
Undermining Racism and a Whiteness Ideology: White Principals Living a Commitment to Equitable and Excellent Schools

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Abstract

This article reports on six White urban principals who came to administration with a commitment to create more equitable and excellent schools for students from marginalized communities. These leaders made strides in raising student achievement, creating a climate of belonging for students, staff, and families, and increasing access to learning opportunities for marginalized students. The analysis sought to address the following research question: “In what ways do White leaders who make significant progress in creating excellent and equitable schools include race and racial issues in their leadership?” Five aspects of these leaders’ work around undermining racism and a Whiteness ideology are highlighted.

Keywords

principals, multicultural schools, race, minority academic success, White principals

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This article reports on a study of six white urban principals who came to administration with a commitment to create more equitable and excellent schools, in particular for students from marginalized communities. These leaders were successful in many ways in making significant strides in enacting an equity-oriented agenda—raising student achievement, creating a climate of belonging for students, staff, and families, increasing access to core learning opportunities for marginalized students, as well as improving teaching and curriculum. They used many strategies to further these advances.

A key aspect of their work was their own consciousness, knowledge, and skills in dealing with issues of race, leading professional learning around issues of race, and making connections between issues of race (and other marginalizing factors for students in the United States) and larger programmatic changes. For example, the principals in this study had each done much intellectual and emotional work themselves around race. They lead ongoing professional development with their staffs that included reading groups, racial autobiographies, examining privilege, and other ways to get staff members to talk about and examine privilege and institutional racism in schools. They also brought discussions of race into their using data for decision making, supervising teachers, planning curriculum programs (in two cases this led to detracking math), and replacing pullout and self-contained special education and ELL programs with inclusive ones. In part, these leaders addressed and eliminated pullout and self-contained programs as they discovered a disturbing pattern happening in their racially diverse schools in that the students of color were more likely to be removed from the general education classrooms than their White peers.

The purpose of this article is to provide a better understanding of how White leaders can play an active role in undermining racism and a Whiteness ideology through the analysis of six leaders who have both helped create more equitable schools and put race in the foreground of school consciousness. These leaders' stance, however imperfect they or their schools were, was that they would not be complicit with promoting or perpetuating racially disparate outcomes, opportunities, or experiences for their students. Studying principals who put into practice their "not on my watch" attitude is intended to ground the need for *all* principals to be equity-oriented leaders and provide a lens into the ways in which urban school leaders have been successful in making strides to reduce the racially bound disparities in their schools.

Understanding the Meaning of Whiteness from a Critical Race Perspective

In this article, we draw from critical race theories (CRT) in education (see Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995) to illustrate the ways school leaders assert a commitment to raising awareness about social justice education, equity issues, and issues of race and ethnicity. Emerging first as a counterlegal scholarship to the dominant discourse of civil rights legislation in the 1970s (see Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, 1988; Delgado, 1995), the use of CRT and other race-based theories and methodologies has gained significant presence in the field of education over the last two decades (see Dixson & Rousseau, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT begins with the notion that racism is intricately sewn into the fabric of American society and that it appears both normal and natural to people in this culture. The features of CRT in legal scholarship that have been applied to understandings of educational inequity in analytic ways include the notion of Whiteness as property, the critique of claims of neutrality, objectivity, and colorblindness, and the use of counterstorytelling to counteract or challenge dominant narratives (e.g., Duncan, 2002; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002).

An emerging interest within educational research and among those who utilize CRT is the interrogation of Whiteness (Marx & Pennington, 2003). From a CRT perspective, Whiteness is a socially constructed understanding of race that is defined by what is non-White (DeCuir-Gunby, 2006). Whiteness not merely about skin color or complexion, but it is a racial discourse and even a performance (DeCuir, 2006; Marx & Pennington, 2003). Because of this, Whiteness is invisible and remains unnamed and unmarked. Marx writes, "Even thinking about whiteness takes a deliberate conscious effort that most white Americans simply never attempt" (p. 32). Educational research literature that focuses specifically on Whiteness and its link to racism centers on the ways that Whiteness influences how White educators construct beliefs about and work with children and families of color.

A central tenet of CRT in legal scholarship is the notion of Whiteness as property. Applied to educational research, this tenet examines how, due to the history of race and racism in the United States, Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights movements and other equity-minded reforms, such as the unintended consequences of school desegregation, in particular the displacement of African American teachers and school administrators (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Payne, 2008; Siddle-Walker, 2001). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) drew parallels between educational equity and the notion in critical race legal theory of Whiteness as property as a way

to analyze White privilege and the exclusion of Blacks in schooling practices. Using CRT to analyze educational inequities makes visible policies and practices (e.g., tracking, rigorous curriculum, gifted and honors programs) that are almost exclusively enjoyed by White students (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

CRT in educational research can be used as an analytical tool to question school leadership aimed at closing the achievement gap and creating equitable educative experiences for all children, particularly when the majority of school leaders in U.S. schools today are White, middle class, and monolingual. Each of the school leaders selected for this study identifies as White American. This is particularly significant given the dominant demographic profile of urban school leaders in the current context of K-12 urban education in the United States. The majority of students in today's urban schools are Black and Latino native-born and foreign-born youth. One of every five students in U.S. public schools is either an immigrant or the child of an immigrant, mostly from Latin America (Zentella, 2005). When urban school leaders fail to see, hear, talk about, and act according to racial, cultural, and linguistic realities, any progressive reform or leadership efforts are hindered.

Another central tenet of CRT is the insistence on a critique of liberalism because to counter racism and White supremacist ideologies, liberalism is not a mechanism for substantive, real change (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Liberal ideologies, such as notions of colorblindness and the promotion of diversity and not equity, fail to take into consideration the persistence and permanence of racism and the othering of people of color (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Another aspect of this tenet of CRT is the notion of incremental change, where "gains for marginalized groups must come at a slow pace that is palatable for those in power" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 29). When leadership efforts fail to systematically address issues of inequity, specifically those related to race, racism and power, and to uncover the remnants of White privilege, "liberal" or progressive efforts benefit those in power. Untouched, a Whiteness ideology inscribes White privilege through everyday values, practices, and norms. Ladson-Billings (1998) stresses the importance of Whites understanding the meaning of their Whiteness. She states that

it is because of the meaning and value imputed to Whiteness that CRT becomes an important intellectual and social tool for deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power. (p. 9)

In this article, we examine how when White school leaders reflect on and understand their own cultural or White ways of knowing, they are in a position to work toward dismantling the persistent White supremacist ideologies that denigrate the intellectual contributions of “others.” We examine how White school leaders’ understanding of their racial identity and history, and the implications of their White privilege, affects the ways they lead and consciously work to undermine racism in educational practice.

Another essential feature of educational research that employs CRT is counterstorytelling, defined as “a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. The use of counterstories allows for the challenging of privileged discourses, the discourses of the majority” (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). Researchers and educators explicitly examine racism in discussions of educational inequity and work to identify practices to mitigate the effects of racism through counterstorytelling. In this article, we privilege the counterstories told by school leaders, in this case while school principals who witness, experience, and challenge the ways that racist ideologies persist in schools and undermine the education of the children and families we purport to serve. In particular ways, these school leaders articulate an activist stance, leadership that is not just about engagement but also about how they enact their commitment to praxis, that is, action that is informed by critical reflection (Freire, 1970/1982).

Here, we offer concrete examples of school leadership that acknowledges that even within the larger postracial and colorblind discourses that persist in the United States, *race still matters* (West). CRT serves as a vehicle for us to interpret why and how White school leaders do equity-minded and socially just work and to see what is at stake as these school leaders negotiate cross-racial and cross-cultural boundaries.

Method

This article reports on one aspect of a larger study that investigated principals who came to school administration with a desire to create more equitable, socially just, and excellent schools. The larger study investigated how leaders created more equitable and excellent schools, the resistance they faced, and the strategies they developed to sustain their work in the face of resistance. This article, however, takes a different tack and provides a secondary analysis of the ways the White leaders in this study thought about and infused race into their leadership. To that end, this article sought to address the following research question:

Research Question 1: In what ways do White leaders who make significant strides in creating excellent and equitable schools (achievement and climate) include race and racial issues in their leadership?

This study relied on a mix of qualitative and autoethnographic methods. This included interviews, site visits, observations, a review of documents, and a detailed field log. The principals were selected to meet four criteria. They each (a) led a public school, (b) possessed a belief that promoting social justice is a driving force behind what brought them to their leadership position, (c) advocated, led, and kept at the center of their practice/vision issues of race, class, gender, language, disability, sexual orientation, and/or other historically marginalizing conditions, and (d) had evidence to show their work has produced a more just school.

Using purposeful and snowball sampling, for the larger study 18 principals, spanning three states, were nominated to participate in this project. Seven of the original 18 met the selection criteria outlined in the paragraph above, and only five of this sample were White—the additional criteria for the analysis for this article looking at leadership around race of White principals committed to equity and justice. In designing this project, we borrowed from the tradition of autoethnography (Cole & Knowles, 2001) and included one of the authors, a principal committed to equity and social justice, as a sixth principal for this project. In doing so, we combined a qualitative methodology with principles from autoethnography. Numerous scholars have used autoethnography as a methodological tool (Cole & Knowles, 2000; Dews & Law, 1995; Ellis, 2004; Jackson, 1995; Meneley & Young, 2005); including one of the authors enabled this work to be more personal and reflective. Tierney (1998) suggests that these are essential elements to meaningful scholarship—“a necessary methodological device to move us toward newer understanding of reality, ourselves and truth” (p. 56). The principles of autoethnography and self-study that were used for this project open open personal experiences to study in a critical, reflective manner. However, we see the experiences of one of the authors as part of a group of principals committed to equity and justice and do not wish to separate those in the writing of these experiences, thus we use pseudonyms for all principals including one of the authors. These are Principal Eli, Principal Natalie, Principal Scott, Principal Dale, Principal Tracy, and Principal Meg.

Participants

It is important to understand that the 6 principals discussed here were White. While the demographic of the leaders presents certain limitations to this

work, in part these leaders make a compelling case that the leadership centered on issues of race and equity cannot only be the work of leaders of color but also must be the work of White leaders. Hence, this article reports on the work of 6 White principals who came to the field to enact an equity-oriented agenda. Table 1 provides details about their schools and accomplishments in creating more equitable and excellent schools for students of color.

Findings

The principals in this study saw issues of race as central to their work to create more equitable and just schools. Five aspects of these leaders and their work are discussed in this section. These include having previously done their own emotional and intellectual work about issues of race, talking about issues of race with their staffs, learning about race with their staffs, infusing race into their data informed leadership, and connecting with families of color.

Principal's Own Emotional and Intellectual Work about Race

Prior to becoming principals, and certainly before engaging their staffs around issues of race, each of these principals had done emotional and intellectual work around race, institutional racism, and Whiteness. While each of the principals had done this in their own way, they were not new to engaging themselves in racial discussions, seeing racial implications, and reflecting on their own paths, struggles, and privileges as occurring in a racialized context. Principal Dale shared,

I have always had an interest in history and a lot of what history taught me was that groups of people have been discriminated against, have been forced to suffer, and that race has been a significant aspect of that in the United States. I was moved and inspired by studying history to see and understand the racial patterns that have left our country where it is.

Part of his emotional and intellectual work about race came from his interest and learning about history. He also credited his personal work on race to “growing up in the sixties and race being a part of my political conversations with my peers.”

Principal Meg shared that she did much of her own emotional and intellectual “work to unpack my baggage about race in our country” when she began student teaching. She student-taught in a predominantly African

Table 1. Principal Participants, Their Schools, and Outcomes for Students of Color

Principal	School level	Students of color (%)	Free & reduced lunch (%)	Changed opportunities & outcomes for students of color
Eli	High	99	90	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased fights; increased attendance • From 15% to 45% passing state tests
Natalie	High	34	35	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From 25% to 85% graduation rate • Increase advanced academic offerings • Reduce from 14% to 7% failing classes • Increase number and percent going to postsecondary (from 68% to 80%)
Scott	Middle	49	47	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase enrollment in HS college-bound program • Reduce suspension • From 69% to 85% reading at grade level • From 55% to 78% math at grade level
Dale	Middle	35	40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduction in behavior referrals, suspension & police involvement • Detracked math & inclusive special ed. • From 62% to 80% at grade level in reading/math
Tracy	Elementary	52	50	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inclusive services: Special ed., ELL, remedial reading • From 33% to 78% African American reading at grade • From 18% to 100% Latino reading at grade • From 47% to 100% Asian reading at grade
Meg	Elementary	38	25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • From 42% to 78% math at grade • Eliminate pullout ESL & remedial reading • Improve to 90% Latino reading at grade • Above district and state averages for African American and Asian reading & math achievement

American school with a “strong and well-respected African American veteran teacher.” She continued, “My cooperating teacher really kicked my ass about race and the realities of subtle racism and my own privilege. It was clear to me that she loved me and loved the kids at school. But more important to my own learning was how she got me to see race in new ways that I had not thought about before.” Principal Meg discussed how her own work continued as she started her teaching career in a 90% Black school in Milwaukee. She stated, “With my eyes open to race and racism, I was able to learn a lot more when I began teaching.” Principal Meg also credits her brother, sister-in-law, and group of friends who “continue to challenge and inspire” her to think deeply about race, Whiteness, and privilege.

While each of the principals took their own path that included wrestling with racial issues and institutional racism, they all shared that they felt that this personal emotional and intellectual work on their own consciousness was a fundamental step they needed to have done before they could effectively lead schools to be more equitable and just, which to them necessarily included dealing purposefully and openly about issues of race.

Talking About Race

The second aspect of their leadership that purposefully dealt with race was to engage staff in conversations that did not skirt racial issues but to talk about race plainly and often. Singleton and Linton (2006) contend that this is difficult for White educators and predominately White staffs. Nonetheless, these principals tried not to avoid race or racially charged issues but to openly discuss or bring them up.

Principal Eli shared that he and his staff would “often talk about race.” He stated, “sometimes I would have to lead a discussion about something [dealing with race] that had happened, or raise an issue in a conversation with staff.” He did not feel that these conversations “undid the impact of our historic racism” but were important to continue a conversation that did not avoid race or deny its “impact in the daily lives of students in our schools.”

Principal Tracy brought race into many different conversations, both daily informal ones with individuals as well as larger staff conversations. He shared one such occasion.

It was interesting that when the middle school our students would go to after completing our [elementary] school would have a day off or a half day of school when we would still have school, many of our former students would come back to visit. We developed a policy that the

students would need to come to the office, then the office would call the room of the teacher they wanted to visit and if the teacher was ok with a visit then, we would send the kids down. This was the policy, all the staff seemed to know it and support it. One such day, three or four middle school students come in one of the back doors of the school and are walking down one of the halls. Four to five different teachers called the office to let us know these students were in the hall. I have to say the teachers seemed nervous. I went into the hall and watched them come down the hall toward to office. They came into the office and asked to visit a couple of teachers. We called the rooms and sent them to visit or if the teacher was not available, we sent the students home. They were not particularly loud or disruptive in the hall or office. This group of students all happened to be Black. Now, about 2 hours later a group of six to seven middle school kids came walking down the same hall, but this time no teachers called the office to say these students were in the hall. However, given that there were more of them and that they were fairly loud I could hear them from the office and went out to see what was happening. They came to the office and asked to visit certain teachers. But here's the thing, this group of students were all White. I was struck by the fact when we had a group of Black students I got many calls alerting me and seemingly nervous about their presence even though they were not loud in the hall. But when a group of White students who were much louder came, no one seemed to notice and no one showed evidence that they were concerned or nervous. So I had to share this story with my staff. . . . We talked about it.

Principal Tracy's point in sharing this story was not that teachers should not call the office or that certain students were being naughty and not getting caught, but that this incident was a way to see and discuss ways in which his staff enacted on their own, sometimes hidden, beliefs that were racialized. He used this opportunity to talk about personal assumption about race, not to blame people for overtly racist action but to "try to get people to realize our assumptions and reactions can be racist without intending to be. This requires a lot of reflection." Principal Tracy did not see this incident as a huge or monumental crisis, and he did not feel that discussing this incident would close the racial achievement gap. This was done as a way to raise consciousness. Through a greater comfort with speaking and thinking about race and developing a greater racial consciousness, he and the other leaders in this study hoped that ongoing discussions and reflections about race and personal assumptions/biases would alter the way in which teachers viewed and interacted with their students and families of color.

Learning About Race

Five of the six leaders engaged their staffs in ongoing professional learning about race. This did not take the form of workshops or sensitivity training, but ongoing investigating and in the words of one principal, “wrestling with race, our own privilege, and our own experience with race.” This took many forms. A number of principals led race discussion groups that were often a byproduct of a city initiative for intergroup racial dialogue. Other principals led reading groups, where they read books like, *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* (Tatum, 1997), *Caucasia* (Senna, 1998), *Other People’s Children* (Delpit, 1995), *From Rage to Hope* (Kuykendall, 1991), *No Excuses* (Carter, 2000), *Young Gifted and Black* (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003), and *A White Teacher Talks about Race* (Landsman, 2005). Two of these principals required some reading about race for all staff to come to professional development sessions prepared and with shared knowledge and shared reading. These two met *some* backlash from the teachers union for requiring staff to read articles outside of school contract hours. Yet, all staff members were engaged in reading and discussing race at staff meetings and or professional development times.

A number of these principals engaged their staffs in sharing their racial autobiographies. Each time the staff assembled for meetings or professional development, a couple of staff shared their personal racial autobiographies with the staff. Principal Meg stated,

This practice of sharing our own racial narratives helped the staff become closer and more trusting of each other but it also positioned race as a part of each of our lives. Almost every time we shared these, the staff got emotional and there were a lot of tears—not tears of anger or joy, but tears of emotion and empathy and struggle.

These personal narratives were an avenue for these principals to keep ongoing learning about race occurring in personal and immediate ways.

Five of the principals facilitated whole staff learning about Whiteness and White privilege. They used readings and personal reflections, a couple also used activities where teachers can give themselves a score about the amount of privilege they have experienced based on their race. Principal Tracy discussed this.

The White privilege survey made issues of race connect with many of my White teachers in ways I had not seen previously. A number

commented that they had not realized the extent to which they benefited, often times in unspoken or unrealized ways, because of being White. For others they really struggled with their personal experiences in that they had worked very hard to achieve but they could begin to see that while they had worked very hard, they still had privilege people of color did not.

Principal Tracy and the other principals engaged their staffs in ongoing learning about race. This built on their commitment to discuss racial issues but took that discussion to the next level in that not only were they open and purposeful about talking about race but also they tried to help their staffs engage in the emotional and intellectual work they had done previously.

Infusing Race Into Data Informed Leadership

These six principals brought race into how they used data to lead their schools. Given that all six principals were in schools and districts they were increasingly using data to help inform decisions, they felt that data were much more meaningful when they infused demographics, and in this case race.

Race and discipline data. At three of these schools when the principal led or shared information about discipline and behavioral referrals, that was always accompanied not only by breaking that data down by race but also by engaging staff and school improvement teams in reflection about that data. They felt they could not talk about behavior and discipline without bringing a lens of race to the data. One principal shared that she felt that if her staff were not also engaging in other personal reflection about race, this combination of race and behavior data might have reinforced stereotypes. The ongoing personal reflection about race and privilege allowed for some teachers to see beyond blaming the students. All of the principals who did this felt that these discussions required facilitation to steer the staff away from seeing the discipline data as a way to blame the students.

Race and special education data. Three of these principal-led reform of special education services brought race into a discussion of special education referrals and the higher rate of placement of students of color into not only special education but into less inclusive settings. Principal Tracy used data to show how students of color were being overrepresented in special placement and referrals particularly for the labels of emotional disturbance. Principal Natalie articulated the result she saw at the high school level when kids had been separated and removed from the classroom for much of their elementary and middle school experience.

When kids are removed and pulled out, we know this has a significant overlap with racial and cultural groups, but it sends a message to students that they need to be separated, so by the time they get to high school all the kids that have been separated and the ones who have been left in the regular classes do not know each other and do not know how to get along. I see the way we have pulled kids away from each other through special ed., ESL, etcetera as contributing to racial conflict in high school.

Two principals who lead service delivery reform mapped out the racial patterns and how the multitude of pullout programs that served their students overlapped with race. Principal Meg stated,

in discussing the current state of programs before we restructured, I mapped out how we were currently serving students. The Black kids went to Title [remedial reading support] and the Brown kids went to ESL, while most of the White kids stayed in the classroom. These racial patterns were essential to discuss and this led us to eliminating all these programs and going to smaller classes with not pullout supports.

While Principal Tracy made a visual representation of this same pattern at his school, the visual of showing teachers the racial implication of the many pullout programs was a key element. While these programs were well intended, they were inadvertently creating a two-tiered racist system, one for students of color that meant being removed from the general classrooms and one for White students where they stayed in the classrooms.

Data about race and tracking. Two of the principals led detracking efforts at their school. A key aspect to teachers' buy-in about changing from a tracked math program to a detracked one was the discussion and realization that the system of tracking was separating students largely along racial line. Both of these schools were multiracial and racially diverse places. This meant the low-tracked programs were predominantly students of color and the higher the tracks, the whiter the classes. Principal Dale shared that while

many teachers initially wanted to keep the tracked math program, they were articulate about the realities that this program was segregating by race. And while they liked the ability groups for math, presenting the data helped them see that inadvertently racist system was being perpetuated. Using race really helped make the case that a tracked system was inequitable.

In these cases the leaders saw the connection between issues of race and tracking and were able to use data to that end with staff.

Racial data and teacher supervision. Principal Scott brought a lens of race to the data he used during supervision of teacher. For example, he prepared for a meeting with a teacher who was not performing well enough and Principal Scott wanted to put on an improvement plan.

So I ran a lot of data reports and I discovered that while I had a feeling this [teacher] was not doing a good enough job with our students of color, the data told me that he fails the most AfricanAmerican students in the entire district. I mean that says something. In looking at the hundreds and hundreds of middle school and high school teachers in our district, this guy fails the most Black kids. I brought that data to our meeting about his performance and we talked about it.

In looking across how these leaders used data with race, it was not prescriptive but was ongoing and interwoven into the discussion they led and the initiatives they sought to enact. They did not feel that using race in their discussions with teachers made the teachers more comfortable with race, but they felt that keeping race intertwined with data informed leadership kept issues of marginalization and in this case race in the foreground. It positioned the connection between their drive to provide more equitable and just schools for marginalized students as necessarily connected with their daily work with data. If they were going to create more equitable schooling, they needed to not see equity work as separate from this kind of instructional and data informed leadership.

Connecting With Families of Color

The final way these leaders were purposeful about connecting issues of race in their leadership was their engagement of families of color. Given that all of these principals were White, they were initially outsiders in the communities of color within their larger school community. All six described their need to build trust and develop relationship with families of color as paramount to developing more equitable and just schools. Principal Natalie shared,

Many of the families of color see me as “that White principal,” so my job is to develop relationship with them so they see that I am an ally,

that I care so deeply about their kids, that we can work together, and that I will listen to them.

Some of the principals felt that building relationships one family or one parent at a time was their most effective way to engage families that had not been engaged previously and connect with families of color. This took a number of forms that they were purposeful about in their weekly routines from being present in the neighborhood, walking students home after school, being in the streets of their communities of color before schools, and making home visits.

A couple of the principals discussed making a concerted effort to invite families of color to help with particular projects, attend specific meetings, or to serve on a committee as a purposeful way to create new relationships. They felt this was an easy way for families to commit to being involved and were often flattered that the principal had asked for their assistance.

A number of principals felt that making a concerted effort to learn as many names as they could of parents of color was a key strategy in making these parents feel welcomed in the school. Principal Tracy commented, "I had to learn who preferred to be called Shana and who preferred to be called Mrs. Roberts but knowing and using people's names was a powerful tool to creating a welcoming climate for families of color . . . many of them told me this."

Principal Meg set up ethnic parent meetings as a response to hearing from their families of color. In addition to the traditional parent-teacher organization (PTO), this principal with the assistance of a couple of teachers ran additional meetings for Latino parents, Hmong parents, and parents of African American students. After running these meeting for years, hundreds of parents who had not been involved previously were attending regularly and had an ongoing connection with the school and a place to communicate their interests and needs. It is also important to note that over time the previously all-White PTO board became racially diverse and one Hmong parent ran for and was elected to the citywide school board.

In sum, these 6 White principals had engaged in their own emotional and intellectual work around race that confronted their own privilege and helped them see the ways in which race and racism were pervasive in the United States. While this was ongoing work for each of them, they felt that because of this work they were able to be more effective at leading and facilitating discussions on race and racially charged topics with their staffs, professional learning about race for their staffs, bringing in race to inform their uses of data, and connecting with families of color.

Discussion and Implications

Colorblind ideologies and false notions of meritocracy still pervade schooling processes. Issues of race and racism are still deeply ingrained in U.S. society, and by extension, public education. Dominant discourses around racial difference and disparities in education, when not critically questioned or challenged, can be stifling for the work of urban school leaders, particularly for those who do not readily share racial, cultural, and linguistic norms and traditions with their student populations. Issues of race and racism remain a formidable force in this society, and when left untouched, they also stand as tangible excuses and reasons for the widening of educational disparities that persist within urban schools.

As we discuss in this article, these school leaders did not dismiss or run from these issues; instead they recognize the powerful ways that race and racism shape and affect access to equity in schooling and can impede efforts toward closing the achievement gap. Their work, however, began first with their own emotional and intellectual undertakings about their own racial identities and histories, their privilege, and the presence of institutional racism.

We learned from this study that this is a necessary and critical step for all future and current school leaders to undergo, and as shown here, there are concrete ways that such learning experiences can be created and encouraged for school leaders. In school leadership programs and professional development, there are specific reflexive exercises, readings, discussion questions, and writing activities that prompt school leaders to look inward to consider the ways that race and racism were and are present in their own life histories and experiences and to then consider differences that exist between their social locations and the locations of the urban student populations that they serve. This is a beginning step toward cultivating school leadership that takes on issues of race and racism directly and explicitly.

By focusing our attention here on the experiences and identity work of White school leaders in urban education, our work also illuminated the diverse, varied, and complex nature of Whiteness. Not all White school leaders are the same; they are different by other factors including class, gender, language, sexual orientation, and regional affiliations. Recognizing these differences disrupts the hegemonic and monolithic treatment of Whiteness and White privilege and allows for more nuanced interpretations of the ways that each school leader in this study experienced and responded to issues of race and racism in their school.

For example, understanding the complexities and intersections of race is further extended when we consider the ways that these school leaders

responded to other issues like special education, the education of English language learners, and the role of discipline in their schools. Again, it was not enough to just say that race and racism persisted and impeded schooling processes. Race did not exist in a vacuum at these schools. There were real intersections that were part of a racial consciousness that these leaders brought to their schools. It was not enough to recognize inequitable outcomes based on race or simply noting the overrepresentation of students of color in special education or recognizing the predominance of black male students in school suspensions and dismissals. Seeing and understanding the Whiteness ideology behind these disparities was a starting point for these leaders to dismantling them.

Leaders cannot see race and special education or race and linguistic diversity as separate issues. Seeing those as separate embraces the assumption that there is some “magic” that will happen for students of color when placed in one of these programs. Ample evidence exists refuting that dangerous assumption. Seeing race as distinct from special programs like special education perpetuates a system that does not provide equitable opportunities and offers a “legitimate” way to separate, segregate, denigrate, and disparage certain groups and communities.

Conclusion

“Decades of ‘good leadership’ have created and sanctioned unjust and inequitable schools,” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 253). This historic reality combined with the analysis presented here presents a stark reminder that White school leaders cannot be complicit with racist school practice and programs. The principals in this study provide a valuable lesson that White leaders are capable of the necessary leadership around race, but require undertaking both intellectual and emotional work.

These leaders give a counterstory to the collective wringing of hands about the overwhelming nature of the racial issues in the United States as well as a counterstory to the too often seen reality that relegates racial talk and racial transformative leadership to leaders of color. White leaders can and must engage in this equity-oriented, racially connected work. This study provides ideas and models—not perfect ones to be imitated, but ones that provide an understanding of how leaders with equity commitments can navigate the racist terrain of schools to create safer, happier, and more rigorous places for students of color and their families.

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Bios

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