also foster loving relationships that can lead to racial healing.

The literature review required me to do some intensive reflection as a white educator and the practices I employ in my classroom. I am now in the process of figuring out how to address McIntosh's (1988) question, "having described it [white privilege], what will I do to lessen it?" I know that there is so much more to addressing institutional racism than simply talking about race, and there are so many more intersectionalities of identity and race that I need to explore and expand my understanding and perception of. This literature review was very limited in scope, leaving many new pathways to expand upon including how queer people of color fit into this narrative, or how students can shape their own learning through authentic personalized learning with curriculum that is built with Ladson-Billings (2018) deciphering knowledge approach. I will continue to expand my own personal research in these pathways as I grow in my confidence to interrupt traditional, white supremicist institutions in education.

Limitations

This project was limited in several ways. First, the scope of the literature review was limited because of the sheer number of ways race is connected to education. From discipline, to test scores, to tracking, and beyond. Another limitation is the fact that the field of anti-racist literature is rapidly expanding, especially with more resources being directed at racial inequity across many insitutions. For example, the director of the Center for Disease Control officially called racism a "public health threat" on April 8, 2021

(Wamsley) and the trial of Derek Chauvin is forcing the public to reckon with racism in policing (Carrega, et. al, 2021). The studies I focused on were targeted toward what educators can do to bring change to their practice and directly impact students. However, there are many other ways we can bring racial healing to our schools and more research would need to be completed to determine those possibilities. One more limitation I will mention is that for this project to work, the educator must be willing to engage and thoughtfully approach discussions about race in their own classrooms. It cannot be forced upon educators who are not yet ready, or who have not started the act of self-reflection and how race impacts themselves and their classrooms. Teachers need to be willing to talk about race. In the next section, I will address my next steps and how I will share my results.

Next Steps and Sharing Results

The journey has been challenging, but my passion is further fueled by the work I have done in this paper. The more I learn about racism and education, the more I want to bring my colleagues along with me. This process has empowered me to feel confident in my understanding of how race is an insidious and persistent force in education. I have learned that if any change is to happen at all, it takes people who are willing to bring others along with them on their journey towards an anti-racist world.

I am excited that I have been able to share my work with my colleagues and administrative team. My principal has asked for my feedback on several projects the administrative team is working on to try to bring equity work to our students and families. I have collaborated with the literacy coach at my school to arrange staff equity

book clubs which have much more interested participants than we originally anticipated. I am also working with the school counselors to look at bringing Black Live Matter at School 2022 to our building next year. The research I have done for this project has undoubtedly helped unveil pathways forward for myself and my school in small, but effective ways—bringing conversations about race to the forefront of both staff and student experiences.

Summary

In this chapter I reviewed the process of creating the project, the implementation of the project and the student reactions to the project. The process was informative and showed that students are much more capable and able to have honest, courageous, self-reflective conversations about race with their peers than I expected. Students became actively engaged when they saw their racial experiences reflected in our conversations and participated in conversations that helped all students to share perspectives, empathize and learn from each other.

I also reflected on my journey as an educator in this learning process and found that students are much more equipped than teachers and that it is teachers who need to put in the most work to advance racial justice for students in their classrooms. They need to be willing to engage in a lifelong journey of learning and unlearning the historical, social, economic, educational (and more) institutions that continually fund race and how they can actively work to dismantle racism in their own ways. Educators need to be willing to do this work, however. But if they are, one way educators can advance racial

justice is to talk about race with their students and bring others along on the journey, including colleagues and administrators.

In conclusion, if we are to address any issue related to race, we must be able to talk about it. Teachers need to reflect and build their own competencies in being able to facilitate those conversations, but it starts with a willingness to talk about race. If we can get educators to talk about race with students, perhaps we will build a community, a world, where more problem solving and racial healing can occur because they are equipped with the dialogue to effectively and authentically discuss race in a way that respects and honors all, while also challenging white supremicist institutions. We must be able to talk about the problem if we want to address it. No more "we'll talk about that later," the time is now. We must get off the necks of our students and allow them to breathe, to help them breathe. We cannot let another generation of Black and Brown students choke on the systems of racism in education. Now, being made aware of white privilege, what will you do to lessen it? I hope, at a minimum, you will be willing to talk about race.

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