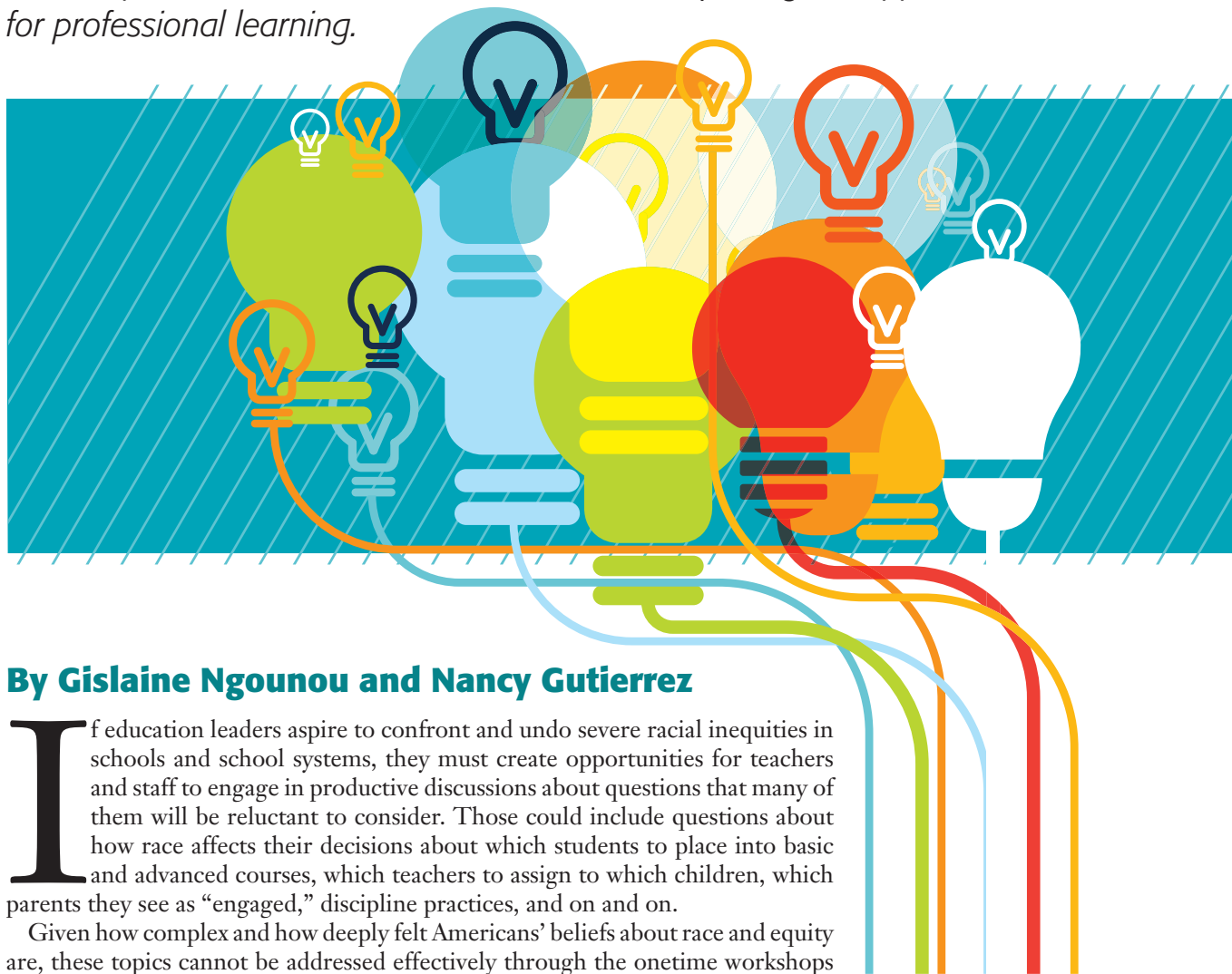


Learning to lead for racial equity

To help K-12 educators confront racial inequities, school and district leaders need to provide sustained, intensive, and carefully designed opportunities for professional learning.



By Gislaine Ngounou and Nancy Gutierrez

If education leaders aspire to confront and undo severe racial inequities in schools and school systems, they must create opportunities for teachers and staff to engage in productive discussions about questions that many of them will be reluctant to consider. Those could include questions about how race affects their decisions about which students to place into basic and advanced courses, which teachers to assign to which children, which parents they see as “engaged,” discipline practices, and on and on.

Given how complex and how deeply felt Americans’ beliefs about race and equity are, these topics cannot be addressed effectively through the onetime workshops that too often pass for professional development in K-12 education. Nor is it effective to lecture educators about racial bias, bury them in data and research findings, or treat social justice as just another initiative for the school to adopt. Rather, conversations about these issues have to be frequent, ongoing, and handled with great care and skill.

GISLAINE NGOUNOU (ngounou@pdkintl.org; @gislainedspeak) is chief program officer, Phi Delta Kappa International, Alexandria, Va., and **NANCY GUTIERREZ** is chief strategy officer at the New York City Leadership Academy.

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Later in this article, we offer guidance on research-based practices that can help school- and district-level educators engage in meaningful professional learning about race and equity. But we begin with a vignette that illustrates just how easy it is for educational leaders — even those who are deeply committed to the pursuit of racial justice — to underestimate the complexity of this work.

How easily it can go wrong

Bryar Middle School (not the school's real name) serves students from various neighborhoods, who were brought together when several schools were shut down due to school consolidations and closures. Like many schools, it struggles on a number of fronts at the same time: Over the past two years, it has experienced a significant decline in student achievement; faculty morale is low; unplanned teacher absences are frequent, creating a daily scramble to find multiple substitute teachers, and student disciplinary problems are common — though it's important to note that while a little over 40% of the student body is made up of students who identify as white, students of color make up 99% of all documented disciplinary referrals.

Bryar's assistant principal, Ms. Miles (also a pseudonym), wishes that she could devote herself to providing instructional leadership but instead spends most of her time fielding complaints. Every day she hears from teachers who are at their wits' ends dealing with students they refer to as "unmotivated" and "disrespectful." She hears from Hispanic students that their teachers misunderstand and disrespect them; why, they want to know, is the Spanish teacher the only Hispanic teacher in the school? And she hears from parents who worry that the teachers and staff don't know how to relate to their children.

Earlier in the month, she had a difficult conversation with an African-American father who had come to the school to share his concerns about his son, a 6th grader, who had been sent to the office multiple times for "not paying attention." In her last note home, the boy's teacher had warned that the behavior needed to be corrected to avoid further disciplinary action. "But Ms. Miles," the man asked bluntly, "how am I supposed to build a relationship with my son's teacher when the look in her eyes is one of

fear, and when she physically backs away every time I approach her?" Without waiting for an answer, he added, "I know that these teachers mean well. But it is hard to communicate with them if they are afraid of me and my child."

The next day, Miles went to her immediate supervisor, principal Nelson, to have a heart-to-heart talk about the increasingly tense environment in and around the school. It was time to do something, she argued, to change Bryar's culture and offer better support to teachers, staff, students, and families. She asked Nelson for permission to attend a regional equity training, which she hoped would equip her with ideas for improving the school community.

During the one-day workshop, titled "equity and identity," participants were led to reflect on their own biases, life experiences, and racial backgrounds and to discuss how those things play out in their work. Miles found it to be an enlightening conversation, especially in that it got her thinking about — and gave her language to describe — the ways in which Bryar's teachers were singling out students of color for disciplinary referrals. She left the workshop inspired to share what she had learned and to give her staff the same opportunity to think about racial and cultural dynamics at the school.

She spent the weekend thinking about ways to introduce these issues to her staff. It occurred to her that she had often worked effectively with her teachers to review the school's performance data and use it to identify student needs and drive instructional decisions, so she decided to apply the same strategy here. That Sunday, without checking with principal Nelson, she created and promptly sent a survey meant to gather data from her teachers about their demographic backgrounds and the ways in which they defined their own identities. Drawing upon materials from the workshop, she included questions such as: *What is your family history of immigration? When did you first become conscious of your race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, social class, mental and physical "ableness," faith/religion/spirituality (or the absence thereof)? What is your first memory of interacting with racial or ethnic difference? What patterns, if any, do you notice in how you respond to those different from or like you? Can you describe any associations you see with your life experiences and your professional practice?*

She hoped the survey results would prompt a discussion among the teachers about their own backgrounds, how different they were from many of their students, and how this affected their classroom practices. Ideally, the survey would serve as a warm-up for a conversation at the next staff meeting similar to what she had experienced at the workshop. She and the teachers would engage in deep discussion about the ways in which identity shapes their interactions with students and parents.

To put it mildly, the survey was not well-received. It was an intrusion on their privacy, teachers argued, demanding that principal Nelson explain its purpose and intent: “Are the survey results going in our professional files? How will these results be used? Is this a way to blame white teachers for the way our kids are acting? Isn’t this a form of reverse-racism? What does this have to do with me doing my job here?” Feeling caught off guard and unsure about how to respond, Nelson mostly listened and nodded. Later in the morning, Miles would have to come in and explain what in the world this was all about.

Some mistakes to avoid

Miles’ decision to send this survey to her teachers could be written off as the sort of thing no seasoned school administrator would do. But in fact, she did have several years of experience in the job, and her story nicely illustrates a few common mistakes that we often see when school and district leaders set out to confront racial inequities.

The first is to overestimate one’s own competency to lead this work. The workshop on equity helped Miles define a specific injustice at her school, gave her words she could use to describe the problem, and inspired her to act. However, the one-day training was simply not enough to equip her with the depth and follow-through skills necessary to design and scaffold a productive experience for her teachers. Indeed, while they may serve as adequate entry points (we must start somewhere), such brief workshops rarely provide in-depth or effective professional development on any topic (Loucks-Horsley et al., 1999), and certainly not on topics as complex as race and equity.

The second is to underestimate the time and effort that this work requires. Miles may have experienced

the one-day workshop as a transformative experience, but it is much more likely that the event helped her crystallize some thoughts that had been percolating in her mind over a long period of time. Nobody changes their beliefs about race, equity, and education in an instant, or even a day.

And the third is to assume that everybody is equally ready and willing to discuss these issues. Miles may have been inspired to act, but that doesn’t mean that her teachers were prepared to do so. Not that school and district leaders can afford to wait for just the right moment to dive into a discussion about race and equity — if that were the case, the discussion might never begin. However, resistance increases when educators feel surprised or caught off guard by the work and if it comes across as an abrupt intrusion into their professional lives. If the intention is to disrupt the status quo in this way, leaders should have a plan and skills to shift the momentum and energy toward learning.

Confronting racial inequity: Key principles

To do this work effectively, school and district leaders need to study, honor, and understand the complexities of both individual experiences and the long-standing history, biases, and deep-seated effect of inequities in American education. They need to understand that discussions about race and equity often bring up emotions, beliefs, and experiences that must be handled with great care. No issue requires more skillful facilitation.

Drawing from the research on race- and equity-focused professional development, and from our own experiences leading such work, we see four principles as absolutely critical for leaders to understand:

#1. Professional learning about race and equity requires a systems-thinking approach.

There is a tendency for educational leaders to view equity-focused professional learning as an add-on, a box on their to-do list to check off, perhaps because treating it as a more complex adaptive challenge requires new learning and more time to construct solutions (Heifetz, 1994). Typically, they hire external consultants for a onetime workshop on equity, or equity becomes one topic in a yearlong scope-and-sequence of professional learning topics. If any changes are implemented as a result, they tend to be

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rushed and poorly designed, which turns everybody off to the work and makes them resistant to future efforts to promote equity.

In its report about equity in the age of the Every Student Succeeds Act, the Learning Policy Institute lays out an opportunity to achieve equity at scale: “An equitable system does not treat all students in a standardized way but differentiates instruction, services, and resources to respond effectively to the diverse needs of students so that each student can develop his or her full academic and societal potential” (Cook-Harvey et al., 2016). Achieving this vision for equity goes well beyond simply paying attention to a list of technical tasks, the report argues. Rather, schools and school systems only begin to make progress when they integrate equity-related issues into learning very intentionally, when all stakeholders are able to see how equity (or the lack of it) permeates the fabric of every aspect of their work, and when they implement a thoughtful and well-designed scope of professional learning.

When equity training takes place across multiple levels of the system — involving a range of constituencies, from teachers and administrators to central office staff, parents, students, community leaders, and others — powerful changes have a chance to take root: People are better able to see that inequities result from conflicting interests and beliefs systems, and to look for effective ways to share and allocate resources, resolve conflicts, and dismantle unjust structures.

#2. Professional learning about race and equity requires some willingness to experience discomfort.

To promote powerful discussions about race and equity, facilitators need to know how to identify processes that advance or shut down conversations, especially when working with participants who are just starting their equity work or who feel uncomfortable with it. It’s important to create and maintain a supportive learning environment while at the same time pushing people to confront truths and realities that may make them feel uncomfortable (Garvin, Edmondson, & Gino, 2008; Singleton, 2014).

We are not advocating for what is often referred to as “safe spaces,” whereby educators refuse to participate in discussions of race and racism unless the facilitator guarantees that they won’t be made to feel personally attacked, blamed, or guilty. Rather, we are talking about the capacity to keep people engaged in the work by helping them to find their entry points into the conversation, to examine their own actions and reactions, to acknowledge that they have been shaped by their own experiences, and to look for

concrete ways in which they can have positive influences on their students and colleagues.

For example, how would things have been different if Miles and Nelson had set the stage for equity work at a faculty meeting during which they acknowledged staff’s hard work, modeled their own vulnerability by sharing what they’ve learned about race and equity and ways in which they are personally impacted and involved, acknowledged the discomfort that this discussion often engenders, and promised that the discussion would be both ongoing and focused on concrete ways in which to improve practice?

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The type of skilled facilitation required here calls for an ability to push people to the edge of their knowledge and competencies, to a space of vulnerability that opens the raw channels of deep, honest, and brave learning without letting them fall over the edge (Armor, 2006). This could include having an intentionally diverse team of facilitators with backgrounds and experiences that spread across a spectrum so that they can present different viewpoints and push on participants to engage in different ways.

In the case of Miles, it might be helpful to engage a trained equity facilitator, who could introduce some key findings from the research on race and education (such as the data from a recent Johns Hopkins University study that found that white teachers consistently hold lower expectations for their black students; Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016) and raise questions that are likely to push Bryar’s teachers to reflect on their own beliefs: When evaluating the same black student, why are white teachers 30% more likely than black teachers to predict that the student will not complete a four-year degree? Why are white teachers 40%

less likely to expect their black students to graduate from high school? And is it possible to engage in effective practice as an educator while holding personal beliefs that discriminate against certain groups of students?

#3. Professional learning about race and equity requires people to tell their stories.

Educators cannot create a new narrative about race and equity in their schools unless they are willing to attach words to their experiences, beliefs, and aspirations. For leaders, especially, it is important to develop and share a personal narrative that speaks to the purposes and values that drive them, and which can move others in the school to articulate their own goals and values (Ganz, 2009). In particular, we've found it useful for educators to share their own racial autobiographies (Singleton, 2014) — stories about the ways in which race and awareness of race has shaped their lives, including the work that they do in classrooms, schools, and school systems. Many times, we have seen such storytelling have a profound and positive impact on educators, helping strengthen their professional relationships, reveal their differences, and clarify their shared values.

Further, we have found that educators have deeper and more productive conversations about race and equity when they consider not just their own stories but also the stories of their students and the narratives revealed by looking at the research literature, popular media, and other sources. Few teachers and administrators have the time to treat their professional development work as if it were a graduate seminar, but it can be a powerful experience for colleagues to engage with each other, their students, and their communities, and to read and discuss books and articles that relate to the challenges they face in their own schools, especially when leaders or facilitators are clear that they will not ask others to engage in work that they are not willing to do themselves.

#4. Professional learning about race and equity rarely leads to closure.

Professional development activities in K-12 education tend to provide far too little time for teachers and staff to process what they are learning and figure out how to apply it to their work. Herein lies the danger of one-off trainings: They falsely suggest that there is closure to the day's session, as though educators could fully rethink their core beliefs, attitudes, and practices in a matter of hours.

One-off workshops on a topic as complex as race and equity are particularly dangerous, given that a single day's work can only begin to tease out the is-

sues that need to be discussed. Such sessions are just long enough for facilitators to pry open what Kegan and Lahey (2009) describe as educators' "worry box" — the mix of feelings, fears, and goals that drive their current behaviors and practices — and then, just when the real work has begun, they come to an abrupt stop.

School and district leaders need to understand that if they are going to raise these issues, they have to be committed to wrestling with them over the long term. Questions about race, equity, and schooling reach people at a level that is deeply personal, emotional, and moral, and they need to be able to work through what they have uncovered. Further, not only must we assume that this work takes time, but we should recognize that it may never come to a tidy resolution. As our colleague Glenn Singleton often points, we should "expect and accept nonclosure."

But as difficult, messy, and inconclusive as it may be, the work of promoting racial equity in K-12 education is also non-negotiable. We owe it to all our children, especially those who are most vulnerable, to push ourselves constantly to ensure that our policies and practices are truly just. ■

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