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Not Just Another Professional Development Session:
Implementing Effective Social Justice Aligned Professional Learning for Educators

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with an emphasis in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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Dedication

I humbly dedicate this work to the memory of Dr. Matthew Davis. From my first class with you in 2007, when you opened my eyes to issues of social justice in education, you were my constant in my 13 years of graduate education. Your energy and passion were infectious, and your knowledge was unmatched. You truly were a warrior for social justice, and I am eternally grateful to have had the privilege to learn from you. I always loved our weekend chats over coffee and never once left those meetings feeling anything but inspired. Thank you for believing in me. You are the reason I pursued this PhD, and you are the reason I continue to pursue work in the field of social justice. Thank you for being willing to be my chair through this crazy process and for supporting me through thick and thin (and a pandemic). I have never been more challenged and inspired than I was in your classes and in conversation with you. The world has lost a warrior, but I am so grateful to have had the chance to learn from and be inspired by you. I still have miles to go on my own journey, but you have my eternal gratitude for getting my journey started.

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Abstract

In schools today, teachers are part of a learning environment in which they are the teachers of their students, as well as students themselves. There are a plethora of traditional models for professional learning, however, professional learning is often disconnected from the realities of the classroom or lacks the elements necessary to lead to practical application. Being able to implement effective social justice aligned professional development is particularly critical in our current climate in which students of color are marginalized and are not receiving the same educational opportunity as their white peers. Through the use of autoethnography, the author shares her journey of identity development as a white female school leader seeking to become a transformational leader. The author analyzes her own experiences as well as current literature to draw conclusions about the critical components of effective social justice aligned professional learning. Through the reflection in the autoethnography and the resulting conclusions, it is the hope that other school leaders will be able to use this work as a lens through which to view their own work, as they too journey towards becoming transformational leaders.

Key Words and Definitions

Autoethnography: autobiographies that seek to describe and systematically analyze personal experiences in order to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2011).

Social Justice: the idea of fairness/equity/equality at the level of society or state that is rooted in the context of history, cultural, and human social relations (Bales, 2018).

Critical Race Theory (CRT): the notion that racism is normal and commonplace, in American society and that because of its entwinement in everyday life, that it appears both normal and natural. It critiques liberalism by asserting that racism requires major changes, but that liberalism doesn't have the capacity to do this (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

Interest Convergence: the theory that states that Black people achieve civil rights victories only when white and Black interests converge (bell, 1980).

Professional Development: continuing education that *happens to* teachers such as one-time workshops, lectures, and any, one-size-fits all approaches (Scherff, 2018).

Professional Learning: continuing education that is targeted to the needs of the students/school as well as the individual and that is interactive, sustained, supported, and in which teachers take responsibility for their learning (Scherff, 2018).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures. –bell hooks

In schools today, teachers are part of a learning environment in which they are the teachers of their students as well as students themselves. One of the pervasive themes in literature about teacher effectiveness is the incredible importance of effective teacher professional development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; McLaughlin & Talbert 2006; Wenger, 1998). There are a plethora of traditional models for professional learning, often driven by district or building-level goals and priorities communicated and practiced in workshops, conferences, or coaching. But “professional development, though well intentioned, is often perceived by teachers as fragmented, disconnected, and irrelevant to the real problems of classroom practice” (Leiberman, 2008, p. 226). One of the ways in which researchers have sought to overcome this irrelevance is by defining criteria by which professional learning can be considered effective.

Implementing effective professional development is particularly critical as we acknowledge that, in our current social climate, students of color are marginalized and are not receiving the same educational opportunity as their white peers. Without meaningful professional learning, it is difficult for teachers to navigate their role as social justice leaders and advocates for their students. The nature of learning about social justice can result in an experience that may be emotional and sensitive for teachers. In the context of this study, schools should consider social justice learning as that learning

which addresses the equity of individual student experience through the lens of variations in race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation within the historical context of inequity, asking teachers to examine and adjust their instructional practices within their classroom and the wider school context to better support their current students. In my experience as an educator, it is often the case in professional development sessions regarding topics of social justice, teachers are given tools and strategies, but are not provided the history, context, and time for their own identity development that will ultimately lead to the changes needed to pursue and achieve equity for students of color. If we as educational professionals desire to truly affect meaningful change, it is critical that school leaders, including myself, engage in identity examination and transformation in addition to understanding the elements of effective social justice professional learning. These two elements when combined will allow leaders to be able to implement this learning for staff.

Before the work of social justice aligned professional learning can begin, a plan must be developed for how this work will incorporate or begin with an exploration of one's individual identity. The school leader at the helm of leading this work must engage in their own identity exploration and transformation before they are able to effectively lead their staff in doing the same.

Notions of promise, liberation, hope, empowerment, activism, risk, social justice, courage, or revolution do not automatically evoke images of educational leaders in charge of schools and systems, working within the dominant political and bureaucratic frameworks of the 21st century. Yet, all of these concepts are at the heart of transformative leadership. (Shields, 2010, p. 559)

In order to truly be transformative, a school leader must understand their own position within equity work and must make informed decisions about how and what to teach to their staff. A school leader must also be situationally aware of the needs of the participants in the school, including students and families as well as individual staff members, so that they can effectively design a plan to embed the content that will most effectively lead to transformation of the positive impact their staff can have on the audience of school, namely its students.

Teacher education and professional learning have long been an area of study as they have a significant impact on teacher effectiveness (McLaughlin & Talbert 2001; Wenger, 1998). Teacher education relies on a system of classroom learning accompanied by observation and practicum teaching. Once one becomes a classroom teacher, the focus shifts from initial education to professional learning. There are a variety of models for this, including on- and off-site workshops, professional conferences, job-embedded coaching, professional learning networks, and teacher mentors. These professional learning opportunities are often driven by a district or building leader, department chair, or are sought out by the teacher through an outside organization or conference. However, while recent research has begun to define the elements of effective professional learning, many teachers are instead forced to participate in antiquated practices and ineffective trainings that do not result in a change in practice or improved student outcomes (Calvert, 2016). This is particularly true in the area of social justice aligned professional learning. School leaders often struggle to know what to do and how to do it when it comes to implementing social justice professional learning. Many rely on bringing in a presenter to fill a professional development day or sending teachers off to a conference but there is no

longitudinal plan for support or explicit connectedness of daily operations and culture to the workshop or conference (Garet et al., 2001). Until we apply the components of effective professional learning to these types of opportunities, we will continue to see a lack of movement towards equity for students of color.

With this in mind, I utilized autoethnography to engage in an examination of my own identity development through my experiences as an educator and through a set of three social justice aligned professional learning experiences that took place over the course of my professional career. Additionally, I examine my attempts as a school leader to improve professional learning in my own spaces. Through this examination, I began to identify the components within the professional learning opportunities that made them ineffective or effective. I found that there were a few critical components that resulted in effective learning opportunities: content delivery, duration, facilitation, agency, and collective participation. This study will provide an examination of these components in relation to my own identity development and will serve to provide me with a foundation from which to implement transformative social justice aligned professional learning for my staff. Additionally, it will hopefully provide an opportunity for other school leaders to use my experiences to reflect on their own.

Purpose of the Study

We live in a world in which students face inequity daily in their educational interactions and teachers experience similar varying degrees of inclusion of issues of social justice in teacher education programs (Cochran-Smith, Shakman, Jong, Terrlll, Barnatt, & McQuillan, 2008). To achieve equity for our students, it is imperative that schools are led by transformational leaders that are able to implement effective social

justice aligned professional learning to support and empower their teachers on their own journeys. Transformative social justice aligned professional learning is a critical component that must be at the forefront of our practice as school leaders. It is my goal to use autoethnography to examine my own identity development and the impact that my various professional learning experiences have had on the evolution and growth in my understanding of social justice as well as my identity and role in this work. Through this examination of my experiences, as well as analysis of the literature on professional learning, it is my hope to establish an understanding of the critical features that impact the effectiveness of social justice professional learning and to establish replicable practices to support transformative professional learning in my school. Additionally, it is my hope that through my reflective work and transparency in sharing my journey of identity development and my work to become a transformational leader, that other school leaders will be able to use my experiences as a lens through which they can view and reflect on their own experiences as transformational leaders.

According to the 2017-2018 National Teacher and Principal Survey (NTPS), 77.7% of public-school principals in the United States identify as white, non-Hispanic, while only 10.5% identify as Black and 8.9% as Hispanic (U.S. Department of Education). These majority white principals are charged with implementing professional learning for their staff that supports equity and liberation for students of color, yet to effectively do this, one must first engage in examination of their white identity and their privilege. It is my hope that my work will support other leaders by allowing them to reflect on my experiences as a white school leader and use them to evaluate and make changes to their own practices.

Theoretical Framework

Transformative Leadership

William Foster, in 1986, was one of the first to discuss the idea of transformative educational leadership (Shields, 2010). He argued that leadership requires that one not only examine the conditions in which we live, but also, how to change them (Foster, 1986). According to Shields' contemporary body of work:

Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy; it critiques inequitable practices and offers the promise not only of greater individual achievement but of a better life lived in common with others.

Transformative leadership, therefore, inextricably links education and educational leadership with the wider social context within which it is embedded. (2010, p. 559)

Transformative school leaders are able to engage in critical reflection and are then able to engage in the work of “challenging inappropriate uses of power and privilege by challenging inappropriate uses of power and privilege that create or perpetuate inequity and injustice” (Shields, 2010, p. 564). Davis (2006) posits that transformative learning, “involves the acquisition (or manipulation) of knowledge that disrupts prior learning and stimulates the reflective reshaping of deeply ingrained knowledge and belief structures” (p. 1).

The modern application of transformative leadership calls for leaders who are able to “work from within dominant social formations to exercise effective oppositional power, to resist courageously, and to be activists and voices for change and transformation” (Shields, 2010, p. 559). In this work, I use this theory to evaluate my

own effectiveness as I strive to be a transformative leader and as I examine the work of other leaders around me.

Adult Learning Theory

In addition to the theory of transformative leadership, Adult Learning Theory played a significant role in examining my own experiences as an adult learner, and as a facilitator of adult learning. “If current and future educational leaders are to foster successful, equitable, and socially responsible learning and accountability practices for all students, then substantive changes in educational leadership preparation and professional development programs are required” (Brown, 2004, p. 80). In her article, Brown (2004) quotes Brookfield (1995) as outlining four major areas that make up the theory of adult learning: self-directed learning, critical reflections, experiential learning, and learning to learn. These elements of the theory were helpful to me in examining the elements of my own adult learning experiences as well as my efforts to design and implement more effective adult learning for my staff. The theory connected on many levels with the ways that I was taught and the ways I supported adult learning. The professional learning experiences that I found to be most effective, aligned closely with the elements that Brookfield defined as the areas that make up effective adult learning, particularly the elements of critical reflections and experiential learning. In my own implementation with staff, the element of self-directed learning was also something that played a major role in the effectiveness of learning.

According to Brown, “Self-directed learning focuses on the process by which adults take control of their own learning, set their own goals, locate appropriate resources, decide on which methods to use, and evaluate their progress” (2004, p. 82).

The second element, critical reflections, is an “understanding of the historical, cultural, and biographical reasons for one’s needs, wants and interests, such self-knowledge is a prerequisite for autonomy in self-directed learning” (Brown, 2004, p. 83). Meaning, that teachers must understand the reasons for their learning needs, prior to being given the autonomy to select their learning. The third element, experiential learning was strongly influenced by its founder, Dewey (1938). He claimed that “not only are experiences the key building blocks of learning, but action is an intrinsic part of the learning cycle; this implies learning by doing as well as a practical understanding of the world” (Brown, 2004, p. 83). Finally, the fourth element, learning to learn, “means that adults possess a self-conscious awareness of how it is they come to know what they know— an awareness of the reasoning, assumptions, evidence, and justifications that underlie our beliefs that something is true” (Brown, 2004, p. 83).

Limitations

As I engage in this work, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this research. First, this work is limited to the scope of the perspective and experiences of one school leader’s experiences. Additionally, I, as the researcher, am a white female and as a result am afforded the privileges granted to me by this identity, which has the potential to limit the scope of my findings. Finally, because it is based upon my reflections and understanding of my own experiences and events, this research may not be easily generalizable to other researchers.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The goal of this study is to examine my experiences as a participant in a variety of professional learning opportunities, all of which were focused on issues of social justice, and to evaluate their effectiveness in the context of my own identity development. Additionally, I will examine my subsequent attempts to improve professional learning for my staff. In order to contextualize my experiences, I have conducted a review of the literature around several topics that are relevant to this study including (a) professional learning, (b) social justice, (c) white identity development, (d) oppression & liberation, (e) formal teacher networks, (f) informal teacher networks, (g) culturally responsive teaching, and (h) social justice professional learning.

Professional Development vs. Professional Learning

In order to be able to engage in research about continuing education for teachers, it is important to make a distinction between the terms professional development and professional learning. While in practice, the terms are used interchangeably, for the purpose of this work, I have used the term professional development to refer to actions or experiences that *happen to* teachers such as one-time workshops, lectures, and any, one-size-fits all approaches to continuing education; in contrast, professional learning refers to continuing education that is interactive, sustained, supported, and in which teachers take responsibility for their learning (Scherff, 2018). Professional learning is targeted to the needs of the students and school community, while professional development is often based upon the expertise of the individual(s) delivering the session (Moir, 2013). While in the references and citations below, the terms will be used interchangeably, in my own reflections and conclusions, I will use the terms as defined above.

Social Justice

It is essential for the clarity of this work to establish a common understanding of how the term social justice is being used in the context of this dissertation. The 2016 *Oxford English Dictionary* defines social justice broadly as “justice at the level of a society or state as regards the possession of wealth, commodities, opportunities, and privileges” (Bales, 2018, p. 5). However, there is a plethora of different definitions of social justice available. Through a brief history of social justice, and an analysis of a modern perspective on the term particularly in the context of education, I will establish for the reader a framework by which to understand the term social justice in the context of this work.

Social justice is a term that has been present throughout world history, finding its modern conceptualization in the 1840s. According to Bales:

Social justice thought and action weaves itself throughout world history, working as a counterpoint to humankind's unfortunate propensities for greed, power, and physical and economic violence. The fundament of this thought and action has come out of philosophy, religion, and politics. It has also originated organically as a reaction to exploitation and oppression. Sometimes it is a combination of two or more of these factors. It never separates, however, from the context of history, cultural, and human social relations. (2018, p. 4)

Despite the materialization of more variance in social circumstance across the decades, social justice continues to be linked to a fundamental fight for equity. “The modern concept of social justice emerged from the throes of early industrialization in France and Britain in the 1840s. The potentially revolutionary idea underlying the concept of social

justice was that the justice of a society's institutions could be challenged not merely at the margins but at the core" (Barry, 2005, p. 5). This concept sparked the wider belief that institutional change was necessary in addition to individual action in order to seek social justice. Weigert offers that:

Social justice is seen as a unique type of justice characterized by a focus on the 'common good' and the individual's obligation and right to make a contribution to that (hence, sometimes called 'contributive' justice) while acknowledging the role of the state and civil society to remove barriers that prevent individuals from so doing. (2005, p. 397)

It is this combination of individual as well as institutional action that has come to define the modern conception of social justice. And, while "social justices may differ in their analytical approaches and practical strategies, theoretical positions appear to fall back on, more or less, this composite idea of fairness/equity/equality" (Bales, 2018, p. 6).

Social justice plays an important role in education, particularly because of the lack of equity present in our system of education in the United States of America.

According to Cochran-Smith, Barnatt, Lahann, Shakman, & Terrell.:

There is no more pressing problem facing the schools--or society in general-- than ensuring that all of the nation's school children have deep and rich learning opportunities, easy and truly equitable access to education resources, and legitimate prospects following K-12 schooling for either further education or employment that pays a living wage. (2009, p. 637)

It is this frame of equitable access to education, resources, and outcomes that define the work of social justice in schools. However, social justice is not something that is reserved

for a single professional learning session or a few days a year. It is an ever-present concept that must be at the forefront of the work of educators. Social justice is a mindset. It cannot be packaged neatly into an informational session, but rather must be a reflective and collaborative undertaking that challenges individuals and their participation in organizational culture and structures in a way that continuously demands equity for students.

One of the challenges of social justice work in schools is that, in many teacher preparation programs, “teacher education for social justice is an ambiguous and vague slogan with multiple instantiations, no clear and consistent professional definition, and inadequate theoretical grounding” (Cochran-Smith, et al., 2009, p. 626). Many have tried to find commonality amongst teacher education programs when it comes to social justice; however this has proven to be a nearly impossible task. One of the reasons for this challenge is that “teacher educators only occasionally acknowledge the philosophical and historical roots of the notion of teaching for social justice, which increases the likelihood that it will be diluted, trivialized, or co-opted” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 627).

To adequately address social justice in schools, “the bottom line of teacher education for social justice must be improving students’ learning and their life chances” (Cochran-Smith et al., 2009, p. 638). To intentionally impact students’ opportunities now and in the future requires a comprehensive program of teacher education that explicitly frames social justice as a mindset, positioning teachers to have the opportunity to develop and practice as they become accustomed to constantly reflecting and taking action to demand equity for their students.

White Identity Development

Many school leaders charged with the implementation of social justice aligned professional learning identify as white (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). For white school leaders, a critical precursor to being able to implement this professional development is first exploring one's own white identity and developing the skills to support their white staff to do the same. This exploration of white identity is important because, according to Helms, “the development of White identity in the United States is closely intertwined with the development and progress of racism in this country” (1997, p. 207).

Helms (1997) cites J.M. Jones (1972, 1981) as having identified three types of racism: individual, institutional, and cultural; and argues that because these three types of racism are so ingrained in our cultural fabric, that each can become a part of a white person's identity just by the fact of being white. In order to develop an anti-racist white identity, it is necessary to address one or more of these types of racism present in the identity of being white. “Additionally, he or she must accept his or her own Whiteness, the cultural implications of being White, and define a view of self as a racial being that does not depend on the perceived superiority of one racial group over another” (Helms, 1997, p. 207).

Helms (1997) shares that it is possible in the United States for a white person to exist without ever having to acknowledge their whiteness. In order to develop a healthy white identity, it requires:

the abandonment of individual racism as well as the recognition of an active opposition to institutional and cultural racism. Concurrently, the person must become

aware of her or his Whiteness, learn to accept Whiteness as an important part of herself or himself, and to internalize a realistically positive view of what it means to be white. (Helms, 1997, p. 55)

Helms (1997) has proposed six steps of white identity development in which the abandonment of racism occurs in stages one through three and the development of a positive white identity takes place in stages four through six. The six steps have been summarized by Parker, C. and Willsea, J. in 2019:

1. **CONTACT:** In the first stage of contact, the individual adheres to the “colorblind” motto. They see racial difference but do not find it salient and in fact may feel that racism is in fact propagated by the discussion and acknowledgement of race as an issue. In this stage, there is no conscious demonstration of racism here. This seemingly non-racist position can cover unconscious racist beliefs. If the individual is confronted with real-world experiences or knowledge that uncovers the privileges of White skin, they may move into the disintegration stage.
2. **DISINTEGRATION:** In this stage, because the person has new experiences which confront his prior conception of the world and because this conception is now challenged by this new information or experience, the person is often plagued by feelings of guilt and shame. These emotions of guilt and shame can be modified when the person decides to channel these emotions in a positive way but when those emotions continue to dominate, the person may move into the reintegration stage.

3. REINTEGRATION: This stage is marked by a “blame-the-victim” attitude that’s more intense than anything experienced in the contact stage. They may feel that although Whites do have privileges, it is probably because they deserve them and are in some way superior to minority groups. If the person is able to combat these feelings, they may be able to move on to the pseudo-independence stage.
4. PSEUDO-INDEPENDENCE: This is the first stage of positive racial identification. Although an individual in this stage does not feel that Whites deserve privilege, they look to people of color, not themselves, to confront and uncover racism. They approve of these efforts and comfort the person as these efforts validate this person’s desire to be non-racist. Although this is positive White racial identity, the person does not have a sense of how they can be both White and non-racist together.
5. IMMERSION/EMERSION: In this stage, the person makes a genuine attempt to connect to his/her own White identity and to be anti-racist. This stage is usually accompanied by deep concern with understanding and connecting to other Whites who are or have been dealing with issues of racism.
6. AUTONOMY: The last stage is reached when an individual has a clear understanding of and positive connection to their White racial identity while also actively pursuing social justice. Helms’ stages are as much about finding a positive racial identification with being White and becoming an active anti-racist.

When one is able to internalize these stages of white identity development, they are better able to move from one stage to another. School leaders are also able to utilize their

understanding of these stages to make assessments of the position(s) of their staff in these stages and how best to help move them forward.

Oppression & Liberation

As educators seeking to achieve equity and liberation for our students, it is critical to understand the role that internalized oppression plays in our ability to effect change. According to Love, “through the socialization process, every member of society learns the attitudes, language, behaviors, and skills that are necessary to function in the existing society. This socialization prepares individuals to play roles of dominant or subordinate in systems of oppressions” (Love, 2000, p. 470). We all have a role in society and as educators we see these roles play out in ourselves and our students each day. We have “internalized the attitudes, understandings, and patterns of thoughts that allow [us] to function in and collaborate with these systems of oppression” (Love, 2000, p. 470). We, whether dominant or subordinate, have learned the norms that will allow us to be successful in everyday society. This, however, only serves to preserve and maintain the systems of oppression that surround us, even if it makes the day to day functioning easier.

Freire argues that ignorance is the key tool of oppression. He believed that the interests of the oppressors lie in “changing the consciousness of the oppressed, not the situation which oppresses them; for the more the oppressed can be led to adapt to that situation the more easily they can be dominated” (Freire, 1970, p. 3). Freire (1970) proposed the idea of the banking concept of education in which education is utilized to deposit knowledge into students from the all-knowing teacher rather than engaging students in actively participating in their learning. By merely expecting students to take in and memorize information, they are never able to question the status quo, thereby

perpetuating the systems of oppression that dominate marginalized individuals and groups. He proposed that this oppressive approach to schooling can be liberated by engaging students in critical thinking and encouraging students to participate actively in their education (Freire, 1970). One must consider carefully, however, the interplay of the role of liberator and oppressor. In his book *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire states:

[T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side. (1970, p. 39)

Freire suggest that to truly fight for liberation, it is not the role of the oppressor to be the liberator of the oppressed, but to rather fight alongside of the oppressed to serve as a collaborator in helping the oppressed to achieve their own liberation (1970). As educators, we work along students every day, empowering them to achieve their own liberation; this skill is one that must be learned in order to truly be effective in making transformation.

Our role as educators is to understand these systems of oppression and to then learn how to make intentional decisions that will support students in developing the critical thinking skills that can lead to liberation from this systems. Love argues that:

Many members of society, both those who benefit from oppression as well as those who are places at disadvantage, want to work for social change to reduce inequity

and bring about greater justice, yet continue to behave in ways that preserve and perpetuate the existing system. This happens because humans are products of their socialization and follow the habits of mind and thought that have been instilled in them. The institutions in which we live reward and reinforce behaviors that perpetuate existing systems and resist efforts toward change. (2000, p. 470)

We have, for so long, lived in a society in which racism and oppression are the norm that those that live within it have learned to adapt in ways to permit them to survive within society. As these learned adaptations continually allow for the reinforcement of internalized oppression, our fight is two-fold: we must fight to dismantle racism and oppression while helping to develop our students and colleagues to fight and dismantle racist and oppressive structures.

These systems of oppression can be overcome through the development of a liberatory consciousness. “A liberatory consciousness enables humans to live their lives in oppressive systems and institutions with awareness and intentionality, rather than on the basis of the socialization to which they have been subjected” (Love, 2000, p. 470).

Love proposes that there are four elements in developing a liberatory consciousness: (a) awareness, (b) analysis, (c) acting, and (d) accountability/allyship (2000, p. 471). “The awareness component of a liberatory consciousness involves developing the capacity to notice, to give our attention to our daily lives, our language, our behaviors, and even our thoughts” (Love, 2000, p. 471). The second element, analysis, “requires every individual to not only notice what is going on in the world around her or him but to think about it and theorize about it—that is, to get information and develop his or her own explanation for what is happening, why it is happening, and

what needs to be done about it” (Love, 2000, p. 472). As humans and as educators, we must constantly not only observe what is happening around us in our schools and our communities, but we seek to gain a deeper understanding of why and what to do. The third element of developing a liberatory consciousness entails taking action. According to Love, “the liberatory consciousness requires each human to take some action in every situation when the opportunity to transform the society and move toward a more just world presents itself” (2000, p. 472). This can be perceived as challenging as it involves action, likely public action, that opens one up to criticism, but ultimately with awareness and analysis complete, taking action will be the only option. Finally is the concept of accountability/allyship. According to Love:

The significance of a liberatory consciousness is that we will always question, explore, and interrogate ourselves about possibilities for supporting the efforts of others to come to grips with our conditioning into oppression, and give each other a hand in moving outside of our assigned roles. (2000, p. 474)

To achieve liberatory consciousness, we must learn from the lived experiences of both the dominant and the subordinate and work together to move outside of these roles.

Freire reminds us that, “Once man perceives a challenge, understands it, and recognizes the possibility of response he acts. The nature of that action corresponds to the nature of his understanding” (1973, p. 44). If individuals truly understand the impact of oppression on the subordinate, then the action taken will hopefully be more meaningful and impactful. This jump to action can often be the barrier to real change, because “people may understand structural inequalities, but not feel compelled to act on their insights unless they believe their efforts will yield a desired outcome” (Watts, 2011, p.

45). There can be hesitancy to take action for a variety of reasons including fear of taking the wrong action or because they feel the action they would be able to take is not large enough to solve the greater issues and therefore default to inaction.

hooks argues that as educators, the action we must take is that of self-actualization. She proposes that:

Progressive, holistic education, “engaged pedagogy” is more demanding than conventional critical or feminist pedagogy. For, unlike these two teaching practices, it emphasizes well-being. That means that teachers must be actively involved and committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students. (1994, p. 15)

Ultimately, one must know thyself and critically analyze one’s own circumstance, meaning their identity, resources, and capability, in order to be able to take meaningful action in the pursuit of liberation for the oppressed.

Professional Learning

Research increasingly has identified the continuing development and learning of teachers as one of the keys to improving the quality of U.S. schools through its role as a critical mediator in enhancing teacher effectiveness and improving student achievement (Desimone, 2009, p. 181). Billions of educational dollars are spent annually on the development of teachers, and it is our critical responsibility that we understand what characterizes effective professional development (Layton, 2015). Traditional teacher professional development has often taken on a model of top-down selection of topics that are often delivered to teachers in a passive format. We spend countless hours designing dynamic, engaging lessons for our students, and yet we expect teachers to enthusiastically

“sit n’ get” for hours on end, often about topics for which they find little relevance in their own practice. “For many teachers, professional development has long been an empty exercise in compliance, one that falls short of its objectives and rarely improves professional practice” (Calvert, 2016, p. 2). Lieberman and Mace have found that while well intentioned, professional development is often perceived by teachers as, “fragmented, disconnected, and irrelevant to the real problems of classroom practice” (2008, p. 226).

In 2014 The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation conducted a survey of over 1,600 teachers about their professional development experiences and teachers described their experiences as irrelevant, ineffective, and “not connected to their core work of helping students learn.”

One of the challenges of professional learning is that it is delivered in such a wide variety of formats and types that it has historically been challenging to define which professional learning opportunities are actually effective (Desimone, 2009). However, in recent years there has been consensus building around the critical components that make up effective professional learning. In 2011, many states adopted the Standards for Professional Learning that call for professional learning that is ongoing, embedded, connected to practice, aligned to school and district goals, and collaborative. The Gates study (2014) reinforced the Standards for Professional Learning and also found that teachers want professional development that is teacher-driven and recognizes that teachers are professionals with valuable insights. Desimone (2009) proposes an almost identical set of criteria and proposed that there are identifiable characteristics of all forms of professional development by which its effectiveness can be evaluated: (a) content

focus, (b) active learning, (c) coherence, (d) duration, and (e) collective participation (p. 183).

In 2016, Calvert further elaborated on the findings of the Gates study by digging deeper into the idea of teacher agency.

In the context of professional learning, teacher agency is the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues. Rather than responding passively to learning opportunities, teachers who have agency are aware of their part in their professional growth and make learning choices to achieve their goals. (p. 4)

The Gates Foundation (2014) study found that while fewer than one in three teachers choose most or all of their professional learning opportunities, teachers with more choice report much higher levels of satisfaction with professional development learners.

Through this research over the last ten years, it is possible to distill a set of common criteria by which effective professional learning can be evaluated. It must be (a) content specific, (b) aligned, (c) ongoing, and involve (d) teacher agency, (e) active learning, (f) collective participation, and (g) skillful leadership.

Content Specific

Research has shown that when professional learning focuses on teaching subject matter content to teachers and then layers on how to teach this content, we see the most significant impact on teacher effectiveness and student outcomes (Desimone, 2009; Corcoran, 1995). In a 2001 study, teachers who “participated in a program designed to enhance teachers’ understandings of fractions, students’ thinking, and students’ motivation” saw positive growth in student achievement data, versus teachers in two

other groups, one of whom focused on collaborating to learn strategies to implement the curriculum, and the other who just relied on the textbook to deliver the content with no real professional learning support (Saxe, Gearhart, & Nasir, p. 1). Both of the last two groups saw no change from pretest to posttest student results (Saxe et al., 2001).

The argument here is that when you increase teacher content knowledge, be that around the math they are teaching or anything that increases their personal knowledge base and discusses then how to implement this with students, you will see positive results. It is not enough to discuss strategies for teaching, we must provide opportunities for the learning of content. For example, rather than provide a curriculum about character building and teach teachers to implement the lessons, it would arguably be more effective to increase teachers' knowledge of emotions and emotional regulation and then help them to understand how to implement this knowledge with students in a way that helps them to regulate their own emotions and to be supportive of one another by utilizing the curriculum as a tool.

Aligned

“Professional development for teachers is frequently criticized on the grounds that the activities are disconnected from one another -- in other words, individual activities do not form part of a coherent program of teacher learning and development” (Garet et al., 2001, p. 927). Aligned professional learning builds upon what teachers have already learned and also emphasizes the content or practices that align with state or local standards. In order for professional learning to be effective the expectations regarding content and pedagogy must first be aligned and then this must be aligned with coherent professional development opportunities that support these goals for instruction. This

holds true for social justice aligned professional learning. It is critical as a school leader to have a long term vision for this work and to make sure that the professional learning is aligned to goals and builds upon itself.

Ongoing

“A common criticism of professional development activities designed for teachers is that they are too short and offer limited follow-up to teachers once they begin to teach” (Penuel, Fishman, Yamaguchi, & Gallagher, 2007, p. 929). For professional learning to be effective, the duration and time span of the learning play a crucial role in overall effectiveness. According to Desimone (2009) “research has not indicated an exact “tipping point” for duration but shows support for activities that are spread over a semester (or intense summer institutes with follow-up during the semester) and include 20 hours or more of contact time” (p. 184). These learning opportunities that are longer or that include follow up, either through coaching or additional learning sessions, are more effective for teachers. In his book, J. L. Brown (2004) shares that professional learning opportunities that are of longer duration and time span are more likely to contain the types of learning opportunities that allows teachers to integrate new knowledge into their practice. Garet et al furthers this conclusion in their 2001 study in which they surveyed teachers to determine the qualities that have the greatest impact on professional learning. They concluded that “professional development is likely to be of higher quality if it is both sustained over time and involved a substantial number of hours” (Garet et al., 2001, p. 933). There are very few things that can be taught in a single lessons, and social justice knowledge acquisition and practice is a life long journey. As such, this type of

professional learning, must be carried out in multiple sessions, year after year, to truly have an impact.

Teacher Agency

Historically, much of professional development was directed from the top down by administrators (Macias, 2017, p. 76). But “we cannot ensure great teaching when teachers feel bored or forced to comply with an exercise that is imposed on them, one that they do not believe will help them to improve” (Calvert, 2016, p. 7). Effective professional learning must allow teachers to have a voice in determining what they will learn. “In the context of professional learning, teacher agency is the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues. Rather than responding passively to learning opportunities, teachers who have agency are aware of their part in their professional growth and make learning choices to achieve their goal” (Calvert, 2016, p. 4). This is not to say that directive professional learning does not have a role in schools, but rather, adopting a hybrid model can allow for professional learning opportunities to be both responsive to teacher requests and also directive based upon perceived need. According to the 2014 report from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, “teachers with more choice report much higher levels of satisfaction with professional development—those who choose all or most of their professional learning opportunities are more than twice as satisfied with professional development as those with fewer options” (p. 10). Ideally, teachers should know and understand their personal needs for growth and can then share this and work in collaboration with their school leader to make these learning choices available that meet their needs. Additionally, teachers should have the opportunity to

contribute to the growth of their colleagues. It is not uncommon for school and district leaders to rely on themselves or outside presenters to deliver professional learning experiences, but often the knowledge that is needed by teachers is right there in the building.

Active Learning

Historically, professional development has often taken a passive form of learning in which teachers listen to lectures or presentations for a duration of time and are then sent back to their classrooms to implement with their students (Lieberman and Mace, 2008). Research today says that in order for teachers to learn and effectively implement their professional learning they must have opportunities for active learning. “Opportunities for active learning can take a number of forms, including the opportunity to observe expert teachers and to observe teaching; to plan how new curriculum materials and new teaching methods will be used in the classroom; to review student work in the topic areas being covered; and to have discussions and engage in written work” (Garet et al., 2001, p. 925). Professional learning that incorporates time for discussion, goal setting, and instructional planning has a positive impact on the implementation of the new learning (Desimone, 2009, B&M Gates Foundation, 2014).

Collective Participation

In their 2001 study, Garet et al. define collective participation as “professional development that is designed for groups of teachers from the same school, department, or grade level” (p. 922). When teachers are able to engage collectively in professional learning opportunities, it provides the advantage of allowing them the opportunity to engage in discussion around their learning as well as to collaborate to integrate and

implement what they have learned into their instructional practices. Collective engagement in professional learning also provides the opportunity for teachers to be able to evaluate the effectiveness of their implementation across multiple classes or groups in the same school. Education researchers (Lieberman & Mace, 2008; Coutinho, 2013) believe that professional learning is a dynamic process that must incorporate teacher networks and collaboration. Having a community of teachers engaged in the same learning opportunity enhances the ability of that professional learning to become a social experience and one in which teachers have a variety of thought and implementation partners, which then increases the effectiveness and likelihood of implementation and overall social capital (Penuel, Riel, Frank, & Krause, 2009). Lieberman and Mace go further to define learning as a social experience (vs. individual) and that, “people learn from and with others in particular ways. They learn through practice (learning as doing), [and] through community (learning as participating and being with others)...” (2008, p. 228). “Evidence from a wide range of studies of schools engaged in reform suggests that those that make extensive use of teacher collaboration are particularly successful in promoting implementation, in part because reforms have more authority when they are embraced by peers” (Penuel et al., 2007, p. 929).

Skillful Leadership

The final element of effective professional learning is the presence and involvement of a school or district leader who is able to support and implement all of the above criteria in collaboration with their teachers (Shields, 2010). The leader is particularly important in ensuring that a coherent professional learning program takes place and in providing the time and space for it to happen. School leaders need to build

and lead a team or professional development committee that works together to ensure that professional learning activities are aligned to building goals as well as teacher need. All too often, school leaders themselves have had poor professional learning experiences and as a result have not had the chance to experience what it takes to implement effective professional learning. Calvert (2016) explains that:

In addition to analyzing data, visiting classrooms, and reviewing school and system goals, leaders must cultivate an environment of continuous learning that engages teachers in their professional learning at every step of way. They must understand the intangible, but enormous, value teachers place on being listened to and involved meaningfully as well as the benefits the school community enjoys when teachers are intrinsically motivated to pursue their continued development. (p. 3)

School leaders need to work relentlessly to encourage their teachers to move towards independence and autonomy in their learning. The leader should serve the role of coach or facilitator but should never be the guardian of learning. Their goal should be to “build leadership capacity among staff in their schools to create, nurture, and maintain over time a vital, self-renewing and authentic learning community” (Bredeson, 2006, p. 399).

Social Justice Professional Learning

Social justice is the concept of fairness, equality, and equity within a society that is rooted in the context of history, cultural, or human social relations (Bales, 2018).

Within the field of education, this plays a critical role. “Many educators hold culturally biased ideologies founded on ignorance, fear, and misinformation--ideologies that consciously and subconsciously inform their responses to demographic change in their schools” (Cooper, 2009). These cultural or racial biases have a profoundly negative

impact on the lives of young people in our schools. For instance, “students of color tend to be tracked into lower-level classes and are more likely to attend schools with the fewest resources and the least experienced teachers. Black boys, in particular, are overrepresented in special education and disproportionately likely to be removed from classrooms as ‘discipline problems’” (Ngounou & Gutierrez, 2019, p. 57). Given these profound negative effects of bias in school, it is critical that professional learning is implemented to help educators to confront their bias and to change their behaviors and practices in a way that will result in equity for all students in light of differences across lines of race, ethnicity, or culture.

While we have an understanding of the elements that make up effective professional learning, the topics of social justice, race, and bias are often particularly challenging to implement in a way that persuades adults to confront their often life-long biases and to make real changes to their actions and beliefs. Ngounou and Gutierrez (2019) believe that “professional learning about race and equity requires at least four key elements: (a) a comprehensive and systematic focus on the whole school or district, (b) a willingness by participants to experience some level of discomfort, (c) a willingness by participants to tell their own stories about race, and (d) the recognition that discussions about these issues rarely lead to a tidy sense of closure” (p. 57). Ngounou and Gutierrez (2019) also believe that professional learning about racial bias is more powerful and more effective when it is led by a diverse team of facilitators. It is argued that this allows for the presentation of differing viewpoints and also allows the facilitators to challenge participants to engage in differing ways.

Teacher Networks

The largest group of social network studies in education examines the premise that a school's social network structure supports or constrains the implementation of reform and, as such, mediates efforts at school improvement (Moolenaar, 2012). Further investigation is needed into both the role of social capital in the success of social networks as well as the factors that affect teacher participation in networks (Schiff, Herzog, Farley-Ripple, & Lannuccilli, 2015).

According to Schiff et al. (2015), "a feeling of isolation among teachers is still the prevailing norm, and opportunities to build a network for support are essential in combating this feeling" (p. 13). He concluded from his research that teacher participation in networks is "closely tied to school culture and persistence in that networking improved culture, and highly-networked schools supported more meaningful collaboration and increased persistence" (Schiff et al., 2015, p. 13). This perception of the use and impact of collegial support can play a critical role in the success of teachers in the classroom and in building initiatives. According to Daly's 2010 research "relationships and collegial support are central for the retention, increased professionalism, and depth of engagement of educators. The stronger the professional network, the more likely educators—at all levels—are to stay in that profession, feel a greater sense of efficacy, and engage in deeper levels of the conversation around teaching and learning" (Daly, 2010, p. 2).

Moolenaar (2012) offers that teacher instructional practice is impacted by relationships within teacher social networks in three ways: (a) opportunities to learn from each other, (b) social influence that they have on one another, and (c) through the

creation of a safe environment in which innovation is possible. Lieberman and Mace (2008) believe that:

Districts and states can support professional learning communities by providing teachers with continuous blocks of time devoted to a variety of ways for teachers to teach teachers the strategies that have been successful with their own students, using technology to illustrate good teaching, and building networks of teacher communities where teacher leaders can provide such professional development with their colleagues. (p. 228)

These opportunities for collaboration within their networks afford teachers the opportunity to grow and learn from each other. This collaboration is essential to our growth as educators in the area of social justice and identity development. We do not exist in a vacuum and it is critical to work together to achieve self-actualization.

Informal Teacher Networks

In his 2015 study, Schiff et al. made the important distinction between formal and informal teacher networks. Formal networks encompass the system-wide structures that exist within an educational organization such as departments, professional learning communities, instructional coaching, and any other structures that have been put in place to support collaboration or communication. The informal networks are those that evolve organically between colleagues and provide peer-to-peer learning or support. These informal teacher networks are far less researched; yet when they have been studied, have shown to have a powerful impact on teacher learning (Daly 2010, Schiff et al. 2015). According to Daly (2010), “successful change requires not only attending to the important formal structures, but also to the informal networks of social relations that create a web of

understanding, influence, and knowledge prior to, during, and after the implementation of a change strategy” (p. 5). Schiff et al.’s research also supports the power of informal networks to support teacher learning. In this 2015 study the authors concluded that:

While traditional professional development is often looked to as a primary vehicle for teacher learning... teacher learning and professional growth take place through a wide range of formal, informal, and in- and out-of-school teacher networks. Teacher networks, particularly those that are out-of-school and/or informal, often remain out of the limelight, and yet may constitute the majority of day-to-day learning teachers engage. (p. 12)

Interestingly, researchers have found that formal and informal networks are interdependent. Both Daly and Schiff et al. concluded that both formal and informal networks play an important role in schools. Schiff et al. concluded that, “the value of, and participation in, informal and out-of-school networks was dependent on the existence and strength of formal networks” (2015, p. 12). They found that while informal networks are able to compensate, to a degree, for lacking formal networks, they cannot fully supplant formal networks. Conversely, the existence of formal networks alone is not sufficient either and therefore leaders should invest in the development of informal social networks (Daly, 2009).

Schiff et al. (2015) summarizes the relationships between formal and informal networks as follows:

The relationship between participation in these various forms of networks was revealed to be interdependent in that these networks variously supplemented or reinforced and extended one another. Given these two relationships—

complementary and supplementary—we describe the connection between formal and informal networks as one of interdependency: Strong formal networks beget strong informal and out-of-school networks, while weak formal networks demand substitutive informal and out-of-school networks. (p. 8)

These networks are critical to the work of social justice learning and the journey towards identity development and transformation. It is through these formal and informal structures that leaders and teachers are able to interact and to enrich their learning with and from one another.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

In the book *Educating Teachers for Diversity: Seeing with a Cultural Eye*, James Banks, the Multicultural Education Series editor, reminds us that “an important goal of multicultural education is to improve race relations and to help all students acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to participate in cross-cultural interactions and in personal, social, and civic action that will help make our nations more democratic and just” (Irvine, 2003, p. x). The question arises: what techniques will best help us to do this? Many, including Dr. Sharroky Hollie (2017), believe that culturally responsive teaching (CRT), or what he refers to in the second edition of this book as culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning (CLR), provides us with a technique that achieves these goals. Gay (2002) defined culturally responsive teaching as, “using the cultural characteristics, experiences, and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively” (p. 106). Supporters of culturally responsive teaching postulate that the “discontinuities between the school and low-income students and students of color is an important factor in their low academic achievement” (Gay,

2018, p. xii). They also believe that if you change teaching to reflect and draw on students' cultural and language strengths, then we will see a significant increase in student achievement (Gay, 2018, p. xii). In his 2017 book, Dr. Hollie shares that, "unfortunately, the term *culturally responsive teaching* has become a cliché, buried in a grave of educational teams that are cast about like ghosts in books, state mandates, district initiatives and conference themes (p. 21). He believes that once a term becomes cliched, that it loses power and that what is happening with the term, is that "many districts want to be culturally responsive...[but] in reality, what they are seeking is how to address racial issues under the cover of *culturally responsive teaching*" (2017, p. 21). Hollie argues that culturally responsive teaching is not a "quick fix for race relations, diversity issues, and achievement gap woes" (2017, p. 21). He believes that this work is better termed as cultural and linguistic responsiveness (CLR) and defines it as, "the validation and affirmation of the home (indigenous) culture and home language for the purposes of building and bridging the student to success in the culture of academia and mainstream society" (2017, p. 22).

While there have been evolving definitions over the years, these definitions generally center around the need for educators to provide students with opportunities to employ their own culturally relevant communication styles, understandings, and experiences as valid participation options and markers towards academic progress. For example, we need to learn to move away from what Kochman (1985) calls a "passive-receptive posture," in which students are expected to listen quietly while the teacher talks and then can only respond when called upon. A culturally responsive perspective teaches us that in many cultures' engagement looks much different than this. Participants in a

conversation or lesson will make physical or verbal affirmation of their understanding or interest that, in many schools today, would be perceived as disruptive. Instead, we need to embrace these opportunities and explicitly promote the ways in which students have been actively engaged in their learning without fearing discipline for being *unruly*.

Though doing this is just one discrete example of the steps that teachers can take to become more culturally responsive, it cannot be considered as the only indicator of a culturally responsive teacher or classroom. Becoming truly culturally responsive is a mindset and practice shift of validating and affirming the culture and language that students bring to the classroom. When this shift is distilled to a list of strategies in a professional development session, the forest is missed for the trees. The strategy is merely a tool to get to the greater goal of valuing and incorporating what our students bring to the classroom each day.

One of the first things that must take place in order to become a culturally responsive teacher is to identify the difference between deficit and affirming perspective and then to make a full shift to the affirming perspective (Hollie, 2017). Unfortunately, there is evidence that suggests that many teachers see their students from socially subordinated groups from a deficit perspective. “Lacking faith in the students’ ability to achieve, these teachers are more likely to have low academic expectations for the students and ultimately treat them in ways that stifle their learning” (Villegas & Lucas, 2007, p. 31). The teachers tend to avoid demanding higher order thinking and rather, place an emphasis upon drill and rote learning. Teachers that are able to embrace the affirming perspective are those that see all of their students make gains in achievement. These teachers believe that students from nondominant groups are capable learners,

“even when these students enter school with ways of thinking, talking, and behaving that differ from cultural norms” (Villegas & Lucas, 2007, p. 32). They will hold their students to high standards, provide them with a rigorous curriculum, and build on the individual and cultural resources that these students bring to school every day (32). “Culturally responsive teachers are committed to designing and implementing instruction...because they hold visions of success for diverse students rather than images of deficiency and failure” (Turner, 2007, p. 13).

Summary

Professional learning is a critical component of improving educator effectiveness and through the work of researchers over recent years, the criteria of what makes up effective professional learning has reached some clarity. These criteria will be used as the measure to reflect upon and evaluate the professional development experiences that are present in this work. The role of teacher networks and collective participation will also serve to facilitate the examination of the professional learning discussed in this work. Finally, these elements will all be combined into a narrowed focus on how the criteria for effective professional learning interplay with the additional components necessary for effective social justice professional learning, including confronting oppression, examining identity, and working towards becoming a transformational leader.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Autoethnography was chosen as the method by which to conduct this research as it offers the opportunity to closely examine from the inside, as a participant, each professional learning experience. I am also able to offer a highly personal examination of how each professional learning experience impacted my own identity development and then how that has translated into my efforts to support professional learning within my role as a school leader. The challenges I have faced as a participant and also as facilitator of professional learning, will allow other educators and leaders to reflect on their own experiences in relation to my own, and better enable them to design meaningful social justice aligned professional learning opportunities.

Methodology

This study is an autoethnographic study. An autoethnography is a qualitative research method that allows the researcher to utilize their own experiences as primary data (Chang, 2008, p. 49). “Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Merriam (2009) says, “The following four characteristics are identified by most as key to understanding the nature of qualitative research: the focus in on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive” (p. 14). In recent years, many have turned to autoethnography because, “they were seeking a positive response to critiques of canonical ideas about what research is and how research should be done” (Ellis, C., Adams, T., & Bochner, A., 2011). More specifically, “they wanted to concentrate on

ways of producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience, research that would sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us” (Ellis, et al., 2011). It is this grounding in personal experiences and identity politics that drew me to the use of autoethnography as a method. One of the important distinctions between autobiography and autoethnography comes in the application of epiphanies. In autobiography, epiphanies are often self-claimed and while one may find them transformative, another might not. Autoethnography on the other hand requires the author to selectively write about epiphanies that are rooted in or made possible by cultural identity (Ellis, et al., 2011).

As is the nature of autoethnography, my work, particularly in my stories in chapter four, dives deeply in stories that are very personal for me, but also for the people in my stories. I have chosen to take a position of vulnerability and share my stories with the reader in hopes of allowing my experiences to be a window through which others can view and reflect upon their own experiences. However, the people and organizations in my reflections have not made the decision to share their stories. Many of my stories, while important to share, also reflect missteps, errors in judgement, or outright racism. To protect the anonymity of those people and organizations represented in my work, I have replaced school district and individuals’ names with pseudonyms. I am grateful to each of these people and organizations as they have played a part in helping me to learn and grow and I hope that they join me on their own journeys of growth.

Reflection on Autoethnography as a Method

Traditionally, there is an expectation that the researcher keeps their voice separate from the data and analysis taking place. However, the use of autoethnography enables a unique opportunity to develop a first-person voice and account, that paints a narrative in which the reader can immerse themselves. “Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)” (Ellis & Bochner, 2011, p. 1).

I did not set out to write this dissertation as autoethnography. My original intent was to craft a work centered around qualitative research, working with teachers to learn about their experiences learning from and with each other around issues of social justice. But two things happened, the first COVID. My ability to gather data about teachers’ interactions with one another ground to a halt when everyone was forced into lock downs and then long-term social distancing. Second, the further I dove into the work, the more I discovered the link between identity development and social justice professional learning. This was a link, that in discussion with my advisor, we determined could be more richly explored through autoethnography. It is my hope that through the use of autoethnography, that my analysis of my experiences can help other school leaders to reflect on their own experiences towards becoming a transformational leader.

The use of autoethnography has been challenged by some as lacking the objectivity usually inherent in traditional research. However, for the purpose of this research, this method presented the opportunity to dive deeply into similar, yet vastly different, experiences of professional learning as well as to explore my own journey of

identity development and its impact on my role as a school leader. Autoethnography is relevant as a method because each of these professional learning experiences engaged the researcher in an examination of identity and bias. These elements are difficult to quantify but through the use of autoethnography, they can be examined closely. “When researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity. However, in addition to telling about experiences, autoethnographers often are required by social science publishing conventions to analyze these experiences” (Ellis & Bochner, 2011, p. 276).

Chang (2008) explains that, “autoethnography shares the storytelling feature with other genres of self-narrative but transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation” (p. 43). In the context of this research, it was important to be able to analyze the culture of each school or district in which these professional learning opportunities took place in relationship to their implementation and outcome.

For this research, I have drawn upon my own personal experiences to serve as a window into the features that result in effective social justice aligned professional learning. Chang (2008) says:

Personal memory is a building block of autoethnography because the past gives a context to the present self and memory opens a door to the richness of the past. As an autoethnography, you not only have a privileged access to your past experiences and personal interpretations of those experiences, but also have first-hand discernment of what is relevant to your study. What is recalled from the past forms the basis of autoethnographic data. (p. 71)

I have been able to draw upon both my own memory as well as writing I have generated in the past to help me to compile and craft my stories. Over the years, I have made notes and written pieces for myself that reflected upon some of the events that I have included in this work. The rest I have been able to piece together from my own recollections of events. This has been an iterative process in which my recollections led to deeper analysis and connections to literature. Throughout my writing I have cycled repeatedly through writing my stories, analyzing and connecting them to research and then as a result recalling additional impactful or pivotal stories that I then added to the work. This cycle was also impacted by the feedback received from others including committee members and friends. As I discussed my work with them, I was able to analyze my own development and make changes to my analysis and the progression of the stories. Finally, current events played a role in my data collection and story writing, as things took place in the world or my life, they occasionally served to remind me of circumstances in my past that I now realized were relevant to my development as well.

As I have written this dissertation, I have felt guilt for selecting this format of autoethnography, often reflecting on whether my stories of privilege are worthy of being told or whether this format would be better served to give voice to the marginalized and oppressed. I have concluded however that my identity as a white school leader is one that is shared broadly in the education community, and it is my hope that through my vulnerability and reflections on my own identity development and work with my staff, that others might be able to reflect and learn from my work.

Position of the Researcher

I am a white female administrator, and I am constantly on a journey of developing and defining my own identity as a school leader and a leader for social justice. It is also important to situate myself with my white, upper middle class, female identity in order to be transparent for readers about the privileges I bring to my interpretation of the research. I am also cognizant of my voice as that of the privileged and the caution with which I must proceed when addressing the voices and issues affecting those that are oppressed. As Freire shares, the oppressor cannot liberate the oppressed, but they must be willing to fight alongside the oppressed to achieve liberation (1970). I learned during my work with Teach For America the importance of humility and since then have always worked from a position of putting humility at the forefront of this work.

I have had the opportunity over my teaching career to work in vastly different communities, and each has challenged me to think differently and to re-examine my own identity. I have constantly struggling with the feeling of not knowing enough to be an effective leader for social justice and am continually trying to learn more. There have been times, particularly early in my career when I have taken the ‘easy path’ of remaining silent or stepping back when I should be stepping forward and leading or challenging injustice. Through all of my experiences, I have grown as an individual, as a school leader, and as an advocate for my students and staff, but it is still a journey that I am undertaking each day. Through my various roles and districts, I have slowly moved through Helm’s Stages of White Identity Development (1997). I found myself stuck in disintegration for many years, not sure of what to do with my guilt and attempting to

channel these feelings into action, but have moved, largely, to immersion/emersion. I am aware of my own white identity and work each day to connect it to being anti-racist.

Chapter 4: Cornerstone Stories

Introduction

These stories reflect the collected experiences of the researcher over fourteen years as an educator, first experiencing and then planning and leading professional learning. This personal account will focus on the pivotal experiences that helped to shape my views on what leads to effective professional learning, specifically in the context of cultural competence, identity development, bias, and equity. Throughout this narrative, I will explore my personal experiences as I reflect on my own identity development as a white female administrator.

But before I begin, it is important to understand where the researcher began. I was born in Pennsylvania to an upper-middle-class family. The elementary school that I attended was primarily white. Many of the families, and most of my friends, had one parent that worked full-time and a mom that stayed at home full-time to raise the children. It was an idyllic childhood with summers spent at the pool and many after school play dates with friends. When I transitioned to middle school, several elementary schools combined into one middle school bringing this more affluent group of white children together with students that struggled as a result of systemic oppression and other barriers that exist for immigrant families. The middle school population was about 70% Hispanic, 10% Black, and 20% white. This was the early 1990s, when academic tracking in school was the norm. As a result, I found myself tracked into the “A” group which meant that my class all had received high achievement scores and, with the exception of one Black student, was all white. My day was spent around, but not with, students of color and I never really understood the privilege that I had as a white person or the

systems that were in place at the school that afforded me opportunities to experience the success I did. Around the age of 12, my mother transitioned back to work full time. This shift, while difficult to not have my mom at home, also helped me to grow my independence and leadership as I took on more responsibilities at home. At the end of my 8th grade year, my family moved to a more suburban/rural community in New Jersey that had many families that commuted into New York City for work. It was a very affluent area and once again my school was primarily white.

My family raised me to have respect for others, to be kind to everyone, and to celebrate the uniqueness of each individual, but we rarely had explicit conversations about race, racism, or oppression; nor did these conversations happen in school. I remember commenting to my parents that there was only one Black kid that got onto the bus for my high school and how different it felt from my previous middle school.

I would not call my family religious; however I was raised in the Unitarian Church and a huge part of the teachings and learning in our Sunday School classes were about acceptance of others and about understanding the differences and uniqueness of various religions and beliefs and strong values rooted in being compassionate and understanding of all beliefs. I spent Sundays visiting other churches, synagogues, and temples learning about other religions. We discussed LGBTQ rights, but again, we never discussed race, and we never discussed the systemic oppression that exists in our world nor the white privilege that I had.

When I graduated from high school, I was accepted into a university in rural Pennsylvania that was predominantly wealthy and white. On campus there was special interest housing to allow gathering spaces for different student groups of students that

shared an identity, and there was a house specifically for students of color. I often felt as though that small house housed the only students of color that resided on our campus.

While at the University I had the opportunity to student teach in communities with high levels of poverty and in communities with students that came from Amish communities.

These experiences began to open my eyes to the differences that exist across our country, and while these were not race-based experiences, they were some of the first times that I began to understand that my lived experience differed so much from so many others.

When I examined the calendar prior to starting my student teaching assignment, I noticed two random days off in the middle of the semester. While glad for the extra days off, I had no idea until starting my placement that these were the first two days of hunting season and that no one would come to school, so the district built them in as days off. The families that I was working with maintained this family tradition as a means of feeding their families and bonding with their children. This was far from anything I had lived in my urban and suburban childhood.

My junior year of college I knew I wanted to travel abroad and that while abroad I want to have the opportunity to teach in a local school. I chose to go to Barbados because it was one of the few places that offered a teaching internship in English. I was placed at a primary school and given the opportunity to help to teach a group of fifteen, eight- and nine-year-old children. Living in Barbados was a life-changing experience for me. While it may seem that living on an island is a six-month vacation at the beach, for me it was an opportunity to truly understand the culture of another country and to experience life in a country that, at the time, was considered a “developing” nation. It was also the first time in my life in which I lived in a community in which I was the racial minority. The

majority of the residents of Barbados are Black. The history of this is rooted in the import of slaves from West Africa in the 1600s to support the growing sugar cane industry.

Barbados also has a broad range of wealth amongst its small population. The tourism and sugar cane industries support the local economy, and there are residents that are extremely wealthy however, the majority of Bajan residents support their families on a modest income.

My commute to my internship everyday was done in a crowded van through communities with many houses built of corrugated metal and with families that clearly did not have the financial resources that the communities I had grown up in did. It was an incredible and humbling experience to teach with only the most basic of supplies. The students each had a few small notebooks made of stapled together lined paper and they did all of their work from what was written on a small green chalkboard or from books from the school library. Their track was a painted circle on the grass outside and there was nothing flashy or fancy about school and the classrooms. But the children were joyful, engaged, and eager to learn. It was incredible to get to experience a completely different system of education that at its core centered around the same desire to help students to learn but took a completely different approach to doing so. Being able to live and work in the community, gave me the opportunity to get to know our neighbors and to really understand the stark differences that existed in this new space and the privileged space I had come from.

While in college, I applied for and was hired to work for Teach For America as a campus recruiter. Through my work with Teach For America, I gained a much better understanding of what the state of education looked like across our country. I began to

understand that not all students had the opportunity to receive an excellent education or even a good one. I became passionate about the work of educational equity through this role and during my senior year of college, I applied to be a part of Teach For America. I drove to New York state to interview in person and was crushed when several weeks later I received an envelope through campus mail telling me that I had not been accepted into the program. I felt as an education major, as someone who had worked on their staff, and because I had worked with a variety of students through my student teaching and my internships that I should have been the perfect candidate for the program. It took me years of reflecting on my lack of acceptance in the interview process to recognize that my own arrogance about my beliefs about how to be an educator are what I feel kept me from being selected. Teach For America had a hiring model that was designed to select people that are able to be trained to be teachers that don't teach in a traditional way. I had just completed traditional teacher training and had all sorts of preconceived notions about how students should be educated and what the right way was to reach our students of color, despite my very limited experience. Looking back, I don't think I would have hired me either.

Moments of Clarity

There have been several pivotal moments in my life in which my understanding of race, bias, and oppression have transformed who I am as a person and an educator. Some of them I recognized at the time, and for some I have only recently realized their significance.

“I’m Not Racist.”

When I graduated from college, I moved to the Midwest to an affluent suburb of a major city. I began applying for teaching jobs and then came across a position as the office manager at Teach For America in a midwestern regional office. I was still fascinated by their mission and their work and in the absence of being able to find a full-time teaching position, I accepted the job working for Teach For America as an office manager. It was through this job that I really began to get my first education in systemic oppression and the very different opportunities and outcomes available to our students based on their race and their zip code. I worked in this role for a year and then took a teaching job. The following summer, after a year of teaching, I was hired by Teach For America to work in Los Angeles as part of their operations team that runs their new teacher training institute. During this institute, the new teachers work with students during the day and attend classes at night. One of their classes addressed diversity in schools and all institute staff was invited to attend. I popped into one of the groups a little bit into the conversation as the group was discussing bias. I listened intently and remember being surprised about all of the biases that the corps members were disclosing that they had. Yet, as I sat there, I honestly thought to myself how confident I was that I was not at all racist. I was sure though that I must have had some sort of bias because surely, I wasn't perfect. Right? And then it struck me, I held bias regarding body size. I have struggled with my own body image and was willing to acknowledge that I judged people for their weight. But of course, not for their race. I remember feeling satisfied that I had been willing to admit to myself and others my bias around weight.

The absurdity of this didn't occur to me for years. I truly felt at the time that I was without racial bias and it took years of self-reflection and growth to recognize in myself the implicit bias that I possess and to begin to take action to grow and change.

Fear of Confronting Racism

I accepted a job as a teacher of English language arts in the Forks School District. This is the first time I remember feeling truly ill-equipped to challenge racist ideas and comments that I overheard or that came up in conversation. I had just spent the prior year immersed in conversations of equity and relentless pursuit of the support of all children to then be confronted with deficit thinking about our students and at times outright racist remarks. I would continue to quietly support my students from within the walls of my classroom but didn't know how to publicly challenge my colleagues. I was a brand-new teacher and they were senior teachers - how could I possibly challenge their jaded views of what our students could and could not accomplish?

This came into stark focus one afternoon when I was a new teacher and a veteran teacher remarked to a group of Black students that was quickly exiting the school building, "What's your hurry? Gotta go get some fried chicken?" Our school shared a property with the fast-food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken, and it wasn't uncommon for students and staff to frequent the establishment. I knew the teacher had a relationship with the students and they laughed as they ran off, but I also knew that the question was deeply rooted in racist stereotypes. I had no idea what to do or what to say...so I said nothing. To this day, I think of this moment often and am deeply ashamed that I didn't have the courage to confront my colleague. This was the moment, however, that I knew I needed to develop language and strategies for addressing these situations head-on.

Interest Convergence

During my years in college, I was invited by a friend to join a social club known for its fancy parties and exclusive membership. At the time I was thrilled to receive an invitation into the group. When I arrived at the annual awards dinner, I was shocked to see that there were men seated in the front of the room representing the leadership of the organization, but not a single woman. I turned to my friend, in shock, and asked where the women were. At the time, it didn't even occur to me to ask why there were no Black members in attendance. She shushed me as the event proceeded with its pageantry and fine dining. During the event, the organization's president talked at length about the charity work conducted by the group in the recent year and invited everyone to continue to donate to the organization. The money flowed freely that night and I felt in awe of participating in a world I wasn't accustomed to of fancy dresses, exclusive membership, and pampering with extensive wait staff. In that moment, I let my dismay over the leadership be overshadowed by my desire to be a part of a group that had a reputation of being influential in the university and business community.

About six months later, after I had continued to learn more about racism and systemic oppression through my work with Teach For America, I attended the annual fall party of this organization. As I sat at a table, once again enjoying the lavish food buffets, I found myself looking around the room and for the first time, realizing that I only saw white faces. My friend was once again with me and I inquired about the lack of diversity in the organization, and she brushed me off by saying, "See, over there, he's a member," pointing to the only Black man in the room, who also happened to be a leader of a large local organization. She explained that there was nothing preventing Black people from

being members; there just weren't many. This left me feeling unsettled and when I got home, I conducted an internet search looking for more history of the organization. I was shocked when I came across their original by-laws that specifically excluded female as well as Black members. But again, I allowed myself to believe the organization had changed.

Later that year, when I first began to teach in the classroom, I had a Black female colleague with whom I had become very close. We spent many lunches discussing everything from our recent weekend to systemic oppression and racism. One day, I shared with her that I had become a member of this elite organization in college, and she immediately stopped what she was doing and said, "Don't ever tell anyone else that, especially not anyone Black!" I wasn't completely surprised by her response as I had done my own googling of the organization and knew a bit about its discriminatory history, but I had allowed myself to believe that the organization had changed. My friend shared her own thoughts on the organization, and I found myself trying to justify how I was no longer actively involved in the organization (though I was still on the membership rolls). She explained to me that while she knew me as a person, and knew my beliefs about racism and oppression, this organization was known in the Black community as being racist and elitist. I immediately called the organization's office and cancelled my membership, all the while deeply wishing I could erase all record of ever joining the group.

At the same time, I was engaged in a course on Critical Race Theory, and it was the perfect confluence of the honest feedback from my friend and the readings and discussion of Critical Race Theory that helped me to realize that what had just happened

was Interest Convergence. As Derrick Bell explained, “[t]he interest of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites” (1980, p. 523). I had ignored the gut feeling I had that something about the organization was not right because I was enjoying the social events. It wasn’t until it was plainly stated to me that being a member could make me be perceived as racist and might jeopardize my job opportunities did I quit the organization. This shift in my actions is an example of interest convergence in which my actions as a white person didn’t change until it was in my interest to make a change (to protect my employment). I am still deeply ashamed that I didn’t take the time to learn about the organization from day one and that I was ever a part of something that had a history of excluding people based upon race and gender. I have since sought to educate others about its ties to racism and sexism in hopes that no one else makes the same faulty assumptions about the organization that I did. This was one of the pivotal moments in my journey of identity development, as it served as the impetus to understand that how naive I was about issues of race and that I had an obligation to learn as much as possible and then to being to take steps to dismantle racism and systemic oppression.

The Tale of Three Districts

Over the course of my career, I have worked in seven different school districts/systems. Each of these has had an impact on the lens through which I view public education. The three districts that have had the greatest impact on my growth as an educator with regards to professional learning are the Forks School District, The Centennial School District, and the Magnolia School District. In each of these districts I have been both participant in and facilitator of professional learning and in each I have

learned valuable lessons about what does and does not work. Each of these districts has also undergone the process of attempting to change the culture within their district and improve equity for staff and students through social justice aligned professional learning. I have had the opportunity to be a part of these professional learning opportunities in each district. Through my work in each district as well as the professional learning opportunities, I have evolved significantly both as an educator and a human over the past 15 years. Each district has been very different from the last, and I'm incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to work in such distinct systems over the course of my career. Doing so has helped me to grow in my understanding of the inequities that exist in our system of education both inside and outside of our country. I have worked in schools that range from majority Black to majority white, and many combinations in between. I have worked in a school in which 100% of the students receive a free lunch to a school where buying Smoothie King Smoothies from the cafeteria doesn't cause a second thought for many students. I have taught in a school where the day is opened with a morning prayer to schools where such a thing would cause an uproar. I have worked in a school that still uses corporal punishment, a school where in-school suspension is packed and out of school suspension is a daily norm, and a school that rarely has the need for an in-school suspension room. I have worked in schools where we were hanging onto provisional accreditation by a thread to a school that is ranked as a top school in the state and country. I have loved each and every one of these places. They each have brought their own challenges and celebrations, but in each of them there were wonderful people and wonderful possibilities. This is not to say that there was not frustration & failure, but it is through these experiences that I have grown and have learned so much about my own

identity as a person, a teacher, and a school leader. I have made mistakes, made assumptions, and examined my own bias through the lens of each new place and, from this, have truly grown. My experiences in these different schools and districts have given me a broad view on the inequities that exist in our education system and without these experiences, I am confident that I would not be the person I am today, committed to doing the work to become a transformational leader.

One Theme, Three Different Approaches

In the three stories that follow, I offer a personal narrative account of my own professional learning experiences in three vastly different school districts as each district attempted to achieve greater equity for students through professional development and professional learning experiences. An analysis of these three experiences offers a unique opportunity to juxtapose the format of the professional learning to the context in which it took place.

Dr. Pierce--Round I

In the spring of 2008, during a faculty meeting in the Forks School District, we were given the following student journal response to read,

“Juliet too young to know if she in love, Romeo jus goin from one girl to the other hisself. He tryin to be a playa I guess. Tybalt the one really be trippin’. He a hater. He not tryin’ to listen to what his uncle sayin’. Romeo a punk cause he shoulda had his boy Mercutio back. That’s why Mercutio put the hex on bof a them. If I was Mercutio I woulda smoked him first time he opened his moth. Far as Romeo killin’ hisself for Juliet, I don’t know, wouldn’t catch me dyin fo no girl.”

The assistant principal asked us what we thought about the response. Quite a few chuckles and awkward laughs circulated the room along with comments like, “Yup, sounds like some of our kids.” Followed by the principal’s question, “Is the response accurate?” There was quiet for a few seconds as people considered this, and realized that yes, while this response did not use standard English grammar rules, it was in fact, an accurate interpretation of the events in *Romeo and Juliet*. This was my first introduction to Culturally Responsive Teaching.

It was soon explained that our district would be undertaking one of its biggest professional development initiatives in years. They would be bringing in Dr. Pierce to train over half of the district in how to use Culturally Responsive Teaching. Many people in the room immediately dismissed this as “yet another district initiative” or “yet another thing stacked on our plate”. Others were skeptical but interested, and a few others were even offended. One of our African American teachers said, “I don’t have to jump and shout to learn, and I don’t talk like that (referring to the student response). Why are we generalizing this to African Americans?” I found myself in the middle of the extremes, tired from all the new things we had been asked to do this year but excited about the idea of having another tool that I could use to reach my students.

Six months went by, during which time I heard a little bit more about Culturally Responsive Teaching. Things like ‘Jump in Reading’ and ‘Call and Response’, began to characterize the beginning of every large meeting. Now, every time the faculty or students get together, we can’t start without a loud “When I say Midland, you say works hard...Midland!...Works Hard!” It would be an understatement to say that this made me uncomfortable. I would engage, but it was with reluctance as it felt truly inauthentic. I

even attempted it in my classroom a few times, but kids are intuitive and they know when something doesn't fit your style. My students and I already had established routines for gaining their attention that worked very well and when I tried this, they could sense that it was awkward for me and while they played along, it faded away, because, in reality, we didn't need it. But I still didn't have the full picture of CRT and was anxious, and admittedly a little skeptical after my initial exposures about what Dr. Pierce would have to teach us. Finally, the two-day training arrived.

The training was held in a high school cafeteria because a space was needed to accommodate half of the district's secondary teachers. We chose our seats around tables throughout the cafeteria, and I opted to sit with members of my teacher team and my middle school. I found a level of comfort from the familiarity that came from being with those that I work with each day; however this also meant that I was not sitting with any person of color and the majority of those at my table were female.

We dove into the training and Dr. Pierce emphasized repeatedly that the focus of the training was to learn to be culturally responsive. Many teachers immediately connected what we were about to learn to race, but he made it clear that while ties can be made to race, we were looking to reach students at a cultural level. In this situation, it seemed that culture was defined as, "the way life is organized in a community or group, including the ways in which community or group members use language, interact with one another, relate to time and space, take turns at talk, and approach different tasks" (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). Our goal as teachers should be to learn about and understand these various cultures and cultural norms so that we can incorporate them into our teaching.

When it comes to practically implementing this in the classroom, Dr. Pierce shared that culturally responsive teaching, as a pedagogy, remains largely theoretical. He felt that teachers need practical, easy-to-use strategies and activities that validate and affirm our students and bridge them towards academic learning. During our training, he consolidated this idea of practical application into four strands: (a) standards-based teaching with culturally responsive literature, (b) systematic teaching of situational appropriateness with language and behavior, (c) building on cultural behaviors to build positive classroom communities, and (d) expansion of academic vocabulary using conceptually coded words.

Dr. Pierce explained that standards-based teaching with culturally responsive literature means that we teach all of the appropriate standards but do so by utilizing literature that illuminates the cultures of a variety of students. During our session Dr. Pierce shared with us that from grades K-12, our African American students only have a seven percent chance of seeing a positive image that is reflective of themselves in their textbook. He proffered that it was even more important that we make sure that we select culturally specific books to teach content rather than generic or neutral books about people of color. For example, you want to choose a book or reading that illuminates the experience of growing up a member of a particular cultural group rather than just a book that features characters who are members of a minority group. The book *Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry* illuminates the experience of a Black family in the south and would be a good text to choose whereas *The Snowy Day* merely utilizes a Black character as the race of the character is not of major significance. While both are important to incorporate into

the classroom, the title that illuminates the experience of a minority group can have the greater impact.

The systematic teaching of situational appropriateness with language and behavior refers to the idea of contrastive analysis, which according to culturally responsive teaching researcher, Dr. Sharroky Hollie, is the “practice of comparing and contrasting the linguistic structure of two languages—for our purpose, the home language and Standard American English (SAE). This strategy facilitates the acquisition of SAE by increasing students’ awareness of the differences (rules) between the language they bring from home and the language of school.” Dr. Pierce introduced to us the rules of African American Language (AAL), and for many of us it was shocking to realize that the way our students frequently speak follows rules. As a white person I know that I was aware that my Black students and friends often spoke or sounded different than I did, but my whiteness served to make standard English the norm and it had never occurred to me that there might be rules or patterns to the ways that my Black student spoke. He explained the importance of teaching students to code switch, to understand when it is appropriate to use home language versus SAE. The goal is to provide affirmation and acceptance of the students’ home language but to also teach them to utilize SAE when appropriate in the academic setting. Code switching was not presented as a formal instructional technique, but rather something to be done in teachable moments and in conversation and writing. For example, when a student says, “He bes lyin’!”; rather than ask them to “correct” that (which would not affirm AAL) you would ask them to code switch to hopefully teach them that the SAE way to say this would be “He is lying.” As I reflect, I can recall that I made assumptions about my students that were more able to code switch

in our academic setting and didn't do much more to help those that couldn't code switch other than to *correct* them. This teaching about code switching stood in stark contrast to the realities of my school where you could find plastered up and down the hallway posters that read "Standard English is the Standard Here". I had always felt uncomfortable when I read these posters, but that method was how staff justified demanding that students speak and write using standard English. Never did I consider the possibility of validating a student's home language as I taught them how to code-switch.

Strand three, building on cultural behaviors for the purposes of a positive classroom community, provides for us the most quickly applicable strategies for the classroom. This strand focuses upon ways in which to engage students in learning in more culturally responsive ways. In many schools, defiance, disruptions, and tardies are major complaints of school administrators and teachers and it is Dr. Pierce's belief that some of these behaviors are misinterpreted or misguided cultural behaviors that can be easily adapted in appropriate classroom practices. Gay (2000) points out that "if teachers are to better serve the school achievement needs of ethnically diverse students by implementing culturally responsive teaching, they must learn how to communicate differently with them. To the extent they succeed in doing this, achievement problems could be reduced significantly". Many cultures have different norms for communication and time, so when a student shouts out an answer because they felt that would display their excitement and engagement, the teacher may perceive this as an inappropriate disruption. Dr. Pierce offered strategies to incorporate these cultural behaviors into the classroom and, for example, to teach the impact of considering the time and place for calling out answers vs. raising hands to share thoughts.

The final strand, expansion of vocabulary based on conceptually coded words, explains that we should attempt to help students to expand their vocabulary by attaching new words to words or concepts that students already know rather than dictionary definitions. Dr. Pierce suggests doing this through the utilization of a personal thesaurus and a personal dictionary. In a personal thesaurus, students will write down the word they already know, and under it, list the new words they are connecting to it. They keep this throughout the school year and add to it any new words they encounter. Students can also keep a personal dictionary that provides them with an authentic resource that helps expand a student's academic vocabulary by building on prior knowledge. In their personal dictionary, students will list the academic term, the meaning, a picture, and connection that they can make to the word. The use of this is most effective prior to encountering the words in a content text and should help to build their vocabulary in an authentic and connected way.

At the conclusion of the training, I had discussions with other staff from my school, and there were mixed feelings about the training. Some were eager to try the strategies, but others were more skeptical. There were some that took away from the training that to be successful, we have to teach Black kids differently. For me, this was probably the first time I had spent immersed in training around cultural norms for cultures beyond my dominant white culture and the first time I was challenged to consider that there might be a different or better way to connect with my students. I knew as a human and a teacher that I wanted to do the best for my students and also knew that I wanted to be the best teacher possible, so if trying some of these strategies would accomplish that, I was willing. But I also knew that I was surrounded by many teachers,

including myself, who were skeptical or unwilling to change their teaching practices. I didn't have the words and the knowledge to discuss with my colleagues in a meaningful way the deeper implications that were the foundations and takeaways from the professional development. We may have left with strategies, but I didn't leave armed with the ability to be a critical consumers of the strategies listed on a worksheet.

While this professional development session wasn't the only development opportunity with that focus, staff didn't engage in meaningful follow up either. This professional development was revisited as a concept throughout the spring in our own building faculty meetings. Our only Black administrator was charged with leading continued learning and discussion on the topic of CRT, but it felt to me and many members of the staff that she had not been given the additional support needed to provide us with deeper training. She attended the same workshop we did and was then asked to keep the training and discussions going without further education for herself. It amounted to worksheets with CRT strategies and practicing them in small groups. It also felt very uncomfortable that our only Black building administrator was the one charged with leading this learning. I don't know if this was her choice or not, but the absence of the white administrators engaging in the work was something that was surely seen and felt by myself and the staff. Within my identity as a white person, it felt awkward that on a predominately white staff, our Black administrator was being asked to speak on behalf of the education of Black children. It would have been far more authentic had all of the administrators worked together to present and own this content as something critical to undertake.

After the year was out, some of the strategies stuck around in my and others' classrooms, but largely it felt as though teachers had reverted to many of their old methods and the discussion of CRT faded with the passage of time as we moved on to the next "new thing."

Dr. Pierce--Round II

In the summer of 2017, I was set to begin my third year as a Dean of Students and Instruction in a middle school in the Centennial School District. The previous school year, the District Board of Education hired a new superintendent to replace our outgoing superintendent, both of whom were Black women. Our new superintendent brought with her several new hires throughout the central office staff. One of these was our new Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, a younger Black man. He shared with the administrators that during the upcoming school year we would be bringing Dr. Pierce to the district to lead professional learning on Culturally Responsive Teaching. The professional learning was set to be a year-long learning series that would kick off with a back-to-school PD day for staff in the high school cafeteria focused on our journey to responsiveness. This session would then be followed in January with a full day PD for those staff that were interested in being part of a coaching cycle, in which they would receive another large group PD as well as individual coaching sessions as follow up. I immediately felt a wave of hesitation and skepticism about bringing him to the district. I felt as though my previous PD with Dr. Pierce was lacking in cohesiveness and I was extremely concerned that he would once again leave in his wake - staff members that felt the only take away was that Black students couldn't learn the same way as white students.

When asked by the Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction my thoughts about this professional learning opportunity via email, I initially didn't reply. Several of my colleagues however responded back to the group email indicating that they had had positive experiences with Dr. Pierce in the past and found his work to be impactful and important for their staff in previous districts. So, I chose to hold my reservations based on my 2008 experience and did not share them in the group email chain. In later conversations one on one with a colleague and with our Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, I shared my opinions of my experience in 2008, explaining that I felt as though the professional learning provided was very focused on strategies and not the why behind the work. I also shared that I felt it also lacked follow-up and follow-through to ensure its effective implementation. The Assistant Superintendent explained that we had hired Dr. Pierce to conduct coaching visits during the school year with a subset of teachers that expressed interest in being participants and learning more about being culturally responsive. I was hopeful that this follow through and individualized support would better support teachers in implementing their learning, but was also wary; I was concerned that if the professional learning days focused only on strategies and not the why resulting in some teachers would once again leave feeling like they had been told that Black students would only learn if taught differently. I am always wary of easily purchased "magic bullet" presentations or programs, particularly in education, and this seemed no different.

After the initial August professional learning for the whole faculty, we sent an email to our staff asking who would be interested in receiving additional professional learning and one-on-one support. We were able to assemble a team of ten teachers that

would be part of the ongoing professional learning throughout the school year. These teachers, along with every district administrator, participated in a January full-day professional learning session with Dr. Pierce as well as trainers from the Equity Partners. The Equity Partners were a local group of former educators and school leaders that represented a variety of races and genders who came to lead the participants to examine racism in the context of our identity and bias. This combined work provided a more in-depth look for staff at the ‘why’ behind the work we were doing. It began to dive into the systems in our society that result in oppression for our students of color. We discussed racism, bias, redlining, and the history of our midwestern city, as well as the impact on the educational system from years of legislation meant to marginalize and limit resources given to schools with students of color. We were provided time to discuss our own bias and experiences with systemic oppression and to learn from each other about these things. I found the January professional learning session to be much more impactful than the sessions that I had experienced in 2008. I also found that the teachers left the session excited to try the strategies in their own classroom, but they also left with a better understanding of why this work was important, how their own identity impacted that work, how to build more meaningful relationships with their students, and how to advocate for and support their students.

The teachers went back to their classrooms and began to implement the strategies and teachings from this professional learning and, in February, a team from Dr. Pierce’s organization came to our middle school to work with these teachers one-on-one. They conducted classroom observations and then provided feedback to the teachers in a debrief session at the end of the day. The coaches then came back for an additional coaching

session in March, and through this follow-up support. Overall, I found the teachers were more successful in implementing and trying new things in their classroom as a result of the more extensive and ongoing professional learning and support.

As I have reflected on these two experiences, I have recently begun to wonder what role the district leadership played in the overall effectiveness of these two professional learning experiences. At the time of the first professional learning, our superintendent was a white man and, until this PD, I had not heard discussion of race or equity on a regular basis within the district. I am left to wonder if this focus was chosen to serve as a Band-Aid for our declining academic scores and struggles to connect with and support our increasing Black student population given that it could be seen as non-threatening because it focused on strategy vs. an examination of historical harm and systemic oppression within our district and community. This professional development also took place prior to what one might call a racial reckoning after the death of Mike Brown and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. At the time, issues of racism and injustice were not discussed as openly as they were at the time of the second professional development, so it is possible that the content of the presentation was tailored to meet the *readiness* of the district to tackle tough topics.

In contrast, at the time of the second PD, the district leader that brought the PD to the district was a Black man who not only brought Dr. Pierce, but also had the insight to bring in the Equity Partners to dive even deeper into the why and to engage teachers in looking inside themselves. Could the differences in Dr. Pierce's presentations been merely an evolution over time of his work? Quite possibly. But I believe that it is also quite possible that the intentionality of doing the identity work with the second PD was a

direct result of the Black male district leader, recognizing the deeper need and being willing to take the risk to support our Black students as well as the time period in which this training took place.

Equity Institute for Schools

In the summer of 2019, I was wrapping up my first year as an assistant principal at Magnolia High School. One of the board goals in The Magnolia School District is for every district administrator to attend the Equity Partners summer professional learning series about being leaders in equity work in schools. This is a four-day in-residence training at a retreat center. While I was excited about the possibilities for the learning that could take place, I was also extremely hesitant to be away from my family for four days and also unsure of what I was going to learn and what the experience would be like. I called the office of the conference facilitators a couple of times in the months leading up to the conference to try to acquire an agenda for the four days. I was asserting my privilege in an attempt to have a greater sense of control by knowing what to expect. I strongly dislike surprises! Many of my colleagues had shared both positive and negative experiences at this institute. Some felt that they had made significant growth in understanding their white privilege and understanding their role as educators fighting against systemic oppression, while others left feeling attacked for their white privilege.

I was the only staff member in attendance from my building, and while I love a good conversation with my friends, I am a more naturally introverted person so when I arrived in the small conference space with a group of strangers I was feeling particularly hesitant. When we arrived to begin our first session, we were each given a piece of chart paper and asked to sit on the floor to create a poster that answered a series of questions,

many of which revolved around our personal identity as a way to help us get to know one another. I found myself glancing around the room, trying to get ideas for what to put on my paper, not wanting to appear naïve or like I lacked introspection. Who dead or alive did I want to talk to over lunch? Barack Obama would have been my first answer, but I found myself questioning: does that sound too cliché?, will I be judged as the white girl at the racism training that wants to talk to our Black president? I settled on my grandfather who had died years ago, but still questioned, was that a good enough answer?

Our first day was focused on examining our cultural charts, getting to know one another, and meeting our ally teams. We discussed data and microaggressions and looked at the racism that exists overtly and covertly in our society. We also examined the things that we heard growing up and the experiences that we had that have shaped our current identities. I sat through many of these conversations thinking about how easy and privileged my childhood had been. As I listened to the stories, I felt intense guilt about my own privilege. Had I ever really had any struggles? Of course, I worked hard in life to achieve goals, but was my life ever really hard? We ended our day with two small group meetings, the first was with our ally teams, a group of individuals from a variety of races, cultures, and backgrounds. This dynamic group of people sat in a small circle on sofas and shared our backgrounds and experiences, and once again...guilt. Guilt that I couldn't articulate my feelings about racism and systemic oppression without moderating every word that came from my mouth and guilt for having such a privileged life. This meeting was followed by meeting in our caucus groups, a group of individuals with the same racial background. Throughout the first day of learning, I found myself becoming more and more engaged. The presenters were able to use the day largely for team building and

discussion of one's own self and experiences. This was a non-threatening way to begin to explore our own identities without having to do too much in the way of challenging our existing beliefs or sharing too deeply. The focus on information sharing and sharing our experiences made the day enjoyable, but also laid the foundation to trust one another and to better know one another as we prepare to dive into the harder work in the next few days. This is a luxury that you have when you have four full days allotted to professional learning.

At the end of the day, I was exhausted both mentally and physically and was still feeling hesitant about sharing a room with another person, so despite the preference of the facilitators, I drove the forty minutes back to my house to hug my kids goodnight and to sleep in my own bed. I felt intense guilt leaving and didn't tell anyone other than my roommate that I was doing it. I just could not bring myself to commit fully to staying overnight. I think some of that is rooted in my own need for control and not liking to be told that I have to stay, and also in my guilt about leaving my young children for so many days in a row. I got up bright and early and was back at the retreat center in time for breakfast with the group at 7:30 A.M. I felt like I was a teenager sneaking back in the window after a night of sneaking out (something I never did by the way...I am typically a rule follower to the core). I recognize now that this was a situation in which I was asserting my privilege and opting to leave rather than to remain as requested and to engage in the workshop in the manner in which it was intended.

Our second day began and was largely focused in the morning on examining the systems of oppression that exist in our society. We started by looking at the housing trends across the United States to try to understand the impact of housing policy on the

Black community. I recognized in myself an initial feeling of, "I've already heard this, can we move on?" But as I sat and listened to the presenter discuss the policies that have been put in place across the country and the impact that these had on the Black community and levels of poverty, lack of generational wealth, and schooling, I realized that there is no number of times that I could listen to this and not learn something new, have something critical reinforced in my own understanding, or have my own beliefs challenged. Housing policy and redlining were a topic of discussion in both my Master's classes as well as my class on Critical Race Theory as a part of my doctorate. At the time of my Master's classes, it was a completely new concept to me and my initial conversations in graduate classes led me to do quite a bit of my own reading and learning because the idea of discriminatory housing policy was so appalling to me and was something I never knew existed. Until the classes and trainings that I had participated in over the last five or six years, I had never even considered that our system of housing is set up unfairly and is set up in a way that it intentionally reinforces oppression. I had always thought of racism as overt acts of discrimination. I did not consider it as being entrenched in the policy and laws of our country. I had always assumed that if you had the money, and that's a big if, that you could buy whatever house you wanted. I never considered it would be legal to prevent someone from living in a particular neighborhood or a particular house. I had also never considered the privilege of generational wealth and was completely unaware of the policies that have made the accumulation of wealth nearly impossible in the Black community. Back again to feelings of guilt, knowing that I live and work in one of the most privileged communities in our area because of my race and generational wealth. I did not have college debt to pay off, my husband and I both had

good paying jobs, and he had money saved from his teen and college years to put towards a down payment for a house.

Our conversation shifted from housing and the systemic oppression that takes place as a result of housing policy to what our trainers referred to as the Table of Oppression and then the Fabric of Oppression. Our trainers used a piece by Barbara J. Love about the pillars of oppression that hold up this table of oppression. We then did an activity in which I wrote down on a worksheet what I heard or learned growing up with regards to race, sexual orientation, religion, and poverty (to name a few). This brought into focus for me the reality of the socialization that had occurred throughout my life and that had resulted in me taking on the role of oppressor whether intentional or not. This intentional engagement of my experience with the content being taught, was incredibly powerful.

After lunch we spent three hours engaged in a quadrant activity. This was one of the activities that I had been warned about by previous white participants because they had felt attacked or targeted during this conversation. As I reflect on this experience, I have realized that I never sought out any previous participants of the workshop that were Black to get their opinion of the work. This was largely in part because my professional network in my job did not directly connect me to any Black administrators on a daily basis. We broke into four quadrants: white women, Black women, white men, and Black men. In these groups we generated a question that we would like to ask of each of the other groups. We had a long discussion in our group of white women about what it was that we wanted to ask of each group, and I largely listened as the other women in my group discussed the options for our questions. The groups each then had an opportunity

to ask their questions of the other group and then to listen, without responding, to their answers. The other groups were also given an opportunity to comment on the question. I was particularly taken aback by the question that the Black women asked of the white women when they asked why white women are viewed as being delicate. I felt offended by this question because I don't view myself as delicate and I felt as though I was being stereotyped amongst all white women. As an athlete and former firefighter, delicate was never a word I had used to describe myself. But I realized through their question and the subsequent conversations that I had the privilege to be "delicate" if I wanted to be and it would be accepted of me as a white woman, but the Black women shared that they didn't feel they were ever perceived as "delicate". After time to process this activity, we broke into our ally teams and engaged in a discussion as a follow-up to the day and then ended in the caucus groups where we were able to discuss the impact of those conversations on us. I sat in these, frustrated with myself because I had so many thoughts in my head and yet couldn't seem to form the right words to engage in the conversation. Again, I chose to drive home. As I reflected later, I came to the conclusion again, that part of my unwillingness to stay overnight was about control. I felt that because I was immersed in a week in which the learning caused such emotional vulnerability that felt out of my control, my ability to control my physical circumstance was part of maintaining my autonomy.

The next day opened with a history of our region and an examination of the racist and oppressive practices that took place throughout our history. We spent a large chunk of the morning examining white privilege and digging deeper into what that meant and what it looks like. These are probably the deepest conversations I have ever had and the

most open I have ever been to discuss my own privilege because I had just spent two days building trust with those in the room and building a deeper understanding of the systems that cause oppression and how the system is set up to benefit me. The trainer shared with us the article “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack” by Peggy McIntosh in which she said, “I was taught to see racism only as individual acts of meanness, not invisible systems conferring dominance on my group” (1989, p. 1). As part of our discussion and exploration of white privilege we engaged in a privilege walk in which the entire group went to an outdoor space and lined up hand in hand across a large field. Facilitators then began to read statements such as, “If either of your parents graduated from college, take one step forward.” and “If you have ever felt passed over for an employment position based on your gender, ethnicity, age or sexual orientation take one step backward.” We continued through about forty of these statements trying to stay connected by holding hands throughout the process but soon realized that the experiences of those standing in the initial straight-line were so varied that ultimately, we ended scattered across the field and unable to remain connected. At the end of the process those that had moved forward on the field were predominantly white, and it was a white man that had moved the farthest forward. Those that had moved the farthest backward on the field were predominately Black. Some participant had to move so far back that they were into the woods at the back of the field. This exercise provided a stark visualization of the inequities that result from the systems and policies in our society; one in which I found myself very close to the front of the group, just behind a few of the white men.

After the exercise, we took time to debrief as a group and eat lunch after we reconvened to discuss internalized racism. This is the first time that I have ever really

understood the idea that many people of color internalized racial oppression. I've seen the study where young Black children preference the white doll, but I'd never examined internalized oppression and racism as a cycle.

The facilitator shared a quote with us about internalized racism that said that:

internalized racism has been the primary means by which we have been forced to perpetuate and “agree” to our own oppression. It has been a major factor in preventing us, as Black people, I'm realizing and putting into action the tremendous intelligence and power which in reality we possess... patterns of internalized oppression severely limit the effectiveness of every existing Black group. (Lipsky, 1977, p. 1)

The experiences that the Black participants shared about how they had internalized oppression and racism and at times justified these horrific experiences to themselves were heartbreaking and infuriating. I felt so much shame for not ever understanding the depth of this oppression and also felt guilty that these Black participants were reliving some of the most traumatic life experiences for what felt like the benefit of teaching us as white participants. The facilitator talked with the Black participants about it being therapeutic to share these experiences, but it still felt unbalanced somehow in the benefit I gained vs. the pain they were sharing. I refused to cry in public during these sessions as I felt it wasn't something I had a right to do, but after this session, I found myself in a far-off part of the campus, alone and in tears. The emotional nature of identity exploration is one of the things that makes it so challenging to implement. It requires people to be vulnerable and open and, for some, this is a barrier that must be broken down prior to being willing to engage.

After a dinner break, we met again with our ally teams and had some very deep conversations about our own self-discoveries that we had made throughout today's experience. I was particularly frustrated and angry with myself, for being unable to eloquently articulate the anger, frustration, and guilt that I was feeling. I shared this with my group but felt guilty in doing so because I have privilege that allows me to enter and exit from these feelings as I please and my ally team members of color do not have this luxury.

We closed the evening in our caucus groups with a brief discussion of the day and then celebrated our newfound friendships and bond with a friendly competition in our ally groups playing relay race type games. It was a welcomed relief from the stress of the day and was followed by a party hosted by our facilitators with dancing, drinking, and eating. Everyone was exhausted but at the same time many were unable to head home to bed because there was such a strong desire to spend more time with these people with whom we had built a bond, and we all knew that tomorrow would be our last day together.

On this last night of the retreat, I opted not to go home; I had reached a point where being at the retreat center felt more comfortable and I had a strong desire to remain both physically and emotionally connected to the people in the space. I also thought that by staying I might get an extra hour or two of sleep, but this completely backfired because I spent the next two hours talking in the dark with my white female roommate, who was a fellow administrator, about how to dismantle systemic oppression and close the opportunity gap in our school district.

Our last day was framed around what comes next, how we can facilitate liberation, how we can be allies, and how we can use our positions of leadership to change the systems of oppression. We spent time in the morning discussing the cycle of liberation, and really digging into how to use our positions of leadership in our schools and in our district to implement strategies that support our students and staff and how in our own lives, both personally and professionally, we can go about fighting systems of oppression. We had an opportunity as an ally group to engage in role-play practice of having the difficult conversations that often result when fighting for social justice. We closed our day with a discussion of reentry to our “regular” lives. Particularly, what not to do when we encountered our friends and loved ones and wanted to share all that we had learned. We discussed the reality of our deep exploration of leadership and racism, and the fact that they had been home for four days not engaging these conversations. Which is not to say that we should not share our learning, but we needed to do it in a way that would be heard and valued and understood and not poured over them.

This four-day retreat was then followed up and supported by two full days of professional learning during the following school year for the group of teachers from my district that had attended the summer training together. This provided an incredible opportunity to come together to revisit the topics we discussed during the summer, to reflect on the things that we were doing and to discuss the challenges with one another. It was also an opportunity to continue our learning around new and deeper topics. We came back together for the first time in October from across seven buildings in our district, and it was like reuniting with old friends. We were so grateful for the time to have with one another to share and continue our learning as the day flew by. We met one more time in

December, before the pandemic hit in the spring and we were unable to meet again. This opportunity to step away from my regular workday and spend two full days revisiting the work of the summer expanding my learning truly helped to reinforce and hold me accountable for using what we had learned.

There is an entire cohort of staff that have gone through this summer institute over the years and during the 2019-2020 school year our Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction created reunion opportunities in the evenings where all of the folks that had attended the summer institute over the years were able to come together and share their experience and continue our learning. This happened three times over the course of the school year and each time was a great opportunity to discuss the impact we can have on our district and our students and to be able to discuss and collaborate around ideas and challenges. It was powerful to see the connections that had been formed by each group over the years. They all worked in a variety of buildings and as they came together at the first meeting, some for the first time in years, it was like seeing long lost friends. The camaraderie was evident in the interactions and for a few groups even in their appearance as they had coordinated to wear the t-shirt provided during their year of the institute. It was evident that this shared experience brought us together in a way that outsiders couldn't understand. The facilitators lead discussions with the entire group and gave us opportunities to reflect on, and share with the whole group, what had made the greatest impact on us at our institute and what we have been able to do, or implement, or change since our experience. Everyone had been clearly impacted by what they learned, the challenge remains however, of how to translate the learning into collective action on an ongoing basis. People had made changes at the individual or school level, but they

were largely singular acts that have not yet reach an organization-wide or systemic level. I am hopeful that with the opportunities to continue to collaboration as a group and to expand our group each year, that this impact will continue to grow.

Attempts to Improve Professional Learning

Over my time as a school and district leader, I have had many opportunities to plan, organize, and lead professional learning. With each opportunity, I have tried to use my own experiences as an adult learner, and the knowledge I have gained through my graduate work, to design effective professional learning for the teachers I supported. The following two stories illustrate two of my most influential and successful endeavors in planning professional learning, however, both are also experiences from which I have learned and made adjustments to my current practice.

No More One-Size-Fits-All Professional Learning

After five years as a classroom teacher and two years after the first professional development with Dr. Pierce, I was hired as the content leader for English language arts for the Forks district. It was through this role that I discovered that the curriculum coordinators and content leaders had the opportunity to play a role in the professional learning that was selected for the district. I quickly learned that this looked like a spreadsheet shared amongst the coordinators in which they typed in a topic and a presenter for their subject area and that was then pushed out as the PD for teachers for professional development days. All I could think about was how much I hated large group PD that was one-size-fits-all and how many times I have been forced to sit through a session that was minimally, or not at all relevant, to my day-to-day teaching practices. It was instead a way to keep me occupied for the six hours of my professional development

workday. As the English Content Leader, even though I was new, there were a whole host of topics that I had heard from my teachers that they wanted to learn more about to improve their instruction. I struggled to figure out which of these topics would meet the needs of most of the teachers and who I could get to present the learning. I posed the question to the curriculum group, "What if we held a conference? We know there are things that teachers must learn, so what if we guided teachers towards some of their learning for the day, but then also gave them choice and trusted them to know what they needed the rest of the day. And, what if we pulled on some of our most talented teachers in addition to outside presenters to facilitate this?" From this, our first professional learning conference was born, and it was the beginning of the end of one size fits all PD.

It took some time for me to get into the planning of this conference to realize what an undertaking I had initiated. I had the support of the other coordinators to find presenters and identify session topics, but ultimately it became my responsibility to find and set up a registration system, to set up the master schedule of all of the session offerings, and to create conference registration packets for each of our 500 teachers. Ultimately, we ended up running two conferences in parallel, one for our K-6 teachers, and one for our secondary teachers because their needs were so different. Within two weeks we had generated over a hundred different session offerings and assembled a schedule that would allow teachers to attend the mandatory sessions but to also offer a plethora of options for the free time in their day.

Our goal as coordinators was to not require more than 50% of their day, and this was something we were able to achieve for 95% of our teachers. As I hit the send button on the registration link, I was equal parts excited and terrified. This is the first time in our

district that something like this has been undertaken for teacher professional learning and I knew it had the potential, if successful, to reshape the way we approach teacher professional development at the district.

In the final week of the preparation prior to the conference was exhausting. The night before the conference I pulled my first all-nighter since college. My nerves were frayed, and I was still equal parts excited and terrified. At five in the morning, I drove the twenty-five minutes to my house to nurse my one-year-old when he would typically wake up, only to find that he had woken up early that day, and my husband had already fed him a bottle. I broke down in tears of exhaustion as I pumped and prepared to make the drive back to work. While I nearly feel asleep while driving back to work, I was excited about the possibilities and terrified that we wouldn't be ready, that it wouldn't feel professional, or that the teachers would not find the day meaningful. But, by 7 a.m. the packets for registration we're ready, the rooms were set up, and my team was prepared to welcome our 500+ staff members for a day of professional learning.

After the PD day was over, we sent out a staff survey to gather feedback about the effectiveness of the day and the results were overwhelmingly positive. It truly was the beginning of the end of the whole group one-size-fits-all PD. We took the lessons we learned from this conference and continued to hold professional learning conferences at each, and every full day PD day led by the district over the next two and a half years. We were able to use this format to continue strands of learning year after year, but to also address immediate needs as well. Even after I left the district, the professional development coordinator continued to hold professional learning conferences as a way to engage teachers in their learning.

Scaling Down: Using School-Based Conferences to Support Agency

In 2007, in my new position as an assistant principal in a new district, I once again encountered quite a bit of large group one-size-fits-all PD. For my first year I engaged as a participant and led some PDs as they have been historically led, with large groups of staff together in the cafeteria. In my second year, through my work with our professional development committee, we decided to apply the conference idea within our own building to engage teachers in a variety of topics on our professional learning days. We recognized that we had a large range of skills and abilities in the various areas that we wanted to provide professional learning, and did not want to require staff to attend things that they had already learned about but also did not want our new staff (we had twenty-two new teachers that year) to miss out on the opportunities to engage in critical professional learning that we felt all of our staff must participate in. From this desire, we created a series of mini conferences over the course of the school year. They were certainly not as elaborate as a conference design for 500 staff members across a district, but instead had a smaller selection of sessions that fell into the three strands of our professional learning focus for a school year. This gave them the opportunity to not only learn from their colleague on that day but to follow up with that colleague after the professional learning with questions or to get feedback about implementation. We utilized an action planning model at the end of the day where the teachers met as a department and reflected on the goal-setting sheet that they had carried with them throughout the day. They then brought these goal setting worksheets to the department meeting to share what it was that they plan to implement in their own classroom and to hopefully create a bit of collective accountability and collaboration. Through the survey

that we gave out after this mini conference we got an incredible amount of positive feedback about its usefulness and relevance to their day today practice. We also got numerous requests to continue learning like this in the future.

The Ongoing Journey

One of the things I have become more and more aware of over the years is that this journey of adult learning, and in this case, learning in the area of social justice, is never over. With each and every professional development I attend, book I read, and conversation I have, I learn something new, challenge assumptions, and get better at engaging in the work to achieve equity and dismantle racism. Last spring, after the murder of George Floyd, I attended my first protest march. I took my daughter along with me and for the first time in my life truly engaged in public activism. I felt such a mix of emotions that day, anger for why the march needed to happen, hope in seeing the hundreds of people who showed up during a pandemic to march, joy in seeing two of my students at the helm leading the march, and hope at having my daughter at my side to let her see first-hand that the racism and oppression in our world is not acceptable and that we are not alone in thinking so.

I have felt so much guilt as I have been on my social justice journey. As I have explored my own biases and my privilege, I have felt and still feel guilt for the things that I didn't know, and for the privilege that I have. For years, I wouldn't even share with my students and colleagues the fact that I lived in an affluent suburb, and now as I look to find a new home in a new city, I feel guilty about my ability to have choice in living in nearly any neighborhood I want to. I have learned though, that guilt is not terribly productive, instead, taking action and finding ways to be a Transformative Leader is a

much more productive use of my time and knowledge. I have come to grips over the years, that I will never be done with this journey of identity development. But with each interaction, and each new thing I learn, I move closer to reaching the stage of autonomy as outlined by Helms. My heart still races when engaging in discussions of racism or handling situations that are racially charged, but I have pushed myself to grow and to take risks to challenge power and privilege and to give voice to change and community building. I have revised and reworked, over the years, my approach to professional development, but am proud of the success I have found in helping staff to find their entry point into social justice professional learning and supporting them to develop the autonomy to know where to go on their journey.

While I set out to write a dissertation focused solely on strategies for social justice professional development, I have come to realize that no professional development can be successful without an element of personal transformation. It is necessary to do the work of transforming and analyzing yourself before you can get to the work of taking action. Much like the differences in successes in the first professional development with Dr. Pierce to the second. I found that the more I wrote and examined my own stories, the more I looked inside myself, the more I realized what a significant role my own identity development has had on my understanding of professional learning. My path to identity development has been long in duration, and steeped with content learning, both critical components to professional learning implementation, that I have been able to experience first-hand.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The decision to select autoethnography as my method for this work was not a linear path and has been a challenging endeavor. I am inherently reserved with my feelings and have never been one to reflect on my feelings and experiences in writing, let alone writing that is for public consumption and critique. However, engaging in this process has led me to deep examinations of my experiences. From this examination, I have been able to learn more about myself and draw conclusions that will have an impact on my own practices both as a human endeavoring to do better each day on my social justice journey, as well as a school leader seeking to do the best job I can for my staff and students and to become a transformative leader. This work, as part of the dissertation process, has pushed me further along on my journey through the stages of white identity development and has served to make clear for me that the work of professional learning aligned to social justice, cannot begin without the foundation of identity exploration. In this dissertation, I have examined my experiences through the frameworks of transformative leadership as well as adult learning theory and have summarized these conclusions below that I will use to continue to guide my own growth and my work as a school leader, while also hoping that they will serve to allow others to reflect on their journey to become a transformative school leader. I have chosen to split my conclusions into two parts, first I have outlined the critical components of effective social justice aligned professional learning and then I have followed this with a summary of the major themes that I have taken away from my own epiphanies and discoveries as a result of this work.

Critical Components for Effective Social Justice Aligned Professional Learning

Through this work, I sought to determine what the critical features are that impact the effectiveness of social justice professional learning and how I can use these to engage in transformative leadership. Throughout the research, it has been found that the elements of effective professional learning as identified in the standards for professional learning play an important role in professional learning around issues of social justice. However, when considering components specifically critical to social justice professional learning, having diverse facilitation plays an important role even though it is not part of the standards for general professional learning. The elements of effective professional learning as identified in the standards also have additional considerations when planning social justice professional learning. For example, social justice professional learning content and context play an absolutely critical role in the effectiveness of the professional learning. It is not enough to introduce strategies to teachers. Given the deep history of race and racism and the systemic oppression that exists in our country and our world, there has to be an opportunity to explore these elements as a way to frame the importance of the learning and also to offer an opportunity for the reflection on one's own identity. Additionally, agency is an absolutely important component of professional learning, however there are times at which teachers must be required to engage in the work of social justice so that we can ensure equity for all of our students. There are ways in which to build the content and context for staff that helps them to understand why they are being required to engage.

There are also opportunities to meet people where they are, and using conferences is a great way to do this. On the spectrum of social justice professional learning and

identity exploration, teachers are often in vastly different places, and by using professional learning conferences, leaders can offer sessions that allow people the agency to choose where to start. This is one area in which I have found an entry point to Transformative Leadership. By being able to examine the conditions of our staff, school, and community, I have been able to establish strategies to meet my staff where they are and to learn with them in ways that will allow them to examine inappropriate uses of power and privilege and to take action to be activists and voices for change. The duration of the professional learning is also important to its success, especially with regard to professional learning around topics of social justice. So much of what is discussed in sessions related to social justice challenges beliefs that may have been held over the entire course of one's life. These beliefs are things that will require time and repetition to change. Finally, collective participation can have an incredible and positive impact on the implementation of professional learning, but it can also have an equally negative impact as well. It is imperative that the school leader and then the facilitator of the professional learning set the stage and the context in such a way that teachers understand, embrace, and engage in the learning rather than attempt to derail it. While there are many more components of professional learning, these five are the ones I have determined to be most critical to social justice aligned professional learning.

Content

We know that when professional learning focuses on teaching subject matter content to teachers and then layers on how to teach this content, we see the most significant impact on teacher effectiveness and student outcomes (Desimone, 2009; Corcoran, 1995). In this context, the teaching of subject matter means not just teaching

strategies to teachers but teaching them the why behind the strategies. In the case of social justice aligned professional learning, it is critical to contextualize the professional learning. In the context of Adult Learning Theory, this is the alignment we can see with the need to engage in critical reflections. In order to do deep and meaningful work, it is critical to understand ones individual historical and cultural needs that impact learning (Brown, 2004). Only when one understands these, can they truly have that knowledge that will allow for the autonomy to select the correct path for their learning.

Over the course of the three professional learning opportunities in which I engaged, there were varying degrees of content delivery, and this volume of content delivery was one of the primary features that influenced the quality of the professional learning. In the case of Dr. Pierce's first professional learning workshop, he provided a small amount of content, mostly in regard to Standard English and the linguistic differences in the Black community. However, the majority of his professional learning workshop was focused on techniques and strategies that teachers could use to engage students in learning. He did not provide enough content instruction about these strategies and why they were important to make the participants value their use. In fact, from conversations with my colleagues, many of us left feeling as though they were not good teachers of our Black students and that the only way to be a good teacher of our Black students was to teach them differently from white students. It is important to also acknowledge that timeframe in which this professional development took place. This professional development was during a time when issues of race were not discussed quite as openly as they were at the time of Dr. Pierce's second professional learning sessions.

Much had transpired in the world in the time between these two sessions, that may have played a role in the willingness of the districts to dive deeply into issues of race.

Eight years later, in the second professional learning with Dr. Pierce, he spent more time in collaboration with the Equity Partners providing context and delivering content prior to diving into strategies. On the first of two days, he spent time defining cultural responsiveness and why it was necessary in our schools. He also built knowledge and created the context for addressing the needs of underserved students, with a specific focus on their socio-political and sociolinguistic “realities” in the American educational system. Only then did he dive into effective instructional strategies that could be used in a way that validated and affirmed our underserved students in the classroom. On the second day of instruction, Dr. Pierce delivered content about biases, misperceptions, and miscommunications that sometimes lead teachers to confuse cultural behaviors with disruptive behaviors. He went through a process in which participants reflected upon their unconscious biases, learned about cultural behaviors according to research and only then did we practice management strategies for their classrooms that would build upon the cultural behaviors. The fact that this professional learning was coupled with support from the Equity Partners who came in and provided additional content regarding the history of racism and segregation in our midwestern city and led participants in additional exploration of their own bias allowed this to be a deeper and more meaningful experience. All of this content provided to participants helped them to engage with the strategies differently. It positioned the participants in such a way that they were open and eager to learn the strategies that would allow them to better support their underserved students, particularly students of color. The outcome of the professional learning stood in

stark contrast to the outcomes of the previous sessions with Dr. Pierce, in that the participants left feeling informed, engaged, and with a desire to continue learning. We also left with a much deeper understanding of ourselves and the work that we would need to engage in to learn more. This was evident through the emails we received from teachers immediately following (and some even during) the professional learning session asking us to please select them to continue this work through the one-on-one coaching and future PD. They clearly embraced and understood their own need & desire to learn more. Again, this was vastly different than the reluctant implementation of strategies in classrooms by a few after his first PD years ago.

These same conclusions about the importance of content, were once again seen and experienced in the summer institute professional learning on leadership and racism in 2019. This professional learning took place over four days which allowed the facilitators to dive deeply with the participants into content and to examine the participants' relationship to that content prior to discussing what to do with the new knowledge. This extended learning not only allowed for the time to engage in critical reflections (Brown, 2004), but to also engage in experiential learning. The four-day format allowed for time to learn by doing, the third component of Adult Learning Theory (Brown, 2004). There was nearly a full afternoon spent discussing the architecture of oppression, a full day discussing institutionalized racism within our society, and another day spent learning about the history of racism in our region, white privilege, and internalized racism. All of this content delivery was coupled with opportunities to discuss and explore one's own role or relationship with the content. There were ample opportunities to practice discussing difficult topics and to explore deeply our biases and experiences. After three

full days spent learning about and exploring the content, only then, on the fourth day, did we engage in the strategies and techniques for implementing that new content knowledge and dismantling systemic inequities and racism. This deep exploration of content was one of the primary reasons why this professional learning was so impactful. It coupled the delivery of the content with lengthy opportunities to reflect and practice discussing the content before moving on to the strategies for utilizing it in our classrooms and schools.

As can be seen from these three different professional learning opportunities, the inclusion of content instruction is particularly critical in effective professional learning, particularly learning about issues of social justice. Many educators have limited knowledge of the topics of social justice, that then make it difficult to dive into strategies without contextualizing them in both the history and identity development of the participants.

Duration

J. L. Brown (2004) shares that professional learning opportunities that are of longer duration and time span are more likely to contain the types of learning opportunities that allow teachers to integrate new knowledge into their practice. Garet et al. furthers this conclusion when they concluded that “professional development is likely to be of higher quality if it is both sustained over time and involves a substantial number of hours.” (2001, p. 933). In the three professional learning workshops discussed in the research:

- the first took place over the course of one full day
- the second workshop was two full days separated by a semester and was accompanied by follow up coaching

- the last workshop took place over 4 days and was accompanied by two full days of follow up learning during the next school year as well as group sessions the brought together past participants of the workshop over the years to continue learning and discussing together.

Time is something that is always at a premium in education. and yet, it is something absolutely critical to the effectiveness of professional learning. In the context of professional learning, duration means both the amount of time spent in the initial learning, but also the amount of time spent in follow-up coaching, discussions, or additional learning. It can be easy to see why a quick thirty-minute workshop does not have the same impact as a four-day workshop, however there is not always time for the four-day workshop during the school year. I would argue, however, that this is where duration and follow up play an important role. Professional learning presented in a series over time, can also have an important impact on the effectiveness of the learning. While it would be ideal to be able to spend full days engaged in professional learning all the time, this is not always practical. When it can be done, it should, as it results in the highest level of quality. However it is also possible to select a focus for professional learning and distribute this learning over the course of many shorter workshop opportunities. This is where the impact of follow-up and follow-through plays a role to make the learning stick. Regardless of the length of the initial professional learning experience, it is imperative for the success of the implementation of that learning, for it to be followed with additional learning opportunities or coaching. When there is not time for multi-day professional learning, one alternative is to develop strands of learning that allow teachers to self-select their strand in order to maintain autonomy, but then remain

in this learning strand over the course of the year to ensure the continual revisiting of the topic at each professional learning day, faculty meeting, and/or professional learning committee meeting.

This is something that has become particularly evident through the researcher's attempt to implement professional learning at the building level. Initially when utilizing conference style professional learning or even full faculty workshops, content related to social justice was delivered to staff based on a current identified need, but it did not always fit into the larger picture in a way that supported connecting the various learnings. This led to a feeling of important but disconnected learning. For distributed professional learning to be effective, it is important to have an overall plan and goal that connects all of these social justice aligned professional learning opportunities.

Facilitation

Ngounou (2019) believes that professional learning about racial bias is more powerful and more effective when it is led by a diverse team of facilitators. This is an element that played a role in the effectiveness of the four-day Equity Partners workshop. At this workshop, the facilitators were both Black and white, male and female, and participants were able to be challenged to engage differently than they would have been, had the facilitators all been of one race or gender. A unique element of this professional learning was also the times in which the entire group split into what they called caucus groups to discuss with those of the same race and gender what they had learned. These were facilitated by a presenter that matched the race and gender of the group. This provided a unique opportunity to ask questions and engage in discussions that might not

have happened in a larger group or with a facilitator of a different race or gender. This then, in turn, facilitated deeper conversations when the whole group was back together.

This effectiveness of diverse facilitation is also something that has been evidenced in our building level professional learning when one of our Black teachers has co-presented alongside a white teacher. These sessions have been particularly powerful and well-received among the faculty as they have provided opportunities to hear and experience their varying perspectives, and to be pushed to engage in the content through the diversity of the facilitation.

Balance of Agency

Teacher agency also plays a critical role in the effectiveness of professional learning. Calvert (2016) shares:

In the context of professional learning, teacher agency is the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues. Rather than responding passively to learning opportunities, teachers who have agency are aware of their part in their professional growth and make learning choices to achieve their goals. (p. 4)

This agency is something that played a role in the overall success of each of the three professional learning workshops as well as the success of the conferences that the I facilitated. To be effective adult learners, Brown (2004) says that adults must learn to learn. They must be self-aware and able to critically evaluate how it is that they came to know what they know and to examine the reasoning and assumptions that caused their belief that something is true (Brown, 2004). The ability to critically evaluate one's beliefs is the final stage of effective adult learning and when this has been achieved, adults can

truly be effective in managing their own agency in determining what to learn and when there is a need to re-learn something from a new lens.

In the first professional learning workshop with Dr. Pierce, the entire district teaching staff was required to attend. There was much skepticism and frustration throughout the workshop and for many teachers, in the days and months after that, it prevented any chance of effective implementation. Years later, at the second workshop with Dr. Pierce, administrators were required to attend but the teaching staff in attendance had volunteered to attend based on interest. This resulted in a completely different learning environment during the sessions. While there may have been a small amount of reluctance among some of the administrators, there was an overall air of eagerness to learn amongst the participants and they were very engaged throughout the session. During the breaks, teachers discussed the content with enthusiasm and had even sent emails requesting to be part of follow up work before the day concluded. This experience was very similar to that of the four-day institute with the Equity Partners. In this case, administrators in attendance from our district were required to be there, but the majority of the participants were there voluntarily, and everyone, required or voluntary, was eager for the opportunity. This led to incredible engagement over the four days and in the years that followed.

There is a clear correlation between agency or having choice in what it is that you learn, and the overall engagement of participants (Gates Foundation, 2014). When teachers understand their needs and are given the opportunity to select professional learning that will meet those needs, the professional learning is naturally more effective. This was the basis by which my attempts at conference facilitation for the teaching staff

in each of the districts was based. It was my desire to give teachers as many opportunities to have agency in their own learning. The session offerings were selected based on a combination of identified needs through data or administrative observation and also through teachers own needs identification in surveys. Teachers were then given the opportunity at each of the various conference experiences to select sessions that they felt would meet their needs. At most of the conferences I organized, there were sessions that were mandated for attendance by all or some of the staff as they had been identified as critical content for staff to learn, but there was always time in the day for teachers to direct their learning. The blending of the mandated sessions with choice still led to an overall feeling of agency amongst the teachers and produced positive outcomes and feedback from the participants.

The challenge that has been identified through this research exploration of all of these professional learning opportunities and conferences is that when given the choice to select social justice aligned professional learning, there was often a repetitive group of teachers that chose to engage in this learning and those that do not. The important takeaway here is that social justice aligned professional learning cannot always be optional. There are times at which it must be required learning for all staff. However, there are opportunities to improve its overall effectiveness by helping teachers to explore and understand their need for this professional learning either before or during its implementation.

Collective Participation

“Evidence from a wide range of studies of schools engaged in reform suggests that those that make extensive use of teacher collaboration are particularly successful in

promoting implementation, in part because reforms have more authority when they are embraced by peers” (Penuel et al., 2007, p. 929). When teachers are able to engage collectively in professional learning opportunities and form networks of colleagues to learn from and with, it provides the advantage of allowing them the opportunity to engage in discussion around their learning and it allows them to collaborate to integrate and implement what they have learned into their instructional practices (Schiff et al., 2015). There is definite power in collective participation, as evidenced particularly through the four-day workshop with the Equity Partners. While there was no one else in attendance from my school, there was an entire group from the district that attended together and this allowed for rich conversation and collective follow up after the session. Because this institute has taken place over the course of many years there was also a contingency of teachers back at my building that had attended in previous years with which I was able to engage and strategize. It also provided an opportunity at the district level to bring together participants from previous years to engage in collaborative discussions and action planning.

The caveat to collective participation comes in the example of the first Dr. Pierce workshop in which the entire teaching staff was forced to attend, without a strong grounding in the importance of the professional learning and without strong follow up afterwards. This led to a kind of collective disengagement with the learning. There were some that fed off one another to form a collective dislike for the strategies presented but only deepened as more and more teachers joined this group of frustrated participants.

Summary

The School Leader’s Role in Professional Learning

The ultimate goal for me as a school leader is to be a transformative leader. To begin this, I must ensure effective professional learning by ensuring each opportunity for learning incorporates the critical components outlined above. As a school leader, I must also be situationally aware; in other words I need to know and understand where my staff is on any given professional learning topic as well as the overall needs of their staff and opportunities for growth. Until one is situationally aware, it is impossible to engage in transformational leadership. This requires me to be constantly engaged in observing classrooms, talking with teachers, talking with students, and examining data in order to make the best decisions about what opportunities to present to my staff. It is also critical for me to have an overall vision and long-term plan for professional learning. School leaders cannot plan learning opportunities from week-to-week or month-to-month when the next professional learning day appears on the calendar. There needs to be a long-term plan aligned with building goals and objectives that will allow for meaningful engagement in learning opportunities for staff. Finally I, as a school leader, must engage in the professional learning myself. It is not enough to plan opportunities and to send teachers to conferences or workshops, I must model what I expect of my staff. I must engage in understanding my own needs and seek out opportunities to grow as a leader through professional learning and to learn alongside my staff in professional learning sessions.

The Role of Teacher Agency

Teacher agency is the quickest way to ensure engagement and the teachers have true agency when they understand their own professional learning needs and are able to make choices about what to learn and when. This is absolutely critical to the teachers'

individual growth through professional learning. Teachers need to know what they need to learn and need to understand their own deficits so that they can seek out opportunities and make the right choices for their learning. The caveat to all of this is that there are times in which teachers must be led towards learning opportunities that they might shy away from. There are times in which teachers may either not be aware of what they need, or they are aware, but are reluctant to engage in learning in that area. The researcher has found this to be particularly true in areas of social justice as these often involve deep personal exploration and can at times be painful or emotional and require openness on the part of the teacher to fully engage. It is at these times where the school leader plays a critical role in helping teachers to understand what and why they need to learn and to guide teachers towards these opportunities. It is not okay for teachers to opt out of social justice professional learning, as it is critical in ensuring equity for all students.

The Impact of Identity Development

School leaders that have not engaged in an exploration of their own identity as it relates to social justice will find it difficult to organize or facilitate these learning opportunities for their staff. It will also be nearly impossible to engage in critical conversations and discourse with their teachers. This is something that the researcher experienced over the course of fifteen years engaged in various learning opportunities aligned with social justice and identity exploration. Engaging in the work requires vulnerability and risk-taking but the more a leader is able to engage in their own identity development and engage in these discussions and conversations the more natural it becomes to engage in the work and to have the tough conversations. When needed, it also enables the leader to be able to better identify within their staff the opportunities for

growth and the types of professional learning experiences that should be offered. As a young white female entering the educational space in a large midwestern city 15 years ago, I had no idea how little I knew about systemic oppression, racism, and my own bias and identity. Had you asked me all those years ago how I identify, White is definitely not a word I would have used to describe myself. I did not truly understand the significance it played in my life and the privileges that it afforded me. If you told me fifteen years ago that I had white privilege, I probably would have been offended and would have tried to explain how hard I had worked over the course of my life despite the comforts of my upbringing. I truly entered my work as an educator in the “Contact” stage as defined by Helms, in which I was proud to say that I couldn’t recall at times whether a student was white or Black. I thought that meant that I wasn’t focused on race and certainly that I wasn’t racist, when in reality, it meant that I hadn’t taken the time to get to know my students as individuals and to value their racial and cultural heritage as part of their identity. It has taken years of exploration of my own identity and my own bias to even begin to understand my role within systemic oppression and the things that I can do to dismantle it. As a school leader, especially a privileged white school leader, it would be easy to opt-out of offering professional learning to staff around issues of social justice because it is difficult, but that is not an option. The more a school leader can learn about their own identity, about systems of oppression, along with the culture of their school, their community, and their students, the easier it becomes to lead or organize professional learning on these topics.

The Importance of Duration and Follow Up

Social justice work can be challenging and there is often the temptation to check the box by attending or offering the professional learning session and then moving on. However, to effect meaningful change, it is imperative that professional learning particularly that around social justice topics is long in duration and or repeated and built upon overtime. Understanding over 400 years of racism and oppression in our country is not something that can be covered in a single professional learning workshop but is instead a journey that must be undertaken by districts, schools, and the people within them. The power of this was evidenced in the second Dr. Pierce workshop where the learning took place over multiple workshops and was supported by follow up coaching. This helped to hold teachers accountable for the implementation of learning and also gave them a network of colleagues that were attempting the implementation of the learning with whom they could share ideas.

The Equity Partners Institute was the best example of longevity and follow up. It was part of a district initiative that took place over many years and resulted in a large network of staff that had all participated in this work with whom follow-up could take place. Not only was this professional learning four days in length, but it was accompanied by two more follow-up days of learning and then network meetings with all those that had participated in the past. All of these factors combined resulted in incredibly effective professional learning that was able to lead to action.

As a school leader, the researcher has attempted to utilize long term planning to create a series of learning experiences around social justice. During the workshops, there are opportunities to select social justice aligned professional learning. Using a workshop format has allowed for the repetition of sessions from previous years or months to make

them available to new staff or to staff that had not attended. There is still much work to be done in this area to truly define a path for this learning and to keep it from being disjointed.

Final Thoughts

While there is no perfect professional learning workshop or system, there are clear elements that result in the most effective professional learning possible. Within this, there is also a deeper understanding that must be had of how to effectively utilize these elements in the context of social justice professional learning. I have learned through my experiences and my reflections in this work, that identity development and social justice aligned professional development are inextricably tied. One cannot truly move forward on their journey towards equity for their students without first exploring their own identity. Social justice professional learning is a deeply personal experience that requires vulnerability and that at times can be painful for participants. However, it is absolutely imperative to engage in this learning in order to ensure equity for students and for the overall transformation of our society. As a school leader, I play a particularly important role in ensuring that these opportunities are present in my building and that the right professional learning opportunities are presented in the most effective way possible if I truly want to achieve transformational leadership. I hope that through my reflections on my successes and failures, that other school leaders can see in their own work the things they can do to work towards transformational leadership.

In her book *Killing Rage: Ending Racism*, bell hooks said, “There must exist a paradigm, a practical model for social change that includes an understanding of ways to transform consciousness that are linked to efforts to transform structures” It is my hope

that this work will help me to begin to find the ways to transform the consciousnesses of my teachers and myself and to connect this to the transformation of the inequitable structures in my school and community.

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