TALKING IN WHISPERS:

How School Leaders Approach and Discuss Race

Student Author

Caleb Hettinger is a fifth-year senior at Purdue University majoring in biology education and educational studies. He began this research through the Undergraduate Research Training Program and was paired with Professor Roegman in August 2016. In summer

of 2017, he interned with the National Association of State Boards of Education, focusing on publications and principal licensure. Hettinger intends to graduate in May 2019 and go on to teach high school biology before eventually getting his master's degree in educational policy.

Mentor

Rachel Roegman is an assistant professor of educational leadership in the Department of Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her research and teaching focus on the support and development of equity-focused

school and district leaders through an understanding of the ways that contexts and systems interact.

Abstract

This study seeks to better understand how school administrators approach and discuss issues of race and racism in K–12 schools. Police shootings, the 2016 election, and riots across America have put race at the center of conversations, but many school administrators avoid discussing these issues in professional settings to avoid tension. Existing school leaders were surveyed to determine their attitudes and perceptions of racial dialogue. Findings indicate that school leaders report being willing and comfortable in discussing race. However, administrators also reported that they avoid these discussions unless prompted. Implications from this work suggest a need to better prepare school leaders to engage in dialogue centered on race.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of the normative literature on social justice leadership highlights the importance of dialogue, conversations, advocacy, and communication (e.g., Brown, 2004; Capper, Theocharis, & Sebastian, 2006; McKenzie, et al., 2008; Shields, 2010). Shields, for example, suggests that dialogue is “central to today’s notion of transformative leadership” (2010, p. 567) for conversations that support students’ sensemaking around social justice and democracy. Similarly, Brown (2004) suggests that school leaders need to be prepared to engage in potentially difficult and uncomfortable conversations, as part of her discussion of leadership for social justice and equity. McKenzie and colleagues’ (2008) proposal for educating leaders for social justice includes as one of its main components “to raise the critical consciousness among their students and staff” (p. 117), which necessitates conversations about often challenging topics in U.S. schools. In

Capper, Theocharis, and Sebastian’s (2006) proposal for educational leadership for social justice, they also suggest that aspiring leaders “actually learn how to engage their school staff in a process to dismantle” inequitable school programs and structures (p. 215). Furman’s (2012) framework for social justice leadership includes interpersonal as one of its five dimensions, highlighting how school leaders rely on relationships and interactions with others to forward their work. Though educational researchers and practitioners have varied definitions of social justice, across these differences, the need for effective communication with students, communities, and faculties is central.

To support this need, there has been a long history of attention to race in leadership preparation in the United States (e.g., Blackmore, 2009; Jean-Marie, Normore, & Brooks, 2009; McKenzie, et al., 2008), though some research has found that issues of race and diversity are intended to be covered more generally in one course offering (Hawley & James, 2010). Research has looked at ways that preparation programs have supported leader candidates in developing racial awareness, self-awareness, and awareness of systemic societal inequities and how they impact students’ educational experiences (e.g., Gooden & O’Doherty, 2015; Hernandez & Marshall, 2016; Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016; Miller & Martin, 2014). However, even within leadership preparation, professors themselves face many obstacles when engaging students in conversations around race, including having to work in silos since their colleagues are not similarly interested; a lack of training and skills for facilitating effective conversations; and a lack of formal university structures to support these types of conversations (Carpenter & Diem, 2013). Furthermore, little attention has been focused on how school leaders develop the skills, knowledge, and dispositions that are needed to engage various stakeholders in conversations around race.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are to better understand administrators’ preparation and comfort in discussing race with the potential for future knowledge to focus on where and how these skills are acquired. The research questions asked are:

- How comfortable do administrators feel when discussing race? How does this comfort affect the degree to which administrators actually engage in conversations?
- Where do administrators feel that they gained the most preparation and experience to discuss race?

These research questions will further understanding of school and district leaders' abilities in these difficult conversations. Answering these questions will lead to knowledge of how to better prepare future leaders to engage in conversations centering on racial issues.

METHODOLOGY

Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment involved a “snowball” sampling method. The researcher and faculty mentor of this study emailed school leaders within their network in states including California, Oregon, Illinois, Indiana, New York, and New Jersey. Included in this email was the encouragement to send the survey on to other school leaders within their own networks. Participants were offered no incentives for completing the survey other than the knowledge gained from the study itself. Participants were told that the survey would take approximately 20–30 minutes to complete and that all responses would be completely anonymous; at the end of the survey, participants were given the option to go to another page where they could enter their contact information in an area separate from their responses if they desired to be contacted for future in-person interviews.

Instrument

The survey for this study was created using the online software Qualtrics. This survey primarily consisted of Likert scales and descriptive responses. It was split into five main sections, each covering a specific topic: “Conversations About Race,” “Beliefs About Teaching and Learning,” “Professional Leadership,” “School and District Information,” and “Demographic Questions.” The “Conversations About Race” section additionally asked questions about the frequency with which school administrators discuss race in different contexts. Below are two questions from the sections “Conversations About Race,” “Beliefs About Teaching and Learning,” and “Professional Leadership,” respectively:

In general, how comfortable do you feel talking about race?

Please indicate how often YOU initiate conversations centered on race.

Whether students succeed in school depends primarily on how hard they work.

Issues related to racism and inequity should be openly discussed in the classroom.

Based on your leadership preparation program ONLY, how prepared were you to talk about race as a school or district leader?

Because of my race, people expect me to discuss race.

Two existing surveys were used as a basis for the creation of this instrument: Ludlow, Enterline, and Cochran-Smith’s social justice scale for teacher education (2008) and Liou, Moolenaar, and Daly’s scale to assess individuals’ beliefs about implementation of the Common Core State Standards (2016).

RESULTS

Upon completion of this study, 57 responses were submitted by school leaders to the survey instrument. However, 35 of these responses were incomplete, yielding a total of 22 responses capable of being analyzed. Respondents represent school administrators from California, Indiana, New Jersey, and Wisconsin. Specific information on participant demographics may be seen in Figure 1. Findings, outlined in specificity below, include race as a topic in leadership preparation programs, initiating interactions around race, and comfort in discussing race.

Figure 1. Demographic information of all 22 respondents.

Comfort in Discussing Race

The majority of participants report comfort in addressing race: 45.5% (10/22) reported feeling extremely comfortable talking about race, 50% (11/22) as somewhat comfortable, and 4.5% (1/22) as somewhat uncomfortable. Similar questions posed specifically on dialogue with individuals of the same racial background (22/22 were extremely or somewhat comfortable) and of different racial background (18/22 extremely or somewhat comfortable and 4/22 somewhat uncomfortable) yielded similar results.

School administrators also shared recent conversations centered on race, focusing on political conversations outside school, responses to specific incidents at school, and conversations with coworkers, to name a few. (Some responses could not be analyzed due to brevity, e.g., “achievement gap.”) One respondent specifically said:

In preparing statistics to provide the board of education on overcrowding, had a conversation with my Business Administrator about how to portray the slide that showed a massive jump in Hispanic students over the last 10 years and slow decline of White and Black students over the same period. I initiated the conversation. The slide stayed as is.

Only 9% (2/22) of respondents reported avoiding talking about race with faculty on a weekly or greater basis, and none reported doing so with students or community members on weekly or daily basis. When prompted with an open-ended question about avoiding engaging with someone around race, 45.5% (10/22) directly stated that they do not avoid talking about race. One said, “I’ve never avoided a conversation about race that I can recall.”

The majority also felt their stakeholders valued talking about race, yet only 23% (5/22) of participants

thought the school or district community as a whole was well prepared to talk about race. Though they reported being comfortable and not avoiding race, participants also reported risk in discussing race as shown by Figure 2.

Participants of color also reported that people had different expectations of them than did the White participants. For example, all five Black participants strongly agreed that people expected them to discuss race because of their race, while no White respondents agreed. Additionally, all Black participants felt criticized for bringing up issues of race because of their race, while only 18% (3/17) of White participants felt this way. The set of questions around expectations elicited the greatest difference in responses by White and Black participants.

Initiating Conversations About Race

Despite reporting a high degree of comfort, participants reported a small number of interactions around race. In considering who initiates interactions, a small number of administrators reported that they most frequently initiated interactions with students or faculty, while they all rarely did so with community members (see Figure 3). In their open-ended responses describing their most recent conversation centered on race and who initiated the conversation, there was great variation. Two administrators shared recent conversations that were part of their larger district strategy to address race. One wrote:

We are currently engaged in a book study in my department (a department of district-level administrators) that directly deals with racism. Each week we discuss a chapter and talk openly about the study questions. Our answers are a direct connection to our personal and professional lives. I am the only person of color on my team and I have to

Degree of Risk in Discussing Race

Figure 2. Reported degrees of risk in discussing race with different constituents.

Who initiates interactions, at what frequency?

Figure 3. Initiating conversations about race with different stakeholders.

be careful not to speak for ALL people of color; however, I do feel like our talks are giving my colleagues a different perspective, as well as they are being asked to look deeply at their own culture and why many of them view race/racism differently.

In contrast, others initiated conversations around race in response to specific incidents; as one participant wrote, “We have kids of all colors saying inappropriate things to each other . . . and we deal with it in advance and afterward.” One of the two Black participants wrote about a conversation with an African American colleague where they “were discussing the double standard for African American administrators compared to our White counterparts.”

Race as a Topic in Leadership Preparation

Participants reported comfort but infrequent interactions. We now consider their preparation to discuss race. Leadership preparation, including preparation programs and professional standards, offers an important way to support administrators in effectively discussing race. Sixty-eight percent (15/22) of participants identified as feeling “Extremely Unprepared” or “Slightly Unprepared” to talk about race based on their leadership preparation program only. When asked to provide an example of how their leadership preparation programs addressed race, only one participant had any positive examples to share: “My program espoused equity-centered language and goals—but lacked the modeling.” More common were responses such as this one: “The conversations didn’t really come up and when they did, people were very quiet and not willing to participate.” Seven of 22 participants, one-third of the sample, responded that race simply “didn’t come up.” One school leader remarked that his experience in another profession taught him how to discuss race, and not his leadership preparation program.

Participants did not find leadership preparation programs to be a source of preparation for talking about race. However, they did share various contexts in which they talked about race outside of their schools and districts. Overall, these conversations rarely occurred, either once a year or less, for most participants (see Figure 4). Participants were most likely to talk about race with a greater degree of frequency with family and friends and in their professional organizations.

In contrast to leadership preparation, participants report being supported by their current districts to talk about race: 68% (15/22) of participants have the

Figure 4. Reported frequency of conversations about race outside of the school context.

resources and materials they need to initiate and engage in conversations about race, and 59% (13/22) have access to staff or consultants within district for mentoring, advice, and ongoing support around talking about race. In contrast, 86% (19/22) reporting having access to external staff or consultants for mentoring, advice, and ongoing support around talking about race; however, participants were not asked whether these external supports were indirectly supplied by their schools or districts.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It is important to note that these findings are based on the responses of 22 administrators, less than 1% of the population of administrators in the United States. These findings are not meant to generalize about the field, but to raise questions and inform research into the preparation and practice of school and district leaders. Especially surprising to the researchers of this study was the contrast between comfort in discussing race and actual discussions of race, which is recommended as a critical area for future study.

Additionally, participants may have exhibited desirability bias in their responses, the implicit bias that results from desiring to conform to social norms. Further limitations of the study include but are not limited to the sample size of 22 individuals, the limited demographics represented by respondents (state, race, age, etc.), and the possibility of further elaboration on a response being prevented by the use of a Likert scale.

The first finding to note focuses on the frequency with which participants discuss race, as illustrated by Figure 4. Results of this study indicate that participants are more likely to talk about race with

family and friends than professional contexts. In the United States, where family and friendship circles are more likely to be racially homogenous (McPherson et al., 2001), this point is particularly important in light of the questions asked regarding comfort in discussing race with individuals of the same race versus a different race; overall, participants stated greater comfort holding these difficult conversations with individuals of their own race. If most conversations are in homogenous groups, it suggests that school leaders have limited opportunities to hear multiple and different perspectives that would provide them with the skills needed to engage in difficult conversations related to race in work settings.

It is also important to ask where participants' comfort is coming from, since this finding goes against much of the literature on leadership preparation and race (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015; Hernandez & Marshall, 2016; Khalifa et al., 2016; Miller & Martin, 2014). As evidenced by survey findings, some school leaders gained experience from other professions while others gained it from earlier years of school. Yet at some point, school leaders find themselves with enough comfort to engage in conversations centered on race. Without observing these conversations, it is impossible to know the depth of this comfort or the depth of these conversations; if discussing race in more surface-level terms, comfort may be easier to obtain. Again, without observing the conversations themselves, it is impossible to know the true depth behind these discussions.

Another important finding of this study describes participant preparation and resources for discussing race. Several participants mentioned gaining on-the-job experience in discussing race and many responded positively to questions regarding current resources at their disposal. Despite these resources, participants did not indicate they engage in conversations about race frequently. New opportunities provide the ability to change that. In 2015, the National Policy Board for Education Administration updated their standards for school and district administrators, creating the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). These newly updated standards reflect greater emphasis on equitable leadership, cultural competence, and social justice (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Even with how recent these new standards are, efforts are already being made to integrate them into professional practice. The Missouri Department of Education has created the Missouri Leadership Development System, a comprehensive professional

development program aligned with PSEL (Missouri Department of Education, 2016). These works do not specifically mention discussing race, but the increased emphasis on school leader support and cultural competence shows promise for future work in this area. Participants in this study showed great regard for social justice in school leadership, but these new standards and supports will provide actionable ways for school leaders to engage this regard in their work.

Participants also reported that their preparation programs were not a source of support to discuss race. Participants largely stated that their preparation programs either did not address race or offered a quick, surface-level discussion on the topic, often focusing on "general platitudes," as one participant stated. Preparation programs have the opportunity to improve with the introduction of the National Educational Leadership Preparation Standards (NELP Standards). These standards come after the creation of PSEL and are aligned to the core values therein. The NELP Standards are still in their infancy, final standards having just been released in 2018, but with these standards lie the opportunity for preparation programs to better prepare school leaders to discuss race (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2017).

Looking at the data above, we see a stark contrast. Participants reported high degrees of comfort in talking about race, but they do not report initiating conversations about race on a regular basis with all of their stakeholders—a finding worth noting within the current political climate when issues centered on race arise frequently. It leads us to wonder how, if at all, schools are addressing race and racism.

We are not arguing that there is an ideal frequency for discussing race. However, we do argue that it is a necessity for school leaders to lead difficult conversations and talk with their constituents about race and racism; as Copenhaver-Johnson (2006) noted, "the *absence* of doing or saying something inclusive had, in fact, demonstrated . . . that the teacher *could* be racist" (p. 12). School and district leaders need more support in making sure these discussions take place.

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