

Yep, we're white: Addressing racial inequity in one MN suburban elementary school
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Abstract:

This action learning project set out to determine if the leaders and staff in one suburban lottery based enrollment arts integration themed elementary school could promote racial justice and improve the experience of Black and Brown students in our school by growing deeper in the understanding of ourselves, the historical context of whiteness, and white fragility through explicit conversations about these topics, and by intentionally changing the curriculum to be more inclusive and connected of the diverse racial backgrounds of the students themselves.

Three years into the project, staff participation in equity surveys and conversations is consistently around 90%. Staff report greater comfort in talking about race and express a desire to share racial and cultural resources with colleagues. Staff report that the content whiteness and white fragility has been eye opening and transformative in how they view themselves. Finally, the achievement gap in literacy has closed markedly (42% since 2015)

Vision: To be a racially-just arts integrated elementary school where all kids leave middle school ready.

Evidence of the Need for Change:

Historically the school was known across the District as a white flight school and racially isolative. EL programming was used for diversification, but then pulled due to programming needs. Families of color (that didn't act white) were turned away from the program. Leadership was known to be racist and exclusive. None of this was publicly addressed or shared. In SY17 staff was given the opportunity to take an equity survey, but didn't. This led to the District leadership calling the school's staff out for being racist. Through inventorying curriculum and classroom libraries, 90% (at most) of all materials and subjects were white male. Student demographics were little to not present in what was available. MCA literacy test scores of Black students were 53% below their white peers. When confronted with these issues staff blamed the District, blamed the kids, blamed colleagues, and spoke of color blindness.

Our vision of all students middle school ready implies that we are preparing students for middle school by not only providing them with the academic content information they need to learn, but also the cultural knowledge and connections they need to identify with in order to enable and extend their learning. Our school staff and curriculum— Western Euro Centric – seemed disconnected from students' own identities and cultural backgrounds.

What We Did:

First we addressed the lack of curriculum diversity through a curriculum audit. This led staff to see first hand the lack of diversity that we had within our curricular units and within our classroom libraries. This was followed by PD, curriculum writing time, and book lists to enable teacher teams to design and implement change in their classrooms. Next we created an equity team to help guide our school in conversations and activities to help us understanding of ourselves, the historical context of whiteness, and white fragility. We leaned on the work of Robin DiAngelo, Muhammad Khalifa, Lisa Delpit, and others to guide our time. We structured 22 hours of time to explore the concepts. Requirements for both activities came from administration as well as the addition of talking about race in classroom observations. The racial equity lens was pushed to be present in every meeting/discussion and work that was being done in the building.

What We Found:

Staff was hungry for the change and conversation. All grades now have an AA or Somali text or resource in their Artful Learning Units. Teacher teams looked for diverse education opportunities, 3rd - 5th grade adopted critical literacy model with CTC and focused on “absent voices” and alternative narratives. Teachers adjusted classroom libraries to be easier to use and showcased books with diverse characters.

As a result of the work and discussion, 95% of staff participated in most recent equity survey (awaiting results). 76% of staff willing to now engage in talking about race (building survey). No staff publicly identify as color blind (building survey). Staff now share racially diverse resources regularly at staff meetings. Reduction of referrals of SOC to quiet room and for SPED services (7-12% reduction). We seen a 7% increase in attendance by SOC for SY19.

Implications for Change:

1. Curriculum audits bring focus to gaps in diverse resources and materials
 - a. Once exposed to inequity staff will look to find materials to address it
 - b. Funding to explicitly support diverse texts in the classroom changed teachers use of classroom libraries
 - c. Students embrace diverse texts
2. Conversation time is an absolute
 - a. 60 minutes or greater is need to have conversations about race
 - b. Frequency of conversation need to take place within a two week window
 - c. Staff need to have choice in being a part of the time scheduling
3. Talking about race leads to change in self perception and how one enters the classroom
 - a. Staff self perception changes how they talk about their classes
 - b. Content and form of presentation of content might change
4. Full system discussion and analysis around race may remove some of the unseen biases and racist acts that a school system enacts upon students of color

- a. Further survey and interview of staff and students around self perception and microaggressions is needed to support this
 - b. YPAR model needs to be used/applied
- 5. We are just at the beginning of our race work
 - a. Deeper conversation around White Fragility and White Identity is needed
 - b. We have yet to focus on student racial identity and how we view, support, and recognize them