Article

Race and Racism: How Does an Aspiring Social Justice Principal Support Black Student Leaders for Racial Equity Among a Resistant White Staff

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Abstract

The leaders of the Black Student Union (BSU) at Liberty High School share their school climate and culture survey with Ms. Nguyen, their Asian American principal. Black youth leaders reveal a hostile and unwelcoming climate in the form of anti-blackness for Black students at a school staffed with primarily white teachers. BSU students request to share their findings with the entire school staff. The question remains how Ms. Nguyen, a principal who has the aspirations of a social justice leader and the desire to incorporate the voices of marginalized groups at her school, navigates a challenging context where white teaching staff exhibit resistance to creating social change at Liberty High.

Keywords

student voice, social justice leadership, racial equity

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Context

Evergreen is a medium-sized metropolitan city located in the Midwest, boasting a reputation as a liberal community notable for its antiwar protests during the 1960s and 1970s. In the last 10 years, Evergreen has witnessed a demographic shift from a primarily white community to an uptick in racially marginalized students. In recent years, the Evergreen Independent School District (EISD), which serves roughly 25,000 school-aged children, has come under tremendous scrutiny from Black[1] community members due to their behavior data and academic outcomes. Disproportionately, Black students are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their white counterparts. According to the 2016 to 2017 school year, even though Black students represent 18% of the school district population, they accounted for 53% of behavior infractions. White students, in contrast, represent 43% of the district and received 18% of behavior incidents. Furthermore, low-income students represent 49% of the school district and 88% of discipline infractions. Four-year high school completion data for EISD also reveal further disproportionality among white (89.6%), Black (58.5%), Latino (74.4%), and Asian students (92.5%).

According to prominent white members of the Evergreen community, Liberty High School (LHS), situated in EISD, represents a resource-rich school that offers state-of-the-art facilities and a rigorous, college-bound curriculum to match. LHS enrolls 1,200 students with a racially diverse student body: 50% white, 40% Black, 8% Latino, and 2% Asian. The catchment area of LHS rests on the west side of town, adjacent to a major shopping complex and a main thoroughfare dotted with strip malls. As an economically mixed school, roughly, 50% of students attending LHS qualify for free and/or reduced lunch and live in low-income housing nearby the school; conversely, students also come from wealthy neighborhoods where the median home value is $400,000. Liberty represents a racially and economically diverse school; however, the disproportionate data plaguing the school district does not leave Liberty immune: white students make up the majority of Advanced Placement and honors courses while youth of color occupy mainstream or remedial classes. Black students receive the brunt of classroom referrals, suspensions, and expulsions while also being over-referred for special education services.

The Quest for Racial Justice

Tasked to address the racial disparities facing the school, Ms. Mia Nguyen, a 40-year-old Asian American female, rose to the principalship this year after serving for 5 years as an assistant principal. A native of Evergreen and alumna of Liberty, Ms. Nguyen grew up in a low-income, immigrant neighborhood nearby and attended the state's flagship school located in the city. She taught middle school English for 8 years at Liberty's feeder school and eventually pursued a master's degree in educational leadership with a principal's certification. Her graduate program had an emphasis on social justice leadership, and she aspired to place much of her training into practice at her alma mater. As one of a handful of students of color on the college-bound track, Mia's

lived experiences as a high school student raised her awareness of the challenges facing Black and Latino students at Liberty.

Ms. Nguyen inherited a teaching staff consisting of 95% white teachers and a marginal group of Black, Latino, and Asian American faculty who expressed a commitment to educating all students; however, professional development (PD) meetings where Ms. Nguyen broached concerns regarding racial disparities were often met with resistance and defensiveness, particularly from a faction of more senior staff. In one particular PD in early spring, after teaching staff reviewed the behavior data at Liberty, a small but vocal group of white faculty members espoused strong opinions about minoritized students at Liberty:

> It's not about race; it's about class.

> Their parents are struggling to make ends meet; they don't have time to help their students.

> These kids come from homes that lack basic family values.

> I don't see race. I treat all my students the same.

> Why do we keep bringing up the race card? I am not a racist.

Ever since that explosive discussion, Ms. Nguyen grapples with how to approach these conversations about race with her predominantly white teaching staff, especially as an Asian woman. She is uncertain if the sentiments expressed by her vocal teachers are indicative of the rest of the staff. She is mindful that the few teachers of color at Liberty are silenced during PD meetings because they have expressed feelings of marginalization in private.

Ms. Nguyen has limited time allotted for PD to focus solely on issues of race and equity, especially considering the district mandates to raise standardized test scores and a new software to track behavior data. Admittedly, her aspirations to address racial disparities with her staff have waned significantly since that explosive PD but not for lack of will. Ms. Nguyen feels inadequately prepared to address these conversations with her white staff. Her leadership preparation program had a social justice focus, but it did not offer any training or guidance on how school leaders actually facilitate conversations about race with reluctant, white staff members.

Student Voice Initiative

Ms. Nguyen recognizes that hearing the perspectives of historically marginalized students and families would be central to her work as a transformative school leader. As an assistant principal, she heard from far too many Black parents about their discontent with how white teachers and administrators treat their Black children. Their complaints and frustrations often fell on deaf ears. As a result, during this first year as

principal, Ms. Nguyen set up a standing, monthly listening session to hear from student leaders in the Black Student Union (BSU). Also, she created a Black Parents' Café on the first Friday of every month in the morning for Black parents to drop in and speak with her. As more Black parents hear about the meeting, the attendance has increased from five parents to over a dozen on any given Friday. She hopes to launch a similar effort with Latino and Asian families in the near future.

In hopes to integrate the voices of historically marginalized students into decision-making processes at Liberty, Ms. Nguyen requested the help of students in BSU on a youth-led school climate survey to gain insights into the educational experiences of Black students, especially in light of the disproportional data on EISD. A core group of BSU students worked with their club sponsor during lunch time and after school in the spring to conduct this research project. Youth researchers engaged in a semester-long research project that included anonymous student surveys, focus groups for Black students, and semi-structured interviews with Black youth known with the most disciplinary issues. In late spring, BSU researchers reached out to Ms. Nguyen and her administrative team to share their research findings. Ms. Nguyen hopes to eventually use the BSU's research findings to inform the practices and policies at her school.

Case Narrative

BSU student researchers are standing along the wall of the conference room near the podium. Their club sponsor stands off on the side opposite the podium to offer a smile or technical support. Although the entire administrative team was invited to attend this presentation, only Ms. Nguyen and her assistant principal, Mr. Revel, are in attendance. Mr. Revel, a white male in his mid-40s, also a native of Evergreen and alumni of Liberty High School, supports the work of students in the BSU; however, he is also mindful of a strong contingency of white suburban families who wield power in the community. The two other assistant principals are dealing with a fight that broke out after school.

Aaliyah, a tall sophomore wearing black rimmed glasses, begins the slides with an introduction. She is the current president of the BSU with a strong academic record; she is also actively involved with the local Black Lives Matter organization. As she approaches the lectern, she takes a deep breath, looks at her peers to smile, and then begins her presentation. She starts by narrating the data available on graduation rates, infractions, suspensions, and expulsions at Liberty High School, painting a picture of disparate treatment and outcomes for Black students compared to white peers. Several youth researchers proceed to offer an overview of their research methods, data collection, and analysis.

DeShawn, a short and stocky junior with a baby face approaches the lectern; he has a perpetual grin on his face and provokes smiles and laughter from his peers. He experienced a lot of hostility with teachers at school and felt joining BSU would be a healthy space for him to just be himself. Since his active involvement with the BSU as a sophomore this year, his attendance and grades have improved compared to his

freshman year. He sways side to side and rubs his palms together before he begins sharing the findings:

> In our survey of Black students here at Liberty, we found some important statistics worth sharing. Out of 50 Black youth we surveyed, only 10 stated they had an adult in this school they could trust, so if you break that down, it's only like 20%.

Ms. Nguyen smiles to affirm to DeShawn that she is listening and scribbles notes on her yellow writing pad. Mr. Revel with his arms crossed fidgets in his seat in discomfort. DeShawn proceeds and points to another pie chart.

Then we asked students in the survey if they felt teachers built relationships with students. Only about 30% of students agreed with this statement. Then we asked students the same question in our focus group. Here is an excerpt from the conversation:

> Student A: A few of my teachers do but most of them do not.
> Student B: My history teacher does. She is always asking us about our weekends. Things we're interested in. She's cool. Connecting what we learn in history to real life right now.
> Student A: I feel like most of my teachers just want to teach the lesson and then go about their day. They don't care about us Black kids.

Ending with that last statement, DeShawn introduces his friend Ely. Ely wears an army green polo shirt with an impeccable haircut and the letter E etched on the right side of his head. A prominent leader and a popular student among Liberty, Ely walks up to the podium with an air of confidence:

> I'm gonna now share data from our interviews with Black students who are our repeat offenders for classroom removal. We didn't have to ask an adult who these folks were. We already knew.

Ely chuckles at his peers while they all let out a guffaw even forcing a smile from Ms. Nguyen and Mr. Revel. Ely continues:

This one student who we are gonna call James shared this about his experiences with us:

> I feel like once you known as the bad kid at Liberty it just sticks with you wherever you go. It don't matter whose class. (James)

Then Ely proceeds to share:

> I want to do better but sometimes it feel like teachers just don't care. And sometimes I see white students do the exact same thing as me but I get kicked outta class. That's some bullshit. (James)

As Ely reads the curse word, he looks off at his audience to catch their reactions. Ms. Nguyen and Mr. Revel collectively smile. Students continue with their presentations sharing a few more findings that reify their central point: Black students do not feel welcomed, connected, or a sense of belonging in their classes or among their teachers at Liberty. Aaliyah returns to the podium to close the presentation:

> The research team for the BSU would like to share our findings with the entire teaching staff at Liberty. Together, we can work towards solutions to these problems and improve the educational experiences for Black students at this school.

She looks up at her audience of two administrators for their responses. Ms. Nguyen and Mr. Revel nod and applaud students for their efforts. As he is applauding, questions and concerns begin to swirl in Mr. Revel's head:

> These students did a great job with their research project. I had no idea how bad things were here at Liberty for Black kids. Damn. The fact that only 10 out of 50 students surveyed said they could identify an adult at this school that cared about them. I don't know though. I can just imagine what some of these teachers are going to say. They are going to tear these kids up. We can't piss off these teachers. They will for sure file complaints with the teachers' union, not to mention the white parents at this school once they get a wind of this research project. Yikes. These teachers are not ready to hear from these student researchers. This is going to be an unproductive conversation. We should just avoid it altogether, for now. We are just not ready as a school to talk about issues of race as a faculty, let alone bringing students into the conversation.

Ms. Nguyen also raises some concerns as she reflects on the student researchers and their request to share their research with staff:

> These young people are speaking truth to power here. Unfortunately, nothing that has surfaced from this youth research project is new or surprising to me. It merely confirms what I've known or suspected all along: there is a clear disconnect between this primarily white teaching staff and the lived experiences of Black students at this school. My teaching staff needs to face the realities of this work: Black students are not being served at Liberty. I am especially concerned about how a small but influential faction of this faculty will respond to these students' research projects. I feel protective of these BSU researchers. I also know that their research findings are important to improving the school culture for Black students. However, I am aware of the resistance from some faculty members to change. I want to be as careful as possible moving forward to ensure the findings these young folks surface will not be dismissed but become central to our improvements as a school.

Teaching Notes

Student Voice in Educational Leadership

Student researchers of the BSU pose a conundrum for Ms. Nguyen and her administrative team: how can educational leaders best support student voice initiatives for racial justice and educational equity within a context such as Liberty High? Researchers in

the field of educational leadership for years have argued that student perspectives and voices should be valued and incorporated into the daily decisions at the micro level (i.e., shaping classroom rules) to the macro level (i.e., informing school and district policies; Mitra, 2009; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Smyth, 2006). Grounded in the literature, student voice can take multiple forms, from merely using students as data to examining student work for learning outcomes or surveying students on their opinions regarding a specific topic (Fielding, 2001). Furthermore, researchers have also linked youth to more integral parts of educational leadership, positioning youth as researchers engaged in critical social inquiry alongside adults at school (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002, 2009; Rubin & Jones, 2007). In their research, Jones and Yonezawa (2002, 2009) have featured examples of how principals incorporate student research to inform and improve the educational experiences of students. Researchers have illuminated how adding the voices and perspectives of students strengthens the educational experiences for all students and enriches the lives of youth leaders involved in this work (Rogers, Morrell, & Enyedy, 2007; Sussman, 2015; York & Kirshner, 2015).

Despite the benefits of incorporating youth voice to education reform, school leaders rarely seek the views of students to inform policies and practices at the school or district levels (Damiani, 2014; Gentilucci & Muto, 2007; Wernick, Woodford, & Kulick, 2014). A paradigm shift, centering students as educational leaders rather than passive recipients of adult leadership, requires school leaders to intentionally disrupt the patterns of the past that have unquestioningly continued for so long (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2017). When administrators elicit the opinions of students, at times researchers have documented school leaders handpicking which students' voices are heard (Silva, 2001). Moreover, when youth of color do speak up about racial and educational injustice, their voices and opinions are silenced or stifled (Lac & Fine, 2018; Beachum & Watson, 2017; Watson & Rivera-McCutchen, 2016). The fact remains that white students and parents continue to wield a web of social, cultural, human capital that is valued in traditional schooling, so their voices perpetually matter and influence educational policies (Kozol, 2006; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Posey, 2012).

Although in recent years, a surge of researchers has pushed for a social justice orientation in educational leadership (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Merchant & Garza, 2015; Theoharis, 2007), the field remains largely an adult-centric sphere, missing the voices of racially marginalized student leaders in the quest for racial and educational justice. Educational leadership programs, furthermore, do not prioritize preparing school leaders to work alongside students, parents, and families, collectively, as social justice leaders (Bertrand & Rodela, 2018; Fernández & Paredes Scribner, 2018). The field of educational leadership in practice, furthermore, has traditionally adopted a top-down model to leading, funneling directives such as policies, curriculum, and standards at the federal, state and local levels, stifling the participation of school leaders, teachers, students, and families from the decision-making process.

Issues of Race and Equity in Schools

The quest for racial justice and educational equity continues to plague U.S. schools long after the passing of *Brown vs. Board of Education* into law 1954. Ladson-Billings

(2004) argues that schools owe an educational debt to minoritized children, having systematically denied Black, Latino, and Indigenous youth the right to an adequate education. Researchers who employ Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the field of education centralize the role of race as a determining factor that bifurcates the experiences of white children from their minoritized counterparts in this country (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2004; Parker & Stovall, 2004; Stovall, 2006). Evidence in the research literature highlight how race and racism informs every facet of American life for K12 students: the funding of public schools, the disproportionate disciplinary infractions meted to Black children, and the Eurocentric textbooks and curriculum found in classrooms to name a few (Kozol, 2012; Loewen, 2008; Skiba & Peterson, 1999).

Specific to Black youth, scholars call for researchers and practitioners to explore the "more detailed ways" Blackness continues to matter and structure U.S. society including within schooling spaces (Dumas & ross, 2016). Beyond the focus on inequity and racism more broadly, researchers urge educational and policy leaders to grapple with the specificity of anti-blackness: the social disregard for and disgust with Black bodies and denial of existence (Dumas, 2016; Wilderson, 2017). In particular, critical practitioners must contend with the ways in which "Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago," even after the end of institutionalized chattel slavery (Hartman, 2007, p. 6). Research consistently documents how pervasive and embedded racial meaning-making allows for schools to be sites of suffering (Dumas, 2014) in which there is a lack of care for and deep-seated, dominant narratives about Black youth as "the bad kid[s]" as Liberty High School students describe. Educational leaders must honestly reflect on how Black humanity is disdained in schooling and through societal arrangements (Dumas & Ross, 2016). Educational leaders must consider how the inhumanity of Black youth and families are forged and reified within school and societal practice, policy, and ideology. Educational leaders must confront any practice or educational reform effort that seeks to maintain rather than disrupt and abolish this status quo (Wilderson, 2017).

For far too long, dominant narratives that direct the blame solely at students and families miss the mark on how structural factors shape educational inequities. Most notably, educational leaders must grapple with the notion of Black youth as the "problem," in which efforts to address the disparities Black youth experience "construct racial inequality as largely a matter of individual choice and cultural defect" and "neither disrupt the White supremacist racial hegemony, nor threaten the capitalist economic order" (Dumas, 2016, p. 108). Black communities continually endure an onslaught of dehumanizing narratives that unfairly shape how school officials perceive their students (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Valencia, 2002). Furthermore, anti-black racism and sentiments permeate the consciousness of teachers, specifically white teachers and non-Black teachers of color, in our country without intentional recognition or redress (Dumas, 2016).

Rarely do educators interrogate the subtleties of race and institutionalized racism in how it shapes and informs policies and practices nested within a school, such as racialized tracking or implicit racial bias (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Oakes, 2005). Without

sufficient attention to the root causes of educational inequity in our nation's public schools, school leaders and teachers, alike, will continue to blindly seek solutions to an enduring issue.

Talking About Race and Racism Among School Staff

Broaching conversations related to race and racism can represent a challenge for school leaders, especially in a sociopolitical context that continually promulgates post-racial logics or historical amnesia to negate how institutional racism persists in every-day life (Bonilla-Silva, 2002; Mills, 2011). In recent years, scholars have offered resource guides and seminal texts to encourage these conversations in PD settings (Brooks, 2013; Okun, 2010; Pollack, 2008):

- Pollack's (2008) book *Everyday Anti-Racism: Getting Real about Race in Schools* offers a series of short readings from scholars across the field of education on topics ranging from disrupting biological conceptions of race to urging educators to move beyond essentializing minoritized youth. At the end of each piece, authors offer additional resources and discussion questions coupled with suggestions educators can implement into practice immediately (Pollack, 2008).
- Singleton (2014) offers tangible guidelines for consideration in his book *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools.* The author, for instance, recommends that prior to engaging in these tough conversations school leaders and teachers together generate norms that all members will adhere to during the discussion (Singleton, 2014).
- Tatum's (1997) book *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria* offers an accessible read exploring the difference between racism versus racial prejudice and arguing that understanding the difference between these ideas is tantamount to antiracist work.
- Lewis and Diamond's book (2015) *Despite the Best Intentions: How Racial Inequality Thrives in Good Schools* offers the case of Riverview High School, a resource-rich school, detailing the stark and disparate opportunity gap between white and Black students even among a primarily middle-class student body.
- Tuck and Yang's (2018) book entitled *Toward What Justice?* outlines new ideas and challenges entrenched views of what "justice" means when considered from the perspectives of marginalized communities. The book helps researchers and practitioners grapple with the difficult and even strained questions of justice reflecting on the contingencies and incongruences at work when considering what justice wants and requires.

To genuinely promote racial equity in schools, school leaders will need to procure a host of resources to develop the skill sets necessary to facilitate difficult conversations about race and racism among their staff.

A Call for Collective Educational Leadership

For far too long, educational leadership continues to operate with minimal input from the stakeholders they serve—students and families—especially in low-income communities of color (Lac & Cumings Mansfield, 2017). School leaders with an arc toward social justice cannot espouse the ideals of racial equity while silencing, ignoring, or negating the voices of marginalized students and parents. Although Ms. Nguyen should be commended for initiating student voice at her school, the incorporation of marginalized voices in spaces such as Liberty High School might be tricky to address. Shifting the paradigm requires treating students and parents as experts in their own lives; their wealth of capital could be leveraged to improve young people's educational experiences (Yosso, 2005). School leaders and teachers must tap into the *funds of knowledge* from families, positioning students and parents as purveyors of knowledge not traditionally recognized in schools that disrupt deficit notions of low-income, racially marginalized families (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). A call for a *collective educational leadership* requires all hands on deck, from the teaching staff to the students, families, and communities that surround the school with principals serving as bridges between various stakeholders (Merchant & Shoho, 2006). The quest for racial justice and educational equity should not rest on the shoulders of school leaders alone; however, administrators are uniquely positioned to facilitate opportunities to leverage the leadership of teachers, students, and families (Auerbach, 2009; Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan, 2011; Giles, 2006). The question remains how Ms. Nguyen, a principal who has the aspirations of a social justice leader and the desire to incorporate the voices of marginalized groups at her school, navigates a challenging context where teaching staff exhibit resistance to creating social change at Liberty High.

Discussion Questions

1. Ms. Nguyen is acutely aware that a vocal group of white teachers are resistant to discussions about race and racism in relation to educational equity. What are some ways Ms. Nguyen could gauge the perspectives of her entire teaching staff? How might this information inform how she approaches conversations with her staff?

2. The principal at Liberty has limited time dedicated to PD due to various district mandates and new initiatives. How does a school leader negotiate the constraints of engaging in racial equity work considering limitations of time and resources?

3. Although Ms. Nguyen graduated from an educational leadership preparation program, she expresses feeling woefully unprepared to facilitate conversations about racial equity, especially with resistant white staff members. How could educational leadership preparation programs best support emergent school leaders, especially principals of color, to facilitate these conversations with resistant white teachers?

4. Mr. Revel, the assistant principal, raises hesitation in his inner thoughts regarding youth researchers sharing their findings with the entire staff. Does Mr.

Revel raise legitimate concerns? What is his role as a white educator who expresses a desire for racial justice at Liberty in addressing white resistant staff members?

5. What would you do if you were in Ms. Nguyen's predicament? How do you support the Black youth leaders at Liberty High School? How do you address the vocal white teachers who are resistant to social change?

6. In what ways does your current schooling context support youth voice to inform decision-making processes? What are some ways school leaders could include youth voice to collectively work toward racial equity in schools?

7. Based on your educational leadership preparation thus far, do you feel prepared to lead PD for teachers regarding racial inequity? What supports or resources would you need?

8. In what ways will Ms. Nguyen's racial identity and gender affect how white staff members respond to her efforts to promote conversations on race and racism?

9. In what ways should Ms. Nguyen's racial background inform how she supports Black students at Liberty High School?

10. Considering how Ms. Nguyen prioritized Black students' experiences in her first year as a principal, has she inadvertently marginalized other racial groups, such as the Asian American and Latino populations at Liberty? If so, how? If not, why not?

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Note

1. Black refers to people of African descent. I also capitalize Black intentionally.

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