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Champions of Equity: Fostering Civic Education to Challenge Silence, Racial Inequity, and Injustice

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This article presents a study that explored how race and racism impact teaching and learning and how civic education can be employed to promote racial justice. We argue the need to examine educators' perspectives on how increased awareness of existing inequities coupled with ongoing professional development can better equip them to understand their identity, engage in meaningful dialogue, and teach in culturally responsive ways. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of teaching implications related to self-assessment, disruptive discourse, and inclusive practices.

Topics of race and racism continue to be socio-politically charged, particularly as our pluralistic society is profoundly polarized and widely characterized as tribal. Contentious rhetoric continues to divide, while an increase of hate-based speech, actions, and violence (Potok, 2017) further

marginalizes those who have been historically oppressed. While examples of interpersonal racism and consequences of implicit bias have dominated headlines and heightened race-based discourse in the media, increased attention must be given to the institutional and structural racism that permeates sociopolitical, economic, and cultural spaces. As Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., declared in his *Eulogy for the Martyred Children*, in response to the four girls who were murdered in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, “We must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers” (The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, 2018). Given the perpetuation of inequities and injustices, it is critical we advance the conversation beyond individual blame and grievance to explore root causes and proactive strategies for sustainable change. If teachers are to empower students to be thoughtful, engaged citizens committed to civic agency and championing equity, then teachers themselves must be champions for equity who employ self-reflection, challenge

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inequities, and foster an inclusive and responsive climate that values diversity and student voice.

Contrary to what many acclaim, we do not live in a colorblind, race-neutral, or postracial society (Bonilla-Silva, 2013). Race is an influential factor that shapes the lives of people in the United States in multiple contexts, empowering some while disempowering others (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Oluo, 2018). Race-based oppression and injustices result in unequal and inequitable access, opportunities, and outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), including the unjust reality that not all people are equally positioned to participate and engage in civic society (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017; Levinson, 2010).

As such, it is critical that educators actively work to counter the legacy of racism by “unsilencing” racism and equipping students with civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions to counter race-based privilege and oppression. It is imperative that educators promote learning that demonstrates racism is not solely an individual act or way of thinking but rather an insidious phenomenon that perpetuates systemic privilege and oppression. Therefore, educators must deconstruct and reconceptualize their thinking about racism to employ inclusive practices that foster civically engaged students who recognize the implications of racism and are prepared to disrupt the existing paradigm. Silence, denial, indifference, or lack of civility cannot drive the narrative; rather, we must authorize a narrative guided by culturally proficient and racially literate orientations and curricula to empower students who are equipped to serve as change agents in promoting an inclusive and equitable society.

To explore how civic education can be employed to address race-based privilege and oppression, we situate this discussion by presenting a study that examines educators’ perceptions of how (a) race and racism impact teaching and learning and (b) the educational context can be used to advocate for racial justice and equity. The goal underscoring our work is to provide examples of ways educators can address racism and injustice in their schools and classrooms.

Civic Education, Race, and Social Justice

There is debate over what are the critical components of civic education, and with many different agendas at play defining civic education is contentious. For the purposes of this paper civic education is characterized by the promotion of deliberative,

democratic citizenship; active engagement; and civic agency (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). In addition, civic education explores how to develop citizens who foster a justice orientation that emphasizes democratic equity and inclusion (Banks & Nguyen, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) as well as multiculturalism and social justice (Castro & Knowles, 2017).

It is important to consider how students are prepared to actively engage in society and if all students are given a chance to develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will be useful in their civic lives (Levinson, 2010). Although participation in discussions of challenging topics inspires future civic engagement and positive educational outcomes (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2015), controversial conversations are minimally represented in classrooms, particularly those in traditionally underserved schools (Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2015; Moore, 2012; Parker, 2012). Many educators are reluctant to incorporate topics of racism and racial disparities, or they silence them completely (Ladson-Billings, 2003; Mazzei, 2008; Moore, 2012; Pitts, 2016). Consequently, conversations about economic inequality, erosion of civil rights, immigration, mass incarceration, police brutality, racial profiling, the school-to-prison pipeline, and White privilege are often avoided. Ladson-Billings (2003) contended that

the failure of the social studies to meaningfully engage in dialogue about one of the nation’s persistent social justice issues is not surprising. However, it is disappointing. The historical, social, economic, and political records provide compelling blueprints for the way the nation has recruited the concept of race to justify hierarchy, inequity, and oppression. The social studies can serve as a curricular home for unlearning the racism that has confounded us as a nation. Yet, we still find teachers continuing to tell us lies. (p. 8)

While the intent of avoiding race-related topics may be to evade potential discomfort of the teacher and/or students, circumventing these topics sends the message that they are not to be discussed, are not valued, or do not have a place in classrooms (Pitts, 2016). Levinson (2010) argued that “there is a profound civic empowerment gap in the United States that disproportionately muffles the voices of non-White, foreign-born, and especially low-income students and amplifies the voices of White, native-born, and especially wealthy citizens” (p. 331). Further, she contends “that schools can and must

help address this unjust civic empowerment gap, especially among historically disenfranchised populations” (p. 316).

Since race is a unique social construct that impacts economic, political, and moral components of American society (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Oluo, 2018), teachers commit an injustice when they silence related dialogues and strategically exclude them from learning. We assert it is critical to examine how a justice-oriented model of citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) that encourages moral and civic virtues to serve the common good (Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, & Smith, 2011) can be evoked to equip students to engage, question, and critique systemic and institutional inequities so they can advocate for a socially just society.

It is within educators’ responsibilities to equip students with tools to think critically; draw evidence-based conclusions; “enter into dialogue with others about different points of view”; “work together to overcome problems”; and be “concerned for the rights and welfare of others” (Gould et al., 2011, p. 11). Since the current sociopolitical environment often avoids issues related to racism, educators must democratize classrooms, foster inclusivity, and give voice to a variety of perspectives, particularly those that have been historically silenced (Howard, 2003; Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2015; Mazzei, 2008). Educators have the opportunity and responsibility to expose issues related to privilege and oppression and respond to the racial climate by creating age-appropriate curricula to explore race, racism, and injustice in an empowering and productive manner.

Research Design

This qualitative study, approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB), centered on a focus group interview that examined educators’ perceptions of how race and racism impact teaching and learning as well as perceptions of how to advocate for racial justice. The focus group interview included nine educators from a suburban middle school in the southern region of the United States. Since civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions can be interdisciplinary, participants represented social studies, language arts, and special education. Participants elected to partake in the study based on their involvement in an established professional learning community and self-identified interest in (a) challenging racial inequities and injustice, (b) learning related to race and racism, and (c) strategies that encourage critical thinking, collaboration,

and controversial issues. Participants included seven females and two males; two Black and seven White participants; and represented approximately 5–25 years of experience in public school settings. Focus group members participated in one session that lasted approximately two hours.

Data from the focus group interview included transcripts and reflective notes from the researchers. A system of open-coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), in which we deconstructed, examined, compared, conceptualized, and categorized data, was used for transcripts and reflective notes. We identified several categories of codes that emerged as major themes in the data related to selective topics.

Findings

One of the members of the focus group had taken a graduate class in which he completed an equity audit of the school where the educators worked. Equity audits are designed to analyze teacher and instructional quality as well as programmatic, achievement, and finance equity (Skrla, McKenzie, & Scheurich, 2009) and can help educators realize that, despite their best intentions, racial inequities persist. Through completion of the equity audit, the participant’s awareness of inequities increased, and he developed heightened concern over the disproportionality of Black students in relation to school discipline. Since teachers in the school “were not comfortable discussing issues of culture and race,” he wanted to take a proactive approach in sharing data and increasing awareness. Subsequently, he developed a plan that involved (a) raising awareness of existing inequities, (b) equipping teachers to better understand their identity, and (c) emboldening teachers to teach in culturally responsive ways.

He collaborated with administration and secured permission to conduct professional development with the faculty related to diversity, inequities, and implicit bias. The whole-faculty session highlighted information he discovered in the equity audit and included facilitation of the Implicit Associations Test (IAT) from Project Implicit (2011). He discovered the tool was valuable in opening dialogue about biases and how those biases impact thoughts and behaviors. While debriefing the activity he asked educators to explore probing questions such as (a) Who am I, as a cultural being? (b) What are my beliefs? and (c) How do my perceptions and culture impact the way I see and interact with students? If teachers were interested in better understanding how identity impacts their role as

educators, they were invited to join a professional learning community and participate in continued professional development that centered around the “Social Justice Standards for Anti-Bias Education” (Teaching Tolerance, 2016). Professional development included four topics (unpacking identity, unpacking diversity, understanding justice, and unpacking action) that were explored in three-month intervals throughout the school year.

Along with increased awareness, the participant’s plan also included a goal of increasing culturally responsive practice aligned with civic education that facilitated (a) increased knowledge of cultural diversity, (b) respectful communication about controversial issues with people who are similar and different than themselves, and (c) students seeing themselves as change agents. Consequently, teachers in the learning community facilitated lessons related to social responsibility, justice, and equity.

Participants also collaborated to prepare a project for their students in which they would be asked to investigate potential racial inequities and disparities on campus and in their communities. Students were expected to observe how people interact with one another (those who are racially similar and racially different). They would chart the date, location, and details of their observations over the course of a week. Then, in class, teachers would facilitate interactive discussions on biases, stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination. Students would be asked to relate these concepts to their observations and consider how they might act to eliminate inequities and disparities they witnessed, either as an individual or working collaboratively to change policies or practices. Teachers also planned to incorporate the idea of self-reflection and ask students to consider their own interactions with people who were racially similar and racially different. This activity reinforces civic education, in particular the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework, in that it requires students to consider complex social challenges, develop questions, and evaluate evidence to take informed action to influence change (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017).

Participants agreed that tools such as equity audits, the IAT, and facilitation of professional learning communities provided an objective foundation that helped springboard meaningful discussions so they could better approach topics of racism and racial disparities with their students.

Findings revealed commonalities related to teachers’ perspectives on how race and racism impact teaching and learning, as well as strategies for advocating for racial justice. While all participants see

great value in giving voice to different perspectives, encouraging disruptive discourse, and preparing students to question and critique inequities and injustices, they understand that matters related to race, racism, and racial (in)justice are often minimized or avoided. As one participant explained, “Many teachers are not comfortable discussing issues of culture and race, so they don’t.” Participants noted that they themselves are not necessarily comfortable with incorporating controversial topics, yet they understand the value in encouraging students to engage, question, critique, and dialogue with others, especially those with whom they may not agree. They also expressed that working together as a learning community increased their confidence and comfort, thereby heightening their commitment and motivation.

Participants were in strong agreement that race is a pervasive factor that impacts the school context in that students themselves are negatively impacted by implications of racism since the school is a microcosm of society at large. Namely, racism influences expectations, access, opportunities, and outcomes for students of color. Teachers highlighted examples of Black students being subjected to discipline infractions more frequently (or harshly) than their White counterparts, as well as persistent achievement gaps that continue to disadvantage students of color. In these discussions, they reflected on the IAT and considered the role implicit bias plays on teachers’ perceptions and expectations.

Discussion

While there are consistent challenges related to racial disparities and implications of racism in schools, civic education encourages strategies that promote active engagement, critical thinking, dialogue, collaboration, and social justice that can address issues of racism and racial injustice. Age-appropriate curricula can be crafted to create inclusive learning spaces and opportunities to examine institutional and structural racism that permeates sociopolitical, economic, and cultural contexts and explore strategies for sustainable change. If educators are committed to progress despite potential discomfort, adverse responses, or repercussions, then they must truly be champions of equity who dedicate themselves to serving the common good and doing what is best for students, families, and communities. They must indisputably commit to ending the silence related to racial inequities and injustices and work to counter racial disparities, inequitable access, opportunities, and outcomes. The goal of

this work must be twofold: (a) prepare educators to facilitate culturally proficient practices with civic morals and virtues who serve as leaders in incorporating learning related to race and racism and (b) foster a climate where culturally proficient strategies drive the curriculum and encourage students to actively engage, critique, and contemplate various perspectives as they grapple with agency related to (in)justice and (in)equity.

Reflection, Self-Assessment, and Awareness

To cultivate cultural proficiency and inclusive environments, educators must engage in authentic self-assessment, including a willingness to deconstruct perceptions, beliefs, biases, actions, and inactions. To truly understand how our experiences inform our thoughts, behaviors, and positionings, we must employ a reflective practice of self-examination to unpack our own narratives, as they are a powerful influence in developing the lenses we use to see the world and its people. “The personal journey begins within [and] culturally proficient leadership is distinguished from other leadership approaches in that it is anchored in the belief that leaders must clearly understand their own assumption, beliefs, and values about people and cultures different from themselves in order to be effective in cross-cultural settings” (Terrell, Terrell, Lindsey, & Lindsey, 2018, p. 9). Therefore, to increase self-awareness of one’s practice, educators must analyze their positionings and assess their cultural knowledge. While this process can be challenging, it is essential on the journey of equity advocacy. Educators cannot unlearn misconceptions if they do not first explore how they came to know them.

Participants discussed the value of engaging in professional development related to the Social Justice Standards (Teaching Tolerance, 2016) and appreciated the critical need to develop their ability to be self-reflective and step outside their perceptions and beliefs in relation to identity and diversity. One participant contended:

We need to first be able to tackle our own orientations, especially the ones that are subconscious. I think we will find we might not be as fair and equitable as we think we are. But it is hard to recognize your biases when we might share many of the same ones as those around us. How do we perceive groups of people? What do we think about people who are different than us? Many of us are conditioned to believe how things should work and when we encounter students with

different cultural norms, somehow, we think it is not okay. We think, how do I handle this or how do I address that behavior, automatically assuming that different is bad or not okay. So, we need to be able to see beyond our own expectations for what is appropriate based on how we were conditioned to think.

Since exploring how one’s identity impacts one’s thoughts and behaviors is a complex process that can result in discomfort, activities that promote self-reflection and self-assessment must be strategically employed in preservice and in-service professional development. Such training should develop a clear vision of how cultural proficiency, equity, and inclusion can be supported in educational contexts, as well as how educators can deliberately (a) recognize and examine issues of race, racism, and racial disparities; (b) explore the impact of privilege and oppression; (c) evaluate, reconsider, and reframe practices and policies; (d) interrupt and respond to inequitable practices; (e) promote proactive strategies for sustainable change; and (f) facilitate advocacy steps to turn equitable visions into equitable realities.

Disruptive Discourse

Along with encouraging themselves to recognize and examine racism and racial disparities; explore matters related to privilege and oppression; reframe and interrupt inequitable practices and policies; and promote proactive strategies for sustainable change, educators must also provide opportunities for students to do the same. “Classrooms characterized by content-rich curriculum as well as respectful and interactive discussions of social issues can make a significant contribution not only to civic outcomes valued in the community or the nation, but also to the achievement of twenty-first century competencies needed in the workplace” (Gould et al., 2011, p. 20). Participants discussed the importance of addressing biases and explicitly challenging misconceptions and racist ideas to better equip students with the ability to collaborate with others, especially those from diverse backgrounds (Gould et al., 2011). One participant explained, “I was teaching about major world religions. When I first mentioned Islam, one of my male students shouted out, ‘Terrorists!’ I knew immediately I could not let this go and that I needed to unpack it in a powerful way. Not a way in which I blame the student for saying something wrong but getting them to understand why many people have this misconception. I had to take that teachable moment, move my lesson

plan aside, and talk about why it wasn't okay and why it wasn't true."

To develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, curricula must be designed to encourage students to engage, question, and critique systemic and institutional inequities, as well as deconstruct and reconceptualize their thoughts and ideas. Educators must disrupt traditional perspectives and the "discourse of invisibility" (Ladson-Billings, 2003, p. 4) while simultaneously normalizing conversations about (in)equity, race, racism, and racial (in)justice. As one participant simply stated, "Just because conversations are hard doesn't mean we shouldn't have them." Educators must shift the paradigm and encourage reflective, meaningful dialogue that disrupts the narratives of silence and avoidance and supports candid conversation about social and political issues. They must send the message that it is not racist to talk about racism. As another participant stated, "I truly believe not being silent is the key to change. It is our responsibility to bring racial disparities and injustices to light. It is our responsibility to use meaningful conversation to build bridges and relationships. It is our responsibility to respond to these disparities and injustices." Another participant expressed, "I think it is our job to challenge students' perceptions. We need to allow them to see beyond their own spaces and places, because it opens the door for them to better understand and hear outside their own echo chambers. It also helps for them to understand not everyone thinks the way they do." Therefore, educators must provide students safe and productive spaces to engage with material that encourages them to frame their opinions with evidence and facts.

Culturally Proficient and Inclusive Practices

How can educators remedy normative assumptions, orientations, and practices to better align curricula with democratic ideals and position students to participate and actively engage with change as well as serve as change agents? As Ladson-Billings (1995, 2014) contended, cultural competence and cultural critique must be embraced to cultivate culturally relevant practice. Cultural competence characterizes practices that support and value students' cultural and linguistic practices and uses them as meaningful resources in the classroom. Cultural critique underscores the value in developing sociopolitical consciousness that critically examines and

counters inequities that schools and other institutions continue to perpetuate.

To employ culturally proficient and inclusive practices, educators must facilitate rigorous learning and maintain high expectations for all students. In addition, they should equip students with tools, language, and socially just orientations that allow students to distinctively know and appreciate their own cultures and other cultures. As one participant stated, "I try to move outside the traditional textbooks. White males drive the history in the textbooks and are shown to have the money, power, and influence. There is just as much history going on from other, less privileged perspectives, but the oppressed stories are a footnote in most books. We need to examine how effects of oppression echo through generations and look at marginalized perspectives, since it is that perspective that is often missing. We need to allow students to see and appreciate various contributions as knowledge." Another participant added, "When we study slavery, I connect that to the racial segregation and the violence and police brutality that exist today." Although many textbooks drive the narrative of "happy slaves" (Banks, 1998, p. 4), it is critical students have access to an accurate depiction of the complexities and inhumanities of slavery and its connection to the racial terror lynching of the Jim Crow South and modern-day mass incarceration crisis.

In addition to inclusive curricula, it is imperative students can recognize and respond to inequities and injustices related to marginalization. Considering the ideas of civic agency and advocacy, a participant stated the following:

How do we teach students, and ourselves, to be agents of change? How can they be encouraged to speak out when they see or hear something that isn't right? As I sit here thinking about how I am an advocate, I don't necessarily know how I do this in purposeful ways. I still am not exactly sure what I do to promote racial justice and advocacy, and that just isn't good enough.

To democratize the classroom and champion equity and inclusion, educators must exhibit a strong desire for presenting and examining *truth* from multiple perspectives and use counterstories to encourage empathy for others. In addition, although cultural respect, appreciation, and inclusion are important components of cultural proficiency, it is essential that equity advocates have a clear conviction for countering inequities and injustices related to access, opportunities, and outcomes, and explicitly teach their students to do the same.

Conclusion

As educators we must ask ourselves, are we complicit in perpetuating a climate where issues of racism and injustice go unchecked? To promote social responsibility and embrace a justice orientation of citizenship, it is critical for educators to distinguish themselves as individuals who confront issues of power and privilege and equip students to be active and engaged citizens. If we are committed to justice as well as developing agency in our students, we must unequivocally challenge the “civic empowerment gap” (Levinson, 2010). We must create opportunities to allow teachers to engage in self-reflection and meaningful dialogue to better develop their knowledge, skills, and dispositions so they have the commitment and courage to foster a responsive climate that hears, understands, and values diverse voices and perspectives.

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