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Understanding and improving urban secondary schools: the role of individual and collective agency

*Introduction*

Urban education has deteriorated badly over the last twenty years. Facilities are decaying, dropout rates have increased, achievement is down, and student employment and further education are at a lower level. (Louis and Miles, 1990, p. 3)

If predictions about the deterioration of US urban schools were bleak in the 1990s, research was optimistic. Practitioners and scholars “discovered” that some urban schools could be very effective working with less advantaged children (Edmonds, 1979, Hallinger and Murphy, 1986), and developers were busy turning the research into programs to support improvement in underperforming schools. In the 1990s, philanthropic foundations and the federal government invested heavily in comprehensive school reform models to radically change high schools, particularly those served less advantaged youth (Tirozzi and Uro, 1997; Wang *et al.*, 1997) and there was accumulating evidence that these models worked (Borman *et al.*, 2003). Weak results in secondary schools were attributed to issues of school organization and curriculum (Lee and Smith, 1995, *Lee et al.*, 1991; Marzano and Arredondo, 1986), which resulted in programs to support college and career readiness through more rigorous curriculum and teaching in urban secondary schools (Roderick *et al.*, 2009). Advocates for smaller and more personalized high schools and schools-within-schools provided impetus and funding to develop individualized student support (Raywid, 1998; Vander Ark, 2002), and some states augmented basic graduation standards with more authentic project-based requirements (Avery *et al.*, 2003).

Effective leadership and modest resources were, it was assumed, essential – but the task seemed within reach (Corcoran and Goertz, 1995; Louis and Miles, 1990).

Researcher optimism was not well founded. Over the last decade, federal and state governments have provided pressure and resources to “close the gap” but by 2014, the disparity between the performance of African–American and white students increased (Heitin, 2014). Others pointed to increases in hyper-segregated schools, where students of color are increasingly concentrated in low-performing settings (Balfanz and Legters, 2004; Orfield and Frankenberg, 2014). The problems facing secondary schools seem intractable: academic performance of elementary students from less advantaged families has improved since the 1970s, but the US secondary school system has not made the same progress. As younger students’ performance on the National Assessment of Educational Progress increased in all tested subjects, the results for students who enrolled in Grade 12 stagnated or declined[1]. Of course, this bleak picture does not include the adolescents who left school before graduating, most of whom are likely to underperform the average[2].

International data confirm that US education continues to be weak in upper secondary schools. The Trends in International Math and Science Study 2007 and 2015 data show that fourth grade US students had above average scores in mathematics and science, but that scores dropped significantly for older students[3]. Recent OECD PISA results confirm that the secondary school performance is below the OECD average (OECD, 2014). Research also suggests that the achievement gap between more and less advantaged students in the USA becomes wider the longer they are in school, although explanations for this finding are unclear (Alexander *et al.*, 2007). The known weaknesses for all US secondary schools understates the issues in the urban core and high poverty inner ring suburbs, where students come to school faced more obstacles to success.
However, the problems are broader than tested achievement, whether on state or international measures: Virtually every US study suggests that high schools fare poorly on other variables, ranging from the quality of instruction and student engagement (Marks, 2000), to teachers' sense of professional community (Leithwood and Louis, 2011; Louis et al., 1996). Secondary schools, particularly those in urban areas, have less effective leadership, less teacher professional community and lower levels of organizational learning, all of which are associated with student learning (Leithwood and Louis, 2011; Louis and Lee, 2016).

Others would argue that the USA is not alone: secondary schools are often dull and uninspiring in other countries as well (Beach and Dovemark, 2011; Bryant and Carless, 2010; Sorgo et al., 2011). OECD results indicate, for example, that students in New Zealand, Spain, Ireland, Finland and Australia (among others) are as bored as US students, and that skipping school (an indicator of disengagement) is higher in other countries than in the USA (OECD, 2002, 2015). This may be particularly true in low-income schools which, in many countries, are staffed with teachers who are less well prepared (Eccles and Roeser, 2011; OECD, 2018). Educational reform initiatives have focused on in the lower grades rather than on the more contentious arena of secondary education (Cothran and Ennis, 2000; Donaldson, 2005; Firestone and Rosenblum, 1988), while recent policy initiatives in European countries reinforce more selective schools or tracked structures that can increase inequitable outcomes (Aasen, 2003; Lundahl et al., 2010; Morris and Perry, 2017).

Inattention to the culture of urban or minoritized secondary schools has been limited as other topical areas that have burgeoned in the last decade. For example, scholars increasingly investigated adult relationships in "typical" secondary schools and their impact on student experiences, including how distributed leadership or teacher empowerment creates effective support for student learning and development (Hulpia and Devos, 2010; Scribnner and Bradley-Levine, 2010). Others have centered on teacher collaboration/professional learning communities (Horn and Little, 2010; Lomos et al., 2011; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2001), which contribute to high-quality instruction. However, the particular nature of urban settings is addressed less often.

Overview of the special issue
The above observations led to a small invitational conference on urban secondary schools, held in May 2017 at the University of Minnesota. The papers included in this special issue grew out of that meeting, which broadly addressed perspectives on a single question: What are the social contexts within and out of schools that affect achievement and humanization of urban secondary students? The authors' contributions reflect a common conviction that it is time to move schools (and school leadership) away from a singular focus on improving instruction in order to increase tested student achievement. While instruction and cognitive outcomes and skills are important, the participants concluded that we need a broader perspective that recognizes the role of all stakeholders in shaping the forces within and outside schools that affect student development and learning.

As is usual, the lively dynamics of an empirically based conference shifted our expectations from the vain hope that we would unearth a new model for effective urban schools to the more realistic focus on identifying underutilized levers for improvement. We have grouped the papers into those that focus primarily on the dynamics of change inside urban secondary schools, and another group that attend to some of the dynamics outside of a school that enhance or constrain improvement.

Community and difference inside schools
Introducing agency while maintaining a keen eye on equitable schooling represents a core dilemma that underpins much of the work in this special issue. National reforms in the past few decades have emphasized system change, often driven from a central government. Many of
these are well intentioned, holding the promise of latitude for school autonomy or site-based innovation in return for working within a state or national framework that specifies curriculum and expected cognitive outcomes. In other words, the policy intent in many countries was (at least initially) to increase agency for families and teachers, and promote innovation within schools (Bryk, 2018; Sahlberg, 2011). However, when coupled with increasingly high stakes accountability both for students and schools, these initiatives have, in many cases, increased pressures that overload and restrict school professionals, narrow the curriculum available to students, and limit community engagement (Bulkley and Fisler, 2003; Ravitch, 2016). This has been acutely problematic in high poverty urban settings.

Starting our examination of member agency with students grounds the volume in secondary education’s primary purpose: to prepare adolescents for taking on adult roles and responsibilities. A particularly salient issue for secondary schools is how they can take advantage of the increased maturity of their students to engage them as genuine contributors to their own development. Dana Mitra takes this question seriously in “Student Voice in Secondary Schools: The Possibility for Deeper Change.” While Mitra takes up youth development outcomes, she concentrates primarily on how student voice, and student–adult relationships, can influence that ways in which schooling and school reform happens. Mitra writes, “Through active engagement in change, students see that they can be knowledge creators, not just receivers.” Thus, Mitra’s powerful argument suggests that student voice can truly have lasting impact on student experiences and academic achievement.

Other papers in this special issue expand on the role of agency both directly and indirectly demonstrate how this comes into play in urban school reform. Peter Demerath, in “The emotional ecology of school improvement culture,” examines this by shifting the emphasis away from what teachers do to how they talk about their emotions. He suggests that one way that teachers sustain their performance under uncertain circumstances is to compile their “sentiment vocabulary” or “sentiment discourses” and then map the local “emotional ecology” or “emotion culture.” Drawing on a multi-year ethnographic study of an urban high school whose student population is composed primarily of first- or second-generation immigrant students, he argues that a set of interlocking feedback loops generated specific emotionally charged meanings that powered the improvement efforts. These loops explain how staff members and leaders generated and sustained empathy for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, optimism in their capabilities and motivation to help them learn and flourish.

“Talk it out: Race talk and organizational learning” by Decoteau J. Irby and Shannon Clark presents another finely grained examination of the power of teacher discourse. By interrogating racial conversations that occurred in the context of a school’s examination of discipline policies and practices, they demonstrate how administrators’ ability and/or willingness to tackle teacher’s conversations can have a lasting impact on school improvement. Irby and Clark do not argue that “talk” can fix the manifest gaps in how teachers and students increase their ownership of equity work in schools. Instead, they point to the importance of increasingly personal and specific discussions of racial equity issues in high schools as a strategy for increasing school leaders’ influence over teachers’ ownership of their role in perpetuating inequality.

Irby and Clark’s analysis of teacher talk aligns with Roozbeh Shirazi’s contribution, “Socio-political belonging and the identity of transnational students.” By looking closely at the micro-politics associated with a school-sponsored group for immigrant students from North Africa and the Middle East, he shows how Muslim students are positioned discursively in a large secondary school. Shirazi examines the fragility of inclusion, but demonstrates that students can act collectively to develop identity and a claim to social and physical space. However, Shirazi’s article goes further to consider societal factors that bear on the education of minoritized students and examines the way that one school’s regulation of Muslim students is
an extension a larger political discourse. In the end, student activism positions them to become fully engaged citizens of a country where many still regard them as outsiders.

Stefanie Marshall and Muhammad Khalifa extend the discussion of agency and community inside urban high schools by analyzing the role of mid-level leaders. “Humanizing school communities of practice: Culturally responsive leaders in the shaping curriculum and instruction” examines how teachers appointed as instructional coaches can foster culturally responsive teaching. The analysis makes an argument for active mid-level teacher leader agency from a perspective that challenges well-accepted leadership paradigms. Marshall and Khalifa’s case study challenges the notion that it is enough for school leaders to be instructional leaders or transformational leaders, suggesting that culturally responsive leadership practices must imbue traditional forms of school leadership at multiple levels. The authors suggest that refocusing on community epistemology and perceptions is one of a school leader’s most powerful tools to enhance student learning.

These papers contribute to a number of revelatory practices around urban secondary schools. One notable crosscutting theme is the implicit or explicit tension around authority. Each paper suggests that increasing agency within a school can create a more dynamic environment that is prepared to engage adolescents in their efforts to become effective, educated and engaged adults. What is expressed as student or community voice in some papers is captured as inclusion or leadership behaviors in others — but at essence is the relationship to the sharing of well-entrenched power that links language, voice and authority. A second theme is that of using insider and community-based knowledge to inform the practice of secondary schooling. This does not negate the role of “evidence based reform,” but supports a perspective that promotes agency for all members as an essential component of the next waves of reform (Sahlberg, 2011).

Politics and policy that bear on the capacity of secondary schools

Our conference also engaged with the effects of the “outside world” on urban secondary schools and the way in which they either increase or decrease agency of schools and communities. In particular, we note that most current research on improving low-performing schools (which are often although not always located in less affluent urban settings) focuses on policy instruments. Much of this work emphasizes the role of neo-liberal policy initiatives and the unanticipated consequence of current policies based on the transnational trends and policy borrowing (Auld and Morris, 2014; Gunter et al., 2016; Louis and van Velzen, 2012; Moos, 2012). In addition, current writing points to the ways in which social change and recent policies affect urban secondary schools by reinforcing broader social inequities, whether in Spain, Sweden, Scotland or the USA (Calero, 2007; Jonsson and Rudolphi, 2010). The emphasis in our conference was, in contrast, on policies and politics in a narrower setting, centering on how schools and stakeholders manage relationships among various actors in the urban educational and community system (Chapman, 2013; Jackson et al., 2012).

What happens within any individual school, no matter how far along in its efforts to maximize opportunities for all members, is invariably influenced by what happens in the immediate context outside the school and in other proximate schools. This is particularly true in countries where schools are organized and managed within districts, municipalities or formalized networks. There is some research that examines contagion (the tendency of colocated schools to resemble each other over time), spillover (unanticipated events in one school or district that affect others) and the effects of deliberately designed school networks (Bohlmark and Lindahl, 2015; Cordes, 2018; Katz and Earl, 2010; Walker et al., 2011). This line of work highlights the need to understand a bounded local system. We argue that there is also a need for more attention to policies and politics within a local context, with a focus on implications for managing implicit and explicit power relationships among various actors in the urban educational system is essential.
In “Re-imagining Turnaround: Family and Community Leadership in School Improvement for Educational Justice,” Ann Ishimaru places parent and community agency at the center of equity-based reforms. Ishimaru examines how parent and community members of one school leveraged their own capital and knowledge to influence a school “turnaround” process, and in so doing, placed parents “not as individual consumers or beneficiaries, but as educational and community leaders working collectively to transform their schools.” This case study is pivotal in helping educational leaders and local policy makers understand the central role parents must play in general school reform efforts and in equity work. This all contributes to the process of decolonizing schools and making them more humanizing for students of color.

Yi-Hwa Liou and Alan Daly fill an important gap in research about how school reform happens across schools. In “Broken bridges: A social network perspective on urban school leadership,” they examine how informal social structures among principals and between principals and a district office can contribute to a positive “eco-system of relationships” that allows the transmission of positive influences among members. In contrast to the elementary and middle schools, however, high school and their leaders had diminished access to dense information exchange networks over time, becoming more isolated. The degree to which network isolation and the relative loss of positional influence within the district’s system may contribute to the weaker performance of secondary schools, including their capacity to serve the needs of less advantaged students, raises critical questions for leaders at all levels.

Finally, the two extended commentaries included in this special issue, provided by Moosung Lee (University of Canberra) and Kathryn Riley (UCL, Institute of Education, London), provide an important perspective on the need for more comparative research on innovation in urban secondary school settings. As we organized our conference, we initially aspired for wider participation from non-US scholars whose work focused on what high schools were doing or from US scholars who had collaborated with colleagues from other countries. We found that there has been relatively little comparative work. Thus, we begin with a plea that the largely ignored area of upper secondary school education reform be placed front-and-center in the coming years. Lee and Riley’s contributions both contain insights that go beyond, pointing to additional arenas for scholarly cooperation.

Both authors draw on their own research to focus on the importance of both the microcontext of an urban school in its community, a larger cultural context that is reflected in different professional cultures (Lee and Kim, 2016), assumptions about school ownership (Riley, 2003), and about the varied role that school leaders play in different settings (Lee, 2016). Their remarks remind us of the many layers of culture that we need to examine when designing research and improvement initiatives in urban schools, as well as the limitations of the transnational global educational reform movement. Each of these affect the policy instruments that are available to move reform forward.

New directions for research on secondary schools
Collectively the papers in this issue have significant implications for scholarship centered on the development of more effective and equitable secondary schools. Several foci cut across many of the papers – school reform, national contexts, discursive practices in school and racial justice to name a few. But what is perhaps most palpable about these collective articles is the shifting and protean context within, around and above urban secondary schools.

Second, each of the papers suggests implications for “what’s next? what’s important?” and we urge readers to pick up the authors’ implicit and explicit challenges. Perhaps the most obvious one is the need for more research that pays attention to secondary schools, and particularly to secondary schools in urban or “urban-like” contexts. Our conclusions about the larger theme uniting the papers – the role of agency in creating schools that stimulate – in addition, we suggest that the papers overall suggest the need for new lenses, both epistemological and in the objects of inquiry.
Third, the papers assume – even in those contributions that use a critical theory framework – the need to examine how increasing agency becomes an institutional as well as an individual asset. How to distinguish between a broader perspective on agency and related ideas, like collective efficacy, may be essential to reducing theoretical cacophony in research on urban secondary school reform. An emergent theme that deserves increasing empirical attention is how expanding agency among members and stakeholders at all levels can foster social justice in ways that support both groups, institutions and individuals. Social justice, in this issue, is not viewed as a separate force for change but as integral to change initiatives. The papers point to the need for new research to explore the implications of these commonalities further.

Finally, the perspectives taken by the authors also raise questions that have not been well-examined in the context of urban secondary schools. In particular, the importance of language and its use as a lever for change is explicit or implicit in many of the papers that focus on the internal dynamics of diverse, high poverty schools. At the same time, we note that the role of leadership and structural arrangements also appear (often implicitly) in most of the papers, and the intersection between agency, belonging, language and structure provides a large research agenda on its own. Each of these is also clearly linked to implications for the design and implementation of initiatives to reform urban secondary schools that are based in the assumption that local conditions matter.

In sum, our aspirations for our conference on Improving the Urban High School included suggesting agendas that could guide inquiry. We believe that we succeeded, and hope that each reader will find an important investigation suggested by the issue.

Karen Seashore Louis and Muhammad Khalifa
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Notes
1. See www.nationsreportcard.gov
2. There are no precise figure for non-completion in the USA, but a recent report estimated it at over 6 percent, with rates as high as 21 percent for young people born outside the USA (https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018117.pdf).
3. See http://timssandpirls.bc.edu/

References


**Further reading**


Stories that change lives
On a warm evening in May 2018, I sit enthralled as Joan Baez – doyenne of the “protest” song for social justice – performs to a packed audience at London’s Albert Hall. One song has a particular contemporary resonance – “Deportee” (Plane Wreck at Los Gatos) – written by the late Woody Guthrie to mark the death of 28 migrant farmers, lost in a plane crash in 1948, while being deported from California back to Mexico. The victims’ names were never reported, they were merely “deportees”. That song is the inspiration for the word “protest” in the title of this piece. The “possibilities” spring from what comes next. How, as citizens, we give “voice” to those who are not named or heard; and how, as educators, we draw on our personal and collective resolve to change things for the better. In 2017, American writer and poet Tim Z. Hernandez named those Mexican workers gave them back their identities.

The notion of “reframing” the agenda for Urban Secondary Schools comes from the authors contributing to this rich edition of the Journal of Educational Administration who take a scholarly approach to these matters. Nearly three decades ago, Karen Seashore Louis and Matthew Miles (1990) opened up the world of the American urban high school to scrutiny in their seminal book. These well-researched articles offer a window of understanding that provides insights into the sometimes troubling and bewildering – and yet frequently rewarding – world of today’s American urban high school. Louis and Miles argued for the need for empowerment and engagement, supported by new forms of school-based leadership and management, themes echoed in the accounts presented in the pages of this journal. However, these articles are located in a very different socio-political environment: a volatile world in which more people are displaced than at any time since the aftermath of the 1939–1945 War: a world on the move, in which half the world’s refuges are children (UNHCR, 2015).

There is much to “protest” about when we take stock of young people’s lives today in many parts of the world, including the richer nations. Across North America, there are young homeless people swept up in the growing problem of labour and sex trafficking (Murphy, 2017); across the Atlantic in the UK, young people from Vietnam have found themselves trafficked to service cannabis farms (Gentleman, 2017). Despite the high levels of investment in schools (relative to poorer nations), one in five children from socio-economically disadvantaged communities, living in some of the world’s most affluent nations, do not feel they belong in school, twice as many as their peers from more advantaged communities (OECD, 2012).

Drawing on their deep knowledge about what is happening in the American urban high school, the contributors to this compendium map out the present-day challenges and problems, and signpost the possibilities: the strategies and approaches that can help reshape school life. Theirs is a powerful imperative which not only speaks to educators in the USA, but also to those elsewhere who seek fresh insights into the nature of schooling in urban localities, and who are committed to reframing the agenda in ways that will enable young people to realise their hopes and their dreams.

Contemporary realities add an urgency to the need to recalibrate what schools do, and how leaders lead. Making sense of those realities, and how the “Zeitgeist” – the ideas
and norms that shape society – plays out in our own contexts and impinges on the world of the school, enables us to enter into that process of reframing the agenda for urban secondary schools with greater clarity and focus, as it discussed in the next section.

The changing zeitgeist

The walls that divide schools from their communities are permeable. Ideas, expectations, assumptions seep through. If there was ever a time that global uncertainties, clashes of culture or belief had little or no impact on children and young people, those days have long since gone.

Changes in the Zeitgeist affect not only adults but also young people. Snippets of news from families and friends combine with the 24-hour buzz of social media to give youngsters a patchwork of understanding of the world around them. They encode “social tensions” about global conflicts, pick up on “the stress and anger” of the adults around them about contemporary events (Rethinking Schools, 2017, p. 4).

Ebbs and flows in the ever-changing Zeitgeist – the shift in the USA from “Obama” speak to “Trump” speak – alter perceptions and realities, and no more so than in communities with high levels of poverty or social need, or with diverse populations. Schools are communities, “political entities” in which young people learn how to become part of society (Alexander, 2013, p. 3), making an understanding of the Zeitgeist – and the power of the Zeitgeist to change beliefs and expectations – as much the business of schools, as test scores.

Let me illustrate this from a UK perspective.

In July 2012, London launched the opening of the Olympic Games with a sassy ceremony designed by Danny Boyle. His inspiration was Caliban’s “isles of wonder” speech in Shakespeare’s The Tempest. The three-hour extravaganza, watched by over 1bn people worldwide, signalled a country apparently at ease with its diversity. The Queen played a cameo role, encountering James Bond. The National Health Service was celebrated. Past “wrongs” were “righted”. The ceremony featured an image of the passenger liner “The Empire Windrush”, the ship which had brought the first wave of immigrants from the Caribbean to British shores in 1948: invited to help rebuild the nation after the devastation of the 1939–1945 War. The young children who accompanied their parents on that boat, and other boats and planes, came to be known as the “Windrush Generation”, and to think of themselves as British.

British-Jamaican Doreen Lawrence (mother of black British teenager Stephen Lawrence, murdered in a racist attack in 1993), helped carry the Olympic Flag. Doreen Lawrence’s long fight for justice had come centre stage with the publication of the findings of the Macpherson Inquiry (1999) which identified how institutional racism within the police force had contributed to the white perpetrators going free for many years. Now “Dame” Doreen, she had come to symbolise a new British consciousness about racism.

Fast forward to April 2018, when a scandal of epic proportions erupted, as members of the “Windrush Generation” became unwitting casualties of the UK Government’s hard line “hostile environment policy” towards so called “illegal” immigrants. Reaching retirement age in a country in which they thought they belonged, where they had children and grandchildren, where they had lived and worked and paid their taxes, they had become the outsider, the unwanted – the deportee[1].

The full ramifications of the “Windrush” debacle are as yet unknown. However, coupled with a reported increase in hate crimes following Brexit, which led to one newspaper asking: is Britain getting Nastier? (The Big Issue, 2017), they represent a change in the Zeitgeist about what it means to be “British”. This raises significant challenges for schools: one of the few shared social institutions that can help create a sense of place and belonging (Riley, 2013).
Issues about place, belonging and identity are central to the concerns of the authors writing in this journal. As an outsider looking in, I am particularly taken with the contribution they make to our understanding about how we “talk” about deeply important issues which are central to the concerns of urban high school, and are strongly connected to leadership and to the power dynamics of voice and agency. I have divided my reflections about their contribution to our understanding of these matters into three parts:

1) talking the talk;
2) leading the walk; and
3) giving voice and enabling belonging.

**Reframing the agenda**

*Talking the talk: how do schools talk about important issues, and can they improve on how they do this?*

In 1981, I was beginner teacher in a South London inner-city secondary school. A fire at a birthday party, near to the school (The New Cross Fire), took the lives of 13 young black British people aged 14–22. Fire investigators later concluded that the fire had been started deliberately. The Coroner’s Court returned an open verdict about the motive. No one has ever been charged. The principal in the school I was working in issued an edict: staff were not to discuss what had happened with their students. This event was beyond the school’s jurisdiction and too difficult and complex to engage with.

Yet, the students in my tutor group were part of the story. The clandestine conversations I later had with them revealed their anger and bewilderment. They knew people who had died. They knew people who had been at the party, or had planned to go but had not. The face-to-face conversations I had with senior leaders in that school were never about these challenging issues.

Peter Demerath’s engaging article “The emotional ecology of school improvement cultures” which draws on an a long-term ethnographic study of Harrison High School Minnesota unravels some of the complexities about school leaders’ “talk”. Harrison High is located in a challenging socio-economic context and, over the years, has been applauded for its upward trajectory. Demerath describes what happens when a school culture – crafted through empathy and a commitment to a growth mind-set, and with a leadership team well-versed in the “talk” (the language of emotional engagement) – finds itself at odds with the policy demands of the school district.

The policy in question – which was one of inclusion – was in strong alignment with the school’s values. What was antithetical to the staff was the required implementation process. The norms and practices of the staff and their sense of both individual and collective agency – which had been carefully honed over some years – became fractured by the demand to act in ways at variance with their shared beliefs. The case study re-affirms the importance of the collective “talk”. When ideas are imposed, there is no discussion about the “how” or the “when”, a sense of individual and collective professional agency based on shared values and beliefs is dissipated.

Decoteau Irby and Shamon Clark “Talk it – racism – out” take us into the challenges of talking about race – the practice of “race talk”, as they call it. Distinguishing between “race neutral”, race proxy and “race specific” language, they argue that encouraging professional practices which promote race-specific dialogue helps identify points of underlying conflict, increasing the ability of an organisation to analyse issues, and identify potential solutions. The implications of their findings for organisational learning and for leadership are significant which is why – as they point out – we need to understand more about what leaders can do to promote the use of race-specific language, and how they can do this effectively.

Stephanie Marshall and Muhammed Khalifa “Humanising school communities of practice” acknowledge the importance of “race talk” in terms of advocating for “minoritized
students”, expanding the scope of the discussion by drawing attention to what they describe as “culturally responsive instructional leadership practices”. Their research focuses on how instructional coaches – appointed by the school district, as part of a plan to counter educational disparity – prepared for and enacted their role. Their findings contribute to greater understanding of the kinds of leadership behaviours that can help promote “equity consciousness” or “cultural responsiveness” in schools, raising important issues about the agency of school principals.

These contributions reinforce the importance of exploring how school leaders talk, what they talk about and the context in which they are talking – which is why when I read Yi-wah Liou and Peter Daly’s article “Broken bridges”, I had to re-read one of the summary sentences about their research findings several times:

[...] over time high school principals have decreasing access to social capital and are typically occupying peripheral positions in the social network.

I paraphrased this for myself as follows: the more experienced the six urban high school principals became – in this school district of 25 school principals – the less likely they were to share their learning with their peers (other principals) or be open to new learning. This led me to think about the implications of “not talking”. If these high school principals were out of the loop, if they did not “talk” about those challenging and profoundly difficult issues discussed earlier, if they were not thinking about how to develop more culturally responsive leadership behaviours, or exploring how to connect to communities in new ways, or discussing how to respond to the unexpected and traumatic events which can implode so unexpectedly, how did they learn from each other? How did they share what they knew? How could school systems build and share deep knowledge, if the principals of the high schools, or secondary schools did not talk to each other?

These issues play out in the UK in a different – but equally troubling – ways. The current dispensation is one in which local education administrations are increasingly depleted of significant levels of resourcing. The political discourse is about a “self-improving” school system which seeks to maximise individual school autonomy, and encourage schools to collaborate with each other. Results are patchy. At one of the spectrum, a group of system leaders can be found who exercise their leadership beyond their own schools, working to share expertise and practice. At the other end are schools which operate in relative isolation from each other, with their leaders seemingly determined to reinvent the wheel (Earley and Greany, 2017) and reluctant to engage in significant “talk” with their peers.

The degree to which collaboration and knowledge sharing between schools takes places is dependent on the mind-set, opportunities and resources. The mind-set (can we learn from others? Who do we collaborate with?) is shaped by many factors, including structural arrangements. In the UK, schools which are part of Academy chains are expected to collaborate with each other, rather than with local schools. Opportunities to tap into networks and alliances are dependent on professional knowledge and connections, and the degree of access. Resources play their part. In a climate of ongoing reductions in funding for schools, particularly those serving urban communities, school leaders find themselves asking: have we the time and capacity to look beyond the school-gates? Looking to the future, we can expect both greater insularity (individual schools and chains of schools) and deeper forms of collaboration, the latter driven by concerns about increased inequities and the well-being of young people in a highly pressurised system, and supported by a range of institutions, including universities.

Leading the walk: what choices do leaders have about how they lead and how they connect to communities?

“Talking the talk” is obviously linked to “leading the walk” and implies that school leaders have a degree of agency in what they do and how they do it. The literature on the importance
of school leaders’ sense of agency is well developed (Clarke and Wildy, 2011; Lovett et al., 2015), with new ideas emerging about professional agency (Vahasantanen et al., 2017).

School leaders have choices to make about how they lead and how they exercise their agency. They set the rules of the game. How they think, decide, act and reflect, and draw on their knowledge to create a roadmap of possibilities is critical to the well-being of both children and adults (Riley, 2017).

In policy environments that are driven by output measures, some leaders make choices which can be detrimental to the well-being of particular groups of young people. In the UK, the pressure on schools to perform well on school performance league tables has led to a rise in formal exclusions from school (Gill et al., 2017), with children and young people from low income families being four times more likely to be excluded than their more affluent peers (The Fair Education Alliance, 2017). While this issue is not addressed directly in this issue, it is a critical feature of the context in which urban secondary schools exist.

Researchers from the Centre for High Performance, who studied the changes made by 400 plus UK headteachers from the time of their appointment until they relinquished their leadership role, concluded that the rewards – in terms of money and Honours from the Queen – went to a group the research team designated as “surgeons”. Their absolute focus on test results led them to exclude, on average, one in four final-year students and dismiss, or move on, one in ten staff. More effective in the long-term were leaders, designated by the researchers as “architects”: who involved parents, got teachers on board, grew their schools and improved teaching. Thus, “leading the walk” in the UK, means just that: do not sprint, take time to talk and to build the shared story.

In a beautifully crafted case study, Ann Ishimara “Re-imaging turnaround” debunks the kinds of super-heroic leadership demonstrated by the “surgeons”, criticising its short termism, and its determination to achieve results whatever the cost. Her focus is on the possibilities of a radical change in school–community relationships: what happens when the boundaries and expectations surrounding school–community relationships are tested?

Having read her contribution, I reflected with a sense of relief that the days of schools in diverse multi-cultural communities, organising an Annual Wine and Cheese Evening – and being surprised when relatively few parents turned up – are long since gone, and that there has been significant, if patchy, progress in rethinking the nature of the school–community relationship. Das Gupta (2006), for example, has sought to identify the processes of engagement that can exclude families: a critical issue for refugee families and those who have experienced major dislocations, as Koyama and Rwehumbiza Bakuza (2017) argue. Ishimara’s exploration of what happens when school–community relationships are recalibrated in a process of equitable collaboration which builds on the social capital in communities leads us back to the importance of talk. As school and community leaders step together into a more equitable and reciprocal space, the dynamic generated, she argues, transforms the relationship between them. She reinforces the findings from her case study with a powerful conceptual framework for reconceptualising school–community relationships and partnerships: an approach which, as she acknowledges, is all too rare.

**Giving voice and enabling belonging: whose voices do we need to hear, and whose do we need to hear if schools are to become places of belonging?**

The importance of rethinking the power dynamics and relationships both within school and between schools and communities is critical, as contributors to this journal argue. Some years ago, in “Whose School is it Anyway?” (Riley, 1998), I asked “Who should decide what goes on in schools?” Interviewees for that book included the late British Prime Minister Jim Callaghan who took the view that, in the 1970s and 1980s, over-radicalised teachers had ignored the wishes of parents in working-class communities and that teacher domination of the curriculum had to change. Young people’s voice was not part of the equation.
To my gratification, two articles in this special issue focus on how can we give “voice” to young people. They also shed light on whose voices decide the things that matter. In a well honed and conceptually grounded paper which adds much to the discussion on student voice, Dana Mitra “Student voice in secondary schools” focuses on the role that student voice can play in school reform, identifying the most important outcomes of youth participation in student voice initiatives as being, “Agency, belonging, competence, deliberation and (civic) efficacy”. A key finding from research of my own – which involved young people and teachers as co-researchers in a collaborative research injury which asked “Is this school a place where everyone feels that they belong?” – has been the importance of “agency” in generating a sense of belonging (Riley, 2017; Riley et al., 2018) [2]. In a climate that encourages schools, as Dana Mitra describes it, to obey mandates and young people to master facts, her review is a timely reminder of the many ways that young people can be agents of change, and the benefits, not just to them but also to society as a whole.

Rooxbeh Shirazi “Sociopolitical belonging and identities of transnational secondary students” enriches this debate by exploring a complex and contentious issue: the right to belong. Drawing on his research findings, he raises issues about belonging and agency, exploring how the social spaces within a school are experienced by different groups. As other contributors to the journal, he asks tough questions about how school leaders need to think and respond to some of the critical issues, such as: should schools create spaces for “affinity groups to meet?” How and when should they do this? Whose voices are heard and are valued? Whose voices count? While in the UK, there is a growing recognition of the need to listen to what children and young people have to say, there remains a hesitancy to activate their agency, or that of their families.

A sense of belonging in any organisation or institution is shaped by what we bring to it – our histories, our day-to-day lived realities. Young people’s sense of belonging or exclusion in school is fashioned by the actualities of school life: relationships and encounters; expectations and beliefs; the pedagogical experiences, as well as the environment for learning; and, of course, the leadership (Riley, 2017; Riley et al., 2018). “Belonging” is that sense of being somewhere where you can be confident that you will fit in and feel safe in your identity (Riley, 2017): a feeling of being at home in a place, and of being valued (Flewitt, 2017). Whether young people are seen for who they are, whether their voices are heard will impact on their sense of agency and of belonging.

To the future
Joan Baez concluded her performance at the Royal Albert Hall by talking about a new form of protest: the young people across America who – in the wake of ongoing violence – manifested in the High Schools shootings which hit the headlines with unfailing regularity[3] – are exercising their right to protest and in so doing, develop their sense of leadership and agency. Protest shapes possibilities. If young people are to find their way in this troubled world, schools need to be places of possibility and agency. Each contributor to this splendid edition has enriched our understanding of what those possibilities are.

Kathryn Riley
Institute of Education, UCL, London, UK

Notes
1. Up to 63 members of the Windrush Generation have been wrongly deported from the UK and many more threatened with deportation. Others have been refused jobs or denied healthcare (Gentleman, 2018). As of May 2018, upwards of 5,000 cases were being investigated.
2. Also see www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe-place-and-belonging-in-schools and www.theartofpossibilities.org.uk
3. The increase in knife crime on the streets of London and other urban conurbations has led to a similar response (Lammy, 2018).

References


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Not much has changed

Back in the spring of 2005, as a first-year doctoral student at the University of Minnesota, I participated in an enrichment program for foreign Fulbright scholars pursuing graduate degrees in US universities. The program was held in New Orleans just a few months before Hurricane Katrina struck Louisiana. More than the enrichment agenda, I enjoyed the mild spring weather of New Orleans and deep cultural flavors imbued in the city. On the last day of the program, the participants visited a local high school in New Orleans. I still remember the moment that I walked through the entrance gate of the high school, because I encountered a dark side of the urban schooling system in America: I saw a police officer with a gun and police car just in front of the main building. “Oh my goodness, a police officer with a gun in school!” I was thinking inside. One may dismiss my experience as just a cultural shock. But I think it is more than culture shock; it is evidence of a systemic problem persistently facing US urban schools. My intention is not to debate the pros and cons of law enforcement officers in US schools[1]. Rather what I wish to point out is that things have become worse since the first school resource officer was assigned to a school in the 1950s. School violence issues have escalated, and other major dysfunctions appear to be perpetuating across many secondary schools in the US. This is evidenced in this JEA special edition, titled “Understanding and improving urban secondary schools: new perspectives.” For example, Roozbeh Shirazi depicts the issue of segregation within a school through the eyes of school staff:

[...] what’s happening even in the lunchroom [...] every time I went down there looking for a student, I’m like, oh, look towards the black tables or the white tables or whatever because very rarely are they, are they intermingling and it’s really disappointing.

Despite the Brown vs Board decision of 1954, black-white racial segregation between schools has continuously taken place in parallel with the racial segregation between urban and suburban areas (Orfield and Lee, 2006). Furthermore, racial segregation within an urban school, illustrated in Shirazi’s article in this issue, has been consolidated and complicated with the influx of new immigrants, including refugees. The findings presented by Shirazi resonate with Stacey Lee’s (2004) observation 14 years ago from an urban high school in Wisconsin:

As a relative newcomer to the United States [...] Cha [Hmong ESL student] occupies the sidelines in the cafeteria, the halls, and classrooms [...] Cha has a small circle of Hmong friends that include his girlfriend and two other boys. Significantly, his friends are all relative newcomers to the United States [...] Cha regularly eats lunch with this same group of friends and laughs and talks quietly [...] (p. 21).

Within-school segregation should not be trivialized as students’ voluntary self-segregating behaviors. Such behaviors appear to be consequences of multiple forms of disadvantage (e.g. lack of parental involvement, culturally-insensitive curricula, limited English proficiency, institutionalized racism, peer pressure, low SES, school poverty, crime). Within this multi-layered disadvantage, minoritized students’ self-segregation within a school seems to be the last resort, because they have no other
options (cf. Lee et al., 2017). In addition, drawing on Stacey Lee’s observation and Roozbeh Shirazi’s findings, it can be said that not much has changed in US urban schooling scenes. One may treat the similar findings of the two studies in different temporal points as anecdotal evidence for within-school segregation.

Then, how about the issue of gun violence at school? Is it right to dismiss it as an anecdotal and intermittent issue? Notably, “more than 187,000 students have been exposed to gun violence at school since Columbine” (The Washington Post, 2018). Amid this terrifying situation, the US president Donald Trump’s solution (i.e. arming teachers) is terrible and even treacherous. This can be neither a fundamental solution nor a quick fix. The seven articles in the JEA special issue provide new perspectives and possibilities, as in the title of the special edition, for us to approach and address the persistent problems facing urban schools in the US. In the following sections, I detail how the unparalleled set of research papers in this special issue advances new perspectives of urban education.

**Student voice for deeper change**

Let me start by sharing a story about Charlie Munger, the well-known American investor, who is Vice Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway. He was at a local shop to buy a fishing lure. He was holding sparkling plastic fishing tackle and asked the shop owner “My God, they’re pink and green. Do fish really take these lures?” The shop owner replied “Mister, I don’t sell to fish” (Griffin, 2015, p. 17). This episode provides an analogy to the problems embedded in reform policies associated with externally imposed accountability measures. A sparkling object—such as turnaround reform—is viewed as a quick-fix measure for improving student learning and may, therefore, be attractive to some stakeholders such as parents and policy makers (customers for the fishing lures). However, turnaround reform (the shiny lure) is, in essence, not appealing to students (i.e. fish). In other words, it often seems that stakeholders (e.g. policy makers, parents, and researchers) involved in education reform may have been more attentive to a sparkling tool than its genuine potential for achieving what they want. The most important stakeholder has been relatively overlooked.

“Student voice in secondary schools: The possibility for deeper change,” by Dana Mitra sheds light on how student voice can make a difference in school change. While accumulating reform initiatives, described by Sebring and Bryk (2000) as a “Christmas tree” approach, can hit the target, they often miss the potential for deeper and more lasting change because of the dearth of attention to student experiences. Mitra clearly shows how we can tap into the potential of student voice for deeper changes in school. She illuminates that when “student voice efforts can lead to increased interest in institutionalizing student input into the decision-making process” beyond tokenistic or symbolic student participation in implementation efforts, students become change agents in school and can bring authentic school changes.

I absolutely agree with Mitra’s stance. Furthermore, I believe that institutionalizing student voice in the routine of school life as well as reform processes at a school level is much needed for secondary schools in East Asia. While there would be a variation, secondary school students in East Asia are put under intense pressure in competitive exam-oriented schooling systems. Yet students have been pushed to remain silent about what they deeply care about in their learning environment, such as relationships, happiness, friendship and well-being. To me, student voice is something like the “invisible gorilla” (Chabris and Simons, 2010). Like the invisible gorilla experiments, we often fail to recognize the importance of student voice even though it has always been around and within our schools as possible pathways to address complex problems facing many schools. This is because we have emphasized other solutions that rarely pay any attention to student voice. In this regard, Mitra’s research contributes greatly to unleashing the hidden resources to our efforts to deepen the changes of urban secondary schools.
The age of identity, engagement and well-being

In his presidential address at the 2018 International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Andy Hargreaves asserted that we are departing from the age of achievement to “the age of identity, engagement and well-being” (Hargreaves, 2018). “Socio-political belonging and the identity of transnational students’ by Roozbeh Shirazi in this special issue is well positioned to address Hargreaves’s proposition. Specifically, Shirazi addresses student voice as a core part of socio-political belonging and identity by questioning “which voices count, and how they come to have value.” In this regard, Shirazi echoes Mitra’s stance on student voice for deeper school change. At the same time, it is important to pay attention to the role of institutional agents in students’ formation of socio-political belonging, depicted in Shirazi’s article. Shirazi fleshes out the contrasting roles of institutional agents in legitimating student voice by illuminating the lived-experience of Somali Muslim students in Light Falls High School in a Midwest urban area. Three institutional agents are featured in Shirazi’s study – i.e., Ms. Sharp, the mental health specialist who also worked with the Muslim Student Association (MSA) as a faculty adviser, an unnamed staff member and Ms. Bernard, the principal.

When the principal notified Ms. Sharp and MSA students that MSA would not be permitted to meet in the school because it is a religious group, Ms. Sharp was the only institutional agent who went against the principal’s decision by supporting MSA students to keep their meetings and activities in the school. Drawing on my own research, which explored an Afro-centric urban secondary school in a Midwest urban area, I also identified such supportive institutional agents who play a key role in guiding refugee students to the pathways of successful school life (Lee and Madyun, 2012; Lee et al., 2014). More importantly, as minoritized adolescents built trust with supportive institutional agents, they exhibited more help-seeking behaviors with institutional agents in order to cope with structural forces impeding their healthy socialization (Lee, 2009; Lee and Madyun, 2012).

The principal’s decision to close the MSA is seen as “racialized policing,” given her comment, “in America, we have separation of church and state.” To me, the principal’s comment sounds quite similar to the Trump Administration’s detention policy of separating children and parents who illegally enter the USA. That is, the principal’s comment sounds as if Trump would have said, “in America, we have separation of children and parents if you are illegal immigrants.” While I write this commentary paper today, Trump announced that the government retreats the harsh detention policy at the borders under enormous political pressure by ordinary people’s collective protests in the USA against the cruel and inhumane detention policy. Like ordinary American people did, the students at Light Falls High School continued advocating for the MSA and eventually the decision of the principal was overruled by the superintendent. This amazing story evidences that a school is a miniature of the whole society. As Kathryn Riley says in her commentary paper, the story further evidences that “protest shapes possibilities.”

There is another lesson about institutional agents that we can take from Shirazi’s article, which reminds me of Stanton-Salazar’s (2001) comment about how a lack of cultural sensitivity of institutional agents with good intention can be problematic. An unnamed respondent was reported as saying to a student, “I’ve watched other students and I know you are struggling with your hijab. You know, it’s ok to do what you want […]. It’s alright. You know, in fact here’s my number, if you want to take the next step, let me know […].” The student was, not surprisingly, offended. Notably, although many institutional agents attempt to help ethnic minority students, it is rare that they develop mentor-mentee relationships. On the one hand, students’ low trust of social ties with institutional agents, especially those who are from different racial-ethnic groups, may be legitimate (Stanton-Salazar, 2001). As in this case, the accumulated experience of cultural insensitivity by institutional agents can create barriers to future efforts to help.
Walking the talk

“Talk it (racism) out: Race talk and organizational learning” by Decoteau Irby and Shannon Clark demonstrates that the use of race-specific language is essential to school improvement particularly in demographically changing school contexts. This is because race talk can unleash teachers’ vacillation and reluctance to talk explicitly about racial issues at school. I am convinced by Irby and Clark’s argument that “using race-specific language makes problem framing more concrete and specific” than using race-mute language. Their argument makes me rethink the case of Singapore, which has been applauded for its racial harmony for decades by neighboring Asian countries. Research suggests that there are several reasons for Singapore’s successful racial harmony such as the government’s policy efforts for social integration through public housing with racial quotas, equal education opportunities and mandatory national service (cf. Chew, 2018). Indeed, Singaporeans tend not to talk about racial issues publicly. Neither do researchers in Singapore. Chew’s (2018) comprehensive search through Google Scholar found only 13 studies (mostly qualitative, narrative studies) on racism in Singapore. Is all this because Singapore is a matured multicultural society?

A recent large-scale survey of 2,000 Singaporeans (Mathews, 2016) tells another story. The survey reveals that two thirds of Singaporeans are reluctant to discuss racism or racial issues because such race talk would cause unnecessary tension. Even almost half to two thirds of them are not supportive of publicly-available information that could display racial disparities in social issues such as educational attainment and crime (Mathews, 2016 cited in Chew, 2018). A recent comment of Janil Puthucheary (the Senior Minister of State in the Ministry of Communications and Information and the Ministry of Education) resonates with the survey finding: “[…] people are hesitant and afraid to discuss race relations because of the fear of being seen as racist. They are also afraid of offending other races […]” (The Straits Times, 2016). On another occasion, he also commented “Do we shy away and pretend this problem doesn’t exist? Or do we accept the fact that we should work on this together? […] how to engage, how to talk about it [racial issues], and how to learn is actually a very positive result” (The Straits Times, 2017).

As I noted earlier, school is a miniature of the whole society. As Irby and Clark stressed the importance of race talk at school, which echoes the Singaporean Minister’s comment on the need for race talk in the whole society, using race-specific language with open mind is the first step towards resolution of racial issues at school and in society. This is the pathway to avoid the pitfall that frames racism as “out of my control” and reduces systemic racial problems to personal remedies such as “being nice” as highlighted in Irby and Clark’s article.

Trust in emotional ecology

Peter Demerath’s article, titled “The emotional ecology of school improvement culture,” represents a crosscutting theme of the three articles commented above – i.e., strengthening diverse agents through voice, talk, conversation and engagement. At the same time, Demerath focuses more on delving deeply into how teachers and school leaders talk about their “emotions.” He illuminates a set of interlocking feedback loops (i.e. empathy, optimism, motivation, confidence, trust) that create and circulate emotionally charged meanings that, in turn, shape school improvement culture. Given the limited space for this commentary, I wish to focus on one of the feedback loops – i.e., trust in shared leadership – because “trust” is a core part of any form and function of school organizational relations (Bryk and Schneider, 2004). Demerath shows how relational trust can be fostered through shared leadership, which is well illustrated in the following observation in a secondary public school in a socio-economically disadvantaged urban area:

Indeed, during a meeting of the school’s “College Readiness” group in October, 2012, the principal came in for the last 15 minutes and sat down at the end of the table. When he entered one of the
As Demerath notes, the principal’s silence is absolute endorsement of teachers’ leadership, implying his confidence and trust on teachers’ work and expertise. Given that teachers are entrusted and empowered, they would be more likely to regulate and release their emotions in a positive form (e.g. empathy, optimism, confidence). In other words, it seems that relational trust among school members functions as a “pressure valve” for teachers to regulate and release work-related emotions in a way to cultivate school improvement culture.

The remaining question is, how can we generate relational trust at school? Demerath’s answer is simple but significant: “come together, talk, and listen. Conversation is slow […] [but] have to sit and listen again and again to conversations […]” This answer powerfully reminds me of a statement from Simon Sinek’s (2014) book, titled Leaders eat last: “Trust is not formed through a screen, it is formed across a table. It takes a handshake to bind humans […] and no technology yet can replace that. There is no such thing as virtual trust” (p. 111).

**Turnaround is rarely pure and never simple**

Ann Ishimaru’s article, “Re-imagining turnaround: Family and community leadership in school improvement for educational justice,” brilliantly complements Mitra’s and Shirazi’s articles. While the latter two articles revisit the relatively overlooked agent of change inside the school for school improvement (i.e. minoritized students), Ishimaru finds other neglected agents of change outside the school – i.e., families (parents) and community leaders in a low SES community. Ishimaru also places the potential of family and community as change agents in the challenging context of neoliberal education reforms.

She proposes “educational justice” referring to “the community-determined educational aims that move beyond test-score based assessments of effectiveness” by problematizing the term of “equity” used in the neoliberal accountability context because the term “has been taken up in practice as a narrow aim of achieving test-score outcomes that do not vary by race […]” We know that this kind of a narrow definition of equity is widely used by policy makers in the process of policy formulation. Notably, OECD has actively disseminated narrow testing metrics as an equity measure through its policy infrastructure (e.g. PISA reports). In addition, pseudo-scientific reports generated by think tanks such as McKinsey & Company and the Grattan Institute have reinforced the influence of OECD on global education policy discourses. Policy makers seem to not just buy the shiny fishing lure of narrow standardized test metrics as a measure of equity, but also formulate educational policy based on those numbers in the metrics. This trend is particularly salient in Anglo-Saxon and East Asian countries. We all know that when Shanghai was ranked at number one in the 2009 PISA, U.S. Education Secretary Arne Duncan said, “This is an absolute wake-up call for America” (NBC News, 2010). Three years later, the former federal Education Minister Christopher Pyne described Australia’s position in the PISA rankings in 2012 as “a serious wake-up call” for the education system (ABC News, 2013). The former UK Education Secretary Michael Gove’s perspective is notable: he called Andreas Schleicher, the OECD architect of PISA, “the most important man in English education” (Gove, 2013).

In this regard, in the game of international student achievement comparisons, the winner is not the low-income or minority student or their parents and communities. There are several problems in using narrowly defined equity. First, as Ishimaru’s article implies, it confines the boundary of our “aim talk” of education (see also Noddings, 2003). For example, if teacher practices and school leadership are only assessed by test scores,
the contributions of excellent teachers and leaders whose work improves student non-cognitive outcomes (such as well-being) are invisible.

A second problem is that narrowly defined equity ignores the importance of local contexts, an issue highlighted by Ishimaru’s paper. In a recent PISA report (OECD, 2012), for example, South Korea is categorized as a highly equitable system because of the relatively small variance in PISA scores explained by family SES and the narrow gap between the scores of the top 10 percent and the bottom 10 percent. However, this is mainly because almost every family in Korea invests family resources on kids’ education regardless of their SES. Low SES families spend a substantial proportion of household income for private tutoring (cf. Choi and Choi, 2016), which is why the gap in PISA scores between the top 10 percent and the bottom 10 percent in South Korea is very narrow. Furthermore, although the score gap is narrow, high- and low-income students go to different universities, which significantly affects their socio-economic future because of the role of Korean universities in socio-economic reproduction (Lee, 2018; Seth, 2002).

Third, even when it makes sense to use narrow measures of equity in a specific context, the way OECD presents equity can mislead our discussions of school improvement. For example, variation in testing scores explained by family SES in East Asian societies is relatively smaller than other countries, so they are regarded as equitable schooling systems. However, equitable schooling systems can be better measured by the moderating effect of school quality on the direct effect of family SES on educational outcomes. For example, if schools can significantly reduce the negative SES effects on educational outcomes, then it can be said that they are more equitable. Unfortunately, OECD reports do not reflect this aspect.

Ishimaru’s article shows how we can possibly pave the new pathway towards more authentic equity-based education reforms. Like other authors in this JEA special edition, she pays special attention to the “voice and talk” of parent and community members as leaders who can reshape the process of school turnaround. Let me conclude my comment on Ishimaru’s inspiring study by using Oscar Wilde’s quotation: “The truth is rarely pure and never simple.” I would say, “Turnaround is rarely pure and never simple.”

A missing link: culturally responsive instructional leadership

“Humanizing school communities of practice: Culturally responsive leadership in the shaping curriculum and instruction,” by Stefanie Marshall and Muhammad Khalifa, explores an important but under-researched area in the school leadership literature – i.e., linking instructional leadership to culturally responsive leadership. As Marshall and Khalifa correctly point out, the two types of school leadership are dualistically described in the existing literature. Considering possible theoretical and empirical interfaces between instructional leadership and culturally responsive leadership, cross-fertilization between the two is much needed.

Instructional leadership has been integral to education reforms, given its strong association with student achievement (cf. Hallinger, 2005; Robinson et al., 2008). In other words, the need for instructional leadership in school improvement has been reinforced by highly rationalized global education discourses, emphasizing accountability for student learning within the “chain of command.” In many countries, instructional leadership is regarded as a policy instrument for school improvement. In this regard, instructional leadership can be called “global syntax” in making sense of what and how leadership practices ought to be embodied in school improvement.

At the same time, the local interpretation of instructional leadership across different schools and schooling systems – which can be called “local semantics” – appears to result in varying (or even contrasting) effects of instructional leadership on student learning outcomes. Research shows that there are variations in terms of how instructional leadership
is interpreted and enacted across different organizational and broader cultural contexts (cf. Lee and Hallinger, 2012) and thereby discrepant effects of instructional leadership on student achievement (Lee et al., 2012; Walker and Ko, 2011)[3]. This seems to be because instructional leadership is a multidimensional construct (Hallinger, 2005; Hallinger and Murphy, 1985; OECD, 2009) whereas different dimensions of instructional leadership are either articulated or attenuated in the process of the local semantics (Lee et al., 2012; Lee and Dimmock, 1999), depending on local school contexts or broader societal cultures. We may speculate that typical instructional leadership practices – e.g. supervision of instruction such as “actions to directly supervise teachers’ instruction and learning outcomes” (OECD, 2009, p. 195) – may not work properly at schools with changing demographics, including students with ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds. It should also be noted that in some East Asian school systems, principals’ instructional supervision, monitoring and observation in class may be interpreted as intrusion on teachers’ autonomy because teachers’ instruction in class is traditionally seen as the territory of teachers’ control (cf. Lee and Kim, 2016).

To enact instructional leadership on the ground more effectively, I think that culturally responsive leadership needs to be infused in instructional leadership. This is since culturally responsive leadership places more emphasis on context-specific leadership practices by reflecting on diverse cultures and local school communities to create more inclusive school environments for all students. Empirical investigations on such infusion and interdependence between instructional leadership and culturally responsive leadership are richly offered in Marshall and Khalifa’s study.

**Bricks of trust for the “broken bridges”**

The longitudinal social network analysis of school leaders in an urban school district by Yi-Hwa Liou and Alan Daly (Broken bridges: A social network perspective on urban school leadership) presents an important but surprising finding: “over time high school principals have decreasing access to social capital and are typically occupying peripheral positions in the social network. The high school principals’ perception of innovative climate across the district decreases over time.”

What was happening to the high school principals? Why were they losing social ties and becoming more isolated over time? Although the quantitative research, given its nature, does not tell us a deep story about the questions, we can find an important puzzle piece of the full picture from the network analysis. The participants in the study were asked to respond to the following question: “Who do you turn to for advice about implementing the Common Core State Standards?” Note that this is a question about “advice” network, which is significantly influenced by “trust” among network actors (cf. Daly et al., 2014). More often than not, principals are tempted to manage things “in-house” rather than constantly asking for support and advice […] [that] may risk sending signals of [their] weak leadership” to the central office (Page, 2014, pp. 60-61). In a school district environment where trust between principals and central office administrators is not established, such self-helping or self-managing behaviors would be more salient. The paucity (or absence) of trust among the leaders in the case school district of Liou and Daly’s study could be indirectly gauged in the following finding: “The coupling of reduced reciprocated ties [i.e. mutually connected ties in seeking advice] and reported perception of the [innovate] climate becoming less open to risk taking may also inhibit the formation of ties [of the high school principals].” Drawing on this finding, I speculate that the “increased isolation and reduced reciprocated ties” of the high school principals are because of the lack of trust. This may be rooted in a complex interplay between factors such as intention not to disclose low confidence in leadership, pressure to impress central
office administrators, and competitive school district environments as a quasi-market (cf. Page, 2014). Indeed, this phenomenon is also observed in Australia:

Are principals having the conversations they need? So how do school systems support the work of Australian school principals and create opportunities for authentic conversations? And how do school principals (at different stages of their careers) make use of that support? In most school systems, supervision and support for school principals is provided by the same person – and many principals have indicated that they are always conscious of this when they meet with their supervisors and senior managers. Principals’ associations and education unions and individual principals have also commented that principals’ meetings may not always be good forums for professional or personal disclosure. *Who do principals prefer to turn to for advice and support when they are struggling with leadership issues?* (Page, 2016, p. 1, italics added)

To rebuild the “broken bridges” as in the title of Liou and Daly’s article, we should note that relationships between school leaders and central office administrators are not always conducive to authentic and open conversations. I, thus, think that the bricks of trust matter for rebuilding the broken bridges.

**Looking forward to the new directions**

My unexpected encounter of the police officer in a New Orleans secondary school in 2005 is no longer news to Koreans. Since 2012, the second largest metropolitan school district in Korea has allocated law enforcement officers to public schools. The former US president Obama praised the Korean schooling system several times. One of the reasons was its almost perfect high school completion rate as opposed to the persistent problem of high school dropout rate in the US. But if we visit typical Korean high school classrooms, it is not difficult to find students sleeping during teachers’ instruction. This kind of classroom scene is normalized for many Koreans. Even most teachers do not intervene to wake those sleeping students during class hours. Notably, these sleeping students are not different from dropouts in US high schools. Even though they are physically in schools, they have nothing to do with learning and education. They are, in essence, dropouts because they give up their learning and their teachers give up on them. The Korean secondary schooling system is regarded as highly effective, highly efficient, and highly equitable, measured by OECD PISA (cf. Jensen, 2012). But deep inside the system, I see many commonalities between the so-called high-performing system and the US secondary schooling system.

How can we change? The seven articles in this stellar edition shed light on possible pathways that need to be taken. Thus, the challenge is to build on and extend a deeper understanding of voice, context, and the meaning and measure of equity in looking at urban secondary schools around the world. As I noted at the beginning of this commentary and have reiterated throughout, there are no quick fixes, but this issue provides additional insights to begin to shift both local and national conversations.

Moosung Lee  
*University of Canberra, Canberra, Australia*

**Notes**

1. See Kathleen Nolan’s (2011) *Police in the hallways* for the debates.
2. The invisible gorilla is a cognitive psychology phenomenon that when people are solely or too much focused on one particular thing, they easily overlook something important and obvious, taking place simultaneously.
3. Notably, Robinson *et al.*'s (2008) meta-analysis suggests that although the effect size of instructional leadership on student achievement is the highest among other types of leadership, there is a variation in the effect size of instructional leadership, even including some negative effects, depending on school contexts.
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Student voice in secondary schools: the possibility for deeper change

Dana Mitra
Department of Education Policy Studies, Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to consider the role of student voice in secondary school reform.
Design/methodology/approach – Through a literature review, it defines the concept of student voice within bodies of research on youth participation internationally.
Findings – It notes the ways the USA is distinct and lagging behind. It then looks at the broadening scope of ways that young people have become involved in change efforts. It considers ways that student voice can deepen implementation efforts and strengthen classroom practice. It breaks this discussion into: outcomes for classroom instruction, organizational change, and the relationship between student voice and power. The paper ends with a discussion of the importance of attending to issues of power in youth–adult relationships, including ways to avoid the co-optation of young people.
Originality/value – This paper reviews the most recent work showing how student voice can impact change, with a particular focus when possible on urban secondary schools to fit with this special issue. It updates a previous review of the field conducted ten years ago (Mitra, 2006). Before beginning this review, however, it is important to understand how student voice varies across global contexts.
Keywords Students, Secondary education, School change, School reform, Leadership, Organizational change
Paper type Conceptual paper

To address the alienation of young people and to strengthen school improvement efforts overall, a growing effort is focusing on increasing student voice in schools. These reforms are needed because adolescents frequently describe their school experiences as anonymous places in which they have no voice and no one cares about them (Cook-Sather et al., 2015; Earls, 2003; Heath and McLaughlin, 1993; Pope, 2001). In fact, alienation results in the majority of students being disengaged from high schools (Cothran and Ennis, 2000). Disengaged students attend school less, have lower self-concepts, achieve less academically and are more likely to drop out or be discharged from school (Fullan, 2016; Lukes, 2015; Noguera, 2002).

While most school reforms seek to change students, student voice places students as agents in the reform process. Through active engagement in change, students see that they can be knowledge creators, not just receivers. The term student voice can range from the most basic level of youth sharing their opinions on problems and potential solutions: to allowing young people to collaborate with adults to address the problems in their schools; to youth taking the lead on seeking change (Cook-Sather 2002; Fielding 2001; Levin 2000; Mitra, 2007a). Other research uses terms such as youth–adult partnership, youth participatory action research (YPAR), or pupil participation to study similar concepts (Camino, 2000; McIntyre and Rudduck, 2007; Zeldin, 2004). All types of student voice, from limited input to substantial leadership, are considerably different from the types of roles that students typically perform in schools (such as planning school dances and holding pep rallies).

Dana Mitra’s (see Figure 1) pyramid of student voice (adapted from Mitra, 2005) a typology of three levels of student voice activities – listening, collaboration and leadership. The higher a group moves on the pyramid of student voice, the greater the leadership of
Defining student voice

This paper reviews the most recent work showing how student voice can impact change, with a particular focus when possible on urban secondary schools to fit with this special issue as the breadth and depth of research in this review will show, the field of student voice has established itself as a legitimate focus of study, and therefore “existence proof” studies are not as needed. It updates a previous review of the field conducted ten years ago (Mitra, 2006). Before beginning this review, however, it is important to understand how student voice varies across global contexts.

In European nations, student voice has been reinforced by formal policies and national educational structures. Called “youth participation” in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), Articles 12 through 15 discuss youth participation as series of rights, including access to information, expression of views and freedom to form a collective organization (The United Nations, 1989). The CRC highlights the need to bolster the capacity of young people and adults to enable child participation and the need for strong standards and accountability to guide this process, and European policies have aligned with these goals.

Nationwide curricula, testing and other educational policy structures increase the mandates for youth participation in most European nations (Lundy, 2007; Quinn and Owen, 2014; Rose and Shevlin, 2008). UNESCO publishes regularly on youth participation in educational development and change (UNESCO, 2016). The New Zealand Ministry of Education states a vision for student voice on its website focused on involving students in
assessment and change (Cook-Sather, 2014). The Ministry of Education in Ontario offers a deep and comprehensive program of youth voice, including a Ministry Student Advisory Council and related projects that prioritize student experience in provincial government (Courtney, 2014). For example, the Swedish national curriculum includes formal standards for children to express views in matters that concern their learning (Sheridan and Samuelsson, 2001). Teachers in Swedish schools are encouraged to work “together with the pupils develop rules for working and participating in their own group” (Skolverket, 2011, p. 14).

Despite the formal structures that signal the encouragement (and requirement) of youth participation, the implementation of youth participation into practice has occurred begrudgingly in many contexts, such as the UK and Australia. While authentic and experiencing examples of youth participation are present in the UK more so than just about anywhere else, often such participation is merely tokenistic or symbolic rather than manifesting as a true act of collaboration with young people (Fielding, 2006; Lundy, 2007). In many cases, poor implementation results from adults not knowing how to partner with young people effectively; other instances result in a lack of shared discussion of the purpose of such activities. Regardless, when poor implementation does occur, tokenistic or symbolic youth participation can be damaging to young people. The promise of voice without actually being heard can lead to increased alienation and disconnection from schooling (Fielding, 2004; Mitra, 2009).

In marked contrast to European nations, the USA lacks any formal policy to spur youth participation. While the democratic foundation of the USA rests on the idea that participation is the fundamental right of citizenship (Ochoa-Becker et al., 2001), many US policies inhibit the voices of young people. The USA is soon to become the only nation that has not ratified the CRC. For example, it is illegal for young people under the age of 18 to serve on a voting decision-making board in the state of Pennsylvania. In the global push toward academic accountability, US schools are spending less time fostering democracy and civic engagement (Fitchett and Heafner, 2010) especially at the elementary level (VanFossen, 2005).

Despite these barriers, the promise of student voice in high school reform efforts persists. The most common framework for US student voice research emphasizes the connection student voice activities with the concept of youth–adult partnership. Youth–adult partnerships are defined as relationships in which both youth and adults have the potential to contribute to decision-making processes, to learn from one another and to promote change (Jones and Perkins, 2004; Mitra, 2009; Wu et al., 2014). Collaboration comes with an expectation of youth sharing in the responsibility for the vision of the group, the activities planned and the group process that facilitates the execution of these activities. Youth–adult partnership efforts tend to focus on examining the process and outcomes of engaging young people in shaping the organizations and schools that are intended to serve them (Mitra, 2009; Pittman et al., 2000). Similar to the work of Michael Fielding (2001) and others in the UK, US student voice initiatives can lead to positive organizational outcomes, such as the development of standing committees on curriculum planning and staff development (Mitra, 2004). However, such activities tend to be more limited in scope than examples from the UK. Few such activities are youth-led or youth-initiated.

The remainder of this review considers how young people can impact the work of school reform when adults learn how to lead in a youth–adult partnership and the potential pitfalls of student voice efforts. It breaks this discussion into: outcomes for classroom instruction, organizational change and the relationship between student voice and power.

Outcomes for classroom change

Rethinking instruction

A large body of research documents the value of student voice initiatives improving classroom practice (including Cushman, 2000; Daniels et al., 2001; Mitra and Serriere, 2012;
Kincheloe, 2007; Niemi et al., 2015; Robinson, 2014). Often, this form of student voice is termed “consultation,” which is defined as teachers partnering with students to discuss teaching and learning, including inviting students to provide feedback on instructional styles, curriculum content, assessment opportunities and other issues in the classroom (McIntyre and Rudduck, 2007; Rudduck, 2007). Research has found that students can improve academically when teachers construct their classrooms in ways that value student voice – especially when students are given the power to work with their teachers to improve curriculum and instruction (Oldfather, 1995; Rudduck and Flutter, 2000).

Consultation can increase the relevance of the curriculum, including self-directed learning opportunities for students, the need to explore connecting students’ part-time jobs with their coursework and the desire to engage in less specialized coursework in their final years of high school so that they have a wider range of post-secondary options (Lee and Zimmerman, 1999; Rudduck, 2007; Soohoo, 1993). Consultation also can provide a better meta-cognitive understanding of students own learning, including helping students to gain a stronger sense of their own abilities and educating students about the differences between learning styles, multiple intelligences and emotional intelligence (Lee and Zimmerman, 1999; Johnston and Nicholls, 1995; Mitra, 2004). Researchers have found that an increase in a teacher’s focus on student experiences and learning styles also can increase student interest in schoolwork and learning (Daniels et al., 2001).

Inquiry as the process for change
YPAR looks at how young people can collect data and engage in critical inquiry that questions fundamental habits and patterns of school and seeks to identify new possibilities. YPAR focuses on three key elements: youth participation as co-researchers, projects that aim toward public impact and critical perspectives on inequality (Cammarota and Fine, 2008; Checkoway and Richards-Schuster, 2006; Colatos and Morrell, 2003; Frost, 2008; Mitra and McCormick, 2017; Mitra et al., 2014; Ozer, 2016; Rubin et al., 2017; Rubin and Jones, 2007).

Given the focus on injustice, YPAR can be considered controversial when conducted within school classrooms. Indeed, community organizations have flourished as settings that nurture youth activism (Kirshner, 2015).

Related to YPAR but focusing on younger students, Mitra and Serriere (2012) define critical inquiry as a practice of asking critical questions, gathering data, reflection and action as a process for how to conduct civic engagement. By engaging in critical inquiry processes, students can explore the world around them, question injustices and impact their surroundings. Rather than just working on becoming adults, young people already have the ability to engage in personally-relevant and critical inquiry that can make a difference in the broader world (Mayes et al., 2016; Osler and Starkey, 2005). Critical inquiry can serve a purpose of making a difference. Layers of inquiry can support one another as teachers engage in inquiries on environmental stewardship, social justice and student-driven change.

Student questions can spur schoolwide initiatives. For example, students at Dewey Elementary noticed that the teacher’s lounge did not have a composting option. They also were concerned that breakfast milks were taken to the classroom where recycling bins were not provided. Third grade students developed inquiries based on questions of why teachers did not compost in the teacher’s lounge and of why recycling was not available in classrooms. They, then, designed student-led actions to regularly recycle and compost in these spaces. This work shows how strong civic engagement initiatives often have layers of inquiry processes that incorporate the work of students, teachers and administrators. Important in these processes are how to scaffold earners who were new to the process and to value deliberation as a part of the process. The work also emphasized the importance of preserving public spaces for the celebration
of critical inquiry. Public ceremonies, assemblies, and media coverage can reinforce to students the value of their work and amplified its importance both to the students themselves and to their teachers and peers.

Outcomes for organizational change
Research from student voice efforts and also from youth involvement in nonprofit and after-school programs finds that youth input can improve organizational visioning and strategic planning for change (Brasof and Spector, 2016; Kirshner et al., 2003; Eccles and Gootman, 2002; Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin et al., 2005). In particular, young people often are willing to raise issues that adults might not see or avoid. Students not succeeding in the current system, including those failing subjects or at risk of dropping out, can offer particularly insightful advice on problems with school structure and culture (Smyth, 2007). Struggling students tend to cite structural and classroom procedures that hamper learning, the lack of opportunities to build caring relationships with adults, and blatant discrimination as being the actual problems (Colatos and Morrell, 2003; Nieto, 1994; Soohoo, 1993).

Student voice efforts can lead to increased interest in institutionalizing student input into the decision-making process, including the development of standing committees on curriculum planning, staff development and discipline committees (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2004). A notable effort at the state level in the USA is the work of the Pritchard Committee in Kentucky. A student-led organization consistently has been a force in mobilizing young people to critique and to influence educational policy in the state of Kentucky (Student Voice Team, 2012).

Recent research has shown the range of organizational change processes possible from including young people as partners, such as teacher assessments in New York City (Sussman, 2013), youth councils and youth activism in Philadelphia (Conner and Cosner, 2016) participatory budgeting in Boston (Augsberger et al., 2017), school redesign in the Netherlands (Burke and König, 2016), municipal councils in Israel (Nir and Perry-Hazan, 2016), youth advisory boards in US child welfare systems (Havlick et al., 2016), and community art hubs in Canada (Hauseman, 2016).

Improve student learning and agency
Student voice is directly related to academic performance, with some emerging research linking GPA with youth activism (Conner and Slattery, 2014). Toshalis and Nakkula (2012) carefully reviewed the body of research on how student agency improves self-determination, self-regulation, student engagement, motivation, competence beliefs and stereotype threat. In my own previous research, I have further identified the most salient outcomes of youth participation in student voice initiatives – agency, belonging, competence, deliberation and (civic) efficacy (Mitra, 2004; Mitra and Serriere, 2012). These outcomes align with prior research in the field of positive youth development (Eccles et al., 1993; Lerner et al., 2005; Klein et al., 2006). By understanding the developmental needs of adolescents and how institutions and organizations might meet these needs, the intention of a youth development perspective is to focus researchers, policymakers and practitioners on youth preparation for improved learning and agency (Villarruel et al., 2003).

Deepen implementation
Involving young people also can improve the quality of implementation of reform efforts. Students can serve as important sources of information that otherwise are not available regarding implementation and experiences of educational change (Kushman, 1997; Rudduck et al., 1997; Thorkildsen, 1994). Student information can be particularly useful for
reshaping reform efforts when they are slowly or shallowly implemented ("..."). Scholars in New Zealand, for example, have studied student critique of the new curricular framework standards. Relatedly, US research has examined ways that student critique can shift and deepen the work of the common core (Kornbluh et al., 2015). Other research as looked at ways to implement and critique sex education in Kenya (Cobbett et al., 2013).

Since effective implementation of reform benefits from participation by and acceptance from those most affected (McLaughlin, 1991), efforts to actively involve students can lead to improved student understanding of the educational changes in their schools (Mitra, 2004). Student voice also relates to a growing focus on student-centered learning. A cohort of states are taking the lead on changing graduation requirement so they are based on learning competencies rather than Carnegie Units (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013; Sturgis, 2016). Many of these states are connecting this focus on competencies with personalization. In Vermont, for example, mandates that all students in grades 7–12 have a Personalized Learning Plan to meet competencies. This plan could include blended learning, internships, dual enrollment, independent studies and other broader interpretations of learning, with the focus on student goals and post-secondary plans driving how to encourage student engagement and investment in learning.

To increase community and parent understanding of the legislation, Vermont’s Agency of Education paired with Up for Learning, a statewide nonprofit that focuses on helping schools deepen learning for young people through youth–adult partnerships. The organization developed two key initiatives to improve implementation of the law. First, a project called Communicating School Redesign (2017) consisted of student-led teams that designed communication campaigns to teach their local communities about the legislation. Second, the organization partnered with young people and a production company to develop a music video that taught the concepts of personalized learning through song (Up for Learning, 2017). The youth–adult partnership team then created dialogue guides to scaffold community discussions of the video.

Students also can help to mobilize teachers and parents in support of change (Levin, 2000). Young people can serve as a bridge of communication and explanation between the school and families reluctant to interact with school personnel. One initiative in Northern California focused on mobilizing the parents of the first-generation Latino families to take a more active role in interacting with the high school and demanding quality educational services (Mitra, 2006). While the effort was designed as a parent mobilization initiative, the adult organizer soon learned that the parents lacked capacity and interest in participating in such an initiative. Instead, the students proved to be the actors who could articulate the concerns of their families and increase communication and understanding between their families and schools.

**Enhance school culture**

In addition to improvements at the classroom level, student voice efforts also have led to improvements in the culture of high schools. When asking student opinions, a common theme across several studies is students’ desires for positive, strong relationships with their teachers as opposed to the isolation and lack of respect and appreciation that students reported they often feel (Lynch and Lodge, 2002; Phelan et al., 1992; Poplin and Weeres, 1992; Scales et al., 2004; Yonezawa and Jones, 2007). Student voice initiatives therefore tend to highlight the importance of teacher–student relationships and the overall culture of a school.

Often student input can lead to an increased focus on improving school climate, such as improvements in advisory period structures and life skill curricula (Fielding, 2001). Students at Whitman High School in Northern California, for example, took teachers on tours of their neighborhood, including where they lived, worked, hung out on street corners
and where gangs staked out their territories (Mitra, 2003). Students felt that they truly did come to know their teachers better, and they believed that teachers came to better understand them as well. Teachers and students reported that they found the experience valuable, commenting that they developed a better understanding of student experience.

**Spark teacher learning**

Student voice can also influence teacher training, and ongoing staff development. Alison Cook-Sather’s (2001, 2002) research, for example, has examined ways for student voice to inform the practice of teachers in training, including encouraging teachers to rethink who is an authority of educational practice. When teachers and teachers-to-be learn how to listen to their students, teachers began to remove the stereotypes and labels that can be so easily attached to students. Alison Cook-Sather, Cathy Bovill, Ulrika Bergmark and others (Bergmark and Westman, 2016; Bovill, 2013; Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Cook-Sather, 2014) have turned the focus of their work more recently higher educational partnerships between faculty and students aimed at improving instruction.

**Student voice and power**

The intention of student voice is a restructuring of relationships, pushing against the expected power dynamics to create “radical collegiality” (Fielding, 2004) – creating counter-normative ways of acting between young people and adults. The positioning of young people must be a critical focus of how adults interact within partnership, and how young people view their roles affects any work that can be accomplished (Balakrishnan and Claiborne, 2017; Conner and Rosen, 2015; McNae and Cowie 2017; Mayes, 2016, 2017; Mitra, 2005, 2008; Nelson, 2016; York and Kirshner, 2015).

A growing body of scholarship has focused directly on issues of power in student voice efforts. One group of scholars examined the issue in a recent volume of the *International Journal of Student Voice*, noteworthy in its launching in 2016 as the field of student voice work continues to expand internationally (Mayes et al., 2016). The collective considers how high school students, teachers and researchers think of power in student voice by focusing on how concepts of power can make visible and mask dynamics between young people and adults. The pieces stress that how we conceptualize power affects what we see, feel, and do in work on student voice.

When student voice is poorly designed and tokenistic, students may be disempowered and have reduced self-concept when participating in student voice activities. Attempts to involve students in school reform efforts can be clumsy and poorly defined. A big reason for the reluctance of adults to increase student voice is that the institutionalized roles of teachers and students in school contradict much of what an adult-youth partnership is about. Within the walls of schools, adult and youth very often fall back to their expected teacher/student roles, even when they are intentionally trying to foster new types of relationships (Mitra, 2005). This problem of poorly designed student voice efforts raises concerns regarding the ethics of student voice – a topic that is in need of greater research but is particularly discussed by Bragg (2007), Fielding (2004), Mayes (2016, 2017) and Silva (2003).

Scholars also have raised concerns of the co-optation of student voice in ways in which students are not authentic participants but instead symbols that the school, district, and/or state is doing “something.” This issue is particularly the case in Europe, Australia, Canada and other places that mandate youth participation on decision-making boards. Often mandates cause implementation to occur at the lowest level if those involved do not embrace and understand the value of the change. Michael Fielding (2004) argues that many student voice efforts are problematic because schools co-opt student voices through a process of “managerialism” rather than learning from them. Emily Nelson (2016)
conceptualizes student voice as a contested terrain of power in which young people and researchers co-produce “truths” through contingent and recursive tactical contests that are played by groups with different yet also mutual powers. Other researchers have raised similar concerns about governmentally sanctioned student voice efforts in the UK that claim to improve pupil performance by building local partnerships, but in practice fail to include students in the process despite the rhetoric (Whitehead and Clough, 2004). A related body of research looks carefully at the ethics of involving young people in activism, organizational change and research (Bourke, 2017; Cook-Sather, 2014; Cowie and Khoo, 2017; O’Neill, 2014, Sinha, 2017; Wall, 2017). Consideration must be given of the purpose of involving young people and the tokenization of youth.

Research also argues for the embracing of a broader sense of what constitutes voice, including poetry, hip-hop and protest (Mockler and Groundwater-Smith, 2014). Youth radio can also be a powerful form of youth pedagogy and voice (Chávez and Soep, 2005). Other research is looking at ways that social media can amplify youth perspectives and increase mobilization and activism (Kornbluh, 2015; Kornbluh et al., 2016).

Other research raises concern about which students participate in organizational change – who can have voice in educational research, policy and practice (Bragg, 2007; Fielding, 2006; Mayes, 2016, 2017). Many scholars have called for greater diversity of ethnicity (Cook-Sather, 2014), gender (Groundwater-Smith, 2011), and ability (Flynn, 2014; Pazey and DeMatthews, 2016). Research on indigenous populations calls into questions values of voice and empowerment when juxtaposed with cultural values and beliefs (Hynds et al. 2014; Kidman, 2014).

Looking ahead
Improving secondary schools, like democracy itself, does not happen by chance. Historically, the USA is rooted in a tradition of action, and its system of public school was founded on a democratic and civic mission. In a climate that pushes schools to obey, master facts and compete, this paper shows how young people can be agents of change in schools. Even when the work might not be enough to transform injustices into justices, schools can be sites of engaged communities of critical agency, and administrators can be the champions of this work.

While not the scope of this paper, greater attention and training is needed to help adults to become better supporters of student voice efforts – how to lead while getting out of the way (Mitra, 2003). Mitra (2007b) focus on conditions of student voice that can enable success. These include cultivating trust and respect, celebrating successes, teaching how schools work, creating a flat power dynamic, building and inclusive community and signaling partnership through visual cues. Organizations modeling, these types of trainings and approach include Up for Learning in Vermont, Youth on Board in Boston, and the Neutral Zone in Michigan.

Policy in the USA must catch up with international policy and practice. The institutionalizing of student voice as a right is needed to bring the USA into the international conversations of youth participation in global settings. Practitioner organizations could have student voice as a part of its policy platforms and include the concepts in lobbying and advocacy work at state and federal levels.

The field also needs comprehensive, well-funded studies that can connect student voice to outcomes. Examinations of indicators of growth for individuals connected to achievement and developmental indicators are still needed. Organizational studies of educational change and the value-added nature of student voice work are also needed. Innovative methodologies including social network analyses (Ozer, 2016) and visual methodologies (Wall, 2017) could help move the field forward.
Sustaining good work, the conundrum of reform in general, is a particular challenge of student voice work due to the re-shifting of power balances and the inherent counter-normative nature of youth–adult partnerships compared to traditional teaching settings. Relatedly, ongoing work on helping adults to become partners of youth and attention to the nature of the relationships will continue to be needed.

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**Further reading**


**Corresponding author**

Dana Mitra can be contacted at: dana@psu.edu

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The emotional ecology of school improvement culture
Charged meanings and common moral purpose

Peter Demerath
Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy and Development,
University of Minnesota System, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Abstract
Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to understand how high-performing schools develop and sustain improvement culture. While school culture has consistently been identified as an essential feature of high-performing schools, many of the ways in which culture shapes specific improvement efforts remain unclear. The paper draws on new research from social cognitive neuroscience and the anthropology and sociology of emotion to account for the relative impact of various meanings within school culture and how school commitment is enacted.

Design/methodology/approach – The analysis here draws on three years of ethnographic data collected in Harrison High School (HHS) in an urban public school district in River City, a large metropolitan area in the Midwestern USA. Though the school’s surrounding community had been socioeconomically depressed for many years, Harrison was selected for the study largely because of its steady improvement trajectory: in December, 2013, it was deemed a “Celebration” school under the state’s Multiple Measurement Rating system.

The paper focuses on a period of time between 2013 and 2015, when the school was struggling to implement and localize a district-mandated push-in inclusion policy.

Findings – Study data suggest that the school’s eventual success in localizing the new inclusion policy was due in large part to a set of core interlocking feedback loops that generated specific emotionally charged meanings which guided its priorities, practices and direction. Specifically, the feedback loops explain how staff members and leaders generated and sustained empathy for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, optimism in their capabilities and motivation to help them learn and flourish. Furthermore they show how school leaders and staff members generated and sustained confidence and trust in their colleagues’ abilities to collaboratively learn and solve problems.

Originality/value – The model of the school’s emotional ecology presented here connects two domains of educational practice that are frequently analyzed separately: teaching and learning, and organization and leadership. The paper shows how several key features of high-performing schools are actually made and re-made through the everyday practices of leaders and staff members, including relational trust, academic optimism and collective efficacy. In sum, the charged meanings described here contributed to leaders’ and staff members’ commitment to the school, its students and each other – and what Florek (2016) has referred to as their “common moral purpose.”

Keywords Change, Organizational culture, Leadership, Beliefs, Commitment, Secondary schools

This paper examines the emotional ecology underlying the improvement culture of a “beating the odds” US urban high school. Using an anthropological approach and ethnographic methods, the paper identifies six core interlocking feedback loops that generated specific emotionally charged meanings which powered the school’s improvement efforts. The analysis here draws on three years of ethnographic data collected in Harrison High School (HHS) in an urban public school district in River City, a large metropolitan area in the Midwestern USA. Though the school’s surrounding community had been socioeconomically depressed for many years, Harrison was selected for the study largely because of its steady improvement trajectory: from 2007 to 2013 it had six consecutive years of improving scores on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment in reading, and was deemed a “Celebration” school under the state’s Multiple Measurement Rating system in December 2013. The paper focuses on a period of time between 2013 and 2015, when the school was struggling to implement and localize a district-mandated push-in
inclusion policy. Throughout this timeframe the district was characterized by a directive administrative style, and school leaders and staff members operated in a climate of considerable fear. This atmosphere threw the charged meanings and improvement efforts under study into sharp relief and amendable to study using ethnographic methods.

The paper argues that the school’s eventual success in localizing the new inclusion policy was due in large part to a set of core interlocking feedback loops that generated specific emotionally charged meanings which guided its priorities, practices and direction. Specifically, the feedback loops explain how staff members and leaders generated and sustained empathy for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, optimism in their capabilities and motivation to help them learn and flourish. Furthermore they show how school leaders and staff members generated and sustained confidence and trust in their colleagues’ abilities to collaboratively learn and solve problems. All of these processes contributed to leaders’ and staff members’ common moral purpose and underlay how they enacted their continuing commitment to the school, its students and each other.

School improvement and school culture
While researchers have learned a great deal about school improvement, many of the processes involved remain unclear, in part because they involve cultural meanings and contextual factors. Harris and Jones (2017) recently argued:

The inconvenient truth is that context and culture are not just irrelevant background noise in the process of educational change and reform but rather, they fundamentally define, elucidate and explain educational outcomes and performance. The failure of many large-scale reform efforts therefore may not reside chiefly in the inappropriateness of the improvement strategies or in weak implementation processes adopted but more fundamentally in an abject failure to adequately acknowledge powerful contextual and cultural influences (p. 636).

More specifically, it remains unclear how “synergy gets created across school effect variables,” and how “latent capacities in organizations get unleashed” (Leithwood and Seashore, 2012, p. 4). Also, while professional community, for example, has been shown to be a critical component of high-performing schools, the characteristics of professional communities, and what makes them professional and community, are still underelaborated (Seashore, 2009). In addition, it is important to understand how schools establish cultural norms of security and relational trust, where the risk-taking essential to improvement is encouraged and supported (Goodlad in Hargreaves, 1998; Bryke et al., in Hoy, 2012). Relatedly, we need to understand how collective efficacy is developed and sustained in schools (Hoy, 2012). Academic optimism, comprised of academic emphasis, collective trust and collective efficacy, has been shown to be a useful construct in understanding school improvement variables. Yet Hoy (2012), who is responsible for much of the work in this area, acknowledged that we need to understand when and how academic optimism promotes student achievement.

Leadership plays a key role in school effectiveness and instructional improvement. Yet there are several key dimensions of leadership practice that remain understudied, including the role of school leaders in developing and sustaining improvement-oriented school culture; and how school leaders motivate teachers and sustain their “discretionary commitments” to student learning and success (see Leithwood and Seashore, 2012; Hargreaves, 1998). Meanwhile, distributed leadership has increasingly been shown to affect school improvement, but its effectiveness depends on how it is implemented and practiced. Indeed Harris and DeFlaminis (2016) pointed out that the effectiveness of distributed models of leadership lies in the emphasis on leadership as practice rather than role, and interactions rather than actions. They stated that research on actual practices of distributed leadership is
“urgently needed” (pp. 141-144). For example, one recent promising study showed a correlation between distributed leadership and teachers’ affective commitment (Ross et al., 2016).

One promising step in this direction is understanding and promoting culture-based leadership in schools (Quanz et al., 2017). Culture-based leadership assumes that schools are “sites of struggle among groups for power, recognition and legitimacy” (p. 386). It creates opportunities for conversations through which, “beginnings are crafted, ends are negotiated, and means are assessed, all in complex continuous cycles” (p. 383). Importantly, in a culture-based leadership paradigm, ethics, especially democratic process and the public good, become centered, while efficacy and efficiency move to the periphery. Overall, research has shown that capacity building for improvement is more likely to occur in schools where professionals work together, share responsibility and intentionally support and motivate one another (see Harris, 2011).

Toward a deeper understanding of school culture: meaning, emotion and practice

School culture is one of the arenas where such capacity is developed and sustained: it has consistently been identified as an essential feature of high-performing schools. Scholars have commented on the role of leaders in developing and sustaining school culture (Schein, 2004; Demerath and Seashore, 2017) and how power and politics are always part of the process (Sarason, 1996). Harris’s (2002) notion of “school improvement culture” is useful. However, many of the specific ways in which culture shapes improvement efforts in school remain unclear.

Anthropologists have long held that culture has a “force” to it (Peacock, 1986, p. 46). To understand how cultural meanings compel action it is helpful to draw on practice theory, social cognitive neuroscience and the anthropology and sociology of emotion. Practice theory is oriented toward understanding how cultural systems are produced and reproduced (Bourdieu, 1977). In this vein, a colleague and I recently showed how feedback mechanisms or “loops” can help explain the interior logic, robustness, and contradictions within complex educational assemblages (see Demerath and Mattheis, 2015). But what accounts for the relative power, impact, or influence of various meanings within a cultural assemblage? Here is where the new research on social cognitive neuroscience and emotion is useful. And to be clear, affect tends to refer to the sensational or physiological experience of feeling. Affect certainly shapes emotion, though emotions are also influenced by culturally specific beliefs, perceptions, interpretations and language (see Turner and Stets, 2005).

Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) comprehensive review of psychological evidence over 20 years ago established that humans have an extremely powerful motivation to “belong” and to establish and sustain “interpersonal attachments” across different areas of life. More recently, Lieberman (2007) used functional neuroimaging to demonstrate that humans are “wired to be social” (p. 9). He lamented, however, that schools, healthcare institutions and other organizations “cannot reach their full potential” if they continue to work from “erroneous theories that characterize our social nature incorrectly” (p. 10). Indeed, Mary Douglas and Douglas Ney (1998) critiqued western social science years ago for the tendency to have a “non-social being at the center of the so-called social sciences.” The Ubuntu Paradigm, articulated by Ndri Thérèse Assié-Lumumba (2017), is promising in this regard: “Embracing oneness […] a collectivity […] of humanity” (p. 2).

Meanwhile, the neuroscience work of Antonio Damasio (1994) has established the foundational insight that human decision making is actually dependent upon emotions. As Turner and Stets (2005) pointed out, “ Without emotions, individuals cannot attach valences or “utilities” to alternatives”; therefore, juxtaposing emotion and rationality as “polar opposites is simply wrong” (pp. 21-22). Researchers have recently established several key understandings regarding how emotions function in human social life and in
institutions: emotions are contagious (Turner and Stets, 2005); emotions are central to morality and culture (Lutz, 1986, p. 304); emotions are a motivating force (Collins, 1993); and confidence, like any emotion, can be collectively felt by members of an organization (Turner and Stets, 2005).

**Emotion and school improvement**

The emotional work of teachers, staff and administrators has drawn increasing scrutiny from researchers. Liljestrom et al.'s (2007) comprehensive review and update of Hargreaves' (1995, 2008) emotional politics framework concluded that:

- teaching and learning involve emotional understanding;
- teachers' emotions are inseparable from their moral purposes and their ability to achieve those purposes;
- teachers' emotions are rooted in and affect their selves, identities and relationship with others; and
- teachers' emotions are shaped by experiences of power and powerlessness.

A key question, then, is how leaders and staff members acknowledge, affirm and support each other's emotional labor so that it can be sustained — especially in the face of uncertainty and challenge (see Hargreaves, 1998, 2005; Zembylas, 2010).

To date, teacher emotions have often been studied in connection to high levels of burnout in the profession (see e.g. Naring et al., 2012). Chang (2009), for example, showed how teachers' “antecedent appraisals,” or “habitual patterns in teachers' judgments about student behavior” shape emotional aspects of their professional lives, including motivation and burnout (p. 193). Importantly, Chang's review points out how “transactional factors” or emotional and social supports can provide opportunities for “reappraisal” and for teachers to adapt to students various situations differently (p. 202).

These bodies of literature suggest that people are predisposed to connect with others in organizations, and that the qualities of these relationships and the ends to which they are directed are strongly influenced by emotionally charged meanings. This research set out to understand and illuminate the everyday processes, social interactions and often hidden dynamics that shape school emotion culture. In this spirit, anthropologists and sociologists of emotion have suggested one way to examine how effective organizations sustain their performance to compile their “sentiment vocabulary” or “sentiment discourses,” then map their “emotional ecology” or “emotion culture.”

**Setting, research design and methods**

River City Public Schools (RCPS) is one of the largest school districts in the state, serving nearly 40,000 students in grades pre-K through 12. As of October 1, 2014, HHS had an enrollment of 2,077: with 83 percent of its students eligible for free and reduced lunch, with 14 percent of students receiving special education services and 38 percent of students designated as English Language Learners. The ethnic composition of the school’s student body was as follows: 2 percent American–Indian; 51 percent Asian–American (primarily Hmong and Karen); 15 percent Hispanic; 21 percent African–American; and 10 percent European–American.

Largely in response to pressure from community members to address racial disproportionality in special education and alternative education placements, as well as academic outcomes, RCPS introduced a new inclusion policy in November 2013. Known as Great Schools & Communities (GS&C), the policy required that most students with identified special education and/or English language learning needs be included in general
education classes, typically, but not always with the additional support of a special education or English Language Learner teacher in core content areas classes.

However, Harrison staff reported that there were insufficient supports to adequately meet the needs of these newly enrolled students, and not enough time for them to become socialized to the comprehensive high school environment. As a result many of these new students found themselves to be significantly behind in their academic classrooms (in which reading levels could span grades 3–12), and acted out their frustrations with teachers, peers and in the hallways. The school had a rising number of fights, assaults on teachers and even “classroom invasions” where students forced their way into classrooms intending to confront specific peers.

The project itself was designed as an ethnographic case study in order to generate grounded descriptions of the school’s everyday efforts to implement GS&C and improve (Hymes, 1996; Fetterman, 2010). The research was part of a longer five-year evaluation study of RCPS’s school improvement efforts as part of a USDOE-funded Turnaround program. It also draws on staff interviews I conducted for an additional study at HHS over the same period on student acquisition of components of “academic mindsets” (including classroom and school belonging, future orientation, perseverance or “grit,” and confidence). For the academic mindset study, a diverse sample of eight high- and under-achieving students from the class 2015 was interviewed at the end of their junior and senior years.

An additional group of seven seniors from the class of 2014 were also interviewed in May 2014. These students identified both teaching and non-teaching staff members as being influential in their development of non-cognitive factors associated with school success. Identified throughout the article as “focal” staff members, they were observed in the course of their professional activities in the school and then interviewed.

While focused data collection was carried out from 2012 to 2015, preliminary and follow-up data collection was conducted prior to and following this time period (Table I).

All observational, interview and documentary data were analyzed and interpreted through an inductive process of constant comparison across and within cases (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Then, a secondary round of theoretical coding of the sentiment discourses identified at Harrison guided the analysis and interpretation of emotion culture in the school.

An emotional ecology of school improvement culture

The first part of the paper presents a grounded model of two closely related sets of charged meanings which underlay Harrison’s improvement culture (see Figure 1). Each of these charged meanings was generated via a feedback loop which reinforced interactions and practices and contributed to its robustness and durability. The first set of charged meanings involves beliefs about students, and the impact of teachers and staff members on their learning and growth. The second relates to the centrality of trust, confidence and commitment in staff members’ ability to collectively learn and solve school-wide problems. The model shows how these charged meanings all contribute, through these feedback loops, to the enactment of leaders’ and staff members’ commitment to the school, its

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observations</th>
<th>District meetings, school staff meetings, professional development sessions, PLCs, inquiry groups, classrooms, staff offices, as well as hallways and the school cafeteria, which generated over 1,000 pages of elaborated fieldnotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Recorded interviews with 38 staff members and school leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document review</td>
<td>District and school policy directives, performance metrics, school continuous improvement plans, meeting agendas and handouts, course syllabi, student college admission essays, school newsletters and yearbooks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Data sources
students and each other — and what Anton Florek (2016) has referred to in part as their “common moral purpose.”

Due to its heuristic nature, the model may appear static in parts. It is inherently dynamic, though, as the strength of the charged meanings involved ebbed and flowed during the course of the study – often in response to particularly challenging incidents and episodes related to the processes of policy localization. In this sense, the school’s emotion culture was evolving, contested and characterized by conflict and dialogue. This reflects the reality that long-term school improvement is far from a linear process; it is in fact characterized by fits and starts as well as progress and regress. The second part of the paper captures these dynamic qualities by throwing the model into motion during a particularly challenging period of time. It shows how specific elements of the school’s emotion culture underlay the enactment of staff commitment and processes of improvement in the school.

**Charged meanings regarding students, learning and teaching**

One of the core strengths of Harrison itself was the commitment of its staff to its students. Analysis revealed that for a critical mass of Harrison teachers, the foundation of this commitment was their empathetic understanding of students, the challenges facing them and most importantly, their capabilities. Focal HHS staff members identified by students as helping them to develop components of academic mindsets were able to reflect their empathy for students back to them and convince students of their credibility as equity-minded teachers — as teachers who sought to “make a difference” in their lives. The meaningfulness of these relationships with students then become motivating via a feedback loop: as teachers saw how their emotional investments in students bore fruit, they saw evidence of their own efficacy — which they could have powerful impacts on students, and were motivated to begin the cycle anew with incoming students.
Empathetic understandings of challenges facing students

Staff members often commented on what they had learned about the challenges students faced out of school. A Native American arts and media focal teacher said, “I’ve been here 20 years, and a lot of these students, they really don’t have much. Even the students that you think have something, they don’t have much […]”. The African–American Cultural Liaison, also a focal staff member, said he frequently heard students say, “we have no food in the house” (he kept a “snack store” in a storage closet in his office where students could buy various items to get them through the day). “Some of them don’t believe that they will own a house,” he added.

A white female focal English teacher commented that most of her ELL students:

[...] Are kind of trapped inside their head because they can’t express themselves as they think. And they’re fearful of saying things out loud because they’ve been misunderstood so many times, because of either pronunciation or not yet developed grammatical skills (Interview April 30, 2015).

Staff members related other student struggles that they had been entrusted with, including extensive commitments to provide care for older and younger family members, past sexual abuse and a Somali student who, when visiting relatives in the borderlands between Kenya and Somalia had been held at gunpoint by members of Al Shabob while her female relatives were assaulted.

It is important to point out that these empathetic understandings of students and their lives is a kind of knowledge generated in part through emotional response. It is this quality that gives such understandings their motivational charge. As elaborated below, they contributed to teachers’ ability to establish effective relationships with students via a process of feedback. This was an area in which the principal thought the school as a whole needed to continuously improve, however. In an interview in December that year, the principal said that one of his key challenges in implementing GSGC was in “trying to build self-awareness and empathy in our staff – because these are tough areas to build awareness in.”

Optimistic beliefs in student capabilities: growth mindset in everyday practice

Closely linked to staff members’ empathetic understandings of student challenges were their strong shared beliefs in student capabilities. These statements, ubiquitous in the ways that Harrison staff members and leaders talked about students, formed a readily apparent discourse throughout the school. Staff members consistently referred to students, including those who caused difficulties in the school by often being tardy, absent or defiant, were usually referred to as “knuckleheads” or as being “squirrely” or “rambunctious” by many staff members. Such terms do not represent students in completely negative terms, and even carry positive emotional valences. Much of this positivity was due to the school’s emphasis on mutual respect and caring. One teacher told me, simply, “Here, we respect everyone.”

A Latina Harrison school counselor and focal staff member said she always told struggling students, “It’s not like you’re not going to graduate, period. You are – it’s just a matter of when.”

As the school struggled to implement the push-in inclusion policy throughout the 2014–2015 school year, it was notable how school leaders continued to talk about students in terms of their capabilities. A European–American male HHS assistant principal, who was frequently a point person in addressing student “behavior,” talked about his work in ways that reflected his belief in their capabilities. One student, who had thrown a bag of carrots at his head in the cafeteria was, “You know, a kid who had struggles,” and another who had inadvertently hit him when he was trying to break up a fight, was a student without “all the supports that he needs to be successful.” The language used by these school
leaders certainly suggested a growth mindset and their belief in these students’ capabilities (Dweck, 2007). Teachers’ optimistic beliefs about students functioned as another feedback mechanism in the school – as these charged meanings shaped and were shaped by continuous cycles of teaching practices.

The foundations of teacher motivation: dedication and confidence from helping students succeed

These empathetic understandings of students, and charged optimistic beliefs about their capabilities were core components of the shared educational philosophies that circulated among Harrison staff. The successes they experienced in using these approaches with students seemed to give them confidence and fuel their motivation to continue and seek to improve their work. Indeed, the most commonly cited professional motivation for the focal staff members was “making a difference” in students’ lives:

I am motivated by making sure the students get the education they need and deserve (European–American Female Focal Teacher).

I’ve found it to be very powerful […] lives you can change […] How many lives have you touched to change and make it better, have you made this place better than when you inherited it? (African–American Male Cultural Liaison Focal Staff Member).

What gets me is the feeling like I’ve helped a student go from point A to point B. It just does it for me […] I’m propelled by the difference I make in people’s lives […] (European–American Male Focal Teacher).

Study data suggested that as teachers saw that their efforts with individual students had been successful, which they had made some sort of a difference in their lives, this seemed to motivate them to continue to work on their craft.

Charged meanings regarding collaboration, leadership and efficacy

The second set of charged meanings which comprise Harrison’s emotion culture was related to school organization, leadership and building-wide improvement efforts. Study data suggested that over time staff members acquired a sense of collective efficacy through their own successful collaborative efforts toward school improvement, such as the school’s earlier whole school reading initiative and integration of literacy across the curriculum.

The Harrison principal, a European–American male, was well aware of the importance of collaborative relationships among adults in the building. Early in the study, he explained that over the years the school had “struggled immensely with increasing parent support.” This seemed to suggest an acknowledgment of his own limitations in becoming the sort of principal as community leader envisioned by Khalifa (2012). When staff and school leadership realized around 2006–2008 that despite their ongoing efforts this would continue to be a challenge, this became an impetus for “staff claiming ownership of the school,” and “a focus on collaboration among staff and shared practices.” From 2008 to 2011 Harrison introduced embedded professional learning community time for teachers during the school day.

The principal frequently commented that a key part of building collaboration was moving from “isolated practices” to “shared practices.” To illustrate he told a story from several years earlier of a teacher at a copy machine, who noticed that the handouts she had made were being used in another classroom. So she began to copyright those handouts at the bottom of each page. “Now,” he said, “This same person is one of my leaders and is one of the best at leading groups of teachers to share their work and their learning.”
Harrison’s culture of collaboration was also intentionally built through explicit attention to the quality of relationships throughout the building. The principal emphasized that being empathetic and trusting of teachers and their work was essential to building this capacity throughout the building. These messages signaled to teachers that school leaders understood and supported their challenging work, narrowed the distance between leaders and teaching staff members in the school and seemed to facilitate more teacher leadership in the school. The principal shared that over his time serving as the building administrator at Harrison, it had become a conscious effort for he himself to become “a more empathetic listener.” “Because when I’m a bad listener I get pissed at myself,” he said, “I like to know that I’m demonstrating that conscious empathy.” The principal also consciously sought to avoid favoritism. Late in the study he told me he did not want staff members to know too much about his personal life (e.g. what he might be doing over a weekend or during a school break).

Most importantly, he said that over the years he had learned that what teachers most valued about his leadership style was that they would get “respect and voice.” Interviewed Harrison teachers almost uniformly said that they felt supported by the school’s administrators. One math teacher said, “Yes, I trust them – they’re always there to support me if I need them.” These empathetic understandings of their position and work seemed to further motivate teachers to not only improve their own teaching, but to participate in school leadership and improvement efforts.

Generating and sustaining relational trust: distributive leadership in everyday practice

Harrison had a complex and highly evolved leadership structure consisting of multiple groups that served both dedicated and intersecting purposes. Someone new to the school would quickly see that this leadership structure did not have a traditional look or feel, as its distributive leadership model was actually composed of eight distinct groups, including PLC facilitators; inquiry group facilitators; lead literacy instructors; a “College Readiness” group to support students not on schedule to graduate; a large-scale “Design Team;” administrators’ PLC; department chairs; and “Equity Team.” Teachers commented throughout the study that their leadership was valued by the school. I asked one experienced math teacher about the extent to which the school was “open to teachers taking on those kinds of [leadership] roles and having an influence.” He responded, “I would say, 100%. We’ve got some great staff members who step up. When something is needed, somebody steps up.”

When I asked the principal, “What is it in your leadership that really builds collaborative culture?” he responded simply, “Getting others to lead. Because collaborative culture comes from learning from others.” I then asked, “How do you know when this is successful?” He replied, “Noticing when people own the work and you don’t have to manage it at all.” Indeed, during a meeting of the school’s “College Readiness” group in October, 2012, the principal came in for the last 15 min and sat down at the end of the table. When he entered one of the teachers on the committee said with a smile, “Uh oh, look who’s here.” The principal smiled and said, “Just keep going.” The meeting continued and the principal was silent throughout. When the meeting concluded he simply got up, patted the teacher who had made the initial comment on the back, and said, “Keep it up.” The principal’s silence in this case powerfully authorized the leadership of teachers in this meeting and was evidence of his trust and confidence in their abilities. One veteran teacher leader summarized the relationship between Harrison administrators and staff members by saying that “administrators work for the teachers.” Indeed, this respect for the work, expertise and judgments of staff members throughout the school, seemed to contribute to their empowerment and agency through a process of feedback.
Building the confidence of teacher leaders through support and advocacy

GS&C also called for the elimination of several courses from the HHS curriculum (these were generally teacher-developed elective courses offered for replacement credit when students did not pass their initial grade level course, such as courses in children’s literature and film critique). These district-level decisions were made without prior consultation with school staff, and teachers in the primary affected department objected strongly, as they had developed the courses over a considerable period of time and, in their view, offered students curricular choices that would enhance their academic engagement. One European–American female teacher was particularly blunt in how she perceived the situation:

Teacher: This was a prime example of the lack of teacher leadership that’s allowed. Teacher leadership should be a big part of Great Schools & Communities. But, are you kidding me? You know you’ve made the decision, and now you’re just blowing smoke up our butts. So, why didn’t you come to us before you made the decision? […] (Fieldnotes, January 14, 2014).

Though a HHS assistant principal played a key mediating role in the teachers’ dispute with the district (attending departmental PLC meetings, conferring individually with teachers, corresponding with district administrators on their behalf, and arranging a meeting of all parties concerned so that issues could be aired face-to-face), the policy directive seemed to have a profoundly negative effect on these teachers and their regard for the district because they felt their professional judgment had been so roundly disrespected. As I describe below, this “justice-related emotion” (see Turner and Stets, 2005) seemed to motivate these teachers to take a dramatic and risky step the following year in addressing some of the challenges connected to the implementation of GS&C.

Generating and sustaining confidence to solve school-wide problems: the role of professional collaborative learning

As mentioned above, shared leadership and effective professional collaborative learning went hand in hand at Harrison. One of the primary ways in which teachers exhibited leadership was through the key roles they took on in professional learning. Harrison’s staff meetings were typically focused around “showcasing” the innovative work of teachers across the various departments of the school (eight different teachers had such roles in the opening staff meeting of the 2012–2013 school year). While these showcases were ostensibly for the professional development of staff, they also demonstrated the commitment of teachers involved to the school’s core values, students, fellow staff members and improvement efforts. Indeed, Beeman (2007) has noted how performance has a unique ability to “affect the cognitive and emotional state of its audience” (p. 273).

A spirit of embracing professional learning was found throughout the staff (though I did observe two or three instances where seemingly disgruntled teachers derailed specific inquiry group meetings – one said under their breath, “I’m tired of listening to these people”). Furthermore, statements about adult learning were frequently laced with humor. For example, at a staff meeting during the 2014–2015 school year, several PLC leaders shared how their PLCs were engaged in the process of developing language goals for ELL students in their PLCs. One LTF said, “I drafted one, and sent it to [an ELL teacher], and he said it sucked, and he sent it back.” The key cultural contour here is that adult learning was expected in the school and it was okay to take chances, to fail, and to learn from mistakes – a vital practice, involving a feedback mechanism, that many Harrison teachers were hoping their students would acquire.

Emotion culture and the enactment of school commitment: key events in GS&C policy localization, 2014–2015

This final section of this paper recounts key events during the 2014–2015 school year at Harrison. It relates difficult challenges, set-backs and conflicts the administrators and staff
faced, and how they ultimately addressed them. As mentioned at the outset, the 2013–2014 school year had been extremely difficult for the entire Harrison staff, and there were repeated calls for the school administration to deal with student “behavior.” While administrators worked to adjust the school’s systems and structures to meet those challenges, they also continuously reinforced the most important shared charged beliefs in student capabilities, collaborative professional learning, distributive leadership and commitment to the school, the students and each other. Accordingly, this section presents an account of the school’s emotion culture in motion – as it underlay the enactment of specific efforts toward school improvement.

In mid-August 2014, the principal and the Design Team held one of their biennial retreats to plan for opening week and the upcoming school year. During the meeting the principal said, “We all know that Harrison has the greatest students in the world […] but we also know that we have the greatest staff in the world […] and the most challenging work in the world.” He explained that his primary takeaway from a book he had read over the Summer was:

Cling to people when it gets really bad […]. And I thought thank god we’ve got each other here […].

(Fieldnotes, August 18, 2014).

When the entire Harrison staff gathered in the warm stuffy cafeteria for the start of “staff week” two weeks later, there was the expected beginning-of-year excitement and energy, but also palpable tension and anxiety in the room, following the previous year’s struggles. The principal and the administrative team were all wearing HHS T-shirts with the new school year’s theme, “Grounded in Strengths” on the back. The principal spoke into a microphone plugged into a small portable PA system which could barely compete with the industrial fans attempting to cool the room. After welcoming the group he said:

I want to begin by starting with the two things I’ve learned during my 7 years here. There is leadership in every part of this room […]. And that it’s an engine that moves such a challenging part [of our] school. And from Roland Barthes, he says the relationships among the professionals are the most important things that move a school […]. And these are some of the greatest pieces for our school – the relationships […].

(Fieldnotes, August 25, 2014).

In these meetings, the principal repeatedly emphasized the school’s strengths in shared leadership, professional learning and collaboration. Both meetings also showed his awareness of the emotional labor that was being asked of staff members.

Despite the initial optimism, however, the school’s struggles worsened as the 2014–2015 year progressed. One teacher said that in one of her inclusive co-taught classes, the number of students on individual education plans had shot up to 18 – which made it very difficult to group students for activities and build an academically oriented classroom culture. Student “behavior” and “hallway” problems intensified, and staff members became increasingly frustrated. Then, in mid-March 2015 the RCPS superintendent held a series of “listening” sessions at district schools that were encountering difficulties in fully implementing GS&C. When I got to the school the day she was visiting Harrison, I asked the principal, “What should I look for in the meeting?” He said, “Look for people who actually believe in the school.” On the way to the meeting in the school’s library, I asked a teacher I knew if he thought any of the teachers would actually say anything to the superintendent. He said, “No one is going to fucking say anything […] A lot of people are saying, what’s the point, it’s like talking to a wall.”

About 25 Harrison teachers and administrators, and 10 or so student leaders were in the library when the superintendent and her assistant were about to call the meeting to order. Then, one of the American–Indian Studies teachers at the table behind me asked us
all to gather around. He reminded them that he was Lakota, the “people of the buffalo,” and said:

[Buffalo] are strong as long as they all stand together [clasping his hands firmly together]. But it just takes one buffalo to get afraid and break the group. So we have to all stand strong together today! It just takes one weak link to break the chain. So remember that! Don’t get afraid! Everyone stand strong!

The meeting then got underway with multiple Harrison teachers detailing their concerns about issues in the school’s hallways. Then the school’s veteran Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher, a European–American woman, said:

I’ve taught here at Harrison since 1986 […] I went into teaching to teach kids […] and I work on those relationships and I get called “mom,” and I know this is where I’m supposed to be. But […] I am not safe […] I’ve been assaulted twice in the last year […] And I brought my son here and I regret it! [voice trembling]. He was a senior here and he was assaulted and he has a broken back […].

At the end of the listening session one of the Harrison students made an impassioned plea that she hoped all the different groups in the room could work together to address the school’s challenges.

However, a group of teachers who were fed up with the principal and district’s unresponsiveness to their demands for changes to the push-in policy went to the press. These were the same teachers (joined by the AVID teacher quoted above) whose replacement credit courses had been eliminated by the district as part of GS&C the previous year. These teachers contacted a local reporter, met with her, and allowed her access to the school hallways. When the story came out it was on the front page of a weekly paper with the headline, “Distrust and Disorder: A Racial Equity Policy Summons Chaos in the River City Schools” (Du, 2015). The cover art featured a rendering of a male student of color in a hoodie surrounded by tentacles and snakes, one of which was pointing a gun at him. The principal said it was the “worst day of his life” (two weeks later I published a counter-narrative in a similar weekly online newspaper that sought to highlight school strengths, Demerath, 2015).

**Evolving school improvement**

As the Spring of 2015 wore on, Harrison administrators and teacher leaders began to plan for their end of year retreat to plan for the next year. In June, I interviewed several teachers and asked them how confident they were that the school could address the challenges it faced that year. Most expressed some sort of optimism. One teacher leader, after acknowledging those very challenges, simply said, “I think we can come up with a plan.” Over the course of the next several months, the school made multiple changes, including:

- integrating components of the AVID program across the curriculum;
- using the Middle Years Program model to move from a lesson-plan focus to more of an inquiry focus;
- re-aligning administrators to grade level teams;
- establishing in-school settings where students could receive support when they encountered difficulties in the classroom; and
- partnering with diverse community stakeholders and leaders to improve the educational experiences of all students – especially those from minoritized groups.

Most importantly, racial equity and culturally responsive teaching were identified as key areas of improvement for the school, as its teaching staff, predominately European–American,
exhibited varying degrees of relational self-awareness with regard to race. In addition, the school diversified its administration and social support services by hiring several African–American and Asian–American staff members.

At the opening staff meeting in September 2015, the veteran AVID teacher who spoke so powerfully at the superintendent’s listening session the previous spring went to the microphone and said the following:

I’ve been teaching here for 30 years [...] I’m taking off my teacher hat and putting on my parent hat [...] As you know my son Patrick graduated last spring from Harrison [...] He had a tough journey getting here to Harrison [...] He started in another school [...] So I brought him to Harrison in 9th grade, and you know you guys [...] I don’t know if I can do this now [chokes up] [...] You guys just embraced him [...] His last quarter here at Harrison, he had over a 4.0 [...] He is now at St. Cloud State, and he got a 97% on his first quiz, and he is absolutely loving college [...] So thank you for not giving up on our kids [...] and even if you didn’t have him, you actually did, because you collaborated with his teachers [...] He left Harrison feeling so smart and feeling on top of the world [...] But when he got here, he thought he was a loser [...] (Fieldnotes, September 9, 2016).

Conclusions
From 2015 to 2018 Harrison again began to register improving scores on state standardized tests: reading scores of special needs students, African–American students and Native American students all increased. The school saw a decrease in student absences and an increase in students passing major core classes. Meanwhile Harrison’s referral and dismissal rate became the lowest in the district. At the Spring, 2017 Design Team retreat, one of the school’s new African–American assistant principals referred to the school as a “flagship program” for the city. All of the teachers who were involved in the dispute with the district over replacement credits as well as those who went to the press over the school’s “behavior” problems were still at Harrison as of May 2018 – including the veteran AVID teacher quoted above and the vast majority of the rest of the staff.

Research showed how teachers’ “antecedent appraisals” of students can powerfully impact their professional quality of life and longevity Chang’s (2009, p. 193). She concluded that teachers “need to be able to regulate their emotions with effective coping strategies” (p. 213). However, research from social cognitive neuroscience on our profoundly social dispositions together with data from this study suggests that long-term teacher motivation and effectiveness are anchored in the intensely social and emotional world of school culture itself. At Harrison, shared optimistic beliefs about students were where staff members collectively held the line against negative “antecedent appraisals” and deficit discourses. The voices and experiences of Harrison teachers presented here also demonstrate the confidence they had in their collective abilities to solve school-wide problems. Though, as shown above, there were certainly discrepant views at Harrison, and regular conflict and contestation, on the whole these shared meanings were intentionally built, over time, through everyday interactions, among staff members and leaders at the school.

Over time, as student successes and the school’s improvement became apparent, these meanings acquired more powerful emotional charges, and staff members became more bound together by these interlocking elements of the school’s emotion culture – which ultimately seemed to comprise their common moral purpose. The overall interpretation that has emerged is that Harrison’s improvement culture was robust and durable – largely due to the emotional energy circulating through the daily exchanges and practices that comprise these feedback loops. It was through these intensely social cultural and emotional processes that staff members and leaders enacted their collective commitment to school improvement. It is worth mentioning that while the specific contours of Harrison’s emotion culture are locally specific, they are likely similar to those of highly functioning schools in similar settings.
This research shows how school-level capacity building for improvement occurs through everyday interactions, exchanges and processes. As pointed out people in schools need to come together, talk and listen, in order to address the cultural politics that underlie so many of the problems that face them:

Conversation is slow and it can be frustrating to have to sit and listen again and again to conversations that appear to spin around and around. But the apparent circularity, lack of progress, and inability to nail down results is precisely the necessary step to bring about real transformation (Quantz et al., 2017, p. 384).

As such, this research illuminates key processes involved in “bottom-up” grassroots educational change and school-level improvement (Harris and Jones, 2017, p. 632). It aims to contribute to efforts to create “a lexicon that empowers people and places their humanity at the center” (Peters-Hawkins, 2018, p. 7). Centering humanity and building capacity mean acknowledging the powerful role of emotion culture which educators make and remake every day.

References


Further reading

Corresponding author
Peter Demerath can be contacted at: pwd@umn.edu
Talk it (Racism) out: race talk and organizational learning

Decoteau J. Irby and Shannon P. Clark

Department of Educational Policy Studies,
University of Illinois at Chicago College of Education, Chicago, Illinois, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether race-specific language use can advance organizational learning about the racialized nature of school problems. The study addressed two questions: first, is teacher use of racial language associated with how they frame school discipline problems during conversational exchanges? Second, what do patterns of associations suggest about racial language use as an asset that may influence an organization’s ability to analyze discipline problems?

Design/methodology/approach – Co-occurrence analysis was used to explore patterns between racial language use and problem analysis during team conversational exchanges regarding school discipline problems.

Findings – When participants used race-specific and race-proxy language, they identified more problems and drew on multiple frames to describe school discipline problems.

Research limitations/implications – This paper substantiates that race-specific language is beneficial for organizational learning.

Practical implications – The findings suggest that leading language communities may be an integral, yet overlooked lever for organizational learning and improvement. Prioritizing actions that promote race-specific conversations among school teams can reveal racism/racial conflict and subsequently increase the potential for change.

Originality/value – This paper combines organizational change and race talk research to highlight the importance of professional talk routines in organizational learning.

Keywords Organizational learning, Language, Race, Secondary schools

Paper type Research paper

Education researchers use a range of terms and concepts to describe the communication processes that individuals and groups use to grapple with race, racism and racial identities. For the purpose of this study, we use “race talk” as a catch-all to describe these phenomena, which encompasses concepts such as wrestling with race (Buehler, 2013), courageous conversations (Singleton, 2014), as well as the range of linguistic deployments of color-blind racism (Picower, 2009). In the past two decades, race talk research has addressed myriad education-related questions. Evans (2007) examined how leaders talked about demographically changing schools. DeMatthews et al. (2017) explored the ways that school leaders evoked racial language to talk about school discipline policies and practices. Irby (2018) studied the ways that race-specific data served as cues to evoke teacher’s use of race-visible sensemaking about discipline problems. Teacher education researchers, such as Mason (2016), Milner and Laughter (2015) and Picower (2009), focused their investigations toward the race-evasive language practices that teacher candidates in college classrooms use to maintain white privilege. In school settings, researchers have used observational approaches to understand the role of racial language in student-teacher dialogue in K-12 school classrooms (Thomas, 2015; Young, 2016) and in school organizations more broadly (Buehler, 2013; Pollock, 2004). Beyond school settings, Villenas and Angeles (2013) explored the ways that racial language framed educational issues in the broader sphere of media related to education and schooling.

This paper considers the practice of using race-specific language as a resource for advancing organizational learning about the racialized nature of school problems. To explore whether race-specific language use is an untapped organizational resource, we conducted a study that analyzed the association between the presence of race-specific language and
teachers’ collective framing of school discipline problems. We sought to determine if the mere presence of race-specific language was associated with more holistic understandings of racial discipline disparities. Our analysis revealed that the presence of race-specific and race-proxy language was associated with more comprehensive problem analysis. This research is important because it suggests that race-specific language is a potential lever for organizational learning. Thus, we argue that school leaders encourage race-specific language use as a routine of professional practice, as it holds the potential to unlock more comprehensive thinking and problem framing amongst leader and teacher teams.

Race talk and organizational learning
We initiated this research based on the premise that talk among school leaders and teachers is a taken-for-granted routine of professional practice that is consequential for organizational learning and improvement. How people within organizations talk with one another influences what they are likely to accomplish (Coburn, 2006; Horn and Little, 2010; Kegan and Lahey, 2002). Yet, many school leaders do not account for how racial ideologies and their associated racial language practices inhibit or advance dialogues about school improvement efforts (Buehler, 2013). For school leaders, understanding and shaping teacher use of racial language is important because it is likely that failure to talk about race limits the potential for change to adequately address issues of equity (Payne, 2005). Leaders who do not intentionally develop teachers’ racial dialogue miss opportunities to leverage the seemingly small, yet powerful, asset of race talk as way to advance equity-focused school improvement. Leaders can gain insight into racial ideologies by listening to what teachers do and do not say about matters of race and racism. Cultivating organizational capacity to talk about race with precision and specificity is a critical skill for leaders who are committed to improving the educational experience and outcomes of children and youth of color.

Reframing race-specific language use as a routine of professional practice is important for urban secondary schools given the racial, ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic demographic changes in school-aged and public school student populations (Banks, 1996; Cochran-Smith, 2004). The demographic imperative is a phrase that speaks to the urgent need for teachers and administrators to disrupt and correct the pervasive and persistent racial, ethnic, linguistic and class-based disparities in opportunities and outcomes endemic to the USA’s educational system (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2007). The imperative is important because the field of teacher education continues to produce a predominantly white female teaching force that is expected to teach an increasing racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse school-aged population (Gay and Howard, 2000). Education researchers concede that improving secondary schools is partially contingent upon addressing the demographic divide. Our concern is to understand if teacher use of race-specific language relates to their practice and the role that school leaders might have in diagnosing and improving teacher race talk.

The vast majority of organizations reflect racial, gender and linguistic structures of domination and inequality that marginalize people of color. They often reflect a tendency toward technical-rational thinking and assumed homogeneity of individual and collective identities and values (Popova-Nowak and Cseh, 2015). Accordingly, unless individuals and collectives within organizations deliberately engage in anti-oppressive organizational learning – communication and co-production of knowledge – that dismantles the power relations that dominate their organizational life, oppression will persist. Race-neutral discourse and technical-rational approaches to problem solving are two dominant school norms that subjugate knowledge and experiences that are essential to understanding and responding to perspectives of marginalized populations. Given the demographic imperative, we believe school leaders and teachers will become better problem solvers if they use
race-specific language while analyzing problems, which begins with how groups of people collectively frame problems. Benford and Snow (2000) define a problem analysis frame as a “shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change” (p. 615).

Although treated disparately, research within organizational studies (Coburn, 2006; Horn and Little, 2010; Kegan and Lahey, 2002) and teacher education (Bertrand, 2010; Buehler, 2013; Howard and del-Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Thomas, 2015) suggests that how people talk matters for how people work, both individually and collectively, and what they are likely to accomplish. Of particular interest is what problem analysis frames people draw on to promote and attempt change (Benford and Snow, 2000). Researchers in both fields share a concern for understanding the relationship between practitioner identities, talk routines, and organizational and instructional improvement, respectively. Organizational change researchers have found that establishing routines of talk-driven professional collaboration is imperative to organizational learning and improvement. School improvement researchers have found that leaders must intentionally cultivate language practices within professional learning communities to unleash the learning potential of teams (Nelson et al., 2010). Nelson et al. (2010) argue that learning potential emerges as collaborative teams shift from sharing opinions to engaging in “deep” consequential conversations. These conversations are marked by transparency and a willingness to explore “critical questions” that examine teacher practice (Nelson et al., 2010). Despite these powerful insights, organizational studies researchers have failed to account for professional talk routines as a racialized practice. They have not accounted for the presence of racial frames within collaborative conversations.

The failure to account for the racialization of professional talk renders whiteness invisible. It also subjugates the potential for race-specific talk to be understood as a powerful lever for change. Together, failure to consider how changing the way we race talk can change the way we work preserves individual and organizational immunities to change racist ways of knowing and behaving (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). Whereas organizational change and school improvement research have all but neglected the centrality of race talk in teacher professional development, the field of teacher education gives this topic considerable attention.

Teacher education research underscores the demographic imperative by seeking to facilitate the conscientization, or ability to think critically about issues of power and privilege, of pre-service and practicing teachers (Howard and del-Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Picower, 2009; Thomas, 2015; Young, 2016). It is upfront about how race, racism and whiteness shapes race talk. Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, a standpoint and a cultural practice (Frankenburg, 1993) that structures the “social and material realities operating in the present moment that perpetuate racialized inequalities and injustices” (Jupp et al., 2016, p. 1154). Within organizations, whiteness manifests as a cultural practice whereby white people individually and collectively employ emotional, ideological and performative tools to maintain and enact white institutional dominance (Picower, 2009; Yoon, 2012). These practices include linguistic strategies such as framing racism as “out of my control,” proposing personal remedies to systemic problems of inequity by placing an emphasis on “being nice” (Picower, 2009), choosing silence in the face of racial discomfort, avoiding racial conflict and dilemmas or withdrawing from situations where they feel subjected to racially motivated “attacks” (DiAngelo, 2011). These race talk practices actively maintain white privilege and supremacy. Within white dominated school spaces, administrators and teachers, by virtue of their race-neutral routines, normalize not talking with racial specificity as a general routine of professional practice.
Study problem and research questions
While organizational change research omits racial considerations, and thus conceals the role whiteness plays in the continual reinforcement of a White racial equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2011), race talk in education research tends to emphasize problems associated with practitioner aversion to engage in race talk (Pollock, 2004; Bertrand, 2010; Howard and del-Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Thomas, 2015). By considering organizational learning research and race talk research in tandem, we can assert two claims. First, professional talk routines are important for building strong cultures of collegial collaboration that lead to organizational improvement. Second, teachers and administrators struggle to talk about race. Since race talk research emphasizes race-evasive behaviors, we do not know the benefits of race-conscious talk routines. Consequently, we know little about race-specific language as a routine of practice and its relationship to organizational learning and improvement. This study addressed these shortcomings by exploring the associations between racial language use and school based problem identification and analysis. We designed our study to answer the following questions:

RQ1. During conversational exchanges, is teacher use of racial language associated with how they frame school discipline problems?

RQ2. What do patterns of associations suggest about racial language use as an asset that may influence an organization’s ability to analyze discipline problems?

Study methods
The data we analyzed for this study stem from focus groups at Douglass High School, which served approximately 800 students during the 2012–2013 academic year. The student body was comprised of a 75 percent white majority, 10 percent Hispanic, 9 percent black or African–American, 4 percent Asian or Pacific Islander and 2 percent of students identified as multiracial. The teaching and support staff of nearly 60 was almost 100 percent white. The school was located south of a small-sized city. Its catchment area included an isolated pocket of the adjacent city’s low opportunity African–American community. It also served a recent influx of Spanish-speaking immigrant students whose families were attracted to recent economic opportunities spawned by the relocation of a large-scale firm that supports the US medical industry.

To answer our research questions, we conducted a co-occurrence analysis of 28 conversational exchanges from a larger data set of audio-recorded focus groups where 44 teachers discussed problems related to school discipline. Co-occurrence researchers aim to generate claims by studying the relationship of paired data as it occurs in a particular time or space. An association exists when items co-occur and increased pairing indicates a stronger association (Buzynowski, 2015). Since we view organizational learning routines as one way to cultivate teacher racial consciousness, we designed our study to explore associations between racial language use and problem analysis frames (Benford and Snow, 2000). The conversational exchanges stemmed from focus groups that lasted approximately one hour and consisted of no more than seven participants. The focus groups were one component of the school’s efforts to address racial inequities that emerged as more students of color began attending the school[1]. We anticipated that introducing racially specific data would compel teachers to use race-specific language to talk about discipline problems.

Variables and codes
Racial language. Several education scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding the shortcomings of color-blind ideology and its associated language practices. Among the
more salient themes within this body of research is that white teachers prefer not to talk about race and the impact of color-blind ideologies on teacher practice. Race talk in education researchers assert that teacher aversion to talk explicitly about race and racism stifle teacher effectiveness (Pollock, 2004; Bertrand, 2010; Howard and del-Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Thomas, 2015).

Our coding scheme focused on language use rather than language meaning. We used the presence of race-specific, race-proxy and race-mute phrases as criterion for coding passages. We coded statements with words, such as Latino, black, white, African-American, Asian and so on as race-specific. When speakers used veiled references to racial groups (Bertrand, 2010), including referencing people based on their native language, where they lived, as well as their socio-economic status and mode of transit to school, we coded these instances as race-proxy. If we did not identify instances of race-specific or race-proxy language, we coded statements as race-mute.

**Problem analysis frames.** Frame analysis research demonstrates that problem framing is integral to generating solutions and prompting action (Coburn, 2006). We concentrated on diagnostic frames, those that define problems and place blame on particular individuals or groups (Benford and Snow, 2000) to understand how teachers collectively made sense of discipline related problems. We applied inductive and deductive coding to generate five problem frames that reflected the ways teachers described problems, which included systemic, procedural, substantive, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Table I displays each code, corresponding definition and sample statement to which the code applied. Each frame foregrounds particular aspects of a problem, while minimizing other aspects, which influences subsequent choices and actions (Benford and Snow, 2000; Coburn, 2006).

**Application of codes.** As a first step, we used Atlas.ti to code for racial language use. Next, we applied problem analysis frame codes across all conversations. We were interested in how many frames co-occurred with racial language uses. Final coded exchanges looked like the following:

So, one kid [RSpec_None] can sit there and be a jerk all the time and nothing happens [Prob_Procedural], but then when the Black kid [RSpec_Black] did something in some other class or some other situation, they’d come to the door with a police officer. That happened twice just in one class early this school year [Prob_Procedural|Systemic]. It was very frustrating. The case manager and I were just like, “I cannot believe this” because we were working with the student on that day [Prob_Interpersonal]. There’s just no consistency [Prob_Procedural].

**Co-occurrence analysis procedures**

To explore the relationship of racial language use and problem framing, we focused on conversational exchanges within focus groups. We delineated conversational exchanges based on episode boundaries (Horn and Little, 2010) or shifts in conversational topics or themes. Each focus group contained several distinct conversational exchanges among two or more speakers. We identified 28 conversational exchanges within five focus groups. The questions that drove our initial inquiry were “How do teachers frame discipline problems in (a) race-mute, (b) race-proxy, and (c) race-specific conversational exchanges?” To answer these questions, we generated co-occurrence tables to look at raw counts of co-occurring codes (limited to two) such as Racially Specific Language [AND] Problem is systemic. We generated a series of co-occurrence matrices that allowed us to discern how types of talk related to problem framing within the conversational exchanges. Second, we explored the prevalence of co-occurrences as a means to gain insight on the relationship between racial language type and problem frames. We computed averages that allowed us to determine if a particular co-occurrence was more or less common across the 28 conversational exchanges. Table AI provides an example of computation.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Names (Abbrev.)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sample quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_All (N)</td>
<td>Race-specific language use</td>
<td>I mean there is an awful lot of segregation, I don’t know if you guys have ever been down to the lunch room, but I do commons supervision. It’s just crazy. I mean literally, like people of – all the African American kids all sit at the same table, almost 95% of them, and all the Hispanic kids sit at the same table, and all the – it’s just so crazy. I mean, I went here 15, 16 years ago and I don’t – there were not as many diverse students here, but for sure, I do not remember there being that kind of just blatant segregation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_White</td>
<td>Use of white as racial identifier</td>
<td>Race talk and organizational learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_Black</td>
<td>Use of Black as racial identifier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_Latino</td>
<td>Use of Latino or Latina as racial identifier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_Asian</td>
<td>Use of Asian as racial identifier</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_Multi</td>
<td>Use of multiple racial identifiers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_Proxy</td>
<td>Proxy language use</td>
<td>I feel a very big disconnect with families who don’t speak or read English in terms of being able to just purely communicate with them. There doesn’t really seem to be a plan or something else in place to look at how can we better meet those students’ and families’ need? When we can pick up the phone and call an English-speaking parent about this, but their situation has to wait until when we have an interpreter, it makes it seem less important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_Proxy_Geo</td>
<td>Use of geographic terms as identifiers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_Proxy_Ambig</td>
<td>Use of ambiguous language as identifiers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_Proxy_Class</td>
<td>Use of class terms as identifiers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_Proxy_Lang</td>
<td>Use of language as identifiers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RSpec_None</td>
<td>Use of no specific identifiers</td>
<td>There needs to be some real addressing of the curriculum. What do we actually have for these students all across the board, not just clubs but academically? I can see how they would feel that way. Things are changing very quickly and it’s the same thing with the soccer with the academics. You’ve had all these advantages by the time you get to high school, obviously, and I think it’s really kids are – they have a really hard time, it’s hard to get kids that are kind of so disconnected interested with what we have to give</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prob_All</td>
<td>Problem frame</td>
<td>It reminds me of the diversity stuff I did over spring break</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prob_Systemic</td>
<td>Explains problem as related to historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts that shape US schooling</td>
<td>Well, she was talking about how culturally, we have this white man’s model of school and we’re trying to get everybody to fit in it, and I think like culturally, I teach my children the white man’s model of school at home, and so they fit in. They don’t know how to play the game</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prob_Procedural</td>
<td>Explains problem as related to school or teacher rules, regulations, and procedures</td>
<td>There’s really no point in sending a kid out. Our detention rates are pretty low depending which administrator a student has to report to. The policies are inconsistent. So a student can get one sort of treatment with one administrator and a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I. Coding dictionary
Findings
Based on our review of literature, we speculated that conversations where participants used race-specific language would also reflect comprehensive understandings of school discipline, operationalized as multi-frame problem analysis. We found that race-specific and race-proxy language use was associated with higher frequencies of problem analysis and with higher frequencies of multiple problem analysis frames. Participants in race-mute conversations talked with the lowest levels of complexity about discipline problems. Figure 1 displays pairings of racial language use and problem analysis frames for the 28 conversational exchanges we analyzed. Each numbered rectangle represents a single conversational exchange. Each exchange contains two variables: racial language use and problem analysis frames. Each exchange contains one or more racial language use type: race-mute, race-proxy, race-specific or any combination of the three. Shading denotes the problem analysis frames coded within the exchange. Darker shading indicates higher uses of multi-frame problem analysis. For example, in conversational exchange nine participants used race-specific language and multi-frame problem analysis that drew on systemic and procedural frames to explore discipline problems.

Zooming out offers a look across conversational exchanges, which reveals patterns that individual exchanges do not. Organizing our data into a matrix of paired co-occurrences enabled us to mine for patterns and several insights emerged. For example, in conversational exchange nine participants used race-specific language and multi-frame problem analysis that drew on systemic and procedural frames to explore discipline problems.

Table I.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code Names (Abbrev.)</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prob_Substantive</td>
<td>Explains problem as related to classroom context, content, and/or instructional practices</td>
<td>completely different one with another, which helps no one. There really isn’t a mechanism to follow-up and do anything helpful for that kid once you’ve gotten past sending them out. I try to have readmit meetings with the kids where if I’ve sent you out, I want to talk to you before you come back in my classroom to see how we are going to keep that problem from happening again. Not just ‘I sent you out, but okay come back in, let’s start again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prob_Interpersonal</td>
<td>Explains problem as related to conflicts between individuals or groups</td>
<td>We as counselors have been trying to figure out ways to build connections with communities? We go to the community that is in Strayville and we try to meet with kids there and we try to do some of those things to try to bring the school world to them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prob_Intrapersonal</td>
<td>Explains problem as related to internal conflicts and struggles</td>
<td>I don’t know how I get to that level with a kid always. And sometime, they have to be willing also to have an adult come into that space. So, that’s something that I just personally struggle with sometimes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table I.
discussed most and least as well as patterns across language use types. Race-proxy and race-specific language co-occurred with problem analysis framings with higher overall frequencies across all frame types. Participants used race-proxy language in 42 percent of all exchanges, which exceeded race-specific language use (38 percent) by 4 percent. Participants referenced each problem frame in the following percentage of all exchanges: procedural (33 percent), interpersonal (28 percent), systemic (19 percent), substantive (12 percent) and intrapersonal (8 percent). They discussed problems that were procedural and interpersonal in nature most often, concerning relationships among teachers, students and administrators at higher relative frequencies, which often focused on questioning the competence or pointing out ineffectiveness of administrators. On the other hand, participants referenced intrapersonal and substantive problems with less frequency, suggesting a lower inclination to discuss problems related to internal conflict or personal instructional decisions within classrooms. This was especially evident when they used race-mute rather than race-proxy or race-specific language.

Figure 3 shows that multi-frame problem analysis occurred more often with race-specific language use or in combination with race-proxy language. In total, 60 percent of all exchanges contained two or three problem frames. Participants referenced four problem frames in 21 percent of the exchanges, however, they did not reference all five problem

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Figure 1. Master co-occurrence matrix

Figure 2. Racial language use and problem frame co-occurrences
frames in any exchanges. In all four exchanges that contained four problem frames, participants used race-proxy language. Similarly, they used race-specific language in all seven exchanges that contained two problem frames and in 80 percent of exchanges that contained three problem frames. Conversely, participants used race-mute language most often during exchanges that contained one problem frame and least within exchanges that contained two or three problem frames.

A closer look at co-occurrences: some examples
When participants used race-specific and race-proxy language, they identified more problems and drew on multiple frames to analyze school discipline problems. The first exchange below illustrates combined race-proxy and race-specific language and associated problem frames. The second is an example where teachers did not use race-specific language and where they also used fewer problem frames. In the following passage, one speaker explicitly mentions race and gives a concrete example of a classroom misunderstanding using systemic, substantive, interpersonal and intrapersonal problem analysis frames:

All kids need to know the expectations. But a majority of teachers are White and there are differences in how students experience and behave in the classroom. How White kids act in class just jives with how a White teacher teaches. For our Black kids or for our Latino kids, their rules of engagement may be different.

But then, also going along with that is just for the White students to – just understanding different perspectives because I’ve had some of the courageous conversations with students because some of my Black students may be doing something that the White student is perceiving as being disrespectful. I explain to my White students “I’m not taking it that way because I know that kid and it is not disrespectful – he’s not trying to be disrespectful and I’m not taking it as being disrespectful when he gets up and walks around the classroom. Like that’s just how he’s functioning.” But meanwhile, that White kid is sitting there like, “Oh my god, I can’t believe this is happening,” and subconsciously getting upset with this peer of theirs. And it’s like I think when you have that common understanding, and knowing it’s okay to talk about that and I don’t think we have a framework here that makes it okay to have those conversations.

In the exchange above, the speaker used multi-frame thinking while utilizing race-proxy and race-specific language. Among the 28 exchanges within our data set, only 4 of 28 (14 percent) demonstrated quadruple frame thinking as evidenced above. In all four, participants used race-proxy and race-specific language. In the passage, it is clear that racism and racial conflict shapes day-to-day classroom interactions. In the following example, three participants talked
using race-mute/proxy and one instance of race-specific language. They described students’ problems of belongingness as systemic, situated in students’ family and community socio-economics and, therefore, difficult for the school to address:

Female Speaker 1: Transportation is an issue and a lot of those students want to be involved. But, they can’t because they have to go home and watch brother and sister or work because they need to help pay the bills. Everyone wants to feel like they are involved or supported, but I think for some, they just can’t be because they need to be loyal to their family. What I think is cool about the new schedule is that those students can feel supported within the school day.

Female Speaker 2: Others are disengaged because by this point they have been defeated. They have not felt a part of the school system since probably elementary school. You play pickup basketball in your neighborhood but you can’t play at the high school. The kids who make the basketball team played club sports all the way through [their school years].

Female Speaker 3: The same happens with the dance team. We have […] [pause]. It’s a group of all White girls with long blond ponytails.

Female Speaker 2: Yep. Why isn’t there more diversity on the dance team? Well, because those girls all take dance lessons their whole lives. We have to find other ways or more options for people to feel connected.

In the exchange above, Speaker 1 initiated the exchange by using proxy language associated with neighborhood and class status to mark Black and Latino students. Although Speaker 1 acknowledged that procedural changes in the master schedule allowed teachers time to address student belongingness, the teachers never shifted to how they could use the new schedule or make other procedural changes to address substantive problems that would benefit the students, who they did not specifically name. Speaker 2 pivoted back to a systemic analysis by describing the cumulative effect of the students’ cumulative privileges or disadvantages. The teachers’ conversation framed students’ historical lack of economic wherewithal as the reason they were unable to engage in school life. Speaker 3 acknowledged the racial composition of the dance team in specific terms (and was tempted to take ownership over its composition). Yet, the overall race-proxy language skirted the question of why black girls were not on the dance team.

In exchanges with prominent race-mute language, teachers offered fewer cues that allowed for multi-frame analysis of problems. The dearth of race-specific language and corresponding single frame systemic class-based analysis reflected the groups’ limited capacity to think through problems in sophisticated enough ways that generated talk about leveraging school resources to cultivate belongingness for students of color. They failed to account for their own power to change criteria for participation in sports (procedural), use of additional time for advising and clubs (substantive), or inter and intrapersonal approaches to improvement.

**Discussion and implications**

We conducted this study because teacher education and organizational studies research points to the importance of developing the capacity of people to talk in particular ways as critical for individual and organizational improvement. Teacher education researchers argue that teacher ability to talk about race is critical for their identity development and teaching effectiveness (Bertrand, 2010; Howard and del Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Picower, 2009; Thomas, 2015; Young, 2016). Developing the capacity to talk about race is important because teachers who are disproportionately white and female will continue to enter schools that require they teach to an increasing racially and ethnically diverse US student population (Banks, 1996; Gay and Howard, 2000). Organizational studies and school improvement researchers also make a case for the importance of cultivating professional
routines of talk as a matter of organizational learning and improvement (Nelson et al., 2010). They argue that language use shapes problem identification and problem framing, which is consequential for how organizational members address problems, if at all (Coburn, 2006; Horn and Little, 2010; Kegan and Lahey, 2002).

We anticipated that race talk was a factor that may suggest something about team capacity for change and improvement (Payne, 2005). Thus, we speculated that teachers' use of race-specific language would pair with more comprehensive framings of organizational problems than those who used race-proxy and race-mute language. However, we found that teacher use of race-proxy and race-specific language co-occurred with higher multi-frame problem analysis. Our findings suggest that there is greater potential for organizational learning in groups where race-proxy and race-specific language use is a routine of professional practice. The findings confirm that the ways that leaders and teachers engage in race talk can and does shape school improvement efforts. As the example passages in our findings demonstrate, using race-specific language makes problem framing more concrete and specific. The evidenced differences between race-mute language compared to race-proxy and race-specific language shows the value in developing school leaders and teachers to use race-specific language to discuss school problems. When participants used race-proxy and race-specific language, they were more likely to express the interconnected roots of problems.

The presence of race-specific language is likely associated with a school's ability to examine the multifaceted nature of school problems. Using race-specific language, teachers were able to highlight inequity that persists in discipline and access. In one exchange participants collectively determined that transportation was a huge barrier to student attendance and participation in extracurricular activities by talking specifically about the black and Latino students who relied on a sole bus to attend school. Likewise, participants concluded that fear of upsetting black students led many teachers to accept mediocre work and tolerate misbehavior. Additionally, participants realized that the lack of rigor in ESL classes prevented Asian and Latino students from succeeding in Advanced Placement courses. Race-specific language enabled teachers to specify problems, articulate the racial dynamics at play and analyze problems in complex ways. Conversely, exchanges dominated by race-mute language turned into venting sessions that blamed students or administrators for persistent problems. These findings build on the notion that problem framing assigns blame and responsibility to particular individuals and groups (Benford and Snow, 2000; Coburn, 2006). Further, our findings suggest that race-mute conversational approaches veil and conceal practices of racial blaming while absolving white leaders and teachers (in our case) of their responsibility for addressing problems (DiAngelo, 2011; Pollock, 2004).

This research asserts that pursuing the value of race-specific language is integral to school improvement. Specifically, our findings suggest that it is important to pursue research that infers a positive relationship between what race-specific and race-proxy language may lead to and produce. Leaders who make race-specific language use a routine of professional practice will develop teams that are better equipped to address organizational problems related to race and racism than those who do not prioritize this critical aspect of leadership. Concentrating on racial language use will require a level of transparency that is rare given the predominance of race-evasive behaviors (DiAngelo, 2011; Evans, 2004; Pollock, 2004). However, we believe that making race-specific talk a routine of practice enables the emergence of racial frames that yield a more powerful capacity to see and address problems. Our data support this assertion. Race-specific and race-proxy language use is associated with higher frequencies of problem analysis and with higher frequencies of multi-frame problem analysis. Moreover, as evidenced in our sample qualitative passage, race-specific talk differs from race-mute talk because it enables racial problem frames to emerge in the course of conversational exchanges.
The differences between race-specific and race-proxy language use were not as pronounced as we anticipated. Although we did not expect race-proxy language to be as effective as race-specific language, findings suggest that it may facilitate similar kinds of problem analysis. We interpreted this unexpected finding as an indicator that the teachers shared implicit meanings of racially veiled and coded language. This may prove beneficial to groups that struggle to overcome white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). For cultural insiders with shared meaning, race-proxy, rather than race-specific language may be interchangeable. Since a shared understanding of racial proxies existed among the group, the meaning of their statements were not lost, thus, their shared meanings of race-proxy language allowed participants to accomplish similar problem analysis without the discomfort of using race-specific language. While race-proxy language may minimize the anxiety that often arises in conversations about race, it may also isolate newcomers to a school community who will need to learn veiled language to fully participate in problem analysis comparable to insiders.

Conclusion: leading racial language communities

Although we drew study data from a suburban school setting, this study holds implications for urban secondary school leadership and research because enrollment in suburban schools, even when well-resourced, does not translate into equitable access to educational opportunities for black and brown students (Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Many problems in urban schools exist in suburban schools, including low uses of race-specific language (Payne, 2005). School leaders should consider the three types of race talk named in this paper in order to determine how to respond in a manner that promotes the use of race-specific language. This might include asking clarifying questions, requesting detailed examples, or suggesting that staff reference students explicitly, rather than generally. Moreover, school leaders should make concerted efforts to use race-specific language and challenge staff to follow suit in order to get to the root of school problems. See Appendix 2 for a series of questions school leaders can reflect upon.

School leaders can determine what issues warrant attention by noting which problem frames recur most often. At Douglass High School, participants described problems using the procedural and interpersonal frames often. They rarely framed problems as substantive or intrapersonal. Common frames used in tandem include: procedural and interpersonal as well as systemic, procedural and interpersonal. Participant preoccupation with rules, control and conflict amidst a changing student body may be the reason for common references to procedural and interpersonal problems. Alternatively, relatively little mention of substantive and intrapersonal conflicts may demonstrate that participants were unwilling to think or speak about classroom decisions or internal dissonance. Repeated problem frames may represent issues that warrant immediate attention in the eyes of participants, yet neglected problem frames can illuminate blind spots and biases. Unexpressed issues may reflect deeper problems within the organization. Addressing often unspoken issues may be the impetus to school improvement. Identifying and questioning patterns and themes regarding problem framing can provide valuable insights into the dynamic equilibrium that maintains the organizational status quo (Kegan and Lahey, 2002).

Future studies should explore what leaders can do to promote race-specific language use among staff to enhance opportunities for collective learning. Additional effort should be devoted to connecting race talk literature to organizational learning and leadership theory in order to design empirical studies that will reveal what conditions create the optimal opportunities to disrupt racist practice. We hope that the study questions and design will encourage education researchers to broaden their approaches to studying school effectiveness and see race and racism as key organizational factors.
Researchers can use co-occurrence methodology to gain insights into the presence of particular kinds of language communities and practices that operate in a school. For example, a study might examine the co-occurrences of racial language use types and teacher instructional quality, student engagement, teacher collaboration and even overall school performance. Such studies may elevate the importance of race talk research by better positioning the centrality of leading racial language communities as a lever for overall organizational improvement.

Note

1. Some examples of equity initiatives included: increased collection and use of data with attention to racial disparities across all areas of student experiences and outcomes. Reorganized school into house model to identify student achievement, social, emotional or behavioral problems and provide early interventions. Moved to block schedule to increase number of instructional hours, increase course offerings and give teachers more time to plan and advise students (clubs moved from after school to during day, added advisory period). Targeted recruitment to teachers and staff of color, including adoption of “Tuition Reimbursement” and “Flexibility in Salary to Diversify Workforce” board policies. Trained department chairs to redesign meeting time for teacher learning and instructional improvement with an emphasis on serving underserved students. Increased number of students of color enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. Revised school discipline policies to reduce suspensions. Adopted restorative discipline model.

References


Payne, C. (2005), “Still crazy after all these years: race in the Chicago schools”, Speech delivered at UIC College of Education on April 22, Chicago, IL.


Appendix 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Computations</th>
<th>Systemic problem frame × Colormute talk sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q1. On average what was the frequency in which participants framed discipline disparities as a systemic problem (reference group)?</td>
<td>No. of none codes + No. of proxy codes + No. of race-specific codes = Total No. of exchanges about discipline disparities as a systemic problem (SysProb) No. of exchanges ÷ Types of race talk ×100 = Average exchanges SysProb SysProb ÷ 28 exchanges = Percent of average exchanges</td>
<td>4+17+18=39 (39÷3)×100=13 (13÷28)×100=46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q2. How often did race-mute language use co-occur with systemic problem framings across 28 conversational exchanges (comparison group)?</td>
<td>No. of exchanges coded as “none” talk AND systemic frame</td>
<td>4 (4÷28)×100=14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table AI. Sample co-occurrence comparison computation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Computations</th>
<th>Systemic problem frame × Colormute talk sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Q3. What is the difference between percent of average exchanges and percent average of race-mute AND systemic frame (comparative analysis)?</td>
<td>Percent average exchanges about discipline disparities as a systemic problem – percent average of race-mute AND systemic frame co-occurrences</td>
<td>46%−14%×32% points less</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix 2. Guiding questions for assessing racial language communities

Considering language use:

(1) How does our school and community context encourage or discourage race-specific language use?
   • Who uses race-specific language? When? Where? Why?
   • Who uses race-mute language? When? Where? Why?

(2) What racial proxies do we commonly use?
   • How do these proxies advance our ability to see and solve problems?
   • How do these proxies inhibit our ability to see and solve problems?

(3) How can I/we promote race-specific language use?

Considering problem framing:

(1) How do our school priorities influence the way we frame problems?
(2) What type of problems do we address in our school most often? Least often? Why?
(3) Who do we assign blame/responsibility to most often? Least often? Why?

Corresponding author
Decoteau J. Irby can be contacted at: irbyd@uic.edu

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Or contact us for further details: permissions@emeraldinsight.com
“I’m supposed to feel like this is my home”

Testing terms of sociopolitical inclusion in an inner-ring suburban high school

Roozbeh Shirazi

Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine how the exercise of administrative authority to suspend the Muslim Student Association (MSA), an affinity group at a suburban Midwestern high school, was experienced and perceived by affected students. Notably, it traces the mobilization of the MSA students to challenge the principal’s authority through formal channels within the district to reopen the affinity group. In doing so, the students’ activism represents an example of dissensus, or mode of political engagement that challenges top-down models of fostering equity and diversity in schools.

Design/methodology/approach – The data are drawn from a nine-month ethnographic case study at an inner-ring suburban school in a large Midwestern metropolitan area. Data include participant observation of classrooms and affinity group meetings, semi-structured individual and group interviews, informal conversation and analytical memos synthesizing ethnographic fieldnotes.

Findings – Though the school and district have made different investments in strengthening equity and diversity at the school, transnational and minoritized Muslim students report a school climate that is characterized by exclusion and racialized surveillance. The principal’s decision to suspend the MSA was characterized by a narrow understanding of the purpose of the group and the identities of the student members. The decision to suspend the MSA, however, produced conditions centering the agentive potential of marginalized and minoritized students.

Originality/value – This paper opens up the tensions challenges of incorporating student voice into educational decision making. Notably, it highlights important possibilities for political action students when their voices cannot or will not be heard by those who make decisions on their behalf.

Keywords Immigrants, Decision making, Inclusion, Empowerment, Narratives, Administrators

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This paper engages with the question of how incorporating student voice can increase equity and belonging in school communities. It begins, however, with the assumption that the term “incorporation” must be seen as problematic. Incorporation is an act that entails some form of labor or effort, some certification of what was formerly outside into an inside. In this way, incorporation becomes political: it is not a given how, or to what effect, or by what means student voice can be heard, to move from an outside to an inside. The questions of interest in this paper are which voices count, and how they come to have value. These are at the heart of understanding the myriad events and relational processes that shape what equity and belonging look like in urban schools.

As Seashore and Khalifa indicate in their introduction, a growing literature examines students’ sense of belonging in urban educational settings. A related but distinct literature addresses notions of cultural citizenship, what Renato Rosaldo (1994) described as a lived expression of the right to be different and the right to belong, in particular the sense of citizenship and belonging among immigrant and transnational youth (Abu El-Haj, 2009; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Negrón-Gonzalez, 2015; Shirazi, 2017). Belonging can be understood as a “feeling-at-home” (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 10), and in this respect, it is a political concept that is tied to citizenship, recognition and the right to be heard within schools.
This paper focuses on the ways in which minoritized Muslim student voices were raised, dismissed, heard and incorporated in decision making around affinity groups in a Midwestern high school I call Light Falls High School (LFHS). At the heart of this paper is a story about how minoritized student space is conceived, policed and struggled for at the school. I use observations and interview data to reconstruct a narrative of the politics of difference and “doing diversity” at LFHS, focusing primarily on the closing and reopening of a student group, known as the Muslim Student Association (MSA). The case highlights three important dynamics at work: first, the targeting, closure and reopening of the MSA highlights the ongoing surveillance and regulation of black and brown bodies at a school that is invested, materially and discursively, in a project of educational equity; second, the struggles around the MSA were indicative of competing notions of educational equality vs equity that informed administrators’ planning and decision making; third, students’ response to the proposed closure of the MSA suggests a mode of political struggle that is increasingly evident in public but not taught at school – that of suspect bodies enacting equality in conditions of exclusion.

Naming these dynamics is critical to analyzing how minoritized students – here, predominantly East African Muslim girls – make claims for sociopolitical space in school. The targeting of the MSA, as well as “Muslim” being the primary lens through which these students are seen, speaks to challenges of representation and recognition that these youth face from administrators, educators and their peers. This story, retold from a year of ethnographic fieldwork, illustrates that incorporating student voice does not always come about through administrative commitment to inclusion. Rather, the recognition of minoritized student voices and perspectives may come from struggle, challenge and a willingness to confront authority – modes of political engagement that run counter to mainstream educational approaches to youth citizenship and civic participation as well as larger claims of “everyone is equal” – while operating within institutional norms.

**Researcher positionality**

My own experiences of schooling and teaching in public schools have played a role in conceptualizing this paper. My feelings of belonging in the USA were shaped by my own experiences of schooling – marked by the questioning of the origins of my name, bilingualism and appearance – experiences that many of my student participants share with me. My background as a former public school teacher in a multilingual and diverse New Jersey school during and after the September 11, 2001 attacks informed my understandings of how experiences of schooling can affect students’ articulations of national attachment. At that time, overt hostility against students with real and imagined connections to the Middle East or “Muslim World” created a climate in which many did not feel welcomed or safe in our school. Over the course of the past two decades, that xenophobia has only become more normalized and prominent in American political discourse. These historical experiences constitute a way of seeing political subject making through schooling, and drew my gaze to specific events, narratives and conceptualizations of space in LFHS in which difference was articulated, rationalized and put into hierarchical relations.

**Methods and sources of data**

The data are part of a larger ethnographic study carried out from September 2013 to June 2014. The broader questions guiding the ethnographic work were how do schools and experiences of schooling produce knowledge of citizenship and belonging? What does being American entail, at a time when diversity and global citizenship are celebrated in schools, and yet xenophobia is on the rise?
Some of the interview and classroom observation data were collected with support from a research assistant who was a teacher at the school (and a former student in my department). Sources of data included group interviews, in-depth individual interviews, analytical memos and fieldnotes from participant observation one to two times/week in focal classrooms, student groups and common spaces. In-depth interviews were conducted with 38 students and 10 teachers, staff and the principal. The observation data emerge from nearly 300 h spent in focal content areas, including social studies, English, world languages and ELL classes. My conversations with students and with teachers later directed me into different spaces, particularly the affinity groups and clubs that met during school hours.

Participants
Participation in the study was open to all interested teachers and students at LFHS, meaning that I welcomed the opportunity to meet and spend time with anyone interested in speaking with me about the study themes. Student participants were recruited in focal classrooms, affinity groups and via school wide flyers. In the case of the focal classrooms and affinity groups, I introduced myself and my project during my first visit to that space, and over time, students would ask me if they could participate in an interview, or I would invite participation from students that I wanted to learn more about. However, my sampling was also purposeful in that I was particularly interested in the experiences of transnational youth – both citizens and recently arrived non-citizens – to get a sense of how their experiences of schooling produced meanings about belonging and citizenship. I considered students who are immigrants, or the children of immigrants who affirmed a connection to their places of origin, to be transnational. Often times, students would self-disclose this information in informal conversations with me. Many who ended up participating were of East African, South Asian and Latin American origin. In this paper, I limit my participants to students who were members of the MSA, as well as the faculty adviser and the school principal. The MSA students were recruited to participate from classrooms I was observing, and also from MSA meetings that I attended. In some cases, students referred other students to participate.

Analysis of data
Analysis was driven by analytical memos derived from fieldnotes that were used to establish preliminary themes for analysis (Strauss, 1987). The development of themes followed a primarily grounded approach in that the broader interests I began the project with – identity, belonging and citizenship – were informed and shaped by emergent and recurring cues that were incorporated into my subsequent observations and conversations (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Upon transcription, the coding was carried out by myself and a research assistant across three stages: first, an initial round of independent open coding in which areas that illustrated points around identity, citizenship, belonging and exclusion were highlighted (Saldaña, 2013); second, the development of a codebook based upon follow-up conversations based on discussions of coding convergence and divergence; third, we undertook a subsequent round of coding which involved reading each interview several times and placing text into one of the 24 categories (Saldaña, 2013). Finally, the codes were collapsed into larger categories to capture the main themes and findings of youth perceptions and experiences (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Among these, ideas of reified “culture” as a casual factor were a major theme, as was the belief by minoritized transnational students that their peers and teachers habitually oversimplified their identities.

Context of the school
LFHS (a pseudonym) was located in an inner-ring suburb of a large Midwestern metropolitan area. Median family income in Light Falls is slightly higher than the state
average, and the town is known for the quality of its public schools. LFHS is a 9–12 grade school where the student body is 23 percent African-American, 6 percent Asian-American, 8 percent Latino and 62 percent white. Nearly all of the teachers are white, and overwhelmingly female. Approximately, 30 percent of students in the Light Falls School district receive free or reduced lunch, and EL students make up just over 5 percent of the district’s enrollment. The district also allows students from outside of the district to enroll at the school as part of the state’s desegregation/open enrollment policy.

LFHS has different academic tracks, including International Baccalaureate (IB), Honors and the Foundations Program. The IB program is touted as part of an effort to cultivate “global mindedness” among the student body. The Foundations Program serves students whose standardized test results indicate a need for additional learning support and remediation. My observations at LFHS spanned grade levels in both Foundations and Honors courses and I spent significant time in six focal classrooms that included social studies, English, world languages, and English for ELL. My observations and conversations with LFHS teachers indicated that social and curricular space was highly racialized across the school. I observed that students in the Foundations Program were overwhelmingly students of color and/or transnational youth, while in the Honors program, the majority of students were white.

The school was selected as a site of study in part because of its stated commitment to diversity, as well as the researchers’ existing relationship with a member of the schools’ faculty.

The district’s central administration allocates resources to support services, personnel and instruction for the purposes of making their schools more responsive to their students. During my fieldwork, I observed this commitment operating in different areas, including setting target test passing rates for African-American males as a strategic objective, and including engagement with student diversity as a thematic component of within-school staff development. LFHS staff included a counselor with a specialization in trauma and a restorative justice specialist who worked with student groups, and, by invitation, with teachers. There was also an academic affairs coordinator who organizes a support program for students of color in Honors and (IB) courses.

Together, I read these practices, aims and displays as part of a larger assemblage of diversity that signaled a broader orientation to making the school welcoming for all students and underscored the prominence of diversity in planning and decision making across both schools. Here, it is important to note that “commitment” is not meant to suggest an approach or set of practices that operated in a consistent or well-coordinated fashion during my time at LFHS. For example, though there were equity coaches at the school, teacher participation was voluntary and not systematically promoted by administrators. Similarly, while faculty in some academic tracks informally collaborated to develop cultural responsive pedagogical practices, these were not uniform across the different academic programs. Though there were electives in English and social studies, the curriculum did not feature area or ethnic studies courses. Thus, the institutional support for diversity was uneven and accompanied by widespread recognition of pervasive de facto segregation within LFHS.

Focus on affinity groups
In this paper, I focus upon student affinity groups at LFHS as an example of this commitment to diversity, insofar as the school allowed them to meet during the school day and provided adult staff support, but also as an example of concurrent tensions around race, difference and equity. There is a large literature around the idea of space, identity and power in education, and affinity groups can also be referred to as safe space, community empowering space (Maton, 2008) and spaces of resistance (hooks, 1990). Affinity spaces can be understood as an
assembly of people gathered with others who share a common element of identity in order to explore, celebrate, sustain and process their experiences around that identity (Michael and Conger, 2009). These spaces often emerge in response to hostile conditions or in unwelcoming settings, wherein minoritized individuals maintain psychological well-being amid oppressive conditions (Case and Hunter, 2012). As a counterspace to white heteronormativity within schools, we can also understand these spaces as “sites where deficit notions of people of color can be challenged and where a positive climate can be established and maintained” (Solórzano et al., 2000, p. 70). LFHS hosts a number of student affinity groups, including groups for African-American boys, African-American girls, Gay-Straight Alliance, Latino boys and the MSA featured in this paper.

This examination is set against the backdrop of several important shifts in school administration and planning occurred during my fieldwork in AY 2013–2014. Most notably, a new principal replaced a popular administrator who went on to assume the position of district superintendent. The new principal, a white woman in her mid-40s, struggled throughout the year to establish rapport with students and teachers at LFHS. Her review of resources and support for existing student groups and extracurricular clubs were seen as heavy-handed and inconsistent. Her contract was not renewed at the end of her probationary period. A second change that occurred at LFHS that deserves mention was the initiation of a district-wide equity coaching program, led in LFHS by two white female staff members, which facilitated several conversations with teaching staff about equity, difference and student. Despite these investments, it was apparent that LFHS was experienced by students in profoundly different ways. Moreover, these simultaneous realities indicated the need to attend to the differences in how educational space was conceived, perceived and lived at LFHS.

**Theoretical considerations**

What space exists for students to be political in school? Education for citizenship – global, national or otherwise – is an oft-stated goal of schooling. While the term is often debated, citizenship can be understood to entail individual membership in political unit, shared identity and values, participation in political life, and knowledge of governance processes and structures (Knight Abowitz and Harnish, 2006). Civic education then is a normative project in that it entails what citizens-in-formation “ought” to know. Most often, these goals are pursued through a mix of curricular and pedagogical means. A recurring aim of the discourse of educating for citizenship is engaging with different viewpoints, or getting active in one’s community (Hahn, 1999; Torney-Purta, 2002; Fischman and Haas, 2012). And yet, a discussion of how citizenship is racialized, classed and gendered, as well as how schooling is implicated in the differential production of political subjectivities, is often lacking in calls to strengthen democracy through civic education (Shirazi, 2018). Moreover, beyond very narrow parameters, schools do not serve as sites of citizenship; citizenship is always something that one does “out there.”

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) argued that the prevalence of personal responsibility and participatory approaches to citizenship in schools (particularly the former) present a challenge to teaching justice-oriented approaches to citizenship, where the aim is to identify and transform the root causes of social problems. In addition to the hegemony of certain political values and forms of citizenship in civic education, educating for citizenship takes very different forms across racial and class lines. Citing a “civic empowerment gap,” Levinson (2014) argued that poor students and students of color are discriminated against in assessments of civic knowledge, and often lack knowledge of political institutions and processes in comparison to their wealthier white counterparts (p. 11). US civic education further alienates non-white and lower income students by emphasizing conventional forms of participation at the expense of alternative repertoires of citizenship acts.
As instructive as this research is, these differences cannot be understood as being limited
to the effects of ineffective curriculum and pedagogy. A focus on formal citizenship – and
an attending mastery of institutionally sanctioned modes of participation – may work to
produce a narrative of civic deficit, and minimize alternative collective political practices.

In light of persistent structural inequalities across American society, there are limits to
understanding citizenship as a universal legal status characterized by the exercise of rights
in opposition to the state. Rather, an understanding of citizenship that centers power and
accounts for how (racial/religious/sexual/economic) difference mediates recognition as a
citizen is needed.

The idea of cultural citizenship is useful to distinguish the social and relational aspects of
citizenship from its legal and formal status conferred by a state. In explicating the idea of
cultural citizenship, where the right to be different abuts the right to belong to a polity,
Rosaldo (1994) pointed to the tensions between ideals and lived experiences of citizenship.
That is to say, citizenship and belonging are recognized differentially across bodies.
Sociocultural studies of immigrant and transnational youths’ experiences of schooling point
to different registers of citizenship and belonging that are available within schools (Sirin and
Fine, 2007; Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012; Maira, 2009; Abu El-Haj, 2015; Shirazi, 2017). These
scholars argue that experiences of schooling often aggregate larger sociopolitical,
institutional, curricular and interpersonal factors that contribute to ambivalence and
erasure of belonging for minoritized immigrant and transnational youth and youth of color.
Said differently, schools do not exist outside of the larger social conditions in which they are
located, which are often hostile to these students.

Transnational and immigrant students are often seen by their peers and educators as
permanent foreigners, inassimilable “others,” and as “guests” (Shirazi, 2017). In the case of
students with origins in Muslim-majority states, such depictions of difference are
exacerbated by widespread suspicion, resentment and fear that characterize the xenophobia
and anti-Muslim sentiment of the current moment. In the context of the War on Terror,
“Muslim” has itself become a racial project, one that both cuts across and disrupts existing
racial formations (Naber, 2005; Rana, 2007; Abdul Khabeer, 2016). As Rana (2007) argued,
the racial figure of the Muslim ranges far and wide primarily to include populations hailing
from the Middle East to Africa to South Asia. Moreover, being Muslim is often associated
and conflated with a threatening political identity. Such representations work to position
Muslims outside of the polity, as cultural others even when they hold formal citizenship.

The lack of recognition of these youths’ cultural citizenship and belonging, along with the
continuing insistence on their otherness (even in presumably affirmative valuations of
their “culture”) sets up an interesting dilemma: what is the basis of political action, when one
is not seen as a legitimate political actor?

Rancière’s (2010) notion of dissensus fits within a larger conversation of what it means to
be a political actor and provides a generative way to push back on the idea of these students
as eternal guests and others without meaningful political claims. I use the idea of dissensus
to analyze the mode of political struggle taken up by minoritized Muslim students at LFHS.
The idea of dissensus is related, but set in opposition to, the idea of consensus – what
Rancière (2010) defined as the idea of the proper – the presumption that there is common
political experience, shared values and understandings. Consensus spells out difference in
hierarchical ways; it determines what is proper from improper, what is acceptable
from unacceptable. In this way, any political equality or reciprocal recognition that exists in
a politics of consensus is premised on fitting within the frame, rights and norms associated
with the proper. This consensus – or idea of the proper – is linked to the idea of
incorporation discussed above. The proper represents the shared frame of reference,
the normative body of knowledge, assumptions and ways of being into which others
are incorporated.
Rancière (2010) argued that this understanding of consensus dispenses with the possibility of politics itself. That which falls outside of the frame is deemed improper, which removes it from the realm of rational politics itself. For Rancière (2010), politics paradigmatically entails the enactment of equality in a situation of inequality, of challenging the idea of the proper. This is what he referred to as dissensus, or the challenging of the logic of counting that marks out some bodies as political beings in possession of speech and consigns others to merely emitting noise. The political is constituted when those who are not qualified to participate in politics presume to act and speak as if they are (Schaap, 2011).

A notable recent example of the process of dissensus can be seen in the activism of undocumented youth, known as DREAMers, who are not “simply waiting on the sidelines for something to change, but have emerged as a highly visible and potent political force” (Negrón-Gonzalez, 2015, p. 8). In the case of the MSA students in this study, the inequality of their standing materializes in the principal invoking a constitutional argument to close their group, to recode it as a club, meaning that its potency as a protected affinity space during the school day would be lost. The MSA was singled out among other affinity groups at LFHS, on the basis of its presumed religious nature. The notion of dissensus – which entails a collective’s public interrogation and disruption of the taken for granted – is a useful theoretical tool to analyze the closure of the affinity group and the students’ collective response to this action to argue that the students’ collective action instantiates them as political actors in a setting that does not necessarily see them as such.

Segregation and surveillance amid “equity and diversity”
In order to contextualize the need for an affinity space like the MSA, it is important to provide a sense of the school climate from participant perspectives. Despite outward institutional and district commitments to fostering a sense of equity and diversity, LFHS students and teachers frequently described a climate of segregation in the lunchroom, classrooms and in wider social relationships. In our interview, even the principal acknowledged, “Here, this school talks about everybody getting along, but you see the segregated cafeteria, you see segregated friends and hallways. You don’t see a lot of mixture.” Muslim students of color often spoke about a high level of surveillance they were subject to in comparison to their white peers. This racialized surveillance came up in my interview with Fardowsa, a senior of Somali origin:

If I’m walking, they’re like, “oh, what are you doing?” If there’s me and there’s a bunch of other kids of other races, they’ll come up to me like, “oh what are you doing?” Like, “you need to go to class right now, immediately,” assuming that I’m somehow a problem […] And then even in the lunchroom, the Somali kids all kinda sit in the same area, and there’s like 6, 7 GLCs [hall monitors], and there’s a cop, and there’s the principal, and they’re supposed to spread out throughout the cafeteria because if any problems arise they can be right there. But they all stand right next to us. Every single one of them. And it’s just like, they’re watching us because they assume the problem’s gonna arise from right here.

The dynamic named by Fardowsa is significant for two reasons: first, it highlights a common view among MSA students that their members, particularly Somali origin students, were frequently targets of preemptive attention and action from LFHS administrators and security guards. Second, her description of how Somali bodies are regularly surveilled at LFHS maps onto longstanding and problematic discourses of black criminality that inform policing and law enforcement (Gilroy, 1982). Here, however, it is not just embodied blackness that invites scrutiny – it is the intersection of Muslimness and blackness, what Rana (2007) called a “double threat,” that attracts the frequent attention of
the security personnel within the school. The surveillance that students within the MSA described was not just in relation to the perceived threats to order or school security they posed, but also gendered surveillance of their bodies and dress. Fatima, also a senior of Somali origin, described an interaction with a staff member who offered unsolicited assistance:

I remember a staff member came [up] to me. The weirdest thing I’ve ever had [happen] […] I was sitting there in the learning lab, and […] she just came up to me and she goes “Sweetheart, I just wanna let you know that I’m right here for you no matter what,” and I was like, “I don’t understand what you’re talking about.” And she goes, “I know, I know, I’ve been talking, you know I’ve watched other students and I know you are struggling with your hijab. You know, it’s ok to do what you want. It’s alright. You know, in fact here’s my number, if you want to take the next step, let me know […]” I told her, “no actually I’m fine.” And she goes “No it’s ok, I understand,” and I was like, “you don’t understand a single thing”.

Similarly, the issue of segregation in the school came up in an interview with Ms Sharp, the Trauma-informed Mental Health Specialist at LFHS who was the MSA faculty adviser:

I find it interesting because […] this is coming from a lot of students even, how we boast diversity and equality in this district and while our faces might look diverse, our classes are not. And what’s happening in the lunchroom is not […] every time I went down there looking for a student, I’m like, oh, look towards the black tables or the white tables or whatever because very rarely are they, are they intermingling and it’s really disappointing.

Different participants similarly described classroom settings in which the students of color sat together because of the hostility and indifference they frequently experienced from their white peers. Nadhifa, a female student of Somali origin, observed how students self-segregate within their classes as well:

I’ve noticed this with a lot of AP History classes, because I took AP World last year, but it’s split up, kind of, in the class. It’s like one side of the room is all the white kids and then there’s me and [names other students], and we’re right in a group together in a center, and then the other side is just another group of white kids.

Fatima made a related observation during an interview in which she discussed different modes of segregation in and beyond the classroom. She elaborated upon Nadhifa’s point, explaining that in-class segregation partly arises from an understanding that “no one was going to listen to our voice, nobody was going to take us seriously, everybody was going to ignore us.” Fatima gave an example of a group project in which she was assigned to work with three white male students, and they did not consult her about extensive changes they made to her portion of the project and the presentation itself:

What happened that day […] this guy deleted everything that I worked on, saying “Oh we’re doing a script,” I said, “Why didn’t you tell me?” and he said “Um, I thought you already knew.” I was like “No, no one told me,” and there’s 3 Caucasian dudes, right? […] [when] I started talking [in class] and he is behind me, [shaking] his head like the information is wrong.

Together, these examples highlight how the space of LFHS, though conceived to be welcoming, was experienced and perceived by these students as an isolating and hostile space of surveillance. Outside of the classroom, Muslim students (of Somali origin in particular) are scrutinized to ensure they are not out of place, or, as Fatima mentions, that they have corrective support. Within classrooms, students report a feeling of hostility, being corrected, or being otherwise ignored. It is in these conditions that we can understand why the MSA was important to the students who participated in it, as a counterspace, and space of community building and belonging. As Ms Sharp explained, the MSA was “a place for them to support each other, and to feel fully accepted for who they are and for their culture,
because they don’t feel like that anywhere else in the school.” Thus, the MSA constituted a space of being otherwise, and being for one’s self that was not readily available for its members in other aspects of schooling at LFHS.

The MSA at LFHS
Over the course of the 2013–2014 school year at LFHS, the PA system would announce meetings for affinity groups, which allowed student members of these groups to leave class and attend without being marked as absent. In the classes I was observing, sometimes two or three students would leave class to attend MSA, or the meetings of another group. In November 2013, I asked one member of the MSA I had gotten to know over the past few months, if she would ask the larger group if I could attend a meeting, and I was invited to attend an MSA meeting later that month. The meeting was held in a large classroom on the third floor to accommodate the more than 60 active members. Due to its size, the MSA had a leadership council of six students. Nadhifa, Fatima and Fardowsa were three of these student leaders, and after hearing about my project and my background, they said I was welcome to attend the MSA meetings anytime. I attended two additional meetings of the MSA, in December and January. In my three observations of the MSA meetings, I did not witness any references or discussions of a religious nature. Instead, conversations within the club centered on the well-being of students, seen in an opening activity of sitting in a circle and hearing from everyone about how they are doing. In these conversations, students talked about the challenges of that particular day, as well as longer-term challenges and circumstances they were facing. They could also pass and say nothing. When these remarks ended, most of the time allocated for the MSA meeting was over. With the remaining time, students would often break up into smaller groups to work on designing materials for MSA activities, or briefly socialize with friends that they would not otherwise see in their classes.

As I learned later, Ms Bernard, the first-year principal, began a review of the student clubs and affinity groups at LFHS in January 2014, due to growing requests for new groups and concerns about redundancy among the groups and clubs. Through this review, she decided that several groups and clubs required modifications in their status to be in accordance with the law and to eliminate redundancy, including the Gay-Straight Alliance and the MSA. In the case of the MSA, Ms Bernard notified Ms Sharp in January that the MSA would not be permitted to meet during the school day, because it was “a religious group,” and that legally, the school could not sanction a religious group to meet during the school day and pay a stipend to a staff member to facilitate.

Here, it is important to understand the principal’s decision as an act of racialized policing. Rancière (2010) termed policing as an act concerned with the distribution of the sensible, or what counts as proper. Policing is concerned with “the regulation of populations by assigning subjects to their proper place within the social order” (Schaap, 2011, p. 35). In this case, Ms Bernard invokes the law – notably the principle of separation of church and state – as a basis for placing the MSA outside of what is considered to be proper within LFHS, and the realm of what is legally permissible more broadly. Her interpretation of the law and the status of the MSA as a “religious” student group rested upon a narrow understanding of the group’s purpose, and took the name of the MSA as evidence to support such a designation. However, Ms Bernard’s act of policing the MSA and its members set in motion a collective youth response asserting their equality while drawing attention to their conditions of exclusion.

Response
In accordance with Ms Bernard’s directive, the MSA stopped meeting in March 2014, but simultaneously, the student leaders attempted to contact her in writing and in person to discuss keeping the MSA as an affinity group. In an interview, Ms Sharp, the staff member...
facilitating the group, tried to explain to Ms Bernard that the MSA was not a religious group but a support group for students who were identified as Muslim and a space for them to talk about their experiences in school and plan community service. Ms Sharp said that her suggestion that the group’s name be changed to the “African and Middle Eastern Student Group” was deemed “insufficient” by the principal. As Fatima and Nadhifa later explained, the MSA students were willing to change the name as a tactic to continue meeting as a group, but they were upset that the principal thought that the primary raison d’être of the group was religious. This refusal to allow the group to meet under a different name draws attention to Ms Bernard’s understanding of the primacy of religion as the organizing basis for the group, and her difficulty in recognizing the alternate and intersecting identities of these students. There is a clear connection between this refusal and the points made by Rana (2007) and Naber (2005), that the term “Muslim” works both as a flexible racial category and as a threatening political identity. In this case, to have a space of support, the students make use of “Muslim” as an identity marker for students whose origins are in various Muslim-majority states (notably Somalia) to create a counterspace and fit within the logic of affinity groups at LFHS. Simultaneously, the term is seized upon by Ms Bernard to place the group in opposition to and outside of the law.

After Ms Sharp met with Ms Bernard, the students tried to meet with her as well. Fardowsa described the difficulty in setting up a meeting with Ms Bernard, and how they were finally able to meet with her in an impromptu meeting following three prior cancellations on the part of the principal:

We tried doing everything correctly. We spoke to the vice-principal first, and then we just [tried to] set up meetings with her […] at first we didn’t realize what was going on. We just thought it was a policy change and we just thought it was happening to everyone else, so that’s why we were completely calm at first, and we set up meetings with her, but when she started blowing us off and not coming […] we slowly started realizing she didn’t want to meet with us.

When the student leaders, including Fatima, Nadhifa and Fardowsa, were finally able to speak with the principal in April 2014, they described the interaction as disrespectful and condescending. Though the students reiterated the suggestion of changing the group’s name to the “African and Middle Eastern Student Group,” they said that Ms Bernard again refused. On two occasions, Ms Bernard mentioned the need for the “separation of church and state” and told the students that “in America, we have separation of church and state.” Here again, Ms Bernard’s comments point to an essentialization of these students’ identities as “Muslim,” which is seemingly outside of the category of “American.” This point was not lost on Fardowsa, who spoke at length about the interactions with Ms Barnard and her unwillingness to entertain different solutions to and understandings of the purpose and aims of MSA:

Every time we made a good point she didn’t really listen to it or comment on it, she just kept talking about the name. And we were in there actually trying to find a solution and she just, and then she was like, “well, I don’t know, I don’t know if you guys know this or not, but in America, there’s this thing called separation of church and state.” And then she said it once, and everyone looked at her and we just ignored it because it didn’t, I didn’t know, I didn’t, I don’t understand why it was relevant because she kept saying it’s a group, she kept saying MSA is about Islam, even though it isn’t. And if the name is the problem, we can change it, so [then to her] we’re admitting that is has to do with religion, so that comment wasn’t even like, relevant, so we ignored it and then she said it again and everyone got really upset because we were like, we were like we know what separation of church and state is […] And what exactly does that mean, “in America?” Are you saying we’re not from America, are you saying we don’t know? I’m not really sure what she was trying to say, but we just generally felt, the tone she set was really disrespectful.

As she and Nadhifa later told me, the MSA students were upset with this response, and reported that the meeting ended after the principal said that “she was not going to be
yelled at and spoken to disrespectfully.” These maneuvers by the principal are significant, for they again raise questions of which voices count, and how they come to have value. In framing her explanation with the preamble of “in America we have separation of church and state,” the principal polices the demands of these youth as those of interlopers; in this case as Muslim others, or cultural outsiders who want space for their faith within the school in defiance of the US Constitution. In characterizing their efforts to address their concerns with her decision to suspend the MSA as “yelling” and “being disrespectful,” the principal polices these youths in ways that render their voice as aggressive and disrespectful noise.

Both the MSA students and Ms Sharp said that the principal was not responsive to further requests to discuss the situation. After the MSA student leaders’ meeting with the principal, Ms Sharp said that many of the MSA students told her about how this incident made them feel unwelcome at LFHS, which prompted her to speak with the superintendent:

In the middle of this whole MSA issue, several of the students did come to me and say, if I’m supposed to feel like this is my home, that’s insane, because this is not my home, this is where I come for school and I hate it and I don’t feel comfortable and then when I go home, I feel comfortable. And that was, that’s when I started talking to the superintendent about you know, students are saying they don’t feel welcome here.

This excerpt is notable because it powerfully captures the limits of belonging at LFHS for minoritized Muslim youth, and the critical importance of the MSA in helping these students feel – even if the feeling was conditional – as if they belong. Here, the students draw attention both to the efforts to make the school feel welcoming and their experiences of that space as unwelcoming. Nevertheless, closure of the MSA did not result in a lasting passivity or indifference on the part of the student leaders. Independent of their consultations with Ms Sharp, the students collectively came to the decision to continue advocating for the MSA, and wrote a letter to the superintendent describing the need for the MSA, the climate that its members faced at LFHS, the interaction with Ms Bernard and how they felt disrespected by her interactions with them. The superintendent, who was the former principal at LFHS, overruled the decision of the principal and said that the only issue was the name, and if the name was changed, they could continue to meet. In this way, the MSA was able to continue as an affinity group that met in school and became known as the African Middle Eastern Club.

Aftermath and conclusion
In this paper, I have used student perspectives to narrate the story of a struggle around affinity space for minoritized Muslim youth in an inner-ring suburban high school. In the case of the students affiliated with the MSA, this was a complicated endeavor: they had to contend with an administrator who viewed their club as a violation of federal law, in an institutional setting that proclaimed how welcoming and committed to educational equity it sought to be. These and other tensions must be acknowledged in efforts to study or create policy around the incorporation of student voice in schools.

I use Rancière’s (2010) dissensus to draw attention to the politics of student voice, and the processes by which voices can be heard and come to have value. The strength of this approach is that it does not take institutional claims of championing equity or sentiments of “everyone is welcome here” at face value. Indeed, Ms Bernard invoked equality to justify the closure of the MSA. Instead, Rancière’s (2010) dissensus allows us to consider what kinds of politics are available to students when they are placed outside of mainstream or the excluded from spaces and rights afforded to their peers. The decision to confront the authority of the principal represents a Rancierian politics entailing the students’ assertion of
an exclusion from equality, as well as a mobilization of action and speech on their part to claim the rights afforded other students. The rights that these students were seeking were concerned with preserving a space within the school that they identify as important to being able to survive their daily school experiences. The significance of the MSA students’ move rests on their refusal to be policed according to how the principal understood the status of the MSA as a violation of the separation of church and state. The students challenged the principal’s dismissal of their club as an unsanctioned religious space, as well as the logic of which voices count and deserve to be heard. The MSA was not a theological space; it was about having a place within the larger school where its members could speak and be heard, where the normative burden of embodying difference in a space of ambivalent welcome could be cast aside, if only temporarily.

After the school year ended, Ms Bernard’s contract was not renewed. However, I was able to interview her in May 2014 and indirectly ask about the case of the MSA. While telling me about her broader efforts to develop a protocol to review and approve affinity groups and student clubs at LFHS, she made no mention of her interactions with the MSA students that catalyzed their further actions. She did, however, provide insight into how she understood the students’ struggles around affinity spaces. In response to my question about her perceptions of the climate around equity and diversity at LFHS, Ms Bernard started by talking about her work as a principal of another inner-ring suburban school, where, she noted, two-thirds of the student body were students of color, and how that environment itself made the diversity work very different in comparison:

Here, I see two things, I guess from my lens, I see students from other countr-other cultures who stick within their culture and don’t accept other people into their culture. So, they do stay segregated. I also see them getting special privileges that other kids don’t get, too. And I don’t think that they realize that. So they want more and more and more. So, if they see something that another group might have, which, you know not necessarily culturally based but, you know, something that some other kid started or has something, they want to have that because of their culture. Even though they may have like 5 other things that they’re getting privileges too that those kids don’t have. So I think that they have a lot of opportunity and a lot of privilege, and I think it’s tough because they do feel so connected to each other, and they don’t accept a lot of people in their world either. And then the second that you tell them, no, that we have to be equal, they don’t like that either.

These remarks, along with her closure of the MSA, underscore the extent to which the notion of rights, exclusion and equity is hotly contested subjects in schools. For Ms Bernard, the MSA students’ desire for a space that provided a respite from the exclusion and racialized surveillance of their school and fostered relationships around shared experiences was seen as an aggregate of their “culture,” “self-segregation” and insatiable demands for “special privileges” that were not available to all students. Her concern around reining in such privileges is motivated by her commitment to her understanding of equality, which is premised on ensuring a form of parity that deepened the feelings of exclusion experienced by these students, rather than working to facilitate the conditions that support belonging and provide what they need to succeed. The students challenge the principal’s narrow understanding of equality to preserve a more equitable arrangement that allows them to maintain one space of affirmation within an oft-alienating school.

Rancière’s (2010) notion of dissensus helps illustrate that Ms Bernard’s beliefs are not merely personal; they are imbedded with authority to designate the proper from the improper within her school. Similarly, dissensus allows a productive vantage point from which to understand how these youths’ rights to an affinity space emerge in action and speech signaling the inequality of their present conditions. Their collective action was itself an act of reclaiming their time and space within a largely inhospitable setting. In raising this challenge, they accomplished two important tasks: first, they drew attention to the gap
between the school’s stated commitment to diversity and equity, and their lived experiences of belonging/exclusion at LFHS. Second, their challenge worked to overturn the conventions, norms and knowledge that mark out some bodies as political beings in possession of political speech, and consign others to the mere emitting of “cultural” noise.

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Corresponding author
Roozbeh Shirazi can be contacted at: shir0035@umn.edu

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Humanizing school communities

Culturally responsive leadership in the shaping of curriculum and instruction

Stefanie LuVenia Marshall and Muhammad A. Khalifa

University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of instructional leaders in promoting culturally responsive practice in ways that make schooling more inclusive and humanizing for minoritized students and communities.

Design/methodology/approach – The data pull from a six-month long case study of a mid-sized, Midwestern school district that was attempting to implement culturally responsive leadership practices. After axial coding, findings emerged from interview data and field notes.

Findings – Instructional leaders can play significant and useful roles in promoting culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy in schools. Districts can establish positions in which instructional leaders can work to strengthen the culturally responsive pedagogy of every teacher in a district.

Research limitations/implications – This study has implications for both research and practice. Culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) exists in multiple spaces and at various levels in a district. CRSL is not only a school-level function, but it can also be a district-level practice. Culturally responsive instructional leaders (in this case, not principals, but coaches) can have significant impact in promoting culturally relevant pedagogy.

Originality/value – This contribution moves beyond school leadership and examines how district leadership practices and decisions foster culturally relevant practices and the challenges in employing this equity work.

Keywords Leadership, Instructional coaches, Culturally responsive leadership

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Culturally responsive leaders exhibit a number of leadership behaviors that improve the lives and the education of children. The research on culturally responsive school leaders has tended to focus on four broad areas (Khalifa et al., 2016): critical self-reflection, community advocacy and engagement, school culture and climate, and instructional and transformational leadership. While this last domain is the focus of this paper, unfortunately, most of the literature dualistically describes the literature in this area; there is on the one hand, the cultural (often thought of as being related to social and emotional learning) and then, on the other hand, there is instructional leadership. There is virtually nothing written on culturally responsive instructional leaders’ understandings and behaviors, despite the fact that they are of the most influential actors on teaching practice (Hallinger, 2003). This study moves beyond examining the role of school leaders, principals, by centering those who are formal instructional leaders.

Instructional leadership involves developing the instructional capacity of teachers in ways that improve student achievement and everything from establishing professional learning communities, to goal framing, mentoring, and evaluation and assessments are thought of as core behaviors. In culturally responsive leadership discussions, the key questions have often been: how can you talk about race and advocate for minoritized students. We affirm this past research, and recognize the necessity of discussing race in schools and education research. Yet, there is also wide opportunity for researchers to think more deeply about how school leaders can develop more culturally responsive instructional leadership practices.
In this study, instructional coaches are connected with the districts’ community engagement efforts, and are referred to as Quality Compensation law, or “Q-Comp coaches.” Broadly speaking, districts gained state legislative dollars to “allow local districts and exclusive representatives of the teachers to design and collectively bargain a plan that meets the four components of the law” (Minnesota Department of Education Website[1]). Q-Comp coaches in Eastern School District provide instructional guidance through coaching and mentoring. Over the past two school years, they have become more intentional about centering the cultural backgrounds and needs of the students in their class. Thus, the purpose of this broader study is to examine the understandings and perceived behaviors of instructional (Q-comp) coaches about their roles in promoting culturally responsive instruction. This research was driven by a central research question and three sub-questions:

RQ1. How do district-level instructional coaches understand their roles as culturally responsive leaders?

RQ1a. How do local policies impact the effectiveness of Q-Comp coaches in one school district?

RQ1b. What practices of Q-Comp coaches enhance their role as culturally responsive leaders?

RQ1c. What, if any, tensions and challenges do Q-Comp coaches face in providing culturally responsive leadership?

Context
This study occurred in the mid-sized suburban Eastern School District which serves just over 10,000 students. The diversity of the district is on the rise with 40 percent of students identifying as students of color, and over 50 languages spoken by the families within the district boundaries. The district has several of the top-rated schools in the state, and has access to one of the wealthiest tax-generated incomes in the state. However, Eastern School Districts’ administrators have been aware of grave educational disparity within the district for the past decade and have an equity plan to counter said disparity.

At the time of the study, there had been limited work at the district level on culturally responsive education. Many of the people interviewed for the study expressed they wanted more culturally responsive leadership at the district level. One of the authors was invited to provide professional development with the Q-Comp, instructional coaches, in the district to provide support to staff that would in-turn work with teachers within the district to counter institutionalized inequitable instructional practices. The training consisted of five, full-day sessions in which a team of researchers guided the instructional coaches through scholarly readings about marginalization and difference, power, oppression, privilege, and other relevant topics. The coaches also led conversations around current and possible administrative tools that could be reformed with an equity focused eye. The team also engaged the instructional coaches in a number of activities that pushed them to critically self-reflect and decolonize their thinking about pedagogy, community engagement, research, and instructional practice.

This context is useful because it indicates that culturally responsive work can happen with mid-level administrators, even without prior culturally responsive leadership at the very top levels. However, the district centered addressing White Fragility as a means of being culturally responsive. According to DiAngelo (2011), White Fragility is, “a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves (p. 57).” The authors found this approach in addressing cultural responsiveness limited the effectiveness of implementing Quality Compensation law.
Literature on culturally responsive instructional leaders

Literature on culturally responsive instructional leaders has been minimal, and thus we approach this by synthesizing two distinct areas of prior research: culturally responsive school leadership (CRSL) and instructional leadership as it is related to equity. Moreover, there are also significant gaps in the literature on how instructional leadership might operate at the district level.

According to a review of earlier research, CRSL has four domains (Khalifa et al., 2016):

- Critical self-reflection
- Community engagement
- Culturally responsive school context
- Culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy

In this latter area domain, Khalifa and et al. (2016) draw attention to:

[…] the crucial role of the school leader in ensuring that teachers are and remain culturally responsive. Thus, [the authors] focus on the ability of the school leader to articulate a vision that supports the development and sustaining of culturally responsive teaching. (p. 10)

Culturally responsive instruction involves drawing from the culture, ethnic diversity and experiences of students to better meet their instructional needs (Gay, 2002). Scholars find that teaching practices and pedagogy are crucial to culturally responsive schooling (Gay, 2010), but not much is written about the impactful leadership behaviors, and in particular instructional leadership behaviors, that would foster academic success of minoritized students.

McKenzie’s et al. (2006) focus on leaders’ ability to develop what they refer to as “equity consciousness” and “equity-oriented teaching skills” – and is one publication that actually directly addresses leadership behaviors as it pertains to equity. We found most useful their notions of equity consciousness in which they describe a belief and practice that teachers have, that all students “are capable of high levels of academic success” (p. 160). They further explain a range in which some teachers exude this belief in their teaching, while others do not. They argue that principals must help teachers understand this. While we find this work valuable, we also add to this work by asking how instructional leaders (who are not principals) promote equity and cultural responsiveness. And more poignantly, we add to the conversation on cultural responsiveness by examining the behaviors and understandings of instructional coaches as they strategically engage with teachers on their culturally responsive practice. In other words, we ask: what leadership behaviors may promote equity consciousness and cultural responsiveness?

Instructional coaches as culturally responsive leaders?

The role of instructional coaches, also referenced as instructional specialists in the literature, is a relatively recent role in many schools with goals to improve academic achievement. Instructional coaches are often employed by the district and may be directly involved with the adoption of textbooks, the development of curriculum and provide ongoing professional development and mentorship for teachers and/or principals (Domina et al., 2015). According to Domina et al., 2015, the number of instructional coaches has more than doubled since the adoption of standards-based reforms in the 1990s. Although instructional coaches may have context specific roles, Galey (2016) identified three main roles they play: cognitive to develop practice, organizational to enhance capacity, and reform to accommodate instructional policies. Across many schools an apprentice mentor model is utilized, or as Lave and Wenger (1991) describe legitimate peripheral participation where instructional coaches learn through the “centripetal participation”, while building the capacities of teachers (Coburn and Woulfin, 2012; Galey, 2016). The goal of this paper is to build upon this foundation of literature to discuss the role of instructional coaches in addressing issues of equity in instructional decisions with teachers.

Instructional leadership is often viewed as the priority of the school principal, however, in recent years the role of the instructional coach has been utilized in districts to enable
principals to focus on various needs within the school. Leadership should therefore be viewed as distributed (Spillane et al., 2001) where instruction is addressed by an instructional team rather than solely the principal. An instructional team may include the principal of the school, an instructional coach, teachers, and in a supplementary role, paraprofessionals. This distribution of leadership often includes support staff in central office like instructional coaches. Districts have been known to provide vague direction for instructional content and little attention is given to developing the capacities of teachers through the use of provided resources (Floden et al., 1988). However, as more districts are involved in the instructional needs of teachers, there is a need for central office staff to better fulfill their job responsibilities through strong institutional supports with role models as well as a broker and/or a buffer (Honig, 2006). Taken together, there is a need for instructional coaches to have coherent and sustainable systems to best support the culturally responsive instructional needs of teachers.

District-level instructional leadership

Prior scholarship has also captured the notion of district-level leadership in support of instructional leadership. Floden et al. (1988) found that few districts actually have processes in place to promote instructional leadership. Waters and Marzano (2006) found that district-level leadership and specific leadership behaviors are positively associated with enhanced students’ achievement. This research is useful. We add to these conversations by looking more closely at how those district-level leadership behaviors impact teaching. Moreover, we also tackle issues of equity and cultural responsiveness head-on.

It is also true that the beliefs of high-level administrators may differ from middle-level administrators which may leave instructional coaches relatively autonomous in regards to instructional decisions. Vanessa Siddle Walker’s (2000) research demonstrates the historical relevance of leadership in providing insights as to the role of black principals in rural schools in the south. In the case presented, given the lack of care and neglect by high-level administrators such as the White superintendent and school board members, the black principal found great autonomy to meet the needs of his students. Siddle Walker (2000) therefore sheds light on how differing values between central office staff and those in schools may leave those making instructional decisions to their own discretion.

Methods

This study is based on a six-month case study in Eastern School District, a suburban district, to gain an enhanced understanding of the culture within the context (Creswell, 2014). Our research rests on the assumption that instructional coaches have the potential to serve as meaningful leaders in the quest towards meeting the instructional needs of marginalized populations. One of the authors of this paper provided professional development over a period of one and one-half years on CRSL to district Q-Comp coaches. This provided an opportunity to serve as a participant observer within the study allowing for an insider view of events taking place (Yin, 2013). This work is based on interviews with five individuals in equity related leadership positions including four instructional coaches (i.e. Q-comp coaches), the Director of the Office of Educational Equity and from field notes from work with district leaders who participated in professional development. We argue CRSL must be thought of as a component of leadership across different forms of leadership, as leadership is distributed across school settings (Spillane et al., 2001).

The participants in this study possess an average of 15 years of experience in education, many of whom have served as teachers. Ninety-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants. The questions in the interview protocol centered: their background, their understanding of equity broadly as well as in Eastern Schools, how
their role addresses equity, and tensions they experience in pursuing their role as a Q-Comp coach.

Once the interviews were transcribed, they were coded using Dedoose based on the leadership literature as well as themes that emerged in field notes and from initial interviews. Themes that emerged include: challenges of bureaucracy, establishing trust with teachers, “unlearning,” the practicality of implementing culturally responsive practices.

Participants
April is a White female who has worked in Eastern School District for 28 years. She has worked across several schools within the district, in other states, and internationally. She currently serves as a Q-comp coach.

Deborah is a Black female and serves as the Director in the Office of Educational Equity, a department of central office. She has worked in Eastern School District for over 25 years. Deborah views her role as to help the district become more inclusive.

Dylan is a White male who has worked in Eastern School District for 14 years as an educational assistant and most recently as a Q-Comp coach. He has worked in a total of five schools across the district, two of which as a coach.

Mike is a White male who has worked in Eastern School District for 15 years and currently serves as a Q-Comp coach.

Sandra is a White female who has worked in Eastern School District for 14 years. She began her tenure in the district as a teacher and now serves as Q-Comp coach.

Janice, Mary and Melissa were participants in the professional development trainings that were led by researchers from a local university. While they are not one of the five respondents highlighted in this study, they made comments or conversed with other participants during PD sessions. Janice, Mary and Melissa are all Q-Comp coaches, White women with at least ten years of teaching experience.

Findings
Overall, we find that instructional leaders (Q-Comp coaches) can play significant and useful roles in promoting culturally responsive teaching and pedagogy in schools. We believe that the most promising finding was that districts can establish positions in which instructional leadership coaches can work to strengthen the culturally responsive pedagogy of every teacher in a district. In this section, we describe five key themes that emerged from this study. First, the instructional leaders (coaches) perceived their ability to be equitable and culturally responsive was easier (or even possible) when district policies supported those behaviors; their commitment to being culturally responsive was far more attenuated, in their view, if the high-level district administrators (e.g. superintendent, assistant superintendent, etc.) did not have policies that would support this work. Second, we found that trust has a strong relationship with the coaches’ ability to promote cultural responsiveness. In other words, teachers would not be open to equity-oriented dialogues about their practice until after they established a level of trust with their coach. Third, it was necessary for the instructional coaches to unlearn certain behaviors and notions that were associated with traditional forms of schooling (i.e. that were not culturally responsive). Fourth, the Q-Comp coaches believed they improved and learned more about their roles as culturally responsive leaders when they learned in professional developments with cultural and community liaisons. This finding suggests that staff composition of PDs was important when promoting district-wide cultural responsiveness. The fifth finding suggests that all of the traditional tools that instructional leaders use must reflect the commitment to an ethos of culturally responsive education.
Between policy and trust: the importance of district-level policy and district-level support

Within a sound educational structure grounded in equity and centered on students, there should be alignment between policies, procedures, and equity values. Eastern School District had been attentive to the diverse needs of students for over a decade. However, the Q-Comp coaches identified a tension that existed between their role as charged by the district and the expectations of the teachers. The coaches described their role with teachers as “inviting” teachers to engage in reflecting about their practice as well as “to think about what equity might look like in the classroom” with teachers. This engagement would potentially lead to conversations about resources, practices, and images of the potential of equitable instruction.

By inviting the teachers to critically reflect, teachers had control of the conversation and the teacher was therefore responsible for raising their concerns, their noticings, as well as receiving the feedback offered. While instructional coaches had received culturally relevant leadership training, teachers had not been prepared to critically engage on their reflections and therefore did not value the offerings of the coaches. According to Sandra:

The district always says […] we fully support you, like we want you guys to do that. They even named us as a group of people that would be continuing this mission, our equity journey throughout the years. But I don’t think you really see the big tension until you actually start talking about it.

This quote is indicative of two distinct findings in this study: instructional leaders would feel more empowered to enact CRSL if the senior district administrators were supportive of their work. Yet, even without district-level support, all of the coaches felt they could incorporate aspects of culturally responsive administrative practices. Essentially, because there was no district policy around culturally responsiveness and because they did not feel that equity was a district-level priority, the instructional coaches did not feel as though they could freely comment on instructional practices of teachers without a potential fracture in their trust and relationship with teachers. A district policy would take the onus off of the coaches, and they could point to the district as the source of their questions around inequitable practice. If the coaches felt they had already established a good relationship with the teachers they supervised, they felt more comfortable commenting on the teachers’ practice. Our research team wondered: “should they not be committed to educational justice, and critique inequitable practices regardless of the district’s commitment, and regardless of the damage done to their relationship to teachers?” We think this is a very valid question, yet in the instructional coaches’ views, they felt that doing this work would breach the trust, and any potential opportunity to help the teachers improve their practice. Mary mentioned:

[…] if I do that, then the teachers would not allow me access to observe any aspect of their teaching [Teachers] would not be vulnerable with me, and they would only allow me into their classrooms on very safe days. I essentially could not do my work.

Thus, there is a need to establish trust between the teacher and the coach by teachers having control of the conversation, but there was also a need to be honest about the capacity of teachers to engage in culturally responsive work. Ultimately, those in leadership of the district must believe equity work is needed in order for reasonable change to be feasible. According to Deborah:

I believe our Assistant Superintendent would be better if he didn’t have that arm [the superintendent] leaning on him. There’s this fear of doing the right thing […] they don’t hold anybody accountable in this district but people of color.

The overall impact of the policies was limited given the minimal attention of the superintendent and assistant superintendent to equity-centered work. Beyond that, it must
be the work of all involved in education and not exclusively people of color. Instructional coaches found that district policies calling for attention to educational equity was not sufficient. Differing values and limited support of teachers on equity resulted in a lack of efficacy in attending to the instructional disparity taking place in schools.

**Balancing trust: the importance of establishing relationships with teachers before engaging in equity work**

In order to promote humanizing practices among teachers, there is a need for establishing trust between teachers and instructional coaches to have challenging and possibly uncomfortable conversations about one's practice. The instructional coaches in our study stressed the importance of teachers having control of the conversation, but it was also expressed by the director, Deborah, there is a need to be honest about who teachers are able and willing to receive information from. In order to garner trust more quickly, according to Deborah, the district hired White staff to work with the majority White teaching force in Eastern School Districts schools:

> So, I learned a long time ago that White people listen to White people better than they’ll listen to me. Black kids listen to me before they’ll listen to them. So, it’s a two-way street. So, in the district we have finally come around where we have kind of this underground plan, we’re going forward, and equity is on their list […] I can’t reach you because you are intimidated by me because I’m very direct. I don’t have a problem looking you in the eye, my head goes side to side – cultural, I’m not gonna change my culture ‘cause you gonna have to deal with parents like me […] I have decided to use the Q-Comp coaches, which are almost all White, except for two, and have [the university expert] come in with them and train them and then they meet with every teacher in this district. And they are going forward with spreading the information that way.

The quote indicates that the strategic, covert, hiring of White coaches by the district enabled them to press the majority White teaching staff members in ways that may have been perceived as uncomfortable with others outside of their race. The White coaches did not indicate any awareness of such hiring practices, and therefore the authors do not believe they are consciously using their privilege to gain the trust of teachers in Eastern Schools. Despite the ostensibly racially oppressive hiring decision of the district to hire nearly all – White coaches, this quote deafeningly acknowledges what students of color must be experiencing and why their performance is lower in the district. If the predominantly White teachers cannot trust and positively respond to coaches of color, how could they ever possibly humanize students and families of color?

By preparing a group of White Q-Comp coaches with knowledge on equitable instructional practices, coaches were able to work with teachers using their privilege to critically reflect on inequitable instructional practices and overcome the “intimidation” the mostly White teaching staff members may experience. Said another way, by reflecting with someone that looked like them, Deborah claimed teachers were better able to focus on the instructional needs of students. Though the races of the coaches and teachers were the same in most cases, White, the information gap between the instructional coaches and the teachers also presented as a hindrance. Although there were district-level policies and initiatives to support equitable practices in schools, the support must materialize as professional development, and actionables to actively counter educational disparities. Deborah went on to say:

> I have been speaking about equity for 25 years and it’s not an easy thing to talk about because I believe if people don’t understand it, they become intimidated by it. Like I’m trying to take something from them to give to someone else, but that’s not what it’s about. So, yes. So, we are starting the conversation, again, for about the twenty-fifth time, about equity, but this time we have data to [determine] where we go.
This quote demonstrates that even with a long tenure of doing equity work – it is still challenging to support because it takes deliberate and continuous effort. There is also a level of autonomy needed to disrupt the status quo. Of the four interviews with Q-Comp coaches and one administrator, all felt relatively autonomous in their work. In other research by the authors of this paper, it was found that paraprofessionals trained to also support equitable schooling practices did not experience this level of autonomy. It may be true that since the coach was also viewed as a peer and centered data and the needs of students, their perspective and work was generally respected. However, it may also be because they were White.

By hiring White coaches, district administrators were being responsive to White Fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). Q-comp coaches described times when they had to make teachers uncomfortable in order to truly center the needs of students. This is exemplified through Dylan’s words:

Many people would probably say that I don’t really toe the line. I do what I feel is right because, in my honest opinion, if anybody wants to talk about the practices that I do, I do it because I put children first, I put families first. If it is a tough conversation, I don’t think anybody can argue with me or write me up by putting children first because I think that’s our job. That’s my philosophy.

I have no problem talking about equity, and I also believe in taking action.

Dylan shared that he is not willing to conform, and that he prioritizes the needs of the children and families he serves. This quote implies that by centering the needs of children, there was little space for argument from teachers. Dylan also touches on the challenge that may exist in having critical conversations around equity. These conversations may be triggers that may awaken White Fragility which may take place in a school context when a teacher’s interpretation of what took place in a lesson is challenged, or when a White teacher receives feedback they believed may be judged as racist (DiAngelo, 2011).

Ironically, although those delivering the culturally responsive feedback were essentially White, the instructional coaches, the messages being delivered are the beliefs from people of color from within and outside the district, including one of the authors of this paper. According to Deborah:

So, that’s how the teachers are getting it (referring to feedback on culturally responsiveness related to instruction). They don’t always know they’re gettin’ it. And it’s not always coming from us, it’s People of Color. It’s coming from others. That’s what I love. And that’s why I’m so excited.

What teachers in the district were not privy to was that the information that was informing the coaches working with them was based on the expertise of people of color. Overall, the main concern those dedicated to equity work in Eastern School District was supporting the needs of White teachers in working with their diverse students. Even if it meant prejudiced hiring practices.

Unlearning through cognitive reflection

The findings indicate that the instructional coaches felt not only that they needed to unlearn many things about minoritized students and their families, but also about the very craft of teaching and learning. When Mike was asked, how they should “find” culturally responsive curriculum and materials that teachers should use in class, he stated “We have misunderstood so much that we’ve learned about how teaching happens.” He learned he did not need to look far, but that he does need to engage and learn from the community (i.e. students, parents, spaces, etc.) in a non-exoticizing way. Mike reconfirmed: “so much that we have learned is wrong.”

As a result of the way materials were presented and the ensuing conversations that took place in culturally responsive PDs, the instructional coaches reported a high level of reflection on their own practice. Moreover, the conversations between the instructional
coaches, administrators, liaisons, and academic research consultant all led to conversations that led to deep cognitive reflections of the coaches; this is taken up more directly in the forthcoming section. Through this dynamic learning process, many reported that they were constantly shifting their practice more closely to what they understood to be cultural responsiveness. Here is one of the new coaches, April, reflecting on her evolving coaching and leadership role:

I think that the administration perceived my role as coaching teachers to become better, and I suspect that they see my role as nudging colleagues into better practice […] I think […] the teachers perceive my role as inviting them to think about their practice in a productive way, rather than telling, inviting them through questions, to think about what choices they can make that might better serve students.

This quote indicates both a reflection about how she viewed her own craft, as well as a recognition that she may be viewed differently by different colleagues. This tension of how teachers vs administrators may see her also sits at the center of “unlearning;” indeed, many of the instructional coaches also needed to contend with yet another gaze: how they (instructional coaches) were viewed by members in the communities they serve.

Teacher pushback to “unlearning”

One troubling finding is that some teachers pushed back against the type of cognitive reflection needed for culturally responsive pedagogy. The push to unlearn pedagogy and behaviors that were culturally exclusionary toward minoritized students was too difficult for some teachers to bear. According to Dylan:

What’s really nice is if I have a concern based on the data that I’ve seen in observation, and they bring it up before I [do] – some teachers avoid tough conversations […] that’s when I know that I’m successful is [when] I get the teacher to reflect and feel comfortable enough to reflect honestly [and critically], because they’ve already thought about, “I should have done this, I should have done that.” […] Sometimes teachers are like, “I don’t want any cognitive coaching, I want feedback.”

This quote demonstrates that some teachers may avoid the reflection and conversations that are needed to enact culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers did not necessarily value the equity work being done through reflections with the instructional coaches – and were therefore resistant to unlearning.

Who else is in the room?: the benefit of shared learning space

These findings suggest that instructional coaches feel that they benefit in understanding their roles as culturally responsive leaders when they learn alongside cultural liaisons. In Eastern School District, cultural liaisons are responsible for understanding the needs, primarily, of students and families of color, and advocating for those needs. They are also tasked with serving as interlocutors between the community and school staff; that is, they help educators and principals understand these needs, and interpreting the schools’ expectations. Thus, the instructional coaches reported feeling they learned more about the perspectives of students and families when exposed to the perspectives and experiences of their liaison colleagues.

Instructional coach Janice recognized and grew to become dependent on this shared space with people who were immersed in communities. Janice stated:

It has been good to be in conversation with the cultural liaisons because [they share the same reality as the students] […] it really pushes our thinking and causes us to reconsider the district’s position on things.

Janice recognizes that she benefits in her role as an instructional coach from the perspective and lived experiences of the cultural liaisons.
Researchers have found that community-based epistemologies must be centered in how educators craft policy and enact practice. But they have struggled to access such epistemologies. The findings here suggest that cultural liaisons, who also serve at the district level in Eastern School District, might be allies in this work. This was true because of both the personal epistemologies (the cultural liaisons were primarily people of color) as well as their professional experiences (the liaisons had primary job duties that required them to hear much about the experiences and perspectives of minoritized students and families). The Director of Equity and Inclusion, who served as the head of the coaches, and the instructional coaches were aware of this previously untapped power. As Dylan stated:

Overall, I see liaisons, and this is just from my experiences, are resources for teachers and students and families when in need. So, liaisons, in my experience in witnessing it, they're usually putting out fires and problem solving a solution when a problem arises.

But according to Dylan, it was important that the epistemological differences were more than a mere exoticizing nod. Rather, it should actually influence what they do:

If I were a leader in this district [...] liaisons would be a huge part in the systemic way that we plan [...] They'd play a role in decision making, whether it's having them part of certain committees. They should be part of Individual Student Support team meetings [...] so they have that equity lens. Even district committees, maybe curriculum and its' structure. Cultural liaisons should be there too with their equity expertise to look through that lens [...] is it inclusive, is it culturally responsive, linguistically responsive to our students?

Dylan notes that the perspectives of the cultural liaisons in Eastern School District were not prioritized in formal spaces (e.g. meetings with parents, in decision making, etc.), though they were charged with meeting the needs of both students and their respective communities. Given the lack of insights from cultural liaisons in formal spaces, opportunities to bridge different cultures to the school community were silenced – limiting the potential of equity work.

Moving from reflection to practice: institutionalizing culturally responsive instructional leadership

A final theme highlighted the ability of instructional coaches to shift from unlearning to practice. Prior research suggests that culturally responsive work is often discussed in ways that is not useful for practice (Khalifa, 2018; Khalifa et al., 2016). In other words, both scholars and practitioners often discuss issues of difference, such as racism, anti-indigeneity, or anti-blackness in education, but rarely do they discuss how practice must shift based on these principles. For example, few authors on CRSL have described how traditional administrative practices – such as observations, walk-thrus, coaching, mentoring, curriculum audits, etc. – should shift to respond specifically to culturally responsive needs of students.

Recently, scholars (Khalifa et al., 2016) pushed further, asking: what, specifically, must be done differently in administrative practice to imbue culturally responsive goals? Here, an instructional coach with five years of experience, April, reflected on this notion, “[A]n equitable school would differentiate [...] where kids would get what they need, whether it's English language learning, or whether it's access to some healthcare sorts of needs, or language [...] or access to English language resources.” Here, April highlights the diverse resources that should be available to students and families – resources that are not exclusive to instruction. However, it may also be challenging to know where exactly teachers should start when adopting culturally responsive pedagogy. During a PD with instructional coaches, Melissa asked:

My main question is how to begin to do this on a daily basis [...] The teachers I work with want to know what to do differently when they begin to accept the trends in their classrooms. So, I need to know what I need to do to adjust what I do everyday.
Melissa seemed challenged when considering how her role as an equity leader is inherently related to her role as an instructional coach. Instructional coaches needed specific training on moving from needs raised during reflective conversations to making equity driven curricular decisions. April described a moment of success she saw with one teacher she worked with:

I was working with a first-grade teacher, and she was choosing to think about informational texts, expository texts, and so she was thoughtful about choosing images of different vocations, and she was thoughtful that the images that she picked looked a little bit like the children she serves. For example, she’s looking for images of kids in a hijab […] we have a huge Somali population coming through. [a nearby city]

April identified an example of a teacher being intentional about representations during lessons that mirror the nationalities and identities of her students. Taken together, instructional coaching can serve as a means to support culturally responsive practices when these culturally responsive leaders are prepared and supported to do so.

Although culturally responsive instruction is to engage culturally diverse students, coaches may not have all viewed the current expectations of their role to be academically focused for all students when they recognized race being glaringly ignored. According to Dylan, the district had not broadly discussed race, specifically involving the achievement gap:

[My biggest point with [culturally responsive support staff] was, we don’t have anything in place [as far as] academic support. It’s been known over time in Eastern, and many districts, that Black students are not […] that we have an achievement gap. So, what can we do as peer coaches to provide PD for staff, resources for staff, and then begin to have dialogue about race, and just race in general?

Dylan is highlighting that although the role of the Q-Comp coach is to reflect with teachers, there are certain conversations that are not being had broadly, but rather in “pockets” as he described. Being limited in what can be discussed with teachers by coaches therefore left the perception with at least one coach that his impact was limited.

Conclusions and implications

The findings of this study offer several compelling contributions to both CRSL and instructional leaders literature. There are three overarching themes that will now be addressed. CRSL exists in multiple spaces and at various levels in a district. Next, CRSL must be taken up systemically, and finally, culturally responsive instructional leaders (in this case, not principals, but coaches) can have significant impact in promoting culturally responsive pedagogy.

We found that CRSL was at both the central office level as well as in schools by way of instructional coaches. Central office administrators worked hand-in-hand with those who worked in schools and were largely responsible for interpreting how policies were translated into practice. Higher level administrators (i.e. superintendent, assistant superintendent) had limited roles in the equity work of the district, which ultimately resulted in equity work not being prioritized by all – unfortunately including some teachers. Even with a department of staff devoted to equity driven work, how can you effectively push culturally responsive work forward without the support of the superintendent? Districts must therefore both embrace and move beyond separate conversations about justice and cultural responsiveness. Discourse within the district can no longer be in isolated pockets, but must be addressed systematically.

Culturally responsive instructional leaders can have significant impact in promoting culturally sustaining pedagogy, but there must be established trust between the teacher and the coach to engage in meaningful work. In this study, there were covert practices employed to avoid White Fragility. Rather than being responsive to White Fragility (DiAngelo, 2011),
we see potential for the administrators to support professional development that may counter deficit mindsets (Delpit, 2006) and rather centers the funds of knowledge student and communities possess (Moll et al., 1992). This will then signal issues of cultural responsiveness and equity as a district priority and will provide leverage of the instructional coaches in their role as instructional leaders to support the development of culturally relevant curriculum. This work highlights a problematic practice that may be widespread and we recognize there is needed research on racist hiring practices. In fact, if those who are in leadership positions who promote equity are adopting such strategic practices, what other practices are taking place in schools in the name of equity?

Again, the instructional coaches in Eastern School District were staff of the district. This is important because there is potential for systematic changes within Eastern. However, as schooling has taken on a business model in many contexts, including the inexpensive outsourcing of services, and therefore individuals, this same potential for systemic changes may not be possible. There was a unified message in Eastern, although we can challenge aspects of the district-level decisions made, the Q-Comp coaches understood their united charge. With that charge, they valued the trust they were able to establish with teachers.

Further work on culturally responsive instructional leadership can examine the trainings of these individuals as well as the enactment of the skills learned through professional development. This paper begins the conversation on the importance of instructional coaches as equity driven leaders.

Note
1. http://education.state.mn.us/MDE/dse/qc/

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**Further reading**


**Corresponding author**

Stefanie LuVenia Marshall can be contacted at: marshalls916@gmail.com

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Re-imagining turnaround: families and communities leading educational justice

Ann M. Ishimaru

College of Education, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to deepen the understanding of how minoritized families and communities contribute to equity-focused school change, not as individual consumers or beneficiaries, but as educational and community leaders working collectively to transform their schools.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative case study examines one poverty-impacted racially diverse high school in the US West and the changes that occurred over a seven-year period.

Findings – Minoritized families, community leaders and formal leaders leveraged conventional schooling structures – such as turnaround reforms, the International Baccalaureate program and the PTA – to disrupt the default institutional scripts of schools and drive equity-focused change for all students, particularly African-Americans from the neighborhood.

Research limitations/implications – Though one school, this case contributes insights about how families and communities can collaborate with systems actors to catalyze educational justice in gentrifying communities.

Practical implications – This study suggests strategies that families and communities used to reclaim school narratives, “infiltrate” conventional structures and reorient them toward equitable collaboration and educational justice.

Social implications – This study contributes to a body of critical scholarship on “turnaround” reform efforts in urban secondary schools and suggests ways to reshape decision making, leadership, parent engagement and student intervention to build collective agency.

Originality/value – This research raises provocative questions about the extent to which families and communities can use conventional structures and policies to pursue educational justice in the US public education. Learning from such efforts highlights strategies and practices that might begin to help us construct more decolonizing theories of change.

Keywords Parents, Educational administration, Educational institutions, Decision making, Community relations, Equity theory

Paper type Research paper

Amid uncertainties in the current educational policy environment and a polarized national sociopolitical context, long-standing racial and other inequities in education have increasingly come to the fore in educational improvement and reform policy and research (Darling-Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2006). So-called “turnaround” reforms, catalyzed by federal education policy during the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) era, incentivize rapid organizational change instigated by major turnover in leadership as well as teaching staff and assessed solely by achievement test score outcomes (Sun et al., 2017). Such reforms continue to hold sway as an enticing theory of change, though the enthusiasm for such reforms belies a decidedly thin empirical basis (Herman et al., 2008; Mathis, 2009; Trujillo and Renée, 2015).

An emerging body of critical scholarship on whole-school reform has begun to highlight how top–down decision-making processes by policymakers and systems leaders largely result in disproportionate impacts on low-income minoritized communities, especially school closures (Briscoe and Khalifa, 2015; Khalifa et al., 2014). Moreover, in the policy context of

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neoliberal educational reforms, “turnarounds” and the school improvement efforts spurred by them often relegate young people, their families and their communities of color to the margins of decision making, which can exacerbate rather than ameliorate racial inequities in education (Trujillo and Renée, 2015). Yet organized youth, parent and community leadership have mobilized powerful resistance in response to school closures triggered by “turnaround” reforms (Kirshner and Jefferson, 2015). Despite the disproportionate closures of schools serving black and Latino students, efforts such as the well-publicized hunger strike in Chicago and grassroots organizing efforts in Detroit have successfully prevented the closure of some schools (Welton and Freelon, 2018). Such efforts have joined an emergent national movement that unites efforts to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline with advocacy for public schools that truly serve all students (Warren, 2014).

A growing body of work illuminates minoritized family and community leaders as drivers of sustained, equitable school change (Bertrand and Rhodela, 2018; Ishimaru, 2014). Rather than passive supporters of educator-driven agendas or individual consumers who “choose” between constrained options, collective parent and community agency and leadership hold potential for re-imagining the urban secondary school “turnaround” toward collective action in improving schools (Shirley, 2009). Drawing on an equitable collaboration framework with racialized institutional scripts, this case study of one poverty-impacted racially diverse high school addresses the research question:

**RQ1.** How did minoritized family and community leaders leverage institutionalized schooling structures toward community-driven educational justice?

Faced with the threat of closure due to low enrollment and graduation rates, Rainier Beach High School[1] parents and alumni mobilized to save the only predominantly African-American school in the Seattle Public School district. The story echoes a familiar cascade of long-standing resource inequities, neighborhood disinvestment, white flight and decision-making resulting in the disenfranchisement of low-income African-American and other students of color in an urban secondary school. And yet, ten years later, the school’s student enrollment of 800 is on an upward trajectory, graduation rates have surpassed the district average and the school has stepped onto the national stage for its academic programs and their role in opening opportunities to African-American and other historically minoritized students from the neighborhood.

Although the daily reality of the school still entails complexity and struggle, a nuanced understanding of this “turnaround” offers insights into how minoritized families and communities can shape the political and normative dimensions of equity-focused change. This case study highlights how families and communities “infiltrated the system” to reimagine traditional structures – like turnaround reforms, advanced learning opportunities, PTAs, and student interventions – in ways that disrupted the typical narratives and expectations for interactions that accompany these structures. I conclude with implications for building decolonizing theories of change for community-determined educational justice in a shifting sociopolitical landscape.

**Informing literature**

*Education reform and racial injustice*

Turnaround strategies represent the latest iteration of decades of federal policy aimed at reforming the “lowest achieving” schools and the lagging test-based performance of a growing proportion of the US public school student population (Trujillo and Renée, 2015). Turnarounds are defined as the “quick dramatic improvement” of student achievement in chronically low-performing schools (Herman *et al.*, 2008). Although there are four specific intervention models delineated by federal policy (transformation, turnaround, restart and closure), the broad class of reforms catalyzed by School Improvement Grants (SIG), Race to the Top, and other NCLB whole-school reform policies shared similar assumptions and strategies.
These strategies include replacing school leaders and teaching staff, charter or state governance, the infusion of short-term resources for major organizational change, evaluations of teaching effectiveness based, at least in part, on student test scores and interventions to raise student achievement as defined by performance on standardized tests (Sun et al., 2017). Such reforms do not explicitly seek to address racial disparities in schooling outcomes, but the lowest achieving schools are largely associated with low-income communities of color (Ladson-Billings, 2006), and these policies have been invoked as solutions to close the so-called “achievement gap.”

To be clear, racial inequities are deeply embedded in schooling processes and outcomes, but the current dominant discourses and policies focused narrowly on closing test score “gaps” between white and other racial groups tend to locate the problem in individual students – and by extension their schools, families, and communities – in ways that do little to account for the unjust historical and structural arrangements of which these disparities are but symptoms (Gutiérrez, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Because the term “equity” has been taken up in practice as a narrow aim of achieving test score outcomes that do not vary by race or other “subgroups” (Gutiérrez and Dixon-Román, 2010), I use educational justice to refer to community-determined educational aims and democratic schooling processes that ensure those mostly affected by inequities are key decision makers in shaping education as a public good (Warren, 2014; Labaree, 1997).

Although a thorough review of the history of schooling is beyond the scope of this paper, a discussion of racial injustice in education must explicitly acknowledge the founding of the USA on stolen lands and centuries of colonization, slavery and oppression. Formal schooling structures often served as a tool of colonization, from Native American boarding schools to African-American technical schools and separate-and-unequal schools for Mexican, Chinese and other communities (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Tuck and Yang, 2012; Wolfe, 2006). School leaders more often served as agents of colonization and assimilation than as equity champions. Despite desegregation, educational injustices live on in the current structures and processes of schooling, from income-based resource allocations to tracking inside schools and implicit bias between educators and students (Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Orfield and Frankenberg, 2014).

Conventional schooling structures – from the curriculum itself and the Parent–Teacher Association to school improvement reforms and decision-making structures – accompany a set of normative behaviors and interactions. For instance, Khalifa et al. (2014) found a technical-rational approach to decision making about closing an African-American school that was “bounded by a bureaucratic system that largely understand[ed] itself as rational, value neutral, interest free, objective, and reliant only on ‘hard facts’” (p. 150). Far from neutral, the rational-technical logic embedded in conventional schooling structures and processes obscures historical contexts and power while discounting non-dominant experiences and understandings to rationalize, perpetuate or exacerbate colonial hierarchies and racial inequities (Patel, 2016).

Consistent with a technical-rational approach, minoritized students, families and communities are often positioned as impacted stakeholders, not decision makers, in school change (Bertrand and Rodela, 2018; Kirshner and Jefferson, 2015). Yet, in their review of turnaround literature, Trujillo and Renée (2015) argue that centering democratic aims and community engagement in turnaround might result in sustained and authentic transformation. Thus, youth, parent and community organizing offer possibilities for enacting democratic schooling practices in school improvement.

**Organized families and communities as educational leaders**

Despite the relatively bleak history and structure of formal public schools and reforms in the USA, many communities and scholars still perceive public schools as a key site of
opportunity for redressing deeply entrenched injustices (Anyon, 2014; Oakes et al., 2006; Warren, 2005). For organized youth and families, their public schools offer the possibility of transforming both the distribution of material resources and the dynamics of power between state-owned institutions and historically marginalized communities (Nygreen, 2017; Zavala, 2016). In an organizing context, sustained school change is a political process linked to collective efforts to ensure families’ own well-being and that of their communities.

Youth and community organizing builds the capacity of “everyday” young people, parents and community members to advocate for themselves to influence decision makers in key institutions (Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren et al., 2011). In theory, the deep expertise from experiencing “unjust social arrangements” (Fine, 2010) serves as a potent resource for organized parents and community members to influence educational systems (Mediratta et al., 2009). Community organizing approaches build relationships, leadership, power and capacities to enable young people, parents and communities to work collectively with each other and with schools to achieve change (Beckett et al., 2013).

Colonizing structures in theories of change toward educational justice

Although community organizing approaches offer possibilities toward educational justice, such efforts exist in a “neoliberal policy context that is the terrain on which organizing work is carried out,” (Nygreen, 2017, p. 42). Inherent contradictions and dilemmas arise from working within that context. Indigenous scholars and others who draw from decolonizing frameworks (Patel, 2016; Tuck and Yang, 2012) critique the idealized structure of democratic decision making as an unquestioned justice-based process and outcome. They raise a critical challenge regarding theories of change relative to schools that rely on tools from the conventional paradigm of school improvement policy. Patel (2016) argues that “the maintained belief that a colonial society’s structures can provide the infrastructure within which noncontingent emancipation can take place is, therefore, a colonizing theory of change” (p. 118). In other words, colonizing logics are so deeply embedded in the structures and processes of schools that even democratically-driven reform to implement educational policies may merely open access to a few and replicate injustices rather than transform systems.

Collectively, then, these bodies of work raise provocative questions about our theories of change in the US public education – Can families and communities use colonizing structures and policies to pursue educational justice? Efforts to do so offer insights about the possibilities for change rooted in local contexts that may aid in constructing more decolonizing theories of change. The next section offers a potential lens to attend to both the structures of schooling and the relations within and across them.

Conceptual framework: equitable collaborations and institutionalized scripts

This study draws on concepts from equitable collaborations, a framework from empirical work on district-organizing group relations (Ishimaru, 2017, 2014), merged with institutional scripts, from neoinstitutional theory (Meyer and Rowan, 2012). Building from community organizing theory, equitable collaborations are inter-organizational relations that contrast with conventional “partnership” dynamics between low-income families of color and schools along four key dimensions: context; goals; roles; and strategies.

First, equitable collaborations attend to context by approaching educational change as a political process connected to historically-driven social, economic, racial and other issues in the broader community. Schools are often stages on which larger political dynamics in the community play out, so change efforts in equitable collaborations recognize and address broader relationships and issues beyond the school walls. Second, the goals of equitable collaborations focus on systemic change in schools and systems, rather than efforts to remediate or “fix” students, families or communities. Third, minoritized parents and families play proactive leadership roles that seek to balance power relations between
educators and families. Equitable collaborations designate families as fellow educational leaders and experts on their own children, cultures, communities, needs and interests. Finally, the framework distinguishes conventional school-centric, activity-focused strategies from efforts to build the relationships and capacity of educators and families to work together for systemic and community transformation. Collectively, these dimensions comprise a model that challenges the conventional “rules of engagement” between minoritized families, communities and schools.

Equitable collaboration is rare in practice; however, the concept of institutional scripts offers a useful lens for making sense of both the stability of dominant family–school power relations and structures and as well as possibilities for shifting them toward more equitable collaboration (Ishimaru and Takahashi, 2017). Within institutions, schooling processes and structures shape organizational activities through rules and regulations, values and norms and cultural interpretations that are shaped by the broader historical and societal context in which they arose and persist (Scott, 2014). These processes and behaviors become routine and attain a “rule-like” status. Institutional scripts constitute the taken-for-granted school norms and routines that define identities, shape actions associated with those identities, and even constrain possible alternative identities and actions that might be imagined within that institutional context (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 2012).

As elaborated elsewhere (Ishimaru and Takahashi, 2017), the institutional scripts about families of color in schools are racialized in consequential ways. Departures from white normative expectations of deference and passive school support behaviors are often interpreted by (white) educators as signs of poor or deficient parenting (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Valencia and Black, 2002). I build on this work to argue that the conventional structures of schooling – such as PTAs, decision making, turnaround reforms, academic programs and behavioral and academic interventions – are infused with racialized institutional scripts that shape the expectations and interactions between educators, students, families and communities. In the case of students, scholars who study the intersections of race, culture and learning highlight how the racialized identities made available to students in their learning environment have implications for their engagement and learning (Lee, 2001; Gutiérrez and Vossoughi, 2010). The schooling processes that foster particular identities are shaped by broader storylines in society – for example, about black males (Nasir et al., 2012) – and become institutionalized in school structures and programs.

These racialized institutional scripts shape how reforms, structures and processes are understood and enacted in schools. In the case of structures like advanced learning programs, the scripts frame such opportunities as appropriate for wealthier, white students who are “motivated” and “highly capable,” as opposed to “black and brown students” often narrated as “at-risk” or “underperforming.” Racialized institutional scripts also shape how policymakers and school actors implement turnaround reforms, which seek to “fix” troubled schools serving predominantly low-income students of color as well as behavioral discipline or academic interventions, which aim to remediate individual students (Gutierrez and Voussoughi, 2010). However, these scripts are not inseparable from the structures they accompany. The shift from default structures and relations to more equitable schools and collaborations may necessitate disrupting racialized institutional scripts to foster new identities, interactions and relationships. In sum, then, this study brings the lenses of equitable collaboration and racialized institutional scripts together to examine how families and communities navigated – and disrupted – racialized scripts in leveraging dominant structures to transform their school.

**Methods**

**Site**

I purposively selected Rainier Beach High School to examine for this study as it represented an “outlier” case of successful turnaround that appeared to depart from the
disproportionate impacts on students, families and communities of color experienced elsewhere (Kirshner and Jefferson, 2015). Rainier Beach is a diverse, low-income high school in Seattle Public Schools, a mid-sized urban district in the Pacific Northwest, in the heart of an historic African-American community. The high school and the neighborhood continue to be home to many African-Americans, refugees and immigrants, though growing gentrification in the city has raised rents and property values and led to an influx of white residents in nearby areas. Constructed in the 1960s, the school enjoys a deep sense of connection with its alumni, many of whom stayed – or have returned – to the neighborhood to raise their own children. In 2017–2018, the student population was 97 percent students of color and over 76 percent eligible for free and reduced lunch, including 50 percent African-Americans, 27.3 percent Asians, 13.5 percent Hispanic/Latinos 13.5 percent, 0.3 percent American-Indians, 1.6 percent Pacific Islanders, 3 percent white and 4 percent two or more races. As discussed in the findings below, the school’s enrollment dropped precipitously in 2008, triggering the threat of closure. Efforts to revitalize the school began around 2009, as communities sought to recover from the great recession and the federal government invested in incentive-based turnaround reforms.

Data
This qualitative case study drew primarily on ten interviews of predominantly African-American parent and community leaders, East African and African-American students and both black and white school and district administrators as well as informal communications with district leaders, observations, publicly available administrative data and documents analyses. Interviewees were identified through a snow-ball sampling method beginning with the core African-American parent leaders and asking them to recommend additional participants until reaching a degree of saturation of those actively involved from 2009 to 2016. Semi-structured interviews were 45 to 60 min long, using a protocol tailored to each role. I collected documents that referenced the school’s improvement work, including the extensive chronicle of the school’s improvement efforts in approximately 25 newspaper articles, radio stories and blogs, as well as school and district publications and grant applications.

Analyses
All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and I wrote field notes for both interviews and observations. I first conducted a close reading of transcripts, field notes and documents to identify descriptive patterns and inductive codes that emerged from participants’ words and concepts (Maxwell, 2005). I then coded the data using both inductive and deductive codes based on the conceptual framework, for instance, goals, roles, strategies and context. Examining coded excerpts, I began to construct a timeline and wrote analytic memos to reflect on emerging themes with regard to the structures and dimensions of changes, particularly a set of conventional school structures that emerged as levers of change (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Finally, I analyzed narratives about the goals, roles and strategies within those schooling structures relative to the conventional racialized institutional scripts associated with those structures. To enhance the trustworthiness of my claims and conclusions, I triangulated my data from multiple sources, considered and reported on discrepant data, and conducted “member checks” by sharing findings with key participants (Maxwell, 2005).

Findings
My findings suggest that a group of parent and community leaders working with educators throughout the system drove a transformation in the school that defied conventional
turnaround reforms, more typically focused on a heroic turnaround leader, basic skills remediation and test-based accountability. Despite using the conventional structures of parent involvement and school improvement, a “small but mighty” group of parent and community leaders disrupted the powerful racialized institutional scripts that typically accompany such reforms. I begin with an examination of how parent and community leaders undertook political messaging and media advocacy to address negative narratives about Rainier Beach High School embedded in the context of a politically contentious district and a gentrifying city. I then highlight how the goals of school improvement necessitated pushing back on the scripts about “black and brown” students by using an international curriculum to attract students back to the school while seeking to ensure access to high quality learning opportunities to the racially diverse students in the neighborhood. I then describe both the roles and strategies of parent and community leaders as change agents in the transformation of Rainier Beach High School as they disrupted the racialized institutional scripts associated with four conventional schooling structures: the PTA; turnaround reforms; parent outreach; and student interventions.

CONTEXT: changing the narrative of rainier beach high school
A deep sense of ownership and identification with the high school permeate the community of Rainier Beach. Even though parent leader Candice Brower moved into the neighborhood less than ten years ago, she still often introduces herself as “an honorary alumni” of Rainier Beach High School at community events. So deep-seated are the commitments to this school that this honorary title is the only way she feels she can accurately convey her commitments. Ask students, parents, teachers or community partners to describe the school, and they will unerringly use the word “family” in their description. As former principal Dudley Law explained:

It was like a family there […] So even the families would huddle, like if there was an issue outside of the school, the families would come to the school, would circle up and huddle how – we’d put our brains around how to support the families and […] the kids […] And teachers and everyone will be involved. Because even if something happens on the weekend it always comes to the school […]

In the next breath, members of the Rainier Beach “family” will highlight its diversity. “We have over 50 languages spoken by the student body,” boasted Jamal Dunbar, a community partner and resident. The US-born African-American “majority” represents half the students; the school’s demographics stretch the definition of “diverse,” with over 97 percent students of color including many immigrants and refugees.

Rainier Beach lies in a region of the city with a long history of both vibrant cultural roots and de facto segregation shaped by historical racial covenants that confined mostly African-American and Asian communities to the south. Jewish families also historically called Rainier Beach home, and Latino and East African communities have grown dramatically over the past decades. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, narratives of violence and decay seemed to define Rainier Beach. According to a local radio reporter, “no [city] neighborhood has seen more violent crime than Rainier Beach,” and “most people knew the school was a dead-end” (Stokes, 2015). By 2008, the school’s enrollment had dropped to just over 300, and a scant 60 students had indicated the school as their first choice, out of the 1,300 eligible students who lived in the school boundaries. The school’s reported 48 percent on-time graduation rate ranked it as one of the lowest performing school in the district and state (Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2008–2009).

When the superintendent proposed merging with another high school and closing Rainier Beach, alumni, parents and community members mobilized successfully to keep the school open, but they knew it was a temporary stay barring major change. A small group of parents and community leaders came together around 2009 with the understanding that
political will to invest in the school was vital. Without addressing the broader narrative about the school, the politics of the city would lead to further disinvestment. Parent leader Layla Townsend explained:

So there was a narrative out there that parents were scared [...] they didn't want to send them there because of the narrative that was out there [...] The angle of [news media was such that] any time anything happened in the Rainier Beach neighborhood, they would show up at Rainier Beach High School and do their report [...] So we contacted our local newspapers, our local news outlets, said you got to stop this, you just got to stop, and we had to make them hear us loud and clear. I mean, things would happen at [other schools], I mean it could happen anywhere, but you keep coming back to Rainier Beach High School to film this.

In addition to “countering the negativity in the media,” the five or six mostly African-American parents also set out to reframe the negative narrative about the school in the Rainier Beach community itself. The institutional scripts about low-income African-American students and failing high schools had infused the public narratives about Rainier Beach High School amongst students and families in the neighborhood. “I would have cleaned sewers rather than come here,” reflected a student of his former perception of the school. The parents began by going to the basketball games and using half-time to re-narrate the story of the school back to the broader community. Candice Brower explained how their efforts expanded to reframing the data about Rainier Beach High School both within and beyond the school:

We began to counteract people’s stories [...] We started to become very knowledgeable in our own data. Where we were able to say we’re graduating more black kids to college than any other school district [...] 47% of our black boys was going to college. That’s bigger than any percentage in the state. We were able to begin to turn their language, that they were using against us, against them, and start putting recognition [...] Whether it was a Council meeting or a neighborhood meeting, or just a parent-teacher conference that they had heard something. We were just making sure that we were on the pulse of whatever was happening at Rainier Beach High School.

Thus, parents began to successfully push back on the negative reputation of the school, but they realized the school needed a unique academic identity to attract families back.

**GOALS: a new academic identity for rainier beach**

By November of 2010, the handful of parents had coalesced into the Rainier Beach PTA. They called together RBHS and local families in a key meeting to set priorities and identify a new academic program for the school. They presented a broad range of different programs, from a focus on the arts, to law, to technology, as well as an idea first offered by the district, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, a rigorous curriculum originally designed for the children of diplomats. “Parents wanted it all,” explained Candice. After the meeting, the International Baccalaureate began to emerge as a lever to raise the bar of academics and to enable the school to become known as much for its academics as its athletics.

Given IB’s establishment in the white, middle class part of town and the gentrification impinging on the neighborhood, though, the parent leaders at first perceived the program as an advanced learning curriculum for affluent white students – a racialized institutional script associated with advanced learning structures. As district grant administrator Doug Ogle explained, “Parents at first were not particularly excited about that, particularly because they thought maybe it was a program just for white students, and that it was a ploy to bring more families from the area who are white who are not attending school to go there.” Parent leader Layla Townsend concurred, “Throughout all of this time though, gentrification is happening. Like, it’s continuing to happen. So then there was thought that, ‘Yeah, we’ll bring this IB program here, it won’t be for the current Rainier Beach students there, it will be for the influx of those who are coming to gentrify the neighborhood.’ ”
When Ogle connected Beach parents with families and teachers from diverse IB schools across the country, they began to see the program differently. The parent leaders – who by now had connected with community leaders, like George Dunbar – insisted that the program be inclusive of all the students at the school. As Dunbar explained, they saw in IB “a strategy to not only elevate the academic ability of the current student population but the esteem of the neighborhood as well.” Collectively, parent and community leaders were explicit that they would not allow the IB to create a “school within a school” like those in neighboring schools, with tracked systems that “creamed the crop” at the expense of students of color, particularly African-American students.

Positioning IB as a lever for equity necessitated disrupting the institutional scripts about students of color that framed them as not “highly capable” of rigorous work. Parent leaders and school staff had to deal not only with the perception of those outside the school but also with RBHS students’ and families’ own conceptions of what Rainier Beach students were capable of doing. Parent Layla Townsend explained:

I was engaged in the community outreach piece of it because even with an oppressed people, it’s still hard to digest that you can do this, it’s somewhat different than what they’ve been doing, the IB portion of it. The academic rigor, the extra study time, to ensure them that the supports were there, that their student would be successful, because there were a number of families who were like, “Nope, this is not for my kid. No, we’re not interested in any of that. We’re not doing any of that, why are you bringing this here?”

Over time and through multiple efforts (described below), parents, community leaders and key teachers and administrators disrupted the scripts and positioned IB as the right program to help Rainier Beach students realize their potential. As community partner Jamal Dunbar described, the IB held a particular resonance for Rainier Beach High School because “it’s an international curriculum. We have a very international student body here […] and people were trying to say, okay, what would work best for this particular population, right? And International Baccalaureate was what folks in the community and folks came up with as being the best for this school, based on […] the internationality of this school.” From the beginning, then, parents, community members and teachers agreed that the goal of adopting the advanced learning program had to be to provide all students a rigorous curriculum and expectations. Teachers operationalized this by making it mandatory for all junior and seniors to take IB language and literature as their standard English class. More recently, the school has continued to transition all students to taking IB social studies classes as well.

Strategies and roles: “Infiltrating the system”

In equitable collaborations, parents and families take on roles as experts and fellow educational leaders who help set the agenda and focus strategies on relationship and capacity-building for joint systemic change work. In the case of Rainier Beach High School, parent and community leaders collaborated with educators and leaders to leverage four conventional schooling structures while disrupting institutional scripts about the roles and expectations that came with them: the PTA, turnaround reforms, parent outreach, and student interventions.

“Not Your Mother’s PTA”: using the PTA for relationships and political advocacy

In the institution of schools, the parent–teacher association is imbued with normative expectations of support and fundraising for the school’s agenda. At Rainier Beach High School, the PTA emerged as a small and tight-knit network of six to ten parent and community members, many of whom were themselves graduates, employees, or relatives of staff at the school, the majority of whom were African-American residents of the neighborhood.
Notably, though, not all of them were parents of children currently at the school, and their affiliation with the national Parent–Teacher Association was limited. Parent Layla Townsend described the striking contrast between the standing-room-only basketball game she had just left and the empty PTA meeting that marked her initial entrée to the Rainier Beach community. “That’s when [alarm] bells started ringing,” she recalled. Hearing PTA president Renee Gardner’s report about the declining enrollment and shrinking programs (due to decreased funding related to enrollment) further alarmed Layla and galvanized her and the handful of other parents at the meeting to action.

The PTA undertook relationship building as a central strategy. They reached out to other parents and reshaped the norms and scheduling of the PTA to better reach them:

For our PTA meetings, we change them so many times to try and engage different families because we recognize people work, and then there’s that language barrier and so we try to have meetings on Saturdays. We would have them after a game, we would try to have them in the intermissions of games [...] We would have them in the hallway, I mean wherever we could grab people, we would grab them.

Moreover, the small amount of funds they raised was used to cover membership fees to ensure anyone who wanted to could join. As a network of parents, they worked to support other families in paying their bills, finding places to live when they became homeless, and dealing with crises involving drugs, incarceration, and abuse. Finally, they built relationships with the broader community, including “honorary mayor” George Dunbar, head of the Rainier Beach Empowerment Committee and member of the local African-American church, as well as other long-time community activists and a new coalition of community-based organizations focused on the schools in the region.

In addition to shifting the broader narrative of the school in the media and in community stories, then, the parents engaged other parents in political advocacy for the school in the district, the neighborhood, the city and even eventually at the state legislature. Renee Gardner explained, “We had parents that had never been to a school board meeting, we had parents that had never voted, parents that had never wrote, never contacted an elected official. They were starting to do this, we were engaging them and it really takes all of that to make it that much easier.” This advocacy resulted, among other things, in a grant from the city’s Race and Social Justice Initiative and support from a state legislator that eventually led to a $1m allocation for the school through the Urban School Turnaround Initiative to support the IB adoption and outreach.

Throughout these activities, the PTA parents explicitly refused the institutional scripts associated with the PTA with regard to their role as passive supporters and “cookie-bakers.” Candice Brower explained how their daily influence for and within the school related to the group’s motto, “Not Your Mother’s PTA,” particularly in response to challenges by formal authorities:

Rainier Beach PTA was brought up, and she [a former co-principal] says, “I don’t understand why they have to be involved in a day-to-day practice of the school. They should be going to make cookies to build money for the school [...] We don’t make cookies. We’re not here to fund raise for your school. We’re here to be transformative change agents for the school. We need you to deploy us to spaces that you can’t get to, like School Board meetings and the Superintendent [...] No, we don’t make cookies. We don’t make cookies [...] We infiltrate, that’s right.

Not incidentally, the PTA later advocated – successfully – for the removal of the co-principal.
school’s impending closure began to circulate. The district applied for the SIG grant with a proposal for “Transformation Modeling 2012,” including removal of the principal and a large proportion of the staff, comprehensive instructional reform (including teacher collaboration time) and increased learning time and supports (such as an additional seventh period and community-based student supports). The proposal also included the creation of a SIG team to oversee the transformation of the school, a committee comprised not only of school administrators, teachers and parents from the PTA but also community leaders, such as George Dunbar, district grant manager Doug Ogle and eventually students. Although the school was not awarded the 2012 SIG grant, the district leveraged its own “segmentation” policy to follow the plan. The SIG team – or design team as some eventually referred to it – was a mandated structure of the turnaround reform that became an integral decision-making body for the school change.

As part of the turnaround reform, members of the SIG team agreed to the dismissal of a much-loved principal and the hiring of a new principal, Dudley Law, to oversee planning and implementation of the IB program. Although the new African-American principal was from out of state, Dudley’s wife was a Rainier Beach alumnus whose family still lived in the area. He brought prior experience with IB, and impressed the team with his emphasis on relationships. IB Coordinator Craig Peterson was also hired around this time from Arizona and joined the design team. The design team played a major role in Dudley’s socialization into the school and the neighborhood, and he perceived their regular meetings as a form of community accountability that he came to value. Dudley recalled stumbling over his assumptions about the role of parents in decision-making early in his principalship:

I remember they got on me […] so my first year I hired, like 19, almost 20 teachers that summer, when I was hired right before school started it. And they [design team members] were like, “When you having these interviews? And um, how do we know that they are best?” And I’m saying, “Oh, I did a great process, I hired these teachers,” and I said, “I know these · we screen the apps.” And they pushed me and was like, “Well, that’s what you think. We’re the parents. Can we […] have some input?” So it made me look at it differently. Like, oh, I guess that does make sense, right? So from there we tried to have as many parents as possible on interview committees and trying to get kids to be part of the process. And I think at one point we were like, at almost like 85 to 90 percent of our interviews had some type of parent participation.

Thus, parent and community leaders’ role in school decision making as part of the design team disrupted the institutionalized scripts about parents, community members and students and enacted a form of collective leadership for the school. Dramatic turnover in staff can sometimes lead to disproportionate impacts on teachers of color, but the collective hiring process increased the number of staff of color from the community and, according to parent Candice Brower, actually “strengthened the staff and community relations.” By the time the school was awarded both a Race-to-the-Top sub-award in 2013 and a SIG grant on their second application in 2014, the “turnaround reform” structure of the SIG team had already solidified its role.

IB community cafes: using parent outreach to build capacity and relationships
By 2013, the IB was officially approved, though ongoing outreach and capacity-building continued in the implementation. As newly-hired teachers worked to improve their instructional capacity and ability to teach the challenging IB curriculum, the Rainier Beach PTA reached out and built capacity amongst parents, students and even community members without children at the school through the IB Community Cafes. Like the earlier two efforts to “infiltrate” conventional schooling structures, the principal and parents eventually re-imagined the expectation that parents needed to come to the school to be involved and used their cafes to build relationships between families and teachers and push
back on their own assumptions about community engagement. Dudley laughed at their initial earnest efforts to engage families through means, such as letters home and multiple robo-calls:

You know how many families turned out? Maybe two. [Laughter]. That was […] what we thought was the best. So we went back and we just had to rethink, what does community engagement look like, what is authentic community engagement? And then what we started doing was, we said - OK, let’s do our IB community cafes in the actual community. And it was […] maybe at the […] Ethiopian restaurant, Rainier Beach Community Center or Urban Impact [a community partner]. We were at one of these locations for the first one and then we had, like 20 plus parents show, literally. And then it just started getting more and more. But then what we started doing was, once we learned that going to the community made the parents feel comfortable, […] it was more authentic […] So it was just […] changing the model, instead of asking them to come to us, we’re going to them.

_Harambee: using student interventions to foster youth organizing and leadership_

Finally, the use of student academic and behavioral interventions typically take the form of individual remediation, but Rainier Beach community partners commandeered the typical structure to instead organize and build youth leadership around social justice issues in their community. With the principal and SIG team, a local community partner decided to adopt the Freedom Schools, a summer and after-school enrichment model developed through the Children’s Defense Fund and inspired by the African-American Freedom Schools in the South during the civil rights movement. Their regular routine included rousing chants called “Harambee” (Swahili for “Let’s get together”) that build community, recognition and student leadership in social justice issues. In 2015, the day of social action at the end of the summer culminated in a major action in which students described that they “did Harambee” and got the city and the district to provide transit cards for low-income students to get to school. In the fall of 2017, students demanded and won School Board commitments to renovate the school, which had long been promised but never delivered.

Rainier Beach staff and community partners, including staff of WA-BLOC (the organization responsible for Freedom Schools), also used conventional structures to foster youth leadership in the school’s adoption of restorative justice practices to address issues of discipline, particularly racial disproportionalities in discipline. With resources from the Rainier Beach Action Coalition (RBAC) and the City of Seattle, the school hired a restorative justice coordinator and trained students to become leaders of restorative justice circles. Most recently, staff, community partners and students have begun to disrupt the institutional scripts about the roles of teachers and students by positioning students as trainers in providing professional development to their teachers focused on undoing institutional racism.

In the end, Candice Bower positioned parent and community leadership as key to equity-driven educational change in complex sociopolitical contexts:

We don’t have to recreate this. We don’t have to keep researching this. Literally what we need is to begin to deploy folks, savvy parents who are able to be chameleon and play the roles that it takes to do this work, and begin to infiltrate their systems. I think that if you have parents who take their power and own that power you could make that happen.

**Discussion and conclusions**

This study is a testament to the changes that can unfold when parents and communities drive priorities and action in school change efforts. Rainier Beach parent leaders shifted media portrayals to remediate the narratives of a failing school in the politics of the city and enacted a form of collective, community-based leadership that spanned multiple contexts. Increasing enrollments, graduation rates that exceed the district average, deep identification
and ownership of the school and a growing collection of state and national awards [2] all testify to the dramatic changes at the school.

To return to the question of whether minoritized families and communities can use “colonizing structures” toward educational justice, this study suggests that they can and did use conventional schooling structures to catalyze change and open high quality learning opportunities for students who previously did not have them. However, tensions and contradictions inevitably persist in these moves. For instance, we might ask to what extent such efforts either seek or begin to realize systemic transformation and, ultimately, “noncontingent emancipation” (Patel, 2016). Parent leaders continue to worry that fewer African-American students elect to take and graduate with the full IB diploma than their representation in the student population. Moreover, beyond the small group of African-American parent leaders at the core of the work, only a handful of other parents joined the effort as leaders; the PTA did not expand to become a substantially broader or more diverse group of families over time. So when many of the key leaders – including the principal and the original PTA members – moved onto other roles or contexts, diverse parent leadership at the school did not persist, a dynamic Candice narrates with regret. Thus, the study also raises questions about how to cultivate and sustain parent leadership beyond a core group of passionate leaders and systematize the activity that emerged in this process.

The district politics and displacement also raise questions about resources to sustain programs like IB in low-income schools. The district has promised no dedicated funding to ensure the IB – and the collaborative structures and practices that support it – can continue. Unlike schools elsewhere in the district, the resources required to sustain the program do not exist in the surrounding neighborhood. Miraftab (2004) argues that neoliberal democracy simultaneously employs processes of symbolic inclusion and material exclusion. In Rainier Beach, parents and community may succeed in achieving symbolic inclusion, but the resources needed for the program may constrain its sustainability, a form of material exclusion.

Finally, much of the turnaround and leadership literature continues to portray turnaround as the work of a heroic leader who single-handedly rescues a troubled school and sets it on a track to academic excellence (Duke and Jacobson, 2011). In light of my findings, future research that expands traditional notions of leadership to include family and community leadership alongside formal leaders may contribute key insights for re-imagining the journey of equitable school transformation.

Notes
1. The school, neighborhood and district are identified at the request of school and district leaders; all individual names are pseudonyms.
2. In 2016, Rainier Beach High School was named a Gold Schools of Opportunity awardee (http://schoolsofopportunity.org/recipient-details/rainier-beach-high-school).

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About the author
Ann M. Ishimaru is Associate Professor of Educational Foundations, Leadership and Policy at the University of Washington’s College of Education. Her scholarship focuses on the intersection of leadership, school-community relations and educational equity in P-12 systems. As a PI of the Family Leadership Design Collaborative and the Systems Capacity for Racial Equity Project, her research seeks to leverage the expertise of minoritized students, families, and communities, alongside that of educators, toward educational justice and community well-being. She received the 2017 AERA Exemplary Contributions to Practice-Engaged Research Award and the 2016 UCEA Jack A. Culbertson Award. Ann M. Ishimaru can be contacted at: aishi@uw.edu

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Abstract

Purpose – Secondary school leadership provides multiple challenges in terms of the diversity of tasks, multiple demands on time, balancing communities and attending to instructional programming. An emerging scholarship suggests the importance of a distributed instructional leadership approach to high school leadership. However, what has been less thoroughly explored is how secondary school leadership is distributed leaders across a school district. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the social structure and positions urban high school principals occupy in the district system.

Design/methodology/approach – This study was conducted in one urban fringe public school district in southern California serving diverse students populations. The data were collected at three time points starting in Fall 2012 and ending in Fall 2014 from a district-wide leadership team including all central office and site leaders. All leaders were asked to assess their social relations and perception of innovative climate. The data were analyzed through a series of social network indices to examine the structure and positions of high school principals.

Findings – Results indicate that over time high school principals have decreasing access to social capital and are typically occupying peripheral positions in the social network. The high school principals’ perception of innovative climate across the district decreases over time.

Originality/value – This longitudinal study, one of the first to examine high school principals from a network perspective, sheds new light on the social infrastructure of urban high school principals and what this might mean for efforts at improvement.

Keywords Innovation, Networks, Leadership, Involvement, Educational policy, Secondary schools

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

A growing body of research from across the globe indicates that school leadership is a key contributor that is only second to classroom instructional practices for positively influencing student learning and successful school reform efforts (Hallinger and Murphy, 1987; Leithwood et al., 2004, 2008; Spillane and Louis, 2002). School leadership is of particular importance in urban secondary school settings as these principals balance a host of instructional, organizational and community demands in supporting equitable and accessible educational experiences for all students and often lack an in depth research base upon which to draw. Given the pressing accountability demands for student learning, secondary school leaders are expected to possess the capacity for leading reforms around the “technical core” of schooling, namely, improving and sustaining the quality of teaching and learning (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Instructional leadership poses additional challenges for urban high school principals because unlike their elementary school counterparts, high school principals are often expected to have expertise in multiple subject areas as well as manage complex organizations that are serving large numbers of students. A growing body of work suggests that distributed instructional leadership approaches to high school leadership in
which principals support the conditions and allocate the resources necessary for improving instructional practices may ultimately impact student learning (Bredeson, 2013; Spillane et al., 2004). A distributed approach emphasizes the work of formal and informal leaders within schools. However, there is a dearth of work in regard to the distribution of leadership, particularly secondary school principals within a district as a way to generate social and intellectual capital, which may be unlocked through collaboration (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

Previous research suggests that organizational improvement is closely linked to the ties within and across units (Tenkasi and Chesmore, 2003). In the field of education, this has led to the development of professional learning communities and emphasis on collaborative structures (McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993). Most often, these types of communities are developed to increase communication and collaboration between teachers within schools; however, educational literature suggests that these communities, whether formal or informal, may be necessary throughout an entire district rather than isolated within schools to generate district-wide improvement (Spillane and Kim, 2012). Recent research has found that informal social networks (e.g. social gathering, breakfast club, as opposed to formal, structured meetings) facilitate the development of more enduring interpersonal relationships that allow for transfer and exchange of tacit knowledge and complex information necessary for organizational learning and innovation (Finnigan and Daly, 2012; Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998). In addition, educational leaders’ relational ties with administrative colleagues and teachers are related to school learning climate and student outcomes (Price and Moolenaar, 2015).

While there is great value in individuals’ social ties for the work of educators, we still know little about the social connectivity of high school principals in their district’s larger networks. A growing number of studies explore the underlying pattern of networks within districts or between district and school leaders (see Daly and Finnigan, 2010; Spillane and Kim, 2012). However, these studies typically examine leaders’ network either at the elementary school level or across a district system of K-12 schools. Findings from these studies although useful for understanding the distribution of leadership, do not highlight the relationships between and among high school principals. In this study, we respond to the gap in the literature around the relational aspect of educational leadership as a lever for change by focusing on the eco-system of relationships in which urban high school principals are situated. We aim to understand the social structure and the positions high school principals occupy in this larger system and what this might mean for efforts at improvement. In understanding these relationships, we draw on concept of social capital and social network theory and analysis as a way to both assesses the high school principals’ capacity for accessing relational resources as well as visualize and analyze the set of leadership ties.

**Framework**

*Social capital as network of relations*

A number of theorists have written on social capital from different perspectives in a wide range of disciplines (e.g. sociology, economics and education, etc.). Authors such as Coleman (1988), Portes (1998), and Bourdieu (1986) took a micro-level viewpoint considering social capital as an individual asset (i.e. level of trust), while this paper proposes a meso-level perspective viewing social capital as network of relations individual actor has with others (i.e. pattern of connectivity) and such individual networks are embedded within a larger macro system (e.g. school district). This view of social capital emphasizes the notion that resources that are shared, exchanged or developed between sets of actors are embedded in larger social networks from which one can draw and accumulate his/her social capital. In other words, individual actors’ volume of social capital can be determined by the extent to
which he/she is able to access, mobilize and utilize the resources embedded in his/her network of relations (Burt, 1992; Lin, 1999).

In addition to the concept of social capital, equally important is its functionality. The functionality of social capital addresses the question why relational ties are decisive of one’s capital capacity. Relational ties, also defined as resources, provide opportunity for individuals to access information, knowledge, materials and even beliefs and attitudes as he/she “wishes to increase the likelihood of success in purposive action” (Lin, 2001, p. 24). This functionality view, from an economic standpoint, considers social capital as an asset of the individual in which she/he can invest in the development and formality of social networks one uses to extract resources to form personal capital (Portes, 1998). Therefore, the individuals’ social capital is related to the amount of ties and resulting networks one has through their existing relationships granting he/she access to a pool of relational resources. As such, relational ties can be a product of personal investment or social status and may be useful for the individual to achieve purposive goals, be it instrumental (work-related ties) or expressive (social and emotional support). Social capital is therefore an investment in the social relations in a system through which the resources of other individuals can be accessed, borrowed or leveraged. This characteristic differentiates social capital from human capital, which refers to investments in training, development or certifications of individuals (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001). In this work we draw on network theorists who argue that much of social capital research must be strongly rooted in individual interactions and networks (Lin, 2001). Therefore, an understanding of the ties between individuals is foundational for our work.

Personal ties can be accessed and mobilized (Lin, 2001) and can result in various degrees of tie strength and different structures of a given network in which ties are embedded (e.g. dense or sparse network structure). It is the processes of accessibility and mobilization that define the structure of individual networks of relations (Lin, 2001). Accessibility refers to the number of actors one is connected with and can access to for purposive action (Lin, 2001). Mobilization is concerned with the relational resources, also referred to as ties, that an individual actor can extract from the network of relations that he/she has access to for purposive action, such as for accessing useful information (Lin, 2001). Individuals that have greater and advantageous accessibility (i.e. more ties, greater amount of network) can better mobilize resources for the achievement of goals/purposes (Lin, 2001). As such, relational ties (both strong and weak) between individuals in a social system facilitates the creation of a network structure that ultimately determines opportunities for exchanges and creation of social capital (Burt, 1992; Lin, 2001).

Strong ties support the transfer of tacit, non-routine, or complex knowledge (Hansen, 1999), joint problem solving (Uzzi, 1997), and the development of coordinated solutions (Uzzi, 1997). Strong ties within and across units are also related with low-conflict organizations (Nelson, 1989) and initiating and sustaining successful large-scale change efforts (Tenkasi and Chesmore, 2003). Inattention to the strength of ties during a significant organizational change initiative of a large organization may result in a failed strategy (Tenkasi and Chesmore, 2003). Conversely, weak ties may result in less dense network structure that tend to be better suited for the transfer of simple, routine information (Hansen, 1999) and allow for brokering opportunities between actors that are otherwise disconnected (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973). Interestingly, both strong and weak ties are necessary within a social structure as they facilitate access to different kinds of relational resources (Tenkasi and Chesmore, 2003). This implies that individual actors must be aware of the capital assets in their network and take action through establishing social ties to access and mobilize resources for goal attainment (Portes and Sensenbrenner, 1993). As there is a focus on the role of relational ties in the development, accumulation, and shaping of social capital as a result of network relations we will draw on social network theory and analysis as a way to focus our work.
Social network theory and network relationship

Social network theory may provide insight into how the social processes and social capital stretch across individuals and levels of the educational system. The concept of social network is concerned with the pattern of social ties that exists between actors in a social network (Scott, 2000). Central to the concept is the structure and quality of relational ties and its affordances and constraints of the larger social infrastructure (Borgatti and Foster, 2003; Cross et al., 2002), meaning how individuals gain access to, are influenced by, and leverage these relational resources (Degenne and Forsé, 1999). Dense network structure (i.e. more ties between actors in a network) allows better flow of information and resources (Burt, 1992) whereas less dense network (i.e. relatively fewer ties) may yield a time lag in the transfer of resources between actors as it is likely to take more time for resources to travel from one actor to another (Burt, 1992). Individual actors occupying central positions of a network (i.e. having more incoming or outgoing ties) tend to have more connections and thus have greater access to resources that one can mobilized with (Burt, 1992) but actors are more likely to be constrained by the norms and expectations from closely connected social groups. On the contrary, actors situating at the periphery or isolated position of a network (i.e. having fewer or no ties) possess fewer or no ties with others (also less social constraints) and may have limited opportunity to access mainstream information. The network perspective does not supplant the importance of individual attributes in understanding change and improvement, but rather offers a complimentary view and set of methods for better understanding the dynamic influence of social processes.

In educational leadership, a growing number of studies have begun to apply social network concept and analysis to the work of leadership and school or district-level reform (Daly and Finnigan, 2010, 2016; Liou, 2016; Spillane and Kim, 2012). For instance, research suggests that leaders who are mostly sought for advice by their administrative colleagues tend to be inclined toward innovation and efficacious about leading educational reform (Daly et al., 2015). Other scholars suggest that principals with advice ties with their teachers are more likely to influence the climate of schools (Price and Moolenaar, 2015). Advice seeking or exchange through social connections enables individuals to access and be exposed to new ideas and perspectives related to their work (Alexiev et al., 2010), and thus it may be associated with better outcomes for students and school climates (Daly et al., 2014). Although these studies provide a solid research foundation around educational leadership from a social network approach, they primarily privilege K-12 schools in general or focus on elementary-level schools. Our search of the literature found very little work that specifically concentrated on high school principals and their social connectivity within a district-wide leadership network. This represents a major gap in the literature given the importance and role of high schools in the developmental lives of youth.

As a large body of evidence across educational settings suggests the important role of collaboration, interpersonal relationships and networked communities of practice (Stoll and Louis, 2007), it is reasonable to suggest that these elements would be relevant to high school principals even though the structure and form of high schools may differ. We argue that accessibility to relational resources outside their immediate school may be important for high school principals to obtain, develop and maintain social capital. Absence the ability to access these resources may result in organizational isolation, a lack of innovation, and the recycling of ideas and knowledge (Fleming et al., 2007).

In sum, social network theory and analysis provides a useful perspective and set of robust methods that can provide insights into improvement efforts. Networks are being more often referred to as a key feature to the urban educational reform landscape particularly at the leadership level and yet we know little about where urban high school
principals are situated in these networks and how their structural position may support or constrain access to social capital resources related to change. This study builds on earlier work on educational leadership at large-scale reform such as Common Core State Standards (CCSS) and further explores leaders’ advice seeking ties with a specific focus on high school principals. Further, as this school district is in the midst of implementing CCSS, which is requiring new approaches and as such the degree to which leaders perceive a climate open to new perspectives and approaches that may come from social ties may be critical (Schwarz and Shulman, 2007). Given the role of perception and its connection to behavior we are examining the leaders’ perception of innovative climate over time.

**Innovative climate**

The concept of innovative climate is context specific as one place’s innovation may be another place’s daily routine. In education settings, innovative climate of schools involves the shared perceptions of educators regarding the practices, beliefs and behaviors that facilitate risk taking and the creation of new organizational routines (Moolenaar *et al.*, 2014; Daly *et al.*, 2016). As innovative climate is key to the success of organizational change, it may be also crucial for educational leaders to perceive their workplace as a risk free, safe environment in which new ideas and trial and error are encouraged, particularly in the midst of implementing CCSS. Studies in education that examine innovative climate during reform are still limited (Daly *et al.*, 2016; Liou, 2016; Moolenaar *et al.*, 2014) and even more limited as related to high school principals.

Organizations with positive innovative climate, as perceived by organizational members, are characterized by proactiveness, creativity and openness to change (Anderson *et al.*, 2014). Such organizations are more likely to outperform those with lower propensity toward innovation (Damanpour and Evan, 1984), as organizational members are more likely to perceive a sense of belonging and work commitment (Anderson *et al.*, 2014), social support and emotional arousal (Daly *et al.*, 2016), and create knowledge through accessing diverse resources (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008). Individuals open to new ideas may be more motivated and willing to explore various diverse relational ties for positive exchanges (Fredrickson, 2003), and thus are likely to be well-connected (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008) and display engaged at work (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005). On the contrary, organizations with individuals that are less risk-tolerant may inhibit the development and breaking of new relations from which one can benefit novel experiences (Spreitzer *et al.*, 2005).

Reform efforts, such as outlined in the CCSS, expect educational leaders to work collaboratively with colleagues with differing expertise in exchanging new ideas and approaches to instructional improvement (Gwynne and Cowhy, 2017). A climate of innovation may be important in terms of leader’s willingness to reach out to others for new and different strategies and improvement for leadership practice. However, work in this space in terms of the role of innovative climate in a school district leadership team over time is scarce particularly as related to the specific perceptions of high school principals. This study will address the gap in examining the perceptions of innovative climate among educational leaders over time as they go about implementing the CCSS.

Taken together, this study aims to address the gap in current literature on the role of high school principals’ social connectivity in their district’s network of reform-related relationship as well as their perception of district’s innovative climate. In addressing the gap, we explore the following research questions:

**RQ1.** What is the pattern of interpersonal connectivity of high school principals within a district-wide leadership team over time?

**RQ2.** What is the level of perception of high school principals regarding innovative climate across the district and how does it change over time?
Methods

The more opportunities we have to collaborate the better. There is a wealth of knowledge within our leadership team and we don’t have a way to regularly access and share with one another. I think this will be the key to ensuring the common core is implemented with fidelity. As the plan has already been developed, I think we should work on the implementation as an entire leadership team- to ensure everyone knows how they fit in AND that we should meet to collectively review and discuss this implementation as an entire management team (classified and certificated, department and site). From the Purchasing Director to the Superintendent, each one of us should know in our heads what role we play in ensuring student achievement (Principal – Fall of 2012).

The above quote was reported to us at the start of the Fall of 2012, when we began this study. It reflects the outlook and potential that was repeated to us as prepared for our three-year examination of a district that was just undertaking the implementation of the CCSS. It was this quote and others that echoed the same sentiment that drove us to take more social capital perspective on the idea of change and reform within a leadership team.

Sample and context

This study uses a case study design (Yin, 2013) that focuses on one urban fringe public school district that serves approximately 30,000 K-12 students with diverse demographic backgrounds in terms of socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and English language learner status. We selected the study district partly because the district represents the demographic composition of general public school districts in California and largely because over the last four years the district has been increasingly focused on implementing the CCSS through a focus on collaboration. The study sample includes the leadership team of the district, which comprises all central office administrators (i.e. superintendent, director, supervisor, and coordinator, etc.) and school site principals (6 high school principals (including 3 comprehensive high schools), and 3 middle and 15 elementary school principals). The inclusion of both district and site leaders helps this study draw a more complete picture of district-wide reform collaboration in an era of CCSS. In 2012, the district started introducing the CCSS to all schools with an aim to implement more fully in Fall 2013 and beyond. Since the instruction phase the district has undertaken a series of reform efforts to prepare themselves for CCSS implementation. Major efforts anchor around fostering a climate of trust and respect, encouraging district-wide collaboration for leadership and innovation for instructional practice, as well as establishing more regular meetings (twice a month) with all school leaders. In this work we take a systemic perspective in district-wide reform with a particular focus on high school principals as we think it is important to investigate the pattern of larger district social system in which the high school leaders are embedded.

Although the total sample of district and site leaders is 51, in this study we report on data from a sample of 44 educational administrators across the district who participated in the study for each of the three years and reflect a 93 percent response rate over time. We created a longitudinal data set to ensure we are comparing the same groups of individuals over time in an effort to see what is happening between and among a consistent group of leaders. We acknowledge there is a small number of churn among these leadership positions during the study period. However, the churn rate of approximately 10 percent does not significantly affect the pattern of overall structure for these network relations, which allows us to explore the ebb and flow of network connectivity among the study leaders over the three time periods. Of the sample, 45.5 percent worked at the district office, 13.6 percent worked as a high school principal, and 61.4 percent were female. On average, these administrators have been in education for about 22 years (SD≈7.33), worked in administration for approximate
8–9 years (SD ≈ 5.98), and worked in their current position for approximately 12 years (SD ≈ 10.11). What becomes clear from the sample is that the high school principals have been in their positions and in education for longer than other comparison groups, suggesting this is an experienced group of leaders (see Table I for sample demographic).

Data collection and instrumentation
We invited the district’s leadership team to participate in this longitudinal network-wide innovative climate study over three time points covering each academic year. The data were collected each Fall starting in 2012 and ending in the Fall of 2014 providing three data points. The data include social network relations and survey perceptions.

Social networks: CCSS advice (CCA). Based on earlier work (Daly et al., 2014; Spillane and Kim, 2012), our research team developed a series of network questions that captured the social relationships of leaders. For CCSS advice network relation, we asked the leaders to assess the frequency of interaction of other leaders “Who do you turn to for advice about implementing the Common Core State Standards” on a four-point frequency scale with one indicating “few times a year” and four indicating “daily” interaction. We extracted ties that are of the more frequent interaction scales (i.e. a few times per month to daily) at each of the three time points as a way to reflect the durable nature of such ties. We administered a bounded approach to network data (Scott, 2000) because this study focuses on a group of leadership team members within a finite district network. This approach, coupled with high response rate, provides a more complete picture of the leader networks and yields more valid outcomes (Scott, 2000).

Perception of innovative climate. We invited participants to assess their perceptions of innovative climate on a six-point Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The innovative climate scale is based on a modified version of a well-validated scale (Bryk et al., 1999) and was validated in previous work (see Daly et al., 2016). The scale consists of seven items that reflect the extent to which the education administrators perceive their fellow

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>27 (61.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>17 (38.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Work level</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
<td>6 (13.6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle school and other</td>
<td>3 (6.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary school</td>
<td>15 (34.1)</td>
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<tr>
<td>District office</td>
<td>20 (45.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years of being an educator</strong></td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school</td>
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<td>Middle/elementary school</td>
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<td>Central office</td>
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<td><strong>Years in administration</strong></td>
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<td>High school</td>
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<td>Central office</td>
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<td><strong>Years in current position</strong></td>
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Table I.
Sample demographics of district and site leaders

Notes: n = 44 district and site leaders. Values reflect the 2012–2013 data
administrators to be open to innovation and are willing to take risks to improve the district and schools. Sample items include “Administrators in the district are continuously learning and seeking new ideas” and “Administrators in the district are generally willing to try new ideas.”

**Analysis**

As this study aims to explore the role of high school leaders in a larger district network, we examine network properties at whole network, group network and individual actor level for each of the three time points. In addition, we also examine individual leaders’ perception of innovative climate as well as individual leaders’ ego network neighborhood by assessing the peers with whom individual ego is directly connected at each time point. We use social network analysis to describe the network properties and descriptive and comparative analyses to indicate the difference in perception and network properties between time points.

**Social network analysis.** We use the Netdraw software (Borgatti, 2002) to generate network sociograms to provide visualization of the network structure at each time point. We then use the UCINET 6.0 software package (Borgatti et al., 2002) to calculate a series of network measures at whole network, group, and ego/actor levels. The whole network-level indices assess the overall pattern of connectivity. The group-level analysis is to identify degrees of homophily (core–periphery) for each group within a larger district network. The group category is based on the work level of leaders (i.e. central office, high school, middle school, and elementary school). The ego network analysis is to characterize individual leaders’ own ego network neighborhood over time. The actor-level network analysis is to quantify the degree of individual leaders’ connectedness in the study social networks.

**Whole network level.** Whole network-level indices include network density, network reciprocity and network fragmentation. Network density refers to the percentage of ties that are present over all possible ties in a given network (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). Network reciprocity refers to the proportion of mutual ties over all possible ties (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). The network fragmentation refers to the percentage of the number of disconnected dyads between two actors to all possible number of connected dyads in a network (Wasserman and Faust, 1994).

**Group network level.** We use core–periphery analysis as the group-level network analysis. The core–periphery analysis seeks to identify two sets of actors based on the degree of homophily and cohesion within each set of actors (Wasserman and Faust, 1994): the core of the network is well-connected and dense, whereas the periphery consists of actors that are loosely connected to one another. The core actors are at a structural advantage to exchange information, whereas the periphery actors are less able to coordinate communication and information sharing as it takes more time and steps to transmit/disseminate information from one actor to another due to a lack of connected ties (Borgatti and Everett, 2000). The C/P analysis generates in-group correlation coefficient to indicate the strength of homophily within each group. It uses the fit function that determines the positive correlation between the observed data and the theorized core–periphery structure. A fitness value of 0 indicates that there was no core, whereas a fitness of 1 means that the observed data were a perfect fit to the theorized model. Network research suggests that fitness values greater than 0.50 indicate a developed core–periphery structure (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005) which merits further analytical examination.

**Ego network level.** Ego refers to the focal node of its ego neighborhood that contain the ego and all other nodes to which the ego is directly adjacent. This type of ego network is defined as the one-step ego neighborhood (Hanneman and Riddle, 2005). We use ego network size and its over time change to profile the composition of resources individual leaders have for each group. It is a common and useful way of closely looking at the network behaviors of
individual leaders within their own ego neighborhood, as each ego is embedded in the larger social structure of district network. The size of ego network refers to the number of nodes/alters the ego is one-step directly connected to (Borgatti et al., 2002). Similar to whole network measure, we further look at ego network density, reciprocity, fragmentation, and average degree to characterize the high school principals’ ego network properties.

Actor-level analysis. We calculate actor outdegree, indegree and ego-reciprocity to measure the degree of individual leaders’ connectedness. The outdegree of a leader refers to the number of outgoing ties a leader has, and can be interpreted as an indication of the leader’s “activity.” The indegree of a leader is the number of incoming ties the leader receives from others, and thus can be regarded as an indication of a leader’s degree of popularity. The ego-reciprocity is the proportion of mutual ties an actor has over all possible ties that actor can have.

Results

Comparison and change of perception over time
Table II presents the descriptive and comparisons of innovative climate. On average, educational leaders perceive medium to high levels of perception around innovative climate with mean ranging from 4.49 to 4.68 and their perception increase at a slow rate over time and is not statistically significant. This suggests that educational leaders perceive the innovative climate of the district as “somewhat” innovative during the study period. However, the high school principals’ perception of innovative climate decreases from Time 1 to Time 3 with an increase in standard deviation, meaning that the high school principals tend to have a wide diversity of opinion about the innovative climate of the district. In addition, of all groups, high school principals perceive the lowest levels of innovative climate, compared to elementary and middle school principals and central office leaders. These findings indicate that high school principals, as compared to their administrative peers, perceive the lowest innovative climate over time and such perceptions even decrease over time.

Matched network over time with HS principals embedded: overall structure and actor connectivity
Figure 1 present the CCSS advice network sociograms and actor-level network indices from a number of 44 leaders who joined the study at each time point. Nodes in all sociograms represent individual leaders that are colored with their work level with orange representing high school principals, green elementary school principals, blue middle school principals,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T1 Mean (SD)</th>
<th>T2 Mean (SD)</th>
<th>T3 Mean (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Innovative climate at district</td>
<td>4.49 (1.06)</td>
<td>4.68 (1.03)</td>
<td>4.54 (0.97)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS perception</td>
<td>4.31 (1.39)</td>
<td>4.61 (1.26)</td>
<td>4.43 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES/MS perception</td>
<td>4.19 (1.39)</td>
<td>4.61 (1.26)</td>
<td>4.43 (1.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central office perception</td>
<td>4.84 (0.58)</td>
<td>5.03 (0.63)</td>
<td>4.87 (0.70)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>2.601</td>
<td>10.550</td>
<td>7.061</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>df</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>p</td>
<td>0.138</td>
<td>0.000***</td>
<td>0.000*****</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: n = 44 district and site leaders. HS, high school; ES, elementary school; MS, middle school; CO, central office. $p$-value superscript notation: *significance between HS and MS/ES, **significance between HS and central office. No statistically significant difference in perception of innovative climate is found for each leader group between time point.
and dark red central office leaders. Lines represent the network relationships between leaders, in this study the CCSS advice and/or social support relations. Node size is based on the degree of incoming ties (indegree) of leaders. The larger the node, the more the leader is nominated by others as one to whom others would turn for CCSS advice and social support.

Network properties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Number of ties</th>
<th>Density</th>
<th>Fragmentation</th>
<th>Network reciprocity</th>
<th>Average indegree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time 1: Provider of CCSS advice</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 2: Provider of CCSS advice</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>2.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time 3: Provider of CCSS advice</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.70</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>2.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Network sociograms of CCSS advice over time

Notes: Network size = 44. Node color: orange/HS principals, blue/MS principals, green/ES principals, and red/central office leaders. Nodes are sized by indegree. Actor label indicates each high school principal. No statistically significant difference in network density between time points.

Figure 1.
Network sociograms of CCSS advice over time

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time 1</th>
<th>Time 2</th>
<th>Time 3</th>
<th>Degree average</th>
<th>Ego-reciprocity average</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Out/-in-degree</td>
<td>Ego-reciprocity</td>
<td>Out/-in-degree</td>
<td>Ego-reciprocity</td>
<td>Out/-in-degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS principals</td>
<td>1.17/0.33</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.33/0.67</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.17/0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES principals</td>
<td>1.47/0.93</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>2.53/2.87</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>2.33/2.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS principals</td>
<td>0.00/1.00</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.00/1.00</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1.67/1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central office leaders</td>
<td>3.00/3.50</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
<td>4.05/3.55</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
<td>3.45/3.30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The high school principals are labeled by “HS\textsubscript{j},” where \(j\) indicates the number of high school at the district. Among these six high school principals, three of them lead large comprehensive high schools, and thus their node label is described as “CHS\textsubscript{j},” where C represents “comprehensive.”

A number of overall structures can be noted in the CCSS Advice network sociograms. First, the CCSS advice networks become slightly more dense (not significant between time points) with more ties, less fragmented, and slightly more reciprocated (not significant between time points). Second, the high school principals tend to be at the periphery of, or isolated from, the mainstream network over time, as evidenced by fewer numbers of CCSS advice ties and more isolated positions. This suggests that they are less involved in the sharing or exchanging of CCSS-related advice and information. For those high school principals who are weakly connected with the mainstream network around CCSS advice, they tend to represent different actors over time points. For instance, at Time 1, CHS\textsubscript{5} and CHS\textsubscript{6} were part of the central network, but they became the isolated actors at Time 2 and Time 3. This suggests that information and resources regarding CCSS have not been consistently distributed across all high school principals. Third, the high school principals tend to be less connected even to one another in terms of sharing, providing, or exchanging CCSS advice, whereas the majority of elementary school principals and central office leaders are connected to one another for the most part.

As for actor connectivity, on average, the high school principals have the lowest number of connections to and from others for CCSS advice than other leader groups and the number of their CCSS advice ties decrease from Time 1 to Time 3, whereas the other leader groups have developed or maintain ties with others over time. As for ego-reciprocity, of all the ties that high school principals have across time points, 0 percent are reciprocated, whereas the other leader groups have established increased proportion of ties that are mutual, even among the middle school principals whose mean ego-reciprocity increases from 0 to 13 percent. This suggests that over time the high school principals, in comparison to their administrative colleagues, report less engagement in terms of seeking, providing or exchanging advice around CCSS.

\textit{Network position of HS principals over time: core or periphery}

The results of the core/periphery analysis are reported in Figure 2 at each time point using the matched data set. At 50 iterations, the final fitness measures for CCSS advice networks across time points exhibit a moderate to strong core formation with final fitness ranging from 0.561 to 0.780, indicating the underlying network structure exhibits significant core/periphery pattern. This pattern is further confirmed by the density matrix where the core-core partition across time point has a higher density level of 0.762–0.804, whereas the density level of the periphery–periphery partition is only slightly above zero. In other words, the leaders in the core group are very well-connected with each other, while on the other hand the peripheral leaders are much less connected with each other. In addition, the central core consists of seven to eight leaders. Interestingly, the majority of these core leaders are from central office and none of the high school principals are in the core group. As also shown in the CCSS advice network sociogram, where circle nodes represent core members and down triangle the periphery group, all the high school principals are at the periphery structure of CCSS advice networks over time. Taken together, the abovementioned network structure confirms the peripheral network position of high school principals over time.

\textit{Ego network of HS principals over time}

Figure 3 presents the high school principals’ collective ego network around CCSS advice at each time point. The HS ego networks become smaller, highly fragmented, and less dense with fewer number of ties from Time 1 through Time 3. The number of ego network size in
### Table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$T_1$ ($n=44$)</th>
<th>$T_2$ ($n=44$)</th>
<th>$T_3$ ($n=44$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Goodness of fit</td>
<td>Goodness of fit</td>
<td>Goodness of fit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starting fitness</td>
<td>0.780</td>
<td>0.705</td>
<td>0.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final fitness</td>
<td>0.780</td>
<td>0.705</td>
<td>0.561</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Density matrix</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Core</td>
<td>Periphery</td>
<td>Core</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core</td>
<td>0.804</td>
<td>0.059</td>
<td>0.804</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periphery</td>
<td>0.049</td>
<td>0.010</td>
<td>0.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core/periphery class membership</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core: 8 members</td>
<td></td>
<td>Periphery: 6 HS and 30 members</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periphery: 6 HS and 30 members</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociogram</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Notes

$n=44$ district and site leaders. The core/periphery analysis reports the results from the matched data set. The sociograms reflect the social network positions of individual leaders with circle nodes representing the core members and down triangle the periphery members.

---

**Figure 2.** Core/periphery model statistics for CCSS advice network over time.
terms of number of ego and alters decreases from 11 to 6 over time. On average, individual actors in the ego networks are connected with approximately 1.4 others at Time 1, with a continued decrease in Time 2 and Time 3 by 88 percent. In terms of reciprocity, while there is 25 percent of ties that are reciprocated at Time 1, none of these reciprocal ties is between any pair of the high school principals and as the number of ties drops over time, the percentage of reciprocated ties also drops to zero. As shown in the sociograms, the high school principals become less connected. At Time 1, three of the six high schools are able

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>T1 ego network size</th>
<th>T3 ego network size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HS principals</td>
<td>1.50</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ES principals</td>
<td>2.20</td>
<td>4.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS principals</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td>2.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central office leaders</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:** Node color: orange/HS principals, blue/MS principals, green/ES principals and red/central office leaders. Nodes are sized by indegree.
to reach out to seven others within their collective ego neighborhood through at least one step away from him/her-self. However, at Time 2, the connection becomes a “line” structure in which ego and alters are connected in a line, one after the other, with little CCSS advice that may circle back to the connected members within the neighborhood. One can imagine that if any of the actors is removed from the ego neighborhood at Time 2, the ego network structure may become even more broken into disconnected pairs. This trend of continued disconnection is reflected in the ego neighborhood at Time 3 where there is only one connected pair of high school principals, with the remaining being isolated. Also note that there are no connections to middle school principals within the high school principals’ ego neighborhoods over time, which may constrain the capacity for high schools to build or maintain the relationships with their feeder schools middle schools, thus inhibiting system-wide coherence and alignment. From a social network perspective, inter-organizational relationships (e.g. school to school and school to district) need to be established and supported in order to support the flow or unique relational resources. Continued absence of work-related interactions (e.g. advice around CCSS implementation) between school principals, particularly high school principals, may inhibit the ability to create collaborative cultures and a coherent system across the district.

As for comparing ego network size between work levels, the results indicate that the high school principals’ average ego network size shrinks by 78 percent (1.50 – 0.33), while central office leaders and ES/MS principals’ average ego network size increases from Time 1 to Time 3. This means that the high school principals are becoming less connected for CCSS advice over time within their ego neighborhood.

In sum, our findings across three year regarding networks of advice about implementing CCSS indicate more ties and connectivity for central office and middle/elementary school leaders within the system. However, the average high school leader was not as embedded as other leaders, which was particularly dramatic in the Common Core advice network. Further, the perceptions of innovative climate while increasing over time for most leaders were less so than for the high school principals. Taken on balance this suggests that in general these high school principals were not accessing social capital resources (access to advice) that were available to them in the larger social system and as such may have not been able to bring these resources to their schools. Further, this pattern of isolation extends to feeder school patterns of middle school principals and even other high school principals potentially making district-wide coherence and alignment even more challenging.

**Discussion and conclusion**

This longitudinal study, one of the first to examine high school principals from a network perspective, sheds new light on the social infrastructure of urban high school principals. Overall results indicate that over time high school principals tend to become even more isolated and move to the periphery of the network. Moreover, these leaders are not just occupying peripheral positions they are often isolated from other leaders and secondary principals, while the remaining network becomes more cohesive. The quality of their interactions in terms of reciprocated ties and perceptions of the overall climate of innovation also differs significantly from their peers. The coupling of reduced reciprocated ties and reported perception of the climate becoming less open to risk taking may also inhibit the formation of ties. This combined set of findings suggest that high school principals are isolated from important relational ties, which have been shown to be supportive of improving outcomes. From a systems level this may also create challenges in terms of creating coherence and alignment for CCSS implementation across the district. In the remaining paragraphs we unpack some of our key findings.
High school principals occupy a peripheral position in the network

Strong connections between administrators are important to a coordinated change strategy as these ties support the transfer of tacit, non-routine and complex knowledge allowing for joint problem solving and the development of coordinated solutions (Reagans and McEvily, 2003). In effect, while improvement plans may prescribe particular ways of responding, it is ultimately the social ties between individuals that may well determine the shape, diffusion and success of any change strategy (Spillane et al., 2006). Therefore, attention to the creation of meaningful strategic ties that enhance information transfer between administrators may support the generation and diffusion of knowledge potentially increasing the social capital in the district, as well as exposing knowledge gaps that could be specifically targeted. Working against the development of these ties for advice connections may be detrimental to the flow of knowledge and information and the fact that high school principals are on the periphery of the network may inhibit the cultivation of a coherent reform approach across the district.

Analysis of the informal social relations within the district revealed the presence of a core–periphery (C/P) structure for the advice networks. These networks are characterized by a significant level of centralization around a few individuals with others, particularly high school principals, inhabiting a more peripheral position. C/P structures limit the contribution and access to valuable knowledge by marginalizing individuals at the periphery and ultimately having a negative impact on intra-organizational knowledge sharing such as within the district (Tsai, 2002). A highly centralized structure is effective for the diffusion of routine non-complex knowledge and information (Cummings and Cross, 2003), such as technical material related to procedures and protocols. However, this type of structure has been found to impede the effectiveness of groups engaged in non-routine, complex tasks, such as high-level communication (Borgatti and Cross, 2003), knowledge sharing (Tsai, 2002) and organizational change (Cummings and Cross, 2003; Tenkasi and Chesmore, 2003) all of which are necessary in implementing the CCSS.

In the district, high school principals occupied peripheral positions and were disconnected from other principals and the “core” of central office administrators. The isolation of high school principals from other principals as well as other high school principals and central office staff may result from a district organizational structure that may privilege elementary schools as these are relatively much well-connected to the “core” of the leadership network. The greater the connectivity over time, in this case exchanging CCSS advice, the more likely the opportunity to cultivate shared norms and language that are necessary for development of organizational routines and coherence. Therefore, structures that support the development of more collaborative relationships between all leaders should be considered.

The district may well be suited in creating formal structures in the organization based on informal social networks to enhance existing ties and bolster those that are sparse (Cross et al., 2002). However, the district will have to avoid the trap of merely providing time and directives to “work together” as this does not necessarily result in meaningful collaboration between leaders. In fact, “forced” collaboration may potentially calcify recalcitrant participants, making both present and future efforts at collaboration even more challenging (Harris and Chrispeels, 2006). A study by Coburn and Russell (2008) suggests that while districts may create specific roles (e.g. coaches) intended to increase collaboration the result is not always realized. Therefore, the development of structures must also include intentional opportunities for routines of interaction that promote productive exchange (Coburn and Russell, 2008). Building and strengthening these relationships may enhance the district’s capacity for change by further developing the social capital within the system (Lin, 2001). Through new lateral connections, the organization’s absorptive capacity for learning, development and goal attainment will be strengthened (Cohen and Levinthal, 1990).
Increased isolation and reduced reciprocated ties

Existing literature suggests that positive experiences from prior social interactions may foster trust by reducing uncertainty about the engagement and involvement of the other party (Tschanen-Moran, 2004). This predictability of relations gained through reciprocal interactions both decrease the vulnerability between individuals as well as potentially increase the depth of exchange due to a willingness to engage in risk taking (Uzzi, 1997). In support of this claim, research suggests that individuals tend to seek reciprocal as opposed to asymmetric relations, as those ties provide mutual benefit to the relationship in creating a reinforcing effect (Daly and Finnigan, 2011; Lin, 2001). Reciprocated relations are therefore important in providing opportunities to build and deepen the norms of trust necessary for the exchange of reform-related resources (Liou and Daly, 2014).

Reciprocity and trust are also implicated in research related to communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Reciprocated relations provide opportunities for individuals to interact and learn together, and have been suggested to be important in educational systems oriented toward learning and innovation (Honig, 2008). These reciprocated relations can provide opportunity to modify and deepen patterns of interaction as well as develop increased repertoires of behaviors, which may be thought of as a process of learning and the formation of an innovative climate necessary for improving practice (Honig and Ikemoto, 2008). On balance this literature suggests that actors who have reciprocated relations also may have more trusting relationships (Liou and Daly, 2014). In this work we noted a decrease in relationships in general and reciprocated ties over time — this may well inhibit the formation of the trust necessary for improvement as well as decreased access to social capital resources.

Decrease in perception of innovative climate

We found that high school principals report a significantly lower perception of innovative climate among their colleagues during each year and over time. If high school administrators do not perceive a climate safe for risk taking and trying out of new ideas, this may potentially inhibit the testing out of novel approaches necessary for implementing reform and change as well as inhibit the formation of new ties. As central office administrators occupy both central positions in the informal social networks and are on the top of the formal hierarchy, they are in a position to both model the behaviors (risk taking and exploring new ideas) and support the conditions necessary for an innovative climate to flourish. Again, as has been shown in other work (e.g. Daly and Finnigan, 2011), the misalignment between perceptions and expectations may result in less coherence across the system. The decreasing of innovation climate perceived by high school principals may potentially lead to negative work relationships, as evidenced by previous work (Daly et al., 2015). Leaders who perceive lower innovative climate across the district may look at the environment from a passive perspective and as such they might display negative attitude and regard their work environment and colleagues as difficult to work with leading to lowered job satisfaction (Daly et al., 2015).

Limited access to social capital and impact on district coherence

Over time site administrators became increasingly disconnected from other principals and the “core” of central office administrators and yet these leaders were identified as resources for innovative practices. This type of disconnected system limits district coherence and the ability of central office and school leaders to develop meaningful partnerships as they had intended through this district-wide reform. Furthermore, this structure may inhibit the district’s ability to effectively develop shared theories of action (Agullard and Goughnour, 2006), learning partnerships (Copland and Knapp, 2006) and effectively broker resources (Honig, 2006).

Limited access to the core/mainstream network of resources may potentially engender network disruption due to weak connection within and outside high school group.
Recall that the number of ties among high school principals is fewer and most of these ties tend to be non-reciprocated. Should the high school principals desire to keep such weak ties, they may need to engage more effort in maintaining existing weak ties that are oftentimes uni-directional. Otherwise, if any of the high school principal deselects his/her point of connection for advice, it may well be the case that she/he would become one of the disconnected, isolated actors within these networks. It is noteworthy that the size of high school has little to do with the pattern of lower connectivity among the high school principals with the principals of smaller high schools being just as likely to be isolated and peripheral as their comprehensive high school colleagues. It may be more of the district-wide systemic issue that deserves more attention including issues having to do with not only lateral ties, but vertical connections across the district.

Study limitations
As with other empirical works, there are also limitations in this study, allowing the researchers to provide suggestions for future work. First, the study sample is confined to the district-wide leadership team in one district. The study results may not be generalized to all other educational settings. Future work may consider investigating the network position of high school principals in a variety of school district settings in order to capture differences and similarities in the role of high school principals as related to reform effort. Further, we acknowledge that placing the focus on high school principals may limit our understanding of the influence of feeder middle and elementary schools. Future study may explore the nuanced relationships among feeder patterns to better understand the systemic nature of the educative process over levels. Second, as we only examine the positive relationship a leader has with others regarding high propensity in risk-taking activities, we acknowledge the consequential influence of negative relationships on organizational change (Daly et al., 2015; Uzzi and Dunlap, 2012). Finally, as the phenomenon of network churn (Daly et al., 2017; Sasovova et al., 2010) is typical in a given school district, in a longitudinal study it would also yield valuable input into our knowledge base to study the impact of churn on the performance of a leadership team in terms of collaboration around improvement. Future studies may explore the churn of educational leaders and its association with the change in district governance.

Broken bridges
Our data suggest that high school principals over time have reduced access to social capital resources, particularly those related to implementation of CCSS. This reduction in access may inhibit the movement of resources into the school itself. However, what perhaps is even more critical is the culture of risk taking for innovation and change to occur is significantly lessened. For novel ideas to enter these high school principals must not only have the opportunity to access others, but also be willing to try to new things and acquire new ideas and practices from other leaders. In the end the district will require system-wide attention to improvement rather than allowing each high school to survive or fail, thereby creating its own destiny. However, any formal support mechanisms that are developed in the district will be pointless without strong informal relationships that bridge district-wide leaders and access to critical social capital resources.

References


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**Further reading**


**About the authors**
Yi-Hwa Liou, PhD, is Assistant Professor of the Department of Educational Management at the National Taipei University of Education. Yi-Hwa’s research primarily focuses on organizational dynamics and learning, leadership and development, professional learning community, and data-informed decisions. She draws on social network theory and analysis and mixed-methods approach to understanding those complex research areas and has published her work in various peer-reviewed journals. Yi-Hwa has been conducting multiple research projects on systemic change within and across various organizations inside and outside education. Particularly, she is currently studying social network change in district-wide leadership team and its improvement efforts as well as cohorts of in-service and pre-service teachers in support of their professional growth. Yi-Hwa Liou is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: yihwa.liou@gmail.com
Alan J. Daly, PhD, is Professor and Director of Educational Leadership Joint Doctoral Program in the Department of Education Studies at the University of California, San Diego. He is also the founding Executive Editor of the new Sage Journal *Educational Neuroscience*. Alan’s research and teaching are influenced by his 16 years of public school experience in a variety of instructional and leadership roles. His research primarily focuses on the role of leadership, educational policy and organization structures and the relationship between those elements on the educational attainment of traditionally marginalized student populations. Alan draws on his theoretical and methodological expertise in social network theory and analysis in his work and has multiple publications and a book on the topic published by Harvard Press entitled, *Social Network Theory and Educational Change*. He has a second co-authored book with Springer entitled, *Using Research Evidence in Schools*, and another with the American Educational Research Association entitled, *Thinking and Acting Systemically: Improving School Districts Under Pressure*. 

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