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Writing Equity Policy for a K-12 Public School District: An Insider's Perspective

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An Insider's Perspective

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Introduction

In <u>Start Where You Are, But Don't Stay There</u>, H. Richard Milner IV reminds K-12 educators that the meritocracy argument is a myth since it does not appropriately take into consideration that wealthier students enter school with resources, advantages, and privileges far beyond those of their underserved and low income peers (p.31). Milner goes on to suggest that a paradoxical dilemma is facing our K-12 public school system. Educators know that education is a strong predictor of economic success, but the very population of students who have been poorly served in our education system, "cannot necessarily transcend our poorly run educational system" (p.58). Ladson-Billings acknowledges the structural inequities in our K-12 public school system that expect all students to end their education at the same place, when they do not have the same starting point nor the equitable support throughout the race (1995). It is this very dilemma, of supporting the students who need it even if it means that all schools do not get an equal amount of resources, that is deep rooted in the policy and practice of K-12 public schools.

Upon examining the literature on school board policy development, specifically through the lens of racial equity policy development and change, three challenging trends emerge. First, it is important to understand that school board policy development is generally the result of what happens when a public problem, such as the disproportionate academic achievement of racial subgroups, gets enough public support to be remedied by the political system (Fowler, 2013). Public school critics, including media, politicians and business leaders, consider the public school system to be in crisis and want to exercise their authority on the education system with numerous school board policy proposals (Fowler, 2013; Howell, 2005). In addition, school board funding partners, including foundations and philanthropies are not only advocating for their projects, but also trying to advance their own policy interests (Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray,

2014). The numerous non-educators who are involving themselves in educational policy formation suggest a need to think about policy writing in a new way (Lubienski, Scott, & DeBray, 2014).

Secondly, despite the lack of correlation data on whether the presence of a racial equity policy in a K-12 public school district directly correlates to improved academic performance, the absence of a school board racial equity policy allows for the positions and resources designed to address the racial inequities in student achievement to be influenced by the whims of school district administration and budget, instead of prioritization. Finally, Fowler (2013) identifies that some of the surprising difficulty with any policy implementation in a school district is the lack of will and capacity of the central office leaders planning for the policy implementation, as well as the capacity for change of the teachers and building principals who work with the target student population (p.242).

Efforts to influence K-12 public school board policy development, specifically to address the inequities of student performance based on academic achievement data, has been attempted through both federal and local policy efforts. At the national level, policy makers have tried to address equity by issuing sanctions when school districts across the nation did not meet their adequate yearly progress (AYP) and academic improvement targets for all subgroups of students, an explicit goal of *No Child Left Behind* (Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2015; Fowler, 2013). The hope was that the sanctions would motivate school leaders to design school board policies that would address the disproportionality in student performance levels (Trujillo, 2012). Unfortunately, the inequities in academic performance that this federal policy was designed to address, still exist throughout the nation (www.nationsreportcard.gov). In the K-12 public school system, the name for the disproportionality in student achievement between White

and Asian students and all other subgroups of students has become so common that the public

school system has given it a name, *opportunity gap* (Darling-Hammond, 2010;

www.k12.us/WorkGroups/EOGOAC.aspx). At the local level, the disproportionality in academic

achievement between subgroups of students were similar (http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/;

www.k12.us/WorkGroups/EOGOAC.aspx). Very few school districts in the northwest region of

the United States responded to this federal policy pressure by developing a school board policy

to address this aspect of racial equity. Specifically in the state of Washington, only three of the

twenty-two school districts with more than 15,000 students have a school board racial equity

policy (WSSDA.org).

The purpose of this autoethnography is to examine the role and experiences of being a central

office administrator in the context of leading a large district equity committee. Nearly eighteen

months ago, I was charged by my superintendent to write a racial equity policy in a new way:

use a group of internal and external stakeholders on a District Equity Committee to write a racial

equity policy for our local school board to consider and adopt. While there has been considerable

research on the development of education policy and the politics associated with policy

implementation, the influence that equity policy development has on the role of the central office

leader has not been explored (Honig, 2009). The result of this paper will provide insight into the

use of groups of community stakeholders to create racial equity policy and my own culturally

responsive leadership development within the context of a large and diverse school district in the

state of Washington.

My own personal context helps illustrate some of the importance, and lack of preparation, for

leading racial equity policy development. My first six years as a central office administrator were

spent supervising building principals and programs in a district of about 15,000 students. In the

summer of 2014, I was hired as the Chief Academic Officer (CAO)/assistant superintendent in a middle size school district in the state of Washington. The previous CAO was an African American female, who served only one year in the position. On top of her other duties, the CAO had created and led a District Equity Committee. The purpose of the 2013 District Equity Committee was evident: analyze equity of opportunity, access, services, and programs to recommend the removal of any barriers that prevented our students from reaching their fullest potential (www.kent.k12.us).

Two weeks after being hired, the superintendent charged me to continue to facilitate the school District's Equity Committee, and use that group of stakeholders to write a racial equity policy for the school board. The superintendent submitted his retirement resignation a short two months later. The interim superintendent, once identified, subsequently spent six months attending nearly all District Equity Committee meetings. Upon his examination of the needs in the district, he recommended that the policy be an Equity Policy, not a Racial Equity Policy; suggesting that the district needed to be inclusive of all under-represented and marginalized student populations. By May of 2015, the District Equity Committee prepared a draft of an Equity Policy and it was presented to the interim superintendent and executive cabinet for feedback.

The very next month, the results of the school board's national search for a superintendent had yielded a qualified candidate. Since the draft policy had been tabled during the superintendent transition, the Equity Policy was a topic of discussion at one of my first entry level meetings with the new superintendent. It was during this meeting that the new superintendent asked me, "Why are you writing an equity policy and not a racial equity policy?" So began my circuitous pathway into equity minded leadership, learning about my own culture

of white privilege while leading a group of stakeholders in a District Equity Committee to develop a racial equity policy.

The Equity Leader's Role in Policy Development

School leaders must have more than just a basic understanding of education policy development, leaders must also clearly understand the values of their community and the climate within the system for which they work (Fowler, 2013). Although getting agreement on the policy within the committee, and with the school board may be considered challenging work, equity minded leaders may choose to use the leverage of an equity policy to create the conditions for rigorous instructional policies, to directly impact instruction in the classroom (Trujillo, 2012). As federal policy mandates such as No Child Left Behind have publicized the gaps in achievement for what Singleton and Linton (2006) name as the *racial achievement gap*, equity-minded educational leaders have to keep in mind the federal reform efforts which have failed to yield gap closing results, to consider the engagement of the community and stakeholders in the policy making. Trujillo (2012) identifies that some urban district leaders have been able to craft policy around instructional alignment to get their scores to improve, but suggests that these top down efforts actually narrow the humanistic outcomes of education (p.553).

Educational policy has had some dramatic impact in the last 60 years, including desegregation mandated through the *Brown v. Board of Education* (Spillane, 2012; Howell, 2005). However, Spillane (2012) would also argue that federal policy writing from No Child Left Behind (NCLB), to the adoption of Common Core State Standards (CCSS), has had little impact on promoting equity for all students. Harvey et al. (2013) agrees that national reform efforts, without the presence of all stakeholders, will get technical solutions that do little to impact broad systemic improvements (p.73).

Blankstein and Noguera (2015) argue that only courageous action and leadership, as well as clear moral reasoning, can sustain equity excellence. They also admit that some individuals in the school systems will likely comply with equity policy mandates as a result of external forces like No Child Left Behind and district developed policies. However, for other leaders in the organization, it sometimes takes a catastrophic event, such as new data that reveals significant disproportionality in achievement or access to programs, to activate leaders to face the facts and take action to change the situation (Blankstein & Noguera, 2015).

Putting policy into action, the equity minded leader needs to consider the influence policy can have to interrupt the historical and predictable patterns of underperformance (Trujillo, 2012). Central office leaders can use policy implementation to transform the public school structures and standardize the norms of how equitable student learning practices are addressed in a school district (Burch & Spillane, 2005). However, most importantly, for the equity minded leader is the moral imperative driving equity policy development. As Milner (2013) suggests, equity minded leaders continue to measure and commit to ensuring all children have optimal opportunities for success in our school system, even when, "the benefits to those in power may not be so obvious or compelling."

Research Methodology

I chose an autoethnography as an approach due to the need, as a white central office leader, to be self-reflective and transparent about the process and analysis of the journey in developing racial equity policy in K-12 public school district (Reed-Danahay, 2002; Traci, 2010). Traci (2010) identifies that the transparency of authoethonogrpahy, versus other qualitative research designs, allows the author to disclose the challenges and barriers along the way, while also acknowledging the twists and turns along that impact the context of the research. This method of

qualitative research also allows for the self-learning and self-criticism which are critical neighbors to other methods of research on topics such as social policy and the only method that allows for the "re-socialization" of the researcher (Denzin, 2008). Throughout this autoethnography, experiences in the racial equity policy development process will be examined and analyzed to show, rather than tell, the transformation of an equity minded white central office leader, focused in this work (Traci, 2010).

I initially began collecting data approximately eighteen months through a doctoral practicum experience. The practicum experience was designed to allow me to research an area where I did not have previous experience, such as school board policy development. The practicum experience aligned with the superintendent's vision at the time, when he charged me with using the District Equity Committee of internal and external stakeholders with the intentional outcome of drafting a racial equity policy that the school board of directors could review and potentially adopt. The practicum summary, and a subsequent change in the superintendent leadership, generated an even greater need in myself to grow in my understanding of my own white privilege by staying committed to the policy work. However, upon completion of the practicum, the policy was still in draft form. I then aligned myself with other regional equity leaders doing similar work in the Puget Sound area. It became clear that although each of us was working on equity policy development, we were moving this process at varying degrees based on a number of factors.

Through weekly journaling, if became clear that the equity policy journey was different for me as a white woman in central office, just as it was for my non-white regional equity leaders. At the time of this research study, each of the other regional equity leaders were leaders of color, in addition their job titles mostly included directors, assistant directors or coordinators. This is a

critical distinction in the systemic leadership structure of K-12 public education, since director

level positions are typically not on cabinet, they are not considered "at the table" as a voice to be

heard when policy and systems are put in place. Instead, they are left with the implementation of

an initiative or program that they did not have authorship. As the only regional equity committee

member that was both an assistant superintendent, and white, the structural inequities of white

privilege were observable at every meeting. This prompted self-reflections and development of

my own equity minded leadership that shaped my identify development.

The following autoethnographic project creates a view inside the demands of designing a

district-wide racial equity policy. Using autoethnographic methodology, I discuss my own

identity development of white privilege, providing an insider's account of how an opportunity to

facilitate a group in writing racial equity policy shapes an equity leader. My journaling included

observations, notetaking, and personal reflections, as well as quotes and detailed experiences of

the eighteen months of facilitating the equity committee. Throughout the autoethnography, any

quotations that are used or stories, are taken directly from the journal. However, Chang (2008)

identifies that authoethnographers are charged with the same confidentiality requirements as

other human subject researchers (p.56). Therefore, strategies to protect the identities of the

attendees of the equity committee as well as other organizational leaders are addressed through

varying the gender, race, ethnicity, job titles, timing and roles of those within the

autoethnography. I did not ask permission to quote any characters in the paper, as every effort

was made to adhere to the ethical principle of confidentiality (Chang, 2008).

This proposal employs a thematic self-narrative, from research that was collected over a

nearly two year period of time of facilitating a K-12 public school district equity committee. The

use of the District Equity Committee to develop racial equity policy allowed for self-reflection

on the relationships between and among committee members, school district staff and leadership, and the challenges I experienced regarding my own cultural assumptions (Chang, 2008). I triangulated my self-narrative, with the artifacts of feedback collected from each equity committee attendee after monthly meetings and juxtapose those data sources with relevant literature.

Theoretical Framework

As a result of reviewing literature on equity policy development and implementation, the self-narrative and artifacts of feedback from equity committee members, I categorized the data through the theoretical change framework of John P. Kotter, renowned for his framework on leading organizational and transformational change (Kotter, 1996). Although his work is specific to reengineering and creating cultural change to develop a new way of doing work in the world of business; the framework for change management lends itself well to role of the leader in managing organizational change in a public school system (Kotter, 2007).   I am approaching this authoethnography through this theoretical framework in order to also examine my own role as a leader in racial equity policy development.

Kotter's organizational change model is one that I have reinforced and used frequently in coaching building principals for changes in their building. Other educational leaders of change such as Michael Fullan were considered, as Fullan specifically cautions educational leaders to think critically about assessing the capacity of their school system prior to implementing any new policy. He further suggests that leaders of change in a system, specific to school board policy, should consider down playing the need for short term accountability measures and instead promote new skills (p.96). However, it was Kotter's framework which supplied both the prescriptive process of change implementation while acknowledging the role of both the leader

and the participants of the change. Kotter's theoretical framework of the change process was able to be overlaid into the District Equity Committee for the purpose of organizing the committee's meetings and generating the topics of discussion at each meeting.

Kotter's updated (1996) process of change includes identifying the process of effectiveness during implementation and is identified as the following steps (www.kotterinternational.com):

1. Create a sense of urgency – Craft and use a significant opportunity for exciting people to sign up to change their organization.

2. Build a guiding coalition – Assemble a group with the power and energy to lead and support the change effort.

3. Form a strategic vision and initiatives – Shape the vision to steer the change effort and develop the strategic initiatives to achieve the vision.

4. Enlist a volunteer army – Raise a large force of people who are ready and willing to drive change.

5. Enable action by removing barriers – Remove the barriers to change, then change the systems or structures that threaten the achievement of the vision.

6. Generate short-term wins – Produce, track and evaluate small and large accomplishments, and correlate them to results.

7. Sustain acceleration – Change the systems that don't align with the vision; hire and promote employees who can implement the vision.

8. Institute change – Connect the new behaviors with the organizational success, and develop the means to ensure leadership development and succession.

In the time allowed in this autoethnography, steps one through four of Kotter's (2007) eight steps of change are linked to the process of the equity committee's policy development as well as my own leadership development steps, as the assistant superintendent, co-facilitating the equity committee in the district.

Research Questions

The overall aim of this autoethnography is to provide a deep understanding of the significant interactions that exist in a K-12 public schools system undertaking the development of equity policy. This paper also examines the role and experiences of using stakeholders in an equity committee to develop public school board policy, and best practices and strategies for central office leaders who lead this work.

My personal and professional understanding of school board policy development and my experiences of working as an assistant superintendent in central office, leading equity work each day, offers insight into the development of white equity leaders. The following questions will guide this authethnographic study:

1. How does a K-12 public school system use local stakeholders to develop equity policy?

2. What factors influence the development of a white equity leader in a K-12 public school central office?

Literature Review

In order to fully examine school board equity policy development, this study will provide insight into two broad system settings that have influenced policymaking for local school boards. Given the federal context of policymaking, specific to the academic equity outcomes of No Child

Left Behind (NCLB), the identification of top down policy making processes will be examined

for stakeholder participation (NCLB: P.L. 107-110, 2001). The second setting that most

frequently influences policymaking is from the state and local level (Fowler, 2013). The state

and local policy development process will be examined, as well as the requirements of

stakeholder participation in policy development. The role of the central office leader needing to

be grounded in equity minded leadership development is explored from a narrative

autoethnographic approach.

Stakeholders in Federal Policy Development

Within the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA; P.L. 89-

100, 1965), NCLB challenged all public elementary and secondary schools with the ultimate in

equity excellence policy accountability; get 100% of students in every state to be proficient by

2014. Although limited in use in some federal policy design, NCLB prescribed stakeholder

input:

> Before publishing in the Federal Register proposed regulations to carry out this title, the
> Secretary shall obtain the advice and recommendations of representatives of Federal, State,
> and local administrators, parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and members of local school
> boards and other organizations involved with the implementation and operation of programs
> under this title. (P.L. 107-110 Section 1901(b)(1)).

Ultimately, the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) created a negotiating committee of

about 20 stakeholders, who subsequently met just five times in March of 2002 (Furgol, K. &

Helms, L., 2012). The charge of this stakeholder group was to review the *standards and*

assessments provisions of Title 1 (Part A). This committee was eventually dissolved and more

formal vested stakeholder groups of testing companies, professional organizations, teachers and

state administrators began recommending modifications to NCLB (Furgol, K. & Helms, L.,

2012). Furgol and Helms (2012) identified other stakeholders in the operational policy writing of

NCLB as the 50 states, who were allowed to choose their own state assessments to measure

growth. This group ultimately defended the USDOE decision to expand the stakeholder group

due to the implicit need to respond to the implementation of the policy action.

The result of the larger NCLB stakeholder feedback from 2005, was a benefit for

Washington State, it was granted a waiver from the growth measure elementary of the Adequate

Yearly Progress (AYP) requirement in 2012 (www.k12.wa.us). Unfortunately, Washington State

did not get 100% of their students to meet standard on the state assessment by 2014

(www.k12.wa.us). In fact, the average statewide performance of fourth graders in the spring of

2014 demonstrated 76% of White and Asian students were at or above standard, and only 56% of

Black and Hispanic/Latino students were at or above proficiency

(http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us). With the unmet accountability measure, and a state wide

teacher's union opposing the policy pressure to use student growth on teacher's evaluation,

Washington became the first state to lose their waiver from the federal accountability

requirements of NCLB (www.k12.wa.us). Even in light of a new way to measure proficiency,

Washington State was once again held to the high standards of the 2015 adequate yearly progress

(AYP) goals; 100% of all students, in all subgroups, must meet 100% proficiency in reading and

math (Smarter Balanced link, OSPI link). The USDOE emphasizes that NCLB policy,

"continues the legacy of the Brown vs Board of Education decision by creating an education

system that is more inclusive, responsive, and fair," however, impact of this policy to close the

opportunity gap remains to be seen (www2.ed.gov).

Stakeholders in Local Policy Development

Local school boards began writing and documenting their own policies, based on their

community's needs beginning in the 1970's, when the National School Board Director's

Association issued guidance that each school board should have a board policy manual to act as their policy guide (Hill, 1976). This left individual school boards with the responsibility of policy writing based on the needs and will of the elected school board members. However, this formation of school board policies, which was at one time led and directed by individual school boards, has become increasingly complex, influenced by multiple stakeholders at both the local and state level (Fowler, 2013; Frankenberg & Diem, 2012).

The primary purpose of all school board policies, is to define a course of action in broad terms guiding present and future decisions; generally telling administrators in the school district what to do, without telling them how to do it (Creech, Roy & Buckler, 2008; http://www.isba-ind.org/Legal/PolicyDevelopment.htm). Though research supports the use of local stakeholders in school board policy development, school decision making and governance, many still view student learning as the sole responsibly of educators (Fowler, 2013;Van Roekel, 2008). The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) in Washington explicitly requires stakeholder involvement in areas such as the school improvement planning (SIP) process that guide individual school and student improvement plans to close opportunity gaps (Cohn, S., 2015). The state legislature has also issued policy guidance for stakeholder input, related to the allocation of funds for accessing dollars for the learning assistance program (LAP). LAP is a statewide program, guided by state dollars, designed to provide supplemental instruction to students who do not meet the state standards in reading, writing or math (WAC 392-162-020). Absent are recommendations that require stakeholder input on local school board policy development.

School board policy development in the state of Washington is most frequently guided through the Washington State Schoolboard Directors Association (WSSDA) (www.wssda.org).

WSSDA develops policy guidance and proposes policy language from existing Revised Codes of Washington (RCW), which is the compilation of all the laws in the state. The Washington Administrative Code (WAC) then organizes the laws by subject (www.apps.leg.wa.gov).

Within Washington State, there are currently no state laws for WSSDA to use as guidance in equity policy development. Without a specific state law to require school districts to achieve equity; inequities in academic achievement specifically, are widespread (www.k12.wa.us/WorkGroups/EOGOAC.aspx). A review of data in the Kent School District mirrors the disproportionality that is apparent in nearly every Washington state school district; regardless of the year and regardless of the data point, White and Asian students have outperformed Black, Hispanic, Native American and other historically underrepresented students on state assessments in every subject in every grade level (Kent School District Equity Committee, para. 5). Washington State's Educational Opportunity Gap Oversight and Accountability Committee (2015) identifies that Kent School District is not alone in this category, as there is a consistent, "20-30 percentage point gap in student achievement between students of color and White and Asian students" (p.5). Although not mandated and defined by a state law, school board policy guidance could specifically focus on equity in education. Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton (2006) defined equity in education as, "raising the achievement of all students while: narrowing the gaps between the highest- and lowest-performing students; and eliminating the racial predictability and disproportionality of which student groups occupy the highest and lowest achievement categories."

Without state legislation, and sufficient localized public pressure, each of the 295 Washington school districts are on their own to determine how to write, and what to include in an equity policy. WSSDA has many reports that tell school board members that there is a

problem with the opportunity gap, but offer few solutions about how leveraging their leadership

roles as a policy governance body could close the opportunity gap (www.wssda.org;

www.k12.us/WorkGroups/EOGOAC.aspx). As Frankenberg and Diem (2012) propose, state

and national school board associations are the very group that should be responsible for ensuring

that school districts get the guidance they need in order to develop strong policies.

Without state level policy guidance, my school district's equity committee primarily accessed

a racial equity framework from a local education service district (ESD) as a model in our policy

development. In Washington State, legislation created nine educational service districts (ESD) in

order to pool resources and deliver specialized services that may otherwise be unavailable

(www.psesd/about/). The racial equity framework, originally utilized by the City of Seattle,

prescribes the engagement of communities of color in the creation of policy development to

ensure racial equity best practices, and strategies for assessing the community conditions for

policy impact (www.psesd.org; www.psesd.org/services/equity-inclusion/). In addition, the ESD

provided the District Equity Committee access to a consultant, an ESD staff member, who had

expertise in equity policy development. The District Equity Committee used the framework as

policy writing guidance to draft the equity policy.

Policy Development and the Central Office Leader

District level administrators play a critical role in planning for the changes needed for

successful policy implementation (Burch and Spillane, 2005; Fowler, 2013). A Burch and

Spillane's (2005) review of subject matter policy implementation in an urban school district

revealed a framework which connected the central office administrator's view of a subject

matter, to their leadership practices for improving instruction and implementing the school board

policy related to that subject. They further identified that one of the challenges of implementing

policy is the institution's environment regarding education reform, rather than a function of the "implementers" inability or unwillingness to carry out policy reform.

Trujillo's (2012) case study of equity policy implementation from the outside looking in, found evidence that equity policy implementation could be compromised by central office leaders from the onset, when the challenges emerge regarding aligning the allocation of resource and beliefs about student needs. If a central office leader's own beliefs of a subject matter such as equity, directly correlate to the leader's ability to implement a policy, the need to have policy writing leaders in central office who are grounded in equity minded leadership would be a prerequisite for equity policy implementation success (Burch and Spillane, 2005). Blankstein and Noguera (2015) insist that the efforts to make significant influence with equity policy will necessitate including language that specifies that, "equity is not about treating all children the same." Beliefs about whether treating one group of students differently than another group or allocating resources differently based on the needs of students is what is needed to achieve equity and close the opportunity gap in schools (Milner, 2013, p. 56). Trujillo (2012) recognized this as a value-conflict for central office leaders; who back away from equitable and rigorous practices due to political concessions.

The role of the "equity minded" district leader conversely comes from being able to model the equity policies within the context of the individual school district, without the need for accountability practices that mirror federal reform efforts (Trujillo, 2012). The challenge of all of the equity policy and implementation resting with one educational leader further supports the need to gather more stakeholder involvement in policy making. Blankstein and Noguera (2015) identify that one of the critical prerequisites of equity in education involves collective stakeholder involvement, identifying that when these adults start working together to meet the

needs of each student, the chance of breaking out of the predictable pattern of disproportionality significantly increase (p.20).

Blankstein and Noguera (2015) confirm, that if the profound inequities in education and the disproportionate access to high level learning that cause the achievement gap are not addressed, the entire U.S. society will be imperiled. It is evident in K-12 public school data that a child's race, socioeconomic status and zip code continue to be a predictor of the quality of education he/she may receive (Darling-Hammond, 2008; Blankstein & Noguera, 2015). The need for equity in education, was revealed to the nation with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), but thirty years later, despite efforts by educators, there has been, "almost no progress in raising the bar and closing the gap." (Fullan, 2015).

Culture/Sub-Culture

As a central office leader, who is a white woman, this autoethnographic journey led me to examine my own cultural identity, and the impact my identity has on the school district equity committee. McIntosh's (1988) article on *White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack* revealed a profile which captures some of my own cultural identity as a white person; although I had been taught about racism in the context of putting others in a disadvantage, I had not necessarily viewed my whiteness as an advantage. Freire (1985) warns that naïve professionals must develop an awareness of their own potential oppressive cultural action for actions that may, "emphasize a *focalized* view of problems rather than seeing them as dimensions of a *totality*."

I frequently remind myself, as Chang (2008) acknowledges, individuals are not prisoners of culture, as we are always acquiring, creating and shredding traits while we interact with others. I reflect on my own position as the Chief Academic and Innovation Officer/Assistant Superintendent in the fourth largest and most diverse district in the state. As a white central

office leader in the K-12 public education system, is the advantages of whiteness reveal

themselves in the disproportionality in student performance on nearly every assessment required

in the state of Washington (OSPI: Report Card).

Autoethnography

Step: 1 Generating a Sense of Urgency

In July of 2014, I started as the Chief Academic and Innovation Officer (CAO) in a large

school district in Washington State. The claim that the district was the most diverse district in the

state attracted me to the position, as I had just spent six years developing my skills as an equity

leader to meet the needs of a growing Latino(a)/Hispanic population and supervising the

development of a Native American parent engagement model. The past sixteen years in a

neighboring school district, six years in an assistant superintendent position, had provided me

rich experiences in leading professional leadership for building principals, programs and parental

engagement.

I was replacing an outgoing CAO, who had served exactly one year in the position. She left

me a thorough transition plan regarding the division. Embedded within the plan, was the work of

an equity committee. "If this isn't your thing, pass it on to someone who will get the job done,"

was listed next to the information on the equity committee. I was surprised that policy writing

would come from the instructional side of the house, given that this large school district had an

accountability and policy division, which was not under my scope of work. However, within the

first month on the job, the few remaining central office administrators of color found their way to

my office. They each individually shared their hope that I would continue the work of the

previous CAO and take on leading the district equity committee.

By early October, the superintendent requested that I identify who would be leading the district equity committee and subsequent equity policy writing. I recall being at odds with my decision making. I was enthusiastic to nominate myself to lead the district equity committee, because I have a genuine passion and interest in closing the opportunity gap. However, I also realized that there was a difference between my leadership and the previous CAO. She was black/African American, and I was white. I questioned whether I would do a good job at creating equity policy, because I had never created policy before. I questioned whether I would or could really understand the barriers that were facing our underserved student populations that were interfering with their learning because I had never faced the barriers they face each day in our schools. And just as importantly, if I was going to be able to develop this committee into equity policy writers, I would need to have a non-white co-facilitator with me on the committee. I wish I had a name for what this racial balance does to a committee or a room when the conversation is about equity. Although I could not assume that just because the previous CAO was black/African American that she was an equity policy expert, it would be inappropriate for me to assume that as a white equity minded leader, that I could thoroughly challenge and create enough urgency with this committee to think about how race was predicting our student's achievement outcomes.

My previous experience in leading parent engagement work had taught me the importance of lifting up non-white leaders, alongside white partners, when the work was specific to closing the achievement gap. I had already learned to "lean in" when parents brought up topics or stories about what non-white students were experiencing our schools, when it conflicted with my own children's experiences. As a leader needing to create that urgency with the committee, I looked inside our organization for a non-white partner to co-facilitate this district equity committee with me.

In less than 90 days on the job, I had already had frequent conversations with one of my executive directors, who was Latino male, regarding his concerns about the inequities in student achievement, disproportionate discipline and racial inequities in some of our programs in the school district. His passion for the work, community connections, and previous experience as a district leader who had walked the walk in leading change in a school building to close opportunity gaps for students, led me to solicit his leadership. In reality, he could not say no to me, because I was his supervisor, but I was most interested in us leading this policy work together if he believed he had the energy and passion to continue to give the message that we needed racial equity policy in order to move our K-12 public school system forward to close the achievement gap for our underserved students.

I knew the power of policy. Policy can be really powerful and influence substantial change if you could engage everyone's moral purpose, or it could just be another top down centered policy with little collective impact on the organization (Fullan, Cuttress, & Kilcher, 2005; Trujillo, 2012). Therefore, I was not surprised when I recall him asking, "Why me?"

It was clear that my co-facilitator was not thrilled with having to be a lead on the committee. Latinos represented less than 2% of our district administrative team, but nearly 40% of our student population. It was clear that he was frustrated with always having to be the *chosen one* to serve on equity committees. He shared his own professional goals of wanting to be an instructional leader, and hopes of higher level district leadership in the future. Although I entered the conversation needing to see if he had the passion for this work, I ultimately believe I was the one being interviewed. He needed to know that if he was going to put himself out in front to develop a racial equity policy in front of internal and external stakeholders, he would have support for the work through my cabinet level position to get the policy through to the school

board. More than one time in our initial conversation he reminded me, that he had already, "checked me out" with other Hispanic/Latino(a)s who had worked with me in the past. "They tell me that you can be trusted," was the results of his inquiry.

Our first hour of preparing for the district equity committee, included sharing our own understanding of white privilege, and institutional racism. His stories included how just a few years before, a central office employee had called district security on him as he sat in his Acura outside his office on his first day of work. He could not count how many times he had been called to go sit in the school principal's office to mitigate a confrontation between an upset parent of color and a white principal during his career in central office leadership. I had wondered if he had the passion to address the inequities our non-white students were facing in our K-12 system, but it also became increasingly clear that as a Latino leader in our system, he was facing similar barriers each and every day on the job.

My own examples included stories about how my own white privilege and systems of institutional racism had been revealed to me through the staff, parents and children in the K-12 public school system. The time a Native American teacher, while I was leading the committee for planning a Native American family night, told me that I was trying to make her "plant her corn in rows, again." When during a school board meeting a Latina parent turned to me and asked that if I had such a shortage of teachers and believed in growing our own, "Why wasn't I growing Latino (a) teachers out of their children?" My own white privilege and the inequities of the shared experiences of the families whom I served, had influenced my development as an equity leader.

He and I concluded with recognizing the benefits that our pairing could bring to the equity committee's conversations regarding race and inequities. Ultimately, we both had the same

outcome, although we wanted this to be focused on student outcomes and achievement, we were going to need the adults serving on the equity committee to share their own reasons for being on the committee and ensure they were aligned to our outcome of policy.

During our preparation for the first equity committee meeting we planned for the potential barriers of entering multicultural conversations and how the perceptions of equity committee members, and community, may not accept me leading this work since it had always been led by a person of color in the school district (Cain, 2012). We also knew that before we could define words such as equity, racism and white privilege, the individuals on the equity committee would need to come to terms with their own self-awareness and identification of culture (Cain, 2012).

The first equity committee meeting included invitations to fifty stakeholders, including the president of the teacher's collective bargaining group, community members, superintendent, teachers, principals and central office leaders who had either been recruited by my co-facilitator or had previously served on the district equity committee in the past. The attendees who attended the first meeting were 50% male and 50% female, with 50% identifying as white and 50% representing non-white memberships. Community participation was low representing only 13% of the attendees, and our district employees citing work and family conflicts as reasons for non-attendance. In my welcoming address to the committee, I honored the previous work that had been done, thanked the committee for returning, and outlined that our most critical charge of the committee at this time was to draft a racial equity policy for the school board to consider.

Our first introductory activity included asking each committee member to state their position or role in the community and share, in one minute or less why they chose to attend this committee. Although the tables allowed for committee members to sit where they wanted, a pattern of whites and non-whites sitting together emerged quickly. Introductions around the

room started with a predominantly white table of building and district administrators stories of

how they wanted to make a difference for our underserved students who were not finding

success in our schools, one employee shared that he had been a foster parent of a child of color,

so he understood the struggle the children in our district were facing. From the non-white

committee members, the reasons why they joined the committee, had to do with their own

cultural identity and frustration with their children's lack of success in our school system. At the

third table, the non-white committee members shared stories of facing their own racial inequities

in the school system and what they were facing as adults. One committee members shared her

challenge of being recognized as part of a racial group based on the color of her skin, and the

challenge she faced each day of having to explain to both white and non-white adults that she

was of a mixed race. Stories of bi-racial, bi-cultural, mixed race marriages and the inequities that

their own children faced in our schools filled the room. All the other –isms were quickly filling

the space as committee members shared their stories of sexism and racism, struggles with sexual

orientation, gender bias, oppression, low-income status and social class were personally defined

through each member's own experiences. The one minute time limit that we had put on each

introduction was not being upheld, and neither I nor my co-facilitator felt that we could stop the

sharing. As I watched the clock tick by, my co-facilitator was attending to the room and

whispered that we needed everyone to say their piece. Previous equity committee members, who

had been part of a racial equity workgroup ten years prior, shared their frustration with how long

it was taking the school district to make the changes that the previous committee had

recommended. Nearly an hour later I felt like I was on an oxygen deprived airplane. The

stewardess had just reminded the passengers to please put on their own oxygen masks before

they tended to the children. After the first hour, I was unsure of how this group of adults were going to be able to help our children.

The silence was broken by an Asian American community member who raised her hand and asked, "I just need to know, who voted you to be the chair of the committee?" I had purposely stayed quiet during the sharing activity, aware that any personal story of growing up in a single family household, or other stories of my own oppression could be viewed as distracting to the work of racial equity. I could have responded that the superintendent appointed me, I could have shared my own understanding of white privilege and the institutional racism of our system, and even though I had never experienced it. Maybe mistakenly, I responded with a partial truth. I told the group I nominated myself, and I shared my belief that my co-facilitator and I would collectively support and lead the committee to create a racial equity policy to present to the school board. I didn't realize at the time, that many of the committee members interpreted my response as, "She's doing this because the superintendent told her to do it."

The first equity committee meeting ended with a request for written, anonymous feedback, using three slightly altered sentence starters from Jim Collins work: (1) I would like more of (2) I would like less of (3) Please continue to. Overwhelming feedback from committee members requested the recruitment of more committee members, the need to create a safe environment for conversations about race, and the need for more team building within the committee. After all, one committee member pointed out, "Our district is nearly 15% Black/African American and there isn't one Black/African American person in the room." Trends on what to do less of consisted of a request for less personal stories, less district talk, and less personal agendas from some political types in the room.

My first conversation with my co-facilitator illustrates the need to create a space where staff, parents, and community members can have a safe place to discuss the inequities that face their children, but also the inequities that continue to face them as adults. Although I thought there would be a need to "create urgency" within the committee on behalf of the children, it was clear that racial inequities live beyond the K-12 system. I didn't need to create urgency with the non-white equity committee members, they were facing societal inequities and racism each day. For me, this need to create urgency regarding racial equity policy development still needed attention with some of our white community members, teachers, administrators and central office leaders. This was evidenced by a frequent mis-step of some of the white committee members in the room who felt compelled to share their own story of misfortune, poor, or dysfunctional households as a way to "connect" to the oppression of racism.

As this equity committee would soon become the guiding coalition for equity policy development, my co-facilitator and I agreed with the committee's feedback. There was a need to provide some more learning regarding understanding white privilege and racism, and creating safe places to discuss these topics with the committee membership, before the committee would be able to move forward. Knowing that this committee would eventually be the leaders of our equity work, we would need to start developing change knowledge, helping our committee translate their new learning regarding equity to racial equity policy writing (Fullan, Cuttress & Kilcher, 2005).

Step 2: Build a Guiding Coalition

Kotter (1996) identifies that a key to building a guiding coalition is to assemble, "a group with the power and energy to lead and support a collaborative change effort." Brown (2006) asserts that a critical element in building educational leader's approach to improving student

learning and equity is through the exploration of new learning in personal and professional

spheres while connecting to the educator's personal knowledge and experiences. Brown further

suggests that only through repeated discourse about justice and equity can leaders in education,

"increase their understanding of how issues of race and ethnicity affect the educational

experiences for all students" (2006). In the following examples, the development of the power

and energy of the committee was approached through an effort to build their understanding of

our district's reality regarding our disproportionality in student achievement by looking at the

data that the committee had suggested may reveal opportunity gaps.

As was suggested by the District Equity Committee, my co-facilitator continued to

outreach to his community connections to get a broader stakeholder group at the bi-monthly

meetings. The benefit of this outreach was that a new committee member attended after the

original committee had been meeting for about three months, the challenge, was that this

committee member had not been a part of our norm building process. My co-facilitator and I had

been preparing our committee members throughout the last few meetings to get them ready to be

good consumers of the district data in order to harness that energy into our new vision for racial

equity policy. The topic on this committee meeting agenda: unpack the structural and

institutional evidence of racial inequalities in the school district.

The committee charged themselves with the difficult task of defining, "What would racial

equity look like in the school district?" The committee then worked at identifying the gaps

between where we were and where we wanted to be. My co-facilitator and I had anticipated the

conversations would be difficult as the committee examined its own current reality. We had

planned to assist the committee in the writing of narrative statements after they had analyzed the

data, a familiar process to those in the K-12 public school system, as it is a recommended model

for developing school improvement plans throughout the state

(http://www.k12.wa.us/StudentAndSchoolSuccess/pubdocs/OSPIAction-

PlanningHandbook.pdf#TOC).

The data requested by the committee revealed the school district's current reality; the

district had discipline data that were disproportionate, over identification of students of color in a

categorical area of special education, opportunity gaps and achievement gaps for students of

color when compared to their White and Asian peers, and the enrollment in the elementary

highly capable program did not reflect the demographics of the school district. The committee

members were all writing statements about what our district would look like without the gaps

and disproportionality. My co-facilitator and I gave each other a nod and continued to press the

group to think about what we would want in our vision for racial equity.

"Remember when one of our schools placed all the kids with a Hispanic last name in

English Language Learner (ELL) classes and did not fix its mistake until the superintendent went

in to tell them to stop, that principal's not here anymore" the district employee's comment filled

the room and he chuckled. With only two non-district employees in attendance at the committee

meeting, there was some eye rolling by committee members who claimed this was a myth. The

newest committee member, then asked how well the system was preparing students for

accelerated programs at the middle school level, because he was certain that the secondary

accelerated program did not represent our district diversity. As defined by this committee

member, this was true inequity and he demanded an answer from the district employees serving

on the committee. A middle school assistant principal in the room felt compelled to respond and

clarify that he believed the school's accelerated program reflected the diversity of their school.

By now, no one was looking at the data now or writing narrative statements. Collective

committee work stopped as newest committee member situated himself next to the middle school

administrator. The new committee member proceeded to further question the middle school

administrator about the program enrollment, while other committee members questioned the

district employee about the current ELL practices for student placement and the rumors of past

practice they had heard.

Although the committee had an agreed upon norm to not use specific school or personnel

names in our discussions, the questions from the new committee member, preceded by the

district employee sharing a rumor had occurred so quickly, and so close to the end of the

meeting, my co-facilitator and I were unable to get the committee's energy back to focus on the

data. The comments about a specific school's disproportionality in program enrollment and

myths about past practice in placing ELL students ended the meeting. Debriefing the meeting

early the next morning, my co-facilitator and I breathed a sigh of relief although we knew that

this would not be the last specific school level claim of inequity the committee would be asked to

address.

Less than twenty four hours later, the supervisors of both the middle school and high

school principals were in my office. The potentially inaccurate statements of some of the

committee members from the night before had gone viral in the school district. One principal

was offended when he heard from his assistant principal that his prized accelerated program was

a conversation point at the equity committee meeting. His next email to the interim

superintendent, myself, and the entire school board of directors shared his displeasure of having

his accelerated program enrollment be in question, when he was not there to defend it and the

data did not support the committee member's comments.

I started thinking that maybe policy was not the place to start, clearly doing a backwards design by revealing and having conversations about potential inequities was going to cause disruption in the system. A new high school principal was upset because she didn't even know which accelerated programs were offered at each of the other high schools, another central office leader was convinced that new committee members should no longer be allowed to join the equity committee. My co-facilitator and I were frustrated that the committee's efforts to try to build trust and a safe place to have conversations, was at risk.

The themes in the feedback from this particular equity committee meeting and my own self narrative reflected a reoccurring need regarding cultural learning for the system. The co-facilitator and I met with our ESD equity lead and acknowledged how challenging it was to ask this District Equity Committee to both learn and lead at the same time. The committee started sharing recommendations that might eventually need to be connected in the policy's procedure: a need for district wide professional development on topics such as white privilege, cultural responsive teaching, and strategies to engage parents of diverse backgrounds. The committee also wanted to know if there were any school districts who had closed gaps due to having a policy. There was also a new determination from the committee to start seeing sample equity policies, captured by comments of, "let's do less talk and more action."

My personal and professional integration of building the knowledge and skills of the district equity committee, while I was also building my own skills as an equity-minded leader in central office, was a developmental process. A foundation of my leadership philosophy for change is based on a belief that learning and leading is hard work and every effort should be made to ensure the "leader" is at least six months to a year ahead of whomever they are leading. With less than six months on the job myself, gathering the disproportionate data less than

twenty-four hours ahead of the committee, left me feeling like I didn't have answers. A frustrating and powerless predicament for a leader, since I frequently got accolades for my ability to problem solve. Perhaps I was still looking to adopt a technical solution to a complex problem. As Harvey et al (2013) assert, meeting the needs of each child, to close opportunity gaps, is a, "complex human challenge calling for difficult, adaptive work involving all stakeholders." My drive to be the fixer, and the one with all the answers, required me to do some more learning about my own white privilege.

Although I consider myself an equity minded leader, it quickly became clear in my efforts to build a guiding coalition around this work, that I was not necessarily prepared to lead for equity. Building a strong coalition required me to first engage in self-reflection. Instead of ignoring the impact of growing up surrounded by my family's beliefs about people of color, adolescent experiences with stereotypes, and my own behaviors that were perpetuating racist micro-aggressions, I needed to first find out where they lived within me. It was only after this reflection and ownership, could I then have others help me consider how to recognize and engage in a critical analysis of my own white privilege (Brookfield, 2014).

My Own White Privilege

My ability to identify and understand my own white privilege was something that developed over time through my conversations with both adults and children throughout my educational career. I say that because although I had attended a racially diverse high school in the White Center area of Seattle, race, when I was growing up, was just a label that divided my high school experience along the color lines. Making the cheerleading squad my junior year in high school, our cheer team referred to itself as *half and half*. Six of the girls were white, and six

of the girls were Asian. The fact that the other girls represented both Vietnamese and Korean cultures was lost on me at the time, as I lumped all of the Asian groups together.

A girlfriend of mine at the time, first generation from Vietnam, teased the Cambodian girls in our high school unmercifully for speaking Khmer in the hallways in front of English-only speaking students. One of our school's hallways was named the foreign language hallway not because Spanish and French were offered, but because that was where the school put all the students who spoke a language other than English. I recall asking my friend from Vietnam how she could tell the difference between Vietnamese and Cambodian. I understand now that she and I both inaccurately referred to the language as "speaking Cambodian" but I now realize it is actually called Khmer. I remember her getting very angry and mimicking the Khmer language with high pitched sounds. I also admitted I could not tell the difference between Vietnamese and Cambodian people, based on what they looked like. By this time, she was very angry and harshly grabbed an unsuspecting Cambodian girl from a locker nearby and had me look closely at eye and face shape as well as nose and lip structures, comparing the two girls. This was the first time I had put much thought into the differences between the two cultures and acknowledged that there were clear differences between her and the other girl. She appeared satisfied, but our friendship did not last much past this hallway event, as she went back to her Vietnamese speaking friends and I went back to my mine. As race tension escalated in the high school, a local Cambodian gang set fire to one of the football player's cars in front of his house; allegedly for stepping on the foot of a gang member in the hallway and not apologizing. The race tensions escalated throughout my high school career as every fight or social dilemma was always prefaced with the students' race first. I had inaccurately classified this as just a high school drama dilemma.

My own culture and understanding of white privilege was revealed through a timeline of selected cultural leadership experiences in my life, as each shaped me into the equity leader I am today. In the summer of 2002, I got my first assistant principal job at the largest middle school in a south king county school district. I was relieved when the white veteran principal, provided me with a six page single spaced outline of his expectations for me in the position. He methodically went through every line, ensuring I had a good understanding of what would be expected, "We don't disagree in public, we are a united front" he said repeatedly during our first introduction. Four hours later I considered our introduction complete, I happily went across the hall to my new office, with my packet in hand, and tacked it on my bulletin board. I didn't realize until much later, that this was a white cultural norm, formulated agenda, absent of relationship building and connection to history. He and I had a common understanding of one another, a common race, we didn't discuss our personal beliefs, cultural perspective, or examine our own family values; a first step in understanding that everyone sees the world through a different cultural lens (Larson & Barton, 2013).

Three years later, I was sitting in his chair as the building principal. I was in the process of sharing my systemic process for on-boarding new assistant principals with a new administrative intern. A veteran teacher in the school district who had worked his way up from teacher, to department head, to administrative intern, I was thrilled that I had the opportunity to have Black/African American male intern. Three hours later, he pushed himself back from the table. I just need to know, he asked me, "How do you treat kids here? I look back on my comments in our early meetings and cringe. As a beginning principal, I responded from my heart. "I treat all kids the same, it doesn't matter what color the kid is, black, white or purple." I can only reflect that I still hear white teachers and principal's use these same phrases today, nearly fourteen years

later, when they are challenged about their belief system. Years later, when the intern took a job in a neighboring school district, he told me he almost quit after his first day with me due my culturally irrelevant and offensive administrative on-boarding technique.

I was thankful that our principal/administrative internship partnership was characterized by a year of cautious conversations about race, opportunity and access; prompting discussions about my own role as a white leader and exploring my cultural understandings. With children of nearly the same age, my intern and I frequently pondered our role in loco parentis," Latin for *in place of the parent*. What would we want for our own children when we placed students in teacher's classrooms, made discipline decisions and phone calls to families? I was able to review my own white privilege through the lens of learning how important it was to acknowledge a person of color when they walk into the office, we explored why the Black/African American parents were the only ones who yelled in our offices, why he was always the one asked to serve on the district diversity committee.

He eventually told me how it made him feel when I said I treat everyone the same, challenging me that it was like saying that I did not recognize him as Black. He and I reflected on the race opportunities that existed each day in our schoolhouse, such as when a parent of color started throwing things at him in his small office, and when I walked in to intervene, the parent looked at him an called him an "Uncle Tom". He and I later reflected on how powerful it was to have an African American call another African American such a derogatory name; recognizing that me needing to come in and "break it up" added insult to the injury of the situation. The insight into the Black/African American culture, working in a trusting relationship where the race conversations could occur, were critical in my role and understanding the need for equity.

A few years into my central office career, I observed schools starting to work on more meaningful parent engagement strategies, especially for our Hispanic/Latino(a) parents. Unfortunately for us at the time, we were missing our engagement strategies at every turn by not involving the parents of the students in the planning for the activities. It took years before a Hispanic/Latino parent finally told me that the Cinco de Mayo celebration was not a culturally responsive parent engagement activity.

Other schools attempted and successfully engaged their families. I recall a family night for the Hispanic Clubs meeting at one of our high schools. A Spanish speaking, although white, assistant principal at the school, insisted I try to make time for this evening event. As I walked up to the building, the assistant principal walked out to meet me and gave me the rules of the evening. Apologize for being late, but walk in, and don't put your stuff down and don't go to the food table yet. Make eye contact, smile and nod at everyone, go to every table and greet the parents. I reminded her that I didn't know any Spanish, but she reminded me that it did not matter. Remember Louanne, "They want to know you care about their kids." She then gave me the appropriate next steps: acknowledge everyone in the room, never walked by a baby without making a comment and preferably a light touch of the blanket with parent permission. I could then ask one of the parent's permission to sit at their table and then I could go to the food table to get my plate. Her cultural introduction, although not transferrable to all Hispanic/Latino(a) people, likely saved me from a blundering entrance.

That evening parents and students shared stories of celebrations and challenges, expressing how some in the neighborhood would likely never come in to the school because of the language barrier and fear of being an advocate for their children. The parents had heard that a member of the school staff had called ICE (U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement) after a parent

complained about a suspension. It was clear that trust was an issue for the families. A few

parents expressed how confused they were about my role in the school district. I had recently

driven a car full of their high school aged children to a legislative session on the importance of

college access for Latino(a)s. One parent, using an interpreter, asked why I was driving cars full

of their children to an event, and she wanted to know why the kids were begging to be the ones

to ride back with me to the school after the event. The parent went on to tell the group of families

how confusing it was to her that although it was clear that I cared for their children, and I was the

assistant superintendent, why wasn't I helping them get through all the barriers at this school:

the gang violence was a constant distraction for the kids, their kids had to choose between being

with their Latino (a) friends or being in the smart classes with the white kids, some of the

teachers were making comments the parents and their children found offensive. As a new

assistant superintendent, I didn't share that the reason I drove was because neither the school nor

I had any budget at the time to take the kids to the legislative session.

This Hispanic Club meeting would later serve alongside me as we created the first Latino

Advisory in the school district. Taking twice as long for each meeting, due to the need for

translations, ultimately this group would identify a need to have a Coordinator for Parent

Engagement to ensure the needs of the families would always have a place and a contact at the

district office. No policy regarding racial equity or parent engagement was ever written in the

school district before I left the summer of 2014. I'm convinced the lack of policy allows these

positions to be at the whim of administration and budgeting, instead of prioritized.

Step 3: Form a Strategic Vision & Initiatives

In the context of K-12 public education, Ladson-Billings (1995) dared to unveil what it

would take to ensure every child receives a quality education by ensuring educators had the skills

to, "critique the very basis of their privilege and advantage." From her learner stance, Ladson-Billings (2014) challenges educators to keep growing their cultural pedagogy, proposing that if we ever get to a place of complete certainty about our instructional practice, we, along with our students, "will wither and die in our presence." Freire (2000) agreed, "those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly." Freire defines cultural synthesis as a, "mode of action for confronting culture itself, as the preserver of the very structures by which it was formed." He then calls for those who have been oppressed and the oppressors to work together in a cultural synthesis where leaders are mutually identified to co-create guidelines for new actions; not denying the differences between the two views, but basing the new work on these differences. As Ladson-Billings (2014) suggests, the conversations about educator cultural pedagogy is not easy. Using this new way of thinking about growing cultural pedagogy and examining the structures of our current system for inequities, my co-facilitator and I attempted to use Ladson-Billings and Freire's ideas into our next District Equity Committee meeting.

Acknowledging the need to have the District Equity Committee begin learning about and examining the systemic inequities of our current system, my co-facilitator and I determined that he would lead the committee's next learning activity. In an effort to develop the vision and aspirations for the policy, and building on the committee's previous meeting when they reviewed data, the committee would categorize racial inequities in terms of structural, institutional and individual. Although a later time start was chosen to encourage more community member's attendance, only two of the 18 were not employees of the school district. The absence of community or parent representation led to very open dialogue among the employees. However,

the lack of community and parent participation in the unveiling of the district's systemic

inequities, meant they would have very little ownership of the vision that was being set.

During the Equity Committee meeting, my co-facilitator provided examples of how each

of the inequities were existent in a public school context. Structural inequities were the unjust

and inequitable patterns and practices in the system, institutional inequities were the policies and

discriminatory practice that produced unjust outcomes for our children of color (Lawrence &

Keleher, 2004). Committee members began actively sharing examples of each inequity while

categorizing indicators of the district's current reality. The disproportionate absence of student of

color in our elementary highly capable program was categorized as both a structural inequity and

dialogue ensued about whether it was also an institutional inequity. Twenty minutes of

categorizing all of the system's inequities appeared to have deflated some of the energy of the

committee, although each member knew that the flip side of this exercise was that we were going

to be able to more clearly articulate what the committee wanted for a vision statement; since we

would now know what we did not want. Nearly each racial subgroup, except White or Asian,

was disproportionate in either achievement, discipline, access to accelerated coursework or

graduation rates.

"All of this racism that has occurred within the communities of color is really nothing

comparted to how the Jews were persecuted in Nazi-led Germany," a White female committee

member shared. Another white committee member went on to share examples of the oppression

that his own relatives had faced during that time. This declaration sparked comments from both

the women and men of color in the room. They offered a context for the micro-aggressions that

they endured each day; "I get up every day and look in the mirror and realize that most white

people, especially females, are going to be afraid of me." "They are going to be afraid of my

children, especially my son because he is an African American male." Another committee

member was unconvinced that the inequities were always based on race, as his sons were bi-

racial, black and Latino, and he was certain that they were doing fine. "I'm convinced the

persecution of Jews was the worst catastrophe that had ever occurred to an individual group of

people." The tone of het comment signaled that she was not going to let go of this point. Unsure

how to bring closure to the disruption of the commentary, my co-facilitator signaled we would

move on to start coding the inequities that each of the sample equity policies addressed. Our

white committee member appeared satisfied she had won the argument, the body language of our

non-white district employees who had spoken out regarding their own experiences of micro-

aggressions communicated frustration.

"What are you going to do with your aunt?" my co-facilitator greeted me the next

morning after the committee meeting. This was his inside-joke of a code to me. Anytime a white

committee member did something he perceived as racially incompetent or inappropriate, that

person suddenly became a relation of mine. The conversation with Whites, about racial

inequities, has been thoroughly explored. Tatum and Perry (1997) asserts that talking to whites

about racial inequities for people of color, "can generate powerful emotional responses in

students that range from guilt and shame to anger and despair" (pp.1, 2). The same was clear in

the committee.

Analyzing the conversation from the evening before, the meritocracy myth had appeared

to be an underlying message of the comments about the atrocities related to the treatment of

Jews. Conversations on race can solicit a number of defensive responses from whites. D'Andrea

and Daniels' (2001) research uncovered the disturbing frequency by which mental health

professionals, educators, administrators, respond to the topic of racial inequities and white

privilege; categorizing the defensive behaviors as, "angry, hostile, apathetic and detached ways." (p.290). DiAngelo and Sensoy (2014) reinforce the importance of establishing group norms to ensure that both Whites and people of color feel safe in cross-racial discussions (p. 104). It is important to understand that this need for safety is, "driven in anticipation of White responses" to cross-racial discussions, "a common complaint is that they (Whites) were 'beaten up' or 'attacked,' and therefore 'didn't feel safe.'"(DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014). Adams, Bell, and Griffin's (1997) well-known source-book for teaching social justice education, "Establishing a safe environment in which students can discuss ideas, share feelings and experiences, and challenge themselves and each other to reevaluate opinions and beliefs is one of the primary facilitation responsibilities" (p. 283). Although the committee were not students, the committee was engaged in learning with each other on this sensitive topic. Initially my co-facilitator and I believed that the most challenging work would be getting the equity policy written, ultimately, the most challenging work was the support and management of facilitating cross-racial conversations.

Inexperienced with the research and protocols for creating a safe place for conversations on race, in cross-racial discussions, I reflect on the silence that followed the committee member's shut down on the conversation; both for those committee members of color and the White committee members. Reflection of the committee member's comment could have been her effort to bring up anti-Semitism or it could also be an unconscious effort to divert the question away from race (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2001). Either way, it demonstrated that the analogy of the American Dream where everyone can just pick themselves up by their bootstraps is embedded with the converse reality, which implies that the lack of progress for our students and families of color must be because they do not have that same determination (Picower, 2015). DiAngelo and

Sensoy (2014) warn that if whites are silent after another White person speaks, regardless of whether they agree or not, this silence communicates agreement, and leads to Whites dictating cross-racial conversations, maintaining what they refer to as, "White solidarity." (p.15). Leaders facilitating these cross-racial conversations about inequities need to be aware that this silence by other Whites, marginalizes the experiences of people of color, effectively validating the "dominant perspectives" (p.5). An expert in adult learning theory and cross-racial conversations may have asked critical questions such as: "(a) How have we learned racism from this dominant ideology? (b) How do our racist impulses continue to manifest in our actions?" (Brookfield, 2014, p.90). As Collins (2001) suggests, when trying to shape a new vision, it is best to, "lead with questions, not answers" (p.74). My own lack of training and experience in this area left me quiet and paralyzed without a response, and unfortunately, the rest of the committee took my lead.

Harvey et al. (2013) describes that creating a strategic vision is about engaging in a continued conversation, getting common agreement on the values, while establishing a sense of identity and purpose (p.44). Jim Collins (2001) asserts that although leadership is about vision, "leadership is equally about creating a climate where the truth is heard and brutal facts are confronted" (p.74). It was this very energy to confront a brutal fact that led to the following conversation with one of our staff members of color who served on the equity committee.

It had been seven months since the equity committee had completed their first draft of an equity policy, and the committee had discontinued, since they had completed their charge. "When is your equity committee going to start up again?" an administrator of color who was not on the committee asked as I was rushing through a busy district hallway. I averted answering the question, ashamed that I could not, even as an assistant superintendent, navigate the policy

process in a more timely way. I asked him what he thought about a quote from one of the other regional equity leaders, "All we have to do to close the opportunity gap is to make all these white people care about kids of color." I also shared with him that up until this point, I had been approaching the solution to the closing of the achievement gaps for students through this idea that our teachers and administrators had a "skill" gap. We just didn't know how to close to the gap. It had never occurred to me that there might be a "will" or a belief gap.

I then asked him if he thought it was more of a skill or a will gap with our staff and administrators. The administrator shared how important he felt that it was for staff and educators of color to remember where they came from. He said he frequently has to remind himself and other staff of color to remember this, assumedly so these staff don't just assimilate to the white predominate culture of our schools. He then asserted that it was his belief that it was truly a *will* gap. "If you don't care for me, really care, I'm not going to connect with you. But if you really care, I'll do anything for you. This is the same for our kids."

DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010) contend that some leaders of equity, who want to use equitable practices in their classrooms, just want to know how to address the specific methods for, "dealing with the difference and inequities that exist in North America's public schools" (p.1). The drive to have concrete answers to "fix" the problems that exist is widespread, while DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010) contend that the answers are complex. "A critical multicultural pedagogy requires a deep and sophisticated analysis, self-awareness, intergroup experience and on-going education," and the ultimate acknowledgement that some of our own success has been based on the disadvantages of others (p.6).

Step 4 Enlist a Volunteer Army

Kotter suggests the volunteer army should be, "a large force of people who are ready, willing and urgent to drive the change" (1996). Building the volunteer army requires deeper conversations, interacting with others, and moving from the expectation that the leader is the expert, with all the answers, to "convener of dialogue" (Harvey, et. al, 2013). D'Andrea and Daniels (2001) contend that the educational inequities that perpetuate the K-12 public school system can only be addressed when white persons transition from just "talking the talk" about the achievement gap as a societal problem to actually making moves and "walking the walk" to addressing the need for both resources and instruction to be allocated where it is needed for students of color (p.299).

In May 2014, an equity committee meeting took place with eighteen of the original fifty invitees in attendance. The interim superintendent had provided guidance that the racial equity policy work should be more inclusive of all underserved populations in the school district. The new charge was to have the policy include equity for all, including transgender, military, and student pregnancy, to name a few. Sharing this new direction with the committee resulted in little resistance, since three of the four national equity policy samples the committee had reviewed included all other subgroups (www.kent.k12.wa.us/page/5406). This was a relevant and subsequently impactful pivot in the committee's work as some committee members' feedback forms included that they found the inclusion of all subgroups validating, since other school districts had included them as well. However, other committee members brought up the challenge that the school district did not currently monitor student success for any of the other protected subgroups of student pregnancy, military, or based on gender identification. The draft board policy would was now being developed to include all subgroups, yet the committee was continuing to struggle with cross racial dialogue.

My co-facilitator and I looked to our regional equity colleagues to assist and guide us through the transition of helping develop an appropriate response when committee member's shared narrow scopes of racism, like the anti-Semitism example or when committee members pivot to talk about low income instead of race. One consortium member reminded me, that I didn't have to always have all the answers. A reoccurring theme in my equity leadership mindfulness development was my effort to stay engaged in cross-racial conversations, without shutting the conversation down with an anti-racist response, causing the listener to get defense (Brookfield, 2014). The consortium team member suggested that if, and when it happens again, that I pose a question that challenges the person to think, such as asking them to compare their experience with the experience that people of color experience each and every day. The committee also suggested that I give the committee membership a copy of, "Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person" (http://thefeministbreeder.com/explaining-white-privilege-broke-white-person/).

The Regional Equity Committee used the next hour to frame other potential responses and redirections to frame cross-racial conversations. Not surprisingly, every equity leader in the consortium had experienced a similar response and defensiveness from white educators when they had topics of structural racism and inequities. D'Andrea and Daniels (2001) classifies white educators' responses to the racial inequities of our public school system into three categorical areas: anger, apathy or intellectual detachment. Their research suggests that if K-12 public education does not make the commitment to confront the inequities in our system, and challenge these inequities in a meaningful change-producing way, our own educational system will be, "increasingly perceived as irrelevant institutions by culturally and racially different persons in our nation." (p.308). I also realized through this experience that my Equity Committee did not

have a method for debriefing when conversations got challenging. What I now had were multiple

committee members, both employees and community, who left the meetings wondering if they

were going to be able to recover their relationships and work together, after talking about race.

This experience helped my co-facilitator and I realize the importance of accessing out of district

or contract agency staff to assist with conversations about race. Since we were asking this group

to both learn about and lead equity policy, there was a critical need to help the committee get

better about having conversations about race.

Harvey et al. (2001) denote that from the leadership perspective, our educational

workforce has seen "three decades of rhetoric from the national and state levels (that) does not

encourage mutual respect, team building, or even capacity building through professional

development" (p.29). Kotter's suggestion about building a volunteer army led me to a regional

leadership opportunity where I would speak at an "Excellence through Equity with Dr. Pedro

Noguera" (November 6, 2015) event hosted in the Kent School District, in Kent, Washington. I

was on the agenda mid-way through the day, between Dr. Noguera and lunch, with a room full of

educators from throughout the region. In five seemingly long minutes, I told the story of when

my superintendent, in the fall of 2014, charged me to lead and write a racial equity policy for our

school board, using our own equity committee. I recalled sitting in his office and looking at my

reflection in a mirror that sat on a nearby table, and thinking, "does he know I'm white?" I

shared with the group that I was a "smart white girl" so therefore I chose an excellent co-

facilitator to help me in leading this work and called out my Latino co-facilitator from the

committee who was in the audience. I tried to connect with the audience, "just like you, we have

gaps in our achievement data based on race and disproportionality in our discipline and we know

we can do better." I shared details of how our equity committee had looked at the achievement

data, all kinds of ways, and it always said the same thing. I welcomed each of them to join us in this learning to, "improve our system, and improve the conditions for our kids." I left them with this message, "If your answer to equity is that you are going to focus on *all kids*. I have to ask you, is it working?"

I noticed, even during my short five minutes at the microphone, that some of my assistant superintendent partners from around the region looked at the floor when I called myself white, and didn't look up when I shared the importance of partnering with a staff member of color to do this equity work. My co-facilitator and some other staff of color from the school district, and those I knew in the room, thanked me for speaking on the importance of the work. Many did not say anything to me afterwards. I reflected on the event with a colleague of mine a few days later, sharing that I didn't think my comments made everyone in the room happy or thoughtful about their role as, majority whites, in this work. He reminded me that, I'm not in the happiness business.

Implications

This study set out to provide insights into two questions: What factors influence the development of a white equity leader in a K-12 public school central office? How can a K-12 public school system use local stakeholders to develop equity policy? The literature review suggests that policy development and policy implementation, when the stakes are low, is problematic and fraught with issues that challenge belief systems, ownership and interpretation. White equity leaders in central office, and in school buildings, need to face the realization that there are no easy answers or "quick-fix classroom strategies" to assist other teachers and administrators in learning about the inequities in our K-12 public school system (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2010). Carr (2008) goes further to outline the journey to equitable practices in schools:

> The notion that a quick eight-step approach could be used to have people become engaged in culture, learning, institutional change, diversity, racism, and many other highly complex areas of inquiry conflicts with the notion that critical learning and engagement involves an on-going process, not just a lesson plan. (p.82)

Looking back on the development of writing an equity policy with a group of both internal and external stakeholders, I would have done three things differently. First of all, I likely would have hired an outside consultant to do the identity development, history of marginalization of our student populations and cultural competency training with the equity committee prior to starting the policy work. The norm development needed to ensure safe cross-racial conversations for both staff of color as well as Whites, was not something I nor my co-facilitator was prepared to do. In some cases, I believe staff and maybe some community members actually withheld back their beliefs and values, due to my supervisory role in the school district as an assistant superintendent. Secondly, I would have been much more strategic and responsive to the needs of the community and parents to reschedule the equity committee meetings for a later time or potentially even a weekend date. Committee participation only represented 13% of the attendees at the very best equity committee meeting, and 3%, or 1 committee member, near the end of the year. I also identified that I completely missed having one group of stakeholders who had the most to win or lose from the conversation; the students. A chance to do it again, and I would have strived to have at least 10% of the committee be student representatives from our schools. Harvey et al (2013) asserts, "If you can find the courage to listen to your community, you have everything to gain and nothing to lose" (p.277). Attention to this previous area, would have likely assisted in the development of the third area and Kotter's second step of strategic change development. I fundamentally believe that the internal organization of the school district, potentially the cabinet level leaders, some school administrators and our teacher's union partners needed to work on our own cultural competency, either before going out to listen to the community or while on a parallel

track as the committee was developing. I found our internal stakeholders of teacher leaders and central office administrators, had not recently received any comprehensive cultural competency professional development, and we lacked a common language to communicate our values and beliefs.

As a white equity leader in the role of an assistant superintendent, the most critical step in my own development was identifying that I didn't know the answer to how to address the belief systems of the committee nor did I have the answers on how to close the achievement gap. I repeatedly heard from my co-facilitator and other equity leaders during my own development how important it was to acknowledge that I didn't have all the answers. It also became clear that Kotter's theoretical framework of change did not address the courageous leadership needed to build the capacity of the equity committee. Noguera and Blankstein (2015) refer to the need for leaders in equity to not look to change the minds of those in education, but the need for leaders of equity to face their own fears and "drive high leverage goals and action" through their own core values (p.24). As they suggest, this relentless pursuit of change can only occur through "developing organizational cohesion through supportive relationships" (p.27). Michael Fullan sums up this framework of change by identifying the most critical element of whole system change occurs when, "the moral imperative of all students learning is the core goal of the system" (Noguera & Blankstein, 2015, p.47). It also became clear that I needed to get clear about why I was doing this work.

Fundamentally, Noguera and Blankstein (2015) offered an additional framework consideration that should necessitate all equity leaders to look beyond a change management framework to one specific to leadership moves of equity leaders. Admittedly, their equity framework considerations most closely reassembled my internal struggle with leading equity

work, they call this "getting to your core" (p.27). Faced with this challenge, I chose to lean in and put myself in spaces where I could learn; such as attending the Race and Pedagogy Conference at the University of Puget Sound, Black Education Strategy Roundtable (BESR), visiting the African American Male Achievement (AAMA) Project in Oakland, California and hearing the journey of Mr. Chris Chatmon, executive director of AAMA. I took risks with facilitating table conversations at the Puget Sound Educational Service District (PSESD) Achieving Educational Racial Equity through Policy and Beyond regional equity convenings, and telling my story at a Dr. Pedro Noguera "Excellence through Equity" conference in November 2015.

Furthermore, this study suggests that engaging in equity policy work is complex and the context may be even more critical than the content (Carr, 2008). From the fall of 2014 to the fall of 2015, our school district had three superintendents. After eight months of equity committee work, a draft equity policy, which the new superintendent is considering changing to a racial equity policy, sits in my electronic bookshelf collecting dust. I am the only assistant superintendent in the school district, who is not an interim. The four other assistant superintendents who were in place when I started the job in July 2014, less than twenty months ago, have all left for other positions or have retired. The implications for this work fundamentally involve change, and Kotter's framework for change warns that 70% of all major transformations fail because organizations do not take a, "holistic approach to changing themselves, nor do they engage their workforces effectively (http://www.kotterinternational.com). I agree with Kotter, if you are going to start this type of critical equity policy work and engage in cross-racial conversations, the team and the leader needs to start with themselves and then build an effective model to engage others in critical and timely dialogue.

Conclusion

I spend quite a bit of time in conferences, in committees and conversations and I am reminded why this equity work is so important. Every time I walk into spaces that discuss racial inequity I hear the personal stories of parents, students and staff members who have experienced racism and bias. Cain (2012) offers that whites can only begin to understand structural racism when they understand the historical perspective that is still absent from our K-12 curriculum, including the displacement of Native Americans, immigration policies and involuntary enslavement and brutality towards Africans. Others content that a substantial number of whites are still apathetic and disinterested in negative impacts that our educational system impacts millions of adults and children throughout the United States (Ponterreto et. al, 2001).

Nearly twenty months after starting the equity policy work, I sit in a room of equity leaders from around the region and I hear stories from these leaders, mostly those of color, who are still being asked to prove that their mere $35,000 budget will reduce the discipline disproportionality in their entire school district. I hear from them, that they can't get their superintendent to listen, and their efforts in pointing out inequities in their system put them at professional risk of being branded as of "one of them". Sometimes one of the regional equity leaders will tell me how important it is for me to be leading this group, because I am white.

Equity minded central office leaders need to model, lead and nurture equity minded leadership (Trujillo, 2012). State wide and in my district, there is still a 20-40 percent gap in student achievement between students of color and White and Asian students (www.k12.us/WorkGroups/EOGOAC.aspx). Washington State School Directors Association (WSSDA), the one group that provides policy guidance to our school boards across the state of Washington, does not have a racial equity policy. Nor do they have an equity policy

recommendation. Neither an equity policy nor racial equity has made it to my school board for a review.

I wonder what would happen if, like Burch and Spillane (2005) suggest, all administrators and teachers were subject matter experts on the subject of racial equity. If all their decisions were made through the filter of racial equity, just like when they are planning their subject matter content. My co-facilitator says my role needs to have the "Oprah Effect". The Oprah Effect, defined by urbandictionary.com, as the phenomenon that occurs when Oprah endorses something, its popularity will almost surely escalate to a point of frenzy. He reminds me that Oprah got 42% of white women to vote for a black president (CAWP, 2012).

I have come to the understanding that my role as a white leader in this work is unlikely to have an Oprah Effect. Nearly two years of sustained efforts of regional equity committee meetings and with equity policy planning has not resulted in any of the seven school districts in my region being able to develop and adopt a racial equity policy with their school board. New superintendents, the need for strategic planning, changes in central office leadership and resource allocation have impacted all. Fowler (2013) recognizes that some people and groups have more power in policy agenda making than others, resulting in powerless groups having little impact on the policy agenda front (p.166). Milner (2013) suggests that to make real gains in the closing the opportunity gap for students, there needs to be a move away from focusing on the achievement data and more effort on the processes to close the gaps in achievement.

The equity minded central office leader needs to keep in mind whether policy efforts can make a difference. I am reminded to not mistake, "hard work, good intentions and tenacity for accomplishment" (Harvey et.al, 2013, p.27). I leaned in close when one of the regional equity leaders whispered to me that she had the solution to the opportunity gap, "all you have to do is

make all these white people care about kids of color." There is a need for the white equity-

minded central office leaders, who have the power and influence in the system to be allies and

advocates for our underserved children and their families, considering the alternative (Harvey, et.

al., 2013; Ponterroto, 2001).

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