Antiracism Education Activism: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding and Promoting Racial Equity

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Although antiracism activism has contributed to substantive progress under certain circumstances and in certain contexts, little research attempts to theorize how antiracism activism is manifest across contexts. In this article, we explore individual and collective antiracist actions within and outside schools. We introduce a theoretical framework that identifies four domains of activism—policy, community, leadership, and teaching and learning—in which activists operate to make a positive difference in promoting racial equity and antiracism in education. The framework offers a systemic way of thinking about antiracist activism in education and the importance of recognizing that several aspects of antiracist activism usually conceived as distinct are interrelated within and across domains. Indeed, antiracist education activism must be understood holistically and systemically if we seek to dismantle the racism that is woven into every piece of the education system.

Keywords: *activism, antiracism, community, educational policy, equity, leadership, racial inequalities, social context, teaching and learning*

RACISM is a deep and persistent problem in education. Researchers from across the social sciences have shown that educational policies and practices in the United States have institutionalized racism (Brooks & Theoharis, 2018), creating an inequitable and hostile system that normalizes whiteness[1] and disadvantages people and communities of color (Horsford, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2004). Racism compromises the quality of teaching and learning, undermines the fairness of academic assessments, and erodes the quality of relationships in schools. It is evident through opportunity gaps, inequities in disciplinary referrals, school (re)segregation, disparate graduation rates, postgraduate educational and employment outcomes, and the disproportionate number of students of color tracked into lower-quality educational experiences (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Leonardo, 2009). Yet racism is more than measurable outcomes—racism is when an individual or group of people oppresses another by creating physical, psychological, socioeconomic, cultural, and political conditions and consequences that manifest as

exclusion, inequity, and/or violence at individual and institutional levels of society (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006; Fordham, 1996). Racism in education is overt and covert. Students are confronted with visible and explicit acts of bigotry that reinforce inequity and a hidden curriculum from school, peers, authorities, media, and society in the form of microaggressions and implicit racism (King, 2015). These interpersonal and institutional dynamics combine to form a unified and systemic oppression that privileges white students and educators while simultaneously excluding students, educators, and communities of color from an equitable opportunity for a high-quality education (Brooks, 2012).

Despite these daunting challenges, a strong and growing tradition of antiracism activism in education has resulted in changed practices and policies that address racial inequalities (Diem & Welton, 2017). This activism often comes from *within* a school or school system—committed teachers, administrators, and students who seek to effect positive change by challenging the status quo (DeCuir & Dixson,

2004). It can also come from *outside* the system—from legal advocates, academics, community members, or legislators with an equity-oriented agenda (Gooden, 2004). An increasing number of activists and organizations are forming culturally diverse coalitions across these boundaries to influence equity in larger numbers (Sonenshein, 2018).

Although some studies provide insight into the ways that school leaders, teachers, and activists think about and engage antiracism in education (Horsford et al., 2011), and a growing number of projects examine how people move from individual intentions to collective action (Stovall, 2016), few investigate the multifaceted individual and contextual factors that facilitate or impede individual and collective development toward antiracism activism in education. The twofold purpose of this article is first to explore individual and collective antiracist actions in and out of schools and then to introduce a theoretical framework that identifies four "Domains of Activism" in which activists facilitate change to make a positive difference in promoting racial equity and antiracism in education. These domains are (a) Policy Domain, (b) Community Domain, (c) Leadership Domain, and (d) Teaching and Learning Domain. Importantly, we see these domains not as discrete "levels" of activism but rather as interrelated contexts in which activism occurs in a fluid manner as a nested system (Lee & Kahn, 2019; Tarrow, 2005). Conceived in this way, students, teachers, administrators, policymakers, and community members might practice their antiracism activism in education as individuals, dyads, or groups within institutions, such as schools, school districts, and local activist organizations, or join in larger social movements that unite activists across institutional and community contexts (Bonnett, 2013). Our theoretical framework recognizes that aspects of antiracist activism in education are interrelated within each domain and provides a more holistic picture of this complex work. We posit that having a comprehensive understanding of the connections among these domains is essential to abolishing racist educational structures and systems. Finally, with this framework, we aim to minimize the theory-to-practice gap that remains in antiracist scholarship in education, and so we use this framework to conceptualize how antiracist activism can be a mechanism for organizational changes that enact racial equity in schools and districts (Welton & Freelon, 2018).

The article begins with an overview and definition of terms that are key to contextualizing our theoretical framework: racism, antiracism, activism, and social movements. We then discuss ways that antiracism strategies are shaped by individual, collective, and contextual factors. This discussion transitions into the presentation of a theoretical framework for understanding domains of antiracist activism in education and an examination of how these domains can leverage zones of antiracist mediation within and across contexts.

Racism and Antiracism: From Individual Activism to Social Movements

Racism and Antiracism

Racism is a systemic phenomenon that manifests in multiple levels of the educational system. Although several scholars have conceptualized how racism transpires systemically (see, e.g., Jean-Marie & Mansfield, 2013; Scheurich & Young, 1997; Young & Laible, 2000), we use Brooks and Watson's (2019) articulation of this phenomenon as a multilevel system at the individual, dyadic, subcultural, institutional, and societal levels. Racism at the *individual* level involves personal beliefs, biases, stereotypes, and assumptions about racially minoritized individuals and groups (Brooks & Watson, 2019). At the *dyadic* level, the relational aspects of how racism transpires only perpetuate racial power dynamics and hierarchies. These relational dynamics can also occur as distinct *subcultures* within an organization, each with its own set of values about race; when subcultures have conflicting beliefs about race, racial politics can develop within the organization (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007). *Institutional* racism includes the dominant norms, routines, and business-as-usual practices that are intentionally and unintentionally harmful to racially minoritized individuals and groups within the organization. Finally, racism is *societal*, and so districts, schools, and communities reflect any broader societal problems with racism and white supremacy.

In addition to being a systemic phenomenon, racism is also contextual and temporal, as the nature and dynamics of racism are shaped by historical, contemporary, and even forecasting circumstances (Brooks & Watson, 2019). Brooks & Watson (2019) conceptualize the contextual aspects of racism as the pretext, context, and post-text. The *pretext* is an individual's or organization's historical relationship with racism. An individual's life experiences and history inform their ideologies, biases, and attitudes regarding race. Similarly, an organization's racist history over time can become deeply rooted as institutionalized values, norms, and practices (Brooks & Watson, 2019; Larson & Ovando, 2001). The *context* signifies the "physical, social, cultural, political, and economic" conditions that affect the racial dynamics within and how race is understood in organizations and communities (Brooks & Watson, 2019, p. 636). Finally, the *post-text* is how organizations use their assessment of the past and present regarding race to consider how they plan to address issues of race and racism in the future. So, then, antiracism is representative of the post-text, as it is a means to redressing past and present racial injustices.

Because racism occurs systemically, the work of antiracism, which is the act of eradicating racism, must also be done strategically, systemically, and systematically (Brooks & Watson, 2019). Moreover, antiracism is more than a stance; it is an embodied everyday practice (Diem & Welton,

2021). Antiracism is also not an isolated effort but a lifelong commitment for individuals and the organizations in which they operate (Diem & Welton, 2021). However, antiracism cannot be fully actualized without addressing whiteness directly (Diem & Welton, 2021). *Whiteness* is the "dimensions of racism that serve to elevate White people over people of color" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 56). Because whiteness, or the act of being white, is perceived to hold value, white people and white-dominated institutions systematically work to maintain power, opportunity, and resources to protect their interests (Lipsitz, 1998). This protection of whiteness often comes in the form of pushback and resistance to antiracist interventions, such as redistributing resources and opportunities that aim to alleviate long-standing racial inequities and injustices (Diem & Welton, 2021). Therefore, when doing antiracist work, it is important to be able to identify and expose whiteness, as it can do significant damage to and even derail antiracist efforts (Swanson & Welton, 2019). Finally, given that the sociopolitical context and circumstances matter to the nature of racism, these simultaneously entrenched and protean qualities of racism hold true for how individuals and organizations engage in antiracism as well.

Activism

In this article, we define an *activist* as "an individual who is known for taking stands and engaging in action aimed at producing social change" (Marshall & Anderson, 2008, p. 18). Activists work toward change individually and collectively by using a variety of strategies to disrupt the status quo of institutions, communities, and society toward equitable and socially just processes and outcomes (Matias & Liou, 2015). When antiracist activists upend the racial status quo in their school communities, they take a great risk—a risk that could jeopardize job security, sever friendships and relational ties, result in expulsion or incarceration, and/or lead to burnout, marginalization, and fatigue (Gorski & Erakat, 2019; Marshall & Anderson, 2008). Antiracism activism in education is dangerous work. It is largely led and carried out by people of color, putting themselves, their children, and their communities in precarious situations (Welton & Freelon, 2018). Despite the danger, antiracist activism in education is on the rise.

There is a long tradition of students, teachers, administrators, community members, and policymakers working for change as antiracism activists in education. This activism takes place within the system and outside the system and takes many forms, including protests, strikes, culturally relevant ways of teaching, social-media campaigns, and other forms of action. Activism is practiced by individuals with the courage to speak out and stand up, partnerships, school or school-system efforts, and, in some cases, larger social movements. Although this history of antiracist activism is strong and, in some cases, effective at changing racist policies and practices, it is still poorly understood and characterized by random acts of improvement that inconsistently effect local change rather than by sustained and systematic efforts. Indeed, most of what is known about antiracist activism in education is the result of outstanding historical research (Bell, 1992), profiles of prominent antiracism advocates (Theoharis, 2010), or case studies of particularly effective educators, movements, or moments (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Contextual Factors

When it comes to understanding racism, context matters—and in the United States, racism is in many ways a regional phenomenon (Diem, 2012). That is to say that racism in a small, Midwestern town may look different than racism in a Northeastern urban setting or Southwestern metropolitan area (Wells & Crain, 1997). This appearance is shaped by the size of the city, demographics, and a range of other factors related to cultural and cross-cultural dynamics (Brooks & Jean-Marie, 2007). In many cities, such policies as racial zoning/redlining, public housing, and restrictive covenants were created to spatially distribute the Black population and played critical roles in geographic and economic mobility for Black Americans and other historically marginalized groups (Rothstein, 2017). For example, the city of Portland, Oregon, was founded on white supremacy via government-sanctioned policies intended to exclude and/or displace nonwhite people. When the state was still a territory, the Oregon Donation Land Act granted land free to any white settler, thus taking millions of acres of Indigenous peoples' land. It was then written into Oregon's founding constitution that Black people could not live within the state or own real estate (Brown, 2017; Perry, 2020). The federal government eventually deemed these racially exclusionary practices unlawful, but decades later, urban-renewal and city-planning projects served as a race-neutral means of displacing thousands of Black families from areas they had resided in for decades (Hughes, 2019).

Today, the majority of the U.S. Black population still lives in the South and urban counties in the Midwest; counties with inordinately high populations of Black residents mirror those from before the Civil War (Hardy et al., 2018). Although such education policies as school desegregation tried to combat racial inequalities that exist because of spatial inequality, communities and schools are still highly segregated. Moreover, suburbs are now home to a majority of people of color and an increasing number of low-income and foreign-born individuals (Holme et al., 2014), while gentrification has affected many metropolitan areas, displacing low-income people of color who have long called these areas their home (Diem et al., 2019). Thus, people may experience racism in education differently, depending on where they live, due to culture, history, demographics, economics, politics, and a variety of other factors (Diem, 2012; Hacker, 2003; Strizek et al., 2006).

Traditions of activism in education also take on a different character, depending on culture and location (Fluehr-Lobban, 2006), and so activists across contexts likely have much to learn from one another. Among these are traditional grass-roots organizing and activist strategies taken up from outside the system, such as protests, picket lines, sit-ins, hacktivism, culture jamming, and strikes[2] (Bennett, 2003). A variety of strategies are used to practice antiracist activism within schools, such as equity audits,[3] diversifying a curriculum, and lobbying a school board to change a policy (Anderson, 2009; Green, 2017). Activists working outside the system form coalitions with in-system educators and simultaneously employ combinations of internal and external strategies. One example of activist strategies outside the system (external) that support antiracist work within (internal) are community-based organizations (CBOs). National and local CBOs can provide teachers, students, and families with the formal preparation, professional development, and capacity-building needed to have a voice in school policy- and decision-making. CBOs also serve as a formal network or space for education stakeholders to strategically plan for the long term the activist strategies they will employ to enact antiracist changes within the system (Welton & Freelon, 2018).

Various nested contexts and domains of change may influence why and how local stakeholders engage in antiracist activism for education. For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, not only did the national Chicano and Black Liberation Movements play a role; the activism of racially minoritized groups and Indigenous peoples was also influenced by a global social movement to decolonize and liberate their communities from historical and institutionalized oppression, resist white-dominated capitalism and Western imperialism, and oppose the Vietnam War (Tarrow, 2005). Likewise, current activism by communities of color in U.S. urban areas challenges the larger neoliberal political context, especially market-driven reforms, such as school closures and charter-school expansion (Diem & Welton, 2017; Frankenberg et al., 2011). There is also a resurgence in activism among students of color tied to social movements, such as Black Lives Matter and the DREAMers (Rickford, 2016), which are tangential to an emerging social movement of youth-led activism whereby youth demand that adults take their recommendations for policy and social justice seriously (Bertrand, 2014; DeAngelo et al., 2016; Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Welton & Harris, 2022). Thus, we infer that context matters to how and why antiracist activism in education evolves as well as the success of practices and strategies to redress racial inequalities in school communities.

Individual and Collective Activism: Individual Action and Social Movements

Activism as a means to prompt more racially equitable changes in policies, practices, and subsequent outcomes is an individual and a collective endeavor (Horowitz, 2017). Throughout history, bold individuals used activism to raise public awareness about pressing issues in education, from school segregation to inequities in school funding (Barrera, 2008). However, these individual activists did not alone achieve the changes needed to rectify the racial inequalities because of racism; they did so through the support of a collective and the momentum of a larger social movement.

Because an individual's decision to engage in activism is often influenced by a collective or a larger social movement (Horowitz, 2017), it is important to consider how activism can be an individual and a collective endeavor. An individual's activism is often predicated by their identity, especially the grievances or sense of injustice they share with others (Horowitz, 2017). Also, an individual's activist identity can be role-based, which is their perceived role as an activist and what influences this perception (Horowitz, 2017). For example, in a cross-case analysis of Black parent activists in Chicago, organizing with other parents plus training from a CBO informed how a soft-spoken parent viewed their new role as an activist once they gained the courage to speak out against the closure of their school during a school board meeting (Welton & Freelon, 2018). Such examples as this help us contemplate what influences an individual to engage and join others in activism and how this newfound collective identity may influence the activist strategies that they employ within the larger social movement (Horowitz, 2017).

Antiracism activism in education can take many forms: individual acts of defiance, awareness campaigns, union advocacy, community organizing, strikes, advocating for curriculum change, walkouts, and reforms of educational policy or legislation. Importantly, antiracism activism in education has *individual* and *collective* dynamics and is practiced in multiple contexts (Brooks, 2022; Horowitz, 2017). This means that racism and antiracism activism may look different, depending on local cultural, historical, sociopolitical, and educational considerations, and thus the antiracist strategies that are necessary and relevant largely depend on the context (Diem, 2012).

Antiracism activism also includes social movements, which occur when individual actors, informal groups, and/or social movement organizations (SMOs) collectively mobilize and take action to redress shared grievances, concerns, or experiences with racial injustice (Diani, 1992). Social movements use informal and formal networks of collective activism to elevate their causes to a national or even a global scale (Snow et al., 2008). These more formal networks are known as SMOs, and they engage in some form of political or cultural conflict that is based on a shared collective identity (Diani, 1992). For instance, Black Lives Matter is a social movement, but it has affiliated SMOs across the globe. In addition to shared grievances, those engaged in social movements can also coalesce based on their shared political ideologies and even shared identities, such as race

and ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality, religion, dis/ability, and their intersections (Diani, 1992). Through social movement work, activism that was once a series of disconnected events becomes more cohesive around a racial justice issue or message (Diani, 1992). For example, many individual student activist leaders' identities as activists were forming long before their leadership roles in the noted East Los Angeles 1968 student walkouts or "blowouts" protesting unequal schooling conditions for Mexican American students, as several years prior they were already attending organizing meetings affiliated with the larger Chicano Movement (Barrera, 2008). However, at the time, there was also a shared political identity across various social movements in terms of goals for education and economic justice. For instance, the Black Panthers (Black Liberation Movement) and the Brown Berets (Chicano Movement) collaborated, learned from each other, and engaged in similar organizing tactics (Correa, 2011).

Yet it is important to also account for any racial politics that exist within and among antiracist activist groups and broader social movements. For example, oftentimes white racial justice activists co-opt and undermine activists of color, are unwilling to do the challenging antiracist work, can take credit for antiracist work or ideas, or engage in classic white fragility (Gorski & Erakat, 2019). All of these behaviors of whiteness can cause activists of color to experience stress and burnout.

A Theoretical Framework for Exploring Antiracism Activism in Education: Domains of Change and Zones of Antiracist Mediation Within and Across Contexts

The development of our theoretical framework began with a critical theory–building literature review procedure, as outlined by Podsakoff et al. (2003). We conducted a search by using electronic databases with specific research collections (i.e., JSTOR, SAGE Education, Emerald Insight, and Academic Search Premier) and Google Scholar by cross-referencing such keywords as activism, advocacy, race, racism, antiracism, diversity, equity, community, and white privilege with education, educational leadership, school leadership, students, principal, and teachers. This technique guaranteed that many peer-reviewed journals and works published by major publishing houses were part of the sample. We extended the search through "bibliographic branching that entailed review of the reference lists in the literature identified to locate additional resources that did not emerge in database searches" (Podsakoff et al., 2003, p. 886). After identifying relevant works, we analyzed articles, reports, books, and policy documents and then coded them into four "domains" in which such activism occurs. These Domains of Activism are (a) Policy Domain, (b) Community Domain, (c) Leadership Domain, and (d) Teaching and Learning Domain. Each domain comprises a set of nested

dynamics that denote strategies and spaces where antiracism *happens* or *does not happen* in a given context. These discrete concepts, and the concepts in which they are nested, were identified and located via a systematic literature review and through a theory-building process in which we identified relationships between concepts (Kettley, 2010). The framework helps us make sense of the complexity of antiracist activism in situ, but it is also evaluative, as it can help identify strengths, weaknesses, and gaps related to antiracist efforts in education. In this section, we share the theoretical framework (Figure 1) and explain and explore each domain in turn.

Policy Domain: Antiracism Activism in Education, From School to the World

One set of dynamics for influencing antiracist activism in education has to do with the various levels and spaces where policies are developed, implemented, and assessed (Diem & Welton, 2021). When it comes to policy, activists work within and outside the system to influence change at the school, community, state, national, and international levels (Lee & Khan, 2019). School policies are commonly governed by a principal and given the structure of decision-making in a given context, this may entail collaborative or consultative involvement of teachers, students, and community members working within parameters laid out by the school district. For example, Kose (2007) finds that a principal facilitating social justice–oriented professional development for teachers created the leverage to implement equity-oriented policies that changed student educational outcomes. Policy processes at the school level can be open or closed to each of these groups of people, depending on the culture of the school and the ways that processes include or exclude various voices (Chikkatur, 2021). With respect to antiracist activism in education, policies pertain to various antiracism practices at the classroom and school levels. It is also important to note that school policies, like all policies, are malleable and can be changed—even if a policy has been in place for a long time, there is a chance for inequitable policies to be improved or move toward promoting equity (Gillborn, 2004).

Community and state education policies often influence the flow of funding to schools, provide broad guidance for equity policies, and offer different ways for communities to influence policy based on the context (Downes & Stiefel, 2015). Many states have district and state school boards, which serve as official policymaking bodies. Such boards typically offer activists three ways of influencing policy: (a) speaking to them or offering perspectives through various formal consultation processes, (b) joining them as elected or appointed officials, or (c) employing protests, petitions, and various other informal activist strategies to pressure change from outside formal processes (Hochschild, 2005). By way

of example, Bertrand and Sampson (2022) find that activists employed each of these strategies to effect policy change in a district beset with racist incidents. The authors underscore the importance of activists adopting language familiar to policymakers to promote change.

In a federal education system like the United States, national-level educational policy will typically provide programming that facilitates or restricts funding for certain programs and offer broad guidelines on equity issues that are ultimately interpreted and implemented at the state level (Wirt & Kirst, 1997). Although local activists can voice their displeasure over policies they see as inequitable, the main ways of influencing *national* educational policy are political rather than educational—primarily, campaigning and voting in national elections in support of candidates who support antiracist agendas (Foster, 2019).

International education policy can provide guidance on issues related to racism and human rights, and many important organizations, such as UNESCO and the United Nations, have taken positions on issues of equity. Notably, the United Nations Social Development Goals address issues related to equity and education (Spijkers, 2018) that can help orient national policies. Specifically, Goal 4 includes ensuring "inclusive and equitable quality education" and promoting "lifelong learning"; Goal 10 is to "reduce inequality within and among countries"; and Goal 16 is to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels." Goal 10 specifically calls for "eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action" that ensure equal opportunity, while Goal 4 demands that all learners be equipped with skills and knowledge that will promote sustainable development, including education for human rights and equality (United Nations, 2015). Such policies also provide points of comparison for countries around the realization of equity in education and ensure that antiracist activists in education are enjoined in a global effort to improve the situation for all students (Sriprakash et al., 2020).

Community Domain: Spaces in and Beyond the School for Antiracist Activism in Education

A great deal of antiracist activism in education happens at the community level (Welton & Freelon, 2018), due in large part to strong traditions of advocacy within Black, Latinx, Native American, Asian American, and other Indigenous communities throughout the history of the United States (Bhattacharyya et al., 2020). Student activism in particular plays an important role as a lever for change, and many antiracist protests and movements have been initiated by students (Franklin, 2003). Although

student activism typically begins in the school by working through established mechanisms, a history of marginalization has meant that students often have no clear way of advocating for change within school processes (Mayes & Holdsworth, 2020). This impediment compels them to take concerns beyond the boundaries of the school and into the community in the form of protests or other forms of civic engagement, such as walkouts, marches, or social-media campaigns (Fullam, 2017). Depending on the culture and norms of the school and community, such activities may be encouraged or met with sanctions or laws governing students-as-students and students-as-community-members (Frey & Palmer, 2017).

In addition to student-initiated antiracist activism in education, there is a robust tradition of teachers and administrators as antiracist activists (Arneback & Jämte, 2022; DeMatthews, 2018; Laura & El-Amin, 2015; Niesz, 2018). As with students, opposition to inequitable practices routinely begins in the school but commonly quickly extends to families and into the community if there is no clear way of agitating for change within the school (Ayers et al., 2000). Again, in many schools, teachers are powerless to effect change through clear and obvious bureaucratic means, which necessitates taking issues and forms of protest beyond committees and the principal's office and into the community (see e.g., Mediratta et al., 2002; Mediratta et al., 2008, Mediratta et al., 2009; Warren, 2010). Teachers have worked with their unions (Peterson & Charney, 1999; Rottmann, 2008) and alongside community activists and organizations to fight for more culturally responsive schools (Johnson, 2002) and to push back against privatization (Mediratta et al., 2002). Principals themselves also have a key role to play as activists, and across the United States, there are numerous examples of administrators advocating against racist practices in schools and communities (Ishimaru, 2013). Administrators carry positional authority within the school system, but they also have a certain status in the community, which means that their public support and activism in support of antiracism can carry a great deal of influence (Khalifa, 2020).

Grassroots activism has been one of the most important community levers for antiracist activism in education (Ferman, 2017). Many changes to inequitable policies and practices have been initiated by community members using activist strategies to put pressure on schools and school systems. Grassroots movements typically identify a racist practice in a school and then gain membership and momentum by forming coalitions and engaging with formal levers of change (e.g., elections, consultation processes) and by using activist strategies, such as protests, boycotts, and campaigns (Warren & Mapp, 2011).

Activist networks connect grassroots organizations to other community groups, national organizations, and even
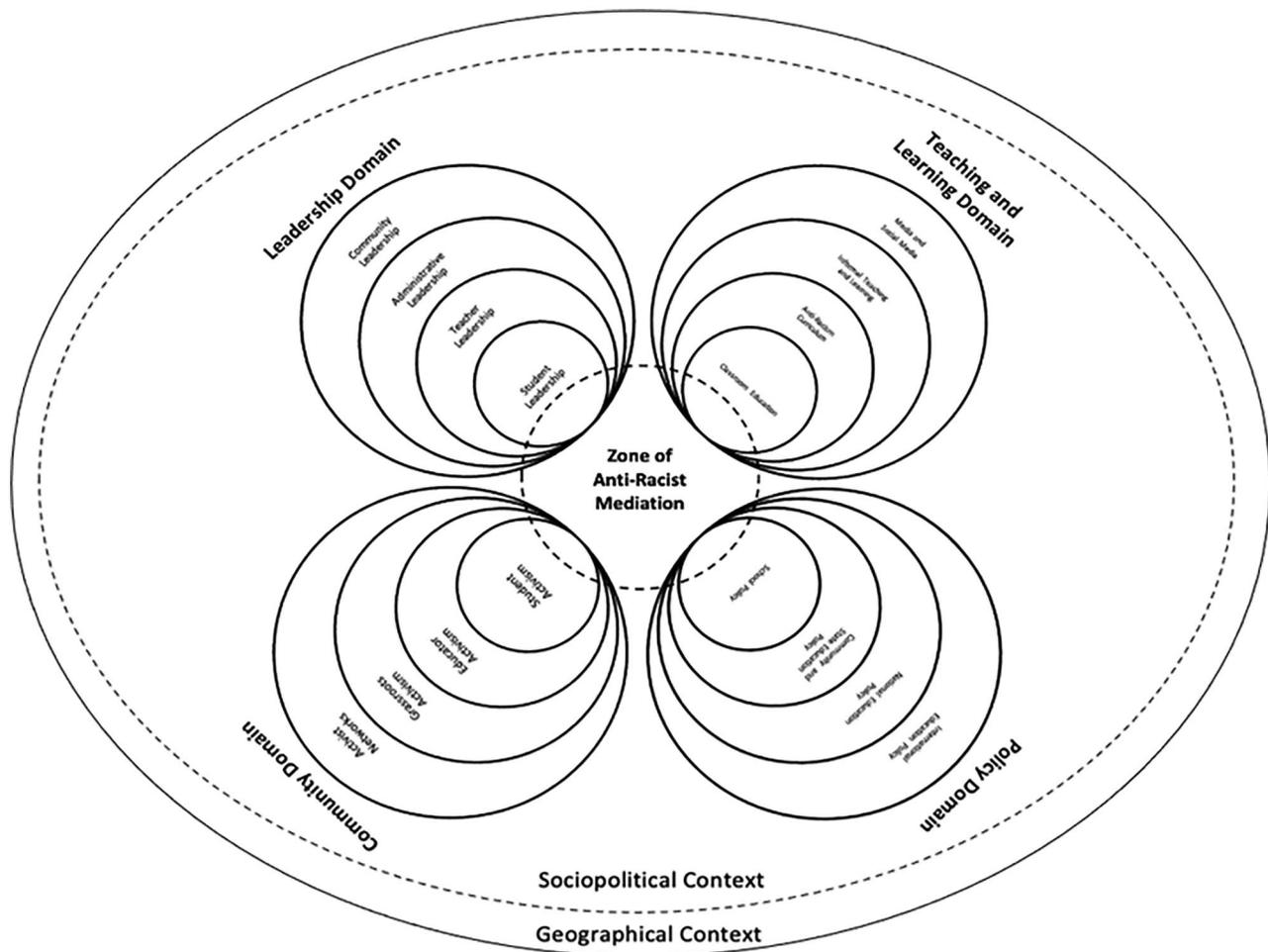
FIGURE 1   *Theoretical framework for understanding and exploring antiracism activism in education*

international activists, thereby supporting local efforts with national and international resources. Examples of this include the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which offers resources, programming, and legal assistance in support of grassroots organizations and individuals fighting against racism in education (Tarrow, 2005).

Leadership Domain: Distributing Influence for Racial Equity in Education

Leadership is the science and art of influencing a group of people toward a shared goal (Brooks & Normore, 2018). It has formal and informal dimensions, and, as leadership roles are positioned throughout the education system, this influence manifests in several spaces that can take the form of antiracist activism in education (Ryan & Tuters, 2017). Further, leadership is not place-bound or value-free, it can be practiced by anyone regardless of position, and it can be

ethical and just or an instrument of exclusion or oppression (Brooks & Normore, 2018). For the purposes of this theoretical framework, we focus on four distinct sources of leadership noted for activism in education: (a) student leadership (Welton et al., 2017), (b) teacher leadership, (c) administrative leadership, and (d) community leadership (Brooks et al., 2007).

Student leadership is important for antiracist activism in education (Lund & Nabavi, 2008). It is critical for a student or group of students to be working to lead change on inequitable policies and practices if activism is to make a difference in a school. Students are most commonly the least positionally powerful and most unorganized constituency of advocates in education, and leaders must help shape the short-term actions and long-term vision of an activist effort if it is to succeed. This often means that student leaders must create, shape, and structure an informal organization and influence others to productively join in their efforts (Lund, 2006). However, this can be difficult without resources for such activity, coupled with the political challenges that

students encounter when trying to make antiracist changes within adult-controlled institutions, such as schools (Welton & Harris, 2022). This adultism largely stems from adults, schools, and/or district officials who are unaccustomed to sharing decision-making power and giving students opportunities to lead antiracist changes within the system (Welton & Harris, 2022). Despite these politics, students, and the adults who amplify their antiracist efforts, are known for their innovations in activism, be it using social-media tools to expand from a local to a global reach, staging district and even nationwide walkouts, or conducting youth participatory action research to address racial-justice issues that directly affect them (Welton & Harris, 2022). Indeed, the resilience and dedication of student leaders have driven a great deal of positive change in education with respect to antiracist policies and practices (Lac & Mansfield, 2018; Martin et al., 2019).

Teacher leadership is also important for antiracist activism in education (Brooks et al., 2007). Due to their direct contact with many students, teachers often identify issues as being larger than individual concerns and can identify when antiracist activism is needed. Teachers have high levels of influence not only on students but also on community members, meaning that their leadership can extend across several educational groups (Lingard et al., 2000). Teacher leadership in antiracist efforts is also important and effective because teachers can institute practices at the classroom level and create spaces for dialogues, activities, and discourses to occur that would not otherwise happen without their influence (Bradley-Levine, 2018).

Teacher unions have also played a pivotal role in advancing equity in schools, for educators and students alike (Peterson & Charney, 1999; Rottmann, 2008). For example, the Chicago Teachers Union has been a formidable voice for using protest strikes to challenge a public-school system tied to Chicago's political machine (Lipman, 2017). Strikes have also occurred in Los Angeles, where members of United Teachers Los Angeles fought to end random student searches, the majority of which were happening to Black students, and in Seattle, where teachers fought for funding and training of equity teams in every school that would work to address racist discipline policies (Winslow, 2020).

Administrative leadership can support or deter efforts of antiracist activism in education. Principals and other educational leaders within a school and at the school-system level have great positional authority (McMahon, 2007). This means that they have the ability to indirectly create the conditions for antiracist activism in schools and school systems by supporting student voices and encouraging everyone in the school community to take a stand for equity (DeMatthews, 2018; Ishimaru, 2013). Of course, they are also in positions to mete out sanctions and negatively influence such activities (Brooks & Normore, 2018). Importantly, administrators can provide leadership as activists as well, using their influence to stand up for equity and speak out against inequity as allies and advocates (Wasonga, 2009).

Community leadership can be an important source of influence with respect to antiracist activism in education. There is a strong tradition in the United States of community leaders influencing change for racial equity, even if they do not hold a formal position of authority that empowers them to directly influence the school or school system (Welton & Freelon, 2018). Further, in many contexts, school or school-system leaders need to form coalitions with community leaders to realize the goal of enacting antiracist educational practices and policies (Brooks & Arnold, 2013; Horsford et al., 2011).

Teaching and Learning Domain: Pedagogy and Curricula for Antiracist Activism in Education

Antiracist teaching has happened in the classroom for several decades, but it has been inconsistent in implementation and primarily led by committed teachers who incorporate lessons and instructional strategies into their pedagogy (Darling-Hammond, 2017). Teaching antiracism in the classroom can entail helping students understand their history and culture, disrupting instructional norms, introducing materials that heighten awareness, informing students about inequity in their community and throughout the world, and making them familiar with a range of activist strategies (Ayers et al., 1998). Although often controversial, as is evidenced by the current "anti–critical race theory" push occurring in the United States and the majority of state legislatures seeking to restrict teaching about race and racism in the classroom (Stout & Wilburn, 2022), such curricula have been developed by several state departments of education, national organizations, academics, community members, students, and teachers themselves (Dei, 2006; Gillborn, 2004; Katz, 2003). Yet as legislation is signed into law that limits how and what can be taught when it comes to race and racism, teachers are left in precarious situations, as they could face legal action from the slightest mis-implementation of the policy.

Despite the ongoing challenges schools are currently facing when it comes to teaching about race, they may still develop or adopt antiracist curricula as a means of raising students' awareness of issues of racism and helping them understand their agency to engage in strategies for change (Gooden et al., 2018). For example, including readings on race and culture as well as racial-identity development theories, screening films that focus specifically on race and racism, and requiring students to write racial reflections on the content they are learning about and discussing with their peers can provide foundational knowledge that can be built upon as students better understand themselves as racial beings (Gooden et al., 2018). In addition to formal teaching and learning, *informal* teaching and learning are effective

strategies for helping students develop their understanding of antiracism activism and how they can make a positive change in school and community (Brooks & Watson, 2019). Informal learning can take place within a school as peer-to-peer teaching, between classes, in extracurricular activities, at home, in the community, or as part of national dialogues around racial issues.

Other important dynamics related to antiracist activism in education are those related to media and social media (Ben at al., 2020). Local and national news sources produce a large portion of the information that students, educators, and community members consume (Kennedy & Prat, 2019). This news can be slanted toward or against antiracist activism in education (and in other sectors) and will shape some of the ways that people view themselves and those on the other side of the issue. Due to its interactive nature, social media has become increasingly important to activists working to change many issues related to education and racism (Fullam, 2017). For example, the Black Lives Matter movement has made excellent use of social media to raise awareness and coordinate action (Mundt et al., 2018). The movement has been a catalyst for much activism and curriculum reform in education, and much of this work has been initiated and progressed by academic activists, teachers, and students working together (Mayorga & Picower, 2018).

Zone of Antiracist Mediation: The Convergence of Domains of Change

The degree to which each of the domains in our framework interacts and converges may be the most important—and understudied—aspect of antiracist activism in education (Hoffman, 2009). The space in which activists come together across domains to co-construct antiracist work in education and form coalitions to address issues can be thought of as a *zone of mediation* (Oakes et al., 2005). This zone of mediation "sets the parameters of policy, behavior, beliefs, and actions" (Oakes et al., 2005, p. 288) and is shaped by actors' decisions and power dynamics. Power dynamics can impede coalition building when potential collaborators wrestle for leadership of a partnership, but properly coordinated actors and activities in the zone of mediation can amplify the reach, scope, and influence of all interests (Gutierrez & Lipman, 2016).

Antiracist activism in education often takes place within one or two of the sets of domains of change outlined above, but it seldom incorporates coordinated forms of action that include antiracist education policy, antiracist community work, antiracist leadership, and antiracist teaching and learning. Competing priorities, politics, and personalities may cause the various domains to diverge or remain separate (Bonnett, 2005). However, in cases where domains and dynamics in this framework have converged, antiracist activism in education has grown from local to national issues

and effected change on a large scale (Lloyd, 2007). Kluger (2011) chronicles an excellent example of this in his book *Simple Justice*, which examines the rise of court cases around racism in education that first garnered local support and then were taken up by the NAACP collectively to produce the landmark *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) decision that changed practices around inequity and race in education in the United States. This was a case wherein community and policy domains led the way before leadership took part to coordinate work happening in schools (Gooden & Thompson Dorsey, 2014; McNeal, 2009).

Importantly, activity in each domain shapes what we are referring to as the *Zone of Antiracist Mediation*, making the space for coalitions and social movements more expansive or contracted by the amount and nature of extant and potential activism taking place (Renee et al., 2010). Activity in the Zone of Antiracist Mediation indicates a convergence of interests and consensus building that may allow for building cross-domain coalitions (e.g., community and leadership domains or policy and teaching and learning domains). It will demand empirical research to investigate the nature of activism in the Zone of Antiracist Mediation, and it may be that this represents a kind of academic press or proactive redundancy, making the work potentially more effective and sustainable (Delpit, 2003; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). If there are few connections or a lack of activity in one or more of the sets of domains, the Zone of Antiracist Mediation may be compromised in its ability to create meaningful change. Put differently, examining the Zone of Antiracist Mediation within and across sites may provide insight into the sustainability and effectiveness of antiracist activist efforts. It may also suggest where coalitions unmade may offer the opportunity to improve antiracist activist efforts in education in and across contexts (Oakes et al., 2005).

To further demonstrate the potential of our theoretical framework, consider the adoption of ethnic studies by states and school districts. Teaching and learning and policy domains can lead to this change in curriculum, which can potentially result in several racially equitable outcomes, such as improved attendance rates, grades, progress toward graduation, and, perhaps most importantly, students minoritized based on race, gender identity, sexuality, and language seeing themselves and their communities' histories reflected in the curriculum (Au, 2020). Ethnic studies benefit all students by teaching them to understand how systems of oppression operate so they can critically reflect on solutions or advocacy to possibly redress these injustices (Maldonado-Torres, 2019). Historically, communities of color have used activism to ensure that their histories and identities are represented. Thus, the community domain is critical to actualizing ethnic studies as an agent of policy and curricular (teaching and learning domain) change. This social movement can first be traced to the late 1960s, when a coalition of Black, Latinx, Asian American, and Native

American students demanded that San Francisco State University create an ethnic studies department, and high schools across the country followed suit by offering ethnic studies elective courses (Au, 2020). Presently, although students and educators have joined forces in activism toward the design of state- and district-level ethnic studies curricula and standards (Snyder, 2017), state- and district-level officials (leadership domain) across the country continue to ban or reverse these curricular changes for fear that they could instill radicalized ideologies (Fensterwald, 2020). When proposed antiracist changes sit outside this Zone of Antiracist Mediation, politics among the various domains comes to the fore, potentially hindering racially equitable changes and outcomes from being actualized.

Concluding Thoughts

Antiracist activism in education has yielded important racial-equity gains in schools, school systems, and communities throughout the United States. These gains are often the work of an individual activist or a small group of committed reformers working within a certain domain—policy, community, leadership, or teaching and learning—to effect change in a school, school system, or community. Yet although there is no doubt that antiracist activists in each of these spaces have positively influenced racial equity, collaborations, coalitions, and coordination across the domains to form social movements are rare.

The theoretical framework that we propose in this article is a systemic way of thinking about antiracist activism in education. The potential of the framework and working toward the Zone of Antiracist Mediation is that it can perhaps provide a bigger picture of antiracist education activism and assist us in embracing the complexity of the work so we can better identify what is working and who is hindering the process. Indeed, there are many obstacles to antiracist education activism—mainly, the persistence of racism and white supremacy in education and society, which are the root causes of educational inequities. Yet we believe that by attending to each of the domains in our framework and their interrelations, we can (re)create education systems inclusive of transformative policies and practices that redress racial inequalities and improve equity in education. Specifically, if activists can work across the domains and forge connections and relationships with those whose work and expertise may be entrenched in one domain, they may be able to forge ahead more united with fewer disruptions and ultimately actualize an antiracist educational movement. Moreover, we believe that the framework can guide educators, youth and community activists, and policymakers in developing context-specific antiracist strategies. It is not until we understand antiracist education activism more holistically that we will be able to dismantle the racism that is woven into every piece of the education system.

Notes

1. Although APA (American Psychological Association, 2020) guidelines note that "racial and ethnic groups are designated by proper nouns and are capitalized" (p. 142), we follow the lead of Dumas (2016) and Matias et al. (2014) and choose not to capitalize white/whiteness as an act of challenging its supremacy. White/whiteness are capitalized only if they appear in a direct quote.

2. Hacktivism and culture jamming are forms of political and social activism. They both involve computer hacking to disrupt the status quo, but culture jamming is viewed as a more creative form of activism, using culture, art, and performance to resist and disrupt mass media and corporate messages.

3. Equity audits are cycles of inquiry used by educators to illustrate the inequities existent in school and/or school-district policies, practices, structures, and norms (Capper & Young, 2015; Frattura & Capper, 2007; View et al., 2016).

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