

# **Flip the Script**

## **What Happens when Teachers and Administrators Lead Together for Social Justice**

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### **Abstract**

Using data drawn from autoethnographic work on social justice leadership and a qualitative study on the lives of antiracist teachers, the authors seek to reveal the need for coalition building between and among teachers and principals. These stories illustrate the common thread of isolation and intimidation felt by those working for social justice at all levels of K–12 education. The authors urge “flipping the script” away from damaging dichotomy of administrators versus teachers that often permeates schools. The article suggests methods for teachers and administrators to work together in order to build inclusive schools dedicated to equity, excellence, and social justice.

### **Objectives/Purpose**

Using data drawn from autoethnographic work on social justice leadership and a qualitative study on the lives of antiracist teachers we seek to reveal the crucial need for coalition building between and among teachers and principals. Our stories illustrate the common thread of isolation and intimidation felt by those working for social justice at all levels of K–12 education. In particular, our research indicates that teachers and administrators that center antiracist work

in their social justice mission are presented with particular challenges, barriers, and consequences.

One of the greatest challenges in leading for social justice at all levels is the isolation that occurs as a result of this work. For many teachers, principals, and other public school staff, a consequence of feeling isolated can steer leaders into being derailed or deterred or both in their pursuit of more equitable schooling. For example, in her study of antiracist teachers, Affolter (2006) found a recurring theme of these teachers retreating to their classrooms and finding little connection or support from the larger teaching staff in terms of transforming schools. In addition to not moving schools forward, the resulting isolation came at great personal cost to the teachers, as one teacher, Ms. Jameson, illustrates in the following comments:

I need other people. Some people are just really very, very, strong and for a long time I was strong enough to just go along by myself. I really think it hurt my health. I actually think it hurt my physical health. I don't know what it was; I had some sort of autoimmune problem. It was horrible, I always worked through it. . . . I think that was because how isolated I was and how stressed I was and I needed to be with other people who didn't have to have the exact same vision, but at least had this sense that we weren't going to be invisible. We were going to try to help out kids and get to know them for who they were.

Similarly, in her autoethnography on social justice leadership, Hoffman (2008) reports of the dangers and costs of isolation. In each chapter, Hoffman gives examples of contradictions that occur that lead her to feel isolated in her social justice leadership. An example of this contradiction is in her description of managing the severe mental health needs of a particular student. As she confronts outside resources such as district staff or physicians that are either unsupportive of or unrealistic regarding the realities of the situation as it relates to race, class, and disability, her isolation and feelings of hopelessness increase. These contradictions within and around her social justice leadership shook her core beliefs. She writes about doubting herself: "Well, I must be missing something." To counter this she would check in with someone she trusted, only to find out that the contradiction in logic existed and that somehow she would need to work with or around this contradiction in her social justice leadership. In writing her story, she realized that a community of social justice leaders is a necessary support system, and that includes teachers and principals working together on a daily basis as well as larger systems of support.

In order to move forward on this crucial work for equity we seek to break down the false dichotomy often present between administrators and teachers sharing an antiracist vision. When the environment has been supportive of breaking down such divisions between teachers and principals, we have seen positive impact on student achievement. Such cooperative communities between

administrators and teachers allow for more positive and rapid change in the learning community not only for students but for all the adults involved. Additionally, social justice communities aid in building, supporting, and sustaining connections and partnerships with parents and the larger community. We seek to illustrate the power and necessity of such antiracist coalitions in the larger project of socially just schools for all students while providing some guidelines for what is needed for such coalitions to work.

## Perspectives

Given that this work is pulled from two distinct research projects, there are a number of theoretical perspectives embedded here. We seek to broaden the definitions of what it means to teach and what it means to lead. Dantley sees social justice leaders as individuals that “will create agendas to deconstruct racist, sexist, and ageist epistemological monoliths and will simultaneously construct strategies for resistance and reconstruction” (as cited in Theoharis, 2004, p. 21).

In all our work there is an underlying belief that in order to combat persistent inequities in schools (and beyond) leadership and teaching must be antiracist at its core. This definition of an antiracist education stems from a number of different sources. These include aspects of culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2001), social reconstruction multiculturalism (Grant & Gomez, 1996), antioppressive pedagogy (Kumashiro, 2000, 2004) and critical race theory (Bell, 1992; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Harris, 1993/1995). The above frameworks attempt to push for more equitable schools and examine or centers battling racism as part of that work.

Working with the term *antiracist* forces us to keep central the battle against racism as a crucial piece of transforming schools. We view racism through the lens of critical race theorists who assert that racism is “enmeshed in the fabric of the U.S. social order” and thus “appears both normal and natural in this society” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 264). We choose to acknowledge this truth while struggling against racism. Thompson (1997) is helpful in explaining the meaning of the term *racism*:

[R]acism is a system of privilege and oppression, a network of traditions, legitimating standards, material and institutional arrangements, and ideological apparatuses that together serve to perpetrate hierarchical social relations based on race. (p. 9)

In racist relations, not only are white perspectives and interests assumed to the exclusion of others’, but they are predicated on others’ subordination to whites. . . . [I]deologically, racism works to legitimize such inequalities by establishing the superiority of one group as a product of contrasts with other groups. (p. 12)

Our concept of racism and the need to focus on battling it in schools stems from the concept that Whiteness is valued and honored above all else. In this work we define Whiteness as “a constantly shifting boundary separating those who are entitled to have certain privileges from those whose exploitation and vulnerability to violence is justified by their not being white” (Kivel, 1996, p. 17). The dominance of Whiteness is perhaps most troubling as it is played out in schools. Kailin (2002) notes:

Given the legacy of racism that permeates all aspects of American society, it is predictable that most white teachers will be affected by racism, or at least with an uncomfortable social distance that will make teaching—and learning—problematic. (p. 69)

Thus, we call for antiracist teaching and leadership in schools as a crucial component to any social justice work.

## **Methods**

As stated earlier, this paper draws from two distinct studies each using different, though complementary, qualitative research methods. Data, stories, and findings concerning social justice leadership are largely drawn from an autoethnography describing the daily life of a school principal leading for social justice. Through analysis of the last 12 years of practice, the author depicts the challenges and obstacles faced and reflects on lessons learned from such practice.

Ellis (2004) defines autoethnography as “research, writing, and method that connect autobiographical and personal to the culture and social. This form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection . . . [and] claims the conventions of literary writing.” (as cited in Holman Jones, 2005, p. 765)

The research on antiracist teachers is drawn from an interview-based study of 8 K–12 antiracist teachers. These interviews could be classified as a form of narrative inquiry. Chase (2005) describes narrative inquiry as

a particular type—a subtype of qualitative inquiry. Contemporary narrative inquiry can be characterized as an amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches, and both traditional and innovative methods—all revolving around and interest in biographical particulars as narrated by the one who lives them. (p. 651)

Chase (2005) offers several analytical lenses through which researchers employing narrative inquiry view “empirical material” (p. 656). These

researchers see narrative as a “distinct form of discourse” (p. 656). As such, “narrative is retrospective meaning making—shaping of past experience” (p. 656). Such meaning making includes the narrator’s emotions, thoughts, interpretations, and uniqueness of each human action (p. 657).

In rereading and analyzing the stories the anti-racist teachers told of their lives and their teaching practices a distinct picture of challenging the status quo of racism appeared. Collectively, these stories tell of a struggle to reshape what we view as normal and acceptable in school. Individually, these stories seek to construct a reality of the teacher’s self that is not overshadowed by the dominant racist discourse of the school.

Binding this work together is the need for these stories to be told, to blend, and to emerge as combined parts of a struggle against injustice. Whether told in the form of autoethnography or through narrative inquiry, the struggles and victories of teachers and principals tells us how crucial making the bridge between the two is in moving forward on this work.

## Results

To continue to build on the natural overlap found in the struggles and victories that teachers and principals experience in their social justice work we argue that practicing principals and district support systems need to be visible and accessible for social justice leaders at all levels. District leaders need to be overt in their commitment to social justice in their schools. This overt commitment needs to be demonstrated in their actions, their policies, their budgets, their guidance of school boards, and in their support for principals. This support naturally frames the way principals approach their work and impacts the leadership they are able to provide for teachers.

For example, several years ago in Hoffman’s school district there was a commitment made by the elementary principals and their assistant superintendent to meet once per month for professional development concerning the achievement gap connected to the racism inherent in our schools. This kind of commitment to learning about, researching, and sharing practices can be incredibly supportive for principals leading for social justice. This formal obligation also makes a statement to the larger school community that leading for social justice and eliminating racism in our schools is a top priority worth the investment of precious time.

When teachers, principals, and other school staff are left on their own in their buildings and or classrooms to create and sustain equitable practices on behalf of students, their leadership is at risk of being unsustainable. Support is needed, both formal and informal, to combat the isolation that causes these leaders to become exhausted. Informal support can come in the form of e-mails, brief hallway conversations, a note in a mailbox, or any other method that allows those working for social justice within schools to be seen in authentic ways. Ms.

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Kline, a teacher in Affolter's (2006) study, discusses the power and importance of being seen:

I try to seek people out. That can be hard because there are so many demands on my time. Sometimes that means I eat lunch with someone I care about in the building. Or sometimes it means that I stop in the hallway with someone who I want to have a connection with, even if we don't talk about school—just have that eye contact and that, "I see you moment."

Contrast this "I see you moment" with the façade many teachers and principals working for social justice are asked to have and one realizes the crucial nature of community. Here Ms. Wilson, a veteran teacher in Affolter's study, speaks of the ways she is policed and included or excluded from the community based on the ways she "plays the game."

I feel alone. Except my voice isn't alone if I choose to ignore and not bring up anything that is of concern to me in terms of social justice or race, then I can have many conversations that satisfy the people that I work with. But I have burning questions about why we can't talk about issues as history teachers. Why we can't talk about issues that really have had a serious impact on this country, and still do? But, if I simply go along the agenda of certain people then I can hang there and have conversations about gardens just like everybody else. If I play the game then I can be included because then people think I am thinking like them.

Similarly, a principal with a social justice mission must find ways to have authentic conversations and push back against pressures to avoid meaningful engagement in contentious issues such as racism and inequity in schools. Hoffman's (2008) study speaks to negotiating this tension. In her final chapter, Hoffman is confronted with being transferred to a new school. This transition created an incredibly difficult situation because she would no longer have a community of social justice leaders (e.g., teachers, parents, and staff) to support her in her own social justice leadership. In her new school, staff had been habituated to the norm of staff and administrators not leading together for the common good of promoting equity. Consequently, discouraged by this past dichotomy of administrator versus teacher, the staff members often chose the isolation of their classrooms. This ultimately slowed the progress toward an equitable school environment for all students.

At the time she took over, the school was facing declining test scores for non-White students, students with disabilities, and students who speak a first language other than English that led to sanctions under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) during her second year at the school. Although the staff worked hard, the systems that supported the students and ultimately the classroom teachers

did not support an equitable schooling experience. Students were taken out of the regular education environment to receive a variety of support services (from Title I to ESL to special education services.) With this pattern in place, many Black, Latino, and special education students were missing a great deal of regular class time that their same-age peers received. Although the specialist teachers and the regular education teachers strove to provide continuity by meeting and planning weekly for all students, the reality was that historically marginalized students continued to get a separate and unequal education. Students who do not have access to the regular education environment lose the opportunity to learn the regular education curriculum. The loss is far greater for students who are pulled out when factors such as time spent transitioning, loss of community support, and friendship are considered. After year one, Hoffman restructured so all students were served in the regular classrooms with small class sizes (15:1) coupled with high-impact professional development through on-site coaching.

After her third year, Hoffman's school made progress and achieved the status known as *Safe Harbor* under NCLB schools in need of improvement. In June of 2011, the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction notified Hoffman that her school had made enough growth to be removed from the NCLB list of *Schools Identified For Improvement*. Only 3 schools in the past 5 years in the state of Wisconsin have accomplished this kind of improvement.

The three major changes that happened to create this improvement were restructuring resources to support inclusive schooling coupled with small class size and professional development. The professional development was devoted to teachers and principals working together to disentangle the barriers impeding the academic, social, and emotional growth of all students. By working together with her staff to lead for social justice, a more equitable school has emerged documented by formative and summative data.

If we are to move past the isolation, silencing, and game playing that teachers and principals report, we must find formal and informal supports such as the ones Hoffman implemented at her school. The script needs to flip for teachers and administrators; the new script for schools needs to articulate that it is imperative for administrators, teachers, and school staff to work *together* toward anti-racism and equity in our schools. Without formal and informal supports, fatigue can become an insurmountable barrier to equity in schools.

Here, Ms. Lessig, a second year teacher in Affolter's study, speaks to the reason she seeks support beyond her classroom:

I guess because I can do a better job in my classroom when there is wider support. My classroom isn't the whole school and I would like my students to feel safe and comfortable and happy when they are at school and . . . that does not happen. I hear sad stories from my students about when they are in other classes . . . then I don't see students feeling safe and happy . . . like I can do my part in my classroom, but I know it is not like that throughout

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the whole school day, it pushes me to try to do more. I also like engaging with other teachers and learning from them, and we can do so much more.

Ms. Lessig's reflections tie in well to the number of ways that building coalitions of antiracist teachers and principals resulted in profound positive results. For example, in one of the high schools in Affolter's study, the principal led the charge to create a shared vision rooted in social justice within the school leadership team. Because of the clarity of this mission, staff members were able to stay focused on main issues and not get bogged down on some of the day-to-day concerns that often mire a staff and create divisions. For example, instead of taking up meetings with debates about the fine points of a school's hat policy (when can hats be worn, what to do when hats are worn during nonsanctioned times, etc.), there was a larger vision of equity that helped to shape the school's mission and goal setting. As a result, the school examined important issues like the racialized nature of the tracking system or the disparate graduation rate between White students and students of color. Thus, the usual divisive issues between staff and administrators were minimized in an effort to pursue the larger social justice goals.

More specifically, as related to antiracist work, we found that successful partnerships between principals and teachers resulted in a significant and lasting counterstory about students of color. In such a social justice partnership, any discussions of students are framed by what students *can* do and not by deficit language of what they cannot do. As a result of the overarching coalition between principal and staff, this social justice community "flipped the script" and in doing so reclaimed space and refused to have their social justice work or their students marginalized. Social justice coalitions did not hide from difficult discussions of race, White privilege, and individual and institutional racism. Instead, such topics were part of the center of staff meetings, book and study groups, and specialized parent outreach groups.

For instance, at Hoffman's first school, she noticed that parent involvement patterns revealed an under representation of parents of color and an overrepresentation of White parents at all school events (e.g., volunteers in the classroom, PTO, and more). To combat this issue, Hoffman and her staff created and sustained what they called parent empowerment groups. These groups were designed to specifically meet the needs of parents of color. Parents set the agenda and the meetings were held in the parents native languages and English speakers needed to wait for translation. Working together, she and her staff participated in the parent empowerment meetings in a variety of ways including providing childcare, setting up dinner, and presenting on topics of the parents choosing. The staff and principal were able to accomplish and document the success of these meetings through collecting data on parent involvement that occurred after their inception. Specifically, at Hoffman's school parent teacher conferences averaged a 99% rate over the courses of eight years (1999–2007), and parent involvement at evening meetings was balanced and representative of the school's population as a whole.

In addition to working together for parent involvement, Hoffman was intentional about the hiring and professional development done at the school in order to support and sustain staff members that would consider, reflect, and represent the needs of students of color. Toward this end, 9 out of 22 classroom teachers were hired with the requirement of dual certification for English as a second language and regular elementary education grades pre-K–6. Three graduate courses were offered to all staff on site to support parent involvement and English as a second language. With this intentional dedication to building the capacity to provide an equitable education for all students, positive results over a 10-year period were sustained. Specifically, students were included in the regular education environment; there was a 95% attendance rate for all students; there was no decrease in academic achievement in reading or math in disaggregated racial subgroups; and the text reading level achievement gap between White and Latino students subsided within a 4-year time span.

## Significance

In our work and research we have found much written on teachers working for social justice (Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Kumashiro, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994, 1995, 2001). There is also a growing body of work on social justice leadership (Capper & Fraturra, 2007; Kose, 2005; Riestter, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002; Theoharis, 2004, 2009). However, we have found little work that examines the connection between the two. Both bodies of literature discuss the importance of each entity but not the crucial *link* of building communities between the two.

In her study of her practice, Hoffman (2008) found there are three overarching characteristics that promote and sustain her social justice leadership: persistence, vigilance, and interdependence. Although all three are important, Hoffman realized that the overarching characteristic, interdependence, might be something that many new principals are not encouraged to realize. Principals are often encouraged by other principals to set up the dichotomy of supervisor and staff, the idea that they are in charge and the staff has to follow their lead. They are union; principals are not.

Clearly, this wisdom flies in the face of the argument we have attempted to construct here. Instead, as Hoffman (2008) notes, we need to look at staff and principals as social justice leaders. Hoffman is quick to point out that “without their support, [she] would not have been effective in leading for social justice.”

Although we agree that teachers need to actively work to build capacity in creating socially just schools and that socially just schools cannot exist without clear and passionate leadership, we argue that having only one of these does not move us forward. Instead, this creates pockets of excellence in schools, isolated teachers, and marginalized leaders.

Our work points to the both the efficacy of such groups and the relatively rarity of such communities in schools. We recognize that our call for “flipping the

script” offers few concrete examples of how to do so. Instead, we want to point out the danger of not doing so and the relatively significant change when that rare partnership is achieved. The lessons offered in this paper point to a crucial link in the survival of antiracist teachers and principals in our quest for social justice in schools. We hope the future provides many more examples of such partnerships and that we continue to move away from the damaging dichotomy of administrators versus teachers that currently permeates schools in many ways and pulls needed energy away from the crucial work at hand.

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