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CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:

ADULT LEARNING FOR CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Dissertation

by

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with

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Abstract

There is a need for schools to implement practices to disrupt the inequities that exist for marginalized students in public education. As the theory of critical consciousness details, inequality is sustained when the people most affected by it are unable to decode their social conditions (El-Amin et al., 2017). An equitable democracy depends on critically conscious citizens (Seider & Graves, 2020). When educators and students can identify oppressive systems, they are better prepared to take action to disrupt those systems.

This study analyzes how adult learning opportunities might position educators as agents of social justice-oriented educational practice. For the sake of this research, adult learning is defined as encompassing the learning experiences of educators, including district professional development as well as outside learning experiences in higher education institutions or the community. There is limited research regarding how the construct of race impacts adult learning experiences for critical consciousness. Therefore, this research studies the impacts of the construct of race during the process of adult learning. This study investigates how educators narrate their experiences with race during adult learning through the lens of critical consciousness.

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CHAPTER ONE¹

Introduction

Social justice demands that those with power challenge the stark realities of systemic racism and disparities in society. If the United States is ever truly to uphold its ideal of “justice for all,” then it must confront the inequities it purports to oppose. However, confrontation will require leaders’ development of critical analysis (awareness and reflection), critical agency (a belief in one’s ability to be a change agent), and the willingness to act. Critical consciousness, the seminal work of Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, provides a lens for this research team. Seider and Graves (2017) describe critical consciousness as a “person’s ability to recognize and analyze oppressive forces shaping society and to take action against these forces” (p. 2). Accordingly, we believe that examining this philosophy within one Massachusetts school district may contribute to the knowledge base toward advancing the necessary work to disrupt oppressive forces existing in public education and society-at-large.

Although systemic racism has been interwoven into the U.S. since its founding, the combined impact of COVID 19 and the nation’s racial reckoning is being referred to by some as a dual pandemic (Yip, 2020). For this group study, we defined systemic racism as “mutually reinforcing systems and policies that limit power and access to opportunities to generate and perpetuate inequity” (Yip, 2020). Moreover, there are those who believe the dual pandemic has thrust the nation into a moment of social awareness, precipitating an interrogation of the existing systems and practices (Yip, 2020). Among other events in our history, COVID-19 has illuminated and further exacerbated systemic racial inequities in the U.S. educational system. For

¹ The authors listed below collaboratively wrote this chapter which reflects the team approach of this project. Authors include: Tamatha L. Bibbo, Ceronne B. Daly, Pauline Lugira White, June Saba-Maguire, and Geoffrey Walker

example, millions of students in urban schools have little to no access to technology needed to access educational opportunities during school closures; whereas, in other more affluent districts, students have access to curriculum, teachers, and live instruction, resulting in far more time on learning than those learning from home (Yip, 2020).

Furthermore, studies have revealed that students who identify as Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) and their families are more likely to have less access to resources and receive little to no information from the school than their White counterparts (Yip, 2020). Given the current socio-political climate and these highlighted inequities, school districts and leaders must interrogate all aspects of equity work to assess the quality of experiences for all students, recognizing that racist systems still exist. These systems need to be acknowledged and dismantled so that all students, particularly our historically marginalized populations, experience learning without barriers. As a research team, we were curious to examine the efforts of district and school leaders to foster and advance the development of critical consciousness in order to mitigate and disrupt the cycle of inequity. An equitable democracy depends on having critically conscious citizens (Seider and Graves, 2020). This is currently a need that persists in schools, specifically for students of Color in (urban) public education. This work is essential for school leaders to undertake because, as the theory of critical consciousness details, inequity is sustained when the most affected people are unable to decode their social conditions (El-Amin et al., 2017). Furthermore, when educators and students identify oppressive systems and believe that they can make a change, they are better prepared to act to disrupt those systems.

This research team recognized that all levels of a school system are integral to promoting practices toward disrupting inequity and advancing equitable practices. Additionally, we asserted that leadership profoundly influences whether a district takes the meaningful and necessary steps

to enact effective practices addressing these inequities. We believe that developing an understanding of critical consciousness strengthens an educational leader's capacity and influence to enact equity-aligned practices and policies. Although there is limited empirical research on the intersection between critical consciousness and educational leadership, this group study added to the literature by examining the efforts of district and school leaders to foster and advance the development of critical consciousness. As such, our research question asked: How do educational leaders foster and cultivate the development of critical consciousness in schools? This qualitative case study researched the practices of district leaders, school leaders, and educators and sought evidence of the existence of the elements of critical consciousness, which included critical analysis (awareness and reflection), critical agency, and critical action. Additionally, one study examined how students experience and respond to leaders' practices. These elements informed the research team's analytical process.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of critical consciousness derives from the work of Paulo Freire, who believed that the purpose of education was to liberate students from oppression. Freire (2005) theorized that the goal of education is to empower oppressed peoples to understand and analyze the oppressive forces and injustices that impact their lives and then act to work against those forces. Freire believed the pedagogical approach to support critical consciousness is a model in which teachers and students co-investigate through a problem-posing method. This process leads to learners who can be critical of their oppressive conditions and be empowered to resist such forces. (Beckett, 2018).

Freire proposed a cycle of critical consciousness that involves gaining knowledge about systems and structures that create and sustain inequity (via critical analysis); developing a sense of power or capability (critical agency); and ultimately committing to taking action against

oppressive conditions (critical action) (El-Amin et al., 2017). As Freire suggested, we believe educators have the power and opportunity to impact the development of critical consciousness within a school system. Consequently, school leaders and educators, as change agents, must create the conditions where analysis and interactive discussions further their capacity to: (1) build their awareness; (2) develop a belief in one's political efficacy; and (3) determine and engage in authentic civic action (Abdullah, 2020). Therefore, this proposed group study examined leaders' efforts to advance critical consciousness in a school district focused on equity work.

While Freire (2000) is credited with *conscientização* or critical consciousness theory, he did not present a conceptual model for this theory (Jemal, 2017). Since Freire's work, researchers have studied critical consciousness as an overarching framework with interconnected components. Radd & Kramer (2016) describe critical consciousness as "an ongoing and growing awareness and knowledge of power, privilege, and oppression combined with a habit of openness and learning to disrupt injustice and create more just action, processes, structures, and circumstances" (p. 584). Watts et al. (2011) conceptualized critical consciousness as consisting of three distinct yet overlapping components: (a) critical reflection, (b) political efficacy, and (c) critical action. Similarly, Seider & Graves (2020) defined their components of critical consciousness as social analysis (awareness/ reflection), political agency (acting on/ belief one can alter the system), and social action (action). Though differing terms, these definitions are grounded in Freire's work, for "Freire viewed the relation between reflection and action as reciprocal. Critical reflection is generally considered a precursor to critical action—people do not act to change their social conditions without some consciousness or awareness that their social conditions are unjust" (Watts et al., 2011, p. 47). Furthermore, Jemal (2017) asserted that "If

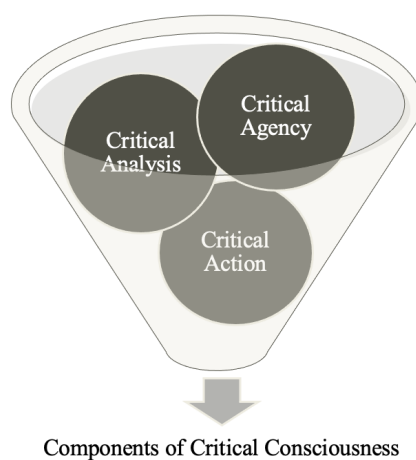
implemented within urban education... Critical Consciousness theory could help achieve a system of education that is just, equitable and liberating" (p. 602).

The critical consciousness framework is relevant to the United States as racial and economic inequities exist that impact the lives of students and their families. Scholars have augmented Freire's work towards developing a framework that conceptualizes critical consciousness as three overlapping elements in a Venn diagram. For this study, the research group operationalized critical consciousness through the Seider & Graves (2000) model: critical analysis, critical agency, and critical action. See Figure 1 below for a diagram of Seider & Graves' (2000) conceptualization of three distinct components that together create critical consciousness. These are not linear strands; thus, the funnel represents the continual overlap and need for each tenet in order for the outcome to be critical consciousness.

Concept Map of Conceptual Frameworks

Figure 1

Critical Consciousness Components



(Seider & Graves, 2020)

Literature Review

This research team's literature review started by exploring the development and fostering of critical analysis among district and school leaders. Next, the team examined the role of critical agency on school leaders and students. We finished with an analysis of the literature about critical action among school leaders, including youth development. We furthered the literature review by reviewing critical consciousness as being the nexus of equitable leadership and then correlated it with race.

Critical Analysis of School and District Leadership

Perhaps the tenet of critical analysis (awareness and reflection) serves as the most vital factor to becoming a truly critically conscious society. As Cooper (2009) states, "as demographic change alters the cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic makeup of school populations throughout the United States, there is a dire need to reframe education accountability discourse and policies" (p. 694). Therefore, students need leaders who are aware of personal and collective ideologies and biases in schools. The next section examines leadership in school settings. We provide an example of how the critical analysis of school leaders impacts equity and social justice. Following this section, we discuss district-level leadership, specifically how the superintendent's critical analysis influences district-level commitments to equitable practice.

Superintendent and District Leadership

Research has consistently provided evidence that an organization's ability to change requires the organization and its leaders to be adaptive (Honig & Honsa, 2020). Accordingly, self-reflective leaders need to be reflexive and creative thinkers and direct their actions toward eliminating inequities (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). However, few studies demonstrate how superintendents or district leaders engage in opportunities that advance awareness of

oppressive structures and practices (Drago-Severson, 2012). Brown (2004) found this gap exists despite our knowledge that "increasing adult learner awareness of how we are all agents of change as educators is a vital part of development. Helping adults see how this new awareness and acknowledgment can be focused and acted on in a meaningful way in real schools and real communities is...critically important" (p. 97).

In her study, *Transformative Leadership: Working for Equity in Diverse Contexts*, Carolyn Shields (2011) assessed two principals and their abilities to affect educational and more significant social change. She found that awareness of justice and democracy is a crucial component of equitable leadership development. She posits the term "transformative leadership," which "recognizes the need to begin with critical reflection and analysis and to move through enlightened understanding to action—action to redress wrongs and to ensure that all members of the organization are provided with as level a playing field as possible—not only with respect to access but also with regard to academic, social, and civic outcomes" (p. 572). Shields claims that the first tenet of this theory to transform schools is to acknowledge power and privilege to confront inequity systems. Since superintendents and district leaders significantly influence student outcomes, there is a moral imperative to increase their consciousness. In turn, research demonstrates that this awareness will enable district leaders to engage in the personal critical reflection necessary to challenge and disrupt inequities and to support this awareness growth in others (Watts et al., 2011.)

School Principals

Consistently espoused throughout our study is that social inequities permeate public schools. Scholars recognize that school leaders are often unprepared for the difficulty of social justice leadership (Cooper, 2009). Furthermore, the principal as the primary school leader has a significant impact on perpetuating inequity and, conversely, promoting equity reform. Cooper's

(2009) research demonstrates that even equity-oriented school leaders are unaware of their blind spots. In her qualitative study of three elementary school principals in North Carolina, two of whom were White and one African American, she found contradictions between espoused commitments to equity and actual practice (Cooper, 2009). The schools included rapidly shifting demographics that represented increasing diversity. The principals felt they maintained equitable and inclusive environments by recognizing cultural differences (i.e., celebrations that acknowledge cultural groups), but they often "fell short of exemplifying cultural work" (Cooper, 2009, p. 718). While the study affirmed these principals were committed to serving their diverse student population, the findings indicate that in some instances, they were unaware "that their schools were becoming tense and separatist" (Cooper, 2009, p. 718).

Critical Reflection of School and District Leadership

In their findings, Watts et al. (2011) refer to critical reflection as the "social analysis and moral rejection of societal inequities" (p. 46). Diemer et al. (2016) defined this reflection as the ability to perceive inequalities and recognize dominant culture and privilege. The researchers continued by describing critical reflection as a process of analyzing historical dilemmas and practices that continue to persist in school districts (Diemer et al., 2016). Therefore, research argues that the development of critical consciousness through the tenet of critical reflection is a definitive practice for district leaders.

Moreover, research supports that the practice of critical reflection amongst school and district leadership contributes to the eradication of inequitable practices. Jemal's (2017) definition of critical consciousness includes an examination of everyday realities in order "to analyze the relationships between personal contexts and the wider social forces of structural oppression that restrict access to opportunity and resources and thus sustain inequity and

perpetuate injustice that limits well-being and human agency" (p. 608). He further delineated critical reflection as:

1. Thinking critically about accepted beliefs, thoughts, feelings, and assumptions;
2. Detecting the hidden interests underlying personal and social assumptions and beliefs;
3. Identifying how history impacts the present details of everyday life and how ways of thinking and feeling serve to maintain and perpetuate the existing system of inequality (p. 608).

Researchers identified that critical reflection has two separate components that must occur concurrently: perceiving inequalities and embracing egalitarian beliefs (defined as thinking about ideological social status). These researchers assert that inequality cannot be separated from the recognition of privilege and the systems and structures that uphold this oppression. Overall, becoming aware of one's privilege and power is necessary to critically reflect and determine action steps to disrupt inequities (Diemer, 2016; Jemal, 2017). In a longitudinal, mixed-methods study of five predominately Black and Latinx public charter schools, with different pedagogical approaches, Seider et al. (2020) found an increase in critical reflection in BIPOC students during their high school years "fueled by a desire to prove wrong the stereotypes embedded in racist structures and institutions" (p. 2). The study, however, did not examine the development of critical reflection among adults in the same school settings, so future research may prove valuable.

Critical Reflection as a Leadership Strategy

Although limited literature exists about the necessity of critical reflection as a fundamental aspect of leadership, studies suggest that in order to change social conditions, individuals must act upon oppressive environments and systems. Critical consciousness is often seen as cyclical and involves the three tenets of critical analysis (which includes awareness and

reflection), critical efficacy and critical action. Although most literature suggests that critical reflection often drives action toward necessary change, this can be an iterative process. Jemal's (2017) study of critical consciousness found that critical reflection requires a school leader to "go beyond a cognitive state to include capacity, ability, skill, or realization of one's power to conduct a critical analysis of structural oppression and potential actions to challenge inequities within socio-political environments (p. 607). Both Diemer (2016) and Jemal (2017) recognize critical reflection as a capacity-building exercise as one becomes aware of the social, political, and economic systems that exist to hold historically marginalized groups down. Diemer et al. (2017) report that "critical consciousness scholarship posits that critical action presupposes some degree of critical reflection—or that people do not blindly participate to change societal inequalities without first reflecting on what those inequities are" (p. 476). Finally, Jemal found (2017) that the critical awareness and critical reflection of educators "most likely would not result in Freire's goal of liberation from an oppressive reality... because analysis without action does not produce tangible change" (p. 606); thus, the need for critical action.

Critical Agency of Educational Leadership

Critical agency is the concept that describes the extent to which one believes in their ability to create or effect social or political change. It is the extent to which people feel that their actions will lead to results or consequences, as they strive against oppressive forces. Scholars have also used political agency as another term to describe the same concept (Seider & Graves, 2020). Critical agency is particularly important because a body of research has identified the connection between high levels of agency and activism. For example, people who think their actions have the power to create change are more likely to take action (Beaumont, 2010). Critical agency is an important component of critical consciousness because this concept can move a person from recognizing and analyzing injustice to taking action against injustice.

In educational leadership, critical agency is relevant and important in a number of ways. First, critical agency is an essential aspect of developing educational leaders' own critical consciousness. Second, educational leaders grapple with how they foster critical agency in their staff, teachers, parents, and community members in order to empower their community to implement change. Finally, schools must work to develop critical agency in youth, and educational leaders are responsible not only for fostering environments where efficacy can occur, but also for developing educators' ability to exhibit the three tenets of critical consciousness.

Critical Action of School and District Leadership

Critical action can be defined as an individual or collective action to produce social change (Rapa et al., 2018). We are living in a moment where some school districts have become incubators for critical action. In some civics and social studies classes, students learn about historical movements that have been catalysts for present-day movements like Black Lives Matter. These social movements may pave the way for students to engage in individual and mass action (Seider & Graves, 2020). Rapa et al. (2018) argued that critical action promotes positive occupational outcomes despite structural and social barriers. Opportunities to engage in activism during adolescence and exposure to activist mentors and organizations can profoundly affect an individual's self-concept and worldview (Seider & Graves, 2020). This participation fosters future civic and political involvement, thus dismantling the oppressive systems that perpetuate marginalization (Seider & Graves, 2020). As a result, districts and school leaders have a responsibility to create such conditions for critical action.

School leaders can take several steps to cultivate critical consciousness in their communities. Seider and Graves (2020) examined schooling for critical consciousness and reported that school leaders helped set the stage and create an environment where critical consciousness had the potential to flourish and grow. One important way leaders do this is by

establishing the values and vision of the learning community. Overt communication from the leader around critical thinking, social justice and action were found in schools that fostered critical consciousness in students (Seider & Graves, 2020). School leaders communicate the importance of critical action to students, families, teachers, and faculty. Another strategy used by leaders is to create learning spaces such as affinity groups and social/community service groups to foster critical action (Andrews & Leonard, 2018). Leaders can also use student voice and student activism to promote the importance of critical action (Diemer et al., 2021). Finally, leaders can select courses and coursework to engage people in participatory action research (PAR) or other curriculum focused on critical action (Bertrand, 2018).

Critical Action and Youth Development

A commitment to activism refers to an individual's propensity to engage in a wide range of social action behaviors (Seider & Graves, 2020). Through the work of school districts and school communities, Seider & Graves (2020) suggest that the actions of writing letters to newspapers, contributing to a political campaign, engaging in protests, or boycotting particular businesses or products are all actions that reflect critical action which is the ultimate goal of critical consciousness development. Furthermore, Godfrey and Grayman (2014) suggest that youth critical consciousness is important from a societal perspective, as it can play a central role in addressing unjust systems, challenging marginalization in society, and promoting positive community development. National and local communities rely on the awareness, reflection, efficacy, and action of their youth. During this time of cognitive development, adolescents can think abstractly about larger societal systems and their place in those systems to develop a coherent understanding of political and social structures for the first time (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). According to Godfrey & Grayman (2014), youth critical consciousness has significant

ramifications for developing other key outcomes and competencies in adolescence, such as mental health, occupational outcomes, and civic engagement.

Finally, Seider & Graves (2020) state that civic skills refer to the capacities necessary for genuine civic involvement, such as running a meeting, giving a speech, and writing a letter or email about a civic issue. Schools create the environment for students to practice these skills to develop an orientation for participation and leadership. Civics classrooms provide youth with the space to engage in experiential learning opportunities that foster critical action. Action fosters youth civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions by supplementing textbooks and lectures with more experiential approaches to civic learning such as simulations of democratic processes, classroom discussions, community service-learning projects, youth participatory action research, and meaningful student governance opportunities (Seider & Graves, 2020). Rapa et al. (2018) found a connection between critical action and career outcomes for students in their longitudinal study of 1,482 middle students from seventh grade until the age of 29. This study suggests that critical action plays a significant role in fostering career expectancies in late adolescence among marginalized African American youth by negotiating social identity threats and structural constraints, thereby providing them with a pathway to engagement and social mobility (Rapa et al., 2018). In short, when school leaders provide students with the opportunity to engage in critical action, they are preparing them for future endeavors. Although critical action is important, Diemer et al. (2017) assert that critical action must be in concert with critical reflection and (or) critical motivation in order to foster social mobility.

The Nexus of Critical Consciousness and Leadership

Radd & Kramer (2016) wrote that "the idea of critical consciousness is often attributed to Freire (1970) as a skill intended for those who are oppressed or marginalized, and it denotes the ability to recognize the myths, operations of power, and social relations that limit one's freedom

and full inclusion" (p. 583). In this group study, we contend that critical consciousness is a vital part of leadership. It is the praxis of critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action that informs a critically conscious leader. As Radd & Kramer (2016) posit, "positional leadership (i.e., administration) involves both privilege and power, [and] we see critical consciousness as utterly essential in order to use that power justly, democratically, and humanely" (p. 586).

Schools are complex organizations that operate with both visible and invisible norms. The historical origins of American educational systems were designed and intended to sustain inequity. Over the last few years, many schools and school districts have expressed a commitment to becoming anti-racist and investing in diversity and inclusion. As a result, school leaders given their positionality and their responsibility to staff and students, have a heightened responsibility to lead these efforts. Capper et al. (2006) argue that "school leaders need to embody a social justice consciousness within their belief systems or values. Moreover, this requires a deep understanding of power relations and social construction including White privilege, heterosexism, poverty, misogyny, and ethnocentrism" (p. 213). Our study explored how leaders at various levels manifest the praxis of analysis, efficacy, and action.

In order for leaders to create these practices, they must value and embrace the discourse that various spaces could engender concurrently. For example, one of our studies relies on a transformative leadership framework to address the development of critical consciousness among White educators. In her book *Transformative Leadership: An Introduction*, Shields (2011) explains that "to be truly transformative, the processes of leadership must be linked to the ends of equity, inclusion, and social justice" (2011, p. 6). Additionally, Radd and Macey (2014) explore the practices leaders employ to support educators of color to develop critical consciousness. Radd & Macey (2014) note:

Systemic equity change requires deep and broad assessments of our current practices and systems to discern which of our current structures, processes, beliefs, and norms contribute to ongoing inequities. This work is messy, complicated, and hard! It takes will, courage, and humility to unearth and articulate the assumptions that underlie our practice and our system. It takes commitment and critical reflection to deeply analyze the role each of those elements plays in either maintaining the status quo or creating meaningful change for equity (p 8).

Here Radd and Macey (2014) remind leaders to create and foster structures and practices that validate equity and embrace the challenges that are created when they attempt to disrupt the status quo and strive for transformation. This recognition is even more important when race and racist outcomes are ever-present.

Critical Consciousness and Race

In order to develop a more complete and nuanced understanding of how individuals develop critical consciousness, our team believed it was important to examine the intersections of critical consciousness and race (Marchand et al., 2019). Through the lens of race, critical consciousness highlights oppressive systems and structures (Bell, 2016) and provides a foundational context for critical race theory. Both frameworks are rooted in the oppressive conditions faced by historically marginalized people. Critical race theory (CRT) speaks to the specific constructs of race and racism in the United States. Solorzano (1997) defines the impacts of racism as follows: one group believes itself to be superior; the group which believes itself to be superior has the power to carry out the racist behavior, and racism affects multiple racial/ethnic groups. This definition assumes that racism is about institutional power, and BIPOC in the United States have never possessed this form of power (Solorzano, 1997).

According to Solorzano (1997), CRT centers on the lived experiences of BIPOC who have been victims of persistent stereotypes. In schools, these stereotypic traits can be used to justify: (1) having low educational and occupational expectations for BIPOC students; (2) placing BIPOC students in separate schools and, in some cases, separate classrooms within schools; (3) remediating the curriculum and pedagogy for BIPOC students; (4) maintaining segregated communities and facilities for BIPOC; and (5) expecting BIPOC students to one day occupy certain types and levels of occupations. Through critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action, these stereotypes might be eradicated. Similar to Freire's definition of critical consciousness, critical race theory has an activist aspect, the end goal of which is to bring change that will increase social justice (Crenshaw et al., 1995).

Critical consciousness has been used in various contexts to make sense of how oppressed people reflect on and act to change perceived inequities and how these same people "identify, navigate, and combat the structural constraints that limit human agency and well-being" (Diemer, 2017, p. 15). However, researchers who study critical consciousness seldom focus solely on race. Diemer et al. (2017) further espouse that critical consciousness is "informed by disparate strands of scholarship that frame how oppressed or marginalized people think about and respond to inequitable socio-political conditions" (p. 15), including how their identity impacts such conditions. In a longitudinal, mixed-methods study, El-Amin et al. (2017) analyzed five urban schools to describe how critical consciousness development can increase students' (particularly Black students') academic motivation and achievement. Fifty Black high school students were interviewed to understand how schools can develop student's critical consciousness and promote stronger academic achievement. In their study, El-Amin et al. note that "Black students can achieve at higher levels when schools teach them how to see, name, and challenge racial oppression" (p. 18). They further detail that "critical consciousness about racism specifically, can

motivate Black students to resist oppressive forces through persisting in school and achieving in academics" (p. 20).

Other researchers, Freire (1970) included, do not delineate race as the only oppressive factor in critical consciousness. In every relationship, power dynamics are fluid, depending on various factors such as gender, age, ableism, and socioeconomic status. Yet, if we acknowledge that 92% of today's educators in Massachusetts identify as White, while the student body is increasingly BIPOC, it is clear that race and racism maintain a power dynamic in our schools that must be addressed. El-Amin et al. (2017) challenge educators to conduct critical self-reflection, critical reflection, and personal and collective action, for we "cannot claim to be concerned with closing academic gaps without taking seriously the question of how to give Black students the language and skills they need to understand the social conditions working against them" (p. 22). Additionally, Seider et al. (2020) reported that they were not making a direct correlation between an awareness and understanding of racism and Freire's (1970) definition of critical reflection. Rather, they found that their research points to the potential of a relation between marginalized youths' academic achievement and their understanding of the roots and consequences of oppressive social forces such as racism" (p. 454). Ultimately, their study demonstrated a narrowing of racial and economic opportunity gaps as the result of incorporating critical consciousness programming into schools for BIPOC students.

In essence, critical consciousness is the realization and analysis of one's ability and power to improve schools, students, and the larger community. Moreover, critical consciousness in schools requires educators to analyze, question, and discuss access and opportunity in their schools and ways they may reinforce these current structures. In order to change these access points, directly addressing the need to develop critical analysis, give space for critical reflection, and foster critical action allows "dialogue [that] creates new possibilities and opportunities for

relationships and interconnections" (Jemal, 2017, p. 613). Whether critical consciousness can be applied to those who identify as White continues to be a debate among scholars (Seider, 2020), who note that a different framework may be better suited for those from a dominant racial group. However, for the purposes of this study we will be employing the fundamental tenets of critical consciousness as a universal framework.

In summary, studies support that critical analysis is a necessary first step to understanding the systemic and racial inequities present in public schools. Research indicates that this is true for all key stakeholders in this study – superintendents, district leaders, principals, and students. Following analysis (awareness and reflection), literature indicates that critical efficacy must occur in order to recognize and challenge the status quo and systems that perpetuate inequities. Finally, studies demonstrate that these tenets combined can lead to the critical actions that disrupt systems of inequity. However, little research exists that explores the role of district and school leadership through the complex lens of critical consciousness.

This group study sought to contribute to a much-needed body of research. Studying how school and district leaders develop critical consciousness in themselves and among the educators and the students they serve may prove valuable to transforming schools and disrupt systemic inequities. Additionally, findings from this study may help to identify effective leadership practices for promoting critical consciousness that leaders could use to strengthen and improve their practice. As a result, this team examined the research questions as stated in Table 1 below and applied the conceptual frameworks as we gathered and analyzed our data.

Table 1

Individual Research Questions

Name	Research Question(s)	Conceptual Framework
Tamatha Bibbo	How, if at all, do white school leaders develop critical consciousness in themselves? What leadership practices, if any, do white school leaders employ to engage their educators in critical consciousness?	Critical Consciousness Transformative Leadership
Ceronne B. Daly	What practices do district and/or school leaders employ to support the development of critical consciousness in educators of color (EOCs)? How do educators of color experience and respond to these practices?	Critical Consciousness Critical Professional Development
Pauline Lugira White	How do adult learners narrate their experiences that support critical consciousness? How does the race of educators impact the experience of adult learning?	Critical Consciousness Critical Race Theory
June Saba Maguire	How, if at all, does a superintendent understand the tenets of critical consciousness? What role, if any, does a superintendent's participation in formal or informal networks have on developing critical consciousness and leadership?	Critical Consciousness
Geoff Walker	What practices, if any, do school leaders implement to foster the development of critical consciousness in their students ? How do students / recent alumni and faculty describe and understand their leaders' efforts to establish a school context that contributes to students' critical consciousness development?	Critical Consciousness Social Justice Leadership

CHAPTER TWO²

Methods

This qualitative descriptive case study examined the efforts of district and school leaders to foster and advance the development of critical consciousness. As such, the sections below describe the overall study design, the data collection, and analysis procedures.

Design of the Study

Our team conducted a qualitative study because "our overall purpose is to understand how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24). This qualitative research study used both case study and a grounded theory approach because the case study method allowed a focus on in-depth analysis within a bounded system, and in our case, our bounded system or our unit of analysis was a single school district in Massachusetts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Grounded theory had us apply an inductive stance that required us to focus on the data and use our analysis to build a theory in response to our study's research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Sampling Selection

We employed purposive or purposeful sampling to select the district and participants we studied which allowed us to gather information-rich data. This data enabled us to pursue the analysis and substantial triangulation needed to answer each of our research questions. In order to locate district and school leaders engaged in critical consciousness, this team conducted pre-study interviews and inquiry meetings with various local experts and conducted a document review to learn more about leaders who may be engaging in one or more elements of critical consciousness. These interviews and meetings supported the team's ability to understand the

² The authors listed below collaboratively wrote this chapter which reflects the team approach of this project. Authors include: Tamatha L. Bibbo, Ceronne B. Daly, Pauline Lugira White, June Saba-Maguire, and Geoffrey Walker

context of potential sites for our research. We worked with the recommendations from college faculty and committee chairs and identified a site that provided rich and meaningful data that addressed our research questions and overall topic.

Given that our individual studies focused on different participants within the district, we determined the following criteria to be important in selecting a study site. We sought a K-12 suburban public district with a large enough population to include multiple school sites with a statistically significant number of BIPOC staff. The team identified a superintendent who participates in formal or informal social networks and has a reputation or proven record of engaging in or supporting anti-racism and equity-centered practices. Finally, we sought to observe a district that could serve as an example of anti-racism and equity-centered practices. As a result, we sought nominations through experts in the field and through peer networks. For this team's work, we have employed Ibram X. Kendi's definition: "One who is supporting an antiracist policy through their actions or expressing an antiracist idea" (Kendi, 2019. p. 13).

This criterion was designed to identify a purposeful sampling. Since we proposed that school leaders' equity-centered practices contribute to critical consciousness, selecting the right study site was critical. Consequently, our ability to gain access to people in our selected district who have been focused on social justice and equity-centered work ultimately determined the quality of our critical consciousness research (Creswell, 2019).

Participation/ Research Relationship

As a result of the team's reflective analysis and partnership with PSAP alumni, faculty, mentors, and committee chairs, we generated a list of districts for our research study. This list included districts focused on equity-centered work and elements of critical consciousness, such as opportunities for faculty and staff to build self-awareness, engage in critical reflection, and conduct critical action. Once our research site was confirmed, we identified our participants in

order to build and sustain our research relationship. As Maxwell (2013) explains: "the process of negotiating a relationship is much more complex than these phrases suggest; not only does it typically require ongoing negotiation and renegotiation of your relationships with those you study, but it rarely involves any approximation to total access" (p. 90). As Maxwell concedes, building relationships is complex, and with our study participants, this relationship has been further complicated by the restrictions in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Special care had been required of each of us as team members to carefully support participants' evolving needs, maintain flexibility, and focus on continually sustaining trust during our data collection processes.

The team was fortunate to engage with willing individuals for this study (Merriam, 2016). In Table 2 below, this list represents participants and their racial identities that were relevant to the research. Investigating these participants' perspectives supported our research by illuminating information that supported our understanding of the scope of critical consciousness work that currently exists in the district:

Table 2

Participant List

Method	Participant and Race
Semi-Structured Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Six BIPOC and two White teachers → Three BIPOC Central Office Staff → Two BIPOC and four White Superintendents → One BIPOC and eleven White School Leaders (Principals, Assistant Principals, Deans, etc.) → Four BIPOC students
Focus Group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → One BIPOC and five White educators in focus group

Questionnaire	→ Forty-four BIPOC school based and central office staff
Observation - Professional Development	→ Seventy-five school-based faculty and staff (teachers, staff, school leaders)

Data Sources

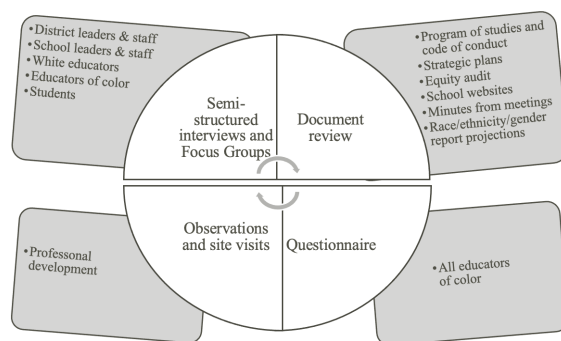
This study collected data through a case study of a particular district and practices within the district as a bounded system. As Yin (2009) describes, there are three reasons for a case study approach: “1. case studies are pertinent when your research addresses a descriptive question; 2. the case study method favors the collection of data in natural settings, compared with relying on derived data; and 3. the case study method is now commonly used in conducting evaluations” (p. 5). Acknowledging that “case study research involves systematic data collection and analysis procedures” (Yin, 2009, p. 6), we chose a case study approach to garner information that we examined to understand further our specific research topic in real-world contexts and situations.

This descriptive case study of a suburban district researched an equity-centered superintendent and his participation in formal and informal networks, and district and school leaders and staff engaged in critical consciousness practices. For example, whereas one member of the team examined the role of White educators, another member focused on examining what BIPOC staff felt about the support they received in the district. We applied various data sources (e.g., interviews- both individual and focus groups, a questionnaire, and district documents) to answer our research questions and provide documentation to code, triangulate, and confirm responses, for “good case studies benefit from having multiple sources of evidence” (Yin, 2009, p. 10). Figure 2 below represents the data sources we collected during our study. The arrows moving in a continuous pattern demonstrate that the data collection process occurred in cycles

and not linearly. These four processes were both concurrent and occurred at various times during the fall of 2021.

Figure 2

Data Sources



Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were employed to assess and gather data to answer our research questions about critical consciousness in the school district we studied. In this type of interview, because questions were flexibly worded, the team was able to respond to each situation and allow new ideas to emerge (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a result, the responses provided authentic evidence to explain how/why some schools have been involved in critical consciousness, how critical consciousness has impacted relationships, leaders' mindsets and attitudes, and inclusive practices. As Figure 2 detailed above, we conducted several interviews with various stakeholders over time; both individually and in dyads or triads. These various interviews offered different perspectives and allowed the team to analyze findings at the district and school levels. When the team conducted semi-structured interviews, we used a co-constructed protocol which allowed for conversational follow-up and/or clarifying questions, as opposed to a static survey.

Focus Groups

In addition to individual interviews, the team was able to conduct focus groups (a variant of interviews) with small groups of role-alike participants such as school-based staff. The focus groups were able to verify and provide more insight into the critical consciousness work being promoted and/or fostered across the district or school settings and/or the structures in place that supported such work. One team member conducted two different focus groups of three educators each who reported to different White school leaders in order to better understand their perspectives and perceptions. The purpose was to hear from many voices and verify for accuracy, for focus groups have proven to be effective because the "nature of interactive discussions reveals information not available during individual interviews" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 114). These voluntary school-based focus groups provided important and relevant information about the communication about, participation in, and experience with critical consciousness. The focus groups worked well because there was an absence of a power differential and the topic was relevant and valuable to the group (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016).

We also recognized that limitations existed when using focus groups such groupthink, power dynamics, and/or dominant, negative voices altering the responses (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). In order for the researchers to focus on mitigating these potential barriers, we conducted focus groups in dyads which allowed one researcher to focus on asking the questions and the other managed note taking and recording.

Document Review

A review of district documents provided our team with information about the structures and policies that supported the development or implementation of critical consciousness. The school-based and/or district level documents that were collected were based on interview and focus group information (e.g., professional development plans, meeting notes/ minutes/ agendas,

School Improvement Plans, Strategic Plans, job satisfaction survey results, school committee presentations, annual budget) and were triangulated with other data sources to analyze the development or support of practices that developed critical consciousness. Collecting documents allows for a quick analysis of what exists, and what does not, in terms of policies and where these may be executed in practice. Although Merriam & Tisdell (2016) found that the documents may be incomplete or not useful because they have not been developed for research and may be "incongruent with emerging findings based on observational or interview data" (p. 181), document review can be completed efficiently and cover a breadth of material when studying a system. Our study relied on document review to check the information we learned about in interviews and focus groups, primarily reviewing documents our participants named as relevant.

Observations and Site Visits

This form of data collection provided the team an opportunity to identify participants' actual behavior, school environments, and/or events, rather than relying solely on individuals' self-perceptions shared through individual interviews and/or focus groups. As Merriam and Tisdell note, "An observer will notice things that have become routine to the participants themselves, things that may lead to understanding the context" (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016, p. 139). In this case study, our observations captured the processes and systems that continually fostered critical consciousness; and even demonstrated systems, structures, practices that did not function properly. These observations further supported the data collected from document review, interviews, and focus groups and provided contradictory information that we discuss in our findings. These observations and site visits were documented through field notes such as written notes and recorded dictation. Our field notes provided further evidence that was used to construct meaning and understanding of the district and schools studied. As Merriam and Tisdall (2017) describe, "observations are also conducted to triangulate emerging findings... they are

used in conjunction with interviewing and document analysis to substantiate findings" (p. 139). These triangulations of the data both confirmed and called into question what we learned from other data sources.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire of educators provided a broader range of responses from teachers and/or school/district leaders regarding critical consciousness understanding, perceptions, and implementation. Creswell & Guetterman (2019) write that "questionnaires are forms used in a survey design the participants in a study complete and return to the researcher" (p. 627). Our questionnaire served as a reliable tool to provide comprehensive, additional data from multiple voices across the district, which could be used as a cross-reference tool with other data sources. As we sought to gain a representative picture of the characteristics and attitudes of a large group of educators, we selected to use a survey method to supplement our other data collection methods (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Since we used the team-designed questionnaire protocol to capture descriptive data, we did not need to use a pre-designed instrument with a validated scale. According to Creswell & Guetterman (2019), "the advantage of this type of questioning is that your predetermined closed-ended responses can net useful information to support theories and concepts in the literature. The open-ended responses, however, permit you to explore reasons for the closed-ended responses and identify any comments people might have that are beyond the responses to the close-ended questions" (p. 220). Therefore, we administered the questionnaire to collect more detailed demographic information, solicit individual and focus group participants and invite BIPOC staff to share their knowledge of potential school or district level practices that supported their personal and collective development of critical consciousness.

Data Collection

Prior to our study, this team piloted our interview questions on a sample population. This allowed us to refine our questions with a similar population of interviewees from outside of the target district. This pilot process enabled the team to test our interview protocol so that our questions were more aligned to collecting the data we needed to inform our study's research questions. We not only collaborated to combine and share interview questions, but in order to avoid multiple interviews with similar participants, we also conducted these interviews and focus groups in dyads, when possible, and then shared our data.

Because race is a factor in three of our individual studies, whenever possible we also conducted individual interviews and focus groups in a mixed-race dyad. Another purpose of the semi-structured interview was to increase validity by comparing responses to other data sources as we moved through the coding and analysis stage (Merriam and Tisdall, 2016). Moreover, our interviews allowed for a depth of analysis between the district and school leaders and enabled the team to collaborate and share our data and responses. As Maxwell (2013) notes, "observation is often used to describe settings, behavior, and events while interviewing is used to understand the perspectives and goals of actors" (p. 102). As a result, our interview protocol detailed and ensured our participants remained anonymous and their responses confidential to "adhere to rigorous ethical standards" (Booth et al., 2016, p. 82).

Entering the Field

Our team finalized our site selection and started our research both in person and virtually in the Fall 2021. We conducted three months of research and engaged in more than twenty-seven semi-structured interviews, two focus groups, and received a total of 44 questionnaire responses from school based and central office BIPOC teachers and staff

Data Analysis

Our team used various data sources to examine the efforts of district and school leaders to foster the development of critical consciousness. We conducted our initial research by reviewing the documents we determined relevant to our individual studies. Following the document review, the team conducted interviews, observations/site visits, administered a questionnaire to all school based and central office BIPOC staff, and conducted focus groups using identified protocols. As Merriam & Tisdall (2016) explain, to complete intensive analysis, all materials need to be organized and easily accessible, and consequently we created a "systemic archive" (p. 233) of the data. This analysis led to emerging categories and themes that determined our findings and a theory to better understand our research.

The process we used to identify emerging trends involved several steps, including multiple rounds of coding our findings (Saldaña, 2013, p. 100), reviewing the data as a team to determine themes, and moving from "coding to theorizing" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 96). We utilized an online coding program Quirkos when completing our first and second coding cycles. In our first cycle, we individually constructed a word or phrase representing emerging ideas in our data and then compared and discussed our emerging codes. In our second round, we expanded and condensed these terms into larger categories (Saldaña, 2013).

Finally, cross-referencing these sources and our findings, the team triangulated the data and uncovered trends. We reviewed and reflected on the data to determine our key findings and conclusions to answer each of our research questions. The team maintained a detailed process memo that documented both individual and collective steps in the research process.

Positionality

The researcher's position impacts and affects the research process at every stage and in

every way. This includes *how* and *why* certain research questions are asked and how data is collected and analyzed. Positionality issues are "methodological issues particularly related to the researcher's role in conducting studies, that are theoretically grounded in any critical perspective analyzing power relations" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As a qualitative study grounded in a critical perspective, it is important to acknowledge the positionality of this research group.

Our group is made up of five members with a variety of backgrounds and identities. We are all currently in educational leadership positions in Massachusetts. As Table 3 details, four of our members work in urban public-school districts, and one works in a suburban district. Four of the members identify as female, and one as male. Two members identify as Black/African-American, and three members identify as White. While members may identify from different class backgrounds growing up, all members currently identify as "middle class."

All researchers share a collective commitment to active anti-racism and equity-centered leadership or disrupting inequities for our students and in our communities and country. We all bring this sense of purpose to this study. These intersections help us to make meaningful connections to the work of critical consciousness. Diverse perspectives and experiences allowed us to situate our analysis and research in critical consciousness through our deconstructed lens of critical analysis, critical agency, and social action.

In order to account for biases we bring to the research, each team member kept a journal of reflections about the research process as it related to their positionality. In this way, our goal was to proactively mitigate biases to the best of our abilities.

Table 3

DIP Team Positionality

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Race</u>	<u>Role</u>	<u>Urban/Suburban /Rural School District</u>
Female	Black/African American	Central Office Administrator	Urban
Female	Black/African American	School Leader	Urban
Female	White	School Leader	Suburban
Male	White	School Leader	Urban
Female	White	Central Office Administrator	Urban

Limitations

Fundamentally, limitations occur when conducting case study analysis, and our study poses several possible challenges (Creswell, 2019). Conducting a research study is arduous under normal circumstances, and the global pandemic has increased this challenge. We recognize that superintendents and school leaders are preoccupied with urgent matters, making it difficult for them to consider dedicating time to research that takes them away from daily demands. For example, we had to ensure that we could gain approval to access the various sites needed to conduct our research. Therefore, this process was complicated by the uncertainty of the pandemic's impact on the Fall 2021 and the reopening of schools.

Next, our overarching conceptual framework of critical consciousness may be unfamiliar to many practitioners in the field, making selecting a site that allows us to explore the phenomenon somewhat challenging. We needed to look for the tenets of critical consciousness by relying on our college faculty and committee chairs' knowledge of district and school leaders

who demonstrate a commitment to equity work. Further complicating our selection of a site was that our study topics required us to choose multiple forms of purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2019). Each study had a distinct factor that required finding a multi-faceted site. Therefore, it was critical that we had the assistance of those who have state-level knowledge in order to identify an appropriate study site.

While we had been optimistic about collecting data for our research, we were also conscious of qualitative studies' limitations of relying on human perspectives. Thus, we were constrained by the filter of the interviewer and the interviewee (Creswell, 2019). Therefore, to effectively answer our research questions with reliable data, we needed to clarify what information we desired by asking descriptive and relationship inquiries to elicit the necessary data to answer our research questions. Moreover, the two most popular methods in a qualitative study, observations and interviews, were challenging for an inexperienced research team (Creswell, 2019). As a result, we sought guidance and feedback to ensure the instruments we used (i.e., protocols for observations and interviews) were tightly constructed. Furthermore, each of us piloted our interview questions and adjusted as necessary.

As Massachusetts educators, researching a Massachusetts study site and participants with whom we may have professional relationships, we were vigilant about the ethical issues of confidentiality. We minimized this issue by working closely as a team to interpret results, ensuring we are lessening the effect of researcher bias. These limitations meant establishing a trusting rapport quickly so our participants were confident enough to share information freely and honestly. We accomplished this by being clear about our purpose and intentions, relying on past experience with Boston College, and building relationships through establishing friendly, professional relationships within the district.

Conclusion

With hate crimes on the rise, the storming of the United States Capitol Building by White supremacists, increasing assaults on BIPOC, and continued murders of unarmed Black men, the space between the espoused values of a just democracy and the reality are apparent to many school and district leaders (Seider & Graves, 2020). Critically conscious leaders want to act in ways that support justice and transform the school system and the broader community (Radd & Kramer, 2016). This research explored how educator practices contribute to critical consciousness and surfaced ways in which educators across levels enact critical consciousness in order to fulfill their espoused values. This study informs practitioners about effective ways to support critical consciousness in schools and educational systems in order to disrupt the inequities we still experience today in our school systems.

CHAPTER THREE³

Introduction

Educators play significant roles in their influence and impact on students. Adult learning can provide educators with the tools needed to provide equitable learning experiences for all students. Critical analysis, a sense of agency, and critical action may be pivotal for this to occur. In the context of critical consciousness' awareness, deconstruction and a call to action can affirm educators and their sense of self to drive achievement and ignite social action for students (Seider & Graves, 2020). In this moment of racial reckoning, educators are being tasked with empowering students through awareness, reflection, and action. Race is a factor that influences the trajectory of education and impacts how we see the world.

According to Zion et al. (2015), to improve student outcomes, teachers and school leaders must be prepared to work effectively with students from many different backgrounds who have been traditionally underserved by the educational system. Marchand et al. (2019) state that to overcome systems of oppression, the causes of oppression must first be analyzed. Critical consciousness, as a framework, describes how individuals think about oppressive structures, how efficacious they feel about making change, and which behaviors they engage in to make such change (Marchand et al., 2019). This process of critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action might be developed through adult learning opportunities. Furthermore, the race of educators may prove to impact the process of adult learning for critical consciousness.

As a framework for adult learning, critical consciousness has the ability to liberate the oppressed. Race and positionality may be factors that contribute to this process. Cain (2002) suggests race, among other elements, influences learning through four major processes: construction of subjectivity, positionality and allocation of resources, through curriculum, and by

³ Pauline Lugira White authored this chapter.

affecting group dynamics and group interactions with other social actors. Specifically, the race of an educator can intersect with their learning process.

This research study explored how race plays a part in the adult learning process through the lens of critical consciousness. Bell emphasizes that both Critical Race Theory (CRT) and critical consciousness bring attention to oppressive systems and structures and have “successfully been used in the struggle for social justice in the past” (Bell as cited in Marchand, 2016, p. 16). Building the bridge between these theories has demonstrated how critical consciousness can support adult learning in preparing educators to make sense of their own experiences and to address the complexities of race and power in our educational context.

This individual study focuses on the experiences of educators that support critical consciousness for adult learning. More specifically, I was able to analyze the types of learning educators experience in the context of critical consciousness development. Moreover, this research study sought to analyze how the race of educators informs the adult learning experience, for there has been limited research about adult learning for critical consciousness through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Consequently, this study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) How do adult learners narrate their experiences that support critical consciousness? (2) How does race impact the experience of adult learning?

Conceptual Framework

Theory without practice is just as incomplete as practice without theory. The two have to go together.

-Assata Shakur

Critical Consciousness

The role of adult learning for critical consciousness holds importance for the citizenry of students (Seider & Graves, 2020). The facilitation of adult learning has the ability to shift the

sociopolitical landscape of the United States through the field of education. Systemic oppression has marginalized students in all educational settings, with particular instances in urban school districts. Marchand et al. (2019) believe that critical consciousness makes connections between the analysis of oppressive systems and action to interrupt and change observed oppression by connecting the personal to the sociopolitical context. Diemer (2014) suggests knowledge of critical consciousness and its elements support educators to facilitate the process and expand understanding of the concept. In order to apply critical consciousness to the development of educator mindset and practices, one considers race as an aspect of the learner's positionality. Therefore, the application of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the conceptual framework is used to analyze how a diverse group of educators experience adult learning practices for critical consciousness.

Critical Race Theory

It is imperative that educational researchers provide analytical tools for the critical exposure of race and racism in the field (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is such a tool that was derived during the mid-1970s as a response to the failure of Critical Legal Studies (CLS) to adequately address the effects of race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). CRT has transformed into a framework used by educators to interrogate the function of race and racism in our educational system. According to Closson (2010), CRT can be defined as a critique of racial reform efforts.

According to Ladson-Billings (1998), the current structure of education makes CRT a powerful explanatory tool for the sustained inequity that people of color experience. Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that throughout history, racially marginalized groups have internalized the stereotypical images that certain elements of society have constructed to

maintain their power. CRT challenges the dominant ideology and uses various modalities in the form of storytelling to heal the pain and history of racial oppression (Ladson-Billings, 1998). According to Friere, dialogue, reflection, and action are all part of what he calls critical consciousness and are key to a new self-understanding in historical, cultural, and political contexts (Diemer, 2014). Therefore, race-centered perspectives may be instructive to the adult learning process for critical consciousness.

Solorzano's (1997) discussion of the five tenets and themes of CRT is foundational to this research and informs its basic perspectives, research methods, and pedagogy. Marchand et al. (2019) adds to the literature by presenting the basic elements of CRT that are essential for its application. Those elements are described as the permanence of racism, critique of liberalism, social justice, counternarratives, and interdisciplinary approaches. Table 1 depicts Solorzano's tenets and themes of CRT aligned with the work of other CRT theorists:

Table 4

Themes of Critical Race Theory

	Solórzano (1997)	Zamudio, Russell, Rios and Bridgeman (2010)	Delgado and Stefancic (2012)
Theme 1	The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism	Critique of colorblindness	Colorblindness
Theme 2	The challenge to dominant ideology	Critique of liberalism	Interest convergence or material determinism
Theme 3	The commitment to social justice	Whiteness as property	Social construction or differential racialization
Theme 4	The centrality of experiential knowledge	Interest convergence	Intersectionality and antiessentialism
Theme 5	The interdisciplinary perspective	Intersectionality	Unique voice of color or counterstories

This research study analyzed the experiences of a group of diverse adult learners to support critical consciousness through the theme of unique voice of color or counterstories (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012).

Counter narrative or counter-storytelling is the element that was used to explore how adult learners narrate their experiences with race. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2001), counter-storytelling is a method that “aims to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority” (as cited in DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). This narrative medium is a method used to expose and critique normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Bell (2016) states that both CRT and critical consciousness focus on oppressive systems and structures. Marchand et al. (2019) concur by asserting that CRT is grounded in race and racism while also recognizing the multiplicity of oppressive factors in our society. Here lies the intersection of critical consciousness and CRT.

Literature Review

This literature review discusses aspects of adult learning for critical consciousness. First, there will be a discussion about the significance of adult learning. Next, the elements of critical consciousness through the adult learning process will be presented. Lastly, there will be a discussion exploring the impact of race on adult learning through the construction of counterstories.

Significance of Adult Learning

Research asserts that nothing within a school has more impact on students in terms of skills development, self-confidence, or classroom behavior than teachers’ personal and professional growth (Drago-Serverson, 2004 p. xxi). Adult learning is a critical element in the function of our educational system (Drago-Serverson, 2004). Learning happens in multiple contexts and encompasses both the individual teacher and the social system in which the teacher participates (Borko, 2004). Adult learning does not happen in a silo and is not divorced from the

sociopolitical context in which it is practiced. King (1991) explains that prospective teachers need both an intellectual understanding of schooling and inequity as well as self-reflective, transformative emotional growth experiences in the context of CRT.

Teachers and school leaders need to be aware of – and prepared to- influence the structural conditions that determine the allocation of educational opportunities available within a school (Banks et al., 2005). To further this notion, Trivette et al. (2009) assert that professional development includes multiple opportunities to learn and master new knowledge, material, and practices, and that any one opportunity includes varied experiences to learn, practice, and process the target of training. Trivette et al.'s (2009) meta analysis on adult learning refers to a collection of theories and methods for describing the conditions under which the processes of learning are optimized (Merriam, 2001; Trotter, 2006; Yang, 2003). Their research analyzed 79 studies and found four methods that support effective adult learning: *accelerated learning*, *coaching*, *guided design*, and *just in time training* (Trivette et al., 2009).

Table 5

Search Terms Used to Identify Studies of the Adult Learning Methods

Accelerated Learning	Coaching	Guided Design	Just-in-Time Training
Accelerated Learning	Coaching	Guided Design	Just in Time
Suggestopedia	Mentoring	Learning Strategies	Just-in-Time
Accelerative Learning	Co-Coaching	Participant Decision Making	Personnel Development
Active Learning	Collaborative Training	Problem Solving	Career Development
Hyperlearning			Employee Development
Superlearning			
Brain Compatible Learning			
Brain Compatible Teaching			

Trivette et al. (2009) also cite Knowles (1984) who used the term “andragogy” to describe the key components of adult learning which include readiness-to-learn,

self-directedness, active learner participation, and solution-centered. Results from their research synthesis extend previous theory and research by isolating what matters most in terms of adult learning and the conditions under which the benefits of adult learning methods are likely to be optimally effective (Trivette et al., 2009).

Similar to the adult learning methods discussed by Trivette et al. (2009), Drago-Severson (2004) unpacked school leadership practices that support adult learning. She examined the practices of 25 school leaders who were recommended by colleagues for their work to support educator development. Through interviews, document review, and data analysis her study identified themes or the Four Pillars for Adult Learning: teaming, collegial inquiry, providing leadership roles, and mentoring.

Adult Learning and Critical Consciousness: Awareness, Reflection and Action

Awareness, reflection, and action are critical elements of adult learning that might be analyzed through the construct of race. Awareness of race in adult learning is valuable because educators need to have an understanding of how race impacts intellectual and academic aspects of education. In addition, educators should be aware of the inequities within our society to meet the needs of diverse learners (King, 1991). The literature suggests that oftentimes White educators feel guilt and hostility when confronted with issues of the oppressive factors that define the social order (King, 1991). Zion et al. (2015) argue that educator awareness is critically important as a result of the current education system and the climate of reform.

Universities and school districts are responsible for preparing educators to do meaningful equity work (Zion et al., 2015), which involves consistent learning and reflection. Zion et al. (2015) argue that educators must have the opportunity to reflect critically on their own thoughts and practices. Through counter spaces African American educators have learned to become

critically reflective to contribute to the development of identity and purpose in the context of educational social justice (Brookfield, 2003). Furthermore, by analyzing how schooling and miseducation can contribute to unequal outcomes that reinforce oppressive conditions, educators can become more informed and focused on systemic issues (King, 1991).

DeCuir & Dixon (2004) indicate that CRT has the potential to create social change. Therefore, educators must develop a pedagogy of social action and advocacy beyond multicultural celebrations in classrooms (Ayers, 1988). Zion et al. (2015) assert that for students to develop the capacity to challenge oppression, educators must have learning opportunities where they are allowed to explore and practice acting as agents of change against oppression in the educational system. While there is a body of literature that speaks to critical consciousness' development in youth, there is limited research on this development through adult learning. In their study Watts & Hipolito-Delgado (2015) discuss the limitations of empirical studies, which mainly reference research outcomes, rather than the promising practices for critical conscious development.

The Role of Race in Adult Learning - Positionality and Divergent Experiences

The oppressive nature of racism in our education system is not fortuitous. Closson (2010) believes that our society is structured with systemic racism. In Closson's (2010) view, when we accept racism as endemic, we accept that everyone is infected with a disease to greater or lesser degrees. The effects of racism show up in every aspect of education and can be most pronounced through policy, curriculum, and relationships.

Solorzano (1997) describes the elements of racism as the following: one group believes itself to be superior; the group which believes itself to be superior has the power to carry out racist behavior; and racism affects multiple racial/ethnic groups. This description aligns to

Friere's (1994) discussion of the oppressed and powerless. These definitions assume that racism is about institutional power, and People of Color in the United States have never possessed this form of power (Solorzano, 1997). The majority of teacher education candidates (and teachers) in the U.S. are monolingual and White, and many enter the profession with deficit and racialized perspectives about students of Color (Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2017). Therefore, preservice and inservice teacher educators must challenge both liberal and conservative ideological thinking on these matters (King, 1991). The role of race in adult learning is a vital element as Whites suffer from White privilege and Blacks suffer from internalized racism (Closson, 2010). The development of counterstories are one way to develop deeper understandings of race and racism.

Intersectionality through Counterstories

Counterstories speak to the unique perspectives of people of color. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that counter-storytelling is a method of storytelling that offers the experience of the nondominant groups. Counter-storytelling is a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004), thus invalidating the dominant culture's voice. According to Closson (2010), a renewed appreciation for the value of nondominant people's experiential knowledge has begun to challenge the deficit discourse of educators.

Much of the research on counterstories has focused on preservice and inservice teachers or students of Color. Kohli et al. (2019) used narrative inquiry to understand how teachers of color developed critical consciousness to support their commitment to social justice-oriented education. This study revealed that the ten women of color who participated developed their critical consciousness through informal learning experiences that did not include teacher education programs (Kohli et al., 2019). The participants engaged in personal learning through

book studies and informal networks that resulted in informal learning experiences. Furthermore, all participants had some exposure to critical analysis about structural power and inequity before entering their teacher education program (Kohli et al., 2019). These experiences led to their counterstories highlighting the intersectionality of women of color outside dominant culture's traditional adult learning modalities.

Matias (2012) utilized counterstories in support of the research design process. The study documented the impact of critical race curriculum on racially diverse high school students including African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Whites (Matias, 2012). Matias conducted three phases of action-based research through semi-structured interviews. The interview phases yielded findings that illustrate the importance of counterstories of resistance by connecting participants' experiences to construct new narratives.

In a study conducted by Bell and Busey (2021), the experiences of Black and Latina first generation educators were explored in order to construct counterstories. Four students of color in teacher education programs participated in this study that focused on the recruitment of students of color in a teacher education program. All four participants engaged in one interview, while two participated in an additional session. The first interview informed the researchers desire to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences in order to support the storytelling process. Session two was a deep dive into their various identities, how these identities impacted their retention in the program, and the support they believed they received as students with those identities (Bell & Busey, 2021). As a result of the interviews, four distinct narratives emerged and revealed how the intersections of race and gender influenced the participants' experiences in the teacher education program. These counterstories highlight the challenging conditions of educators of color moving through the dominant culture.

The colorblindness critique is an element of the centrality and intersectionality of the race and racism theme. In an empirical study Solorzano et al. (2000) analyzed the experiences of African American students at predominantly White universities. In focus groups, 34 students shared experiences of microaggressions, which compelled them to retreat into counterspaces. The dominant white culture on campus prevented the professors, students, and staff from acknowledging the lived experience of the Black students (Solorzano et al., 2000).

Matias (2013) asks what happens to the white child when she or he grows up and decides to teach students of color without ever recognizing the lie of colorblindness? According to Matias, white educators must be prepared to acknowledge and cope with their complicit role in maintaining White supremacy. Counterstories can be utilized to draw attention to white educators when teaching students of color because when they realize they are as much a part of race as people of Color, they cannot help but get angry (Matias, 2013). Zion et al. (2015) asserts that in order for students to develop the capacity to challenge oppression, educators must have learning opportunities where they are allowed to learn and practice acting as agents of change against oppression in the educational system. When educators engage in adult learning for critical consciousness through the perspective of race we move to action and empowerment.

Methods

According to Creswell (2019), the researcher should select sites and participants who can best help them understand a phenomenon. This qualitative case study examines the experiences of a diverse group of adult learners that support critical consciousness. More specifically, given that critical consciousness and Critical Race Theory are the conceptual frameworks, I have examined how race and power may play a role in the adult learning process. Through a series of in-depth interviews with district and school-based educators, participant narratives or

counterstories were developed that examined how critical consciousness, developed through their lived experiences, is part of their epistemology and ontology (Kohli et al., 2019).

Research Design

In order to gather information regarding adult learning in the district, I began by reviewing documents. Information about professional development and other learning experiences which address elements of critical consciousness and race was used to identify district and school-based educators for interviews. Counter-storytelling (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002), a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes, was used to explore educators' experiences.

Site Selection

In order to locate a district where school leaders were actively engaged in critical consciousness, our research team identified three key criteria for site selection. These included:

- A K-12 urban school district in Massachusetts with a diverse population of leaders and educators;
- A district that had school communities that were engaged in adult learning experiences that align to the elements of critical consciousness and race;
- A district with a Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee and/or Diversity policy.

As a result of the team's reflective analysis and partnership with professors and chairs, we were able to generate a list of potential districts for our research study. This list included districts that were focused on equity centered work which possessed elements of critical consciousness. Once a preliminary site was selected, the team conducted pre-study interviews and inquiry meetings with the district research facilitator. These interviews and meetings were supportive of the team's ability to understand the context of the potential site for our research.

The ability to gain access to people and school communities focused on social justice and equity-centered work was critical to supporting the quality of our critical consciousness research (Creswell, 2019).

Participants

As a result of our district selection, I interviewed a diverse group of school leaders and educators who have been involved in adult learning experiences in the district, particularly those that relate to race. The participants included the following:

- A racially diverse group of 5 district level or school-based leaders
- A racially diverse group of 5 educators (e.g. teachers, school counselors, paraprofessionals) from racially diverse backgrounds

Through investigating the perspectives of these participants, I was able to explore how these leaders and educators engaged in critical consciousness.

Data Collection

Through the implementation of in-depth individual interviews with leaders and educators, I collected data to learn more about their narrative history as it relates to their trajectory of adult learning.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Based on the data collected in the initial interviews, I first interviewed all participants at least once. Participants who shared more in-depth experiences with race in their first interview were interviewed a second time in order to delve deeper into their identities and experiences. The process of conducting multiple interviews was to support the development of counterstories to be used to understand their diverse perspectives as learners (see Appendices A and B). Two of the ten participants were selected for a second interview.

Document Analysis

The document analysis process involved a review of documents that described adult learning experiences in the district (and their participants) that related to critical consciousness and race. Documents that provided information regarding the following elements were analyzed:

- Adult Learning Priority Areas
- Adult Learning Plan (ark of learning)
- Adult Learning curriculum and resources

Data Collection & Analysis

Creswell (2019) defines triangulation as the process of corroborating evidence from different individuals, types of data, or methods of data collection in descriptions and themes in qualitative research. Multiple in depth interviews, in combination with detailed document review, were used to identify findings that support recommendations. The coding process supported the analysis of the events and experiences of the participants through the lens of critical consciousness and race.

Coding

Thematic coding was used to conceptualize the nuanced perspectives of each participant. In the first round of coding I utilized predetermined codes in order to ensure that the categories of awareness, reflection, and action as well as the CRT element of intersectionality were used to analyze the experiences of participants (Creswell, 2019). In a second round of coding I looked for additional themes that may emerge from the narratives.

This research study sought to analyze how the race of educators informs the adult learning experience. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants at least once. Through semi-structured interviews, two participants who shared more in-depth

experiences with race in their first interview were interviewed a second time. The process of conducting multiple interviews supported the development of counterstories that provided insight into the diverse perspectives of adult learners. Table 3 describes the participants' role, level, race, gender and varied experiences with the elements of critical consciousness.

Table 6

Research Study Participants

Participants	Participant Role	Participant Level	Participant Race	Participant Gender	Critical Conscious Observations
Participant 1	leader	school	BIPOC	female	CA, CRE, CAC
Participant 2	administrator	district	BIPOC	male	CA, CRE, CAC
Participant 3	leader	school	BIPOC	female	CA, CRE, CAC
Participant 4	district	district	BIPOC	female	CA, CRE, CAC
Participant 5	educator	school	White	female	CA, CRE
Participant 6	educator	school	White	female	CA, CRE, CAC
Participant 7	leader	school	BIPOC	female	CA, CRE, CAC

*CA; Critical Awareness, CRE; Critical Reflection/Efficacy, CAC; Critical Action

This study analyzes the types of learning educators experienced in the context of critical consciousness development. The data analysis process was guided by interview data that has been analyzed through the process of coding for specific themes and concepts that highlight the process of critical consciousness (awareness, reflection/efficacy, and action) and the CRT elements of colorblindness and intersectionality.

Positionality

In my experience, race has played a factor in how adults experience opportunities for learning, and I have come to the understanding that the positionality of the learner directly impacts how the information is received and put into action. As a Black woman I have

experienced elements of race and racist practices that have informed how I was able to participate in learning experiences. As a facilitator of adult learning, addressing the diversity of the audience, in the context of race, has been an intentional practice on my part.

The intersections of my positionality guided my understanding of the perspectives and experiences of the study participants. As a Black woman, I had similar experiences as the experiences of BIPOC participants and female participants. Conversely, my bias showed up in the process of interviewing and analyzing the experiences of educators of different races and sexes. In a reflective journal, I have documented my reactions to participant interviews in order to record and process how any potential bias might be influencing my interpretation of the data and the findings in order to limit their impact.

Limitations

Although there are several factors that could have limited the progress of this research study, the criticality of this work affirmed the need to conduct this research and contribute to the literature. Some of the limitations included time and access. Time was an obvious limitation that prevented the team from engaging with more participants in order to collect data. In addition, having access to participants, at times, posed a challenge given some of the restrictions that were in place through the pandemic. Furthermore, there were limitations concerning my use of CRT as a conceptual framework. While this study includes the element of counterstories, DeCuir & Dixon (2004) believe there are additional elements of CRT that could be leveraged to contribute to the body of research.

Through the process of critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action, adult learners can engage with critical consciousness which leads to social analysis and moral rejection of societal inequities, such as social, economic, racial/ethnic, and gender inequities that constrain

well-being and human agency (Diemer, 2014). This narrative investigation of the experiences of educators details how race impacts the adult learning process which supports critical consciousness.

Findings

The findings presented illustrate how adult learners in one district narrate their experiences that support critical consciousness. Critical consciousness as a framework describes how individuals think about oppressive structures, how efficacious they feel about making change, and which behaviors they engage in to make such change (Marchand et al., 2019). Critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action are entry points in a non-sequential process that can be developed through adult learning opportunities. School districts provide educators with the opportunity to engage in adult learning that supports critical consciousness development. This findings section will discuss how equity-centered learning opportunities, awareness and educator practice and discussion, reflection and application are all experiences that support critical consciousness for adult learners.

Finding 1: The district provided learning opportunities that contributed to the development of critical consciousness, specifically through opportunities that centered around equity

Participants in the study described their professional learning experiences organized by the district as the key vehicle of district educators' experiences with critical consciousness. These included various adult learning opportunities. Within this district, professional development offerings varied depending on district position. Coaching, workshops, trainings, book clubs, and affinity groups were opportunities where adult learners could develop critical consciousness. A district administrator noted:

It really depends which tier and which positions but from an organizational standpoint, we provide on site modeling and coaching, actual workshops and training. We have book clubs, we have affinity groups. We've done different iterations of this but like resource sharing, and like regular updated newsletters with content that kind of follows up on some of the PD opportunities.

Over the past 2 years there has been intentionality around the adult learning offerings. Across the district educators have participated in professional learning that aligns with the tenets of critical consciousness. District educators have participated in response to the racially charged climate thus creating authentic opportunities for awareness, reflection, and action. Overall, district professional learning has created opportunities for educators to engage in critical consciousness.

Equity centered learning opportunities were accessible to educators who shared varying perspectives. The perspectives came from participants who had different roles within the district. All diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) professional development comes through the office of diversity equity and inclusion, primarily when it is offered at the district level. Moreover, there are also opportunities that support and promote opportunities for equity center PD at the school level and departmentally across the district. Furthermore, there are also opportunities for individual professional development. A district administrator shared the following observations based on their context:

DEI training opportunities primarily come through my department. So then that is usually at the district level. Now schools may take on their own initiatives around DEI and some training opportunities, but that may be with a particular cohort of individuals at their school, like the history department, for example. You know, there's times where a school

is looking to change curriculum, for example, or have a different lens around curriculum and so they may contact us to be a partner in that work. Another one of the opportunities we provide is hiring a consultant or a trainer to work alongside them.

Through this work, district educators experience learning that informs their criticality and their practice. This emphasis on equity-centered learning was due in part to the equity audit that was conducted a few years ago. The audit identified specific areas of improvement that have shaped the professional learning opportunities offered through the district. Each professional development day offers a variety of topics for educators to engage with. At least three hours are dedicated to the work of anti-racism and equity on those three to five training days. As a result of the equity audit one participant noted that comprehensive professional learning includes a self selected model driving ownership and efficacy.

The district has offered PD around unconscious bias, understanding microaggressions, working with transgender youth and understanding the backgrounds of marginalized communities. Authors like Bettina Love were also invited to present professional development to district staff. One district administrator noted the following:

At any professional development day, we dedicate at least three hours towards the work of anti-racism and equity. And so we've done understanding unconscious bias, understanding microaggressions working with transgender youth, understanding backgrounds of like marginalized communities. We've also brought in speakers, books and had follow up sessions for work that translates to students.

Another participant noted that last year, when returning to school after the pandemic there were ten additional PD days issued to support learning around equity and racism. The participant shared, “we had multiple opportunities to work on issues of equity and racism.”

Additional data collected through the research process addressed mandatory and optional professional development sessions in support of equity centered PD for district educators.

At the high school there is also the DEI committee that drives some of the professional learning opportunities. The committee arranged for all educators to receive Bettina Love's book as a summer reading opportunity. A school based educator noted the book as another big opportunity for learning through the DEI committee:

Our curriculum group arranged for every teacher in the school to get a copy of *We Want to do More than just Survive*. And so we all read that over the summer. That was the idea anyway, thatwould be our summer reading and we are currently working through. It's taking a little long and we don't have quite enough time I don't think, but we're working through in small groups.... almost like book club groups to answer certain questions that the curriculum committee also came up with throughout the book and how it applies to Framingham.

Another participant observed the variety of mandatory equity-based professional learning opportunities held in large Zoom meetings. These virtual settings limited engagement from all educators. The educator stated:

So there are mandatory equity based professional development things, but those have been very large zoom meetings, where cameras are off and you know. I don't know how familiar you are with the sort of teachers behind the scenes, but they are the worst students in the world, and they're constantly multitasking. And my guess is that the people who would have opted into it anyway are probably the people watching and the people who wouldn't have opted into it are not paying attention.

In conclusion, district educators experienced a variety of equity-centered learning

opportunities, although educators report some were more meaningful than others.

Finding 2: District learning opportunities were designed to impact critical consciousness by providing the platform to reflect on practice as it occurred, make space for reflection, discussion and application

Critical awareness through educator practice was evident as a result of district adult learning. Across the district, educators engaged in adult learning that informed various aspects of their practice. In some schools there was a direct correlation between the professional development that was offered at the district level and the work that was taking place at the school level. This varied by district department and school building. At the district level, staff received coaching once a month. The coaching was focused on the tenets of antiracism and inequity. From the educator, school based perspective, many of the strategies that were learned about through equity centered professional development impacted practice in the classroom. In addition, through previous experiences, educators implemented practices that were aligned to equity centered professional learning because they reported it was best for all students. Equity-centered professional learning can have direct applications to curriculum implementation that is in alignment with critical action, a tenet of critical consciousness. A school based educator shared:

I think that English and History classes at the secondary level and a lot of our elementary school teachers are looking for direct applications into the curriculum. I was a part of the affinity group for white educators committed to social and racial justice. Talking with them last year I heard some really amazing things about the ways in which the elementary teachers are looking to build curriculum, that is race positive, and that person's perspectives other than the white supremacist narrative, and all of those sorts of things. And so I think that one of the strengths in this district is that educators have a lot

of leeway in developing their own work. And so you can see people with passion and creativity building really cool things...

Creating safe and welcoming learning environments must be at the center of engaging in this type of teaching and learning. Culturally relevant curriculum that addresses current events is critical to student learning and an act of critical consciousness. Traditional curriculum presents a westernized Eurocentric narrative that is not aligned with the equity-centered professional learning presented by the district. An educator shared:

Everything about the study of anatomy and physiology, as presented in textbooks and the curriculum is very white, male, Eurocentric, Christian. And, you know, naming those things and looking for the ways that we can look critically at the curricular materials, look critically at the representation. I put a huge amount of time into my development of my PowerPoints and visuals into not always having the doctor be a white haired man kind of thing.

As a result of participating in equity adult learning, these educators have been able to take actionable steps in response to awareness and reflection. Whilst this important work of critical consciousness is taking place in the work of a few district educators, investment in these professional learning opportunities varied. Therefore, the implementation of equity-centered practices varied as the two educator participants expressed employing these practices amongst the colleagues who did not engage in this work.

Discussion, Reflection and Application

Discussion, reflection, and application were collective elements that supported district educators to enact critical consciousness. This was illustrated through the experiences of the participants. At the central office level, this work was owned by the office of equity. Therefore

discussions and application to practice were essential to their work. However, central office team members did not consistently participate in equity-centered PD, therefore participants shared that discussions did not take place consistently nor did they take place across the district. An administrator stated the following:

I can say there aren't facilitated DEI discussions outside of the work of this office. Our office quite naturally has done the most. We have functioned like a community resource development department. But when I think about some of the other departments, maybe like business operations, they're primarily doing financials, right? Discussion and reflection, that's not something that's consistently done at all.

At the school level, book clubs and thematic professional development created the conditions for discussion. However, participants reported that these opportunities were limited and did not lend themselves to rich dialogue as a result of time constraints. In response to previously shared findings around the book club work, one school leader shared:

Specifically from the book we've had so far, only one opportunity to discuss that was our first professional development day. I believe it was sometime at the end of September. We've had only one opportunity to discuss it and it wasn't a very long session, and so I don't feel like we really got into it.

A subsequent assertion was that there was limited time for collaboration. Many educators were conditioned to their routines and practices preventing them from authentic engagement in this work. Evidence supporting this claim came from one of the school based educators who explained,

It is related to being afraid that people will do it wrong and I think that it's also related to being concerned that people will be prickly about it. And I think that it is something

where, as I mentioned, the way I was educated as an educator, started with engaging with and validating students and student experiences, which is very different than a lot of other educational programs, I think. And also a lot of our staff members are very far from that experience of you know, learning how to teach. And I hear a lot even when we try to work as a group to have any sort of, you know, shared experiences or cross cutting things within the department. It's often met with a "Yeah, but I'm not going to do that because what I'm doing works and I'm just gonna keep doing what I know works for me." And we don't have a strong enough leadership to say no, you have to break some old a little bit because when you say it works, it doesn't work for everyone.

As a result of the diverse experiences of school based educators, in addition to varying educational philosophies, equitable practices and routines range. This range results in mixed levels of engagement and interest when it comes to antiracist work within school communities.

Affinity groups were another iteration of small group learning and discussion named through this research. Although there were limitations to their effectiveness, district affinity groups were created as a direct result of educator desire to engage in equity-centered discussions that influenced their practice. Although imperfect, efforts to foster discussion, reflection and application assisted in the development of critical consciousness for district educators.

Finding 3: Race Narratives, Positionality and Life Experiences

Race influenced the narrative experiences of district educators. Through this research study, district educators were able to engage in reflection about race. These experiences included various narratives about the impact of race. Participants noted how race influenced their practice. Race, positionality and life experiences shaped how individuals reflected on their experience and professional practice. An administrator stated:

I'm an African American and Puerto Rican. And so I have a particular lens that I bring to this work. So I have my own lived experiences that I reflect on. My own lived experiences have shaped the ways in which I perceive the world and then the bias piece as well.

Adult learning opportunities contributed to the ways in which individuals were able to identify how race has been influential in educator practice. In addition to race and role, working with students and young people in previous career opportunities cultivated the ability to be reflective about race and practice in the field of education. Six out of seven participants indicated that lived experiences also shaped their practice. Through this participant's work with marginalized communities, a perspective for reflection that led to advocacy was pronounced. Her experiential knowledge created the ability to empathize through shared experiences, that supported her ability to more easily reflect on how race reflection is influential to her practice. This administrator shared:

Through that work, I was ready to take on systems. That being said, like my own personal work, I think it is partially led to an experience I had growing up. I was like, look, I mean, I am Latina, and Spanish is my first language. I had already had the accent my whole life. And so it kind of transcended to like this deep understanding and this acknowledgement that when I started to lose my accent, how different my experiences were in that way, like revelation, that process for me... So when I was in school, I actually learned a lot and one of my focus areas was substance abuse and the trauma of slavery and Caribbean islands just to kind of really understand how brain development impacts you and everything.

Previous work experience in more diverse learning communities cultivated her ability to

be reflective about race. Personal and professional learning experiences created the conviction and awareness to engage with equity-centered teaching practices.

Personal reflection and perspective led to the critique of schoolwide practices and initiatives for another one of the school based study participants. This participant commented::

We did this whole analysis and of course, you know, we found that there was a trend of students of color being disciplined just more often and more severely than students who were white. Boys were disciplined more often and more severely than girls and students who spoke a language other than English at home. We presented that data to our administrative team.

This level of reflection created awareness that led to action. Racial identity and reflection supports individuals to develop a narrative about their own historical experiences, creating empathetic understandings that can cross the lines of race. Another school based educator narrated their experiences relating to critical consciousness development:

So my mother's a German immigrant, and I identify more as first generation than anything else. She did not have a good immigration experience. And so that was something where it was really hard for me to separate my racial identity from that immigrant identity. But ultimately what most impacted the way I think about things is to look at the fact that my mother at three years old lived in a house with a dirt floor and a chamber pot, and now owns her own house, has multiple educational degrees, has no debt, and her children and grandchildren are very comfortable. And so thinking about that sort of fast track of opportunity, and how much that it was potentially aided by whiteness, and her assimilation into being American as soon as she dropped her accent, she was good to go. And that is something that was a big emphasis on my family growing up.

Hard work and knowing who's doing the work for you. If you work hard enough, that builds a lot of unconscious bias. Which of course, you know, is American meritocracy and ridiculous but it took me a really long time. It took me once I started to do that I was really angry. At least so sort of the white fragility defensiveness and more so angry at the people that I have trusted who raised me, who had sold me a lie. And then that is something where, at this point, the way it influences me and my practice is recognizing how much we are driven by our implicit biases, and by their nature, you're not always aware that that's what you're doing.

Race, positionality, and lived experiences shaped the participants' development of the tenets of critical consciousness. In addition, these elements also influenced their daily practice and the way they narrative their experiences.

Finding 4: Adult learning opportunities led to critical awareness and action

As a result of adult learning experiences over time, critical action has been the response of educators in the face of inequitable practices. In support of critical consciousness, five of the participants in this research study were able to describe a time when they were able to take action in response to inequitable practice. As a result of trend analysis, race, gender and role impacted how participants took actions in response to inequitable practices. Based on these narrations, one could argue that critical awareness and reflection drive critical actions. Participants who have experienced inequitable practices could articulate and take action when systemic oppression was at play based on experiential knowledge. An administrator acknowledged the following:

When I think about inequitable practices around referrals being made to law enforcement, I particularly think about BIPOC students. If there is a concern that is raised from a staff member, a parent, a community member who's involved, or we are informed of an

incident or collection of incidents, it is because maybe we're receiving some sort of investigative report. And so at these times, then depending on which ways I receive it, now, am I an advocate on behalf of the family and on the behalf of the community.

These narrative experiences inform how participants engaged in critical action. District data and investigations that highlight inequitable practice are opportunities for critical action to take place. Depending on positionality and influence, actionable steps are taken to address inequity. One participant, who is a district administrator, shared their work on the district data team meetings that analyzed the demographics of students in AP classes. This analysis led to significant inquiry in regards to the rate of white students who participated in AP classes in comparison to BIPOC students in the district. As a result the district was able to reevaluate how students were placed in AP classes.

Critical action was also enacted through participation in the DEI committee. Specifically, work to implement a new code of conduct in collaboration with the DEI committee was an action informed by the critical consciousness of one of the study participants. However, this participant in previous roles outside of the district had been reluctant to engage in critical action although opportunities presented themselves as a result of critical awareness and critical reflection. This school based educator considered the following:

I can't really think about it, which makes me sad when you put it that way. I guess the closest I would get to that is right now, with the DEI committee is the implementation of the new code of conduct K through 12. And while it wasn't written in collaboration with our committee, many of the members on the committee were also working on the code of conduct and so and it is something that we've been reviewing through that lens of equity and antiracism. We also have the opportunity to comment on it and we're making changes

and suggestions. So that is an opportunity for us to take action.

Subtle yet consistent actions can be implemented to proactively counteract inequitable practices. Three of the participants found that they were limited in their ability to act outside of their realm of influence but held firm to their conviction in their locus of control. One educator made a decision early in career to work with all students persisting through behavior challenges to combat inequitable treatment of BIPOC students. This was their critical action against traditionally oppressive structures and systems. They spoke to the idea of other “very well intentioned educators” labeling students and disproportionately assigning disciplinary consequences. Ultimately, critical action has been the response to inequitable practices for five of the study participants.

Discussion

The findings presented above demonstrate how district efforts to support adult learning were linked to the non sequential development of critical consciousness in district educators. First, the district provided learning opportunities that contributed to the development of critical consciousness, specifically through opportunities that centered around equity. Furthermore, district learning opportunities were designed to impact critical consciousness by providing the platform to reflect on practice as it occurred and to make space for reflection, discussion, and application.

Participants did identify some ways in which the district’s efforts fell short. With diverse perspectives and experiences, district leaders, school leaders and educators unanimously agreed that the district work needs to be more aligned, inclusive, and intentional. In all three groupings, the school leaders were the only group that received consistent and mandatory professional development related to equity and social justice. With varied commitments and a lack of

coordination in the presentation of strategic opportunities, educators across the district are in various places in the learning continuum. As a result, time for collaboration and shared reflection was reported to be limited which may have impacted the development of shared understandings and collective action. This has a tremendous impact on how the work moves forward district wide.

The race of educators proved to impact the process of adult learning for critical consciousness. Participants shared that personal lived experiences, positionality, and race influenced their critical awareness and enhanced their ability to empathize and engage with race narratives. Awareness, reflection, and action are critical elements of adult learning that have been analyzed through the construct of race. Awareness of race in adult learning is invaluable as educators need to have a culturally proficient understanding of themselves and others. DeCuir & Dixson (2004) indicate that CRT has the potential to create social change. The effects of racism show up in every aspect of education and can be most pronounced through policy, curriculum, and relationships.

The majority of teacher education candidates (and teachers) in the U.S. are monolingual and White, and many enter the profession with deficit and racialized perspectives about students of Color (Picower, 2009; Sleeter, 2017). The development of counterstories are one way to develop awareness of race and racism. Counterstories speak to the unique perspectives of people of color. This was evident in the research findings through the narrative experiences of BIPOC district leaders and educators. Delgado and Stefancic (2001) state that counter-storytelling is a method of storytelling that offers the experience of the nondominant groups.

There are several implications of these findings for district educators and leaders who impact all district constituencies in the development of critical consciousness. Since the

participants represent a variety of perspectives through their positionality, it is important to acknowledge how this research applies to future practice and action. Both common and divergent narrative experiences detailed the ways in which district leadership can embrace critical consciousness in order to continue to push this important work forward. The district should consider how they strategically move this work forward to impact the practice and actions of all leaders and educators. This work could be facilitated by common district priorities that are clearly articulated throughout the system. Consistent requirements for universal engagement in district professional development and increasing time for shared reflection and collaboration would support desired outcomes. School improvement plans should be linked to these priorities through a collaborative process that includes the voices of each school based community.

Equally important would be a differentiated strategy to engage all district leaders and educators in this work in a manner that aligns to the diversity of educator experiences. The tenets of critical consciousness are closely aligned with adult learning opportunities that could lead to more equitable practices across this district. By creating multiple entry points and a diverse body of professional development offerings, district leaders and educators could be empowered to engage in this work that ultimately supports the experience of students across all district school communities.

In addition, in order to create opportunities for critical awareness, critical reflection, and critical action, the district should consider utilizing affinity groupings as well as intersectional groups to provide spaces for district leaders and educators to share their narrative experiences. These opportunities could create open dialogue, understanding and empathy across district constituents in regards to the topics of equity, social justice, and race. As a result of this research study, I have shown how the power of narrative experiences can assist in the process of reflection

and ultimately lead to actions. District leaders should consider leveraging the wealth of knowledge and experiences of leaders and educators to foster a culture to facilitate critical consciousness in the wake of the current racially charged climate.

Conclusion

There are many opportunities for this district to engage in the work of critical consciousness in support of the adult learning process. This work could transform the inequitable experiences of leaders, educators, and students across the district. The district provides learning opportunities that contribute to the development of critical consciousness, specifically through opportunities that are centered on equity. In addition, district learning opportunities are designed to impact critical consciousness and provide the platform to reflect on practices in order to help educators engage with race narratives. Lastly, district learning opportunities have led to instances of critical awareness and action. With a clear strategy the district could adopt practices supportive of the diversity of the district constituents. Listening to diverse narratives acknowledges the complexity of this work while building understanding. This is a moment in time where the tenets of critical consciousness can lead to transformative practice in support of the important anti racist work that could shift the trajectory of the district.

CHAPTER FOUR⁴

Discussion

⁴ The authors listed below collaboratively wrote this chapter which reflects the team approach of this project. Authors include: Tamatha L. Bibbo, Ceronne B. Daly, Pauline Lugira White White, June Saba-Maguire, and Geoffrey Walker

This team dissertation explored district and school-level leadership and its connection to Critical Consciousness. Our overarching research question was: How, if at all, do educational leaders foster and cultivate the development of critical consciousness in schools? Specifically, we sought to undertake a multi-faceted examination of critical consciousness at multiple levels of leadership. As such, we researched leadership and critical consciousness issues for superintendents (Saba-Maguire, 2022), district leaders (Daly & Lugira White, 2022), school-based leaders (Bibbo & Lugira White, 2022), educators (Bibbo, Daly, Lugira White, Walker, 2022), and students (Walker, 2022). Our study also addressed how critical consciousness interfaced with racial difference with a focus on both educators of color and white educators confronting injustice.

The primary focus of our study was one school district in Massachusetts that has been working in various ways toward critical consciousness and racial justice. Chapter Four begins with discussing the district's strengths toward working with the district leaders and school leaders to develop two of the tenets of critical consciousness, critical analysis and agency. Next, we will examine the final tenet of critical consciousness: critical action and consider how the district might further expand its efforts to enact this. In addition, we looked at how engineering and leveraging networks provided powerful opportunities for professional development and deeper understandings of the tenets of critical consciousness and the district's role in becoming an anti-racist organization. We will then discuss how leaders' positionality related to race influenced their identity in their school communities and will further examine how each tenet intersects to construct an organizational climate and culture committed to disrupting the inequitable systems and structures harming BIPOC students. We conclude this chapter by offering policy, practice, and research implications and recommendations for the district and the field of education.

Critical Analysis & Agency through Self-development

In our study of the Freetown* School System, we found that leaders, at both the district and school levels, have engaged in critical awareness and critical reflection as an act of personal growth. In order to accomplish this, they utilize networks, coaches, feedback, and effective professional development (individually and collectively). We discuss each in turn below along with our recommendations for implementation.

Expand Networks for District and School Leaders

Our collective studies revealed that regardless of positionality, race, or gender, having intentional networks of support is crucial to moving district and school leaders toward confronting institutionalized inequities. Our analyses revealed that developing the tenets of critical consciousness is not work that can be undertaken alone. For this reason, we assert that creating opportunities via networks, both informal and formal, can provide a foundation for this needed support. We further found that joining with other leaders who share similar beliefs and commitments offered the opportunity to cultivate racial equity commitments. Furthermore, networks that ground their work with critical consciousness in mind can have a broad impact on leadership development.

We uncovered that networks can take many forms and that frequently the composition and focus of a network dictates its impact. Literature purports that the characteristics of networks are directly impacted by those who construct them, who participate, and their objective (Paulsen et al., 2016, p. 211); consequently, how and why networks form directly impact their ultimate purpose. Scholars have asserted the need to clarify a network's purpose otherwise the work of the network can be trivial (deLima, 2010). Accordingly, our research revealed that networks, for example, the Urban Superintendents' Network (USN), had a clear purpose and focus, and the

work of this network aligned well with the tenets of critical consciousness and supported Superintendents in leading equity work.

We suggest that the intentional use of the essential language of consciousness might further assist superintendents with recognizing and challenging inequitable systems and practices in education across entire school systems. Research has demonstrated that having clear goals increases the likelihood for collaboration and new learning can occur (Leithwood & Azah, 2015). As a result of new learning, superintendents have the power to take their learning back to the district and influence other school leaders. Providing district and school leaders with the opportunities to engage in networks will only strengthen the work of equity within school districts and across the state, for networks provide the support system often needed to make equity a priority and an urgent focus.

Formal networks can serve as a springboard for other supports that will lead to critical consciousness development. For example, in the Freetown School District, because of network participation, the superintendent learned about equity based coaching opportunities. Understanding the value of this professional learning and networking, the superintendent was able to leverage this knowledge within the district and offer the same opportunity for coaching to other school and district leaders within the school community. Notably, the superintendent became aware of this support structure because of network participation. Having a forum for information dissemination led to extending and furthering opportunities for others to seek self-development.

Not only do formal networks have an impact on a leader's ability to push forth an anti-racist focus, but we also found that informal networks emerge due to a desire and need to collaborate. The strength of informal networks should not be overlooked. In many ways, these

informal connections provide the ongoing support that superintendents, district, and school leaders need to sustain them through the daily challenges of equity work. Therefore, in addition to establishing formal networks within their school districts that have a clear focus on equity, superintendents must also value the impact and power of informal networks between and among their school leaders. By designing intentional opportunities for collective learning and collaboration focused on developing critical consciousness, leaders inherently will build trust and relationships with colleagues that they can lean on when confronted with conflict. Through these connections, leaders can establish informal networks within their district that support their ability to lead for equity.

Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Expanding

Networks. Overall, our study revealed that interpersonal relationships and connections among people dramatically influenced their confidence, focus and ability to engage in the challenging work of anti-racist leadership. Therefore, policies must be drafted and enacted with the specific purpose of ensuring that district and school leaders have the time and space to delve deeply into issues of systemic and structural racism. Building networks with this focus is one way to strengthen the commitment to this work. Additionally, state and district-level policymakers must consider embedding this work into teacher and leader preparation programs. Becoming an anti-racist educational organization cannot be left to chance and instead must be intentionally designed, with an expectation that all district and school leaders participate in this work. At the same time, recognizing that support systems via formal networks offer a powerful way to develop this systematic understanding is necessary.

State and district level practices can serve to construct effective networks. Thus, those who plan agendas and the focus of networks must have a firm understanding of what being

antiracist means. Furthermore, social justice and equity work cannot be achieved through “one and done” professional development. Accordingly, networks offer ongoing opportunities to develop relationships, create trust, establish rapport, and build ties that support the meaningful advancement of antiracist work.

Our study has demonstrated that networks have a positive and lasting impact on participants. There is a need to explore further how a district can become a racially just organization that develops district and school leaders' critical consciousness through purposefully constructed networks. Future research should investigate how network participation might directly strengthen a superintendent's commitment to this work and strengthen the will and skill of other leaders in school districts.

Expand Diversity Coaches focused on Anti-Racism for Leaders

Having a coach who has demonstrated expertise and a deep understanding of equity work is crucial to success. Scholars agree that individual coaching, as opposed to workshops and seminars, proves most effective in promoting adult educator growth (Knight, 2005). It was clear that the district and school-level leaders found great value in working with diversity coaches to help them to understand more confidently, and thereby, effectively navigate the work. In response to the nation's racial reckoning, coaches often function as a thought partner and can guide district and school leaders grappling with rapidly evolving situations. Moreover, because coaches are experts in this work, they can act as powerful allies when leaders confront the inevitable pushback present in this work (Knight, 2005). A potential added benefit is that the coaching relationship can provide a source of guidance and assistance that may last far beyond the formal association. For example, a number of white school leaders shared that having a BIPOC coach, secured through partnerships with local universities and outside organizations,

provided them the necessary mentoring in order to engage in critical conversations about race and systemic inequities. Estrella-Henderson and Jessop (2015) conducted a research study that focused on the impact of coaching for school and district leaders who were working to eliminate racial achievement gaps between students. In their study, they showed that school and district leaders benefited greatly from the specific and individualized support of a professional coach and were motivated to set and achieve goals, as well as discuss how the results contribute to the success of all students.

Similarly, the white leaders we interviewed also referenced relying on their professional and personal coach. This was particularly important as they navigated the challenges that came as school leaders dedicated to anti-racism and anti-racist practices including recruiting and retaining BIPOC staff, leading and fostering professional development, gathering feedback from school community members who identify as marginalized, and making change.

Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Expanding

Coaches for All Leaders. Coaches have had a meaningful impact on those leaders who have maintained this support system and invaluable resource. More formalized coaches are needed in the Freedom School System for all leaders, with a purposeful structure that allows for feedback and input of particular individuals. Research on the benefits of mentors and professional coaches for all school leaders, particularly white school leaders, may prove prudent. Furthermore, a need exists for coordination and baseline understanding of the coaches' roles and responsibilities, alignment K-12 among the coaches' expectations, and expertise in mentoring leaders, particularly those white leaders who need more support, in order to become an active anti-racist organization. Furthermore, the role of race and coaching connections may impact the degree to

which the relationships are successful. Therefore, future research should consider how race and coaching relationships intersect.

Foster Affinity Groups for BIPOC Staff

While many BIPOC staff valued the district's commitment to creating affinity groups, they had varying experiences across the district. The district's BIPOC staff reflect the rich intersectionality of race, ethnicity, and language; however, the current affinity groups are not as representative. Even though the district sanctions affinity groups, they are organized and facilitated by the participants, therefore the momentum and longevity of the groups vary depending on the availability of the "participant" facilitator. Leaders' professional networks require thoughtful, facilitated structures that allow leaders to be fully immersed in the experience. BIPOC staff also need to be only participants in order for them to take full advantage of the learning space.

Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Fostering

Affinity Groups. As we affirm the value of networks and coaches for the development and sustenance of equity-focused work for superintendent, district and school leader affinity groups, leaders need to champion the development of a network structure for BIPOC affinity groups. BIPOC affinity groups need to be a combination of formal and informal networks both focused on professional learning and on personal healing. To that end, leaders need to allocate resources to convene multiple facilitated affinity groups across the district, assuring the opportunity for consistent development of learning and healing spaces available for all BIPOC staff. In addition, BIPOC affinity groups should also be a formal part of new teacher induction programs, therefore institutionalizing the network and better supporting retention of BIPOC educators.

Create opportunities for leaders to receive critical feedback

Despite the above-mentioned support systems, the absence of agency for some leaders was a theme we uncovered. In most of our studies, agency or staff empowerment was limited to engagement in, or opportunities for, feedback. For example, district and school leaders could not provide explicit examples of educator, student, or family empowerment that shifted the power structures that have impacted historically marginalized communities of learners. Furthermore, despite interview questions that focused on agency as one of the main critical consciousness' components, responses were limited or nonexistent. Additionally, we found a disparity between what white leaders and BIPOC educators viewed as agency. Often white leaders shared that they provided staff "agency" by encouraging them to organize or lead anti-racist professional development or lead race talk; whereas, the BIPOC educators did not view this as agency, but rather as tokenizing or another example of representation. As a result, across our studies we found the lack of agency, or empowerment, as a theme.

Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Offering

Opportunities for Feedback. Prior research has shown how social justice efforts by leaders can go wrong without active engagement and/or listening to the voices and perspectives of groups who have been traditionally marginalized by school systems, such as: people who identify as BIPOC, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+, people experiencing poverty or homelessness, students, and people with limited English proficiency (Radd & Grosland, 2018). The people who have, or are experiencing marginalization in and by the system, can provide valuable insight into how to rectify some of these fundamental problems. Leaders should be strategic in ensuring that the voices of peoples who have experienced or are experiencing oppression from the system are present in decision and policy making. Listening to these perspectives will support leaders' abilities to analyze systems of oppression within districts and schools. Specifically, BIPOC staff

insist on Leaders creating opportunities for voices to be heard, coupled with the power to influence decision making and action.

Require leaders to participate in effective leadership professional development

Leadership professional development is a key component in the effectiveness of a school district. District and school leaders, particularly the superintendent, cast the vision for district priorities, often made public through professional development offerings. Leaders facilitate the implementation of districtwide practices through these adult learning opportunities and staff accountability. The role of district leaders is critically important; therefore, the work of leadership professional development should be aligned with district priorities while simultaneously differentiated to meet the individual needs of diverse leaders. Understanding the experiences and needs of leaders creates an opportunity for strategic and intentional learning opportunities. This type of learning approach is not typical throughout the field of education. The tenets of critical consciousness provide a mechanism for a superintendent to engage district and school leaders in professional development that attends to diverse learning needs.

Scholars such as Swanson & Welton (2019) and Seider & Graves (2020) recognize that critical consciousness must occur at both a personal and institutional level. As the findings demonstrated, those white school leaders who had been engaged in their own identity journey, in conjunction with professional development offered in the district, demonstrated critical consciousness including critical analysis, agency, and action. Although school leaders detailed a focus first on individual identity formation through critical analysis, they also understood that, as district and school leaders- most of them white- have positions of power and privilege, and therefore must provide transformative experiences for educators in their schools through promoting the agency of others and via specific leadership actions. At the district level, through

engaging as participants in professional learning opportunities, leaders must examine and dismantle systems that uphold and reinforce racist structures and policies; similarly, at the school level, leaders are charged with confronting and changing inequitable practices that impact their staff, students, and families. As Swanson & Welton (2019) found “leaders must encourage their staff, both White and people of color, to take risks and be willing to lean in and engage in racial dialogue that is uncomfortable” (p. 736). Self-awareness and social analysis, core tenets of critical consciousness, required educators to commit to both personal and institutional learning experiences and opportunities.

Critical Action for Social Justice Leadership

A final tenet of Critical Consciousness is critical action, or the engagement in political or social activities, that disrupt inequalities (Diemer et al, 2016; Jemal, 2017; Seider & Graves, 2020). For leaders to be committed to social justice leadership, they are compelled to lead and take action steps towards more equitable outcomes for students. In our studies, we found that district and school leaders engaged in a number of leadership practices and critical actions that work towards a student experience that is equitable, transformative, and “a gateway to academic motivation and achievement for marginalized students” (El-Amin et al., 2017). These actions included, but were not limited to: amplifying and elevating voices of marginalized peoples; leading professional learning opportunities for faculty and staff; creating opportunities for conversations on race; facilitating instructional leadership for critical consciousness; and diversifying their staff.

Leaders amplify and validate the voice and experiences of historically marginalized peoples

Understanding the voices of stakeholders across the district is critical in order to honor diverse experiences. The amplification of educator and student voice can bring clarity and

direction to the work of becoming an antiracist in practice. Educators across the district have engaged in critical analysis, leading to critical actions that empower students. By validating voices that may regularly go unheard, those experiences create the conditions for a more unified district. District and school leaders have the opportunity to reflect on the implementation of professional development and practices that have been polarizing versus inclusive. Through the collection of data, the different types of experiences of BIPOC leaders and educators vary from those of white leaders and educators. The amplification of diverse voices builds awareness and understanding where these elements have not been considered. Leaders have the influence to create inclusive dynamics to support awareness and reflection. One finding that was common to some individual studies was that educational leaders who foster critical consciousness engage in the political process of schools and districts. One way is through engagement with and amplifying the voices of peoples who have been historically marginalized by schools and school districts. For example, it was found that one strategy school leaders used to engage in a critical consciousness was to engage with students in conversations about injustices within the schools and how to rectify them. School leaders met with students regularly to hear about their experiences and ideas on how to create a more just and equitable school community. The superintendent of this district also engaged directly with students in an effort to hear their perspectives on how to become a more equitable district.

Similarly, it was found that leaders needed to engage more deeply with educators of color in order to better understand how the district, at times, marginalized their voices and perspectives. Educators of color mentioned that while some school and district initiatives around increasing equity were well-intentioned, these initiatives fell short and could have been more effective if they had included the voices of educators of color. The district's core values center on

respecting the diversity of thoughts and engaging in antiracist advocacy. Representation matters at all levels of the organization, especially when and where decisions are made. BIPOC representation should be considered essential in all decision-making processes such as: budgeting, hiring, and participating in family engagement, student discipline, and student support services teams. Leaders need to advocate for representation, thereby acknowledging the value that the diversity of perspectives BIPOC staff offer. Most notably to lead an anti-racist organization, one must create the conditions for all staff to feel valued in the organization.

Leaders who understand that race, ethnicity, and linguistic diversity coupled with professional training and their lived experiences makes BIPOC staff unequivocally valuable are then able to advocate for BIPOC representation throughout the organization.

Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Amplifying

Voices. Overall, participants in our studies longed for more consistent, ongoing, meaningful opportunities for staff and students to be empowered. Seider and Graves (2020) claim that, “feelings of political agency represent a key dimension of critical consciousness that allows individuals to transform their ability to analyze oppressive social forces into meaningful social action challenging these forces” (p. 64). Participants expressed an appreciation for how they felt empowered to be involved in decision making and wanted more consistent, ongoing opportunities for themselves and their students. Findings suggest that agency is a critical component of promoting school-wide change; therefore, district and school leaders should actively seek ways to empower staff and student voice, particularly those who have been defined as marginalized, and provide more opportunities for leading this work in order to address systemic biases. Future research on ways to generalize these findings in order to create more equitable systems may prove worthwhile. Additionally, research should further explore the

implications for offering staff opportunities to provide feedback to determine its impact on increasing staff agency and efficacy.

While relationship building with a variety of stakeholders, and in particular those from traditionally marginalized communities, was found to be important, it was also found that leaders needed to be able to navigate the tumultuous political environment of education. Superintendents need to have the fortitude and ongoing support to navigate difficult conversations with board and community members. We suggest that to do this effectively, a superintendent needs internal and external systems of support. Furthermore, this support must be focused and intentional. The political landscape that superintendents navigate is often perilous. It is a position, much like an elected official, accountable to the public. Superintendents must be able to hear the diverse opinions and perspectives of the community and at the same time have the courage to challenge inequities often resisted by the most vocal, empowered members of a community.

Similarly, this study found that at times school leaders need to navigate parents and community members are on different ends of the political spectrum. For example, on January 7th, the day after the insurrection at the Capitol, leaders needed to listen to community members who were advocating for different approaches to communicating with students. All of this work requires leaders to have political acumen to be able to lead in ways that engage in the practice of critical consciousness.

Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Developing

Political Acumen. It is difficult for educational leaders to lead for critical consciousness in schools and institutions that continue to engage in practices and traditions that are racist, classist, homophobic, and unjust. These challenges have increased in the last several years in some communities with the rise of far-right activists, an example of which are the attacks on the

teaching of Critical Race Theory in schools. Opposing and changing oppressive practices not only requires the will and courage of educational leaders, but also the political skill and acumen to be able to navigate districts and schools as complex political organizations (Ryan & Higginbottom, 2017).

It is not enough for leaders just to listen to voices of those experiencing marginalization, leaders should take action to amplify the voices that are often drowned out by voices advocating for status quo. In systems, such as Freetown, where there is a disproportionality in the demographics between educators and students, it is essential that leaders work to rectify this imbalance. For example, in the district studied, 67% of the students are BIPOC and yet only 9% of the educators in the system are BIPOC (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2022). The implication of this disparity is that leaders have the responsibility to work to amplify the voices of BIPOC students and educators in an effort to be leaders who work towards equity and equitable outcomes.

Leaders implement effective professional development for all

The superintendent and district level leadership should create differentiated learning opportunities to support the intersectional and diverse needs of educators across the district, for effective professional development provides district staff with opportunities to engage in learning in a differentiated manner. Teachers and school leaders need to be aware of– and prepared to– influence the structural conditions that determine the allocation of educational opportunities available within a school (Banks et al., 2005). To this end, Trivette et al. (2009) assert that professional development includes multiple opportunities to learn and master new knowledge, material, and practices, and that any one opportunity includes varied experiences to learn, practice, and process the target of training. In one study, we found that school leaders believe that

professional development should be top down and compulsory. District leaders and school leaders should be afforded the opportunity to learn and master equitable practices in order to engage educators with learning opportunities at the school level, yet this is not enough. White school leaders reported that they had received professional development focused on antiracism and social justice in a manner that acknowledged and honored the intersections of race and the experiences of diverse learners, and yet reported that they did not feel ready to lead.

Most white leaders detailed that they had the content- awareness and analysis- yet lacked the belief that they are expert enough to function as the sole leader of this work. They claimed that they would defer to other experts, and instead, participate in the learning process; for as white leaders, they did not want to project an expert stance while also aware of their whiteness. This is a significant tension. We found that white leaders often default to experts or colleagues of color to lead this work so that they do not appear to be acting as the sole experts on race and racism. There is both an assumption that BIPOC educators are more able and have more lived experiences to deliver the professional development through an authentic lens; however, those who identity as BIPOC have reported that they want and need the white leaders to “step up” and thoughtfully and collaboratively lead the anti-racism work. Without breaking this cycle, the work will not fully be embedded, and this tension and frustration will linger (Welton et al. 2015).

Consequently, effective professional development for white leaders must include opportunities to practice leading these conversations about race and racism and building their confidence and skill in leading adult learning on these topics.

Leaders create opportunities for race talk

In order to develop and foster critical consciousness in schools, one leadership action in which district and school leaders engaged was discussion on race or “race talk.” Critical

awareness and analysis requires educators to reflect on their identities, including race, and be open and willing to engage in dialogue and discussion on race and its impact on teaching, learning, and leading. In each of our studies, we found that in order to foster critical consciousness in others, effective leaders facilitated, coordinated, and supported efforts to amplify staff and families' experiences including conversations on identity. We found that in order to engage in critical discussions on race, school leaders had to be race-conscious and become critically aware of the habits, practices, and behaviors they display and uphold.

As researchers found, race-consciousness involves ongoing self-reflection and internal exploration of identity in order to understand how educators consciously and subconsciously participate in a system of racism (Swanson & Welton, 2019). For example, “principals who engage in race conscious dialogue and practices should help their staff critically examine how the system of racism plays out in their school community” (Swanson & Welton, 2019, p. 736).

Openness to discussing race and its impact on policies and practices that uphold inequities must be a first step, particularly for white school leaders. Although research has found that leading race talk may be challenging for white educators, white leaders should be encouraged and empowered to move from a race-evasive stance and embrace the discomfort needed to lead and foster conversations about race openly and often (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011). As a result, engaging in action such as race talk is a necessary step towards an anti-racist school and a critically conscious school community and leadership development programs should give thoughtful consideration to supporting white leaders in understanding their own racial identity and moving past white fragility and color evasiveness.

Implications/ Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Creating and

Maintaining Effective Professional Development. The role of district and school leaders in the

creation and implementation of consistent and effective professional development is paramount. Trivette et al. (2009) assert that professional development includes multiple opportunities to learn and master new knowledge, material, and practices, and that any one opportunity includes varied experiences to learn, practice, and process the target of training.

Critical consciousness development supports educators with the awareness of the inequities within our society to meet the needs of diverse learners (King, 1991). Therefore, district leadership should determine district wide priorities and a multi-year professional development plan that addresses these priorities. This professional development should be part of a policy set forth by the superintendent in conjunction with other district offices. Professional development should be mandatory. Furthermore, all district and school leaders should participate in a specific leadership track to support their facilitation of professional development for central office staff and school-based staff. In addition, minimally the Professional development plan should be assessed on an annual basis for effectiveness and impact. The district can anonymize the survey but collect gender, race, ethnicity and linguistic diversity data and location either school based or central office. This process will allow for continuous improvement and opportunities for all voices to be valued. Lastly the Freetown district needs to consider how to incorporate this essential professional development into their mentoring and induction plans for new staff members. This would provide staff who are new to the district the support they need during the onboarding and mentoring process.

Leaders engage in instructional leadership for critical consciousness

Ultimately, schools exist to educate students, and the job of leaders is to ensure the best conditions are in place for students to learn and develop. Leaders who aim to support the

development of critical consciousness in their schools and in their students can do this by engaging in instructional leadership (City et al, 2009). Through instructional leadership, Leaders can positively impact the instructional core and support more equitable relationships and classroom experiences for all students. Instructional leadership for critical consciousness can come in a variety of forms. We found that some school and district leaders took action through involvement in courses and curriculum. Curricular equity audits that examined practices such as the diversity of texts and the level and quality of civics education was something in which both district and school leaders engaged. The district's Diversity Equity and Inclusion team had a curriculum subcommittee who was tasked with examining the material and assignments being presented to students. Both the middle and high schools recently launched state directed civics projects, or Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) projects. Some of these projects, presented to the school committee, were examples of self-directed learning opportunities supporting the development of student critical consciousness. While teachers, students, and school leaders named specific departments where topics of social justice were being examined, extracurricular and cocurricular activities such as the Black Student Union were also cited as critical to the student experience in their cultivation of their critical consciousness. One important action of educational leaders to support critical consciousness development was through their work as instructional leaders.

Implications/Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Growing

Instructional Leadership Opportunities. While effective educational leadership has many aspects, it is important to note that the ultimate goal of our school systems is youth development,

and thus instructional leadership is paramount (Grissom et al., 2021). In the myriad of challenges that educational leaders now face, we recommend that leaders make policies that support schools becoming places where students can develop their critical consciousness. Some of those policies may include curricular equity audits, implementing Ethnic Studies courses, expanding co-curricular opportunities for students such as affinity groups and other clubs, providing professional development for teachers, setting goals for and assessing critical consciousness, and embedding YPAR in schools' curricula. Leaders must maintain the practice of keeping an instructional lens as paramount to their practice. Finally, we recommend that more research is conducted to better understand which practices educational leaders, at both the district and the school level, should engage in order to positively impact the development of critical consciousness in students.

Leaders diversify and retain staff. We found that the school leaders with whom we studied made explicit efforts to recruit and retain a diverse staff in order to reflect the demographics of their students and families. Our research has uncovered that as challenging as it is to recruit BIPOC staff, it is much more difficult to create an environment that retains them. District and school leaders in our study have implemented intentional, systemic hiring practices focused on recruiting BIPOC educators. A few leaders shared strategies that have been put into place to retain BIPOC educators including mentors, coaches, and affinity groups, yet this remains an area of growth. As research has shown retention of BIPOC staff is essential to creating and maintaining a school climate and culture that will allow students, particularly those who traditionally have been denied access and opportunity, to be successful in their educational experience. Further research is needed to provide guidance on relevant and effective efforts for retaining these invaluable hires.

Implications/Recommendations- Critical Consciousness Development by Diversifying Staff.

Increasing diversity at both the school level and the district level requires leaders to commit to both recruiting and retaining BIPOC staff. Retaining BIPOC staff is more complex because Leaders need to influence the culture of the schools or departments that BIPOC staff join, and that poses its own challenges. BIPOC staff interviewed for this study all described not feeling connected to the district. Some felt that they were not valued for their lived experiences even though they have taught in the district for many years, some felt that their knowledge of their students and families was dismissed even though they share similar racial or ethnic backgrounds, and others felt that they did not get invited to participate in any decision-making spaces. Therefore, for Leaders committed to diversifying the district, representation matters. BIPOC staff need to see themselves represented in all areas of the organization and specifically in the committees where policy and practices are developed and decided.

Final Recommendations for Critical Consciousness Development

In conclusion, it is critical to evaluate the systemic opportunities for the Freetown district. This research study has provided data that speaks to holistic and strategic steps that could strengthen the critical conscious work of district leaders. The superintendent has prioritized a relentless focus on post-pandemic recovery and rejuvenation, nurturing a sense of belonging for the broader community and becoming an antiracist school district by focusing on the code of character, conduct and support. This work can be accomplished through the lens of critical conscious leadership. A cohesive and systemic approach will create opportunities for awareness, reflection and action throughout the district. The findings of this research study provide a variety of final recommendations in alignment with the superintendent's priorities.

Since our study encompassed a wide range of stakeholders and, therefore multiple data sources, we are confident in putting forth the claim that a superintendent plays a critical role in providing the school district the leadership needed to become an anti-racist organization. Moreover, clear data emerged supporting critical consciousness as a robust framework for a district to examine its understanding of and progress toward ensuring an equitable and inclusive school organization. As we learned, the positionality of a superintendent is influential in setting equity priorities and commitments at the district office and ultimately affects practices at the school level. Subsequently, ensuring strong, equity-minded, active anti-racist, anti-bias leadership over school districts must be prioritized.

As an initial step, Freetown district leaders should seek to understand the current methods for stakeholder engagement in order to create more effective and authentic opportunities for two-way communication and understanding. The exchange of ideas and experiences should involve the district leaders, school leaders, educators, students, and families. In addition, the district should seek to create spaces for educators of color to share their unique experiences as BIPOC, to voice their concerns about policies and practices, and to be valued as collaborative problem solvers and informed experts based on their lived experiences. As a result, the district will be able to collect data regarding the areas of strength and growth from all stakeholders that could support the priority areas, while simultaneously nurturing a sense of belonging for the broader community. As Ishimaru (2019) found in her study, in order “to move beyond ‘random acts of engagement’ (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010), systemic collaboration practices may need to shift from remediating families and staffing family engagement positions ... to fuel collective organizational improvement and leveraging family expertise to foster professional learning and innovations in designing equitable educational environments (p. 31).

Next, the Freetown district should consider restructuring the work of the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Office. Although the majority of the equity centered learning and practices are supported through this office, in order to build capacity through all stakeholders a new approach could support the intent and impact of this office's work. Through shared responsibility and collective action, alignment of learning and practice could come to scale through district and school leaders. In order to become an antiracist school district that is focused on the code of character, conduct and support for students (who are the major stakeholders), creating a deliberate and measurable plan is paramount. Common languages and practices are critical to this planning. Therefore, the Freetown district should consider mandatory, districtwide learning grounded in the Path to Becoming an Antiracist Organization Framework (Tool Kit for Equity Project). This work lives with all district leaders and with uniformity should be practiced by leaders and educators throughout the district. In support of monitoring progress towards this district priority, the implementation of the Continuum for Becoming an Antiracist Organization as a tool could provide check and balances for district leaders (Crossroads Ministry).

Some white leaders still demonstrate a color-evasive perspective which has implications on preparation courses and ongoing professional development. Due to the critical need to dismantle inequities in education, leaders must be prepared to guide and lead this work; this may not be possible for those who have a race-evasive perspective. As a result, all candidates for leadership positions should be required to engage in coursework on anti-racism in education and should be required to maintain professional growth and learning on this topic (Theoharis & Haddix, 2011; Welton et al. 2015). Capacity of leaders must be at the forefront of goals for the district and requiring coursework prior to hiring as well as continued development through professional workshops, relying on professional coaches, and expanding networks will prove

invaluable in dismantling systemic inequities that remain.

Conclusion

This study was conducted at a pivotal time in our country's history. Not only is the United States in the midst of a global pandemic, but there is also a reckoning with racial injustice and significant threats to our democratic system. Public education has been theorized to have the power to support increasing social justice and strengthening democracy (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1993). While there are leaders and districts pushing to ban Critical Race Theory (CRT) and books about oppression, there are other leaders and districts pushing to become anti-racist and pro-social justice organizations (Kaplan & Owings, 2021). Now, more than ever, school leaders need to be leaders that cultivate critical consciousness if we are to build an anti-racist school setting in which access and opportunity are a reality for each of our students and families regardless of their racial, ethnic, or linguistic attributes.

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Appendix A

Interview 1 Protocol and Questions

Introduction

- What is your role, and how long have you been in your current position?
- How many years have you been in the district and in what capacity/ capacities?

Interview 1 Questions

- Describe the type of adult learning experience you have engaged with over your career as an educator?
- How often do professional development opportunities help you explore new ways to promote equity in your practice?
- Share the types/topics of equity centered adult learning that are provided by your district/school?
- How do these adult learning opportunities inform the practices of educators in your district/school?
- When it comes to promoting culturally responsive practices, how helpful are your colleagues' ideas for improving your practice?
- When have you heard of critical consciousness?
- Are you provided opportunities to reflect on your race as an educator in how you support the student demographic in your community?
- How are you given opportunities to take action in order to offset inequities you described previously as a result of your adult learning experiences?

Appendix B

Interview 2 Protocol and Questions

Introduction

- What do you really enjoy about your work?
- What do you find challenging in your role?

Interview 2 Questions

(During the interview, 1 questions in each of the categories of critical consciousness will be posed to the participants)

Critical Self Awareness:

- Describe a person with whom you share a close personal relationship experienced marginalization due to race?
- Discuss how some of your life experiences or the experiences of people close to you have allowed you a deeper perspective towards certain student racial identities?
- In your district/school are there opportunities for development of awareness of your racial identity?

Critical Reflection:

- Have you been influenced by pre-service/PD/ professional learning (e.g., book group, course, or speaker), to change the way I think about a certain group(s) of people who had a marginalizing experience.
- Do you have opportunities to reflect on marginalized groups in your school?
- When do you engage in critical discussions with colleagues about oppressive systems or structures that exist in your schools?
- Does your school/district leaders offer opportunities to discuss anti-racist practices?

Critical Action:

- How do colleagues confront someone who talks to or about a student(s) in a way that you felt was racially degrading?
- How do you or your colleagues enhance (or encourage a teacher to enhance) curriculum material to include non-dominant culture perspectives and/or learning styles?
- When do colleagues raise questions about the validity and/or reliability of assessments and data analyses for certain groups of students?

Race

- How has your race influenced your adult learning experiences overtime?
- How have your experiences with adult learning supported your ability to be aware of the elements of systemic oppression that exist in educational systems?
- How have your experiences with adult learning supported your ability to be reflective about the educational experiences of marginalized students?
- Have your experiences with adult learning empowered you to take action when considering how racial inequity and social injustices have negatively impacted the learning experiences of students?