The current socio-political climate is one where a person cannot escape the news of the day no matter what they are doing. Reading the paper, listening to the radio, scrolling mindlessly through social media, even chatting with a neighbor can provide us with unfavorable information about our current state of affairs. School leaders must manage this reality both in their personal and professional lives. The impact on their students and school community is immediate and constant, whether it is how the humanitarian crisis at our city centers and borders are impacting our students and families who are document insecure or how the constant assault on Black and Brown people settles onto students and staff like a film that slowly hardens and immobilizes them. It is imperative that school leaders are able to process how these events impact them personally and professionally as well as organize their school community to be able to do the same. In order to organize effectively and for a greater purpose, a school leader has to act decisively and in collaboration with their community.

Too often school leaders are trained and supported to work alone; the false mark of an effective leader. In order to create anti-racist schools and communities, isolation has to be targeted and seen for what it is -- a purposeful barrier towards racial equity. Only through meaningful collaboration can this work succeed within the school and on a larger scale even though it can be challenging to create and maintain meaningful collaboration within. In my work as a school leader and now supporting leadership at the district and school-level, it is clear that school leaders need guidance and support to create human-centered systems within their schools in order to develop and lead with a racial equity lens. It is with this lens that...
systemic change can occur to improve the experience and outcomes for Black, Brown, and Indigenous students.

A human-centered approach borrows from the ethical belief that centers human beings, their experiences and needs over other mandates. A human-centered approach is necessary in racial equity work because the larger system is perfectly designed for its intended results, a phrase credited to organizational design expert Arthur Jones. Schools are organizations comprised of various systems and supposed to be centered on their students’ experiences and needs. However, the racial disproportionality and long-standing segregation present in most school districts are not accidental. Too often we see that the school system is not designed in a way that can be responsive to the people, students and staff within it.

In my current work supporting school and district teams to develop authentic and humanist systems to address the racial disparity within their respective schools and districts, I have found that school leaders need more support in understanding the purpose of teaming and collaboration as it relates to racial disparity. This realization has been echoed by others entrenched in this work, including Glenn Singleton who is known for his work in supporting communities engaged in addressing racial disproportionality. Mr. Singleton noted that, “schools cannot achieve racial equity without explicit processes for leaders and staff to examine their personal, professional, and organizational beliefs about race. But in 25 years of working with schools and organizations in the United States and abroad, I have learned that educational systems are deeply challenged to examine their beliefs about racial equity” (Singleton, 2018, p. 1). My own research echoed this need. While exploring the instructional culture that high school principals create in order to make meaning of the various district mandates and their students’ academic and personal needs, I discovered that principals felt ill-equipped in creating systems for personal examination and reflection that included them. Principals went above and beyond to create school communities that were collaborative and supportive of their staff’s needs, particularly the teachers. However, each principal remarked on how isolated and alone they felt in leading the work (Rosario, 2014). The notion that school leadership should be a solitary endeavor is false and yet it permeates almost every system a school leader interacts with. Therefore, it is not surprising that principals would think deeply about creating systems to eradicate teacher isolation but not consider their own.

Reflecting on the world in and out of the school building with a critical eye towards protecting their students from those harms can only happen in spaces where meaningful and humanist collaboration is centered and through 1) reflecting on themselves and their racial consciousness journey, 2) identifying where their staff is individually along their own journey towards racial consciousness, and 3) Creating multiple and consistent feedback loops that will allow the school leader to inoculate their community from the various harms that this current climate is injecting into the culture.
Self-reflection is absolutely critical for a school leader to truly lead this charge. Too often as a school leader, one becomes the face of a policy that is unclear or mandated without consideration of the school community. Racial equity work is personal and professional, requiring support in both domains. In order to recognize the humanity of each person within the school community and create systems that counter the problematic and biased status quo school leaders need to understand why this matters to them. That process of self-discovery takes time and purposeful reflection.

Ultimately a school leader will ask why they need to do this work or what the greater purpose is. Their answer will be greater than any mandate: “while schools cannot do this work alone, they have a legal and moral responsibility to ensure that every student exits our systems with the knowledge, skills, competence, confidence, creativity, curiosity, tenacity, support, sense of advocacy and efficacy to access and succeed in college, careers, and society” (Rimmer, 2016, p. 2). Developing a racial equity lens in leadership matters because without it, underserved and undervalued students and staff, primarily Black, Brown, Latinx and Indigenous people, will be unable to succeed in a system that is designed for their failure. The moral responsibility to get this right is profound; we are not engaged in this work for ourselves or for our children. It truly is living the Seven Generation Principle, which comes from atavistic Iroquois philosophy, where we are thinking beyond our current state and instead focused on the world we want to leave for our descendants.

Those who have spent time in their journey towards fuller consciousness and see the importance and urgency in aligning a school’s systems with their racial equity goal may lack the patience it requires to bring their entire staff along. In this work we often say that everyone is starting from a different place. Planning with racial equity in mind can be challenging and requires authentic and humanist collaboration. Collaboration is essential for various reasons including job satisfaction, which according to Bakotic (2016) and Eckman (2004) is a key aspect of work performance. Therefore, if principals want to see increased productivity from their teams, it is important to establish meaningful ways for their communities to engage in this work. In my work we recommend the implementation of equity teams. An equity team is a form of inquiry teaming that distributes the work of interrogating the school’s systems to analyze their impact on student outcomes. Through this structure we support schools in exploring data-informed questions such as:

- Based on our data, which students are more likely to experience positive outcomes, like being enrolled in the honors program?
- Based on our data, which students are more likely to experience negative outcomes, such as a classroom removal or suspension?
- How are these groups of students related to each other?
- How are our systems and beliefs supporting these disparate outcomes?
Race is a part of this inquiry, and if the school team is engaged in color-evasive thinking, also known as colorblind thinking, then the entire process will be compromised. Engaging in this inquiry stance will feel foreign and uncomfortable. However, the clearer the school leader is in their reasons why this work is important for them and their school, the process will be richer and more productive. I've experienced equity team meetings where the participants are afraid of naming race or cannot accept that their school is engaged in practices that target their most vulnerable students. These conversations are stifled and don’t result in actionable next steps. On the other hand, for teams with a clear purpose and focus on creating new systems that honor their students’ humanity still feel discomfort, but they are able to move through that discomfort into an action plan to address the disparity within their school. I often compare this inquiry process to modifying habits to be healthier. Changing my diet and incorporating strenuous physical activity doesn’t feel good on the first day and if I am unsure why I need to do those things I am much more likely to disregard these behaviors before I see any change. However, if I understand how changing my diet and hitting the gym consistently will lower my blood pressure which will help me keep up with my children and feel better, I am more likely to stay in the discomfort long enough to see progress physically. In inquiry as in health, it pays to stay committed to the process.

It is essential to create multiple and consistent feedback loops to assess the work as the team engages in it, both to measure the effectiveness of the equity team’s efforts as well as how the work is resonating for each team member and members of the school community. Dr. Edward Fergus, who is a central figure in this field and has essentially provided the roadmap for engaging in this style of inquiry in a humanist and collaborative way, strongly advocates the use of feedback, “…given the inevitability of our own blind spots, we have a responsibility to seek out regular feedback on the racial and economic ecology of our schools” (Fergus, 2019, para. 21). As previously noted, the principalship can be lonely and isolating, therefore it is equally as essential that a humanist and collaborative approach be applied to principals as well. Creating a space for principals to be brave and engage in these conversations together allows for a stronger and more robust journey towards racial equity in schools.

Every person has a blind spot and every system has a process gap which can be incredibly difficult to identify with the naked eye. As previously noted, this work is both personal and professional. For school team members who identify as BIPOC or as a member of a marginalized community, engaging in racial equity work can further trigger and traumatize them. It is critical that the school leader utilizes multiple methods to assess the work, including but not limited to: individual meetings, use of surveys, opportunities for written reflection and feedback, as well as intra- and inter-racial conversations. The extensive system of providing and receiving feedback is designed to target the emotional toll of racial disparity in schools. Maslach (2003) identifies burnout as the prolonged, negative response to stressors in the workplace. Over time this negative response will impact the individual to the point where it can impact their work and well-being. The current socio-political climate is impacting students and staff negatively and it is manifesting in schools in many ways. For a school leader to be able to connect with their community and receive how each person is processing and engaging in this work will target burnout. A principal should focus on what they can control and creating authentic spaces for acknowledging...
the impact of the current socio-political climate is a strong step in the right direction.

In an interview, author and scholar Ibram X. Kendi shared the difference between a racist and an anti-racist which would alarm many school staff and leaders, “...anti-racists support policies that yield racial equity. Racists do nothing in the face of racist policies that are creating and reproducing racial inequity” (Kendi, 2019, para. 10). In thinking about the policies that govern schools, many well-intentioned people will wring their hands and say there is nothing that can be done about them. They may be district mandates, they may be the way things have always been done, they may be comfort policies that would upset the status quo if changed. Regardless of why these policies continue to persist, they are hurting the students we need to uplift and honor the most.

In order to impact and ultimately change the status quo it is essential that purposeful, human-centered structures are created and led by a person who deeply understands why they are engaged in racial equity work. More importantly, the leader needs to have a greater vision for their work guided by benchmarks towards their intended results. Until then, we will be complicit with a toxic and dangerous system that continues to get its intended results at the cost of Black, Brown, and Indigenous children.

REFERENCES


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