

Empowering Educational Leaders through Self-Reflection on Incidents of Race and Ethnicity

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Abstract

Exploring incidents of race and ethnicity in one's life can help an educational leader unearth hidden assumptions and biases, resulting in transformed frames of reference that support social action. This article discusses the perceptions of the participants as they explored their racial and ethnic experiences that have impacted their understanding of bias and themselves. The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how engaging in reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity empowered the researcher participants to become transformational educational leaders. Data collection included researcher participants' written racial incidents and racial autobiographies, rational discourse conversations, and meeting reflections. Reflective accounts were framed using Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning to discover common threads. Based on the information elicited from respondents, several themes were identified, namely, geography, influences of environment, feeling seen and heard, and self-acceptance, which contributed to the researcher-participants' feeling empowered to become transformational educational leaders.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, Transformative Learning, Racial Awareness, Bias

Introduction

The field of educational leadership necessitates an understanding of race and its relationship to leadership action to empower transformational leaders. Coursework in educational leadership preparation programs should facilitate these often difficult critically oriented conversations yet have been slow to integrate topics of race and ethnicity into the curricula and pedagogy (Diem et al., 2013; Fraise & Brooks,

2015; Hawley & James, 2010). The racial autoethnography is a valuable tool to help educational leaders reflect on their own racial identities through writing and discussing the impact of specific racial incidents on their views of race, and their actions as school leaders (Gooden & O'Doherty, 2015). We posit racial autoethnography may serve as a 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 1991) to empower educational leaders to become transformational leaders.

As professors in a doctoral educational leadership program and experienced classroom practitioners, we embarked on a journey with our doctoral students to explore the power of reflection and discourse to unveil their perceptions and beliefs about race and ethnicity and ultimately to ignite personal and professional transformation. Our roles as both instructor and research partners (with each other and with our students) provided opportunities for us to figure out our own assumptions about race and ethnicity, leadership, and praxis; but that is a story for another time.

Study and Researcher Context

The context for the current study was a course for doctoral students enrolled in an Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership. This program is offered by a regional university in the southeast area of the United States and is designed to prepare educational leaders to be agents of change and critically conscious leaders. Doctoral students in this program work as teachers and educational leaders within multiple learning organizations surrounding the university community. Their work contexts include some of the most racially and culturally diverse organizations within our state; one school district is the ninth largest of 67 school districts in the state and its more than 90,000 students speak 147 different primary languages and hail from 141 different countries (School District, 2022). The university has a 24.5% Hispanic undergraduate enrollment and is nearing its goal of becoming a Hispanic-Serving Institution (HSI), designated by the U.S. Department of Education as having a 25% Hispanic undergraduate enrollment (University, 2022).

The Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership has five student learning outcomes with two related to issues of social action: (a) advocate for ethics, equity, and social justice, and (b) collaborate and communicate with diverse communities. The indicators for demonstrating mastery of these learning outcomes requires students be empowered as transformational leaders; those who can reflect critically to become aware of oppressive structures and practices, develop tactical awareness of how they might change these, and build the confidence and ability to work for collective change (Brown, 2004, p. 85; Mezirow, 1991). The Instructional Leadership course is offered annually to students in the Ed.D. program. Students who take the Instructional Leadership course are asked to submit three critical incident assignments and a final racial autobiography as part of their coursework. These assignments and related class discussions are designed to provide students with opportunities for critical discourse as they move through the stages of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991) and address the program's learning outcomes related to social action.

As experienced faculty members, our interest in race and systemic inequities related to race and ethnicity have permeated our personal and professional lives. Recently, our concern was elevated by state legislation that limits the ability of teachers and educational leaders to discuss issues of race and social inequities that exist within our culture, school communities, and lives of learners. We, the primary researchers and authors, were unified in our efforts to create an open environment where our doctoral students, who were also our research partners, could grapple with issues of race and identity. The course, which was the springboard for this study, was designed around the principles of intergroup dialogues where reading, writing, listening, and reflection are used to engage in active learning through discourse to intentionally create learning across differences.

Class discussions flowed from critical discourse about students' racial and ethnic experiences to students feeling 'safe' and 'empowered' to be open about their feelings on these topics for the 'first time in any of their graduate coursework'. In addition to the writing assignments, students began to eagerly share their 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1991) in class discussions, describing their emotional connections to the racial and ethnic experiences that shaped them in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. The faculty

researchers recognized these class conversations as the beginning stages of transformative learning, where the disorienting dilemma denotes a life crisis that prompts a questioning of assumptions, resulting in transformed beliefs (Laros, 2017; Mezirow, 1991). We wondered how these critical conversations about personal racial and ethnic experiences might impact our students' understanding of bias and challenge their understanding of themselves to become empowered as transformational leaders.

Literature Review

Educational leaders today face some of the most challenging environments in recent history (Alvarez et al., 2018). Not a day goes by where the state of educational affairs in the United States does not make national news (Darling-Hammond, 2022; Izaguirre, 2022; Lavietes, 2022; Schwartz, 2021; Wood, 2022). The current trending concerns facing these leaders include school/student safety, book bans, banned words and context conversations such as “gay”, state assessment and curriculum requirements, “woke” education accusations, and racial discourse prohibitions to include training on diversity and inclusion. The national debate on the inclusion (or exclusion) of race and ethnicity dialogue (history, equity, systemic racism) in our educational systems is of primary concern for educational leaders today especially for those that seek to impart change in their local educational structures.

Issues of Race, Ethnicity, and Bias for Educational Leaders

The ethnic and racial makeup of students, in both K-12 and postsecondary education, is shifting (NCES, 2020). While White students still make up the largest population in U.S. public schools, the population is declining and is expected to continue declining over the next decade. The Black student enrollment is expected to remain steady at around 15% in the coming decade. However, the enrollment of Hispanic students grew by 7 million between fall 2017 and 2020. In comparison, Hispanic students comprised 13.5 percent of public-school enrollment in 2017 and 26.8 percent of public-school enrollment in 2020 and is projected to continue climbing (NCES, 2020). These shifting trends necessitate understanding how to lead and better serve those of diverse cultural and racial identities, especially, considering that most educators and educational leaders in the U.S. are White. Currently, K-12 teachers in the U.S. are 79% White, 7% Black, and 9% Hispanic, and K-12 public school principals are 78% White, 11% Black, and 9% Hispanic. Post-secondary teacher/administrator demographics largely mimic the predominantly White population seen in K-12.

Racial marketing in education is another common theme that has been the subject of much debate in recent years, with some arguing that it is a necessary strategy for increasing diversity and inclusion in educational institutions, while others argue that it is a superficial and exploitative tactic that perpetuates existing disparities and reinforces stereotypes (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Turner, 2018). The institutions use buzzwords like inclusion and diversity to insinuate a commitment to racial equity in the face of a changing student demographic. Meanwhile, little is being done to encourage leadership to have difficult conversations and take actionable steps to improve the school for all students, but specifically those of minority status (Chen & Guo, 2022). Racial marketing is not a sufficient strategy for addressing and correcting the systemic racism that leads to disparities in educational outcomes for students. It's important to note that racial equity in education goes beyond just a marketing strategy; it's a continuous effort to address and correct the systemic racism in education, through policies, practices, and culture change within the school. Educational institutions must actively commit to addressing and correcting the systemic racism that leads to disparities in educational outcomes for students of color (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown, 2020; Chen & Guo, 2022).

Educational leaders are legally bound by the Department of Education to ensure equal access to educational opportunities (US Department of Education, n.d.). Often, this requirement is negated by other laws that impact equity in education such as state educational standardized assessment and curriculum requirements, school assignments, and district requirements for segregated classroom placement. This puts K-12 educational leaders in a difficult situation because they are contractually bound to the requirements of the school district with most mandates being pushed by the local school board, which is

not supposed to be political leaning, but often is just that (Okhremtchouk & Jimenez-Castellanos, 2018). Educational leaders in higher education are obliged to accrediting bodies and state and national legislatures regarding their actions. Counter to these obligations are the moral and ethical obligations that educational leaders feel for teachers, instructors, and students to create an environment that helps students thrive by providing an opportunity for diverse discourse, and a space for all students to feel accepted and to share their personal experiences, culture, and upbringing. Educational leaders are teaching individuals to be open-minded stewards of diverse perspectives (Ginsberg, 2015) while at the same time being legally required to remove diverse perspectives from libraries and report teachers who speak about historical racism because it will make other students feel uncomfortable (Bendery, 2021; Wood, 2022). The intersectionality of legal, contractual, and ethical obligations of educational leaders is ambiguous and creates a sort of legal and ethical minefield for educational leaders to traverse.

The Importance of Racial Discourse for Educational Leaders

Due to their commitment to equity and the changing student demographics in American schools, educational leaders must be prepared to work with racially and ethnically diverse stakeholders. The ability to examine assumptions of one's beliefs, often acquired through racial and ethnic experiences beginning in childhood, and uncover their functionality is an integral leadership quality. It is also one that must be learned (Mezirow, 1994).

Schools do not exist in silos independent of the external world around them (Lac & Diamond, 2019); instead, they are embedded in a broader context with which they must contend. Currently the context surrounding race in education includes an attempt to silence discourse in the face of expanding racial diversity (Gross, 2022). The primary reason cited for removing race from education is for fear of making White students uncomfortable (Farrington, 2022). The literature has established that the talk of race makes people uncomfortable for reasons like shame, fear, or defensiveness (Matias, 2016; Chapman, 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2000). For example, the increased conflict erupting in school board meetings and school racial equity conversations are the result of this fear and defensiveness (Lac & Diamond, 2019).

Leading and participating in racial equity discourse is stressful and emotionally exhausting (Collins, 2002; Singleton, 2014; Smith et al., 2007). It can result in resistance, anger, and microaggressions from those in the dominant class, therefore, making it professionally risky to talk about race (Miller, 2019). In the 1990s, it seemed that more and more organizations, including schools, were expanding their conversations about race and equity (Darder, 2016). However, in the past decade, it seems that as society and schools become more diverse, the topic of race has become forbidden. However, no matter how challenging, academic scholars cannot stand idly by; they must be the voice for change (Preston, 2021). Education leaders must be prepared to speak about race, and educational leadership programs must develop and hone this skill set (Hambacher & Ginn, 2020).

The field of education is built around sharing facts; however, the current landscape creates extra hurdles and tiptoeing around sensitive topics for both teachers and administrators (Frag, 2021). One example of that is when faced with questions regarding critical race theory (CRT) in the classroom, K-12 educational leaders are sharing that this legal theory is not being discussed within their schools. However, they are being challenged with arguments that include things like history, equity, and diversity being incorrectly considered a component of CRT (Delgado et al, 2019).

Importance of Being a Transformative Educational Leader

The literature is full of stories of minority children's racial experiences and the negative effects those experiences have on them emotionally as adults (Hughes et al., 2016; Lesane-Brown, 2006; Saleem et al., 2016). However, there is a gap concerning childhood and adolescent racial experiences and the impact on one's racial outlook, bias, or desire for transformational change. This is an important area to explore and understand because professional adults in educational leadership have a responsibility to all individuals—both children in PK-12 and adults in postsecondary education—to be advocates for fair, equitable, and just educational environments and outcomes and practitioners of the same.

It is widely accepted that an individual's life experiences shape their attitudes, beliefs, and values. The same understanding holds true of our racial experience or "racial socialization" and the resulting attitudes, beliefs, and values regarding our own race and other races. While the long-term implications of our racial experiences or socialization by significant others is largely unknown or varied, some individuals explain those experiences to encourage mistrust and racial prejudice (Saleem et al., 2016), teach children about the traditions and history of their racial group to instill a sense of pride (Lesane-Brown, 2006), and prepare children to manage racial discrimination (Hughes et al., 2016). Importantly, the messages communicated from adults to children are usually informed by their own encounters (Bentley-Edwards & Stevenson, 2016). Therefore, as children, it is often close adults/family/parents' experiences regarding race that create the fabric of one's own beliefs. As adolescents, our peers have a considerable influence on what we accept and believe regarding race. However, as adults, it is our job to become stewards of change. Depending on our own racial experiences, that might require different amounts of "unlearning". Unlearning is not easy for adults, especially academic leaders who take pride in education and knowledge (Rusch et al., 2009). The conditions for this transformative learning (unlearning and relearning) include the right context, varied medium, support, critical reflection, direct and active learning experiences, dialogue, and trusting relationships (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

Summary

This brief literature review summarizes some of the current challenges facing educational leaders today. Primarily, it focuses on the race and ethnicity issues that these leaders are currently facing and will continue to face as our educational institutions become even more diverse in future years. It is critical that our educational leaders grow and develop beyond the dialogue (misguided or not) shared with them as children and adolescents through transformational learning to lead our educational systems properly. Transformative learning is fundamental to educational leaders being able to reflect on their racial experiences and assumptions and negotiate new meanings and understandings with new information, dialogue, and context (Mezirow, 1994). Transformational leadership—including racial reflection and cross-race dialogue—allows educational leaders to learn, grow, and develop their understanding of racial challenges, equity issues, and inclusive practices, as well as expand their capacity to lead effectively in diverse schools and provide an equitable and safe environment for all stakeholders in educational systems.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how engaging in reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity empowered the researcher participants to become transformational educational leaders. Based on a narrative pedagogical approach using elements of intergroup dialogues and racial autobiographies, the authors and study participants reflected on racial incidents at various times in their lives with the explicit purposes of exploring what influenced their racial awareness and how their awareness and knowledge about race and ethnicity might empower them as educational leaders and seekers of transformational change.

Research Questions

The following central question directed this narrative inquiry study: "How might engaging in reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity empower doctoral students' to become transformational educational leaders?" The following sub-questions further guided this study:

- How do childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences impact understanding of bias?

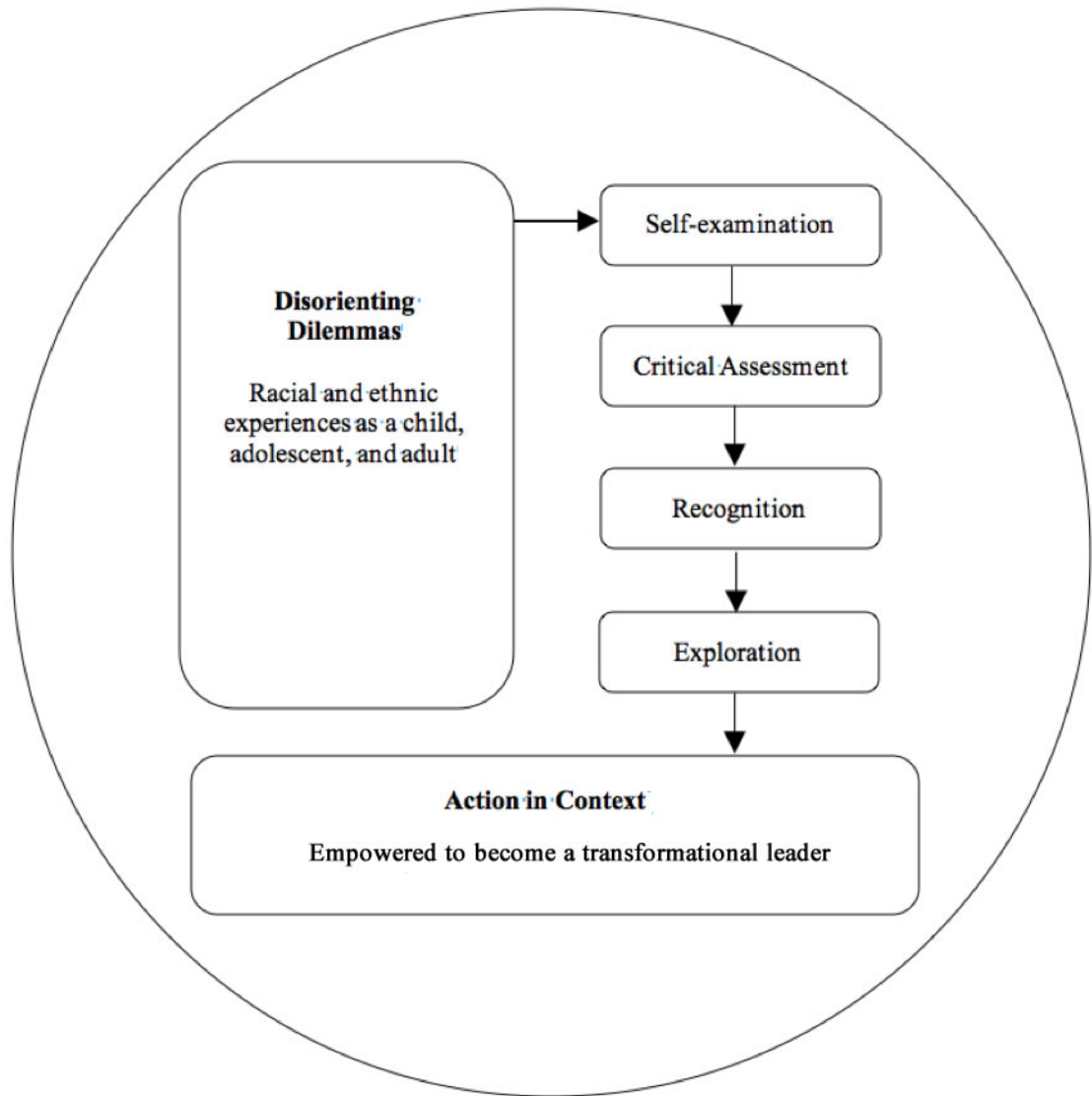
- How do childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences challenge our understanding of ourselves?

Overview of Conceptual Framework

For this narrative inquiry, the conceptual framework was developed using a review of the literature, characteristics of Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning, professional experiences, and generalizations from empirical data (Baxter & Jack, 2008). To safeguard against becoming deductive, the researchers journaled their thoughts and decisions and discussed them with the other researcher-participants to determine if their thinking had become too driven by the framework (Yin, 2014).

The theory of transformative learning is a constructivist, comprehensive adult learning theory characterized by critical reflection and rational discourse appropriate for individuals who must be prepared to make many diverse decisions on their own (Mezirow, 1994). Transformative learning theory offers phases of learning that require critical reflection and dialogue. For the purpose of this study to explore doctoral students' desire to be transformative educational leaders, we focus on the first six phases of transformative learning sparked by (1) a disorienting dilemma, described as a "personally meaningful experience" (Dirkx et al., 2006, p. 132), which sets the stage for (2) self-examination of past experiences and the perspectives that shaped those beliefs, which may or may not be shared by others (DeAngelis, 2021; Mezirow, 1991). In phase (3) critical assessment, learners reflect on their assumptions and become more open to new information and beliefs, resulting in perspective transformation. This is followed by (4) recognition that one's personal problem is shared, and learners realize that others have overcome similar challenges. In phase (5) exploration, learners explore alternative ways of being and living in terms of relationships, roles, and actions. This phase is complemented by another phase, where (6) learners plan new courses of action (Mezirow, 1991, p. 168-169; Moran & Moloney, 2022, p. 81). The major constructs are organized in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework



Research Methodology

Narrative research has a long history in education research and invites exploration of change (Bateson, 1994; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Geertz, 1988). Embracing Dewey's (1934) view that experiences are always social and personal, grow out of other experiences and "move back and forth between personal and social simultaneously," we specifically used intergroup dialog techniques, to explore stories about "critical racial incidents" shared through researcher and participant auto-ethnographic writings. We held firmly to the tenants of narrative inquiry to explore and understand experiences through "collaboration between researcher and participants over time and in conjunction with social milieus" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20).

Data Sources and Analysis

Over the course of the semester, all doctoral students in the Instructional Leadership course submitted a racial autoethnography. Three vignettes describing critical racial incidents were part of their work as well as an analysis of their stories with the goal of making sense of their various socializations around race, racism, and racial identity. Directions for the autoethnography are in Appendix A.

The purposeful sample of participants (researcher participants) consisted of five doctoral students who were enrolled in the doctoral course. In addition, there were two faculty researchers. All students in the course were invited to participate in the research. The five student researcher participants made up 50% of the students registered in the course. Each researcher participant who volunteered and used their spirit of inquiry to transform an assignment into a research study, signed a written consent form, and agreed to work as members of a research team; they will be identified as researcher participants in this article. The five researcher participants and the two faculty members self-identified as female, all were under the age of 50 except for the two faculty researchers; one who is in her 50s and one who is in her 70s. Five of the participants were born in America; one identifies as a Black American, one identifies as a Haitian American, and three as white Americans. One participant identified as an immigrant, was born in Jamaica and identifies as a Black Jamaican American immigrant, the last participant was born in Puerto Rico and identifies as a strong Puerto Rican woman. These participant researchers hold a variety of professional positions: One serves as a Captain in a county sheriff's office and was the first Black woman to achieve this rank; three work in higher education; one is a K-12 school administrator; all have a master's degree; all five are working on their Ed.D., and one is completing a second terminal degree.

Data consisted of the initial three vignettes written by the participant researchers and writings by the authors along with transcripts from five research team conversations/dialogs about the meanings and impact of the racial incidents. Team conversations occurred during the spring and summer following the conclusion of the course and were facilitated through the online meeting platform, Zoom. Questions guided the conversation and brought structure to the first three conversations. Questions were developed by the study participant researchers or emerged from the conversations. Questions can be found in Appendix B. The last phase of the study involved the analysis of the data through a series of two conversations. Constant comparative discourse analysis was used as a tool because it provided the potential to challenge our thinking about aspects of reality around issues of race, identity, and empowerment.

All members of the research team read all critical incidents and transcripts multiple times to identify ways we used language to make sense of everyday social life focusing on issues of race, racial identity, and empowerment. Since the participant researchers were novice users of discourse analysis, it was agreed the analysis would be used to identify themes that emerged from the data. Coding and memoing were used at the beginning of the process to identify shared language around racial incidents and clarify their meaning(s) through ongoing data discussions. Themes were brought back to the group for further discussion and to identify those themes that addressed the research question. Both discourse and thematic analysis techniques are appropriate for narrative methodology because we were "thinking together to understand the lives being lived" (Downey & Clandinin, 2010, pg. 385).

Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, the research team used reflexivity to assure minimal researcher bias. This was accomplished during the analysis conversations where emergent findings and possible alternative interpretations dependent upon the context of the stories were discussed. Participants challenged each other, including the authors, to unveil assumptions and preconceptions that could bias the findings. These conversations were especially noteworthy because of the variance that contextual variations can bring to any experience. Themes were agreed upon through group consensus. Credibility was established through peer review of all data, careful attention to establishing shared language about race, inequity, identity, and power relationships, prolonged engagement with data, and the authors' notes of the meetings. Participants also provided feedback and suggestions on the drafts of this article. Pseudonyms were used to link de-identified data to the same participant and retain confidentiality of the individual.

Findings and Discussion

Through this study we explored the research question: How might engaging in reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity empower doctoral students to become transformational educational leaders? We conducted constant comparative discourse analysis of the written racial autobiographies and transcripts of the five research team conversations. Several themes emerged that illuminated our original research question regarding how childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences impact understanding of bias and how those experiences challenge our understanding of ourselves. We suggest that each of these themes was revealed through rational dialogue that began as a result of the 'disorienting dilemma' (Mezirow, 1991) faced by the faculty researchers and sparked by the racial autoethnography assignment; to create an open environment where our doctoral students, who were also our research partners, might feel empowered to become transformational educational leaders. The following sections provide a detailed discussion of the findings from the analysis of this qualitative data.

Location, Location, Location

Regardless of whether the participants described childhood, adolescent, or adult racial and ethnic experiences, mentions of place and location were woven throughout the self-examination stage of our rational dialogues. When asked to describe themselves, all the participants included a location, and this revealed the lens through which the participants shared their experiences and understanding of bias and themselves.

"I am a Black woman who was born in New Jersey raised by strong women of the South."
(Monique)

"I am a Haitian American woman and a first-generation doctoral student." (Faith)

"I identify as a Black Jamaican American immigrant born in Jamaica and raised in the United States for the past 26 years." (Sara)

"I grew up in a small midwestern town full of people with deep rooted "conservative" beliefs."
(Micaela)

Carmen identified herself as "a strong Puerto Rican woman" and mentioned, "... I am extremely proud of my Latino heritage, and I hope to pass those feelings on to my son someday."

During the self-examination stage of transformative learning, participants began to think about their past experiences and how those connected to their racial and ethnic experiences. Location remained a main focus for the participants as we examined our beliefs and understanding of racial experiences.

I never felt like I fit in, and I always desired a life that allowed me to be who I wanted to be outside of who my family was and beyond the scope of the small-town watchful eye. I moved to a big city, and I found freedom in being invisible. I lived in other countries and in different parts of the U.S. I became friends with a diverse group of people. (Micaela)

During my teenage years, the Haitian population was small but rapidly growing in my city. During those years, there were only certain places I felt comfortable. We had less than 5% of Black teachers and administrators on our high school campus. We clung to those teachers and tried to get to know each other even if we did not have their class. (Faith)

I grew up in Jamaica which is a predominantly Black country in the Caribbean. It was a very diverse nation, but I remember when I first visited the United States when I was five or six years old with my dad and my aunt, I was amazed by White people and people speaking Spanish. I remember trying to talk Spanish. Because I lived in a predominantly Black country, it's all about the skin color. (Sara)

The racial makeup of the teachers and staff in New Jersey where I grew up were African American. It wasn't until I became an adult and moved to this state when I realized that it wasn't the norm to have African American educators in high-ranking positions. (Monique)

I remember the first time I was told I am "brown." I was 22 years old, and I had recently moved to Washington state to attend graduate school. It was in that town where I found out that I am "brown" and that there were people who did not welcome those who do not look or sound like them. But it was also there where I had the opportunity to learn more about my identity as a Latina and as Puerto Rican, and I also learned the value of always being proud of my heritage, even when others do not understand it or accept it. (Carmen)

Assumptions about race and ethnicity impacted by location or geographic area is evidenced in the literature (Forest, 2002; Freng et al., 2019; Gilmore, 2010). As participants reflected on their own childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences, they explored their perspectives about themselves and others through the lens of place. By critically examining the way their assumptions influenced them, the participants began their perspective transformation. Self-examination is an essential aspect of the transformative learning process because it leads to transformative action (Gooden & Dantley, 2012). Marsick and Mezirow (2002) concluded that critical reflection is a necessary step in the transformative learning process to move toward exploration (Mattila et al., 2020, p. 39).

Influences of Environment

In addition to childhood school experiences, other environmental factors may contribute to racism, including size and diversity of one's hometown, diversity in friendships, and travel experiences (Smith & Ross, 2006, p. 2752). It is widely understood that assumptions about race and ethnicity originate from parents and peers (Aboud & Fenwick, 1999, as cited in Smith & Ross, 2006), an idea that participants also noted. Several participants commented on how their family or environment influenced the way they viewed themselves and others.

Carmen shared, "I always thought I was white until I moved [from Puerto Rico] to the United States and was told I was brown." Sara described her struggles with being a proud Jamaican and not feeling part of the Black community in the United States, "I think that's why a lot of times we exclude ourselves from Black culture because we view ourselves as just Jamaican". Faith considers herself a

Haitian American because she was raised in the United States, but her parents raised her as if she were “on the island”. This made her feel “different” than her parents.

During our discussions, participants recognized some of those influences may have been biased. During our conversations, Sara began to recognize why her ethnicity made her feel separate from those with a similar race, “[T]hat’s why it’s been really hard to connect to what a lot of Black people face in America, because I’ve always viewed myself as an outsider [because I’m Jamaican].” As they acknowledged some of their assumptions might be wrong, they shared that they were becoming more open to new information and thoughts.

Faith, who is Haitian, shared an experience that was several years old but was a factor in how she perceived some White people. “Is that really your name?” a White female customer said to me one day. “I bet your mama wanted to be unique and different, huh?,” she said laughing in my face while attempting to make eye contact with another customer. My biases against a specific population affect my ability to show up as an educational leader adequately...I have been empowered to think twice about the biases I hold and the benefits of learning more about others.

I witnessed racism, and I realized that some people can never be invisible. The world is always watching what they do to further solidify biases and stereotypes. (Micaela)

I’m so happy we are doing this because I see them (my peers) through a very different lens right now... now learning about them, makes me understand that everyone has so many different experiences and knowledge and backgrounds and we should be able to take the time to listen to them, compare, connect, and be willing to accept the differences as something beautiful... not everyone is brave enough to do that. ...it’s hard for everyone. (Carmen)

Throughout the critical assessment phase of our discussions, participants began to look at their past assumptions and review them critically. During this phase, participants shared how their ideas about race and ethnicity had been influenced by their environment during childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

Feeling Seen and Heard

During the recognition phase of our conversations, participants shared perspective transformations. When they described feeling seen and heard, they also considered strategies for learning new things, seeing new perspectives, or talking to new people. At this phase of the learning process, participants realized they were sharing the journey of transformation (Mezirow, 1994).

The faculty researchers noted a pivotal moment during one of our conversations. Sara shared her anguish over feeling that she had to sit her Black sons down and explain that if they were walking down the street or pulled over driving a car they had to respond in a certain way because she was afraid the color of their skin would make them vulnerable. She shared, “this is a long and hard journey I am willing to take to heal my heart and make this world a better place for my two Black beautiful boys.” In response, Monique, who is a police captain commented:

I am also frightened for my own Black son who is 25 and big and has dark skin. I worry a lot when he’s out after dark because he’s a soft gentle guy but because of his race people may feel threatened by him. I always remind him that he must be extra respectful, so he doesn’t have any issues or problems when he’s out.

As faculty researchers who are White, we realized that we were walking the journey of transformation with our students. We shared with the other participants that we had never even considered having that conversation with our own White children. We noted our own new perspectives. Sara responded by saying, “I felt so vulnerable in sharing that but I’m happy you saw it”.

Listening to my peers' stories gave me a new perspective of myself and how they see me. I feel closer to them, because we connected; they can see me, and I can see them. We understand each other at a different level. (Carmen)

I think we see each other so much more now, more than just classmates but for who we really are. This experience has allowed me to recognize my biases, but also how I see myself. It showed me how to see how my experiences influence my perception of others. (Sara)

This research project demonstrated how educational leaders can discuss race and its impact on the educational system in an empathetic and meaningful way. It demonstrated a method for discourse that allowed us all to know each other better, grow our relationships, and develop our trust and commitment to each other. This is what every school needs, and it can be done if all participants are willing to empower themselves and each other. (Carmen)

Transformative learning is designed to help individuals develop new assumptions about the world that will guide their activities to create enhanced conditions for social action (Mezirow, 1991). Feeling seen and heard led the participants to feel more open to new information and thoughts. They became empowered participants, hearing their own stories and the stories of others (Solórzano and Yosso, 2016, as cited in Maylor et al., 2021). With appropriate attention to issues of race and ethnicity, and development of personal awareness, participants' perspectives are transformed (Gooden & Dantley, 2012), which may enable aspiring leaders to explore opportunities for change.

Self-Acceptance

Conversations during the exploration phase revealed participants' self-acceptance. The participants described how their roles, relationships, and actions were connected with their new understanding. Sara commented, "once you have a different lens on you see so much more". She shared that she normally talks about issues of racism with her "core group of people" but "it was very eye opening to talk about it with everyone and to listen to the experiences of everyone, and to learn". She elaborated further:

I think it's like the first step, and it's in such a structured way to even talk about race because you're talking about yourself you're talking about you first and what happened in your life...and then, it allows you to analyze information, so I thought this process just it was it was really powerful.

Participants began to share the ways our rational dialogues had empowered them. Micaela shared her thoughts about this, "I feel like there's been a shift since your class where there's a stronger comfort between everybody and I really do think it's because of sharing more with each other." Sara mentioned, "I think a format like this, or something where people can have honest, open conversations and have that space to do that, I think that is a good step".

I am a woman who did not know my strength until I was pressed and challenged by life. I am eager to push my limits to see how far I can go before I am told I can't go any further, just to push a little more to prove them wrong. I was empowered going through this project with women of all shades finding their way in life to make changes for themselves and others to follow. (Monique)

It made me realize my want to be seen and heard for who I am, for my experiences to be told, and to be understood. For the first time in my life, I felt my experiences as a child immigrant mattered and shaped who I am today. Through this research project, I realized that I need to be that person for others and see others for who they are. (Sara)

It often becomes frustrating when bureaucracy, people's ignorance, and the lack of resources (and/or interest) prevent you from even getting closer to achieving part of these goals, but I keep trying. Living is learning, and it is my goal to keep learning. I'm not trying to impose anything on anyone, but I do try to provide opportunities to learn about things that we cannot find in books. I think I owe that to my students and to my son. (Carmen)

My goal is to continue to educate myself and encourage other people to push past the fears of racism and negative stereotypes. People working in Corrections or Law Enforcement should be trained about understanding different races, racial identity, and racism such as Human and Cultural Diversity. (Monique)

Mezirow (1994) suggests that transformation does not necessarily mean taking action but deciding to take action because of changed perspectives. Participants in the exploration phase reflected on their new understandings about their roles, relationships, and actions. This led them to discuss the paths they may take in their own leadership practice as transformational leaders.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This research is shared through both researcher and participant auto-ethnographic writings. We focused on how we assigned meaning to our experiences through the stories we shared. The richness and nuances cannot be expressed in definitions or abstract propositions, they can only be evoked through storytelling (Moen, 2006, p. 60). As a result, our final narrative is open to a wide range of interpretations by others and findings may not be generalizable beyond this study.

People often fear talking about experiences with race and ethnicity because they are afraid of how others will react. It can feel unsafe to share uncomfortable experiences, because they can reveal who we are. Sharing our lived experiences in educational leadership programs can provide a model for practitioners to become agents of change. By engaging in reflective practice and actively listening to the stories of others, leaders can gain a deeper appreciation for the diversity of experiences and perspectives within their communities. This can help them to create more inclusive and equitable learning environments, where all members of the community can thrive and succeed. We encourage other researchers to explore with their students the ways reflective written and oral discourse about incidents of race and ethnicity are integrated into educational leadership preparation courses to provide opportunities for transformational learning.

Narrative inquiry in the social sciences is a form of empirical narrative, and in every narrative study from educational practice there will always be some facts (Denzin, 1989, as cited in Moen, 2006, p. 64). Future narrative studies may consider how to inspire and initiate dialogues about race and ethnicity in the field of leadership; something that is essential for reflection on practice and development.

Conclusion

Scholars acknowledge the importance of educational leaders recognizing issues of race, ethnicity, and bias in professional practice (Diem et al., 2013; Fraise et al., 2015; Gooden et al., 2015; Maylor et al., 2021; Theoharis, 2019). The ability to examine assumptions of one's beliefs, often acquired through racial and ethnic experiences beginning in childhood, and uncover their personal impact, is an integral leadership quality. It is also one that must be learned (Mezirow, 1994). The journey to empowerment in our study is the power of the storytelling, both the commonalities and the uniqueness of the researcher participants' experiences. As we engaged in these storytelling experiences, we uncovered the hidden stories, experiences, and perspectives that shape the lived realities of not only ourselves, but also our educational institutions and communities. Reflecting on racial experiences with others can enable educational leaders by providing them with a deeper understanding of their own stories and the stories of those around them. By listening to these stories, educational leaders can gain insight into the complexities of their institutions and communities, which can help them to develop more empathetic and inclusive

leadership practices. As we shared our own stories, we built trust, understanding, and respect for one another. This can help to foster more collaborative and supportive learning environments, where all members of the community feel valued and heard. Using racial autoethnography activities with opportunities for open, rational discourse and critical reflection in educational leadership preparation courses can offer students and faculty a transformational learning pathway to become agents of social change.

In his “Talk to Teachers,” James Baldwin (1963) asks, “Because if I am not what I’ve been told I am, then it means that you’re not what you thought you were either. And that is the crisis.” We offer this crisis as our spark...our disorienting dilemma...for this work. We wondered how doctoral students in an educational leadership program might be empowered to become transformational leaders through a journey of reflection and discourse about childhood, adolescent, and adult racial and ethnic experiences. We walked together with the participant researchers as they explored their understanding of bias and challenged their understanding of themselves. We agreed that location, influences of environment, feeling seen and heard, and self-acceptance were threads woven throughout our transformative learning experience, and these themes led participants to embrace social action in the context of leadership practice.

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Appendix A **Autoethnography Assignment**

*Because if I am not what I've been told I am, then it means that **you're** not what you thought **you** were **either**. And that is the crisis.*

James Baldwin "A Talk to Teachers."

Goal of the Assignment:

In this assignment, you will explore your racial identity and the messages, lessons, distortions, celebrations, stereotypes, and ideas you carry with you, regarding how you understand race in general and your racial identity in particular. What are the stories you tell and were told to you about race? How has race and your own racial identity impacted your life?

Your final completed assignment must:

- Address your understanding of your racial identity by exploring your experiences and various messages you have received about race.
- Analyze how your racial identity impacts you and your understanding of race in the USA.
- Analyze how your racial identity interacts with other pieces of your apparent and non-apparent identities (i.e., social class, ability, gender, sexuality, language, citizenship).
- Describe where you think you are headed in your understanding of race. You might also consider where you see the USA is heading regarding race.
- What learning, action, or reflection do you personally hope to be able to do in the coming years in relationship to race?

Structure: We are borrowing ideas from Gloria Ladson-Billings' approach, using "critical incidents" to structure this assignment ("It's Not the Culture of Poverty, It's the Poverty of Culture: The Problem with Teacher Education"). For each section (and there are three), write a brief vignette that in some way deals with lessons and experiences you've had regarding race, racial identity, and racism.

Following your description of each critical incident, analyze it and explore what it taught you. You are encouraged, where possible and appropriate, to use course texts, journal articles, class notes, and discussion notes to explore each critical incident. The idea is to make sense of the various socializations you've had around race, racism, and racial identity and how those socializations impact your larger understandings of the world.

Note that in this assignment you are exploring race, racism, and racial identity, but that race also interacts with a variety of other aspects of your identity and education. While you will privilege race in your discussion, you are encouraged to continually ask: How does race connect with your other apparent and non-apparent identities (gender, social economic status, language, sexuality, ability, citizenship, nationality?)

Critical Incident #1:

Describe an incident during your childhood that focuses on early teachings about race (100 words or fewer). Analyze this incident (600 words or fewer).

Questions you might consider:

- Who makes up your family?
- How do they racially identify?
- Where did your parents grow up?
- What exposure did you have to racial groups other than your own?
- What messages did you get from parents and/or other adults in your life regarding race?
- What were you taught (explicitly or implicitly) about your own racial identity?
- What was your first awareness of your own race?

Critical Incident #2:

Describe an incident during your teenage years (100 words or fewer). Analyze this incident (600 words or fewer).

Questions you might consider:

- What cultural influences were big in your life: TV, advertising, novels, music, movies, etc.
- What was the racial makeup of students at your school?
- Racial makeup of the teachers and staff?
- Racial makeup of your teams and organizations? (sports teams, music, drama, scouts, church etc.)
- What was the racial make-up of your own friend group?
- Were there any experiences with racial slurs or racial conflicts?
- What lessons, discussions, curricula, or other academic structures dealt with race, racial identity, or racism?

Critical Incident #3:

This incident should deal with a more recent moment and explore where you are today regarding your own racial identity and your own understandings of race. Describe an incident in Southwest Florida (100 words or fewer). Analyze this incident (600 words or fewer).

In your analysis, you should address:

- What has been the most enlightening or frustrating (or both) aspect of addressing race, racial identity, and racism in Southwest Florida? What learning do you feel you still need to do around race, racial identity, and racism? How might you go about expanding your learning during the next year?

Suggestions for All Sections:

- Use stories that take us to specific moments from your past as you craft your critical incidents.
 - Don't try to tell someone else's story. Tell your story and how you understand yourself in our racialized world.
 - Free write on the questions listed under each critical incident before you choose a critical incident. Find out which questions and ideas have the most resonance with you.
 - Write more than you have room for, and then trim away excess before submitting your final draft.
 - Work with your colleagues; read their vignettes; talk about the assignment with each other.
 - Plan to re-write your initial draft.
- <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/01/my-pencils-outlast-their-erasers-great-writers-on-the-art-of-revision/267011/>

Requirements:

Length and Format: Each section begins with a critical incident (100 words or fewer), which should be at the top of the section, single spaced, and in italics. The analysis of the incident (600 words or fewer) should be double-spaced.

Voice: The paper is a structured autobiography. Please use first person in writing this essay. Avoid separating yourself from the analysis.

Content: Each section must contain a critical incident and an analysis. In each analysis, you should refer to course readings and/or lecture notes and/or and discussion notes. You must directly cite course readings at least three times in the paper. But avoid making a superficial connection to the readings. Also avoid misapplying the readings by (for example) using short quotes that support your point but misrepresent the overall ideas of the author. You are welcome to cite outside class materials in your analysis, but these do not count towards the three required citations.

Citations format: Use APA 7. Include a bibliography at the end of the final product.

Appendix B

Guiding Questions for Research Team Dialogues/Conversations

Meeting 1 Guiding Questions:

1. What exposure did you have to racial groups other than your own as a child?
2. What were you taught (explicitly or implicitly) about your own racial identity?
3. What was your first awareness of your own race?
4. As a teen, were there any experiences with racial slurs or racial conflicts?
5. What lessons, discussions, curricula, or other academic structures dealt with race, racial identity, or racism during your teenage years?
6. As an adult, what has been the most enlightening or frustrating (or both) aspect of addressing race, racial identity, and racism in Southwest Florida?
7. How do you think these experiences/incidents impact your outlook on race?

Meeting 2 Guiding Questions:

1. Who makes up your family?
2. How do they racially identify?
3. Where did your parents grow up?
4. What exposure did you have to racial groups other than your own?
5. What were you taught (explicitly or implicitly) about your own racial identity?
6. What cultural influences were big in your life as a teen: TV, advertising, novels, music, movies, etc.
7. What was the racial makeup of students at your school during your middle and high school years? Racial makeup of the teachers and staff? Racial makeup of your teams and organizations? (sports teams, music, drama, scouts, church etc.) What was the racial make-up of your own friend group?
8. How do you think these experiences/incidents impact any bias(es) you may have regarding race?

Meeting 3 Guiding Questions:

1. What learning do you feel you still need to do around race, racial identity, and racism?
2. How might you go about expanding your learning during the next year?
3. How do your racial experiences/incidents impact the way you view your role to transform institutional and societal systems of racism as an educational leader?