**Student Life Advisory Council (SLAC): The Pursuit of Justice, Critical Literacy, Healing, and Change Through a Novel School Leadership Collective**

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## ABSTRACT

Sustained inquiry between school administrators and mental health professionals around critical incidents, school policy, and problems of practice is required to mitigate inequities so prominently illuminated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Collaboration between school stakeholders with different role identities and positionalities gainfully blurs structural and organizational barriers to equity and, ultimately, reform. To that end, a formal structure called SLAC, or the Student Life Advisory Council, is presented in the following article. The conceptual rationale for the work of a pioneer three year old SLAC team situated in a large suburban middle school is intentionally grounded in Kaplan and Garner's (2017) DSMRI framework. SLAC's output is then considered through the lens of Victor Ray's theory of racialized organizations (2019). The SLAC approach has the potential to disrupt inequity in schools, build collective capacity for inquiry, and manifest real change in all educational sectors. It is offered to the field for consideration here, with the sincere hope that the organizational hierarchy of schools might be flattened in the interest of our students and their freedom.

School leaders manifested radical and innovative systems-within-systems during the COVID-19 pandemic, often without sufficient resources, support, or critical engagement. Schools mustered through days, months, and years of uncertainty and scarcity. We must acknowledge that nothing will ever be the same for schools and school employees. We must capitalize on the reckoning for justice the pandemic materialized, particularly for our most marginalized students and families (Lamont Hill, 2020). To that end, this essay introduces a novel collaborative school leadership council. At Hommocks Middle School in Westchester, NY, an interdisciplinary collective coalesced out of the pandemic, called the Student Life Advisory council, or SLAC team. SLAC's structure will be introduced, followed by the theoretical frameworks that ground its work and an assessment of SLAC's outputs using Victor Ray's (2019) tenets of racialized organizations as a critical lens. Additionally, five essential core ideas are outlined to encourage practitioners to explore the possibility of the SLAC implementation at their own sites of practice.

At Hommocks, SLAC unites school administrators, psychologists, social workers, school counselors, directors and care workers each week for an hour long meeting. The team utilizes inquiry-based casework and storytelling methodologies to generate new and situated knowledge for school improvement and crisis response (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). For the last three years, the SLAC team has iterated collaborative justice initiatives and sustained disruptive dialectics typically suppressed by technical divisions of labor in schools. We've developed support plans and interdisciplinary parent outreach for students of color with multiple suspensions. We have staged increasingly complex restorative interventions born from viral moments of racialized animus that hurt real kids in real time. We have considered cafeteria procedures. We've discussed hallway congestion. The Hommocks SLAC team has labored over

re-defining and integrating academic intervention, social and emotional programming, restorative justice as a transformational paradigm, and frameworks for racial healing and literacy (Davis, 2019; Stevenson, 2014; Winn, 2018).

SLAC is a site for transformative dialogue. It is both a provocation and balm for a site's systems and professional culture. SLAC follows the Freirian tradition of dismantling and flattening hierarchy in the pursuit of revolutionary wisdom and critical consciousness (1970). School administrators, mental health professionals, and care workers often pass student issues and problems of practice from one silo to the next without structured dialogue and grounded inquiry. Transactional quality assurance and accountability measures obscure the humanity of students and, crucially, deny talented employees opportunities to manifest their expertise into change. Transactional relationships and hierarchy were exacerbated and ingrained into practice by the pandemic's chaotic urgency. In response, SLAC intentionally levels the playing field.

No SLAC member is more important or valued over another. As a facilitating administrator, I endeavor to lift all voices, encourage disagreement, and center healing justice. Notably, SLAC's incubation is deeply connected to my own journey of praxis through association with graduate school mentors and my dissertation research. My research investigates the relationship between school employee role identity and the enactment of restorative justice. The opportunity to present with two SLAC colleagues at Penn's celebration of Writing and Literacy in October of 2023 validated and challenged the development of the concept. Feedback from teachers and administrators from outside our site and local geography affirmed that the field need more relational and humanizing leadership spaces. Colleagues at the Mid-Career Program for Educational Leadership (MCDPEL) and attendees at the 2023 celebration warmly embraced the egalitarian vision of SLAC.

Each week the SLAC team meets around a twenty foot long conference table. The agenda for each meeting is simple. We engage in clearing protocols at the outset which take the form of guided meditations, impromptu celebrations of students and colleagues, or the "letting go" of preoccupying or conflictual thoughts in a safe and non-judgemental round. We follow with reaffirmation of our collaboratively generated group norms. SLAC meetings braid the critical capacity of talented clinicians, systems-based capacity of administrators, and the relational expertise and organizational footprint of school counselors and care workers. We get vulnerable. We get honest. Most importantly, we get real about our practice and students, together. SLAC is necessarily fluid. Its relational and dialogic nature requires trust, time, and an explicit commitment to invite practitioners to view themselves as intellectuals and purveyor-generators of situated knowledge (Giroux, 1988).

Depending on the events of the past week, the bulk of a SLAC meeting focuses on analysis of a school wide critical incident such as a racialized conflict in the cafeteria that erupts into physical aggression (Tripp, 2011). Alternatively, SLAC stakeholders have open invitations to present cases for group inquiry, utilizing a loosely structured descriptive review protocol (Cruice, 2018). The group identifies and agrees on the meetings' flow and emphasis. We leave each meeting with next steps, problems of practice, and relationships to study for the week to follow. In this way, the first theoretical anchor for the work of SLAC follows Cochran-Smith and Lytle's "Inquiry as Stance" (2009). They redefine inquiry as a collective methodology, inclusive of formal and informal practitioner spaces, that stretch beyond classroom work into systems and leadership. Inquiry guides the cyclical and generative relationship between knowledge and practice within the SLAC team, and mines the group's experience for rich and complex solutions.

Restorative justice is SLAC's second theoretical anchor. Restorative techniques such as circles, affective language, and explicit focus on harms, needs, and obligations provide interpersonal, intergroup, and intragroup checks and balances (Davis, 2019; Wachtel, T., et. al., 2010; Winn, 2018; Zehr, 1990). It must be clearly and simply stated that SLAC positions itself in opposition to traditional executive leadership structures. Speaking from my own positionality and privilege, my desire as administrator and SLAC facilitator is to cede power and authority to the SLAC collective. I do this in service of disrupting the pernicious fractal nature of leadership that repeats and reproduces oppression in teams, classrooms, and student experience (Supovitz & D'Auria, 2020). Rigorous fluid inquiry, intellectual and professional solidarity, and commitment to restorative justice strengthens the SLAC team, and in so doing, the school at large.

Kaplan and Garner (2017; 2018) offer the Dynamic Systems Model of Role Identity (DSMRI) as a conceptualization of the complex balance of factors that impact a practitioner's embodiment of their role identity. The DSMRI is the third theoretical anchor that guides SLAC. It was introduced to me at MCDPEL by Dr. Abby Reisman as a means to analyze and understand teacher choices in relation to their role identity. This model infuses my own research and the development of SLAC with layers of complexity. I strongly encourage practitioners to read Kaplan and Garner's work in its entirety and explore the DSMRI in the context of their own practice.

Kaplan and Garner posit that a practitioner's role identity is a fluid system composed of a unique ontology and epistemology, a sense of purpose and goals tied to role, perceived action possibilities situated in practice, and self-perceptions and self-definitions (2017; 2018). These domains intersect through attracting and repelling forces, caused by external and internal stimuli. Thus, practitioners embody and continually revise their role identities through non-linear and

reciprocal pathways. The DSMRI's meta-theoretical lens on role identity affirms SLAC as a site for real-time two-way professional development, in contrast to the drain-and-train model so often used in schools (Kaplan & Garner, 2017).

Dialogue, inquiry, and restorative practices have challenged my own role identity as an administrator. At SLAC, I frequently experience tension and distress around my own perception and enactment of my role. While I validate and re-commit weekly to the relational tentpoles of SLAC, I have also received verbal and non-verbal rebukes from visiting administrators and guests unaccustomed to flattened hierarchy and tempered positional influence. As a result, I consider different action possibilities, and revise my own purpose and goals as administrator in the SLAC setting.

SLAC members with different roles, experience, and vastly different expressions of epistemic privilege are challenged through SLAC dialogue (Mohanty, 2018). Team members are checked on their positionality by colleagues. Student conflicts and structural misalignments are interrogated through the lenses of race, privilege, and access. Sometimes those conversations are difficult, and we view that as an asset and buoy for our continued work. The DSMRI provides a critical lens with which to support SLAC team members and the collective as a whole. We are more than our roles, so often defined narrowly by our sites and professional networks. COVID-19 taught us this. Our whole, dynamic and idiosyncratic selves enrich and complicate the dialogic space that is SLAC. It is my continued hope that team members explore and rebalance their role identities through this work.

Victor Ray's (2019) theorizing of racialized organizations is a welcome grounding framework for considering justice outputs of the SLAC team. Ray's sprawling work deserves more complex acknowledgment and explication than this short essay can provide. His core tenets

however, serve as guideposts for the development of SLAC as an instrument of justice. First, Ray asserts that racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups (2019). SLAC team members speak from leadership roles that span multiple specialized programs disproportionately attended by students with minoritized identities. SLAC team members intentionally center the perspectives of students and families whose agency is diminished by the school's bureaucratic structures. Our school social worker uses SLAC as an opportunity to tell stories about families and children without voice and access in the school building. In this way, through inquiry, dialogue, and action SLAC mediates prescriptions and pathways that virtually guarantee racialized outcomes

Ray's second tenet describes racialized organizations legitimizing the unequal distribution of resources (2019). SLAC explicitly challenges unequal resource distribution across multiple channels. The presence of administrators at SLAC frequently impacts funding of programs and policies that promote racialized outcomes for students. For instance, the SLAC team conducted hundreds of restorative mediations in the 2022-23 school year, resulting in the full funding of restorative practices training for 44 sixth grade teachers and district leaders this year. While restorative practices do not guarantee improved disciplinary outcomes for students of color alone, the resulting mediations have surfaced stories and forced awareness of harmful practices that pervade student discipline at our site (Gregory et. al., 2018; Katic et. al., 2020; Lodi et. al., 2021).

Ray describes whiteness as a credential in racialized organizations (2019). In SLAC conversations, intentional and programmatic interrogation of stakeholder privilege and positionality lead to discomfort and racialized stress (Stevenson, 2014). The SLAC team is the most racially diverse in the school. As a matter of protocol, when racialized conflict emerges we

slow down, check our biases, and work through difficult conversations together, mindful of the disproportionate impact on colleagues with minoritized identities. As in many American schools, a racialized dynamic is engendered by a majority white administrative team and teaching staff. For this reason, SLAC grounds conversations in whiteness as a credential. For instance, cyclical conversations about student achievement are grounded in data disaggregated by race, disability, discipline, and access. These conversations intentionally leverage the interdisciplinary and racially diverse makeup of the SLAC team, thus interrupting transanctional, hierarchical, and racialized outcomes and action steps. We ask questions about who gets access to academic intervention and why with input from administrators, counselors, psychologists, directors, and social workers.

Finally, Ray asserts that decoupling is racialized (2019). Decoupling describes the space between how official organizational policy may not describe or produce its intended outcomes in actual classrooms, hallways, or meetings with parents. For example, when school policies around student referral to special education are decoupled from the preponderance of classified students of color, the SLAC team prioritizes inquiry around the issue. Psychologists and School Counselors commonly facilitate student referrals and "catch" discipline before administration is involved. Potential instances of racialized decoupling are discussed at SLAC by these stakeholders, and proposals for system revision or dismantling are workshopped and realized.

The SLAC structure fortifies systems that support and impact the core work of instruction. We have found that a greater degree of coherence and partnership between school administrators, mental health professionals, social workers, school counselors, directors, deans, and care workers creates possibility and light in the often lonely and dark corners of practice. The Hommocks SLAC team is currently studying the inclusion of representative teachers and

service providers in the near future, a prelude to deeper organizational healing and reinvention. We encourage you to consider the creation of a SLAC team at your site of practice, and offer the following five principles generated through our work.

1. Center Students. Always.

2. Nurture professional capacity through equity of voice.

3. Define SLAC as a restorative and healing space: for yourself, your professional community, and your school.

4. Embody, model, and pursue racial justice and literacy.

5. Represent and advocate for students, families, and colleagues that are underrepresented and unsupported in your community.

In closing, the SLAC structure intentionally pursues complexity, dialogue, and inquiry towards a more just school community. We endeavor to rise against the uncritical reproduction of oppressive systems. We believe that interdisciplinary collaboration flattens traditional hierarchies that suppress knowledge generation in schools. We believe that SLAC teams at schools like yours can manifest and animate radical new articulations of restorative leadership and expand heretofore unimagined visions of justice for all of our students, and the world.

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