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CONFRONTING AND HEALING FROM RACIAL TRAUMA IN THE CLASSROOM: REFLECTIONS ON A RACIAL LITERACY COLLABORATION IN A PROJECT-BASED LEARNING HIGH SCHOOL ADVISORY

Kelsey M. Jones and Jordan Adler
University of Pennsylvania

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Introduction

Urban education has seen many changes in the last fifteen years, and we believe we know what good teaching looks like. We know we must be rigorous. We know we must appreciate the beauty of childhood. We know we should address the oppressions that perpetuate inequity and marginalization. We have data about students' achievement, teachers' effectiveness, and information from assessments that throw schools into chaotic shame spirals each spring. But with all of this knowledge, we resist the thing we know we need to know: the challenges we face in urban education are rooted in the challenge of addressing racial stress in schools.

Jordan (a high school teacher) and Kelsey (a university researcher) co-developed a unit for Jordan's tenth grade advisory class that would teach and integrate racial literacy[1] techniques in the classroom. Here, we reflect upon our experiences and share our initial thoughts on recognizing students' racial trauma and supporting them as they heal.

Background

The stigma surrounding conversations about race has left many with an inability to engage in meaningful discussions that allow them to express themselves and resolve racial stress (Stevenson, 2014; Milner & Laughter, 2014; Young, 2016). In schools, this is particularly troublesome; racial stress causes unhealthy relationships in teacher-student interactions and may be amplified if the teacher is perceived to have a different racial identity or acts in oppressive ways. Research shows that racial stress can lead teachers to engage in the harsh and disproportionate punishment of Black and Brown students and, eventually, contribute to the push-out of these students who are marginalized in schools that do not honor their cultural experiences and styles (Mickelson, 2001; Ferguson, 2003; Thomas et al., 2009; Yerrick et al., 2011; Tyson, 2011; Stevenson, 2014).

Racial Literacy

In an effort to disrupt the marginalization and criminalization of Black and Brown students, we offer *racial literacy* as a theoretical framework and a practical tool for educators who struggle to manage their racial stress. Racial literacy describes the ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful moments, a set of skills that is essential if we are to engage in effective teaching and learning in schools (Stevenson, 2014). The health of the classroom depends on direct and open conversations about race and racial moments, yet most discussions about race and racial moments are seen as supplementary to the core curriculum, or something only the humanities teachers can tackle. And, when we do talk about race, we focus on the facts—we want to quiz students on heroes and holidays. But racial moments and racial stress happen everywhere in a school and talking about racial moments and racial stress is emotional. A frame of racial literacy encourages us to understand the stress of racial encounters as emotional and personal. It also reminds us that there is potential for meaningful and positive learning experiences if teachers and students have strategies to manage their racial stress before, during, and after a racial encounter.

In this collaboration, we sought to answer two questions. First, what is the impact of a racial literacy curricula in a project-based 10^{th} grade advisory class on a teacher and his students? Second, what does it look like to introduce a racial literacy theoretical framework and support practitioners and students as they learn and use racial literacy strategies? With these questions in mind, we believed a collaborative study between a teacher and university researcher would provide an excellent opportunity for an exploration of racial literacy in practice.

Our Intervention: "Race, Science, and the Media"

Jordan, a tenth grade teacher, wanted to design a project for his advisory class that would challenge him to approach racial conversations with his Black and Brown students, and Kelsey wanted to know if racial literacy theory could be used effectively in the context of a classroom, in real time. Together, we designed "Race, Science, and the Media," a quarter-long project divided into three mini-units. First, students would be introduced to racial literacy as a toolkit for navigating racially stressful—and traumatic—moments in their lives. Each student would keep a journal, answering daily prompts about racial stress throughout the unit. The racial literacy mini-unit was also designed to help students practice healthy coping strategies such as racial storytelling, debating, role-playing, and relaxation, following the techniques outlined by Stevenson (2014). Second, students would be introduced to the neuroscience of trauma, learning the structures of the brain and understanding how the brain responds to trauma—in this case, racial trauma. We wanted to connect the emotional work of racial literacy to the concepts outlined in the school's science standards in order to explore how teachers can integrate racial literacy into curricula as both practice and content. Finally, students would prepare for the quarter's exhibition week, choosing three assignments from a Tic-Tac-Toe board to complete and present to their peers and the school community; examples of these assignments included written analyses of television shows, interviews with family members, critiques of prevalent stereotypes, three-dimensional models of the human brain, and original poems and visual art projects.

What Happened

We believed we had developed the perfect unit and were sure the students would love it. We imagined a classroom full of engaged tenth-graders, eager to share their experiences. And while many of the students were ready to talk about their racial stress, about half of the students were reluctant to talk about race during group discussions. We were surprised and disappointed; we knew from their stories that they were experiencing racial stress, so why were they unwilling to fully engage in our lessons? One day, a student yelled out in frustration, shouting that she couldn't talk about race because the previous day's discussion had left her with a migraine that lasted all night. We started to realize that, in our excitement to offer strategies and discussion, we forgot to thoughtfully attend to our students' emotional needs. The pressure to keep to a schedule and get through each lesson—the pressures teachers face every day—overwhelmed us and we forgot why we were doing the project in the first place. We were supposed to be creating a space for students to navigate their racial stress in healthy and healing ways. Teaching racial literacy strategies and accepting racial literacy as a teaching stance means we must commit to making time for the deep and sometimes painful processing that individuals need. As we paused to reevaluate, we were forced to manage our own racial stress about this unexpected—and completely human—response to our project. We spent so much time trying to draw out the racial trauma in the classroom that we neglected to spend an equal amount of time healing in each lesson.

We decided to introduce a fourth mini-unit focused on healing after we taught the racial literacy skills. Students thought about how they heal as individuals and how we, as a community, heal together when living with trauma. The class opened up and we started to hear powerful stories from students about the pain they were experiencing and how they managed their stress, trauma, and childhoods. Even though we knew our students were special, we were struck by the sophisticated and complex analyses of their experiences as Black and Brown children. When we added the healing unit to our project, we were able to find a balance that would ensure our students felt respected, safe, and successful.

Although the project pushed students to deeply explore the pain of racial stress and trauma, it was the new focus on healing that drove the project and allowed the students to engage in meaningful work. And, of course, the students' final presentations were beautiful. Once we, as overwhelmed and frantic educators, got out of their way, we were able to heal as a community and they truly made the project their own.

Moving Forward

Teaching and applying racial literacy in the classroom proved to be more difficult than we thought. In order to support students, we needed to address our own stress and practice what we were preaching. Even with the best intentions, in a school that fully supported our collaboration, we succumbed to the stress that many educators face when crunched for time and, most importantly, the stress that inevitably appears when race is at the center of classroom interactions. While race is always a factor in the classroom—no matter who you are, no matter who you teach—we realize the urgency of the content and the desire to equip our students with racial literacy skills clouded our judgment. Moving forward, we will revise our unit to account for these stressors and include notes on how we can take care of our students and ourselves, and address our racial stress when we teach the unit again.

Our students are ready to heal if we, as educators, are ready to make our classrooms healing communities. Looking ahead to the next fifteen years, we must commit to address racial experiences openly and honestly in our classrooms if we are to make significant changes in our field and for our students.

Kelsey M. Jones is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and the Racial

Empowerment Collaborative. She is a former special education teacher, having taught at an elementary school in Brooklyn, New York prior to completing her doctorate. Her research in Dis/ability Studies in Education, racial literacy, and the school-to-prison pipeline is grounded in her classroom experiences as both a Woman of Color and an educator of Black and Brown children.

Jordan Adler is a tenth grade advisory teacher at The Workshop School, a Project Based Learning School in West Philadelphia. In the past he has taught chemistry, biology, environmental science, and physical science. His experiences in the sciences inform his project designs in his current position. He also recognizes the importance of racial literacy as a central part of his own practice and curriculum, especially as a White educator in a school that serves Students of Color.

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