IN PURSUIT OF HEALING-CENTERED EDUCATION:

A CASE STUDY OF A RACIAL LITERACY AND HEALING PROFESSIONAL

DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOP SERIES

by

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ABSTRACT

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In an attempt to tackle issues of racism in the U.S. public education system, school districts throughout the country are paying particular attention to how teachers and educational leaders are trained and supported to address issues of racial disparities. As a result of this, there has been a diffusion of various anti-bias and racial literacy-based trainings in some of the largest school systems. This dissertation explored a case study of a unique racial literacy and healing professional development (PD) workshop series within the New York City Department of Education, which was offered to a group composed predominantly of educators of Color. This inquiry was primarily concerned with how the educator of the PD workshop series designed and enacted a *healing-centered* pedagogy and what were the affordances of such an approach. A number of qualitative research methods—including contemplative inquiry—worked together to understand how this professional learning experience enabled participants to engage in a healing praxis. The PD curriculum structured opportunities for participants to deploy a

two-pronged healing praxis, which combined racial literacy and critical consciousness on one side, and healing and self-care on the other. Through the combination of a *transformative activist stance*, a *healing-centered engagement*, and an *indigenist stance*, this study drew on a unique conceptual framework to examine how the PD series enabled participants to: (a) surface feelings of racialized stress and trauma; (b) potentiate their own healing journey; (c) articulate gratitude and cultivate empathy; and (d) explore conflict and cultural fault lines. This work finds a home in the coming wave of scholarship and a canon that considers healing within the context of education as an urgent matter.

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INTRODUCTION

The task of preparing educators to understand how racism works in schools has, in large part, been situated within university-based teacher preparation programs and university-based educational leadership development programs (Brown, 2004; Gooden, 2012; Horsford, Grosland, & Gunn, 2011; Parsons, 2005; Rusch & Horsford, 2009). In the case of teacher education, researchers have documented how programs struggle to equip teachers effectively with the skills needed to teach a diversifying student population and to dismantle long-standing racist policies and practices (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Mosley & Rogers, 2011; Picower, 2009). Scholars in the subfield of educational leadership have also examined the challenges that come with training and educating superintendents, principals, deans, and other school staff to address issues concerning racism (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Lightfoot, 2009; Rusch & Horsford, 2008; Solomon, 2002). This study drew on the recent trend in the field of education that focuses on ensuring that teachers and educational leaders have the racial literacy and cultural competency to identify and interrupt personal prejudice and structural racism in schools (Bolgatz, 2005; Gillborn, 2014; Horsford, 2009).

Rusch and Horsford (2008) asserted that aspiring educational leaders who feel unprepared to talk about race and who do not have access to opportunities to explore complex social justice issues constructively experience difficulties when leading in diverse contexts. There is a palpable sense of urgency toward building educators'

competencies through different anti-bias, anti-racist, and racial literacy-based

professional development and leadership programs. The core assumption here is that by

helping educators to understand "what race is, why it is, and how it is used to reproduce

inequality" (Horsford, 2011a, p. 95), they will develop the racial literacy and skills to

interrupt policies and practices that reinforce racism in schools (Gilborn, 2014).

Fundamentally, this inquiry is influenced by three specific developments. First,

some school districts throughout the country are providing opportunities for their leaders

and teachers to learn more about how to better address issues of racial disparities

(Darling-Hammond, 2004; Horsford, 2010). Second, some of the challenges that come

with this task have given rise to the development of racial affinity groups to help

educators discuss issues of race and racism in separate spaces (Bennett, Cole, &

Thompson, 2000; Irizarry, 2007; Kohli, 2008, 2012; Kohli & Pizzaro, 2016). Third, there

has been an emergent focus on *healing-centered pedagogies* to support communities

processing and recovering from racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of

institutionalized oppression (Ginwright, 2015, 2018).

Correspondingly, this is a case study on the design, implementation, and impact

of a racial literacy-based and healing-centered professional development (PD) workshop

series within the New York City Department of Education (NYC DOE) that was

provided for educators of Color in the fall of 2019. My research closely examined a NYC

DOE-sponsored educator affinity group—the Male Educators Collective (MEC)—as its

members participated in an intentionally curated professional learning experience. To

protect participants' identities, the names Cindy Bailey-Cruz and MEC are used as

pseudonyms. As I briefly mentioned, school districts are investing significant money and

energy in deploying different strategies to address issues of equity. The MEC represents

one of many opportunities the NYC DOE has provided to support educators with tackling

issues of racial disparities.

Background of the Problem

The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the
colorline. (Du Bois, 1903)

The unique combination of American terrorism—Jim Crow and
lynching—as well as American barbarism—slave trade and slave labor—
bears witness to the distinctive American assault on black humanity. This
vicious ideology and practice of white supremacy has left its indelible
mark on all spheres of American life—from the prevailing crimes of
Amerindian reservations to the discriminatory realities against Spanish-
speaking Latinos to racial stereotypes against Asians...In this sense, the
problem of the twenty-first century remains the problem of the colorline.
(West, 1993)

In 2019, issues concerning race and racism remained intractable throughout U.S.

culture and society. Exactly 400 years after the arrival of enslaved Africans to

Jamestown, Virginia, the racial fault lines within the United States of America were still

wide and exposed. Various scholars have suggested that the system of slavery never

ended; rather, it transmuted into more sophisticated mechanisms of control and

stratification (Alexander, 2010; Coates, 2014; Du Bois, 1903; Ladson-Billings, 2006;

West, 1993). For many of these researchers, the prison-industrial complex, voter

suppression, the wealth gap, the opportunity gap in education, and pervasive police

brutality represented some of the ways the aftermath of slavery manifests itself in

contemporary American society.

The further entrenchment of racial stratification and the resulting inequality impact the life trajectories of not only African Americans, but other minoritized groups as well. In many ways, the United States has had to deal with the ramifications of its encoded and institutionalized form of racialized hierarchy. For example, it has wrestled with the byproducts of what many scholars considered to be the failure of integration after *Brown v. Board of Education* (Horsford, 2011a; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Ogletree, 2004). Scholars have documented how the process of desegregation resulted in failed efforts to truly integrate schools in a way that went beyond just dismantling the legal barriers that separated the races, but to thoroughly ensuring a fair and just distribution of resources in the nation's schools (Bell, 1992; Guinier, 2004).

In her book *Learning in a Burning House: Educational Inequality, Ideology, and (Dis)Integration*, Sonya Horsford (2011a) provided an examination of the negative consequences of school desegregation on Black communities in the United States. Her work illuminated how the legal effort to desegregate and integrate the nation's school systems was thwarted, stalled, and derailed by the persistence of racist ideologies and the permanence of structural racism itself (Horsford, 2011a). Furthermore, the U.S. education system as a whole has had to respond to the demographic shifts in its population. The current student population in schools throughout the country is representative of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Anderson, 2003; Johnson, 2019; Noguera, 2003, 2009). Many school districts are overwhelmed with the influx of students with complex cultural, linguistic, economic, and health needs (Howard, 2007; Johnson, 2019). Presently, the population of the U.S. teaching workforce is predominantly composed of White female teachers. Less than 10% of the teaching workforce is constituted of teachers of Color

(Carter-Andrews et al., 2019). This reality also has propelled scholars to study the absence of teachers of Color in classrooms, and the various issues relating to their retention, professional development, and turnover (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010; Bristol & Shirrell, 2018; Carter-Andrews et al., 2019; Kholi, 2018).

At the same time, a plethora of scholarship and educational initiatives has emerged to understand and support teachers and educational leaders who are tasked with educating a diversifying student population and addressing issues racial disparities. Research on the demographic changes and present educational inequalities confirmed how institutionalized racism within school communities continues to constrain efforts to educate all children, especially children of Color, in more equitable ways (Alexander, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Payne, 2008; Sizemore, 2008). Fundamentally, racism still plays a debilitating role in how schooling is experienced and administered. School communities that are predominantly populated by students of Color experience a disproportionate distribution of school funding (Anyon, 1997; Gooden, 2012); overtly punitive school discipline (McKintosh et al., 2018); disproportional labeling of students with disabilities (Green, Cohen, & Stormont, 2019); and truncated access to postsecondary education (Hung et al., 2020). This disproportionality experienced in communities of Color in relation to education is a byproduct of centuries of systemic and structural inequality.

Evidently, legislation to desegregate and integrate schools over the last half-century represents legal efforts to create a more equitable schooling experience for all Americans. Yet, these legal strategies did not do enough to level the playing field (Wells, Duran, & White, 2008). In addition to legislation, a variety of curriculum-based

interventions have emerged to address racial disparities in schools. In particular, over the last decade, educational leaders have recognized the importance of advancing policies that increase educational access and equity, especially for communities of Color (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). These efforts somewhat reflect a recognition that the current socioeconomic conditions that limit social mobility and further cement the opportunity gap in education need to be urgently addressed. Scholars in the field of education have created curricula and academic departments that aimed to address the needs of an evolving multicultural society riddled with racism, sexism, classism, ableism, and other forms of discrimination. For example, the evolution of multicultural education (Banks, 2004; Nieto, 1999; Shannon-Baker, 2018; Sleeter, 2018), social justice education (Parker & Villalpando, 2007), culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1995b), critical pedagogy (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2003; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 2007), and racial literacy-based education (Bolgatz, 2005; Horsford, 2009) have emerged to equip teachers and school leaders with the strategies and knowledge base to combat institutionalized racism and other forms of oppression in schools and communities. These approaches to education have made their impact on the public school system in myriad ways. In particular, school systems like the NYC DOE have provided its educational leaders and teachers with professional development (PD) opportunities that deepen their understanding of race and racism through anti-bias, anti-racist, and racial literacy-based trainings.

With the help of university-based partnerships and educational consultants, school systems throughout the country have offered a variety of PD opportunities to its staff. This case study examined a professional learning experience curated and sponsored by

the Male Educators Collective (MEC), a program within the NYC DOE. MEC partnered with a professor from a private university and educational consultant, Dr. Cindy Bailey-Cruz, to facilitate and host a racial literacy and healing PD workshops series. Dr. Bailey-Cruz was a university-based scholar who had spent the last decade teaching about the effects of racial divisiveness and institutionalized racism in the context of education. I came to learn about her work and the PD workshop series through my relationship with her as a former student of hers. I viewed the PD workshop series and MEC as a unique development that aligned with my research interest. I explore this synergy in more length in Chapter III.

The partnership between the MEC and Dr. Bailey-Cruz is connected to the recent history and developments within Mayor Bill de Blasio's *Equity and Excellence* mandate and former mayor Mike Bloomberg's education agenda. In terms of the de Blasio administration, the component within the mandate that is of interest here is the fact that it provided more access to PD to help with implementing and integrating equity-based leadership and instructional practices. More specifically, the Chancellor of the NYC DOE—Richard Carranza—committed an additional $23 million dollars to pay for anti-bias trainings for the next 4 years (Veiga, 2018). These trainings would be mandatory for every employee who works with students in the system. Carranza and the de Blasio administration were attempting to ensure that students were being well-served, and that teachers and school leaders were equipped with the skills to educate a more diverse population. By the end of 2019, the NYC DOE expected to train 10,000 employees and reach the rest of the department by 2022 (Disare, 2018; Veiga, 2018). The central goal of this effort was to help the system as a whole to dig more deeply into data and practices to

uncover and address racial inequities. This increase in funding for anti-bias training also brought about more support for initiatives like the Male Educators Collective. This initiative aimed, primarily, to increase the small number of males of Color who served as teachers in NYC public schools. It also provided a mentoring program and curated PD workshops on culturally responsive teaching practices and racial literacy-based education to its male members, but it also invited other educators to participate in these opportunities and in the MEC community. In a sense, the program cultivated an ecosystem that supported teachers of Color in particular, but also invited all educators interested in issues of racial equity to come together to build cultural competency and resiliency. Again, although its mission was focused on supporting men of Color in the teaching profession, many of its professional learning experiences and community events were open to all educators who were interested in learning more about racial disparities.

In early February of 2019, MEC and Dr. Bailey-Ruiz launched the *Racial Literacy and Healing Professional Development Workshop Series*. The curriculum was designed to explicitly center the lives and experiences of educators of Color. This inaugural series was comprised of five day-long workshops. It was hosted at a private university in the NYC region, where Dr. Bailey-Cruz taught. The series invited participants to reflect on their experiences as leaders and teachers of Color and provided them with an opportunity to discuss issues of race, racism, racial literacy, and healing. After a successful inaugural series, MEC and Dr. Bailey-Cruz decided to host a second round of workshops addressing similar themes. This case study looked at what transpired during the second installment of the racial literacy and healing PD workshop series.

Statement of the Problem

The NYC DOE's efforts to educate its teachers and leaders about how to disrupt racism is a crucial step toward addressing pervasive racial inequalities in the system. Access to anti-bias, anti-racist, and racial literacy-based trainings and workshops have, on some levels, advanced the conversation on racial equity. One of the major contributions of this work is the discussion of how Whiteness and White Supremacy reinforce racism in schools (DiAngelo, 2011; Howard, 2006; Leonardo, 2002; Margolin, 2015; Picower, 2009). Many of the anti-bias and racial literacy-based trainings made available to educators have exposed participants to conversations about unearned privilege, White fragility, and Whiteness as a form of property and cultural capital (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). This is a step in the right direction for a school system that is taking concerted efforts to transform itself. However, most of these PD opportunities are designed, often unintentionally, to support White educators with having courageous conversations about racism (Singleton & Linton, 2006).

In both teacher preparation programs (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Nieto, 2000; Picower, 2009) and within educational leadership programs (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Rusch & Horsford, 2008; Solomon, 2002), there is evidence of the benefits and challenges to teaching White educators how they are implicated in how racism works inside and outside of schools (Leonardo, 2002). Within these programs, educators of Color often end up lifting the emotional weight during conversations about racism and feel unsupported afterwards (Leonardo, 2004; Sleeter, 2008). Critical conversations about racism—that are often revelatory and transformative for some White

educators—leave educators of Color drained (Bennett et al., 2000; Irizarry, 2007; Kohli, Nevárez, & Arteaga, 2018). For many educators of Color, these kinds of programs, trainings, and PD experiences trigger trauma from past overt and subtle racist acts, and, at times, incite racial battle fatigue (Smith et al., 2006). This reality has given rise to new scholarship on racial affinity groups in education, primarily to support teachers of Color with navigating racist public school systems (Kohli, 2012; Matias, 2013; Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Sleeter, Neal, & Kumashiro, 2014). Research on teachers of Color has pointed to a growing hostile racial climate within school systems (Jayakumar, Howard, Allen, & Han, 2009). This case study on the MEC's professional development workshop series is situated within a growing interest in exploring professional learning spaces that specifically aim to support teachers of Color. The PD series deliberately carved out an open space to center the lived experiences of educators of Color, while supporting them with exploring issues of racial literacy and racism through what seemed to be a *healing-centered* curriculum. My core research questions were organized around this notion of a *"healing-centered"* approach.

Rationale

Again, within education systems like the NYC DOE, there is a growing commitment to addressing issues of racial disparities. The rapidly diversifying student population, the persistent gaps in educational opportunity, and a predominantly White teacher workforce propel educational leaders throughout the country to find ways to address these problems with various reforms. One of the elements of these reforms is the use of professional and leadership development as a mechanism to produce change.

However, a growing body of work reveals how education and training on issues of race need to be differentiated for educators, especially educators of Color who frequently experience the intensity of racism directly on a daily basis (Kohli, 2018). Professional development, teacher preparation, and educational leadership programs that attempt to help educators deepen their understanding of how racism works are often insufficient in providing educators of Color with the support, knowledge, skills, and insights they need to navigate school systems riddled with racial disparities. As education systems continue to invest heavily in PD to reduce racial disparities and provide resources for the development of culturally responsive leadership and instruction (Veiga, 2018), it is crucial to understand how different professional learning offerings can be differentiated, especially for educators of Color. There are limited studies on existing PD offerings that create space for educators of Color to explore issues of racism and racial literacy through a *healing-centered* pedagogy.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

Part of the purpose of this study was to document and analyze how the educator—Dr. Bailey-Cruz—designed and implemented the professional development workshop series. Additionally, this qualitative inquiry explored how participants were impacted by their PD series experience. A core intention was to understand the possible affordances and hindrances of using a *healing-centered* approach to the workshop's facilitation and design in the context of exploring issues of racism, racial literacy, and healing. The following were the central research questions:

- How did the educator design the curriculum for the *healing-centered*

  professional development workshop series?

- How was the curriculum implemented?

- How did participants process the impact of the experience?

Significance

The findings from this study contribute to the growing paradigm concerning research and practice involving restorative and healing-centered pedagogies. This singular case study shed some light on what happens when the lives of educators of Color are centered in the process of having difficult conversations about racism, racial literacy, healing, and self-care. The work explored here informs practitioners and school leaders on the promise of using *healing-centered pedagogies* for exploring issues of racial disparities. It also engages in a larger conversation on the necessity of such approaches and their history. Additionally, with the need to recruit, retain, and support teachers of Color in urban schools, this inquiry hopes to inform theory, practice, and policy through the documentation and analysis of the experimental design and implementation evidenced by the PD workshop series.

Conceptual Framework

This study was shaped and supported by three specific constructs that formed a guiding conceptual framework. Together, these constructs informed methodological decisions concerning research design, data collection, and data analysis. The following is a brief exploration of how I combined a *healing-centered engagement*, a *transformative*

activist stance, and an *indigenist stance* to provide a useful and transformative framework for carrying out this study. In essence, over the last several decades, scholars and practitioners have deliberately integrated the notion of *healing* into specific approaches to education (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ginwright, 2010, 2015; hooks, 2003; Pour-Khorshid, 2016). This work has been heavily influenced by efforts to reform the U.S. criminal justice system and find alternative ways to discipline students in schools (Barnett, 1977; Barton, 2000; McCluskey, 2005). In a way, the rise and proliferation of restorative justice programs in schools is one example of *healing-centered engagement* (Bazemore & Umbreit, 2001; Bitel, 2005; Cameron & Thorsborne, 2001; Chmelynski, 2005). More broadly, the use of restorative practices in schools (Drewery, 2007; Drewery & Winslade, 2005) and the integration of indigenous ways of knowing into research and curricula (Lincoln & González y González, 2008; Rosa, 2014; Smith, 2001) serve as other examples of different ways *healing* has been integrated into the field of education.

Furthermore, scholarship on the impact of trauma on student behavior and academic performance has facilitated the emergence of trauma-sensitive teaching (Crosby, 2015). This too is part of the movement toward incorporating *healing* into educational discourse by finding more holistic approaches for supporting students and communities, especially for those at the margins of society. While writing on the flaws of trauma-sensitive teaching, Ginwright (2018) suggested that the movement within the field of education to address issues of oppression and trauma through *healing-centered pedagogies* and methodologies reflect a collective shift within the field toward *healing-centered engagement*. For Ginwright, the following represent some of the features and functions of *healing-centered engagement*: (a) It is explicitly political rather than clinical;

(b) It is culturally grounded and views healing as the restoration of identity; (c) It is asset-driven and focuses on the well-being we want rather than the symptoms we want to suppress; and (d) It supports adult providers and educators with their own healing.

For Ginwright (2018), the work of *healing-centered engagement* provides practitioners, community members, and students with a framework for engaging in lasting social change. More precisely, Ginwright (2015) asserted that this kind of approach to education facilitates *radical healing*. The dire circumstances and conditions in which many communities find themselves necessitate bold, robust, and transformational efforts that cultivate hope and nurture community. In terms of *healing-centered engagement* and *radical healing*, Ginwright pointed to the following three fundamental ideas that set the foundation for approaching education in this way: (a) Structural oppression harms hope; (b) Healing is a critical component in building hope; and (c) Building hope is an essential political activity. *Healing-centered engagement* supports this case study with relevant language and concepts that lend themselves to a better examination of the enactment of a *healing-centered pedagogy* within the Male Educators Collective PD workshop series. Using this construct helped to consider how *healing* was possibly operationalized within the PD curriculum and exhibited in the participants' behavior.

Moreover, the concept of *transformative activist stance* (TAS) comes out of what Anna Stetsenko (2014) called *post-objectivist critical* (POC) scholarship, which challenges the traditional objectivist scientific paradigm. A *transformative activist stance* questions the notion that "the pursuit of knowledge is value-neutral and independent from practices, histories and the contexts of its production" (p. 181). Implicit in TAS is the