

EMPOWERING TEACHER LEADERSHIP IN SYSTEMIC JUSTICE EFFORTS

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Abstract:

In the United States, almost one-quarter of all youth are children of immigrants and it is projected that by 2040 over a third of all children will be growing up in immigrant households (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2010). This shift in demographics has the potential to compound the inability that many school districts demonstrate to effectively serve culturally and linguistically students as evidenced by disparate outcomes and experiences. New frameworks of equity work incorporate systems of change from all levels of school district organizations. This paper looks specifically at the power of teacher-facilitated professional development to affect greater climate consciousness.

Keywords: Teacher Leadership, Culturally & Linguistically Responsive Education, Equity, Climate Consciousness, Systemic Change

Introduction

As an educator in the Ossining Union Free School District over the last 24 years, I have learned and participated in a number of systemic attempts to realize equity for all of the students in our diverse community. Like New York City and other surrounding communities, the demographics of Ossining have shifted over the last forty years. While Ossining has historically been a diverse community, the district presently serves a culturally, linguistically and economically diverse community with a significant immigrant population. The community is located alongside the Hudson River, with the Sing-Sing Correctional Facility, the town's largest employer, sitting on its banks. This backdrop serves as a powerful reminder of the urgency of the work set out for the District, which is presently rolling out its fourth iteration of work to address patterns of inequity over the last forty years.

Shifting Demographics

In 1975, 20 years before my arrival in Ossining as a special education teacher, 75% of the 5,136 students in the District were White, 19% were Black, and a mere 5% were Hispanic (Fleming, Horn, Freeman, Ruiz, Saltzman, & Buggs, 1977). While the current Black population's percentage has dropped to 10% and the percentage of White students has shrunk to 22%, the Hispanic/LatinX population has now increased to represent over 60% of the District population. Presently, nearly 40% of residents are now foreign-born, emigrating mainly from Ecuador. This shift in demographics provides important context in the ongoing pursuit of equity.

Iterations of Change

Over the years, multiple measures—including disaggregated achievement data and climate surveys—reflect that the district has historically struggled to respond to its evolving community. From 1968-1974, Ossining experienced rising racial tensions culminating in a riot that spilled from the cafeteria to the streets downtown. This major disturbance resulted in national attention and a subsequent civil rights investigation into the origin of the racial tension. With this pressure, an intensive self-study that served as the first iteration of the District's work culminated in the implementation of the "the Ossining Plan," based on the Princeton Plan, which organizes schools by grade level rather than neighborhood in order for each school to reflect the demographics of the overall community. The Ossining Plan is now widely esteemed as the symbolic structure for the communal value of diversity.

Despite this stated value, equity efforts to ensure a responsive and just school experience for all students have started and stopped. As I began my role as a school leader in 1998, Superintendent Dr. Robert Roelle convened a group of diverse teachers, administrators, and community members as "The Superintendent's Advisory Council on the Achievement Gap" that served as the second iteration of the District's work. The Council's final report expressed concerns over the lack of representation of diverse cultures in the curriculum; family reports of poor school climate for minority students; low expectations for student achievement; and lack of professional development in diversity, multiculturalism, and language acquisition. My focus as a young principal was addressing the concerns and implementing corresponding recommendations. My attention to culturally and linguistically focused professional development continued through 2007, when my first cohort of students reached high

school. Impacted by my personal connection with these students, I was devastated to read an external review that raised concerns of how my former students were experiencing high school. Specifically, a study by The Metropolitan Center for Urban Education used surveys, achievement data, and interviews to explore the student experience at Ossining High School (Noguera, Sealey-Ruiz, Fergus, Christodoulou, Handville, Meade, & Torres, 2007). This third iteration of our pursuit for equity included recommendations to enhance academic opportunities for all students based on the painful picture of negative high school experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students. These recommendations were in response to the report's identification of low expectations and the school's level of concern as aligned to their immigration status and home language. Existing artifacts reflect the technical efforts made to implement the recommendations from this 2007 report; actions include increasing the number of diverse students in Advanced Placement classes, providing complimentary SAT and ACT preparation classes, adding electives that facilitate student study of class and race, and creating a dual language program that seeks to use students' language and culture as a resource. Nonetheless, despite these three major District attempted initiatives, recent surveys suggest that the lived experiences of students have not improved.

A Systemic Approach

Fortunately, I see evidence that our long history of attempting to make meaning of our multiple cultural contexts has deepened in a revived multi-dimensional effort. Under the leadership of our current superintendent, Ray Sanchez, we have again taken on equity work with the NYU Metro Center and Director Natalie McCabe Zwerger. This new and fourth iteration is propelled from multiple directions, including the leadership of a District-wide committee that provides direction, building committees made up of teachers who facilitate professional development for their colleagues, and student leaders who lead "teach-ins" in collaboration with their teachers as well as the Board of Education. The District Equity Committee—comprised of parents, community members, educators, and students—is committed to creating educational structures and systems that realize lasting change. After a year of shared study, the District Equity Committee developed recommendations to drive this work, including (1) ongoing study, implementation, and review of a representative and responsive curriculum; (2) identification of disparities through regular study of disaggregated academic, behavioral, and attendance data; (3) equitable communication methods including clear messaging about equity work; and (4) forming more locally, school-level equity committees, which will now lead local professional development on racial literacy and overall climate consciousness from an equity lens.

Teachers Leading

While student leaders have driven the secondary schools' work, I see the teacher-led building committees in my elementary school as the force behind the most palpable changes in staff openness to engage in conversations about race and privilege. In order to understand teacher leaders' experience with their colleagues, I observed a focus group of five teacher members from my school's equity committee led by the teacher and building committee co-chair, T.R.. In order to provide context to this videotaped focus group, T.R. began by recounting how the committee introduced this professional development including the review of the District Equity Committee's recommendations, facilitation of a shared definition of educational equity as well as the understanding of the differences between the following terms: equality (everyone receives the same resources based on the belief that "equal" means "fair"); equity (everyone receives what they need in order to have the opportunity to be successful); and justice (tearing down the structures that privilege one group over another, the act of disrupting and dismantling systems of oppression). In order to see barriers to justice, the committee proposed that teachers needed to understand how privilege keeps these structures intact. As a result, this work began with diving into the concept of privilege. With the understanding of their colleagues' paradigms, the committee members also theorized that approaching privilege would be best received when paired with their own personal stories. In fact, the power of storytelling was the dominant theme that emerged from coding this focus group. When discussing the use of storytelling, T.R. asked a teacher, C.E., to share about his experience facilitating this introductory conversation with his colleagues. In turn, C.E. asserted: "As one of the few White males on our staff and therefore possessing the greatest privilege, I thought sharing my understanding of my own White privilege would help my colleagues be more open" (Focus Group, January 2018). C.E. continued by describing the evolution of his initial defensiveness when presented the concept of White privilege. Specifically, he shared his dissonance as a beneficiary of privilege given some tragic childhood events, and described his journey toward realizing that, despite these struggles, he never faced barriers to access due to his race. For example, he cited that he was privileged to never worry for his safety when traveling or looking for a home.

Storytelling and privilege continued to be salient themes as the remaining committee members recalled facilitating a professional development session on the experiences of our immigrant families. During this professional development session, a presentation was given by Neighbors Link, a local organization whose mission is to facilitate the healthy integration of immigrants into our community, in part by educating residents on the contributions of immigrants. After this presentation, six members of the committee told their personal immigration story, including their reasons for leaving their home country as well as aspects of their journey. Teacher and building committee co-chair, A.F., described her experience immigrating from Colombia at age 15. Sharing her profound cultural shock as well as her struggle to learn English in high school was a deeply emotional experience, A.F.'s story gave her peers a newfound understanding and respect for her, which A.F. hoped would translate to them being more empathetic toward their students. To provide further perspective, teacher and committee co-chair, L.D., shared her experience as the daughter of immigrants. Specifically, she revealed the low expectations insidiously communicated to her

and her mother, who was learning English. L.D. continued that her experience as a student fueled her desire to be a teacher who embraced the strengths of students and families. As social worker, A.V. transitioned to sharing the obstacles and hardships that our immigrant families endure via their anonymous stories. Ultimately, teachers attending this professional development session reported greater empathy for students and their families' experience.

Having participated in several major equity initiatives, I see the power and promise of new frameworks that approach the need for change from all positions of the organization. The role of teacher-facilitated professional development focused on racial literacy, climate consciousness, and Culturally Responsive Education demonstrates great promise; therefore, the potential for this type of work should be studied more widely.

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