

Fostering Student's Transformative Agency in a Predominantly White School District: Opportunities and Challenges

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This paper provides a brief overview of a one-year school district-university-community partnership to implement Learning Lab—a formative intervention designed to create an inclusive problem-solving team to address complex localized problems (Bal et al., 2016; 2018). In this paper, I utilized Learning Lab to address discrimination and harassment of historically marginalized students, both with and without disabilities, in a school district in New England, U.S. In particular, I focus on how a diverse group of members navigated challenges and opportunities in leveraging students' voices as critical in the creation of the protocol for addressing discrimination and harassment.

Problems and Contexts

Greenville School District (GSD) (pseudonym) is situated in a predominantly white, middle-to-upper-class town in New England, recognized nationally for its academic excellence. Despite this reputation, GSD has faced various equity challenges, particularly the underreporting of bias-based incidents of discrimination and harassment. In the GSD context, these incidents are driven by hate, prejudice, and discrimination against racial minority students, students from religious minority groups, and students with disabilities. For instance, disabled students using wheelchairs were mocked for their inability to use stairs, and a Black student was repeatedly called the N-word. During the 2020-22 academic years, GSD reported zero bias-based incidents across its 11 public schools serving 4,500 students ([State] Department of Education, 2021; 2022). However, the district's director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEI-J) observed a significant number of biased-based discrimination cases affecting historically marginalized students (Asian, Black, Latinx, Native American, LGBTQ+, and students with disabilities).

In the 2021-22 academic year, the DEI-J director documented 15 race-based incidents, eight gender-based incidents, and two disability-based incidents. The following academic year, 2022-23, saw an increase in reports directly to the DEI-J director, with 26 racially motivated incidents, nine gender-based incidents, 17 religion-based incidents, and two disability-based incidents. Despite these reports, these incidents were not officially recorded in the district's system as bias-based incidents. Such off-the-books discrimination evades scrutiny, data reporting, and investigation, perpetuating the problem and eroding trust and relationships between students, families, and schools, especially those from historically marginalized backgrounds. This disparity between actual incidents and reported numbers prompted community members and GSD leadership to develop a protocol to address bias-based discrimination and harassment.

Methods

In the 2022-2023 academic year, the director of DEI-J and I collaborated to implement the Learning Lab. The purpose of this initiative was to create an inclusive process for co-designing a protocol to address discrimination and harassment. The Learning Lab methodology values and

utilizes the empirical knowledge, expertise, and experience that historically marginalized students and families bring to the co-design process. It also enhances institutional capacity to build a system from the ground up, rather than imposing a top-down approach, and fosters equity-oriented partnerships (Bal et al., 2018; Ko et al., 2022; 2023; Mawene et al., 2022). The Learning Lab held 18 bi-weekly in-person meetings, each lasting 60 to 90 minutes. The lab members included three high school students, three parents/community members, two teachers, two district administrators, and six school administrators.

Challenges and opportunities in fostering students' transformative agency

When members with various motives, epistemologies, and ontologies joined the Learning Lab, challenges inevitably arose regarding who owned the knowledge of the problems and solutions. The most significant barrier faced by Lab members was the prevailing paradigm that adults were more knowledgeable than students (Bertrand et al., 2023). For some students, joining the Lab was an act of agency to improve the school system, while for some school administrators, it was an attempt to protect the status quo, which worked in their favor. Despite the director of DEI-J and other Lab members emphasizing that the current systems, such as the bullying protocol, did not address discrimination, ableism, and racism, certain administrators insisted that the district did not need a new protocol. Consequently, these administrators often silenced students' voices during early sessions of the Lab meetings.

Aware of these contradictions, Lab members organically devised strategies to challenge adult domination and recenter students' voices in problem identification and problem-solving. Two prominent strategies were: calling out adult domination and suppression of students' voices, and reorganizing small group discussions to amplify students' perspectives. For example, one teacher challenged the administrators, stating that their unwillingness to critically examine the existing system slowed the Lab's progress and silenced student perspectives. This sentiment was echoed by other adult allies. In subsequent meetings, other adults in the Lab began to organically call out inequities within the Lab itself. The second strategy involved regrouping small discussions by roles (e.g., students as one group) when mapping out their ideal protocol. This allowed students to fully express their voices without being silenced by authoritative adults.

These strategies led to the creation of a protocol inclusive of all stakeholders' perspectives. The inclusivity of roles, experiences, and knowledge underscored the importance of: a) communication with families, and b) an accountability system for reporting and recording bias-based discrimination and harassment. For example, the first step in the protocol is to "write down the incident as it is reported (immediately), either in Google Docs or another documentation form used in each school. Ensuring the report is written is imperative."

Recognizing discrepancies in reporting, members urged for accountability. They also recommended that the school administrator receiving the report (e.g., assistant principal) should not investigate the incident. Instead, each school should establish a separate investigation team, including a school counselor, Restorative Justice Team, Behavioral Health Team, an assigned assistant principal, and a school psychologist/counselor/social worker. Currently, the protocol is being implemented in all schools within the GSD. We aim to further study its implementation.

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