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Anti-racism is not an initiative: How professional learning communities may advance equity and social-emotional learning in schools

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ABSTRACT


There is a sense of urgency among P-12 educators to dismantle systemic school-based racism and radically transform conditions for teaching and learning in ways that advance equity, social justice, and social-emotional learning (SEL). This transformation cannot be achieved through typical top-down, short-term approaches to school improvement or professional development. In this article we explain how, in an urban school district working to bring Digital Literacy and Computer Science (DLCS) to all students, robust professional learning communities (PLCs) have been leveraged to redress racism and led to changes in teacher mind-sets, more equitable classroom practices, and positive social-emotional learning outcomes. We explain how routine school improvement initiatives, such as stand-alone professional development events, fail to address racist beliefs and behaviors, and are inadequate to the task of advancing SEL. We describe the attributes and outcomes of effective PLCs, including the effects that PLC participation may have on teacher capacity to make anti-racist changes to curriculum and instruction, and advance the social, emotional, and academic learning of all students.

Introduction

In responding to the call for proposals for this special issue of *Theory into Practice*, we resonated strongly with this assertion, paraphrased from the words of the guest editors, Dustin Miller, Brett Zyromski, and Melvin J. Brown:

K-12 schools in the US are microcosms of society, and in mirroring larger social inequalities and injustices, they render the experiences and outcomes of students of color inequitable in comparison to their white peers. Historically racist structures and practices in our schools negatively impact the academic and social and emotional learning of students of color.

This assertion is well-supported by decades of empirical research, and the lived experiences of students and their families, and is increasingly shared by the policy-makers, district and school leaders, and teachers whose decisions and actions hold the potential to address this catastrophically unjust reality. Yet there remains no clear road map to de-centering

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whiteness and bringing about positive change in P-12 education. Miller, Zyromski and Brown then posed a compelling question intended to elicit responses that might illuminate pathways to restructuring educational environments so that all students, but especially historically marginalized students, can thrive: “Can the application of social and emotional learning be used to dismantle and rebuild racist structures in K-12 education?” The framing of this question, we believe, relies upon two implicit premises about the nature of school improvement initiatives and teacher professional development which must be made explicit and re-envisioned before a viable theory of change linking social and emotional learning to the eradication of racist structures and practices in schools can be put forth. The underlying premises that we discuss in this article as a way of contributing to this critical conversation are

- (1) The conceptualization of social-emotional learning (SEL) as an initiative that can be “applied” in school settings neglects the ways in which school-based SEL, and other areas of P-12 curriculum content, are rooted in whiteness (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013) and deficit thinking about the cultures, identities, and behaviors of historically marginalized students (Kaler-Jones, 2020).

In our view, SEL cannot be seen as a curricular or instructional initiative that is planned or purchased, implemented, evaluated, and completed by teachers. Mainstream SEL initiatives are not a strategy for dismantling white supremacy and systemic racism in schools. Rather, if SEL is to support the learning and development of all students, especially those currently and historically marginalized and silenced by racist educational structures and practices, *all* learning must be seen as social-emotional learning, and SEL must be approached in the context of forming strong, developmental student-teacher relationships (Li & Julian, 2012), explicitly combatting deficit mind-sets and unleashing the potential for genius in every student (Muhammad, 2018), and building inclusive, identity-affirming classrooms and school communities (e.g., Nagaoka et al., 2015; National Equity Project, n.d.). In other words, educators should not assume that SEL will manifest in the classroom as a result of teacher participation in SEL-focused PD, and in fact, doing so may replicate and reify the very social-emotional dynamics we intend to redress.

- (2) Relatedly, the conceptualization of social-emotional learning as an initiative that can be applied in school settings neglects the critical role of adult learning environments — the modes through which teachers are or are not afforded the opportunity to surface and transform their own assumptions and practices — in ways that will lead to the creation of inclusive, identity-affirming classroom environments and thus to improved SEL and academic outcomes for students (Leonard, 2021; Woodland, 2021).

Our stance regarding the current theory and practice of SEL-related PD in the US P-12 public schools is that the compartmentalized, episodic, and expert-delivered sessions that typify teacher PD are unlikely to lead to the changes in teacher mind-sets and practices needed to bring about positive SEL outcomes for students. Instead, effective adult learning related to SEL must be designed based on the learning sciences and studies of effective collaboration and implicit bias. Professional development should invite robust discourse, not compliance. It must increase teacher self-awareness of how their various social identities

(e.g., race, class, gender, language, dis/ability) shaped their education and development, their beliefs about schooling, and how they continue to shape their views of students, and it must engage them in designing, piloting, and reflecting on curricula that actively value, engage, and empower all students (National Equity Project, n.d.). We believe that robust job-embedded teacher professional learning communities (and not stand-alone or short-term SEL-focused initiatives) have the potential to radically transform teaching and student learning for the better.

Problematic legacies in traditional teacher PD & SEL initiatives

To understand why traditional school improvement initiatives cannot yield transformative change, it is necessary to understand how the legacies of a system of public education steeped in the industrialist, colonialist ideologies of the nineteenth century continue to dominate US P-12 public schools in the twenty-first century. Students are rigidly age-grouped, and move through the system in these age-grouped batches with minimal regard for natural variation in human development. Content knowledge is compartmentalized by subject area, and aspects of schooling from daily timetables to standardized assessments to teaching licensure are structured in accordance with these divisions, in spite of their irrelevance to much of life beyond the walls of the school (Goodlad, 2004; Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). Studies indicate that the percentage of US-based classroom instruction that employs extensive lecturing in which students are passive learners averages at least 60% of the time across all disciplines and has persisted in this fashion for over a decade (Hurtado et al., 2012). In spite of clear consensus in the learning sciences that validates active, learner-centered pedagogies, a factory-based model for efficiently processing children in “rationally organized and cost-effective institutions” still has a powerful hold on our schools (Rury, 2020).

Approaches to teacher professional development also suffer from the influence of the industrial model of education. Research in teacher PD has converged around 5 elements that empirically appear most likely to increase teacher learning and student achievement. These elements consist of the following a) a content focus which attends to subject-specific knowledge and skills; b) active learning that engages teachers in observation, dialogue, presentation, and writing vs. sitting and receiving information; c) coherence, i.e. alignment with school-based initiatives and goals; d) duration, that is, adequate frequency and contact time, and; e) collective participation enabling teachers to interact with colleagues who share the same students, grade level, and/or content area (Desimone, 2009). Most PD provided by US public school districts, however, falls short of honoring Desimone’s principles of effective PD. Instead, PD entails teachers attending classes, conferences, or in-service workshops led by experts from outside their school. Individual teachers are subsequently left to decide on their own whether and what to implement in their classrooms (Schleifer et al., 2017).

These problematic legacies can be viewed in more depth by examining the specific case of how SEL initiatives are currently enacted, and how teachers are prepared (or not) to enact them, in the mainstream of US P-12 public education. In most school settings, SEL is delivered via programs or lessons rather than integrated into regular classroom instruction. The programs are not context-adapted, culturally responsive, nor do they address

racism or other forms of systematic oppression. As the products of mostly white program developers, SEL programs do not routinely center the cultures, identities, and aspirations of historically marginalized peoples. Instead, they implicitly center whiteness, reinforcing deficit perspectives of Black and Brown children rather than affirming their emerging identities and celebrating their potential for genius (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Muhammad, 2020). Prominent SEL frameworks appear to assume a homogenous student population, and do not sufficiently explain how to contextualize SEL related to the presence of systemic racism, implicit bias, white supremacy, student trauma/toxic stress exposure, or other salient conditions. An inordinate emphasis on self-management skills like anger management or mindfulness may have the effect of minimizing students' lived experiences of trauma or oppression (Berman, 2018). A review of 51 studies of SEL initiatives in urban schools by McCallops et al. (2019) found that only 5 of 51 indicated use of culturally responsive practices, while none addressed the effects of stereotypes and discrimination on development. The recently released *Guide for Racial Justice and Abolitionist Social Emotional Learning* (Abolitionist Teaching Network, 2020) is a marker of progress toward calling out and dismantling white supremacist SEL, but mainstream SEL initiatives cannot be looked to as a strategy for dismantling white supremacy and systemic racism in schools.

Through our work with teachers, teacher-leaders, administrators, and fellow researchers as part of a CSforALL Research Practice Partnership (RPP) in an urban school district in the Northeast, and with collaboration and inspiration from scholars including Dr. Keisha Green and Dr. Gholdy Muhammad, we have seen how typical school improvement initiatives, characterized by a discrete content focus and the implementation of a set of steps and specific tactics, are woefully insufficient to the task of transforming (predominantly white) teacher beliefs and practices. Instead, educators must re-envision PD and PLCs in school improvement to align with this clarion call from Jamilah Pitts in a recent issue of the *Learning for Justice* magazine:

Anti-racist education and anti-racist schooling cannot be packaged or prescribed, arranged into a checklist, rubric or formula. Anti-racist educators understand that anti-racist work begins with the self. They begin by grappling with their beliefs, mindsets, philosophies and biases about the world, education and their students. They work to become conscious of the intentional, multiple ways schools mirror society and how all aspects of school systems are designed to uphold the oppressive aims of the society in which they operate (Pitts, 2020).

In this article, we draw on our own experiences as white researchers, and on the voices and experiences of our nonwhite and white teacher and researcher partners in the RPP, to illustrate how leaving behind the typical, expert-delivered approach to curriculum initiatives and teacher PD and instead embracing a collaborative, iterative design for robust professional learning communities enabled teachers to engage in the reflective, challenging conversations that are essential precursors to disrupting existing racist curricular and instructional practices and enacting transformative changes in the classroom that honor the developing identities and social-emotional learning of all students.

Overview of RPP context

For the past six years we have worked in a CSforALL RPP that aims to bring standards-based Digital Literacy and Computer Science (DLCS) to all K-5 students in a medium-sized urban school district. The district serves more than 25,000 students from preschool to grade 12 in 32 elementary schools, 12 middle schools, 3 schools serving grades 6 to 12, and 8 alternative schools. Nearly 20% of the district's students are African American, 65% are Hispanic, 12% are white, and 3% are Asian. More than 67% are classified as economically disadvantaged (among the highest in the state), and more than 26% do not speak English as a first language. There are roughly 2,040 teachers in the district. The state rates the district as one that is in need of substantial assistance.

After an initial year of attempting to support teachers' DLCS learning through the use of a publicly available online course designed to train K-8 teachers in computer science integration, the RPP recognized that this course implied to teachers that they could adopt and implement the course's recommended curriculum units and instructional practices without considering how they needed to be adapted to the particular context of this school district and the needs of its students. Additionally, the course advanced a definition of equity, the *ALL* in CSforALL, as *access* to computer science education. Providing access might bring students to the threshold of learning about DLCS, but it would not ensure that they could cross the threshold, enter the room with a sense of belonging in that space, and engage in making sense of who they are (identity), developing proficiency in DLCS (skills), gaining knowledge (intellect), or learning to think in ways of understanding power, privilege, and oppression (criticality; Muhammad, 2018). Reflecting with other RPP members, we came to understand that this *access*-centered vision of computer science education in which teachers delivered standards-based DLCS modules to all students was bound to fail to yield the transformative outcomes the district hoped for, and that a shift to a vision that centers opportunities for teachers and students to develop their identities and criticality, along with their DLCS knowledge and skills, was needed. The RPP's model for innovation thus evolved to prioritize the establishment of PLCs, through the district's predominantly white teaching force could engage in iterative cycles to create, pilot, revise, implement, and reflect on equity-centered DLCS units of study.

Professional learning communities

The establishment of PLCs is an important, yet under-utilized school-wide strategy to transform the content and raise the caliber of classroom teaching (Woodland & Mazur, 2019). Blitz and Shulman describe PLCs as "teams of educators (most commonly teachers) who meet regularly (often but not always during scheduled school time) to develop lesson plans, examine student work, monitor student progress, assess the effectiveness of instruction, and identify their professional learning needs" (2016, p. 1). Effective PLCs are grounded in the principles of improvement science, a type of evidence-based collective inquiry that aims to increase organizational capacity to solve pressing problems of instructional practice (Woodland, 2016). Schools that adopt PLCs reserve space and time for collaborative teaming, enabling teachers to jointly assess and find solutions to problems of practice related to what and how students are learning (or not) through a continuous cycle of improvement. PLCs have taken root in many schools across the United States for good

reason — their benefits are numerous and profound. Studies have shown that PLCs enhance everything from teacher satisfaction to student achievement (see, Vescio et al., 2008). They have been shown to positively impact school culture, improve teacher self-efficacy, reduce teacher isolation, boost an organization's overall capacity, and build a shared culture of high-quality instructional practice (Caprara et al., 2006; Dufour & DuFour, 2008; Talbert, 2009). Little is known, however, about the role PLCs may have in dismantling racist structures and practices and promoting social-emotional learning in schools.

In our RPP, PLCs became the primary mechanism through which teachers collaborated to produce and enact DLCS modules, and identify and address problems of practice related to designing culturally responsive curriculum and instruction. From the launch of the project the RPP's leaders worked to create the conditions necessary to enable robust PLCs. Specifically, we ensured that every person working on the project (i.e. 100+ classroom teachers, 5 teacher-leaders, 8 district administrators, and 4 university personnel) was a member of at least one PLC, and that every PLC had allotted a regular and sufficient amount of time to meet face-to-face (online or in person), had a shared purpose, and employed effective collaboration processes (e.g., protocols to facilitate dialogue, preplanned agendas, documentation of decisions and actions, etc.). PLCs in the RPP network include multiple teacher Design Teams (organized in cohorts by grade level), a team of teacher-leaders, an RPP leadership team, and an RPP advisory team. Through the RPP's NSF funding, the teacher-leader team and Design Team teacher PLCs were provided stipends and afforded time to work in dyads on curriculum development and in PLC meetings outside of the contractual day and during the summer. To better understand how the shift from traditional PD to PLCs influenced the beliefs and behaviors of teachers, and influenced the social-emotional learning outcomes of both teachers and students, we conducted a series of interviews, reviewed, and analyzed teacher and student interview transcripts and PLC meeting transcripts, and reviewed and analyzed teacher follow-up surveys about PLC meetings. These sources revealed (a) how PLC participation influenced teacher mind-sets; and (b) the effects that PLC participation had on teacher capacity to make anti-racist changes to curriculum and instruction and to advance the social, emotional, and academic learning of their students.

PLCs and changes in teacher mind-sets

Effective collaboration in a PLC “inevitably requires touching teachers’ underlying beliefs, which will inevitably lead to disagreement and conflict” (Vangrieken et al., 2015, p. 27). Teachers in our RPP shared that PLCs enabled them to surface and address conflicting points of view. As one 4th grade teacher described, “It doesn’t matter as much whether we know each other or have a high degree of trust already, we can have difficult conversations.” Use of protocols helped make collaboration “safe” by establishing rules of engagement in which everyone had an opportunity to be heard. The teacher continued, “[The PLC] allows all different types of people to participate . . . protocols give everyone an entry point into the conversation or the activity even when, or especially when, it’s difficult.” A 5th grade teacher and Design Team member explained, “Topics that make individuals feel uncomfortable need to be discussed or else resolutions cannot be made and steps to improve different systems won’t happen. [Our PLC] can discuss just about anything.” Teachers contrasted their positive perceptions of collaborative learning in the RPP to (more negative)

experiences with the passive, didactic group learning that they more typically experienced in traditional in-service PD. Quality of collaboration is one factor known to influence how committed teachers are to their school and to teaching (Johnson et al., 2012). In the first three years of the RPP, 93% of participants completed the full year of involvement in their Design Team PLC; and the 5-member teacher-leader PLC had a 100% retention rate for that three-year period.

In addition to attending to the fundamental attributes of effective PLCs, the leadership team deployed strategies specifically for the purposes of advancing equity within the RPP. These include the RPP leadership modeling equity learning and racial literacy development; incorporation of scholarship such as Culturally Relevant Teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1994) and Muhammad's HILL Framework for Culturally and Historically Responsive Literacy (2020); long-term relationships with embedded equity consultants; and a coaching (rather than training) model to build practitioner expertise in leading equity work. Critical concepts like implicit bias and asset/deficit mind-sets were introduced in PLCs with facilitation from scholars like Dr. Keisha Green and texts like Muhammad's *Cultivating Genius*. Unlike a traditional "book study" PD, these PLCs were sustained across multiple school years and engaged teachers in iterative cycles of learning from *Cultivating Genius*, considering and planning how to apply Muhammad's ideas in their own teaching, and then returning to share reflections on what actually occurred in the classroom. In these ways, the PLCs enabled teachers to reflect on their own identities and those of their students, and grapple with their implicit biases, leading to deepened critical consciousness, as illustrated in this teacher reflection:

Equity can be intimidating for a lot of people, it's a difficult conversation. In the past, I would get nervous because I would be afraid to say the wrong thing in a conversation about equity. I was afraid I'd insult somebody or say something that would make someone uncomfortable, just because I wasn't 100% sure. Having PLCs to have those conversations, it allowed me the opportunity to really think and process and to share. I realized I didn't need to be right and I wasn't afraid to be wrong.

PLCs and anti-racist changes to curriculum and instruction

As Schweisfurth noted,

Teaching and learning are deeply embedded in the cultural, resource, institutional and policy context in which they take place. Classroom interactions are at the heart of pedagogy, and any effort to improve or to evaluate the outcomes of these processes generates its own sets of interactions, and shapes the priorities and identities of teachers and learners. (2015, p. 259).

RPP participant teachers described the transformative nature of the PLCs on themselves as learners, and on the changes in their classroom practices that followed. For example, a 2nd grade teacher described changing her practices around intervening when students are struggling:

It was really easy for me to jump in and just do things for the students, especially in remote learning, because you say something, you say something, you say something, and then you just want to do it for them. And a big thing that I was trying to push with students was, just try. If you have a problem, just try to figure it out first, switch around the box, try something new, just not giving up.

Other teachers noted how their PLC participation led to changes in the language they used to promote broadened visions of who can be a computer scientist, such as switching the pronouns used for a Beebot device from masculine to feminine. A 4th grade teacher reflected on how her choice of a nonfiction text to accompany a Scratch story-telling lesson raised student interest in coding because it portrayed a Puerto Rican artist and activist. The classroom interactions occurring during the teaching of the DLCS modules developed, piloted, and refined by these teacher PLCs thus mirrored the interactions in the PLCs themselves: whether plugged-in or unplugged, they were active, reflective, inclusive, and identity-affirming.

Computer science education suffers from a pronounced racial participation gap and lack of consensus about effective ways to support teachers in creating equitable learning opportunities (Goode et al., 2020). Our observations about the influence of our RPP's PLCs on classroom practice extend earlier findings about the value of PLCs that are inquiry-based and equity-focused (Ryoo et al., 2015) and suggest that these PLCs may create conditions that build teacher confidence to make inclusive, anti-racist changes in their instructional practices. This is illustrated in the reflection of a 3rd grade teacher:

PLCs give me the space to actually think about the topic of equity and think about my own personal ideas on it, and learn from other people's ideas. And it helps me grow in my own understanding. Being able to talk about it openly, being able to participate in that conversation in a way that's useful and meaningful to everyone, I take what I have learned, can reflect on my own biases, and am able to better design lessons for all students. PLCs provide a structure for all of that to happen.

Teacher reflections suggest that the teaching of DLCS units resulted in increased student engagement across the board, with particular gains for English Learners and other historically marginalized students. Student interviews provide examples of how the DLCS units were experienced as identity-affirming and confidence-building, enabling students from disenfranchised groups to envision a future as a programmer or engineer, in spite of currently low representation of Black and Brown people in those professions. A second-grade girl, when asked how she felt about her Scratch coding project, responded, "I know the code, I know everything." Similarly, this excerpt from an interview with a second-grade boy exudes confidence:

Interviewer: It sounds like you're going to grow up to be a tech person. You're so good at this. And you like it?

Student: Yes. I totally love it.

Implications for educational practice

In the mainstream of US educational practice, to use the language of social network theory, SEL and anti-racism are typically treated as simple innovations that can be spread rapidly through "weak ties,"¹ such as brief, episodic dosages of classroom instruction or traditional teacher professional development. Our experience with PLCs in this CSforALL RPP, however, suggests that SEL and anti-racism are not simple innovations that can be transmitted through traditional, didactic practices. Rather they are complex, more akin to larger social movements like Marriage Equality or Black Lives Matter than to typical school improvement initiatives. Scholars have found that individuals value the informational and

emotional support that can only be given and received through “strong ties” (Krämer et al., 2021), and that complex innovations (such as anti-racist and SEL-affirming pedagogy) do not spread rapidly through weak ties, but rather emerge and develop through a social system (i.e. PLCs) of dense, strong ties over time, before eventually being more widely adopted (Centola, 2021). The spread of a complex innovation such as anti-racism or SEL, requires changes to beliefs and behaviors, and teachers need opportunities to see, talk about, and understand what their peers are doing and how they are doing it before having the confidence to enact those changes themselves. We believe that educators who want to dismantle systemic racism in schools and improve student SEL need to be attentive to the conditions that enable strong adult learning networks to thrive. These include:

- Building and sustaining robust, effective school-based PLCs as levers for individual and institutional change.
- Providing teachers with time, space, and support for critical dialogue about identity, implicit biases, and systemic oppression, so they can recognize and transform racist beliefs and practices.
- Treating SEL and anti-racism not as initiatives but rather as transformative pedagogical approaches embedded within and essential to all aspects of teaching and learning.

In the 21st century, raising all teachers’ capacity to equitably support the social-emotional development of students has become a pressing educational priority. Social-emotional competence is more strongly associated than test scores with beneficial life outcomes for students (Jackson et al., 2020) but further work remains before a viable theory of change linking SEL to the dismantling of systemic racism can be put forth. Other contributors to this issue take up additional complexities related to the question of whether and how social-emotional learning can become a lever to bring about transformative anti-racist change in school settings, such as the role of the principal in leading change, the knowledge base and skill sets required of teachers enacting change, and, critically, the culturally affirming SEL that must be provided for educators themselves before they can be expected to meaningfully enact anti-racist SEL in their classrooms. We look forward to their contributions and to the strengthened dialogue that can follow as a pathway to transforming schools into more just learning environments in which all children, especially those historically and currently marginalized by structures and practices that center whiteness, can thrive.

Note

1. See Mark Granovetter’s (1973) seminal piece, “The Strength of Weak Ties,” in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

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Additional Resources

Books

1. MacDonald, J., Mohr, N., Dichter, A., and McDonald, E. (2013). *The power of protocols*. Teachers College Press.

This book introduces readers to the why, the how, and the what of protocols, a critical component of building an effective professional learning community.

2. Safir, S., and Dugan, J. (2021). *Street data: A next-generation model for equity, pedagogy, and school transformation*. Corwin Press.

This book offers an assets-based approach to understanding and using data in re-envisioning and re-building the education system, rather than the prominent deficit-based approach to fixing ‘problems’ and closing ‘gaps.’

Websites

1. Center of Racial Justice and Youth Engaged Research

Located at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, this Center advances racial justice work in schools, educational research, and teacher education.

2. LiberatED SEL

The website of Dr. Dena Simmons connects readers to the work of LiberatED, a collective focused on developing resources at the intersection of SEL, healing, and justice.