Looking Differently

Mapping Out Perspectives on Diversity Between Well-Intentioned White Teachers and Students from Diverse Backgrounds

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Abstract

This study examines how one school's well-intentioned White teachers and students from diverse backgrounds—all of whom belong to their school's working groups created to address issues of diversity—conceptualize diversity. Utilizing a qualitative case study, the study shows a discrepancy between what teachers and students felt comfortable discussing, how they conceptualized diversity, and the degree to which both groups evaluated the rate of progress being made within the school. Despite their explicitly good intentions, White teachers' failure to access and incorporate the views of students participating in diversity working groups served to perpetuate the centering of White middle-class perspectives in the school environment and hindered equitable approaches to students from diverse races and ethnicities.

Introduction

The demographic mismatch between teachers and students has been regularly addressed in the United States, especially since students of color became the majority student population in the school system (Maxwell, 2014; Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). This fact not only relates to ongoing discussions about how achievement gaps[1] are formed due to the disproportionate allocation of resources to majority White[2] schools (Paris, 2014), but it also calls for further investigation into how White teachers are working to achieve inclusive and equita-

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ble learning environments to close the opportunity gap (Douglas et al., 2008). Many studies have focused on how White teachers understand diversity in their classrooms and what limits their perspectives and practices in terms of achieving social equity and justice in education.

However, few studies focus on the disconnect between student and teacher perceptions of their school's efforts to create a more equitable learning environment. My study sets out to fill this gap by explicating teacher and student conceptualizations of diversity at a large Midwestern high school in which mostly White teachers instruct an increasingly diverse student body. Specifically, this qualitative case study (Merriam, 2009) asks how White teachers approach the school's efforts to support diversity and what students from diverse backgrounds think about the way diversity is addressed by their teachers. Analyzing the intersection of these viewpoints highlights the vital role students play in creating successful diversity programs in schools as their teachers strive to create more equitable learning environments.

Rationale

While student demographics have changed, the racial makeup of K-12 teachers has not, as 4 out of 5 teachers in U.S. schools are White (Meckler & Rabinowitz, 2019). In response, school administrators and curriculum supervisors in predominantly White institutions are working to provide professional development opportunities for faculty in an effort to create more culturally responsive schools. Teachers also work to better understanding the implications of diversity for their teaching content by attending related programs and events within and outside schools and, afterwards, increasing the number of inclusive texts they use. Teachers also create school-wide events and programs in which their coworkers and students can participate to enhance their understandings of diversity (Schick, 2009). Still, these well-intentioned teachers' efforts to create more inclusive environments and teaching practices have limits. Whether these efforts are successful cannot be measured through teacher and administrator self-reporting or surveys alone; student voice must be included in the professional development and evaluation process if the gap between the desired goals of such programs and the reality of students of color is to be closed.

This study examines how one school's well-intentioned White teachers and students from diverse backgrounds—all of whom belong to their school's working groups created to address issues of diversity—conceptualize diversity. Furthermore, the study analyzes students' thinking about their school's promotion of diversity and their views on how their White teachers should support students. Analyzing the

intersection of these two viewpoints highlights the potential contributions students can make by challenging White teachers' perspectives to create a more equitable climate in the school (Sleeter, 2017). This study looks beyond this initial step of having the student diversity group to examine whether the inclusion of students in diversity groups was enough to guarantee that their perspectives were acknowledged and incorporated into the school's efforts to create a more inclusive environment.

Concepts and Theoretical Framework

A framework is needed to critically analyze how White teachers conceptualize diversity, as well as to offer students a space to disrupt the dominant views that teachers have on diversity. For this study, the concepts of diversity and Whiteness are used to explain why there is a discrepancy between how well-intentioned teachers and students of color conceptualize diversity. Also, critical race theory (CRT) is utilized (Delgado & Stefencic, 2012; Fasching-Varner, 2013; Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2017) as a fundamental framework and tool for how to disrupt Whiteness in the school and facilitate a more equitable school climate. CRT provides a strong mechanism to generate counter stories of non-dominant groups, which dismantle the status quo of power in society. In the following sections, I will outline the concepts of diversity and the theoretical framework of Whiteness, as it is informed by critical race theory, as lenses for this study.

Diversity

Throughout U.S. history, the meaning of diversity has been expanded to accommodate many areas. According to the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion Extension Organization (2022), diversity refers to the presence of differences including race, ethnicity, gender identification, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, socioeconomic status, language, (dis)ability, age, religious commitment, or political perspective.

While most educators express support for students' diversity, it is unclear—sometimes to a controversial degree—how they do so, what aspects they focus on, and what their reasons for offering support are based on (Bettez, 2017). Scholars have observed that numerous schools that promote diversity in multicultural education mainly focus on celebrating traditions and food festivals (e.g., international days) and that this approach could be harmful to minoritized students because it perpetuates cultural stereotypes (Nieto, 2005). Some researchers, including Bettez (2017), have argued that to promote diversity in ed-

ucation, schools need to move beyond passive attempts to recognize diversity—such as by celebrating traditions and introducing food—to achieve equity in education. For this reason, identifying gaps in the ways teachers and students understand diversity lays the groundwork for a more critical examination of the ways it is supported in schools. Merely mentioning the term "diversity" can divert educators' attention from the needs of students from diverse backgrounds and from questioning structural inequality.

Whiteness

A critical examination of how diversity is supported within education is needed in order to achieve the equitable society most teachers wish to pursue. As research (Apple, 2012; Jenks et al., 2001) has shown, acknowledging the various aspects of diversity that each individual embodies is not the same as critiquing the hierarchy and power *within* each concept and the intersections between them (e.g. inequalities based on race and gender, race and class, or complexity of inequality based on race, gender, and class). White teachers may attempt to recognize students' diverse propensities, but their practices are strictly limited to the liberal framework of multiculturalism in education (Jenks et at al., 2001). Within this framework, the components of diversity are seen as being celebrated and tolerated without questioning the status quo of power relations. Specifically, well-intentioned White teachers who promote diversity from within the liberal framework of multiculturalism rely on an individual humanity of welcoming and tolerance in order to change the reality that minority groups face in their daily lives at school rather than engaging in a structural analysis of power between the dominant group (White) and minority groups in society (Cross, 2005).

The liberal approach to practices and support for students from diverse backgrounds can be explained through the concept of Whiteness (Cross, 2005; Picower, 2009). Whiteness is the ideology that White people don't recognize their privilege and benefits based on their race due to the attunement of social arrangements and institutions to White perspectives (Picower, 2009). Through Whiteness, White dominance and institutional racism have developed and reproduced the supremacy of Whites as a system.

A common question that arises from recognizing this system is, "How can Whiteness be disrupted?" Scholars in CRT argue that it should be disrupted and challenged through structural transformations beyond individual intentions and efforts (Sleeter, 2017). In this sense, schools' promotions for diversity cannot stop at the good inten-

tions of White teachers who select what they want to focus on or discuss in classrooms or schools, but should further examine structural inequality based on race, class, and other diversity factors that hinder social transformations. One of the tenets in CRT shows that paying attention to the counter stories of students of color moves diversity projects in schools closer to social justice/equity (Sleeter, 2017). Students' counter stories, especially those related to their daily experiences in school, shed light on what it means to be 'diversity support,' and can challenge dominant narratives, which are historically and socially constructed through Whiteness. In acknowledging student stories, well-intentioned White teachers can be more critically conscious of defining the diversity that they try to support in schools (Ullucci, 2011).

In light of the above literature review, this case study asks the following research questions:

1. In what ways do White teachers understand diversity and their school's support for diversity?

2. How do students perceive the school's promotion of diversity?

3. What are the implications for schools that include both teachers and students in the process of forming diversity programs?

Research Method

Background and Setting

The study was conducted in South High school,[3] which is located in a small, affluent, politically conservative town in one Midwestern state. The town is bordered by a city of approximately 135,000 people and two small towns and has a mix of urban and rural economic activities. The town has three public school districts, including South High community school district. The South High community school district serves seven elementary, two intermediate, two middle schools and one high school (South High School). According to the census (2021), the school district's per capita income is 25 percent higher than the state and its median household income is about 25 percent higher than the whole county. The poverty rate is 6.8%, which is three-fifths of the rate for the state, and about 45 % of the population in the area holds bachelor's or higher degrees. White students comprise the majority (80%), which is higher than the state's average (77%). Remaining students are Asian 5%, Black 6%, Hispanic 4%, and two or more races 5% in the school. At the time of this study (2017-2018), the racial make-up

of full-time teachers were all White,[4] while Asian students were 4.7%, Black 4.3 %, and Hispanic 3.6%.

The number of students of color has been increasing since their families move to the town from big metropolitan cities and as immigrant families. Responding to this demographic change, some teachers at the school took an initial step to organize working groups comprised of teachers and students to address issues of diversity. The teacher working group (24 White teachers) is voluntary and tries to bring colleagues together for professional development sessions. The teacher group and the curriculum supervisor offered students of color an opportunity to present their culture to the teacher meeting (e.g. Indian students' presentation). Another invitation was made to the school's LGBTQ+ student group, who shared hardship and challenges in the school. The curriculum coordinator also organized a diversity day with the aid of the teacher working group, and teachers and students spent a whole day learning about diverse cultures through student presentations and guest speakers. The teacher working group and the curriculum coordinator had already been actively organizing events and professional development opportunities related to diversity for more than a year before I started to interview them. I considered the White teachers who provided the events and the ongoing diversity group discussions as being well-intentioned White teachers.

Along with the teacher group effort, the curriculum coordinator in the school invited 28 students to create a diversity working group as a space for students to discuss their experiences in the building and in the surrounding community.

It was with two groups of teachers and students that I spent time and sought to learn more about how they understand diversity and the extent to which these efforts were successful. The meetings occurred in 2017-2018 and I interviewed participants from each group in a group setting as well as individual meetings. I conducted interviews with six teachers who volunteered from the teacher group, and I attended the student group's discussions (four times) and met individuals for an interview with volunteered students from the student group.

Data Collection and Analysis

Utilizing qualitative methods, I collected interview data from six teachers (three White female and three White male teachers) and six students (two Black females, one Black male, one biracial female, one Hispanic female and one White male) who belong to the working groups and who volunteered for the study[3]. Each teacher participated in one-on-one interviews that lasted around one hour. The students

had a one-hour small group interview so that they could share their experiences and thoughts regarding the diversity program and related issues in the school. The students from the small group were also invited to individual interviews.

The interview questions for small group and individual interviews were (a) how do you understand diversity? (b) how do you evaluate your school's diversity program? (c) what characterizes the culture or climate in your school or community?

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The data was coded capturing frequent themes and/or unique perspectives utilizing In Vivo coding first and then noting themes that emerged across interviews, using a constant comparative method (Saldana, 2015: Wertz et al., 2011). Combining my field notes with interview data, I narrowed the focus to main themes after multiple readings. The themes are sorted by those representing White teachers' perspectives and student perspectives, respectively.

Results

Based on the analysis, four themes emerged in the teachers' perspectives on diversity and their school's diversity program: (a) Selective focus, (b) Race as a charged issue (c) Dividing class based on race, (d) Limited perspectives on student needs. From the students' perspectives, three themes developed: (a) Teacher avoidance of issues, (b) Frustration with class assumptions based on race, (c) Insensitivity to the various needs of students of color.

White Teacher Perspectives

Selective Focus

White teachers in the school wanted to create a more inclusive environment inside and outside of their classrooms to reflect the recent changes in student demographics. With no exception, the six teachers were conversant in a range of aspects of diversity and stressed the importance of including race/ethnicity, class, gender identity, and sexual orientation in the school's diversity program. One female[5] science teacher said:

> I mean, you have to be open to the, the potential problems in, in, in all groups, whether its sexual orientation, or um, minority groups, or, or what have you. There are issues in all of those areas… Uh, I think all of those issues are important. It's not one over another; it's, it's- all of them have to be addressed.

However, these teachers put more emphasis on gender identity and sexual orientation as rapidly emerging aspects of diversity. This perception could be a result of a club students formed for those of non-hetero sexual orientation organized in the school and the presentation of their different identities to teachers in a professional development session. The effect of the club's presentation on teachers' understanding of and openness to diversity seemed quite clear. One female math teacher expressed her growing awareness of students' diverse gender and sexual orientations after the club presentation. She said:

> Our diversity group came in and talked to all of the teachers with the students, which I think just displays incredible bravery. They got up in front of all of their teachers in small groups and spoke about what we could be doing to help them and some of the struggles that they go through because they're different from their peers. And I think that, you know, that kind of kept the ball rolling.

Further, the reason gender identity and sexual orientation were more easily accepted by the school than other aspects of diversity was unveiled. Here is what the math teacher said:

> [Our state] has not been traditionally diverse. Um, we know somebody closer to us who was identified in that, in that group, of you know, sexual issues, gender issues, things of that, you know, we have a close friend or family member, somebody who's in that, so we're more willing to open up and ask them kind of the hard questions of what makes someone comfortable, but somebody who's different say racially or ethnically, um, they're not in my direct family.

Thus, the teacher's relatively comfortable feeling discussing and supporting gender identity and sexuality as aspects of diversity in school seemingly stems from White teachers' familiarity with the issue from their experiences with their families and local community. The community where the school is located has more direct experience with issues of gender identity and sexuality, which permits openness in the school and a sense of safety when students and teachers deal with these issues. An emphasis on gender identity and sexual orientation provides teachers with a sense that they are making progress in promoting diversity in the school. The female math teacher expressed her satisfaction with how diversity is discussed in the building by pointing out that the teachers were looking beyond race.

> Um, I think that it we-we are diverse in many ways. Um, not necessarily just, you know, we're not very diverse when it comes to ethnicity and race, but we are diverse when it comes to gender issues and, um sexuality, and we're fortunate in that aspect, but, you know, when

> you think diversity, I think a lot of people solely think, you know, race and cultural differences.

This quote demonstrates how White teachers, who have greater level of comfort discussing gender identity and sexual identity with students (rather than race), selectively frame diversity in the school.

Along with openness to gender identity and sexual orientation, another aspect of diversity that teachers and staff saw as creating a more inclusive school environment was to have more cultural events and programs related to students' family backgrounds. Here is what the math teacher said:

> Um, even in the standpoint of we had a diversity, uh, presentation from some Indian families came in to speak about their culture so that we could learn a little bit more…we also are going to have another one where groups of African American families are going to come in and talk about their culture and how it's different.

In fact, many teachers during the interviews mentioned that Indian students and Black students presented their cultural heritages and differences to teachers and staff in professional development sessions. Learning about different non-White cultures is a common practice related to diversity programs in schools across the country, although studies show that enhancing knowledge about different cultures does not guarantee deeper understandings of people from diverse backgrounds and can even lead to forming stereotypes (Bettez, 2017). Going beyond knowledge of different cultures is necessary if White teachers want to be more equitable practitioners, which I will discuss in later sections.

Race as a Charged Issue

While teachers and staff are more open to student diversity based on gender identity and sexual orientation, and tried to understand diverse home cultures, it was also found that teachers avoid contentious issues related to race/ethnicity. Teachers expressed fear of dealing with these issues when they arise between teachers and students of color, and when they arise among students themselves. The math teacher expressed her honest feelings about talking about race:

> I think that it's also a very charged issue right now, when we talk about racial diversity and all, with everything going on in the media and the police, and you know, that people are afraid to say the wrong thing, and so they just don't say anything at all.

Interestingly, the teacher also shared her observation of the school climate of fear of talking about race compared to her own experience as a high school student:

> We had a club in high school called MAPS. Like, the Minority Achievement Programs and any minority could be in… and we talked about it (race) more. Up here I think everyone is just so afraid to say anything. You know, and, and there's still a lot of under, you know, undercurrent of some, you know, prejudice and discrimination that you're almost afraid to say anything…You don't want to get into an argument because you don't want to offend somebody. You know what I mean, versus with gender issues.

The male social studies teacher had the same sentiment of being careful of saying things regarding race. He said:

> Cynthia [curriculum organizer] organized that diversity workshop day and that was positive and was a lot of dialogue…There are a lot of conservatives and a lot of Trump supporters and a lot of- you know, not overwhelming… but they're in my class, and so I have to, I find myself being more careful about just, political discussions… about the way I phrase things here than I was at my old school, knowing that there's kids that go home and tell their parents what I'm saying in the classroom.

Thus, White teachers are hesitant to have important conversations about contentious issues of race/ethnicity because they fear it will disturb the current climate of the school where Whiteness remains unchallenged. This is a big contrast to the previous section where teachers selectively supported students from diverse backgrounds in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation and by learning about racially/ethnically different cultures based on what is considered safe in the White, wealthy community.

Dividing Class Based on Race

Some teachers explicitly expressed an understanding of the growing diversity of social classes in their school. One male science teacher pointed out a change related to social class: "at least from the numbers that I hear, we have a growing, eh, um, diverse-diversity in socioeconomic status."

Furthermore, growing socioeconomic class diversity is viewed in terms of White and non-White students and families. One female associate teacher who helped students with special needs said that a class division among racial/ethnic groups was quite evident in the school:

> I think there is quite a break between, um, those who are of higher socioeconomic status, and between those who are not... [In] South High, who they think is mostly just the upper-class Caucasian people…, lower-class African-Americans feel disconnected, and um, struggling Hispanics and Indian-Americans who don't connect with that, uh, higher class also struggle.

Based on a growing gap between students of low and high socioeconomic status, teachers recognized struggles among students from low-income families and focused on providing more resources and help with their homework as an important aspect for supporting diversity in the school. In the meantime, recognition of the emerging class gap and support for students in lower classes should be examined further because a growing diversity in class emerges within as well as across races (Nasir & Hand, 2006). I will discuss this in detail in the later section "Students' Perspectives."

Limited Perceptions of Student Needs

When teachers were asked about the needs of students from diverse backgrounds, they expressed differentiated opinions depending on students' race/ethnicity. For instance, teachers viewed their non-Black students as being well-integrated into the school environment. The male social studies teacher said, "Hispanic students, Indian students, and ELL students are a very few, they are integrated well." According to this teacher's view, Latino/a, Indian students, ELL students, and other diverse groups were not very visible in terms of needs in the school due to their small numbers. Interestingly, despite each group having a similar number of students in the school, most teachers had a lot to say during interviews about the increase of Indian students, their high academic achievement, and the high pressure they fell to succeed. Below are some examples of teachers talking about Indian students' high achievement and the pressure they feel to succeed:

> And they have a lot of pressure, you know, because they're, um, family units tend to very, value education and be very focused on that, um but also be very strong as a family unit, too. So, I see them, you know, striving so hard and achieving really good things here. So, they tend to, you know, that population tends to do pretty well. But I do see that there could be some maybe, you know, anxiety and perfectionism and things like that (Female math teacher).

> [T]here are cultures that really want to push their students, and again I, a lot of times, think of Asian culture, which, you know sets this high expectation (Male science teacher).

Teachers perceived the needs of Indian students more clearly compared to their counterparts in other racial minority groups despite similar representations among diverse student populations. Teachers' *relative* perceptions toward Indian students' academic success became salient among diverse students' needs. Selective perceptions of student needs were shaped by the schools' dominant norm focusing on academic success, while the other needs of diverse students became invisible.

In other words, Indian students' needs among diverse students were outstanding because they were attuned to what the White, wealthy community and school expected of them.

Students' Perspectives

Teachers' Avoidance of Issues

Just as teachers recognized students' diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, students in the diversity group also acknowledged their school's selective promotion of diversity. In the meantime, it is noteworthy to students to point out the gap between recognition of sexual orientation and active interruption of bias. One Black female student said:

> Sexuality is a big thing. I think we need to talk about sexuality. I heard a lot like 'why are you acting so gay'… I feel like we educate them[teachers]…Teachers ignore what they heard, act like they don't hear about something derogatory related to sexual orientation.

This suggests that LGBTQ+ students in the school are still left to deal with discriminatory climates individually without teachers' interventions, although the school endorses sexual orientation as one aspect of diversity. The recognition of different orientations compared to the majority is a big step for the school, but the differences in perception among students and teachers reveal that important tasks remain to be completed before the ideal of diversity is fully realized.

Students also differentiated their positions from teachers' in relation to race and racism. Students from racial minority groups expressed their frustration with teachers' avoidance of contentious issues of race and racism. Another Black female student expressed her views regarding teachers' avoidance in school saying, "Teachers seem uncomfortable to talk about issues... Honestly, I want teachers to talk about more and am able to talk about issues [of race]."

One White male student who moved from Abu Dhabi shared his observations on the school climate of avoiding discussions about race, saying "I think… religion and race are social taboo and people might respect others' point of view." He, however, expressed the benefit of having conversations about the topic, observing that "absolutely, people could be informed. I am up for that." Because of his teachers' and school's climate of avoidance of race discussions, this White male student sought spaces outside of school to have these meaningful conversations. He said that he had a friend who engaged in discussions about difficult issues, which were not addressed in the school. The discussions usually happened in a country club where his friend and he went together. Here is what he said:

> I do appreciate discussions with my friend who is more conservative than me. I would say I am pretty liberal, but we had conversations and I appreciated it. He was my intellectual superior. We could discuss things [like race]. I could have intellectual conversations with him.

In contrast to the school climate of teacher fear and avoidance—which results in this White student's dissatisfaction—this student noted that even though he and his friend had different views, they could learn from one another.

The avoidance of talking about race and racism negatively affects students' daily school lives, which reinforces the feeling of being outsiders and lacking meaningful conversation in spite of the school's attempts to promote diversity (Douglas et al., 2008). Here is what one of the Black female students, who moved to the school from a large metropolitan city, shared about her daily experience in the school:

> Before I moved here, I didn't look at racism. But, here all things are related to White people. Students ask me where I am from. Teachers watch me. I have a feeling that others think I will do something wrong.

Similarly, the Black male student said he had negative experiences in schools based on his racial appearance; he concluded his comments by saying, "I don't think White girls respect me." Students' perceptions of school culture in which teachers avoid uncomfortable issues of race and students make derogatory remarks, especially about racial assumptions, have influenced their identities as students of color in a negative way.

As such, students wanted to go beyond the general promotion of diversity in the school to more open discussions and examinations of assumptions and stereotypes related to race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and other elements of diversity.

Frustration with Class Assumptions Based on Race

The most widespread perspective in the school and the community was a binary of wealthy Whites and "poor non-Whites," which extended to the student population. This class binary based on race critically affected the perspectives of White students and teachers when it came to students from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds and diverse students' daily school experiences. Students shared that their economic status was automatically assumed due to their race/ethnicity. For instance, one of the Black female students in the diversity group shared her unpleasant experience in her school. She said:

> My White classmates were surprised to know I live in a house, not in an apartment. White students here think that apartments are a common housing type for people in poverty in the area where the school is.

Her classmates' assumptions were based on her status as a Black person, and they reacted to her with surprise when she told them she didn't live in an apartment, a sign of lower social class. The Black female student said that White students' bias toward students of racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds came from their limited experiences in the small, suburban, White community, which she called a "small town mentality." Even though she acted like she understood where the bias came from, she also couldn't hide her frustration and related that her friends from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds had the same experience in the school. Another female student echoed the school climate of positioning students of color to the assumed lower class. She noted:

> White students think Black and Hispanic students don't come from good families, they are really struggling, don't have a lot of money. For example, when I was holding my friend's phone while she went to bathroom, my White classmate said 'Oh, you got a new iPhone.' And I said 'No, this is Savannah's phone.' He said, 'How could she afford that?' I think that is not fair to say that.

The dichotomy of economic status based on race reinforced White students' stereotypes toward students of color and caused frustration and resentment among students from racially/ethnically diverse backgrounds. The student's experience resonates with what White teachers said in the previous section. Teachers see this binary assumption in the school but are not aware of growing different class status within the same racial group. Further, White teachers and White students maintain their stereotype of the binary, which fails to respond to the need among students of color to be recognized as individually complex beyond race- and class-based assumptions (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003; Nasir & Hand, 2006).

Insensitivity to the Various Needs of Students of Color

As mentioned in the section on Teachers' Perspectives, students from diverse races/ethnicities—with the exception of Indian students—were not visible to teachers. One Hispanic female student expressed her frustration about the school's insensitivity to Hispanic students' needs. She said, "People think we eat tacos at Christmas. Bias toward Hispanic people is not considered as an important subject to deal with due to the small number here." She interpreted her teachers' lack of attention to Hispanic students' needs as being due to their small number. Even though students of color—from Hispanic to Black to Indian—are similarly represented in terms of numbers, teachers are more attuned to academic success than the need to address assumptions and

prejudices that these students face. In this climate, Hispanic students like the one described above feel left out.

In addition, students of color need the recognition of individual differences within a group. The female student said:

> People don't try to distinguish individuals of Hispanic people. People didn't try to recognize me with other Hispanic girls. I got called as a different name [her another friend]… I like to make people know better about feeling when they say something. Educate them to understand actual people not by race or other categories.

She pointed out that it is important to recognize that differences exist among members of the same racial and ethnic group. Her lived experiences reflect what scholars have labeled as essentialization (Gutierrez & Rogoff, 2003), which is attributing students' identities to a group character and is as harmful as not recognizing the cultural characteristics of students from diverse backgrounds.

In sum, how students perceive diversity, and the school climate should be a litmus test for successful diversity programs in schools where well-intentioned White teachers teach. Interviews showed that students had different voices and stories in relation to issues and agendas of diversity in the school. It is critical for White teachers to challenge the status quo of school climates where Whiteness is strongly grounded historically and socially to hear their students' voices about diversity programs. Taking this critical step moves diversity programming beyond self-satisfying events to attending to students' multiple and real needs.

Discussion

Based on Markowitz & Puchner (2014)'s study, which pointed out that it is unclear how schools promote diversity in spite of its growing popularity, this study tried to capture how well-intentioned White teachers and their students of diverse backgrounds—all of whom belong to South High School's working groups on diversity—perceive diversity and their school's attempts to promote a more equitable school culture.

For White teachers in the diversity group, gender identity and sexual orientations are selectively facilitated since they are seen as relatively safe in the White community[6]; race and ethnicity, meanwhile, are seen as acceptable topics for cultural celebration but not for discussion, due to fear of raising contentious issues. Observed issues by students, such as assumptions about race and class and derogatory remarks in the school regarding diversity, are not addressed in the school. The limited focus and avoidance of issues basically derive from

a willingness to maintain the status quo of dominant White power relations. The current manifestations of power—such as an unwillingness among White teachers to address race and the presence of world views that assume class based on race—are not challenged and as a result serve to perpetuate Whiteness as a system (Picower, 2009). The findings show that teachers' good intention to promote diversity needs to go beyond selective efforts. Teachers must ask, "How can Whiteness as a system be challenged to build a more equitable diversity program?"; and this question can be facilitated by paying attention to the needs and perspectives of students of color who attend their school.

Having close discussions with people from minority groups has proved to be a powerful and effective means for Whites to adopt transformative action and practices (Middleton et al., 2009; Sleeter, 2017; Tonbuloglu et al., 2016), and the disconnect between teachers and students at South High School shows that the mere inclusion of students when planning diversity programs is not enough to achieve this ideal. Tonbuloglu et al. (2016) observed that the actual implementation of a diversity curriculum in teaching, which goes beyond the mere rhetoric of agreeing on the importance of diversity, depends on constant effort and teachers' awareness of students' needs. Simultaneously, it is critical for White teachers to understand that racism and other types of discriminations are shaped by the wide social structures that produce and perpetuate inequalities among diverse groups so that they can see their avoidance or unwillingness to address the "tough issues" of race eventually help maintain the system for White dominance whether they intend this or not (Crowley & Smith, 2015). The analysis of Whiteness as a system fundamentally transforms the views and practices of well-intentioned White teachers both inside and outside of classrooms, giving them the perspective they need to pursue equity for *all* students in the school (Douglas et al., 2008). Without this critical awareness, well-intentioned White teachers fall into the pattern of trying to fit students of color into an educational system that is structured in favor of Whites. Furthermore, they never have the meaningful conversations with students of color that would help them to eliminate the school culture of negative assumptions and derogatory remarks toward diverse students (Douglas et al., 2008; Middleton et al., 2009).

Along with a critical awareness of current power relations in the wide social structure, understanding the lived experiences of those who belong to non-dominant groups is an important step for Whites if they are to transform their ingrained Whiteness into equitable perspectives and actions. In this regard, scholars (Bettez, 2017; Delgado & Stefencis, 2012; Middleton et al., 2009; Paris & Alim, 2017) emphasize the importance of listening to the counter stories of people from

diverse backgrounds. Middleton et al. (2009) explained that White people exposed to new thoughts and attitudes toward Whiteness need to articulate the discomfort they feel from seeing Whiteness as the dominant social system, and root their new awareness through "difficult dialogues" (p. 302) with those who do not belong the privileged group. Having these difficult dialogues enables Whites to move to a deeper level of understanding of privilege and oppression and construct greater racial consciousness and awareness of Whiteness as a social system that affects individual world views (Bettez, 2017; Crowley & Smith, 2015; Middleton et al., 2009).

In my study, students in the diversity working group shared stories of their diverse experiences in the school culture and showed they are needed counterparts to the well-intentioned White teachers to contextualize a diversity program that will develop equity and teachers' awareness of the systemic Whiteness, which has never been challenged before. Since students in the diversity working group identified the limitations of the diversity program at their school—such as pointing out the avoidance of addressing discriminatory remarks among White students toward students in LGBTQ+, assumptions about students' class status based on race, and stereotypes about Hispanic students—teachers and the school administrators need to delve into open dialogues with the diversity group students and work on challenging these assumptions and stereotypes. Also, teachers need to examine their selective foci on students in the LGBTQ+ group and on Indian students' academic achievements to widen their efforts to support the diverse characteristics of all students. In this sense, White teachers need to understand and learn how to challenge their fear of discussing race/racism in the school, which requires enacting courage. Bettez (2017) argues that connecting the concept of courage to a commitment to equity is a way of actually promoting equity rather than passively celebrating diversity. Teachers also need to examine why they do not address Black and Hispanic students' academic achievements as often as they do for Indian students by questioning whether they (un)consciously hold deficit attitudes toward their academic abilities.

It is promising that schools like South High already initiated diversity programs and organized diversity working groups for teachers and students. However, they would miss a great opportunity for them to make the school culture more equitable if teachers and the school take no further steps to create spaces to discuss serious issues and embrace students' needs by hearing students' daily lived stories in the school. Their endeavor would end up teachers feeling self-satisfied about their good practice without actually employing equitable education on students' end.

While this study is limited to one school' case, the research result will appeal to a larger audience within race and critical Whiteness studies in education because of its focus on what teachers and students in the same space think and do to disrupt White supremacy in schools, the salience of Whiteness in school cultures and society, and the placing of students and their stories at the center, rather than at the margins, of programming and professional development aimed at creating a race conscious and culturally competent public school.

Conclusion

Teachers who were interviewed recognized a wide range of factors that contribute to diversity in their school, but mainly stressed gender identities, sexual orientation and class; while race was acknowledged, teachers did not feel comfortable discussing it. Scholars have linked these approaches to diversity to Whiteness (Leonardo, 2004; Lopez, 1996). By contrast, students identified race and class as factors most in need of attention and discussion. When asked about class in the school, each student interviewed agreed that the intersection of race and class was evident each day in the building and that class was a greater basis for discrimination than the adults realized. However, gender identity and sexuality—as evidenced by the support in the building for LGBTQ+ student groups—received the most attention. Consequently, the research clearly identified a discrepancy between what teachers and students felt comfortable discussing, how they conceptualized diversity, and the degree to which both groups evaluated the rate of progress being made within the school. Despite their explicitly good intentions, White teachers' failure to access and incorporate the views of students participating in diversity working groups served to perpetuate the centering of White middle-class perspectives in the school environment and hindered equitable approaches to students from diverse races and ethnicities. As made explicit in the CRT framework, listening to students' counter stories is essential if well-intentioned White teachers are to realize the more equitable education they are aspiring to.

Notes

[1] The term 'achievement gap' is used due to its prevalent use that has been circulated, but I also point out that 'opportunity gap' is a more accurate term to explain why the differences between White students and students of color exist (Douglas et al., 2008).

[2] I use a capitalized White as well as Black to signal individuals as part of each group

that holds constructed characteristics of Whiteness and Black identities, which challenges unracialized and separate individuals. See Appiah's (2020) analysis of developing terminologies for the meanings of capitalized White as well as Black throughout US history. Appiah, K. A. (2020). The case for capitalizing the B in Black, *The Atlantic.* https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/06/time-to-capitalize-blackand-white/613159/

[3] All names in this article are pseudonyms.

[4] There were one Black female and one Indian female para-educator in the school.

[5] Due to their school schedules along with the diversity meetings, access to teachers for interviews for my study purpose was limited, which hindered obtaining each teacher's more personal backgrounds for understanding the individual view. For this reason, each teacher was not personalized with being assigned to pseudonyms. Instead, I described each teacher as 'female' or 'male' teacher with the subject they taught. Like the teacher case, no opportunity was given to obtain individual student' background, which result in describing them as 'female' or 'male' student along with their racial or ethnic characteristics.

[6] While the author revised this manuscript, a few states including the state where the research was conducted passed a bill banning books and transgenders' choice of bathroom use. It will be interesting to investigate how the school maintains, changes and navigates their relatively open attitudes to students' gender identities and sexual orientations.

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