Do You See What I See? Fostering Aspiring Leaders' Racial Awareness

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Abstract

Programs preparing culturally responsive school leaders must address how race, power, and individual, institutional, and cultural racism impact beliefs, structures, and outcomes for students of color. To develop greater awareness of race, instructors in a principal preparation program assigned students in a primarily White cohort to compose racial autobiographies. Analysis of these racial autobiographies revealed early racial identity development impacted by racial isolation and family influence. The autobiographies included evidence of growing racial awareness and movement away from racial unconsciousness and colorblindness toward acknowledgment of privilege and commitment to future action. Racial autobiography serves as a useful tool to have students examine their own racial identity—a necessary first step toward building an awareness of race, privilege, and institutional and societal systems of racism and other forms of oppression. Further study will determine what changes in leadership practice, if any, might be attributed to this increased awareness.

Keywords

race, racial awareness, racial identity, racism, culturally responsive pedagogy, principals, leadership preparation

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For Dr. King, race was in most things, but defined nothing alone.

—Taylor Branch

Principal preparation programs are faced with growing demands to prepare current and future school leaders for the changing educational environment. In an era of accountability, and myriad mounting demands placed upon principals, preparation programs must focus on developing relevant content to support these leaders to create the conditions needed for every child to receive an equitable and excellent education. This goal is especially pertinent given that schools are becoming increasingly more racially and ethnically diverse, while more than 80% of teachers and principals remain White and often culturally different from students of color and students of poverty (Bitterman, Goldring, & Gray, 2013). According to the Office for Civil Rights, researchers consistently found stark discrepancies between racial categories of students on measures of college and career readiness, discipline, and teacher equity (as measured by newness to profession and salary; March 2012). In the majority of the 20 largest districts in America, schools with large Black/Latino populations consistently, and sometimes dramatically, were found to be operating under egregious inequities that pointed to what has been called an opportunity gap. Interestingly, the disproportionality by race and the opportunity gap represented in this report have been studied for over 30 years in the literature (Deshano da Silva, Huguley, Kakli, & Rao, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2010). Scholars have long highlighted both magnitude and persistence of the phenomenon of suspending Black children, especially Black males, at a higher rate than other children for the same infractions (Skiba, 2001; Taylor & Foster, 1986). It has also been well documented that Black children are overrepresented in the subjective special education categories (Artiles, Harry, Reschly, & Chinn, 2002; Ferri & Connor, 2005), and underrepresented in gifted and talented areas (Ford, 2011).

Critical race theorist Derrick Bell (1992) challenged conventional thinking when he first argued that race and racism permeate all facets of American life. Consistently, recent data strongly support the notion that race still matters broadly in education today. Hence, the question is not whether race specifically influences educational leadership, but rather how does race impact educational leadership, and what should principal preparation programs do to prepare graduates to address the pernicious opportunity gap between Black and White children? What follows is our purpose.

We embody two roles in this article: university instructors and educational researchers. As instructors in a principal preparation program, our intent is to offer our graduate students powerful learning experiences to unearth their

perceptions about race, and through this process cause students to examine their beliefs and ultimately impact their leadership practice. As researchers for this study, our purpose is to examine what influenced the racial awareness of these aspiring leaders and gain insight into how knowledge about race, racism, and privilege might impact the practice of aspiring educational leaders. What we learn through this research has broader implications for teacher educators and those who prepare aspiring leaders.

Toward Using Racial Reflection as a Pedagogical Tool

In recent years, educational leadership scholars have moved toward addressing questions about inequities by exploring how aspiring leaders in preparation programs might be trained to use social justice to advocate for PK-12 students who have been marginalized in schools because of aspects of their social identity. For example, scholars have contemplated and studied the impact of gender on leadership (Grogan & Shakeshaft, 2010; Shakeshaft, Brown, Irby, Grogan, & Ballenger, 2007), spirituality and leadership (Witherspoon & Arnold, 2010; Witherspoon & Mitchell, 2009), sexual orientation on leadership (Capper, 1999; Lugg, 2003a, 2003b; Koschoreck, 2003), religious affiliation on leadership (Khalifa & Gooden, 2010), poverty on leadership (Vanderhaar, Muñoz, & Rodosky, 2006), and race (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007; Dantley & Tillman, 2010; Gooden, 2005; Parker & Villalpando, 2007; Santamaria, 2013). Some of this research has focused specifically on social identity development and how aspiring leaders learn as a result of experientially based learning in courses that place the students in social justice learning situations (Brown, 2004; Hernandez & Marshall, 2009; Marshall & Hernandez, 2013). In sum though, this corpus of scholarship has suggested that principal preparation programs can and should influence the learning of aspiring leaders on the many aspects of the principalship, especially in the context of social identity and social justice.

Costa and Garmston (2002) argue cogently

> that all behavior is determined by a person's perception and that a change in perception and thought is prerequisite to a change in behavior . . . that human beings construct their own meaning through reflecting on experience and through interactions with others. (p. 7)

In their research, Lawrence and Tatum (1997) concluded participants' reflections supported changes in racial identity development and behavior as a result of participating in ongoing professional development.

More recently, Milner (2010), who has used teacher reflection in his work to support teachers as they unearth their beliefs, argues that in addition to embracing the myth of meritocracy, that is, that all students have an equal chance of succeeding if they simply work hard, teachers may hold several assumptions and assertions in mind when teaching students of color. For example, teachers who believe they are colorblind, while often well-intended, may also be unaware of the deficit thinking and low expectations they hold for students of color. As the majority of principals start their careers as teachers, Milner's findings caused us to hypothesize whether aspiring school leaders might hold some of these same assumptions, beliefs, and assertions. Moreover, Milner's work on teacher thinking and reflection on race is instructive. To be clear, while several scholars have discussed reflection in leadership for social justice in general, Milner takes us in the direction of facilitating deep reflections specifically about race, which aligned precisely with our goals in teaching our principalship program students.

While Milner (2010) and Lawrence and Tatum's (1997) research focused primarily on teachers, other researchers have examined similar arenas with principals (Beachum, Dentith, McCray & Boyle, 2008). Zimmerman (2011) argues that reflection as a process is an important means of principal learning, but she emphasizes that writing is an excellent way for principals to enhance and crystallize their learning. She notes that intentionally engaging in the steps or reflecting and then writing can help principals become reflective practitioners. Hernandez and Marshall (2009) studied 15 educational leadership students' online reflections about issues related to equity, diversity, and social justice and found that preparation programs can play a large role in helping students explore their cultural identities. More recently and specific to social justice, Marshall and Hernandez (2013) analyzed the written reflections of aspiring principals in two principal preparation courses that purposely examined the social justice leader's role in addressing sexual orientation issues in schools.

Accordingly, we carefully consider both the work of foundational social justice educational leadership scholars and racial reflection work with teachers and principals. We hypothesize that racial reflections, when used to support aspiring leaders' learning in preparation programs, can be productive and integral to the decision to act and adopt an anti-racist leadership mindset. Below we discuss what we mean by anti-racist approach and why it is an effective way to address racial inequities in schools.

Racism and Anti-Racist Leadership

We argue for an anti-racist approach to support racial reflection, grounded in acknowledgment of the primacy of individual, cultural, and institutional

racism. First, "racist behavior is measured by its outcomes for people of color, rather than its intentions" (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997, p. 22). That means the outcomes evidenced currently in the dramatic inequities between Whites and students of color (Office for Civil Rights, 2012) should be the focus, not whether individuals *intended* to be racist as they failed to challenge the status quo. Individual racism, institutional racism, and cultural racism all have generated outcomes consistently inimical to people of color. However, understanding the nuanced difference is central to this discussion, and it is explained by Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton (1992) who provide that

> Racism is both overt and covert. It takes two, closely related forms: individual Whites acting against Blacks, and acts by the total White community against the Black community. We call these individual racism and institutional racism. The first consists of overt acts by individuals, which cause death, injury, or violent destruction of property . . . The second type is less overt, far more subtle, less identifiable in terms of specific individuals committing the acts. But it is no less destructive of human life. The second type originates in the operation of established and respected forces in society and thus receives far less public condemnation than the first. (p. 4)

When a teacher consistently punishes African American students in class for the same behaviors exhibited by White children, it is individual racism. When a school leader consistently notices a pattern of African American boys being suspended over and over again by that teacher and other teachers, but fails to critically address it, then that is institutional racism. Finally, there is cultural racism, which is more informal than the rule-contingent institutional racism, but similarly consists of the beliefs, symbols, underlying cultural rules, and norms of behavior that directly and indirectly communicate and endorse the superiority of the dominant American culture, which happens to be White, generally made up of English and other Western European cultures. When teachers consistently recognize European physical features such as straight hair, lighter skin, thin lips, and nose as desirable physical attributes of beauty, they promote a form of cultural racism.

Educational leaders, like other members of the society, are born into a society that perpetuates racist behaviors through an organized system. As Tatum (1999) argues, racism is like smog in the air—we all breathe it, and are affected by it, and thus continue to maintain the system in some way, often subconsciously. Alternatively, working in schools presents aspiring leaders with an opportunity to take decisive anti-racist action to influence and change the dynamic within the system through building trustful relationships.

Lawrence and Tatum (1997) examined reflections written by teachers exposed to anti-racist professional development and found evidence of

actions related to improved interpersonal relationships with students and parents, curricular transformation and institutional efforts and supports. We argue that through an anti-racist approach in graduate coursework, aspiring leaders can decide to change the system of institutional racism by consciously seeking to reduce and eventually eliminate racism. Through the development of racial awareness and critical consciousness, the leader can build community and develop new institutional relationships that are not dependent on domination and subordination of any racial groups. Here, "individual intent and attitude become critical because they influence whether a person chooses to acquiesce passively or to resist" (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997, p. 22). The point about racism is that these three manifestations are intermingled, and racist behavior, whether covert or overt, generally does not exist outside the system of institutional racism (Derman-Sparks & Phillips, 1997). However, the institutional system does not evolve and cannot exist outside of individual actions, made more noticeable through the promotion of individual and cultural racism. Thus, the focus of our work is on seeing, surfacing, interrogating, and changing those individual actions, regardless of intention.

Program Context

Preparation programs often have only one course on diversity to deal with social justice issues. Lightfoot (2009) studied three preparation programs that claimed to "offer their candidates richer opportunities to engage issues of social justice, oppression, and critical consciousness and education than many of the more traditional school administration programs" (p. 211). His research revealed that to be effective, "programs need explicit antiracist vision and mission" that permeates five categorical criteria of vision, personnel, curriculum, fieldwork, and assessment (p. 231). From Lightfoot's work, we found three of the criteria compelling, and those formed the basis of our inquiry: vision, curriculum, and personnel (faculty).

Vision

A vital part of the vision for the program is the theory of action stated below:

> If we provide graduate student/participants with multiple opportunities to reflect on how race plays a personal and professional role in their lives and in the lives of the students they serve, then our participants will develop a keen awareness of inequities and beliefs that may enable them to actively fight institutional racism in schools and society.

Each year, educators with prior teacher leadership experiences are invited to apply to the 2-year program to earn a master's of education and principal certification. Candidates submit application materials and selected candidates are invited to an assessment center that includes a team interview, presentation on a school data set, and response to a learning observation video. Assessors use a rubric to score candidates in several categories including their approach to equity. At the end of this process, about 12 to 20 candidates are invited to enroll in a 2-year program.

Curriculum

The curriculum for the first summer's coursework has been designed to support the above theory of action and includes readings, videos, individual, small group and large group discussions, and learning experiences designed to expose students to the concepts of race, individual, cultural, and institutional racism, and anti-racist leadership.

Personnel

By design, co-teachers who hold different racial identities deliver the first summer curriculum (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997), which has intentionally been a hallmark of our approach to anti-racist leadership development. In the past 5 years, across three different geographic locations, we have deployed three professors who are Black (two male and one female) and three professors who are White (all female) in these "diverse identity" pairs. Providing diversity in perspectives and experiences offers students opportunities to more deeply explore their own racial identity and awareness.

Methodology

In this study, we explore the racial autobiographies of 12 graduate students enrolled in a 12-credit introductory principalship course sequence. Hughes (2008) contends that you can develop culturally responsive educators by connecting auto-ethnography to critical race pedagogy. To test this belief, we assigned a brief auto-ethnography (i.e., a racial autobiography) to our principalship program students.

Critical Race Pedagogy guided our thinking in considering how best to teach about race and continue to maintain awareness of the power differential in the class (Jennings & Lynn, 2005). Teaching race requires a facilitative approach in the classroom. As such, we argue that facilitating a class that interrogates race and power necessarily requires a flattening of the

subconscious power hierarchy between professor and student. Hence, as an authentic demonstration of this "flattening," as professors we shared our racial autobiographies first, which chronicled our respective journeys as a Black male and a White female.[1] By modeling our own vulnerability, students experienced the revealing nature and authenticity of our essays as well as examples provided in the book *Courageous Conversations* (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

Data Sources and Analysis

The convenience sample of participants included 12 aspiring principals who were enrolled in a principal preparation program at a university located in the Southwest part of the United States. The entire cohort of students volunteered to participate and signed a written consent form. Ten of the students were females (83%), which incidentally is a close approximation to the percentage of female teachers in America's public schools. In the cohort, 8 students self-identified as White (67%), and 2 identified as biracial White/Latino (17%), while the remaining 2 identified as Black (17%). Place of birth was given as America by 11 students (92%) with one student born in Nigeria (8%).

Students journaled throughout the summer inside and outside of class and transferred those entries into Blackboard course management system. The primary focus of this analysis was a single data source, a racial autobiography submitted by each student after approximately 4 weeks (18 hr/week) of instruction in the second of the two related summer graduate courses. The excerpted assignment prompt the students received is included below.

> You will write a racial autobiography that recounts one or more significant events in your life that involved you asking really serious questions about your racial identity or your reaction to the racial identity of someone else, as it *relates to your identity.*

The instructors/researchers/authors read each piece several times. In our instructional role, we read the essays the first time for the purpose of class assessment (non-graded credit/no credit), and we used a rubric to provide feedback to each student. After the courses ended, we conducted subsequent readings as researchers using various lenses of racial identity development research as a general guide (Cross, 1991; Helms, 1990). Helms' model of White identity development incorporates six stages of growth that are primarily, though not necessarily, linear. The first three—Contact, Disintegration, and Reintegration—represent a progression from a low level of racial development to a higher level, and thus a movement away from racism. The next

three stages—Pesudo-Independence, Immersion-Emersion, and Autonomy—represent an eventual formation of a nonracist White racial identity (Helms, 1990, 1995). We were also informed by work on biculturalism that explored intersections of race and culture (Darder, 2012).[2] Darder proposes four major response patterns related to the biculturation process: alienation, dualism, separatism, and negotiation. Cultural alienation is a rejection of one's primary culture in exchange for embracing the dominant culture while cultural dualist is a response that identifies with one's primary cultural identity and one that is tied to acceptance of mainstream values. The cultural separatist response rejects the dominant culture altogether while remaining strictly within boundaries of primary culture. Finally, the cultural negotiation response pattern involves attempts to mediate, reconcile, and integrate the sum of all lived experiences in an effort to retain primary cultural identity while functioning within the dominant culture with an aim of transforming it. This response pattern helped us better understand some of the struggles of Latina and Black students as we considered intersections of culture and power. While we referred to the Cross (1991) Black Identity Development model (Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment), given the small number of Black students ($n =$ 2), we have not labeled the stages of their experiences in this article, but instead review their experiences within the context of the themes. These identity models, which support learning about identity development of Blacks, Whites, and Latinos, were useful as we set out to explore the content of the racial autobiographies. Our original aim was to determine if an identity continuum could be used to measure students' development of racial awareness. Though there are challenges with the thinking behind using a continuum for this purpose, we thought it was still useful to mark where students were developmentally at the start of this process.

Racial Autobiography Themes

Through this study we explored the following research question: What are the ways in which the racial autobiography (as part of a leadership course) influences aspiring leaders' perceptions about race and racism? We conducted an analysis of each of the autobiographies for evidence, if any, of growing awareness relative to race. It is important to recall that the students self-identified as White (8), biracial (White-Latino) (2), and Black (2). Though these are small numbers of students in each racial category, there were some distinctive features in the ways that they described themselves and their lives in terms of race. We were especially interested in whether their understanding of their racial identity influenced their thinking about their

leadership practice. Several themes emerged that illuminated our original research question regarding the development of racial awareness, the impact of racial awareness on development, thinking, and influence on leadership. Below we share those themes.

Earliest Memories and Significant Racial Events

The racial autobiography assignment directions prompted students to "recount one or more significant events in your life that involved you asking really serious questions about your racial identity or your reaction to the racial identity of someone else." Several students wrote about their earliest memories connected to race. Three strong themes emerged in these descriptions of racial memory: racial isolation or racial separation, influence of family members, and discomfort when in the minority. While parental/family influence likely contributed to racial isolation or racial separation, we have chosen to report these findings as separate and yet related themes.

Racial separation or racial isolation. Most of the autobiographies in this study mention racial separation and/or racial isolation. Racial separation was evident when the White students identified childhood experiences where they were intentionally, mostly by the power of their parents, separated from other races (i.e., people of color). Indeed, six of the eight White students described living in all-White areas of town, or all-White communities. That separation often led to years of limited experiences with people of color and often an almost exclusively White existence, which led to White racial isolation. Descriptions of racial isolation included notions like "80% of the community was White" and the following quote:

> Growing up, White people were all I knew. All of my friends were White. There were no minority families in my neighborhood. Every teacher I had from pre-K to 12th grade was White. God and Santa Claus were White, too.

In contrast, one White student recounted his experiences of being one of a few Whites when he went to live with his grandparents in a primarily Black neighborhood.

Repeatedly, we found instances of the White students living and learning in racially homogeneous environments as a result of housing choices made by their parents. Due to this isolation, these students' earliest autobiographical accounts appeared to be at the Contact stage of Helms' White identity development model. Helms (1995) maintains that the individual at this stage lacks an understanding of racism and has had minimal experiences with

Black people, and may even profess to be colorblind. Needless to say, being reared in a predominantly White, racially isolated environment had an impact on the racial views of the White students. With limited contact with other races, students were learning implicitly and explicitly that there was a White way of doing things, thus supporting a belief system that would easily usher in cultural racism. Interestingly, the phenomenon of White students' family members' decision to maintain the racial separation and isolation appeared to lead to the aspiring leaders now professing to be colorblind as teaching professionals (Helms, 1995).

Racial separation/isolation in a world dominated by Whites also appeared in the autobiographies of people of color in this cohort. One of our two White/Latina students related her father's personal experiences. She described her father as racially separated because, even though he had gained access to school, it was still within a White system. "When my father arrived in Texas at the age of 14, he was put into a 1st-grade classroom because he could not speak English. This is one of many racist experiences from which he still harbors bitterness and resentment." This student further described the pain she experienced in her realization about her father's response to racism. She shares that "despite loving and marrying and fathering children with a White woman, my father still feels prejudice toward White people. This prejudice has kept us apart." In spite of the father's "prejudice toward White people," he was forced to conform in a White-dominated world. He responded by deciding not to teach his "biracial" children Spanish in what the student later learns was an effort to help his kids avoid the painful effects of racism he had experienced. Her father's response is consistent with cultural alienation (Darder, 2012). Notwithstanding her father's best intentions, the student, who self-identified as biracial White/Latina, was also impacted by racial separation. She intimated,

> My brothers and sisters and I display varying degrees of skin color, eye color, and hair color, and hair texture. We were different from each other, and we were different from the children we went to school with. Outside of my home, my siblings and I were minorities in our predominantly Hispanic neighborhood. In that neighborhood at that time, we were not Hispanic. My father was. But at the same time, we were not White. My mother was. We were Other. My parents didn't speak to us about it; it was never discussed, and I struggle to understand why.

The parents' struggles with, and response to, racism were passed on to their daughter and influenced her racial identity development and how she would later think about racial separation/isolation. The lack of discussion

about race and its sway forced this lighter complexioned student to accept the prevalence of Whiteness (mostly) as normal and adopt a colorblind approach to leadership and life as she noted, "When I am in Austin, I am White. Naively, though, I am only considering my own perception." Darder (2012) in her model of biculturalism argues that Latinos are culturally conflicted about particular aspects of their identity when responding to the dominant culture. Here, the student's experiences have caused her response to vacillate between cultural alienation, thus rejecting her primary Latina culture, and cultural dualist, thereby displaying two separate identities, Latina and White.

For the Black students in this study, this separation happened on smaller, more socially personal levels, and seemingly in response to the social structural composition. For example, the Black male student indicated he chose to sit with other Black students when he entered his college cafeteria because it was the only comfortable place he could find in a predominantly White environment where he knew no one.

Another way this racial/isolation manifested for Black students in this study is addressed in the literature as a result of structural changes, such as Whites abandoning central cities to establish predominantly White suburban communities. One of the Black students expressed anger directed squarely at working- and middle-class Blacks in his community who followed Whites as they fled the city, thus depriving the city of a much needed and valued economic base. He included a memory of a coach describing his high school as a "victim of White flight" and he wrote,

> The demographics and climate of the school had been forever changed. What was more disturbing was the number of Black families that had withdrawn their children from the school and enrolled them into private schools for the same reasons as the White families.

The other Black student had been born in Nigeria, lived in Ireland with her husband and children. later moved to the United States, lived in Pennsylvania and then in Texas. In the new country, she quickly encountered a different set of racial norms that necessitated the need to advocate to keep her children from being placed in racially separated/isolated classes or tracks identified for special education, and precluded from enrolling in advanced content courses. She shared,

> As if the struggle will stop, we moved to Texas in 2008 and we realized that advocating for our children is a continuous struggle that parents of White kids do not have to go through day in and day out.

This student further identified the racial isolation she experienced in her work as a teacher and a graduate student in the current predominately White and White-normed cohort.

> Experiencing racial discrimination as a student is totally different from experiencing it as a teacher and a mother, in the sense that I felt left out like an "outcast" and was expected to accept all the decision made in the class and the only time I was heard or they pretend to hear/support my input is when the professors are in class. I felt helpless but knew deep down that if I do not address the issue, I will end up drowned and will be unable to achieve anything in class and this will ultimately affect my grade.

The student here was referring to the non-traditional structure of the two summer courses that requires the aspiring leaders to cooperate for many hours without the presence of the professors. Students meet 4 days a week—3 days facilitated by the co-professors and 1 day reserved for students-only to work as a full group conducting a school study and other collaborative projects. Even when present, the professors serve as facilitators and co-learners as opposed to driving the course. This process requires students to learn to work together and create and follow group-developed norms. The student-driven process can be challenging if the majority of the group wants to pursue a course of action and other members disagree. There is a potential for students to feel demoralized if the process is not discussed and addressed by the group. Hence, these racial separation/isolation experiences had a profound impact on these aspiring principals as they were shaped by family beliefs, societal actions, and tacitly and explicitly learned and understood taboos.

Ongoing family influence. Not surprisingly, we found that the influence of family on one's views on race is important to the development of the thinking of that individual. Though there was a broad range of responses, students generally included candid descriptions of different ways family members impacted their own views of race and the subthemes varied greatly. For example, one White student who grew up in a racially mixed area credited her Jewish parents for teaching respect for other races, "We were taught to respect every individual regardless of his or her origin, beliefs, traditions, and religious practices" while another White student described being taught to fear Blacks, "The town was 80% White and I can only remember one part of town where my parents trained us to lock our car doors." Alas, our findings revealed most familial advice on race aligned with this second description, making negative familial responses more common.

Several of the students described their first racially significant event occurring as a teenager though they may have initially suppressed its impact. Even much later in life, the racial autobiography revealed the emotions were still raw. We found that this theme played out differently for White students and those of color. White students encountered a struggle that presented them with a choice to reluctantly trust their parents and remain silent or disagree and resist in some way. In the end, the White students complied with their parents, but later realized the life-changing consequences such as being unsure how to authentically engage with people from other races. The students of color described choices that had been made by their parents or others, which included responding to the power of White dominance. Again, we see a response of the parents where, consistent with or aiming for cultural negation, they attempted to mediate and reconcile the dual identities of primary culture and the dominant culture and teach their children the same (Darder, 2012). At times, parents equipped the students to resist and survive, but at other times it was to quietly comply with the "way of the world" to be successful. As the theme indicates, in either case, familial influence was significant.

Several autobiographies included descriptions of families actively working to continue the racial separation between races through restrictions on dating and schooling. As several members of this predominantly White and female cohort noted, as they reached dating age, parents became direct and explicit about race and relationships. For example, a White student described her father's admonishment, "He had told me long ago not to bring home 'any other color.'" Other White students shared that parents did not allow dating Black students or attending parties with Black students. These descriptions recounted episodes of changing middle schools to avoid racially integrated boundary changes, cessation of inviting the sports team over when a Black student joined the squad, and a description of changed parental attitudes toward a Black student at a nearly all-White high school when he began dating one of the White girls, "White parents who didn't even know Perry were all of a sudden looking at him as a threat, and we (my group of girlfriends) weren't allowed to hang out with him."

Students' written accounts reported this racial separation challenged the students and their views on race, and more importantly their decisions to act or not act. These examples show that what students were recounting were part of the Disintegration stage as they realized that even in the past the "colorblind" or humanistic racial perspective was flawed. The rules of dating presented by their parents were confirming in fact that race matters, racism exists, and that they were White (Helms, 1995). For the students, who were children or teenagers at the time, this painful process and realization was

eventually suppressed and was later replaced by an act of minimizing race. As this student further noted,

> My girlfriends and I were mad at our parent's for treating him like that, but we did nothing to fight back. Eventually Kelly and Perry broke up, and it remained an unresolved issue. As teenagers, even though we didn't agree with it, we blew it off to our parents being "stuck in the 50's," but what we didn't see was the impact this type of racism has on our whole society. To us this was still an isolated incident and only about interracial relationships, nothing more.

While the White students initially seemed to disagree with their parents, as children with a limited understanding of how to face racial bias with family members, they described eventually buying into the racially separatist thinking. Repeatedly, we found instances where that was the case with the White students. As children, the students were already living in environments that were predominantly White and as they exited prepubescent years, they were coming to understand cultural racism that was now being explicitly promulgated via the vocal admonitions of the parents. Recall that cultural racism, while not legally sanctioned, stems from Whites' beliefs, symbols, underlying cultural rules and norms of behavior that are based in White superiority. For Whites, there are cultural rules that reinforce the idea that Whites are superior in intelligence, beauty, taste in art, and work ethic, among other things. Hence, the White parents were emphasizing and asserting the need to preserve the racial purity of Whiteness and recognizing and asserting the inherent interest in Whiteness as property (Harris, 1995).

As our White students grappled with this incredible burden of making sense of their family's influence on their thinking about race, they described specific breakthroughs for them. In particular, the autobiographies of the White students included examples of making the shift from individualized and cultural racial thinking to an understanding of how institutional racism is supported by the former two aspects of racism. Writing uncovered students gaining clarity on how they could learn and grow from the reflection on racial thinking exhibited by parents and others, and also how they might start to interrogate and dismantle institutional racism.

Discomfort in being in minority. The essays of White, Black, and biracial students included descriptions of discomfort when in situations where the majority of other people were of a different race from their own. We noticed a difference in the level of adaptability here for Whites and students of color. For example, students of color reported feeling the impact of being in the minority much more frequently than the White students. While it is

inappropriate to describe Black and Latino students as "more comfortable than White students," being one of the few or only person of color or minority occurred frequently enough that they had learned ostensibly how to "cope" with it. Research reveals though that coping mechanisms espoused by people of color may not be as effective as they might think. For example, Steele's research on Stereotype Threat makes clear that the additional cognitive load to process decisions that are required of people of color in mixed race environments does take a toll (Steele, 2010). Relatedly, Derald Wing Sue (2010) defines racial microaggressions as brief, commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color. As minorities in most environments, people of color are sure to feel the sting of these microaggressions, and Sue argues that they most definitely adversely impact the individual's psychological health and general well-being. Hence, race-conscious minority leaders will undoubtedly be aware of and mentally processing these issues, even if they choose not to verbalize it in mixed race environments.

On the other hand, White students, as members of the dominant culture, were more comfortable in majority White environments. It is interesting that we found that those White students who often claimed not to see race, became keenly aware when even a modicum of White dominance diminished or disappeared, for instance, when the person counts tipped in favor of people of color. Racial isolation became visible as expressed in the autobiographies of several White students when they were not in the racial majority. One student described moving to a majority Black neighborhood and his first experiences at school, "There were at least forty people in the gym. There were no other White people, a few Hispanics, one Asian, and the rest were all African American. I was very nervous, even scared." Obviously, some of the student's angst was stemming from recognition of being the only White person in the gym. The complete essay reveals he was also aware of stereotypes about African Americans and athletic prowess in basketball, impacting his thinking and adding to his anxiety. In developing questions based on Steele's (2010) theory, one might ask

> How might stereotypes affect this student's performance on a basketball court within a gymnasium of predominantly African American students? How might an African American student's performance in an AP Calculus class be impacted when they are aware of stereotypes about racial group categorization and intelligence?

Steele again reminds us that our subconscious awareness of stereotypes, with or without conscious confrontations relative to race, can still increase cognitive load and adversely impact performance.

Another student related how she felt while dating a Filipino and visiting a Filipino-owned restaurant with his family:

> I felt uncomfortable and as though I wasn't wanted in their place of business. It was hard for me to sit and eat knowing that I was being watched and scrutinized by every other patron. I was not prepared for the reactions I received and the feelings that I felt.

Both of these students also recognized how their own temporary experience of being the minority contrasted with the experiences of people who are traditionally marginalized due to race:

> I realized I may have felt very uncomfortable for a few hours, but I was able to leave the gym and return to the real world where most people looked like me. All the African American students in that gym left and went out into a world where not many others looked like them.

And from the restaurant experience,

> Reflecting upon it now, I can recognize that the way I was feeling is the way that many people feel on a daily basis. I cannot comprehend how dehumanizing it must be to feel like you are being constantly judged.

As professors we noted with some pride that these students had made the logical jump to empathize with people of color and how they might feel living constantly as "the minority." Though there was progression on this point as the above quotes demonstrate, there was at least one student who expressed shock of this reality. In recounting a recent discussion with a Black male classmate she shared, "His next words changed everything. He said, very calmly and sincerely, 'That's what I experience every day.' Even then, I asked in disbelief if that was true for him everyday." In the end, when our White students were cast in role of "the minority," they experienced implicit feelings of powerlessness. In explaining that sentiment, they revealed more about a personal, subconscious, broader view of the relationship between White skin and power of privilege, also referred to as the property of Whiteness (Harris, 1995). Indeed, this paradox of race and vision is common and consistent with the American landscape. That is, how can Whites generally profess to be unaware of race (i.e., colorblind) but instantly uncomfortable and extremely aware of it when found to be the only White person?

We also think this paradox pointed to a growing awareness. While proud of the development of these insights in the White students, as professors, we frankly felt inadequate and powerless as we contrasted this progress against

the lived experiences of our Black students in the class as compellingly illustrated by one of the Black students here:

> the need for courageous conversation about race cannot be overemphasized because true racism is experienced either directly or indirectly in a subtle way. I cannot go into a store without being watched. My colleagues at work and school do not even think I am smart enough to do my job or pass. My children and every other minority student that I teach are struggling everyday with their majority counterparts and I keep asking myself, will the struggle ever end???? I need someone to help me answer the question for me to have a closure on this issue.

On one hand, power of privilege is truly invisible to our well-meaning White students and exists below the surface. On the other hand, that same power and privilege of Whiteness is most apparent and oftentimes suffocating to Black students, who struggled to "cope" with the microaggressions and the additional cognitive load of working against negative stereotypes in a dominant culture.

Increasing Racial Awareness

The racial autobiography assignment is intentionally designed to increase awareness of race by requiring students to explore their own racial identity. Within these themes we noted progression from the Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration stages to the Pseudo-Independence stage, where a decision to abandon racism is made and the person begins the intellectual process of strategizing to fight racial oppression (Helms, 1995). These themes included awareness of previous racial unconsciousness, rejection of colorblindness, and acknowledgment of White privilege.

Racially unconscious. As students explored their racial identity through the autobiographies, we noted several instances where students, particularly White students, grappled with how they had previously ignored race, denied that race existed, or believed racism did not have a place in modern society. Quotes associated with being racially unconscious included a student recounting a childhood memory of questioning her mother about a Black woman in her town who wore White face paint.

> I asked my mother why she looked that way, "She paints herself white because of racist people. She's making a statement to show everyone that her skin is now white, so treat her White." I had no idea what treating someone White meant, nor did I question my mother.

Another student reflected on a high school classroom experience, "I even remember the teacher telling us how racism still existed today. Unfortunately that comment fell on deaf ears. I thought that was a problem in the past, that didn't exist in the here and now."

Colorblindness. To avoid being the offender, educators often adopt a notion that they fail to see color (Milner, 2010). Before people develop a framework for understanding prejudice and power and the debilitating impact of racial discrimination, they may find comfort in declaring colorblindness. This is often seen in statements of "I don't see color. Everyone is the same to me." One student captures it here, "Prior to attending graduate school, I had always referred to myself as 'colorblind' and often made judgments based on stereotypical information." This stance negates the lived experiences of people of color and overlooks enduring obstacles supported by personal, institutional, and societal racism because it requires no interrogation of race at all. However, in leadership, as it is in society generally, to adopt this stance is one of privilege. For example, our Black students, with their greater awareness of White dominance and racism, did not embrace colorblindness at all. They instead acknowledged the struggles that resulted from their being Black in America. White dominance, as explained through culture and power, also forced our biracial Latina aspiring leaders to identify mostly with their White identity as they were not visibly as Brown as some Latinas.

While students may have expressed colorblindness with some pride at the beginning of the summer, we noted in the autobiographies a new perspective now tempered with an understanding of the negative impact of maintaining a lens of colorblindness. "I was colorblind and I was going to conquer all. If only I had known then what I know now." Or as this student noted, "My feelings and defensive language conveyed that I did not value and recognize skin color and the impact it might have [on] peoples' lives." Another student offered a compelling account of her transition from colorblindness to greater racial awareness:

> I feel as if I had been blissfully ignorant in the past assuming that all students are given equal opportunities and are treated equally regardless of race and/or their culture. I can definitely see that ignoring a person's race and culture contributes to the White power dilemma.

Acknowledging White power/White privilege. Leadership has been defined as the ability to influence people (Northouse, 2010). However, implicit in almost every definition of leadership is an understanding of having power, formal (defined by position and/or hierarchy) or informal (based upon and

defined by influence without formal authority necessarily). We found that our White students consciously claimed to be racially unconscious but maintained very real and tangible awareness about how power structures in society should look relative to race. They unconsciously expected leaders to be White, and often male. For example, after seeing a snippet of *White Man's Burden* (Bender & Nakano, 1995), a movie that literally reverses the Black/White racial power dynamic by placing Blacks in powerful formal leadership positions and Whites in the role of an oppressed, subordinated group, one student journaled that viewing the shift in power structure as shown in the movie "was unnatural." That logically leads to the question of what is natural then to this student and others struggling with this question.

Related to this thinking and subtler than the above example, our White students continuously pointed out areas where they expected to be acknowledged and respected as citizens with full rights, for no other reason than their Whiteness, demonstrating clear evidence of the Reintegration stage.

> What [I] denied was privilege. I ignored race. My feelings and defensive language conveyed that I did not value and recognize skin color and the impact it might have [in] peoples' lives. I removed myself from the equation.

Harris (1995) argues that there clearly is privilege and power in the property of Whiteness, historically confirmed by the legal system. It is considered normal, though invisible, to many Whites until it is challenged or taken away. Katz (2003) even argues that Whites harbor a fear of people of color and are afraid that they will take away their power. This is really evident in debates about affirmation action and charges by Whites of reverse racism. The complexity of the normalcy of White supremacy is that it creates the world in neutral terms while mostly avoiding the use of the term *White*, and all of its associated historical and present day privileges. As this student above reveals, this discourse ignores race on one hand, and even denies the existence of White privilege, but it becomes aware when that privilege is threatened in any kind of way. White privilege personified becomes "offended" that one would even insinuate the structural dynamics of American organizations and social institutions are based on race in the least. But if presented with the alternative reality where the current structure holding Whites in power is flipped to place Blacks in power as indicated in *White Man's Burden*, it becomes, as the White student remarked, unnatural.

Taken as a whole, the students' racial autobiographies revealed a growing awareness and recognition of race, privilege, and power. Implicit to the recognition of White privilege is acknowledgement that racism, which extends beyond simply personal idealogy, is

a system involving cultural messages and institutional policies and practices as well as the beliefs and actions of individuals. In the context of the United States, this system clearly operates to the advantage of Whites and to the disadvantage of people of color. (Tatum, 1999, p. 7)

The students' racial autobiographies contained evidence that individual students were starting to acknowledge the existence of White privilege, thus demonstrating movement into the Pseudo-Independence stage. As one White student shared, "It was not until my first teaching job that I began to understand the concept of White privilege and how my neutral cultural stance was merely just a farce." Students also recognized how they might have personally benefited from privilege and what it might take to begin to understand the experiences of others who do not enjoy the same privileges. As this student intimated, "My newfound understandings of race left me with a simultaneous feeling of immense guilt as well as a serious need and desire to understand what it would have been like to grow up as a minority." While the act of coming to recognize previously invisible privilege was described as painful, students also offered empowering notions of what to do to counteract the perpetuation of unearned privilege as a student wrote,

I now know that I cannot change the past or who I am or the privilege I have had. However, I can control what I will do with my privilege. I also know that I am dedicated to doing whatever it is in my power to provide equitable circumstances to every child that walks in to my school.

All of our students were starting to question White power and privilege and becoming uncomfortable with the status quo. They were challenging the notions of people of color as inferior. Initially these changes were primarily intellectual but were undoubtedly associated with the Pseudo-Independence stage (Helms, 1995). Indeed, our White students were grappling the most with a range of turbulent emotions and even bouts with guilt after discovering a previously unrevealed world of invisible privilege. Awareness can be helpful but we understood that it could also create and foster more resistance (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997).

Reflection and Commitment

While increasing racial awareness is the primary goal of this assignment, that goal aims to propel students toward advocacy and future actions, which are the desired outcomes of the 2-year principalship preparation program. We found within the racial autobiographies data supportive of both self-reflection and a commitment to action.

Self-reflection. Self-reflection requires moving beyond the episodic to thoughtfully and intentionally surface patterns of behavior and thinking. Exposing oneself to critical inquiry requires courage, vulnerability, and forgiveness. About a fourth of the student autobiographies included evidence of self-reflection and deep interrogation of personal beliefs and how these beliefs influenced behaviors, decisions, and actions. As one White cohort member related about her prior decision not to support Black students, "I didn't stand up for those students, I didn't advocate for them, and I didn't bring it to anyone's attention what was really going on." Or as this student acknowledged,

> Before entering graduate school, I did not think denoting the color of my skin important to understanding myself. After strenuous reflection, I realize that my race has influenced and affected my life in ways that I either did not notice or took for granted.

In contrast, this quote from one of the Black students relates elements of Cross' (1991) Internalization and Internalization/Commitment stages revealing prior awareness of race and racism, acknowledging the ability of racist practices to shape his experience and his fierce pride in who he has become in spite of these trials

> Racism and racial barriers are deeply rooted in our society and have shaped my life and how I interact with society. I work extremely hard to get what I want. I became an educator in order to be a positive model in the lives of urban youth and to show them that if they want a better life they can get it, if they are willing to work for it. Resentment or anger does not reside within my heart or soul. Every racist act or injustice committed towards me or my people has strengthened and shaped me into the person I am today and I am proud of who I have become.

Commitment to action. While this assignment requires students to explore personal racial identity, it does not explicitly ask the students to commit to future action. However, in almost every case, we found supporting evidence of a personal commitment to action. These statements often included acknowledgment of the enormity of the work and that there was still personal work ahead as this assignment was completed at the beginning of the 2-year program. As this student noted, "Although I am not able to fully understand life for people of color, my views have shifted and I now feel like I have a voice that needs to be used when I observe injustices taking place." Others gave more specific examples of how they might exercise their new awareness,

No longer do I accept the self-righteous statements that spew out of the mouths of others, including my own family. I am changing everyday. I will be the voice for those who have none. I will be an advocate. I will continue on this journey of actively working against racism.

While another student acknowledged the need for action in light of larger societal issues:

So the question to me is how we (as a society) can let something be that easy to ignore when the implications are so severe? This is an issue that's more important than all of us, yet it seems that we let it slide because we rather let people's sensitivities drive the landscape of our society. So how can I change this, what can I do going forward?

More than one student referred to the need to know oneself to approach this work as represented by this quote:

This process has led me to the realization that evaluating my own beliefs about race will impact my ability to lead conversations with others. I have to know myself in order to put my own biases aside to invoke the empathy needed to break through racial barriers that exist in education.

Discussion

Graduate courses ought to stretch students intellectually, and our theory of action holds that it is imperative that aspiring leaders grapple with deep-seated beliefs regarding race and how these beliefs impact their decisions and, in turn, influence who they are as leaders. By knowing ourselves in all of our imperfections, we are better equipped to interrupt our own assumptions and attempt to better understand the perspectives of others. This is not just to be in service of ourselves and our own development, but to provide the building blocks that support critical examination of individual, cultural, and institutional racism and dismantle the structures that perpetuate the current opportunity gap that students of color experience in our schools.

Derman-Sparks and Phillips (1997) remind us, "Life circumstances precipitate and support change—toward or away from anti-racist consciousness" (p. 30). We sought to alter the life circumstances of our graduate students, through intentionally designed powerful learning experiences that might require students to become more racially and culturally aware. To precipitate and support this change process, we developed and relied upon the need to negotiate power within the classroom, self-critique our work as social justice educators, and adopt a counter hegemonic stance of advocacy and action

(Jennings & Lynn, 2005). As part of our desire to craft experiences supportive of critical race pedagogy, we intentionally asked students to examine the development of their racial experiences—with full understanding that this would be a difficult undertaking for most, if not all, of the students. Specifically, learning about race and racism and completing the experiential work in the course caused disequilibrium in our students and that meant that we had to be prepared to deal with emotional responses such as denial, anger, and guilt, among others.

For students to move into a zone where they felt capable of addressing issues of race, they needed to be clear about their past and frame it in a way that could support their current identity and development as leaders. Though the level of racial isolation/separation described by several White students early in their lives is consistent with Orfield and Lee's (2005) conclusion that most White children attend schools that are predominantly White, this finding struck us as significant. The students' childhoods, and in some cases, their early adulthood had been shaped by a lack of exposure to people of races or ethnicities different from their own. Students described parental influence—but with many different areas of emphasis—ranging from personal experiences with racism to expressions of racist beliefs and actions to ensure continued White isolation or separation from other races. Most autobiographies of White students centered more on family and personal experiences rather than school experiences.

Through analysis of the data we found salient themes, through which we noted progression of the White students from the Contact, Disintegration, Reintegration stages to the Pseudo-Independence stage, where a decision to abandon racism is made and the person begins the intellectual process of strategizing to fight racial oppression (Helms, 1995). These themes included awareness of previous racial unconsciousness often spurred by parental action, and colorblindness into adulthood followed by a rejection of colorblindness, and eventual acknowledgment of White privilege.

Though personal experiences and family were important, school experiences really were more prominent for the two students who self-identified as Black. These students recognized and more fully described an earlier awareness of hegemonic systems that created and maintained oppression of people of color in schools; thus, their journey appeared less layered. Though they were often left unsure of how to respond precisely to these systems, they instinctively resisted hegemony and waged personal battles, raising concerns about the weight of cognitive load and personal emotional toll (Steele, 2010). Examples of their fight are illustrated through a Black male student resisting hegemonic systems in support of himself, as well as by a Black student resisting on behalf of her children. That caused us to reflect on the vast difference

of experiences and how for Whites specifically, the schooling process might appear normal, fair, equal, and thus operating below consciousness, a clear manifestation of privilege (McIntosh, 1990). Racial re-segregation of schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005) explains only some of the structural challenges that color the rich experiences of students of color. While there were only two Black students in our sample, their interpersonal experiences were consistent with those of Black and Latino children in the United States, as we noted in the literature above.

Finally our two biracial Latina students' experiences were influenced by White dominance, and often framed through negotiations between culture and power (Darder, 2012). Hence, in many cases they chose to identify mostly with their White identity, as they were not visibly as Brown as some Latinas. The racial reflections revealed that such decisions did not come without costs to their primary Latina cultural identity.

From the evidence, we concluded that racial autobiographies, as part of a course built on critical race pedagogy, can influence graduate students to examine their own racial beliefs and potentially influence their future actions as educational leaders. As a result of completing the racial autobiography, students who self-identified as White and biracial were confronted with making race personal to them instead of seeing it as someone else's issue (Helms, 1995). They were also challenged to keep the focus on race instead of shifting to less contentious areas of oppression, like gender or socio-economic status. Thus, this work led to students answering exactly what they meant by use of the term race and how Whiteness was a part of that thoughtful construction. The racial autobiography caused all of the students to reflect on the impact of White privilege on their own lives, and acknowledge how a lack of privilege would influence life opportunities and experiences. Most students who self-identified as White made statements of commitments to change their own behaviors, and continue their own education while actively engaging others in courageous conversations to disrupt the status quo.

Students who self-identified as Black learned how to better frame issues around race. Assigned readings, such as Ladson-Billings (2006), McIntosh (1990), Singleton and Linton (2006), and Tillman (2004) resonated with them and confirmed many of their struggles were legitimate and recognized in research literature. Race and racism were already personally identifiable in their lives, and the class seemed to provide a forum to explore these concepts deeply and examine them in the context of a leadership class. Each student responded to the same prompt, but told a story unique to his/her own experiences. This emphasizes for us the need to inquire about and listen deeply to individual experiences—rather than impose stereotypical views on people based on race, ethnicity, or presumed identity. Though space limitations

prohibit a discussion here, all students, regardless of race, described writing the racial autobiography as an emotionally challenging, yet a positive life-changing experience. The students still expressed that sentiment in exit interviews when they graduated from the program 2 years later.

Conclusion

Racial autobiography serves as a useful tool to encourage students to examine their own racial identity, which is a necessary first step toward building an awareness of race, privilege, and institutional and societal systems of racism and other forms of oppression. In addition, helping students understand their racial identity can influence their thinking about their leadership practice. Finally, this personal racial awareness journey aspires to spark a budding desire for advocacy for those students who have been traditionally marginalized, which may lead to specific actions that can disrupt and dismantle systems of privilege present in our schools. After all, individual decisions and actions have built these systems of inequity—and therefore only committed individuals through intentional, thoughtful, and tenacious actions can dismantle them.

What we learned through conducting this study is that the process of reflecting and writing about race is itself a substantial action. Singleton (2013) refers to this process as making race immediate, personal, and local. Milner (2010) also supports this argument as his work reveals that the use of reflections about race can indeed be productive and supportive of educator's growth. When most of our students took on this assignment, there was awareness of race but not in ways that made it relevant to their practice as leaders. We found convincing support that the power of this reflective process made race more salient which is critical as discussions that might lead to greater understanding of the impact of race are currently so suppressed in leadership, teaching and learning, and society (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The substantiation of this racial salience was so powerful that we concluded the action of completing the assignment itself to be the first part of implementation as leaders.

We understand that research on the impact of completing a racial autobiography, which is metaphorically tantamount to growing a third eye, requires more exploration and we plan to expand this work with follow-up with the students as they enter and progress through their formal leadership positions. While most students credited the experience of writing a racial autobiography as personally transformational, further study is needed to determine what impact, if any, this experience has on the leadership beliefs, decisions, and actions of graduates once they serve in formal school leadership roles.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Notes

1. For a discussion and analysis of one author's racial autobiographies, see Gooden (in press).
2. Hispanics or Latino/a designation does not represent a race in the peculiar and limited way this construct is used. Hispanics can be any race. Hence, Darder's work was particularly helpful as we considered issues relative to Latina students and their racial/cultural identity development. We refer to the Latina students in this study, who self-identified as biracial, as people of color.

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