Roadwork Ahead: Fostering Racial Literacy in Educator Preparation Programs

Amy J. Samuels and Gregory L. Samuels
University of Montevallo

Abstract

Equity and advocacy are essential in deconstructing and challenging racism, but how do educators apply these concepts in preparation programs to promote sustainable change? This paper explores a qualitative study on educators' perceptions of racism in P-12 schools to examine how educator preparation can navigate complex terrain to better prepare candidates to employ equitable, and socially just practices informed by critical race theory and foster racial literacy. The researchers' findings support the works of others in the field who assert that educator preparation programs must explicitly address race-related issues to prepare both instructional and teacher leaders to confront critical concerns that impact students and communities.

Keywords: critical race theory, educator preparation, racism, racial literacy, social justice

Professional standards support educators in developing the individual and collective capacity to meet professional performance expectations by highlighting knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, and dispositions for educator effectiveness. The standards guide policies and programs and establish outcomes for professional learning in both educator preparation programs and professional development.

According to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015), the *Professional Standards for Educational Leaders* (PSELs) highlight foundational principles of leadership that provide a framework for instructional leaders to accelerate student achievement and promote increased equity in relation to outcomes. Ten interrelated standards present a holistic view of leadership that directly connect to student learning. Specifically, standard one, which relates to vision, mission, and core values, states, "Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student" (p. 9). Connecting more explicitly to the idea of *each student*, element three of standard one states that instructional leaders are expected to "articulate, advocate, and cultivate core values that define the school's culture and stress the imperative of child-centered education; high expectations and student support; equity, inclusiveness, and social justice; openness, caring, and trust; and continuous improvement" (p. 9).

As said by the Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2011), the *Teacher Leader Model Standards* highlight foundational principles of leadership that provide a framework for teacher leaders to work collectively with administrative leadership roles to support effective teaching and promote student learning. The standards emphasize a broad range of knowledge, skills, and competencies characterized as domains that define critical dimensions of teacher leadership. The standards consisted of seven domains and included in each domain are functions that explicitly outline actions and expectations that include how teacher leaders serve to promote increased equity and foster collaborative communities. Domain one, which relates to "Fostering a Collaborative Culture to Support Educator Development and Student Learning" (Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011, p. 14) emphasizes the importance of developing a collaborative culture of collective responsibility while promoting an environment of collegiality, trust, and respect that focuses on continuous improvement. Connecting more specifically to the idea of equity and inclusiveness, function 1d states that the teacher leader, "strives to create an inclusive culture where diverse perspectives are welcomed in addressing challenges" (p. 14) and function 1e emphasizes that the teacher leader "uses knowledge and understanding of different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and languages to promote effective interactions among colleagues" (p. 14).

Although professional standards underscore the critical need for equity, inclusion, and social justice in leadership dispositions and actions, data suggests there is a lack of continuity between theory and practice. While educators have been aware of race-based educational inequalities for decades (Coleman, Kelly, & Moore, 1975), such inequities and injustices continue to persist in schools and manifest themselves in a variety of ways. Educational disparities can be seen in unequal access and opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gay, 2010; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017), lowered expectations for students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Grissom & Ressing, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2014), implicit bias (Dynarski, 2016; Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti & Shic, 2016), the resegregation of schools (Hannah-Jones, 2017; Orfield, 2014), and the school-to-prison nexus (Anderson & Ritter, 2018; Blad & Harwin, 2017; Smith & Harper, 2016; U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2014). To advance the profession and better support development, leadership preparation programs must consider

how to interrupt traditional perspectives and narratives that avoid, minimize, and silence implications of racist ideology in schools. If preparation programs are genuinely committed to equity, inclusion, and social justice, the programs must prepare educators to reflect and act on difficult questions such as (a) How can teachers and instructional leaders effectively challenge unequal and inequitable outcomes for students of Color? (b) How can teacher and instructional leaders counter implicit biases, a culture of low expectations, and underlying racism that are built into the systems and institutions? and (c) How can teachers and leaders promote equitable excellence for *all* students? The time has come for a strategic response to challenge oppression, disempowerment, and unjust policies and practices. Educators must consider how to disrupt the narratives of silence and avoidance (DiAngelo, 2018; Diem & Carpenter, 2013; Oluo, 2018; Pitts, 2016) and advocate sustainable change for equity, inclusion, and social justice.

The researchers situate this discussion by presenting a study designed to (a) examine educators' perceptions related to race, racism, and racial (in)justice and (b) explore how educator preparation can better prepare teacher and instructional leadership candidates to engage in practices informed by critical race theory and foster racial literacy.

Critical Race Theory

While some purport America is a post-racial society (Bonilla-Silva, 2015), with the increase of hate-based speech and actions (Potok, 2017) and the perpetuation of alarming achievement gaps (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gay, 2010; Hannah-Jones, 2017), data suggests that racism is deeply embedded in American society and racist ideology plagues educational institutions. Although schools should promote a caring, safe, and welcoming climate and culture, given the pernicious and irrefutable implications of racial disparities, this is not the reality for many students of Color. Further troubling the existence of race-based disparities, research suggests that both teacher and instructional leaders are ill-prepared to discuss or address such issues which, often results in a culture of silence and avoidance (Boske, 2010; Diem & Carpenter, 2013; Gay, 2010; Samuels, 2017). Many educators report educational training did not prepare them to meet the needs of racially diverse learners (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gay, 2010), give attention to issues of race (Boske, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2014), or challenge the implications of racism in educational contexts. Interpreting silence as informative, rather than a lack of information, Diem and Carpenter (2013) contend educators must consider how such silences "shape the ways in which students and professors interpret, address, and avoid race-related issues" (p.57). Many instructional leadership programs continue to marginalize issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion to a single course (Hawley & James, 2010), which often results in a culture of silence and fear where preparation programs are less likely to graduate leadership candidates who have the skills to address complex, yet essential, discussions connected to issues of race (Rusch & Horsford, 2009).

Given the existing implications of racism in P-12 schools, as well as the corresponding silence related to race in educator preparation, the researchers believe it is advantageous to employ critical race theory (CRT) as an analytical tool to frame the study, as well as consider how to better prepare educator candidates to apply equitably and socially just practices. CRT establishes a foundation that racism is endemic in the United States' society and influences social, political, and economic aspects. The critical theory addresses the dynamics of power and oppression and explores strategies to advance society in a more equitable direction. It examines and evaluates power relations and highlights questions such as (1) who controls power, (2) what constitutes power, and (3) how is power utilized to maintain current social standings (Lynn & Parker, 2006).

CRT is a critical theory that establishes racism as the precursor to disempowerment and oppression, identifies racist ideology as the critical component in existing social inequities, and offers a framework for studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Bell, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2013). "Critical race theory begins with the notion that racism is normal in American society" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 7). Although CRT is interdisciplinary, it can be used to explore various educational components and provide a foundation to challenge the dominant discourse on race and racial oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Derrick Bell, one of the leading scholars in CRT, contends that "racism lies at the center, not the periphery; in the permanent, not in the fleeting; in the real lives of black and white people, not in the sentimental caverns of the mind" (2002, p. 37).

Racial Literacy

Teachers and instructional leaders must be aware of the explicit and pervasive consequences of the underlying racism that persists in educational contexts, as well as understand how to challenge and dismantle it. Consequently, educators need to be racially literate. Although the term racial literacy was first used by sociologist France Winddance Twine (2004) to describe strategies White mothers with biracial children in the United Kingdom used to heighten racial awareness and promote positive racial identity development in their children, the term has come to be applied in a broader sense. It is currently used to describe an understanding of the origins of race and the role it plays in schools and society (Horsford, 2014). As Stevenson (2014) highlights, racial literacy is the ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful situations. To be racially literate means that one can recognize a racial moment; understand the contextual, fluid, responsive, and socially constructed nature that race plays in those moments; and apply a sophisticated understanding to decode racial encounters to promote improved racial understanding and positive race relations (Horsford, 2014; Stevenson, 2014).

Research Design

This IRB-approved qualitative study sought to explore perceptions of P-12 in-service educators at public schools in the Deep South related to race, racism, and racial (in)justice. Participation was voluntary, and participants were recruited based on the interest in racial equity and social justice they exhibit in academic or professional work. Since teaching has implications for instructional leadership and instructional leadership has implications for education, the researchers decided to explore the perceptions of both teacher and instructional leaders. As such, the researchers contacted 30 people who serve as teacher leaders, assistant principals, and principals. Nearly two-thirds of those who were contacted agreed to participate in the research study. Data were collected from 20 participants over six weeks. First, participants completed a ten-question online survey, where the average completion time was 55 minutes. Then, participants engaged in a brief 15-minute follow-up phone interview with the researchers where they were asked questions about how race and racism impact teaching, learning, access, and opportunities, as well as their perceptions of how to advocate for racial equity and racially just schools.

While most participants were teacher leaders (academic coaches, department chairs, and team leaders) in elementary and secondary settings (approximately 70%), 30 percent of participants identified as building-level administrators (assistant principals or principals). The professional experience of participants spanned a broad continuum and represented educators from

three years to those with over fifteen years of experience. In addition, participants represented a mix of female and male (60% female, 40% male), as well as Black and White (55% Black, 45% White) educators.

Once the researchers collected the data, a system of open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2007), in which data was deconstructed, examined, compared, conceptualized, and categorized, was used for both the ten open-ended survey questions, as well as the transcripts from the interviews. Several categories of codes emerged as significant themes related to (a) the impact of race and racism on teaching and learning, (b) racial climate in schools, and (c) advocacy for racially just schools.

Findings

Findings from the study revealed commonalities regarding educators' perceptions of how race and racism impact access, opportunities, outcomes, and the overall school climate. While the findings were neither novel nor unique, the study reinforces what research suggests about the substantial implications of race in schools and the need to promote increased racial awareness and racial literacy among teacher and instructional leadership candidates to shift racist ideology and address underlying racism built into systems and institutions.

Participants suggest that racial disparities are revealed in a variety of ways in educational contexts that include but are not limited to (a) deficit thinking, (b) inequitable access and opportunities, (c) implicit bias, (d) disproportionality, (e) pervasive academic achievement gaps, and (f) a culture of low expectations where students of Color are not expected to perform as well as their White counterparts. The participants in the study were in strong agreement that race is a prevalent factor that impacts the educational context and climate of schools but is frequently not acknowledged. As one participant stated, "We like to act like we don't have racial problems here. We say we don't see race among our students. We say we don't see color; students are *just* students." However, according to participants, given existing academic achievement gaps, where students of Color are not performing as well on standardized tests as their White counterparts, and vast disparities in behavioral consequences, where students of Color receive disproportionate numbers of referrals and suspensions, race-related issues are evident. As one participant stated, "Educational systems operate within a country and society that is continuing to grapple with a past and present history of racism. Economic contexts for education result from racist policies and funding formulas. Racism is part of our history, so it is always present in education. It is revealed in hidden biases, unconscious racism, perceived stereotypes, and it plays out in our expectations for students."

Similarly, another participant added, "I think that racism does exist in my district--maybe not blatant racism, but more of unconscious, implicit racism and hidden biases. The number of discipline referrals and special education referrals of Black and Brown students is disproportionate to that of White students. The low number of minority students in gifted or advanced classes is also largely disproportionate to that of White students." The participant continued, "I notice that the expectations of some teachers and administrators are not the same from one group to the next. It seems to be the exception, not the expectation, for minority students to perform well academically and stay out of trouble. Also, there seems to be a level of 'uncomfortableness' or 'we don't want to deal with this' when topics about race arise. It's like the elephant in the room. However, our school data and district data show these are the facts, so they can't be ignored."

There was also a consensus among participants that while most people seem to be respectful to one another, there is a lack of awareness and engagement regarding race-related matters. One participant stated, "Almost all teachers are White, and most teachers are out of touch and show little interest in relating to students' racial backgrounds. They prioritize White European history and literature and assume the goal of our students is assimilation and compliance." Another participant emphasized that although faculty and staff "employ a veneer of civility," the racial climate is still "incredibly divisive." The participant explained, "Although racial things are open for conversation between Black teachers and Black students, things are guardedly cautious, if not completely unspoken, between White teachers and Black students."

Notwithstanding the general lack of engagement with race-related issues, several participants emphasized witnessing an increased commitment for heightened awareness and advocacy. Although most participants articulated an absence of diversity-related topics in preparation and professional development, several participants emphasized progress in professional contexts. For example, one teacher stated, "Our principal has provided in-service to our faculty on race in education and leads us to make school changes that will be more inclusive to students and faculty of Color. We (faculty) discuss how we can be aware of these issues and make sure we are diverse in choosing students to participate in school competitions and events or consider who is being placed in gifted and talented programs or who we are hiring for positions in our school." The teacher continued, "We also talk about how we can best address students who have said racially inappropriate comments and use those opportunities as teachable moments for growth." On a related note, a principal reported, "I try to support my teachers to be more equitable in their practices and communicate the importance of getting to know students and building relationships to help break down some of the barriers that exist, especially those race-related barriers. As a school, we constantly engage in discussions about how race is a factor, and that it can create unfair barriers for some students, and we brainstorm ways to help overcome the issues that arise within the classroom and the school."

Participants emphasized a need for increased discussion and difficult conversations to explore racial inequities and examine strategies to promote increased equity and justice. To encourage issues related to race to enter the dominant discourse, participants contend that educators must challenge the silence related to racism in schools. As one principal stated, "I encourage conversations about race, and we talk about misconceptions regarding race. In our school, we promote appropriate language and do not permit insensitive language or terms to go unchallenged." The participant continued, "We also work to challenge biases and preconceived notions about race and class. Many people like to say they don't have them, but they do. We all do. So, it is really important to talk about them. We also present whole school activities and presentations that address race and diversity and provide perspectives on how we can meet the needs of all of our students and do right by them."

Discussion

As with most research, the design of this study is subject to limitations. First, the researchers acknowledge that findings may have been limited given that participants were recruited based on their interest in racial equity and social justice. As such, they were likely more willing to highlight and discuss racism and related injustices. Second, it is important to emphasize that the experiences of the researchers, who self-identify as advocates for equity and social justice, influenced the interpretation of the data. However, given that the findings reinforce what research suggests about

the troubling existence of race-based disparities in educational contexts, the researchers assert that there is a strong need to promote increased racial awareness and racial literacy among teacher and instructional leadership candidates.

Critical Self-Reflection

To understand the role racist ideology plays in schools and society, teachers and instructional leaders must understand the impact underlying racism has in their own lives and how it has influenced their beliefs, values, assumptions, dispositions, and actions. Therefore, racial literacy is tightly entwined with critical self-reflection and increased self-awareness. Educator candidates must be given opportunities to think reflectively about how race has influenced and shaped their place and position in society, as well as their understanding of others. "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 assumptions, beliefs, and values about people and cultures different from themselves to be effective in cross-cultural settings" (Terrell, Terrell, Lindsey, & Lindsey, 2018, p. 9).

To cultivate equitable and socially just practices, educators must engage in authentic self-assessment, including thoughtful deconstruction of their own perceptions, beliefs, biases, actions, and inactions. To truly understand how experiences inform thoughts, behaviors, and positionings, educators must employ a reflective practice of self-examination to unpack personal narratives, as those narratives are a powerful influence in developing the lenses used to see the world. Exploring how one's identity impacts one's thoughts and behaviors is a complex process that can result in cognitive dissonance and discomfort. As such, activities that promote self-reflection and self-assessment must be strategically employed in educator preparation programs so candidates can develop an understanding that worldviews are shaped and influenced by life experiences. Subsequently, candidates can understand worldviews (including their own) are limited and include blind spots. Educator candidates should be given opportunities to reflect on questions such as (a) Who am I as a racial being? (b) How have my experiences shaped who I am? (c) What are my assumptions, values, and beliefs about those who are similar and different from me? (d) How do my (in)actions and dispositions reinforce and challenge diverse perspectives? (e) In what ways do my (in)actions and dispositions promote or interrupt racist ideology and underlying racial oppression? Candidates cannot unlearn misconceptions if they do not first explore how they came to know them. Therefore, knowledge of self is a critical component in increasing critical consciousness, which Freire (2000) defines as expanding one's worldview to truly recognize and comprehend the role of power in creating and sustaining structural inequities, as well as developing a sense of efficacy about how to expose and actively challenge those inequities in given spaces and places.

Applying Critical Race Theory and Fostering Racial Literacy

Since CRT offers a framework for studying and transforming the relationships among race, racism, and power, educator preparation programs should promote learning to prepare teachers and instructional leadership candidates to reflect on and engage in practices informed by CRT. As participants in the study highlighted, there are deep-rooted implications of racist ideology in schools that result in harsh disparities that continue to marginalize many students of Color. Rather than grappling with the difficult questions, a climate of avoidance and silence often prevails, and discussions about race are treated as the elephant in the room. To promote heightened awareness,

engage complex and disruptive discourse, and encourage dispositions and actions that truly promote diversity, equity, and justice, teacher and leadership candidates must be given opportunities to develop their racial literacy. Educators must understand that racism is endemic in American society and, consequently, is built into educational institutions (Ladson-Billings, 1998). If teachers and instructional leaders are to be prepared appropriately to counter racism, they must come to know the origins of racism and how racist ideology operates in schools and society (Horsford, 2014).

As such, leadership preparation programs must revisit content and pedagogy to better address race-based issues related to privilege and oppression and bring race and racism to the forefront. To more effectively prepare educator candidates to engage in culturally responsive and socially just practices, this process should not be limited to one "diversity" course but should be a framework for thinking that is encouraged throughout preparation programs. Rather than allowing candidates to inaccurately proclaim the United States is post-racial or permit students to minimize racist ideology by citing race-based discrimination as individual acts only, teacher and leadership candidates should be given opportunities to investigate the historical underpinnings of race-related oppression, examine how structural exclusion and inequality operate in schools and explore sociocultural and political contexts that perpetuate inequity and injustice at structural and institutional levels. Educator candidates must understand the complex dimensions of racism and develop a deeper and more nuanced comprehension of the role that power and privilege play in sustaining racist ideology and oppression.

To shift the tide and truly advocate for change that fosters school environments conducive to learning and that promote equitable access and achievement for all students, as one participant proclaimed, "We cannot be silent. We must commit ourselves to bring racial disparities to light." We must first ensure educator candidates know that such disparities exist because equitable and socially just practices cannot be employed without a solid and informed understanding of existing inequities and injustices. Educators must develop foundational knowledge about achievement gaps, disproportionality, and disparities in access, expectations, and outcomes. In addition, teachers and instructional leaders must understand the value in advocating for a curriculum that deeply reflects all students, as well as employing and retaining diverse and representative faculty and staff. To increase racial literacy, along with ensuring candidates have a working knowledge of how racist ideology and oppression are manifest in schools, educator preparation programs need to ensure teacher and leadership candidates have the necessary skills, commitment, and courage to speak. As one participant stated, "I believe the first thing educators can do to combat racially unjust schools is to be brave enough to speak and act on it when it is witnessed."

Conclusion

Leadership preparation programs must support continuity between theory, preparation, and practice. Although the PSELs and Teacher Leader Model Standards emphasize principles that promote increased academic success, equity, inclusiveness, high-quality education, and social justice to promote the success and well-being for all students (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015; Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium, 2011), data from the study suggests a disconnect between theory, preparation, and practice. While there are a variety of reasons for the inconsistent progression, given the existing inequities, the researchers contend the data is disconcerting, argue there is strong reason to be troubled, and assert that educators cannot be cavalier about the issue. If preparation programs are genuinely committed to equity,

inclusion, and social justice, the programs must place the countering of racist ideology at the forefront of the work and ensure teacher and leadership candidates are equipped effectively with the dispositions and actions to challenge the implications of racism in educational contexts. While this is an intricate and complicated process that will not come without opposition, resistance, and roadblocks, if educators are dedicated to progress, they must strengthen efforts to encourage critical self-reflection and disruptive discourse that interrogates race and racism. It is time to generate solidarity to foster racial literacy and critically informed practices in educator preparation that embrace equity and justice orientations and actions.

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