COURAGEOUS JOURNEYS: DEVELOPING EQUITY MINDSETS

by

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ABSTRACT

The passion for this study is grounded in my hope for assuring an excellent and equitable education for all students. Under current school conditions, we can have a better chance of achieving this when we focus our attention on transforming school culture by promoting social justice and mindset shifts. Although the scope of the study did not focus on transforming school culture, the practices of an educator with an equity mindset can potentially help set the stage for this institutional transformation. This institutional transformation is driven by the personal transformation of educators' mindsets that result in a critical racial awareness that I have described as an equity mindset. The educators in this study had been engaged in a process of learning to talk about race as it related to educational disparities and the racial achievement gap. The focus of my research was on examining how the educators reflected on the impact as well as the challenges of participating in critical dialogues about race and educational inequity through the Courageous Conversations process. The understanding of institutional racism and the impact on students became clearer for most participants.

The findings indicated that although the process of engaging in these conversations was complex, challenging and emotional, the respondents described their learning and growth with the metaphor of a journey. They also reflected on their initial and sometimes ongoing fear of participating in the conversations, but they acknowledged the support and relationships that developed throughout the process helped them through

this journey. The impact of this knowledge and understanding on their practice went beyond the classroom and into relationship building with students, families and the community. As the Black feminist facilitator/educator/scholar, my reflections were a component of this process.

First of all, to God be the Glory! Without Him, this would not be a reality!

This dissertation is dedicated to my village of supporters who have been by myside throughout this journey. To my advisors, Dolores Delgado Bernal and Audrey Thompson, I thank you for your endless support and encouragement. To the rest of my committee, Paula Smith, Laurence Parker, and Harvey Kantor, thank you for your constant support and confidence in me.

To my family, you never gave up and encouraged me throughout this journey. Your love is what sustained me.

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I want to thank the educators who trusted me as their facilitator throughout our journeys together as we courageously sought to provide better learning opportunities and conditions for our students.

Finally, to the all of the students who are impacted by the inequities and systemic racism in our institutions, stay strong and know that we will continue to work to create excellent and equitable education for you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> Culture does not change because we desire to change it. Culture changes when the organization is transformed; the culture reflects the realities of people working together every day. (Hesselbein, 1992, p. A15)

> Human conversation is the most ancient and easiest way to cultivate the conditions for change – personal change, community, and organizational change. (Wheatley, 2002, p. 7)

A teacher recently reported that her involvement on her school's Site Equity Team, which started with conversations about race and the achievement gap, was the most influential professional development affecting her teaching practice that she had experienced in her 15-year career. It was through those difficult conversations that she learned about educational disparities and historical institutional racist practices that permeate our schools. This conversational process, with new knowledge and experiences, was the beginning of a journey that has led her to the development of an equity mindset. This teacher's report, and the experiences and conversations that I have had with other educators involved in this work, have convinced me that when we find ways to engage in conversations about race and institutional racism in the educational setting we can have great impact on educators' mindsets and, ultimately, institutional practice. These conversations have to be intentional and focused on eliminating the educational disparities that help create the achievement gap. They must be action-oriented continual

processes, as Gay (2010) argues, of "inquiry, discovery, problem solving, deconstruction, and transformation" (as cited in Howard, 2010, p. xx). If school cultures are to become more equitable and responsive to student needs, the educators within the system have to be transformed and embrace an equity mindset. When educators gain an understanding of the impact of racism, Whiteness, and White privilege, and develop skills to deconstruct and disrupt the status quo, I believe they develop what I describe as an equity mindset. It requires a shift in thinking, believing, and acting.

As a Black feminist/womanist educational leader, it has always been my passion to address issues of inequity and institutional racism. Whether as a classroom teacher, building administrator, central office administrator, or state equity specialist, my efforts have always been grounded in creating the conditions of change that will impact the lives of students who are the most vulnerable. Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) describes a Black womanist tradition of caring. This caring, as argued by researchers (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 1999), is what is needed to transform educators into people who can relate to and more effectively impact the improvement of all students.

In my current position as the administrator for educational equity, I'm responsible for leading the school district in its efforts to improve student achievement. I work to implement programs and strategies to address the achievement gap. One of the first strategies was professional development at varying levels, with the intent of creating more culturally proficient educators. These professional development trainings, along with data analysis, are how I worked to help us understand the achievement gap. However, I observed that there was some hesitancy among educators as we tried to make sense of and discuss the racial implications of the gap. My experience was that these

types of discussions that focus on racial disparities were difficult at best and usually avoided. My quest and my commitment to seek answers to the achievement gap led me to discover a framework for engaging the process of conversations about race in the educational setting. I implemented this framework, called *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (Singleton & Linton, 2006), as a professional development course in our school district over 7 years ago. This was a unique type of professional development and required a team of teachers and an administrator to come together with my staff and me monthly for these conversations about race. Research helps us understand that although these types of conversations are needed (Delpit, 2002; Tatum, 1997), they are rare and usually feared, unwanted and missing in the educational setting. Although I recognized that implementing this framework was a risk and that not all of the district leadership was on board, I believed that engaging in the courageous conversations would help the district to address the difficult task of closing the racial achievement gap. After facilitating these conversations for 5 years, I wanted to find ways to uncover the impact that the conversations had on educators' practice. I also wanted to explore what it meant for me as a Black feminist educational leader to learn more about what I experienced facilitating such a difficult topic in a district where the educators are predominately White and the students are predominately of color.

I argue that through the process of Courageous Conversations about race, educators' racial awareness can be raised and an equity mindset achieved as they discover the impact of institutional racism and the resultant inequities. Understanding some of the underlying causes of racial underachievement is one important step toward

addressing it and creating more equitable school climate and classroom practices. Educators can then begin to actively engage in the analysis of race-based inequities in their schools. The achievement gap data is so alarming that it makes me recognize that what we as educators have done and are continuing to do in terms of school improvement, attending to technical and structural changes, has not been enough. I am motivated by the belief that a clear understanding of institutional racism and reflection on the underlying causes of educational disparities will work to disrupt the normative educational system that is entrenched in institutional racism and has such a detrimental effect on students, especially African American students. Therefore, this study will focus on the reflection of educators who have participated in the Courageous Conversations. I am not interested as much in the design or framework of the conversations; I am interested in studying participants' reflections on the process of engaging in the conversations. Additionally, I am interested in examining my role as a Black feminist educational leader in developing a pedagogy of change that supported the educators through the process of engaging in courageous conversations.

The research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do educators reflect on the impact as well as the challenges of participating in critical dialogues about race and educational inequity through the Courageous Conversations process?
2. What does it mean for a Black feminist educational leader to develop a pedagogy of change/transformation with predominantly White educators?

The following section identifies the racial achievement gap as a real problem that schools and districts need to address. I then discuss the lack of critical understanding by

educators of this racialized achievement gap and the lack of opportunities and spaces for teachers to gain this critical understanding.

Statement of the Problem

The significant achievement gap that exists between many students of color and their White and Asian counterparts has gained much attention since the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2002. While I believe that NCLB has acted as a catalyst for school accountability, among its faults, it ignored the ways in which public school operations need to be overhauled and the issue of institutional racism must be addressed in order to improve student achievement. However, it instigated a view of student data disaggregated by race that uncovered serious concerns. Across the country, P-12 performance data indicate that there are differences in students' achievements that are predictable by race. It is the students of color who consistently show up in the lowest performing ranks. As a result, schools and districts have spent time and resources identifying reform programs and efforts to address this low academic achievement. Scholars (Garcia & Guerra, 2004) write that studies of comprehensive school reform suggest that such efforts often fail because of educators' unwillingness to examine the root causes and underachievement of students from low-income and racially or ethnically diverse backgrounds and because of their tendency to locate the problem within students, families, and communities. According to Lewis et al. (2008), there are many factors that contribute to this disparity in achievement; however, low teacher expectations, disparate allocation of resources, limited access to programs, and disproportionate suspension and graduation rates are particularly important factors. All are symptoms of systemic inequities that have their basis in institutional racism or racist practices.

Scholars such as Julian Weissglass (2001) have identified racism as the systematic mistreatment of certain groups of people on the basis of skin color or other characteristics. Although individuals can consciously or unconsciously act in racist, harmful ways toward people of color, systemic racism is more widespread, universal, invisible, and normalized in institutions such as schools. When schools or school districts remain unconscious about policies or practices that enforce a dominant perspective or mistreatment of students of color, inequities persist and the status quo is maintained. The resultant teacher discourse and attitudes about students are fueled by assumptions and faulty perceptions about the students. These assumptions may include beliefs such as parents of color not valuing education, low expectations for Latino students, or tracking into less rigorous courses for Black students (Singleton, 2013). While the vast majority of educators are White, this deficit discourse can be taken up by educators of color as well, because the manifestation of racial superiority is unnoticed and invisible in institutions such as schools. When this discourse remains unchallenged and unquestioned, the effect on students of color can stigmatize and marginalize them and lead to the disparities that foster and preserve racial inequities in schools (Garcia & Guerra, 2004). This pattern is evident regardless of the social economic status (SES) (Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004) of these students. These rigor inequities show up as low expectations, tracking and limited course-taking patterns, and less in instructional practices. Scholars have argued that these inequities have lasting effects on students of color (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Weinglass, 2001): from feelings of inferiority based on the low expectations and low classroom tracks with less experienced teachers, to the lack of validation in the curriculum, to issues of racism and discrimination ignored or avoided.

These disparities, when examined through an equity lens and disaggregated by race/ethnicity, reveal a clear institutional racist system that serves to perpetuate the achievement gap and that has a life-long impact on many students' lives. This impact, according to Howard (2010), has implications for all of society to suffer "when human capital and intellectual potential of groups of color are neglected or squandered" (p. xxi).

While this gap has been well articulated in research studies (e.g., Braun et al., 2006; Wiggan, 2007; Williams, 2011), its persistence has created a sense of urgency for educators like me to advance theories and concrete practices of change to address the gap and maintain an equity focus for the district. This achievement gap, which exists not only between White and Black students, but also between White students and students of most other minority groups, has been well documented on almost every measure of achievement (Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2004).

A review of achievement data in many urban school districts, such as the district where I work, shows that African American students are likely to be the lowest or among the lowest performing of all racial/ethnic student groups. For instance, in the Great Lake District for the 2014-15 school year, the percent proficient of White students in Language Arts is 61%, Asian 45%, Hispanic 21%, Pacific Islander 24%, American Indian 19%, and African American is 19%. The percent proficient of White students in Math is 59%, Asian 47%, Hispanic 23%, Pacific Islander 26%, American Indian 22%, and African American is 19%. Mitchell and Poston (1992) argue that achievement data with a difference of 20 percentage points or more "is indicative of systemic problems between socioeconomic and racial groups" (p. 231). These data motivate me even more and cause me to continue my quest to impact the underperformance of Black students.

Having open and honest conversations about these data—what they mean, why they exist, and what we can do about the disparity in achievement—is needed at a systemic level. These difficult conversations take time and require educators to reflect on the practices that may help them to develop the racial awareness and shift in their mindset that will lead them to challenge deficit ideology and low expectations. When attempted, these conversations are often confrontational, defensive, and unproductive. Educators are usually fearful of participating in conversations that include these issues of race and racial disparities. Without these difficult conversations about the impact of underachievement of students of color and inequity, a common response is a quick solution based on fixing the students and/or their families. This response is based on deficit discourse and focuses solely on the supposed lack of culture, skills, or abilities of the students and their families (Valencia, 1997). Thus, the explanation for the academic failure of many of these students is located in the students, their families, or their communities (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). For example, some educators are quick to refer students to interventions before or after school and encourage parents to attend well-meaning parenting classes.

Another common response by educators is to blame economic, social, or political factors that are external to what we have control over at school. This response, while helpful in understanding the macro causes of inequity, leaves little hope for educators in terms of their participation and accountability in eliminating the achievement gap. In many instances, the poverty status of the student is cited as the reason for poor academic performance, especially for students of color. Teachers claim issues of home environment and family dysfunction as reasons why students don't perform well in school (Braun et

al., 2006; Lewis & Moore, 2004; S. Thompson, Ransdell, & Rousseau, 2005). Based on research (Delpit, 2012), I agree that school underperformance has less to do with these external factors and more to do with inequitable educational conditions and the quality of our classroom instruction.

With the rapidly changing racial composition of our student population across the nation and in the district where I work, along with the fact that few teachers of color are joining the ranks, there is a need to create opportunities and space for teachers to engage in dialogue that will help to increase their awareness of inequities. I am convinced that this awareness is necessary for educators to reflect on their practice and to develop a critical understanding of the underlying causes of the achievement gap.

Scholars (e.g., Cochran-Smith, 2004; Grogan, 2000; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1995; Shields & Oberg, 2000) advocate for a critique of educational systems in terms of access, power, and privilege based on race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, language, background, ability, and/or socio-economic position. Educators who are able to critique and analyze the educational system in ways that challenge the status quo and dominant belief systems about structural and institutional inequities have developed an awareness of the racialized inequities. This awareness is grounded in their knowledge of the students they serve and the impact of racial/cultural/linguistic inequities on them. Educators who develop this awareness are often frustrated with the educational system and often seek opportunities to address these inequities.

The development of this critical racial awareness is not a linear process (McDonough, 2009; Milner, 2003; Sleeter et al., 2004), but is shaped by many social contexts, including opportunities and spaces for dialogue. When educators are given the

opportunity and time to explore inequities and examine institutional racism and practices that lead to inequities, they are likely to develop an awareness that allows them to critique school practices and student outcomes. This awareness can assist educators in transforming schools to be places where all students reach high levels of achievement. An emerging critical awareness helps educators form the basis for a social justice agenda and an antiracist pedagogy (Tatum, 2000). Without development of this awareness, I believe that it would be difficult to enact a social justice agenda that includes an antiracist pedagogy and equity mindset. An antiracist pedagogy includes interrogating Whiteness and addressing White identity development. Although I do not include antiracist pedagogical discussions within the scope of this study, it is clearly aligned with the development of critical racial awareness for teachers. An approach to developing a mindset for social justice transformation is having open, honest dialogue about the achievement disparities that currently exist among students.

The development of a critical racial awareness could lead educators to understand that they have understood this process as part of a journey to becoming more equity minded. Carol Dweck (2006) has introduced the concept of mindset as it relates to growth or fixed attitudes and behaviors. Educators have grasped that concept and are using it to think about how we address student learning. I have applied the concept of mindset to equity development. In other words, I believe that once we become critically aware of race and racism and the disparities that are present, we develop an equity mindset that allows us to develop an understanding of the achievement gap.

Many educators are aware that the achievement gap exists, but talking about it and the possible underlying causes are difficult conversations. In order to address the gap,

we have to acknowledge that according to our data, there are clear differences in performance that are predictable by race. The salience of race is ever present, yet avoided. Educators who are developing critical racial awareness either could be unafraid to name or discuss race, or there may be fear, frustration, and anxiety, but they press on to new learnings.

Educators have become too comfortable utilizing deficit discourses as a rationale for the achievement disparities. These discourses oftentimes mask the misconceptions and unconscious biases that prevent educators from effectively reaching all students. These discourses are often masked by coded language (Lewis, 2008), silence (Castagno, 2014) and sometimes fear (Sleeter, 1992). There is a general perception that when we have conversations about the data and the gap between student performances based on race, we are racists. Rather than engaging in these conversations about how to address our attitudes about race, some choose to ignore it, therefore precluding a racist stance. This approach is defined in the literature as a colorblind ideology (Atwater, 2007; Taylor, 2006; Thompson, 1997) and colorblind race talk. According to Atwater (2007), color-blindness is "the ideology that 'race should not matter' in how individuals are treated" (p. 246). She argues further that in the educational setting, teachers are often unaware of how they may unconsciously hold racial or cultural biases that could affect their expectations of students and ultimately students' performance. Ignoring these biases or naming race is a societal message that according to scholars (Bonilla-Silva, 2001; Gordon, 2005; Lewis, 2001) can emanate from White liberal discourse that posits that naming race is unnecessary and undesirable. Within this perspective, if race were ignored, equality would naturally follow. This colorblind ideology, according to Lewis (2001), shapes

teachers' practice and understanding of school context and ultimately results in the reproduction of racial inequality. The process of examining race openly and challenging inequities leads to a critique of the system and opens what McDonough (2009) identifies as "discourses of possibility" (p. 528).

Educators who are able to critique the system and the impact on marginalized students are on their way to developing a critical awareness of racialized inequities that can support an antiracist pedagogy. The development of a critical awareness that can aid educators in addressing their behaviors and attitudes as well as fostering a critique of the educational system is lacking not only for practicing teachers, but also in teacher education.

In her review of teacher education programs, Sleeter (2001) found that "most White preservice students bring little awareness or understanding of discrimination, especially racism" (p. 94). Sleeter (2001) also found that White preservice students interpret social change as meaning almost any kind of change except changing structural inequalities, and many regard programs to remedy racial discrimination as "discriminatory against Whites" (p.94). There are now efforts in many preservice teacher education departments (Pollock, Deckman, Mira, & Shalaby, 2010; Sleeter, 2001) to address this knowledge; however, attention to the need of moving from knowledge to action is lacking. Within the context of a college classroom and a few weeks in the field, it is questionable if these teachers are able to develop the critical racial awareness to apply in their practice.

Opportunities for in-service professional development are often contingent upon time and priority in school and district operations. When offered, professional

development for diversity usually is in the form of surface-level multicultural awareness trainings or cultural competency development. These offerings fall short of assisting educators to develop the skills and knowledge to address the systemic racial disparities. Most don't have the time built in for on-going learning and feedback that could lead to an equity mindset that could work to challenge the status quo.

Courageous Conversations

To assist the district in addressing these achievement disparities and to provide an ongoing practice of professional development, I initiated a process of conversations and dialogue around the racial achievement gap over 7 years ago. I invited a group of district leaders, teachers, and university and community members to participate in these conversations. Using the *Courageous Conversations about Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* framework (Singleton & Linton, 2006), we began our dialogue about the educational disparities that lead to the racial achievement gap. Over 45 people attended the first session, which was the introduction to the Courageous Conversations process. A couple of months later, an invitation was extended to the previous attendees, inviting them to further engage in the conversations to address the educational disparities in the Great Lake School District.

In the second year, smaller groups of interested educators and community members focused on the process for having the conversations. Monthly meetings were held and the groups engaged in conversations using the Four Agreements and the Six Conditions as outlined in the Courageous Conversations framework (discussed in more detail below). Facilitators were assigned to lead the groups in the monthly conversations. It wasn't long before it became apparent that this process became fragmented and the

smaller group conversations were not strong enough to sustain themselves, so I worked to revise the process to create a leadership team.

In the third year, the Equity Leadership Team was formed to lead the district in equity efforts using the Courageous Conversations as a framework and process for developing the skill to dialogue about the racial disparities in the district. Participants from the original group were invited to continue with the conversations, while district department heads were invited to join the team. This group represented a more powerful group of central office leaders and principals, along with the few community members who remained on the team. After engaging in several months of Courageous Conversations, the leadership team began to conduct equity audits on some of the disparities that had been revealed. These equity audits helped to uncover patterns of disparity in schools and throughout the district. Recognizing the difficulty of addressing schools-based disparities at a district level, the leadership team recommended that site equity teams be formed in the schools represented by the principals on the Equity Leadership team. As a result, five schools were recommended and site teams were formed within those schools. Given some parameters regarding team size, the principals of these sites invited teachers to serve on the Site Equity Team (SET).

That same year, these SETs began to participate in monthly Courageous Conversations with me and my Equity Department team to develop the understanding and skill for addressing the inequities at their respective sites. Of the original five schools, three remained active after that first year. In 2010, a second group of SETs were added based on interest, perceived readiness, and principal request. Two schools were included in this cohort. In 2011, four more schools were added to begin the process. As

we worked with these schools through the course of action, we documented the process and made adjustments and changes to what we were doing. To date, 11 school teams have participated in the Courageous Conversations professional development.

Both the Equity Leadership Team and the Site Equity Teams met monthly to continue to develop the skills for talking about race along with specific content related to better understanding racial disparities. These conversations have led to the on-going dialogues that have begun to make systemic changes in some areas of the district as well as at the school where Site Equity team educators work. Building the capacity to sustain the conversations while supporting critically aware educators as they work to improve their classroom practices is the foundation of this important work. However, a lack of clearly defined district focus on equity and the importance of developing more racially aware educators who can work to challenge and disrupt inequities has made this process difficult to sustain and grow. Without a clear equity focus, other colorblind technical-based initiatives and improvement efforts compete with this process.

These conversations utilize **Four Agreements** and **Six Conditions** in order to engage, sustain, and deepen dialogue about race, racial identity, and institutional racism and are an essential component of examining schooling and improving student achievement (Singleton & Linton, 2006). The four agreements are: (a) stay engaged (b) experience discomfort (c) speak your truth, and (d) expect and accept nonclosure. These agreements are coupled with the Six Conditions:

1. Getting Personal Right Here and Right Now
2. Keeping the Spotlight on Race
3. Engaging Multiple Perspectives

4. Keeping Us *All* at the Table
5. What Do You Mean By "Race"?
6. Let's Talk About Whiteness

A great deal of time is spent throughout the conversations coming to agreement on the definition of race. We work to come to a consensus and understanding that race is a social construct and in the educational setting, the term mostly refers to Black and Brown students. I make it clear that the conversations are about not just race in isolation, but the impact of students' race on the type of education they receive. Keeping the racial conversation within the context of education keeps it focused and not global. However, it was clear that many educators lacked knowledge of the historical impact of racism in this country. Including short history lessons in the dialogue helped us understand the "why" for the racial conversations.

The historical perspective of race, racism, and its legacy in our country helped to define and create an understanding of what race is. Rather than keeping race in the abstract, it was important to relate it to the disparities we were observing in the data and in our schools. By understanding that race is not a biological construct, but a social construct, we were able to deconstruct and examine school as part of the institutional racist structure.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine how educators reflected on their experience as they participated in racial dialogue/conversations as a means for understanding and addressing the inequities that may lead to the racial achievement gap. Because having conversations about educational inequities, including the racial

achievement gap, is difficult at best and has been attempted on a limited basis (Singleton & Linton, 2006), efforts to have these conversations at a systemic level are not sustained or supported to discover if they can lead to eventual change in classroom practice which could impact academic achievement. I believed that these conversations would contribute to a better understanding of the underlying causes of educational disparities based on race as well as improve the relationships between White educators and Black students and other students of color. I was interested in examining the challenges that educators who have been engaged in the process experienced as they participated in the dialogue using the Courageous Conversations protocol, as developed by Singleton and Linton (2006). This framework served as a process for creating the conditions and actions to implement an equity and social justice agenda, which enabled educators to engage in difficult conversations about race. The study was influenced by my positionality within Black Feminist thought (BFT) as practiced by me, as an educator and my lived experiences as an African American female. Thus, another purpose for the study was to examine my role and my pedagogy as a Black feminist educational leader facilitating this process. My positionality influenced my role as a facilitator, participant, and observer and researcher. For example, while facilitating the conversations, I often had to respond to questions about my experiences as a Black student/parent/educator/community mother. This was often awkward for me, but necessary to deepen and sustain the conversation. My participation, as well as the lack of sufficient numbers of educators of color for effective cross-racial dialogue, caused me as facilitator to make adjustments in the framework and process as we implemented it.

Because I use Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework, I am

mindful of the voices of color that needed to be heard. Important tenets relevant to this study are the counterstories of the educators of color, including me. CRT provided a framework for analysis of the reflections and counterstories of the educators of color. Other tenets that inform this work are: (a) race as a social construct (b) racism is a normal societal practice, and (c) colorblindness needing to be critiqued.

Research Questions

An analysis of the literature examining the social production of race in face-to-face interaction (Lin, 2007) uncovered the "messy process of negotiating the ambiguities and dangers of social interaction" (p. 1743). The messiness and dangers of these interactions and conversations require us to be cautious and purposeful in our efforts to have these conversations and assist educators in critical reflection that is necessary to really understand the racial inequities in education. If these conversations are to be effective, they must be carefully facilitated in order to limit these dialogues so that they are as nonconfrontational and nonthreatening as possible, while also pushing educators past their comfort zone. Most of all, these conversations must be purposeful. My role as a Black feminist enabled me to keep the focus on the topic while working to develop trust and relationships. It is critical that attention be paid to the possible elements for having effective conversations about race. These elements include, but are not limited to: lack of a focus on race; creating safe spaces for cross racial interactions; clarity about the purposes of the dialogue; moving to action; engaging all parties; reaching deeper perspectives/understandings; fear, resistance; uncovering inequities; making Whiteness visible; interrogating Whiteness; developing the context; and building trust and safety. As we engaged in the Courageous Conversations process, these elements emerged as issues

that had to be addressed. These issues will be discussed as they emerged from my data.

These elements were important as I looked at how educators reflected on the process of racial dialogue. They were significant for me to learn whether they can or cannot contribute to a raised critical awareness that leads to an equity mindset.

This was a qualitative study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994) that utilized a phenomenological approach to understand the experiences of educators who participated in Courageous Conversations professional development. The participants were teachers and administrators who had been engaged in the Courageous Conversations about race for at least 2 years. This study also explored my own process of learning how to facilitate these conversations within my Black feminist stance. The main theoretical framework that I used to analyze the data was Critical Race Theory. I drew from the Critical Reflection framework as a way to describe the process of reflection and I used Black Feminist Thought to drive my methodological approach.

Specifically, I restate my research questions here and then list the follow-up questions that framed the direction of my inquiry with the participants.

1. How do educators reflect on the impact as well as the challenges of participating in critical dialogues about race and educational inequity through the Courageous Conversations process?
2. What does it mean for a Black feminist educational leader to develop a pedagogy of change/transformation with predominately White educators?

The follow-up questions below helped me to uncover specific challenges that might have impacted the participation of the interviewees:

- How might these critical dialogues lead to the development of a critical racial

awareness that could lead to antiracist actions within a social justice agenda?

- What were the fears that educators had?
- What made these conversations difficult? What made them easy?
- What were issues of trust that educators experienced?
- How might these critical dialogues alter the relationships between teachers and students, administrators and teachers, and educators and the community?
- How might these critical dialogues deepen educators' understanding of the impact of race/racism on the achievement gap?

These follow-up questions helped me understand how the educators who participated in the Courageous Conversations reflected on the process. They were directly related to my first research question and were presented as a part of the Interview Protocol. Recognizing that throughout the process participants experienced discomfort, anger, and fear, or some may have felt the need to protect their privilege, their responses provided good information on how they experienced the process.

Their responses also helped to identify the areas and spaces where trust was either built or lacking, or where spaces weren't safe or comfortable. This helped inform me and caused me to reflect on the process as well as the strategies that I employed to build relationships that supported the facilitation of the conversations.

Based on my experiences and attempts at addressing educators' understanding and beliefs about race and the achievement gap, my hope was that most participants would reflect on the process and realize what they did not know concerning institutional racism and how our educational system contributes to educational disparities.

My hope was through this experience, their reflections would lead to a mindset change and changes in practice would occur.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This chapter outlines the theories and concepts that will be used in the dissertation. This section begins with a review of the literature on the salience of race and the achievement gap, specifically addressing Black student achievement. I chose to focus on this research because it sets the case and points to the foundation and motivation for my study. While numerically there are few African American students in my district, I focus on Black students because of my interest and personal commitment to create better learning conditions for these students, both locally and beyond. Additionally, the current data that cause alarm and concern for the future of many of these students heighten my moral obligation to use my influence to create better educational opportunities not just for African American students, but for all students of color who are impacted by the racial achievement gap. The educational system has historically and persistently failed many of our students. The underlying racist foundations of our country and institutions need to be examined and understood if we are ever going to transform them.

Following the literature about the conditions that guided this study, I offer a review of the current efforts in the preparation of teachers to engage in race issues in their work, both preservice and inservice. These efforts include race talk and dialogue about race. I limit my examination to the literature that focuses on the conversations or dialogue of race within the context of educational practice. I am interested not in the topic of race

as an isolated course, but in how educators can experience and reflect on the everyday, real-time racial dialogues that are grounded in their educational professions.

Finally, I present the literature on the current educational leadership movement called leadership for equity and social justice and the limitations of this movement in sustaining the conversations about race that are aimed at improving the achievement for African American students. In my review of the salient literature, I was seeking perspectives that would help me to conceptualize and make sense of our practice of dialogue about race as a critical tool for social justice that could lead to an equity mindset.

In the last section, I present Critical Reflection as a theoretical framework to examine how educators think deeply about their experiences and practice as well as their new understanding and knowledge related to the educational disparities in education. Next, I present the relevant tenets of Critical Race Theory that I use to understand the experiences of the participants in these conversations as well as to understand how race predictably influences our lives. Finally, I introduce the concept and redefinition of mindset theory as a means to understand how educators change their deficit ideologies and attitudes about racial disparities and work toward change in their practice that supports all students. Dweck (2010) helps us understand the difference between a growth mindset and a fixed mindset. She argues, “Humans are capable of learning and mastering new things at any time in their lives” (p. 28). Since “mindset” has become a buzz word in educational discussions, I expand Dweck’s mindset theory to describe how educators can incrementally develop a growth mindset that affects their attitudes and behaviors about a phenomenon such as race. This growth mindset is aligned to the journey metaphor that

has been a critical part of this study. According to Dweck (2010), "teachers with a growth mindset don't just mouth the belief that every student can learn; they are committed to finding a way to making it happen" (p. 28). A growth mindset is comparable to having an adaptive/flexible mindset, which leads to a mindset shift. For the purposes of this study, I am proposing that the adaptive/flexible mindset leads to a mindset shift as a precursor to an equity mindset.

The Persistent Racial Achievement Gap

The research literature is robust with explanations about student achievement and school failure (Braun, Wang, Jenkins, & Weinbaum, 2006). In particular, there has been a lot of attention on the persistence of the racial achievement gap (O'Connor, Lewis, & Mueller, 2007). However, not much focus has been paid to the significant and specific impact of race on the academic performance of Black students. In this sense, researchers (O'Connor et al., 2007) claim that race has been under theorized and under analyzed in education research. While race has been under theorized and under analyzed in education, the effects of institutionalized racism and our attempts at understanding race related inequities have been explored (Lewis, 2003; Pollock, 2001). These studies are useful to help us understand the effects of institutional racism on student achievement; however, they stop short of helping us understand the underlying causes of the racial achievement gap and, subsequently, what we can do about it.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) offered another way to frame the problem by arguing that "race, unlike gender and class, remains untheorized" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 49). They suggested that for many years we did not possess a language that allowed us to talk about race and racial inequities in ways that are useful. They argued

that this is especially true in education, where we are we are accountable for student achievement yet we don't know how to talk about student underperformance in productive ways.

Accountability systems in schools, as required by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), require districts to report the annual yearly progress (AYP) of all student groups based on state tests. These groups include ethnic groups such as African American/Black, American Indian, Asian, Hispanic/Latino, Pacific Islander, and White. Other categories for accountability reporting are special education, English Language Learners, and socio-economic status. The data that are reported represent how these students performed on the state accountability assessments as a measure of student progress. It is expected that student performance on the state tests will indicate improvement, which is referred to as the AYP. While most states and districts report some progress, there is a constant difference in the performance between White students and their peers of color as well as between low and high socio-economic groups. These reports reflect the achievement gap that is so widely referred to in state and federal accounts. Districts and schools face consequences for failure to make improvements in student performance. While there are many disagreements about the impact of the NCLB legislation, the most revealing is the racial achievement gap. The intent of the legislation was to place more accountability on states and districts to assess and account for the achievement of their students. However, researchers such as Lewis, (2008) have analyzed the impact of the legislation and report that the

> Policies enacted under NCLB had no impact on achievement, because 88% (reading) and 87% (math) of the (Black) students scored at "basic" and "below basic" levels at Grade 4. Stated differently, given the slow rate of change, during the first 5 years of NCLB, it will take another 45 years for all African American

> students in the eighth grade to achieve "At Proficient" levels in reading and math (p. 19). This is in comparison to 60% (reading) and 53% (math) of White students at Grade 4 who reached the "At Proficient" category. (p. 130)

Other national reports, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the NCES, show the same "pervasive, profound and persistent" (Braun et al., 2006, p.2) racial achievement gap. The 2005 NAEP reports the "gap between Black and Latina/o fourth graders and their White counterparts in reading scaled scores was more than 26 points. In fourth grade mathematics the gap was more than 20 points" (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 4). The eighth grade reading and math scores show similar gaps. Yet even with the racial predictability of the achievement gap and the high stakes situation for states, districts, and schools, the conversation about race and racial inequity is limited. Although the racial achievement gap is published in state reports and local newspapers, it is usually misunderstood or presented in ways that mask glaring inequities and underperformance by student groups. Data analysis is mainly conducted quantitatively and often fails to isolate race from other factors like language and poverty. For example, researchers O'Connor et al. (2007) have asserted that research on the educational outcomes and experiences of African American students and the impact of institutional racism and how it shapes access to educational opportunity and resources are not adequately addressed. They critique studies that don't capture the "complex conceptualizations of race . . . (nor) the meaning and consequences of race for educational experiences and outcomes" (p. 541). They challenge researchers to build on critical race theory (CRT) to examine how racism shapes educational experiences and outcomes by studying (a) how the discourses that emerge in and around schools and students are not neutral but, rather, have 'embedded in them values and practices that normalize racism' (Duncan, 2002, p. 131;

Rousseau & Tate, 2003); (b) how the historical legacy of racism structures group advantage and disadvantage in school (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995); and (c) how the narratives of people of color are central to analyzing and understanding these phenomena. (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 42).

Although these key CRT tenets will be useful for framing this study, previous research falls short of describing and offering a process for examining the impact of racism on educational outcomes or how educators should talk about race.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because of the current educational reform movement to increase accountability, turn around persistently low performing schools, and close the achievement gap. Current reform practices focus on accountability but tend to look for quick fixes for low academic performance. These quick fixes are usually the needed structural and technical improvements to the teaching and learning process; however, they often gloss over underlying causes of underperformance, low expectations, and low rigor. This study offers a critical way to understand the impact of educators' reflections about their practice in relationship to their understanding of race, White privilege, and institutional racism in the educational system. As I began this process, I found that most of our educators had limited awareness of the institutionalized nature of racism and how it produces inequities throughout our educational system. More importantly, they were unaware of the advantages that Whites receive as a consequence of their racial privilege. The concept of Whiteness is important to interrogate in that educators need to critically reflect on the impact of racism at the personal, professional, and institutional levels in order to develop an awareness of educational disparities.

These types of conversations are rare in school settings with educators who are current practitioners (Singleton & Linton, 2006). I believe that we have been unable to effectively address educational disparities and close the achievement gap because we have not found ways to systemically engage in these critical dialogues that could serve to raise awareness of educators' beliefs and perceptions. The fear of being called a racist or being misunderstood by colleagues creates barriers for having these types of conversations. Our common practices of multiculturalism and cultural competency have fallen short in helping to develop the type of critically aware educators who can work to disrupt institutional racism and transform the culture of schools.

Many reform efforts have been initiated to address the achievement gap, but, with clear evidence that the gap is generally based on the race of students, educators have diverted their attention from race to other factors like poverty and language to address this gap. This may be due to a lack of skills or knowledge for addressing race or even having a forum for the conversation. The topic of race itself may cause some level of discomfort for educators, so engaging in critical dialogue around race is usually not a priority. Nor is it seen as valuable in many instances. Scholars like Tatum (1992) have argued that a key component for assisting Whites in gaining the courage and racial awareness to engage in the conversation is the development of a White racial identity and learning and understanding Whiteness. Addressing Whiteness and White privilege are key elements of the Courageous Conversations process; however, they are placed near the end of the framework and, as such, are a little late for those participants who have struggled in the earlier sessions to get comfortable with the conversation. I have had to revise the framework as laid out to begin the conversation about Whiteness, White

privilege and White identity development earlier in the process.

The context in which this study was conducted is of significance as well. The district, located in an urban city in a predominately White state, influenced by a major dominant religion, Mormonism, provided a backdrop for understanding the attitudes and perspective for engaging in racial dialogue. Interestingly enough, the educator demographics of the district do not mirror the student demographics, which are predominately of color.

Known for having a highly educated populace in the city and state, there is a culture of niceness that permeates relationships, interactions, and decision making (Castagno, 2014). This concept emerged in the data and will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Thus, my intent for this study was to inform reform and school improvement efforts by documenting a process of conversations about race that can lead to a focus on equity and changes in mindset. This work will add to or problematize the work that has been done in the area of racial dialogue.

Although there were participants who did not demonstrate or refer to a changed mindset in reference to inequities, the experience for both me as a facilitator and many participants was invaluable as we sought to create new learnings and understandings. The skills that we practiced in engaging in these types of conversations are transferable in many settings.

Black Student Achievement

When analyzing the achievement gap through student group (e.g., Black student) performance, recognizing the presence and permanence of racism is necessary because the educational system is a microcosm of the greater society. As such, researchers (Bell,

1992; Feagin, 2006; Haymes, 1995) assert that "every institution in America, including education, has been affected by socially constructed determinants of race" (Lewis, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008, p. 128). As such, racial categorizations and the connections of this ideology to historical notions of racial superiority support causations for the achievement gap to be located within the Black student and his/her family or community.

Although the achievement gap has been under theorized and under researched, because of the lack of focus on the importance of race in schooling, it is well known that African American students have experienced long-term patterns of scholastic and achievement disparities. Attempts to address the achievement gap have been approached from many different paradigms and theories. Much of the research and theories are derived from Black-White dichotomous studies—that is not my intent here. As stated earlier, my focus on Black students is because of my affinity, care, and commitment to my community and the children who are our legacies.

Lewis et al. (2008) present a model of achievement paradigms to help make sense of the Black-White achievement gap. They identify three paradigms for understanding African American student performance: 1) social-structural, 2) deficit, and 3) discontinuity examples. These examples encompass the most salient hypothesis, theories, and arguments that have been put forth to explain the Black–White achievement gap.

The first example, the social-structural paradigm, argues that schools exist within a racist structure and perpetuate the achievement gap through institutional racism. Within the institution are the actors/agents who participate in the system. For example, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2008), public school enrollment

is becoming increasingly diverse while the educator ranks are increasingly White. Black students account for 17.2% of students enrolled, but Black teachers represent only 7.3% of public school teachers while over 90% are White. Based on these demographics, it is likely that most Black students will experience only White teachers in their education. While just having a White teacher may not cause Black student underperformance, a teacher who views the student's culture as deficient can. In her study of effective White teachers of Black children, Cooper (2003) reports that with the exception of the seminal study by Ladson-Billings (1994) of successful teachers of African American students, little is known about effective White public school teachers of Black students. Her study focused on classroom life, where student-teacher interactions and the learning environment revealed that there is a "complex relationship between teacher's beliefs and practices that fostered their Black students' learning in ways significantly compatible with the beliefs and practices of effective Black teachers described in the literature" (Cooper, 2003, p. 413).

The second example in the Lewis et al. (2008) model is the deficit paradigm. Based on notions of African American cultural inferiority, the deficit ideology (Gay, 2000; Milner, 2006; Skrla, & Scheurich, 2001) "infects teachers, curriculum development, administrators, school policies, and ultimately, students' academic progress" (Lewis et al., 2008, p. 141). This ideology blames African American students for their underperformance. The "blame the victim" stance can be exacerbated when the teachers and the students come from different cultures. This theory is one of the most commonly accepted explanations among educators for the underperformance of students of color, especially African American students.

The third example in the Lewis et al. (2008) model is the discontinuity paradigm. Here the cause of the achievement gap is placed on the school system and the personnel within it. As noted in the section above, most African American students will have White teachers in their educational path. However, researchers (Milner, 2006; Nieto, 1996; Shujaa, 1994) claim that the teacher's level of cultural competence and the ability to teach culturally responsively makes a difference in the academic culture and climate of the classroom.

Ladson-Billings argues that there are central conceptions that are shared by culturally competent teachers such as those described in her book *DreamKeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students* (1994). These conceptions were grounded in the beliefs that the teachers held about themselves as professionals who embraced their students as learners: they understood the social relations that create community in classrooms and they held conceptions of knowledge that were different from many of their colleagues'. These conceptions of teaching and learning were grounded in the cultural competence that was a source of connection between them as teachers and their students.

These paradigms are not the sole explanations or solutions for the achievement gap for Black students. However, they have helped us uncover the some of the systemic forces: for example, racism and other inequities that need to be addressed if we are to close the achievement gap. What has been missing in these studies and in educational discourse is an examination of race talk among educators that addresses institutional racism, deficit thinking, and cultural competency.

Engaging Preservice Teachers in Race Talk

While my study focused on inservice educators, I am providing this review of race talk for preservice teachers to demonstrate that teachers have little engagement in the process of race talk in their teacher preparation. The question of how to train teachers on diversity has plagued teacher education departments for a long time. An approach focusing on the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that educators need to be effective with diverse learners (Delpit & Dowdy, 2008; Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Irvine, 2003; Nieto, 2000) has dominated the field. In their review of the literature for the American Educational Research Association, Hollins and Guzman (2005) report that teacher education programs do not use a clear definition or approach to train preservice teachers for diversity. This inconsistency has resulted in a largely White teaching force lacking the necessary skills to effectively educate all children.

Cochran-Smith, Mitescu, Shakman, and the Boston College TNE Evidence Team (2009) are among many scholars who have documented the efforts of teacher education programs that prepare teachers to teach for social justice and equity. They report that the central themes explicit and implicit in the term "social justice" include recognition of significant disparities in the distribution of educational opportunities, resources, achievement, and positive outcomes between minority and/or low-income students and their White, middle-class counterparts. In this view, teaching for social justice

> depends on the knowledge teachers have about subject matter, curriculum, and how people learn as well as the pedagogical strategies and methods they use. But it also involves the teachers' interpretive frameworks—what they believe, how they think about their work and its larger connections, what they consider to be reasonable expectations for various learners. . .and how they collaborate with others to continue to learn from and about teaching over the course of the professional lifespan. (p. 350).

Howe (1997) claims that, “from the perspective of justice, new teachers should be prepared to practice in ways that challenge the ‘cultural imperialism’ of curriculum, educational policies and practices, and school norms” (p. 221). These social justice themes are often lacking from explicit learnings and from experiences in understanding institutional racism. Although teacher and leader preparation programs have other conceptualizations of social justice, for this study, I focus on its claim/potential for addressing institutional racism.

Pollock, Deckman, Mira, and Shalaby (2010) present three tensions that surface when preparing teachers for racial diversity and inequality. These tensions are embedded in the question “what can I do?” with inflections on each word in the question posing its own issue. First, the word “do” leaves teachers searching for “concrete, actionable steps that they can take in their classrooms and schools” (p. 211). They question what they can do with abstract ideas and theories about racial inequities. Next, the word “can” causes teachers to wonder if they have the power to actually affect the structural or societal issues of race inequity in their classrooms. Finally, Pollock et al. (2010) describe how the word “I” in the question points to the teacher’s own personal readiness to address issues of race and racism. The researchers noted that even though these tensions surface frequently in teacher preparation courses, “far less research has ethnographically examined the moment to moment tensions that arise as teachers ‘talk and think’ during their PD [professional development] for diversity, and particularly during race-related PD” (Ahlquist, 1991; Lin, 2007; Luttrell, 2008, in Pollock et al., 2010, p. 212). Although this study was primarily concerned with preservice teachers, it identifies the implications on the professional development of inservice teachers, especially as schools and districts

attempt to engage in race-related PD for inservice teachers.

Race-Based Discussions in Schools

Researchers have studied the ways in which conversations about race or race talk operate in the school setting (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Pollock, 2001, 2004). These scholars have described how schools struggle to talk or not talk about race. McDonough (2009) argues in her study that "research related to teachers engaging in critical consciousness is limited mainly to single course experiences in teacher education programs, with a scarcity of research that explores classroom teachers and their practice" (p. 530). Her research is an attempt to add to the limited literature by studying a beginning teacher who seeks to make connections for her learning about race in a college course and her classroom practice.

Bringing educators together for critical racial conversations to address achievement and equity can be very challenging. These challenges include, but are not limited to a lack of focus on race; creating safe spaces for cross-racial interactions; clarity about the purposes of the dialogue; engagement by all parties; reaching deeper perspectives/understandings; making meaning; uncovering inequities; making Whiteness visible; interrogating Whiteness; developing the context; building trust and safety; and ultimately how to move to action (Singleton, 2013).

Conversations about race in schools are mostly focused on achievement, as related to standardized test scores. The NCLB requirement to disaggregate test data by student group has opened the door for possible discussions about race and achievement. Unfortunately, without the skills to engage in these discussions, race is usually avoided or glossed over in polite talk (Milner, 2003).

Pollock, Deckman, Mira, and Shalaby's (2010) work raises critical questions and tensions regarding teachers' struggle to apply theoretical and abstract ideas about race to their practical, everyday work. Similar to what was mentioned in the discussion above regarding preservice teachers, foremost on inservice teacher's minds as they begin to have conversations about race is the question "what can I do?" (Pollock et al., 2010, p. 211). To address the "what can I do?" dilemma, scholars (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997) have identified the need for professional development to help White educators "expand their perspective and deepen their understanding of the ways in which race and racism have affected their own education as well as that of their students is evident" (p. 163). They describe how White teachers are "fearful that conversations about race will degenerate into angry, personalized accusations of racism" (p. 163).

In talking about these issues, the conversations can help educators probe their underlying assumptions about the way the world works, and forge new perspectives on both personal and socio-political relationships (Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 1998). The addition of race—whether intentional or because of the participants' race—creates a new dynamic with the potential to cause discomfort. However, a focus on race can help to uncover inequities and disproportionate representation in programs, policies, and procedures in schools. For example, in examining data related to the overrepresentation of students of color in a remedial math program, an initial review might draw attention to the situation and may fuel efforts to change the data, without uncovering the practices that may have led to the placement of students of color in remedial courses. Conversations should be centered on a "critical examination of systemic factors that perpetuate deficit thinking and reproduce educational inequities for students from

nondominant sociocultural and linguistic backgrounds" (Garcia & Guerra, 2004, p. 155). When data are presented about the academic achievement of the students in the Great Lake School District, they are usually presented in the aggregate. I am, more often than not, the one who asks for the data to be disaggregated.

Oftentimes, there is confusion about what race is or is not. These ideas can be upheld by stereotypes or racial identity issues. Pollock (2004) describes how conversations about race "lapse into divisiveness, but divergent perspectives are central to struggling productively with race categories, rather than treating them as fixed or simple identities" (p. 26). Understanding the complexity of race as a social construct is critical to this study.

Social Justice

A relatively new concept in teacher education and leadership development is social justice. As mentioned above, many teacher education programs have attempted to incorporate social justice themes into their curriculum. They are primarily designed to examine prospective teachers' attitude beliefs, attitudes, and interpretive frameworks (e.g., Enterline, Cochran-Smith, Ludlow, & Mitescu, 2008; Villegas, 2007); however, recent programs have begun to focus on the social justice outcomes of teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Critics have questioned the impact of a socially just teacher on student achievement. I believe the social justice movement has the potential to jumpstart mindset shifts and transformative thinking and action. Socially just teachers can create a pathway for creating equity mindsets.

A body of scholarship posits that today's schools need leaders who are capable of recognizing and addressing the inequities that exist in our schools (Theoharis, 2007).

These leaders are called upon to transform the culture and create socially just schools. Leadership for equity and social justice is a relatively new framework for addressing the type of work that school leaders need to serve today's schools. It supports leaders—both teachers and administrators—who have the skill and will to address educational disparities, and can create schools in which all students can reach their full potential (Scheurich & Skrla, 2001).

I emphasize leaders as both teachers and administrators because, in my experience, I believe principals alone cannot do this work. I am a firm believer that the administrator has to take the lead for equity work, but leadership is also among teachers. In an effort to describe leaders who enact a social justice agenda, we see a myriad of practices. As Theoharis (2007) asserts, engaging in these practices "in the realities of public school work" is both the meaning and definition (p. 153). He describes these leaders as those who

> advocate, lead, and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. In doing so, inclusive schooling practices for students with disabilities, English language learners, and other students traditionally segregated in schools are also necessitated by this definition. (p. 222)

Social justice scholars (Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Marshall & Ward, 2004; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003; Theoharis, 2007) have contributed to this discussion of leadership for social justice. Their scholarship has helped to identify "real-life descriptions and models of socially just leadership" (Theoharis, 2008, p. 4). This research can either help to inform practices and support efforts to sustain social justice work or can be useful in helping to identify how and when leaders get stuck in

their attempts to move forward.

Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, and Koschoreck (2001) claim that "what is critically needed is real-life, context-specific, tactical, antiracist work in our schools" (p. 239). This antiracist work is usually taken up by transformational leaders who see their moral responsibility as being to challenge the status quo and commit to the systemic changes necessary to address the achievement gap. I add to that argument that our schools need leaders who have an equity mindset that will challenge the status quo.

Leadership for equity and social justice should be a major focus for transformational leaders, and this type of leadership should be of interest in U.S. public educational systems, as more and more attention is paid to the persistent achievement disparities that serve to continually marginalize groups of students. Leaders who understand their roles in promoting equity and social justice are needed to lead schools in which racial achievement disparities are challenged and addressed. This social justice movement has promise for developing the leaders that we need to transform school cultures. However, the pedagogy of social justice leadership has not been defined enough to explicitly address the impact of race on achievement. It is noteworthy that the social justice movement is concerned with the intersectionality of multiple inequities; a focus on race needs to be explicit. Since race is such a difficult topic to discuss, it has to be a prominent component of the pedagogy. I believe that conversations about race should be a pedagogy of social justice. Only when these conversations about race are implemented can educators begin the journey to developing an equity mindset.

Courageous Conversations About Race

Singleton and Linton (2006) present Courageous Conversations as a "practical and practice-based strategy for confronting race in open and honest ways" (Ladson-Billings, in Singleton & Linton, 2006, p. xi). According to the authors, their strategy was introduced not to just point out the obvious—that we have not figured out how to educate all children well: "what we offer, instead, is a detailed, thoughtful, ongoing, and influential strategy for having conversations about race that deepen our understanding about how and why the racial achievement gap persists in most schools and at all economic levels" (p. xiv).

In efforts to uncover the silence and helplessness in addressing systemic racism and inequities, the Courageous Conversations about Race initiative has been implemented in many school districts with varying degrees of success. Even so, this initiative has provided a much-needed framework and process for engaging educators on developing a common understanding of this achievement gap phenomenon. This process has implications in addressing the inequities of systemic racism in a school system. The Courageous Conversations framework is intended to be used in cross-racial settings, so that the participants can gain a better understanding of the different perspectives of race on the achievement gap. Cross-racial conversation is a major tool of the protocol. Within the framework, conversation is used to create purposeful interactions focused on the development of critical racial awareness, in order to address educational inequities. The purpose of this collaborative process is to help educators use dialogue in order to learn from one another, create common understanding of the problem or phenomenon, and subsequently take action in addressing educational disparities. The resultant equity

mindset is what I believe is necessary for educators to address the educational inequities in our system. When educators have gained an understanding of the impact of racism, Whiteness, and White privilege, and have developed skills to deconstruct and disrupt the status quo, I believe they I will have developed what I describe as an equity mindset. This requires a shift in thinking, believing, and acting. I introduced this concept earlier and discuss it later in this chapter. It was my intent for this study to support our understanding of an equity mindset.

Within the framework, dialogue is used to create purposeful interactions focused on the development of critical understanding, in order to address the inequities. This collaborative process helps educators to use dialogue in order to learn from one another, create common understandings of the problem or phenomenon, and hopefully take action. Commonly referred to as the achievement gap, this phenomenon is universal and historical.

Critical racial dialogue that is focused and deliberate will engage adults who are attempting to make sense of data and circumstances in order to address the achievement gap. If both educators of color and White educators have a desire to problem-solve, inquire into difficult areas, and keep race central, dialogue may bring the differences together in order to find strategies to change the educational outcomes for marginalized students. This is a position of not just having the dialogue, but reflecting on the dialogue, which will lead to a critical awareness of race and racism, and eventually, action (Milner, 2003).

Limitations of Courageous Conversations

Asberry (2007) describes the Courageous Conversations about Race framework as a "challenging approach to any productive multicultural dialogue" (p. 56). However, a critique of the Courageous Conversations process is the concern of ensuring that engaging in these conversations is "not merely rhetoric, but instead grounded in an authentic commitment to begin addressing this racial achievement gap—intentionally, explicitly, and comprehensively" (Asberry, 2007, p. 56). This process of bringing people together from various backgrounds and perspectives to create new understanding and propose new solutions to the problems we face has great potential. Unfortunately, educators' practice of dialogue is often limited, due to time, interest, or knowledge. When the topic of the conversation is as difficult and complex as race and the impact of race on academic achievement, the time or space is very limited. It is often in these circumstances that the conversations become more rhetorical.

From another perspective, Delpit (1988) warns us about issues of power in these conversations. She argues that, in cross-cultural dialogues, those in power often silence the marginalized participants. She offers her perspective on this process:

> Our understandings of the social construction and concept of race, our own racial identities and perceptions about others who are racially different can sometimes get in the way of our potential for practicing these conversations. . . . I am also arguing that appropriate education of poor children and children of color can only be devised in consultation with adults who share their culture. Black parents, teachers of color, and members of poor communities must be allowed to participate fully in the discussion of what kind of instruction is in their children's best interest. Good liberal intentions are not enough. (p. 296)

The kind of participation referred to here requires intentionality of purpose and the creation of conditions for such conversations to occur. I clearly understand that the diversity of a cross-racial group, which could be comprised of representatives of all

racial/ethnic groups, genders, ages, sexual orientations, and socio-economic statuses, from different sections of the community, ranging from activists to educators, will have different perspectives, values, and visions for the work. The complexities and tensions that will arise as a result of the meaning-making will no doubt be questioned and challenged. However, in this context, with limited participation of educators of color, the conversations are primarily between White educators, a few educators of color, and me as facilitator. The Courageous Conversations framework requires cross-racial dialogue to give voice to multiple perspectives, so the adjustments that I had to make changed the dynamics because the conversations were primarily among the White educators. This situation, at times, caused the space to not be so safe for participants of color. It was at these times that I, as facilitator, had to become a participant in order to add another voice to the conversation. This added a sense of safety for the participants of color.

The concerns of a "safe space" for the critical conversations were real and needed to be addressed. For White participants, As Zieghan (2001) argues, "metaphorical borders need to be crossed in order for new meanings and perspectives to be forged across differing cultures, languages, and experiences, as learners grapple with the complexities."

How can those who have been outnumbered and marginalized, or felt that their voices haven't been heard, feel that this process is going to make a difference? Cross-racial dialogue is not intended to place the dominant White perspective at the center, so the conditions must be such that the conversation itself creates a spatial metaphor in which all voices are brought to the center and the dialogue is inclusive. This requires what radical theorists identify as the vehicle of "voice," as an important strategy in the conversational process. It could be for this reason that conversations about race have not

been as sustainable as expected. When the voice is not present physically, a different challenge altogether is posed.

In essence, there is a need for open spaces in which educators can talk about the educational issues that cause so much concern. Whether the educators are White or of color, the data and performance of so many students cannot be ignored. While giving voice to the marginalized, the conversation creates the space necessary for the dominant perspective to be critiqued, deconstructed, and transformed. These spaces can open opportunities for different perspectives to be heard and passions unleashed. There are not many occassions for these types of dialogues between dominant and marginalized voices to occur. In addition, many times those of us who have been marginalized are afraid to speak our truth.

When I reflect on the time it took me to find my own voice to engage in conversations regarding my passion for equity, I can understand why it is difficult to use our voices.

Theoretical Frameworks

I have used critical race theory in studying and analyzing my research problems. Also, I used constructs from critical reflection and White racial development to describe portions of the data. In this section, I describe how each theory or construct was useful in helping to frame this study. Additionally, I used Black feminist thought to describe my methodological approach as I facilitated the Courageous Conversations professional development. This approach will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Critical Race Theory in Education

The use of CRT in education is mostly based on five foundational principles: (1) The centrality of race and racism; (2) the challenge to the dominant ideology, which employs storytelling as an epistemological resource that is used to analyze, challenge, and break down dominant ideologies; (3) a commitment to social justice and praxis; (4) a centrality of experiential knowledge of people of color; and (5) a historical context and an interdisciplinary perspective (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As such, CRT operates on three basic premises: racism is pervasive; racism is permanent; and racism must be challenged (Bell, 1992; Bernal, 2002; Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lynn, Yosso, Solórzano, & Parker, 2002; Tate, 1997). The importance of the centrality of race and racism and the experiential knowledge of people of color are significant for my study.

As a framework, Yosso (2005) asserts that critical race theory (CRT) can be used to theorize about, examine, and challenge the ways in which race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourses in schools. For instance, in utilizing conversations to help educators understand the racial achievement gap, CRT can *both* help to illuminate the understandings and experiences of race and racism *and* reflect the larger socio-cultural racial structures that inform their thinking (Ladson-Billings, 2000). This understanding can help to further the examination of practices that appear "normal" on the surface. Ladson-Billings (2000) also argues that "a CRT perspective on the literature [on multicultural teacher education] is akin to applying a new prism that may provide a different vision to our notions of school failure for diverse students" (p. 215). Engaging in dialogue about race also aids in what Ladson-Billings

(2000) describes in her article about racialized discourses as "uncovering the complexities of difference—race, class, and gender" (p. 42). This work is set up to challenge the hegemonic structures and dominant ideology that keep inequity in place. As a researcher, I am thus in a good position to utilize the epistemologies and ways of knowing that are familiar to me in order to analyze this study through the CRT lens.

In her arguments about epistemologies and the impact on research, Ladson-Billings (2000) offers a rationale for including the experiences and knowledge systems of peoples outside of the dominant paradigm. I chose CRT as a framework because it allows my perspective, experience, and knowledge to be foregrounded in this educational context. In the previous chapter, I stated that the use of race as a research and theoretical framework in educational research has not been theorized systemically. Likewise, the underpinnings of institutional racism have not been systemically analyzed using a CRT lens.

DeCuir and Dixson (2004) assert that employing CRT as a theoretical framework allows researchers such as myself to "explore the culture of K–16 institutions, explore the nature of racists acts, behaviors, and/or utterances to students of color, and examine the disciplinary acts (if any) of students who engage in these racial undertakings" (p. 25, in Jett, 2012). I studied the reflections and utterances of educators who engaged in critical race discussions about educational equity by analyzing the responses of the participants, using the CRT lens.

Just as Singleton and Linton (2006) sought to open the dialogue about race in education, Parker and Lynn (2002) described how CRT is useful "as a way to link theory and understanding about race from critical perspectives to actual practice and actions

going on in education for activist social justice and change" (p. 18, in Jett, 2012, p. 24). These studies and articles all point to the usefulness and appropriateness of CRT, as a framework committed to a social justice agenda in order to eliminate all forms of oppression of people. As such, it can be used to deepen our understanding of the historic and present-day institutional and structural barriers experienced by students in our schools. Using the principles of CRT, our conversations about race can become intentional and focused.

When the conversation is intentional and focused on a critical issue (race), it has the potential to keep the participants engaged in the process. Educators of color have longed for these types of dialogue and want them to happen, as they create an empowering potential for educators of color, who often feel as if their voices, experiences, and concerns are silenced because of the general unwillingness to engage in dialogues about race. Because of its tenets, including one that acknowledges the experiences of people of color, CRT can help to "expand the dialogue to recognize ways in which our struggle for social justice are limited by discourses that omit and thereby silence the multiple experiences of People of Color" (Ellison, 1990, in Yosso, 2006).

CRT is also critical to understanding and framing the central role of race in the day-to-day activities of schools. This may show up as the dominant narrative of colorblindness, the nuance of policies, and the experiential narratives of educators of color. As a framework, CRT provides support for critiquing school inequity.

Critical Reflection

"Reflective practice is an evolving concept that has been influenced by various philosophical and pedagogical theories" (Florez, 2003, in Fox, Campbell, & Hargrove,

2011, p. 37). Reflection can be described in three phases or modes: (a) reflection *in practice*, or the dynamic, "thinking on your feet" a teacher does during a lesson; (b) reflection *on practice*, the reflection that occurs post instruction, when a teacher thinks in hindsight about the lesson, student engagements, and other components of the experience; and (c) reflection *for practice*, the thinking about future experience informed by the past practice, which now needs to occur through reflection on the past (Schon, 1983).

Research on critical reflective practice is currently on the rise in the educational arena. In preservice programs, emphasizing critical thinking is considered an important educational activity (Rodriguez, Sjostrom, & Alvarez, 1998). These studies of preservice programs (Fisher, 2003) have identified three of the limitations and difficulties of the critical reflection research. First, these limitations include a focus by teachers on the practicality of the context, rather than the theoretical or critical elements of their work. The second constraint was time constraints or sufficient time in the teacher education program for preservice teachers to develop critical reflective skills. Third, the preservice teachers lacked the knowledge base to engage in reflective practice. Finally, because of feelings of insecurity and vulnerability, these preservice teachers were afraid of reflecting effectively on their practice. What is important to take away from these studies with preservice teachers is the claim that Hatton and Smith (1994) make, that it is "imperative that the environment is supportive and that modeling and scaffolding are essential components" (p. 4) of engaging in the practice of critical reflection. These researchers make another claim that critical reflection should be taught in preservice because inservice teachers "may never reach levels of reflection that could be considered critical

and transformative practice may not ever be achieved" (p. 4) because of the busy and demanding world of classroom teachers.

The idea that critical reflection can have transforming effects is useful and relevant for my study. Whipp (2003) investigated online collaboration between preservice teachers and concluded that the discussions must be carefully structured to go beyond generalities to higher levels of reflection. Whipp (2003) and Hatton and Smith (1995) argue that it, through dialogic reflection, reflection moves into the critical form, where newfound knowledge and awareness can be used to disrupt the status quo. Although these studies involve preservice teachers, I can apply the thinking to my own research. I also can apply this thinking to my own search for voice.

To effectively engage others in critical reflection, Milner (2003) and Howard (2004) claim that spaces in which participants can feel comfortable having the conversation are important. They argue that teacher educators (and researchers like me) need to provide spaces for preservice teachers (the participants) to express their uncertainties, frustrations, and fears. I employed these strategies as I facilitated the conversations; however, I needed to be conscious of that need to do the same as I conducted my study. These reflections were a critical step toward understanding what was necessary for the equity mindsets that I was hoping would emerge.

White Racial Development

I use White racial development theory to frame the challenges of White educators as they engage in talk about race. Scholars (Pennington et al., 2012) have described Helms's (1990) stages of White identity development as a descriptive typology for understanding the markers of progression that educators move through as they learn

about Whiteness. Being aware of their Whiteness and the privilege that their racial identity affords them is a critical step toward developing critical racial awareness. When critical racial consciousness is developed, educators are able to question practices and challenge the status quo. Their awareness of the inequities around them has the potential to move them to action, which is necessary for equity work. Studies like Carter and Goodwin (1994) point to the need for White teachers to attend to issues of White racial identity development, in order to work effectively in multicultural environments and employ antiracist pedagogy.

Early studies on antiracist pedagogy and professional development (Redman, 1977; Sleeter, 1992; Washington, 1981) indicate that fundamental changes in racial attitudes are made when teachers participate in these trainings; however, they believe that a question remains: Do these educators alter their classroom practices as a result?

Lawrence and Tatum (1997) argued that White teachers need to progress along Helm's continuum in order to "be successful first learning about then teaching in ways that constitute antiracist pedagogy" (p. 164).This antiracist pedagogy has the aim of promoting equitable education for all students and showing where the teaching and learning processes are examined to discover the ways that racism impacts schools and students. The pedagogy also works to empower students to challenge the status quo. Lawrence and Tatum further argued that antiracist educators like Lee (1995, in Lawrence and Tatum, 1997) maintained that "antiracist pedagogy must be the 'business of all teachers' (p. 9) if it is to be effective in changing the inequity of schools" (p. 164).

Tatum (1994) used Helm's model of White racial identity as a framework for understanding White educators' responses to conversations about race. Helm's model

certainly has implications for understanding White identity development as a process for gaining critical racial consciousness. While most of this literature addresses race development as linear or in hierarchical stages, I find it much more productive to think about racial development as an ongoing, circular process. By this, I mean that White people and people of color do not "move up" or step neatly from one stage of racial identity to the next, but rather our racial development is part of an imperfect, complex, and ongoing process. We might find ourselves engaged simultaneously in what are often called *stages* or moving in and out of stages depending on the context and circumstances. There are always contradictions and messiness about how we think of our racial identities.

Being familiar with Helm's and Tatum's racial-identity development theories helped me understand the responses and reactions of the participants, especially White educators. Similarly, I have observed racial-identity development among the participants of color. Goodman (2011) suggested that identity-development theories can help provide a different lens through which to view situations; this, in turn, provides more ways to think about the situation, which can lead to different strategies to address a situation.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, I drew on the traditions of qualitative research methods as I studied the impact of Courageous Conversations about race among educators in a Western, mid-sized, urban school district. Few studies have examined this process as it relates to inservice educators; most of the studies focus on preservice educators (Darling-Hammond, 2011). I wanted to learn whether this process of engaging in these critical and Courageous Conversations had an impact on the achievement gap. More specifically, I was curious about how educators develop a critical awareness about race and racism that allows them to focus on educational equity as a factor for addressing the racial achievement gap. I had two questions that guided the study. The first question was as follows: How do educators reflect on the impact as well as the challenges of participating in critical dialogues about race and educational inequity through the Courageous Conversations process? I was interested in learning whether educators, both teachers and administrators, felt these conversations impacted their practice, improved student–teacher relationships, or deepened their understanding of the impact of race/racism on the achievement gap. What I was hoping to see was whether this understanding would lead to mindset shifts in educators that would lead to the changes we need to see in our schools.

The second research question was as follows: What does it mean for a Black

feminist educational leader to develop pedagogy of change/transformation with predominately White educators? With this question, I used a critical-reflection approach to explore my own process of learning how to facilitate the conversations within my Black feminist stance.

In this chapter, I describe the procedures that I employed as I conducted the study. I include the research context, the research design, review of the research question, a description of the study participants, methodological approach, emerging themes, the data collection protocols, and the methods and theories used for data analysis.

Review of the Research Questions

As discussed in earlier sections, the conversations were designed to help educators develop a critical awareness about race in order to create a better understanding of other perspectives and experiences so as not to remain unconscious about policies or practices that enforce a dominant perspective or mistreatment of students of color. Where there is a lack of a critical awareness about race, inequities persist and the status quo is maintained. The resultant teacher discourses and attitudes about students are fueled by assumptions and faulty, deficit perceptions about the students. These assumptions may include beliefs about parents of color not valuing education, low expectations for Latino students, or tracking into less-rigorous courses for Black students (Boykin & Noguera, 2011). While the vast majority of educators are White, this deficit discourse can be taken up by educators of color as well because the manifestation of racial superiority is unnoticed and invisible in institutions such as schools. When this discourse remains unchallenged and unquestioned, the effect on students of color can stigmatize and marginalize them and lead to the disparities that foster and preserve racial inequities in

schools.

This unchallenged discourse and deficit thinking serves as a shield for educators to refrain from engaging in the critical conversations that I argue can lead to an awareness of race and racism and a changed mindset. The Courageous Conversations process allowed participants to learn about and understand institutional racism and focus on the multiple perspectives, the impact of race, and the achievement gap. Thus, for my research I wanted to know the following:

1. How do educators reflect on the impact and the challenges of participating in critical dialogues about race and educational inequity through the Courageous Conversations process?
2. What does it mean for a Black feminist educational leader to develop pedagogy of change/transformation with predominately White educators?

Black Feminist Thought and Self as Researcher

As the researcher and facilitator of the process, I recognized and reflected on my role and involvement in this process. Aligned with Black feminist thought that posits that Black women intellectuals use everyday actions in their theoretical work, my positionality and my racial identity played a role as I facilitated the dialogues (Collins, 2000). As the researcher, I was aware that reflection is critical to this qualitative research; I had to constantly reflect on my work because it was both personal and professional. It is part of the "everyday me" that I cannot separate as other researchers may be able to. For instance, as a classroom teacher, I was known by students, parents, and my peers as a compassionate, caring, yet firm teacher. I worked to develop relationships that led to trust among my students, their families, and me. Klienfield (1975) called such teachers "warm

demanders" (p. 4). During many of the sessions, I was able to use the relationships that I had built to keep conversations going or ease tensions that were on the verge of erupting. However, I was aware of the concept of *bracketing* in phenomenological studies. Bracketing, as characterized by Hychner (1985), refers to the process of challenging and identifying one's own preconceptions as a necessary part of the research process. Through the bracketing process, I used my Black feminist standpoint to challenge my preconceptions and thoughts about my facilitation of the Courageous Conversations process. I constantly raised questions about how to address our student-achievement issues, how to facilitate the dialogue around these issues, how to keep people engaged in the dialogue, and how these conversations have the potential to impact students. It was through my involvement as the facilitator of the process and the researcher that I was in a good position to obtain data from my respondents. Our interactions and time spent together have contributed to a positive effect for building the trust necessary for the respondents to feel that they are listened to (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003).

Drawing on Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), which supports a critical, political type of caring and compassionate process, issues of trustworthiness in data gathering and analysis were rigorous. The relationship that had been developed between the participant and researcher diminished the potential threat or obstacle often identified when researchers pose as instruments in a research project (Krefting, 1991). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2002) described the caring in sociohistorical terms that allow for a womanist perspective that supports relationships and the sharing of knowledge power, which also means we share power. I believe the relationships I had with the participants are indicative of the caring Beauboeuf-Lafontant described. Being mindful of my

insider/outsider position, as Weis and Fine (2000) suggested, allowed me to consider that the participants would be fearful of disclosing their feelings, cautious about the relationship with me, and concerned about being placed at risk.

I used Black feminist thought as my methodological approach to this study for a couple of reasons. First, Black feminist thought argues that Black feminists use self-defined standpoints, knowledge and epistemologies to challenge dominant ideologies. Second, Black feminists have skill in using this alternative epistemology to work within dominant frameworks and structures to bring about change.

"Black feminist thought supports broad principles of social justice that transcend U.S. Black women's particular needs" (Collins, 2000, p. 22). This is exemplified in perspectives on family and community responsibility and is characterized by Black women's roles as *blood mothers*, *othermothers*, and *community mothers* demonstrating models of caring and personal accountability. Black women understand the connection between experience and consciousness that impacts their everyday lives and impels them to become activists and advocates for social justice. This describes the motive for the work that I do in both the school community and the African American community. African American women educational leaders are like the women Collins described who cannot separate themselves from community (Collins, 1990). These women feel a responsibility to care for not only their families but also to extend their influence to the larger sociopolitical realm including the care of the school and community (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002). This translates to a passion for and a commitment to do what is right by the children. I find myself in this position most of the time. My community is my extended family, and I have a passion for doing all that I can to make things right for

marginalized children, especially African American children.

In her study of effective teachers for African American students, Ladson-Billings (1994) identified Black women as othermothers (Ladson-Billings, 1994), which are those who care for and "present hope and the possibility of certainty to the members of their school communities" (p. 294). Like these othermother teachers, Black women school leaders find themselves involved intimately in the communities of their students. This involvement fosters the connectedness between experience and consciousness in their everyday lives both personally and professionally. In my role as a community mother, it is my obligation to use my standpoint epistemology and understanding of the dominant frameworks to advocate for change. Like many Black feminists working within the system that is bounded by the dominant ideology, I feel there are constant challenges that must be addressed.

When Black feminists are in leadership roles, the impact of their involvement to create and foster sites of resistance can be impactful. Kohli (2009) described how Black feminists reflect on racism in their own educational experiences and are able to connect their experiences with the current-day realities of the students in the schools. These experiences and knowledge provide the basis for conversations and dialogue that can lead others to challenge the dominant discourse and approach the achievement disparities in schools.

As a Black feminist researcher, my position within the dominant structure is to use standpoint knowledge to question elite knowledge and to reconstruct knowledge based on my own experiences (Collins, 1991), that is, disrupting the dominant deficit discourse about marginalized students or students of color. Engaging in conversations

that challenge dominant ideologies and using these dialogues for meaning making and understanding can help raise the racial awareness of everyone involved. My understanding of the political power of such a practice has the potential to build a culture of equity (Brown, 2005).

Currently, I am an assistant superintendent of my district who came through the ranks of teacher, assistant principal, principal, and central officer director. Between my position as a teacher and assistant principal, I served as a specialist in the State Office of Education. Including my beginning years as a teacher, I have served the district for a total of 25 years. When I was appointed to my current position, I was charged with developing an Educational Equity Department to address equity initiatives. One of the first challenges of which I was made aware was the achievement gap. As I began to research approaches to addressing it, the study that had been conducted in our district became a springboard for my thinking. The study revealed that there was not only unequal implementation of the policy but also a variance in the way educators perceived the students depending on the side of town in which they attended school.

As I worked to set up the Educational Equity Department, I was able to draw upon my experiences working in equity at the State Office of Education. This, along with my personal commitment to equity and social justice, created the perfect space for my work. As a result, I was motivated to explore options for the district to address the inequities and the more evident achievement gap that challenged us. In my graduate studies, I had become familiar with critical race theory (CRT) and found it to support my own beliefs about the educational inequities in our everyday practice. I was soon able to use CRT tenets and principles as I began to address the challenging work in educational

equity. For example, based on the centrality of my experiential knowledge, CRT helped me to understand and challenge the racial inequities that were present in our achievement-gap data. As I reflected on racism within my own educational experiences as a learner, parent, and educator, I certainly did not need to be convinced of the reality of institutionalized racism, the achievement gap, and the disparities that I saw.

My knowledge and practice of CRT in my daily work is transparent to my colleagues and the participants in this study. Because the research topic focused on race and educational inequities and could be perceived as based on my personal experiences, I needed to be aware of my own unresolved issues and/or attitudes that could pose a threat to data collection and analysis (Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2003). These issues included my own growing understanding of Whiteness and the power structure that permeates our system as well as my role in internalizing Whiteness. I had feelings, emotions, and thoughts about what was both said and unsaid. Moustakas (1994) described the concept *epoche* where investigators suspend their experiences as much as possible to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination (Creswell, 2009). I found that it was impossible for me to suspend my experiences, and thus, as Ladson-Billings (2012) described, I have had to draw upon and make a "deliberate appearance in [my] work" (p. 424). I believe that any attempts to suspend my experiences caused messy situations where I was both a facilitator and participant. It was common for the participants to ask me to join the conversations as a participant. In many cases, I obliged because I wanted another perspective to be heard.

Our consultant, Curtis Linton—the male, White, middle class co-author of the book *Courageous Conversations about Race*—facilitated most of the first year of our

Courageous Conversations process. Mr. Linton is a local business owner and native to the state. Mr. Linton was unusual in this context because he represented the dominant religion and is outspoken about racism, Whiteness, and White privilege in education. His direct and tell-it-like-it-is approach was intimidating to most White educators and welcomed by educators of color. I felt that his approach was honest and passionate; however, it was not always received that way. His direct approach would sometimes cause uneasiness, especially among the White participants. After a few sessions with his facilitation, I became more comfortable with the content and process of the Courageous Conversations framework and began to co-facilitate with him. By the end of the first year, I was usually facilitating by myself or with a member of my staff, mostly due to budget restraints and also to ease a sometimes strained environment. At the beginning, my role as facilitator was tenuous at best and difficult most of the time. I had to work to establish a trusting environment where the participants were comfortable with the conversation. I wanted to create an environment where educators could hear one another, acknowledge the validity of racial disparities, and hear one another's perspectives. As we moved through the process of dealing with our personal selves and then our professional selves, the conversations became easier.

My goal as the facilitator was to help move us through the guilt and discomfort of dealing with such an abstract concept as race to a place where we had found the voice to talk it through. In hindsight, I now realize this was a difficult thing to do, but guided by my Black feminist theoretical perspective, I did what felt natural to me and approached sensitive and difficult issues with care and understanding. This enabled me to help the participants clarify the abstract theoretical ideas about race. Getting to this clarification

often required me to lead deep discussions to help form newly developed understandings among the participants. I attribute the development of trust and connected relationships to this process. Black feminist thought is grounded in the belief that relationships are critical to gaining deeper understandings among people (Collins, 2000).

As the teams moved through the process and safe spaces for conversations about race were created, I realized that I learned a lot about myself as an African American woman educator facilitating others in their personal journey of self-discovery and critical reflection. I learned that this process is actually a journey that we, as willing and courageous learners, embark on. I recognized that my identity as a Black feminist influenced my actions, perspectives, and interactions with my colleagues, and my understanding of CRT enabled me to understand what was before me in terms of addressing the topic of race in education. I had the feeling that this project was going to be difficult and challenging. I knew that we were going to be creating the pathway as we progressed through this journey. I had my fears but realized that as a Black feminist and CRT scholar, I had a responsibility to the students and educators who were depending on someone to do something about the racial achievement gap.

Reflecting on both my position in the district and my experience as a Black feminist was essential to understanding the phenomenon of the conversations and the process itself (Watt, 2007). My own assumptions about the process and the participants' experiences influenced the inquiry. Because of my closeness with and passion about my subject, I realized the need to be reflective throughout this process. I kept a reflective journal as I engaged in my study.

Research Context

This study was conducted in the Great Lake School District, which is located within the city limits of a growing, Western, urban city. The city's diverse demographics are unlike most of the state, which is predominately White and rural. Recently, the city has served as a resettlement site for African, Asian, and Middle Eastern refugees. This, coupled with a growing Latino population, has caused the city to experience unprecedented, rapid demographic shifts. The city is known for its two distinct residential sections, a lower income west side and a more affluent east bench. Additionally, the dynamics of the urban nature of the city and the dominant religious influence impact the shifting demographic diversity.

The school district is mid-sized with a stable student population of 24,000. Like the city, it reflects the same demographic shifts with a growing population of students of color and low-income population on the west side. Considered a majority–minority district, the student populations are as follows: Latino 30%, Pacific Islander 5%, African/African American 6%, Native American 1%, Asian 4%, and White 46% (USOE, 2014). Unlike the racially diverse student population, the teaching staff is predominately White, female, and middle aged. Ninety-one percent of the 1,500 teachers are White.

The district has been engaged in reform efforts to improve student achievement for several years. These efforts include curriculum alignment, improved pacing, instructional delivery, and a focus on strengthening teachers' content skills. For the past 3 years, the district has implemented leadership development as part of a national turnaround school reform effort. The initiative has had a great impact on supporting school leadership for the purpose of improving schools. While these efforts have had a

great impact on the district and our student achievement has shown steady growth, the gap between our student groups had not narrowed much. Although my concern for the disparity in student achievement has troubled for some time and continues to trouble me, there were two major events that caused me to pursue this research project. First, a doctoral dissertation study conducted by Angelina Castagno (2014) on the multicultural policy implementation in the district revealed that the "well-intended, nice ways schools engage diversity-related policies and practices solidify inequity and reinscribe Whiteness" (p. 2), and second, the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary School Act, known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2002 brought attention to the significant achievement gap that exists between Black and Brown students and their White and Asian counterparts.

The dissertation, conducted in the district from 2005 to 2006, was an ethnographic study that examined a district policy that provided a framework and guidance for addressing diversity and multiculturalism. In her book *Educated in Niceness* (2014), based on her dissertation, Castagno explored the concept of niceness and how it works in schools to maintain the status quo, and "maintain the conditions within which Whiteness thrives" (p. 135). As Castagno argued, the language that teachers used in her study masked the content of race. The culture of niceness in this instance prevented educators from exploring the issues that they saw relating to the students of color in their classrooms. This culture of niceness could also prevent open and honest conversations among educators who want to address the achievement gap.

It was during an administrative meeting when the results of the study were presented that I heard a comment from one of our administrators: "It's not our job to be

concerned with social justice" (personal communication, April 6, 2006). I had a visceral reaction that had a tremendous impact on me. Under my breath, I asked, "Are you kidding?" At that moment, I decided that I would find a way to bring some level of social justice to the district. I knew from the beginning that introducing social justice and examining the hidden and coded racial discourse was going to be difficult, but I knew that it had to be a part of building an equity focus that would lead to a change in educator practice in the district. I also realized that the task was not going to be easy. There were no models for me to follow and I had to build my own team of support. This would require me to work with my staff to incorporate social justice concepts in our everyday equity support to teachers and schools.

The second event that had an impact on this study was the NCLB Act. This accountability measure required state and school districts to report student achievement disaggregated by student groups such as race/ethnicity, language, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status. The annual report of student achievement data disaggregated by race shed light on the deafening silence around the underperformance and disparities among many of our children. The achievement data in almost all instances indicate that there are differences in the performance of students that are predictable by race. Lewis et al. (2008) argued that there are many factors that contribute to this disparity in achievement; however, low teacher expectations, disparate allocation of resources, limited access to programs, disproportionate suspension, and graduation rates account for most of the factors and are all symptoms of systemic inequities that have their basis in racism or racist practices.

The persistence of the racial achievement gap along with the status quo practices

of Whiteness shrouded in niceness created a sense of urgency for me to establish an equity focus for the district. The process of engaging in critical conversations about race was the place that I chose to start and eventually study.

Research Design

Qualitative research is a method that centers on discovering the meaning, processes, and activities of a select group of people or individuals (Creswell, 2009). Its purpose is not to generalize results to a larger population but rather to better understand an issue or phenomenon. A hallmark of qualitative research is the ability to study "deep involvement of gender, culture, and marginalized groups" (p. 43). To this hallmark, I add the topic of race as an emotionally laden topic that is close to some and extremely distant from others and usually resisted by all. To study such a topic, open-ended research questions are appropriate and useful for understanding the issue. My intention was to use my skills to have good conversations with all the participants.

The process for these conversations was guided by the *Courageous Conversations Field Guide*. The sessions were organized by the Six Conditions. Each month, a new condition was introduced and related educational examples were included in the essential questions and framing questions. Various conversational activities were organized around the questions. For example, an *elbow partner discussion activity* meant that the participants turned and talked with the person sitting at their elbow. This set up a paired situation where the participants could have a discussion about a particular question or topic and not have to worry about talking to the whole group. Other resources, including videos, YouTube, and other media, were often used to complement the lesson and encourage conversation.

My staff and I prepared the agenda for this monthly site equity team Courageous Conversation professional development. We spent at least 2 hours in preparation and considered this planning a major portion of our own professional development. During our preparation meetings, our learnings were deepened through our planning. For some of my staff, these planning sessions were the first opportunities for their own voices to emerge. We learned a lot about each other through our planning.

I knew that bringing educators together for critical racial conversations to address achievement and equity disparities would be very challenging. Critics of such conversations claim that the conversations are challenging because of a lack of a focus when talking about race in the context of education, creating safe spaces for cross racial interactions, clarity about the purposes of the dialogue, how to move to action, engagement of all parties, reaching deeper perspectives/understandings, making meaning, uncovering inequities, making Whiteness visible, interrogating Whiteness, developing the context, and building trust and safety. In addressing the clarity about the purpose for the conversations, I continually kept the achievement data and other disparities on our agenda. When questions about moving to action would arise, I would steer our conversations deeper into the systemic issues that needed to be uncovered. The more we conversed, the more complex the dialogue became. Although I was not trying to keep the participants from moving to action, I wanted to make sure we were gaining the necessary knowledge and understanding of the issues.

Phenomenology

In this qualitative study, I used a phenomenological research approach, which allowed me to better understand the individual experiences of the participants and gain a better understanding of how participating in the process of Courageous Conversations enabled the participants to answer my first research question. According to van Manen (1990), at the heart of phenomenological research is the deep questioning of an experience. A unique feature of this approach, as described by van Manen, is that it uses conversations as a methodological tool:

> Conversation is a process of coming into an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. (p. 26)

Conversations were central to the professional-development process that the educators had been involved in throughout the sessions; now, this important tool was used to initiate the data-gathering process. As I engaged in conversations with the respondents, I was able to gain an understanding about their experiences of participating in the process. I tried to create a comfortable conversational method of collecting my data. Hays and Wood (2011) described how the phenomenological research tradition allows scholars to "understand the individual and collective internal experience for a phenomenon of interest and how participants intentionally and consciously think about their experience" p. 291). Using my caring conversational stance and the relationships that I had built with the participants allowed the collection of my data to be comfortable and natural. It is both through the conversation process during the Courageous Conversations as well as the in-depth interview questions that I, as a researcher, was able to collect the data and determine how the participants experienced the phenomena.

This qualitative study was conducted through the use of semi-structured, formal, and informal face-to-face interviews/conversations, and focus groups. The interviews were individually conducted with teachers and administrators who had participated in the professional development of Courageous Conversations about race. The purpose of using this approach was that it allowed me to take the individual experiences of the participants in the conversations and create a composite of the essence of that experience for all individuals (Creswell, 2009). The interviews allowed the participants to reflect on the process of engaging in dialogues about race. I also used field notes, journal notes, and personal communication. With each participant, I began the interviewing process with a conversation. Since all of the potential participants knew me from our work together, I was hoping the conversations during our interview would help us reconnect as colleagues. That is exactly what happened.

All group and individual interviews were recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. Member checking was conducted with follow-up visits and phone calls to ensure the accuracy of the quotes and corroboration of insights reported by the participants. Pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality of the respondents.

Participants

Since Courageous Conversations about Race was implemented in 2007, over 60 educators, both teachers and administrators, have participated in the process. This pool of potential participants consisted of about 90% female and 90% White. They included members of the Equity Leadership Team, Educational Equity Department staff, and teachers and administrators from school site-equity teams. These were educators who had been engaged in professional development for at least 2 years. I extended an invitation to

participate in the study via e-mail to all educators in the pool. The selected sample of knowledgeable informants included those who agreed to share their experiences of engaging in the conversations. My intent was to let the voices of the participants speak and carry their experiences through the interviews (Creswell, 2009).

There were nine educators who responded to the e-mail that I had sent to all previous participants in Courageous Conversations inviting them to participate in my study. Of the nine educators who responded to the invitation to participate in this study, three were administrators and six were teachers. Racially, the group consisted of two Latinos, one African American, and the remaining six were White. There were also two males in the group. Table 1 provides a description of the respondents.

Janelle is a teacher who has been serving as a language and culture coach for the past 8 years in the Educational Equity Department. She began her career 15 years ago

Table 1

Respondents

Respondents	Gender/Race	Years in Education	Current Position
Janelle	White female	20 years	Teacher specialist
Mary	White female	13 years	Language/culture coach
Sharon	White female	21 years	Teacher
James	White male	13 years	Teacher
Renee	White female	15 years	Administrator
Mike	White male	16 years	Administrator
Serena	Latina female	14 years	Teacher
Marta	Latina female	17 years	Teacher
Beatrice	African American female	31 years	Administrator

and has been trained as a bilingual teacher. She recently changed positions and now serves as a teacher on special assignment. She is hoping that her equity mindset will help influence another department to engage more in equity practices.

Mary is a teacher who also has served as a language and culture coach for the past 6 years. This position was her introduction to doing equity work.

Sharon is a kindergarten teacher in a central city school. Before beginning the equity work in the GL district, she had been involved in women's issues at the local university. She had been on her school's Site Equity Team for 3 years.

James is a 5/6 grade teacher in a central city school. He has always been curious about equity work and was glad when his principal invited him to become a member of the school's Site Equity Team.

Renee is currently an administrator on the city's west side. At the time of the study, she was an assistant principal. Five years ago, she was a member of the Educational Equity Department. Her experiences in equity began when she provided professional development to teachers for English Learners. She later became a facilitator for Courageous Conversations.

Mike, a White male, is currently a middle school assistant principal in an east side school. He is also a former member of the Educational Equity Department focusing on Alternative Language services. He began his teaching career 16 years ago in Ohio.

Serena, a Latina, is a high school teacher who also works as a language and culture coach half-time. She has an extensive bilingual and Spanish language background.

Marta, a Latina, is a fifth-grade teacher in a west-side school. This professional

development experience was her introduction to equity. She was learning how to apply her new understandings to her personal and her professional life.

Beatrice is an African American female administrator with over 30 years of experience as a teacher and administrator. She began her teaching career in this Midwestern state.

Appointments were set and arrangements were made to conduct the interviews either in their schools and offices or my office. We sat at a table comfortably with a digital tape recorder between us. I informed them of the research process, read the informed consent form, and solicited their signatures. Each informant received a copy of the interview questions. I informed them that I would be using them as a guide for our conversation. I began the interviews as a conversation with each participant. Because I had relationships with the participants, it was easy to start with a let's-catch-up conversation. My intent was to create a safe space for our interview. Because I had spent time with each participant throughout our professional-development sessions, I wanted to recapture and reignite the relationship that we had developed.

Data Collection and Management

Creswell (2009) identified data collection as a series of interrelated activities that are aimed at helping the researcher answer the research questions. Included in these activities are the site location, establishing rapport, purposeful sampling, and the best approaches to collect the data. According to the author, there are choices that a qualitative researcher has regarding collecting data. Examples include e-mail messages, person-to-person interviews, or telephone interviews. For this study, data were collected from more than one source; however, the main source was the person-to-person digitally recorded

interviews. The recorded data collected were transcribed and stored in a retrievable database with files created and organized for ease of management.

The individual interviews were reflective and served as the primary data-gathering process. They took place in a neutral space in schools and/or in the district office. The interviews were documented through digital tape recordings. The interviews lasted at least 1 hour and often longer with follow-up questions. The initial questions were open-ended regarding the participants' experiences engaging in the Courageous Conversations process. I used conversation as a research tool as described by van Manen (1990).

Additionally, I held focus groups using open-ended questions to create a rich picture of the complexities of critical conversations with these educators. The questions led to discussions that focused on the challenges educators face when experiencing conversations about race. The questions were aimed toward a better understanding of the difficulties, complexities, and concerns regarding the conversations and were carefully cross-referenced to the research questions. I used the focus groups to gather information within a community of educators who had been or were currently involved in the process of Courageous Conversations. According to Creswell (2009), these groups are "advantageous when the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information" (p. 133). This will be possible due to the experience that the participants have had with the process.

Analysis

My goal for this study was to understand how educators reflected on their engagement in the Courageous Conversation process. I was interested in understanding

how educators developed an awareness of race and racism that would lead to an equity mindset. From my initial research question, I developed 13 interview questions to expand my query and facilitate a conversation between the respondents and me. I was also interested exploring how I, as an African American female educational leader, used Black feminist pedagogy to influence change and transformation.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I began the initial coding process of the responses of the participants to the 13 interview questions. Transcribed text was grouped and classified into meaningful units for coding and interpretation. The analysis steps included the following: identifying significant statements, creating meaningful units, and clustering themes. I organized the raw data from the interviews by question. I became aware that the responses from the participants who were interviewed varied in content and substance. This was an indication of how uncomfortable this topic is still for some educators.

In the first round of coding, I was able to identify three thematic categories from the data. These categories were drawn from the words and statements of the respondents to the interview questions. These themes were as follows: content of the conversations, the process of the conversations, and the practice that was influenced by the conversations. Another round of coding and looking for subthemes revealed an overlapping of the main themes. Although I did not ask the questions in the order of the three categories, grouping them provided me with a way to identify subthemes and patterns within the categories. For the most part, I relied on the phenomenological interpretations of the themes (Saldana, 2013). Bracketing was also used throughout the data-analysis process as a means to prevent my personal biases from interfering with data

analysis. I was careful to document and isolate my comments and thoughts about the reflections.

The analysis for this study was shaped by the following theoretical frameworks: CRT and critical reflection. Although the major unit of analysis for this study focused on the responses from the interviewees, the CRT framework provided a lens that helped me focus attention on understanding how race and racism is deeply embedded in American society and its institutions (Parker & Lynn, 2002). The CRT framework was also used to support the experiential knowledge of people of color who participated in the conversations.

Yosso (2005) asserted that CRT can be used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourses. For instance, for those who participated in the conversations, the CRT lens helped me as a researcher understand the participants' statements, discourses, and stories within the context of institutional racism and its impact on education.

Because of my position in the Great Lake District, I have been immersed in my research site for over 8 years and have had numerous interactions, observations, and conversations with individuals that have helped to drive the direction and content of the Courageous Conversations. I chose to conduct my study on these conversations because of the impact that I was seeing in educators' practices. All of these interactions, observations, and conversations have informed the way I approached my research and have helped shape my analysis and findings. Scholars like Parker and Villalpando (2007) argued that CRT "is a valuable lens with which to analyze and interpret administrative policies and procedures in educational institutions and provides avenues for action in the

area of racial justice" (p. 519). It is my intent to use CRT to analyze the responses from my respondents around race as we seek the possible avenues for action.

Emerging Themes

I will now present a description and interpretation of the three main themes of content, process, and practice that initially emerged from the data.

Content of the Conversations

Using the Courageous Conversations about Race framework, Site Equity Team members (the participants) were introduced to the concept of race by examining the racial achievement gap through disaggregated student state performance data and exploring other educational inequities. Within the Courageous Conversations framework, the participants engaged in dialogue around race at monthly professional-development sessions. Following the protocol, throughout these sessions, as they developed an understanding of the definitions of race, racism, and institutional racism, the participants worked through the first three chapters of the field guide. The focus was to help the participants gain an understanding of race and racism at a personal level. After engaging in initial conversations around the data, the participants were then challenged to draw conclusions based on their assumptions and understanding of the root causes of the gap. Educators seldom have the opportunity to participate in this type of data mining and thus are not accustomed to having to speak about the disparities that are in front of them. Because the focus was on the racial achievement gap, the activities relating to the achievement gap caused the participants to have to think in terms of the differences in student achievement that they had seen before them. With the content of these

conversations being race and the disparities in academic achievement, and more specifically, the impact of a student's race on their performance, it was expected that there would be some hesitancy and reluctance in engaging in the conversations (my assumption).

Process of the Conversations

The process of engaging in Courageous Conversations about Race was explicitly laid out in the *Courageous Conversations Field Guide*. The framework as outlined in the book was used as a guide throughout the professional-development sessions. Although some departures were made from the suggested activities in the guide, our process followed the sequence and format for introducing the topics and discussion items. Each session began with a review of the Four Agreements: a) stay engaged, b) expect/accept nonclosure, c) speak your truth, and d) experience discomfort. The participants were asked to commit to the agreements in order to create the safe space and trust needed for the critical dialogues. Time was spent before each session to review the agreements and understand how they would help guide our conversations. The process of these conversations emerged as a theme as participants reflected on whether the process made the conversations *difficult, uneasy*, or whether they created an *opportunity* or a space where this difficult topic could be addressed.

This process of the Courageous Conversations created the conditions for educators to develop new learning methods and understandings of the institutional and structural racist practices and disparities, which will lead to the development of critical racial awareness that can lead educators to make pedagogical changes. However, throughout this process, many educators found it difficult to talk about the inequities that

are grounded in institutional racist practices without powerful emotional responses. At best, many sessions were very emotional, ranging from defensiveness and guilt-laden resistance to outright outbursts and crying when the conversations became challenging. The Agreements were oftentimes hard to adhere to, and as a facilitator, I had to constantly remind the group of our agreements for the conversation. These responses have led me to examine this process and learn how the educators can engage in critical reflection of the dialogues.

Critical reflective practice is a tool that I included in our Courageous Conversations process. As educators are challenged in their beliefs and awareness is raised about the issues of the inequities experienced by students in the school system, participants are asked to reflect on their newfound knowledge. This usually led to them updating their racial autobiography, participating in *knee-to-knee* (an active listening activity) where they are given a reflective question to respond to, or participating in large group discussions.

The emergence of this theme suggested that the approach to the conversations enabled relationships to develop between participants.

Practice

The third main theme that emerged from the data was the reflection of the impact on the educator's practice as a result of participating in the conversations. My initial assumptions about practice, as with most professional development, were that the participants would leave the sessions with a toolbox of strategies to implement in their classrooms. Indeed, that was the assumption of most of the participants. As the respondents reflected on their practice, they were able to see it in a different light. They

spoke about their mindset shift, seeing the disparities they had not seen before, witnessing their own Whiteness, and wanting to do something about the status quo. The emergence of thoughtful and effective equity practices was found.

A further analysis of the data revealed subthemes as I was looking for other patterns. What became clear to me was that content and process both overlapped with each other and had different meanings within each respective category. A regrouping and identification of the subthemes led me to combine the three main themes into the titles of the next two chapters, where I present the findings and analysis. In Chapter 4, I address both content and process thematically through the emotions, feelings, and understandings of the participants. In Chapter 5, I present the findings that were related to the impact of the conversations on the participants' practice. The subthemes presented in Chapter 5 focus on the respondents' reflections about their growth and understanding of race and racism as well as their understanding of what their practice needed to be. As the findings were analyzed, the metaphor of a journey became evident.

CHAPTER 4

YOU MEAN WE GET TO TALK ABOUT THIS?

Introduction

One of the respondents, Sharon was very excited when she was invited to be a part of her school's Site Equity Team. At one of the first sessions for her cohort, she expressed how excited she was to be able to discuss the racial achievement gap. She could not believe that we were going to actually have conversations about race.

> I've been waiting for something like this. I think [our district' likes to act like there is nothing going on, like everything's okay, like all of our students are performing at high levels. Like our students of color are succeeding like they should. We are good at pretending. I am not sure how long it [this type of PD] is going to last, but I'm glad to be here.

In this chapter, I present the findings related to my research questions. First, I present the findings for the first question: How do educators reflect on the impact of, and challenges of participating in, critical dialogues about race and educational inequity through the Courageous Conversations process? I then present my reflections on the second question relating to my role as the facilitator of the Courageous Conversations process, specifically: What does it mean for a Black feminist educational leader to develop a pedagogy of change with predominately White educators?

I organized the findings for my first research question around four interrelated themes that spoke to both the content of the Courageous Conversations and the process of

these dialogues. These themes were: a) glad for the opportunity to discuss the racial achievement gap; b) this is hard and emotional; c) forging relationships; and d) new understandings. I weave my reflections upon my second research question throughout the discussion of findings. Then I present a summary of my reflections at the end of both Chapters 4 and 5.

Talking about race in schools has proven challenging. Whether the conversation covers achievement or other educational disparities, people avoid it, some because they fear others will call them racist. I observed that many educators exhibited a lack of will, skill, and knowledge for engaging in the conversation. The literature backs this up. In her study of race in a California district, Mica Pollock (2001) states that "the question Americans ask most about race in education—how and why do different 'race groups' achieve differently—is the very question we most suppress" (p. 2). Castagno's (2014) work in the Great Lake School District (GLSD) revealed the coded language used to talk about the color (race) of students. Castagno's subjects avoided talk about how and why racial groups perform differently. It seemed as if the mere topic of race could hinder a conversation or shut it down completely. Indeed, the silence around this topic is deafening, even when achievement data point to racial discrepancies in student performance.

In an Equity Leadership Team conversation about the achievement gap, an administrator asked if we could use different language from "the achievement gap." The equity leaders expressed a major reaction and the administrator explained that she only meant that we needed positive language that did not imply we were going to lower the standards for the students at the top. I was encouraged when equity leaders provided a

clear explanation of the achievement gap and made it clear that our goal was to close it by changing the predictability of which student groups were the lowest performing. I believe this administrator was speaking out of concern for niceness. It was not comfortable, therefore not nice to talk about what the gap meant.

Castagno (2014) described this culture of niceness in her study. I believe niceness often creates barriers for race-related discussions.

My initial findings pointed to the common suppression and avoidance of race-based conversations. However, I soon learned educators were willing to talk about the racial achievement gap when there is safety and trust. Drawing on my Black Feminist Theory (BFT) sensitivities, it was natural and comfortable for me to help create that safety and trust. This involved reiterating to the participants that the students were the reason we were having the conversations. It also required me to listen to their experiences and their truths. I believe niceness and politeness attracts us when we are afraid that our conversations will hurt or offend others. If we set up the conditions for safety and trust, then we open up space where we can have honest conversations about race, and therefore do not have to be concerned with niceness.

Engaging educators in addressing the racial achievement gap and education gap had been a longtime personal and professional goal for me. Even before the NCLB Act, and we had to disaggregate data to show student performance, I knew intuitively and experientially what the data would reveal. So, when I had the opportunity to implement and facilitate the Courageous Conversations professional development, I was immediately interested. I knew it was risky, but also knew I had to accept the challenge. Working with educators could change the achievement trajectory for our students,

encourage a culture of critical understanding, and eventually close the achievement gap. Alston (2005) describes Black female superintendents as tempered radicals and servant leaders, who have the tenacity and resilience to meet the challenges of working within systems while critiquing them. It was my Black feminist, tempered radical, servant leader, critically spiritual self that supported this idea.

I paid attention to the need to establish trust and safety with the participants. I found that listening and validating each person's truth, no matter how misguided or incorrect it was, I listened and found a way to bring certain topics back into the conversation. This was even the case when deficit ideologies were described as truth. Having the Courageous Conversations helped us to seek new knowledge and understanding regarding the racial achievement gap.

The purpose of my study was to understand how educators experienced and reflected on their participation in the Courageous Conversations and how I, as the facilitator, used my sensibilities to influence the development of racial awareness among the participants. It was my goal to transform educators' thinking about the achievement gap.

The subject of race as it influences what happens in schools is usually not openly discussed (Keyes & Kusimo, 2004). "Many U.S. citizens, educators, and policy makers are not even willing to acknowledge the existence of racism in education, not to mention subjecting it to careful scrutiny and targeting it for explicit intervention as a means for improving the performance of underachieving students" (Howard, 2010, p. xvii).

The Courageous Conversations encouraged us to begin with our individual willingness to discover our own personal, local and immediate racial meaning. Doing so,

and starting with ourselves, we discover how race affects our everyday life experiences and perspectives. This discovery helps us avoid racial unconsciousness or colorblindness.

The reflections of the educators in my study are similar, yet different from what I found in the literature. Their accounts reflect the struggles, fears, and resistance the literature has cited (Ladson-Billings, 2012; McDonough, 2009; Gay, 2002). However, their accounts also reflect the positive emotions that focused on an opportunity to engage in the conversations and the relationships that developed from shared understandings: *You mean we get to talk about this?* I also found that respondents' overwhelmingly felt that their understanding of achievement disparities had grown and they had learned some skills for discussing race. As James shared,

> Between test scores, and so when you look that at it like that, I couldn't deny it. That race was a huge part of the achievement gap. And it's sad because it showed me . . . just how much engrained it is in the school system, cause I know there are racist people out there, but I didn't realize it was such a part of this system of what we're really doing and really not meeting the needs of all of our students.

Glad for the Opportunity to Discuss the Racial Achievement Gap

Although my assumptions about the participants' reluctance proved true, they also showed they recognized a rare and welcome opportunity to talk about race and the disparities that we see in our schools. The pattern of comments from the participants suggested that most had a heightened awareness of the racial achievement gap and some educators wanted to address it, but did not know how. My initial assumptions were that educators were willing to accept that they had limited racial consciousness, that they did not know which things they did not know, and that this affected their comfort level in the conversations. They were silent at first; I had to prompt them. It was not until I had established a safe space that the content of the conversation, race and the achievement

gap became more comfortable. Gay (2002), discusses how the need for "safe places" as requested by students in their classes may imply the desire for conversations "devoid of controversy, conflict, confrontation, and contention" (p. 3). However, I realized the need for such a safe space to invite educators into the conversations. When I could see that the conversation was moving towards confrontation or contention, I stepped in to ease the tension. That would sometimes mean changing the agenda or interjecting my experience as an example. There were also other times when deficit ideologies were presented in stories and/or events involving the students and I had to maintain composure and continue facilitating until the opportunity arose for us to address the issue.

As we were discussing the immigration issue in our country and its impact on some of our students and families, strong opinions on both sides clearly emerged. I watched the body language and heard the verbal retorts as we engaged in the large group discussion. Some participants were silent and others very vocal. We were scheduled to move onto the next agenda item when I called my staff co-facilitator out of the room and told her that I thought we needed to regroup and do a small group protocol to allow for more participation and give the silent voices an opportunity to talk. We came up with a framing question and asked the participants to engage in elbow partner discussion. The elbow partner protocol involved asking participants to turn to the person at their right or left elbow, depending on the seating. They were then instructed to engage in a conversation with each other using the essential question as their starting point. They were given a short period of time for the discussions. After debriefing both the question and the process, the participants shared that they felt the small group protocol allowed more engagement and made it safe to speak. We would then open the question for those

who wanted to respond to the whole group.

Throughout the Courageous Conversations, participants would often share that they really did not know what things they did not know. We used this poetic phrase in our conversations as we acknowledge that there are some things that we do not know and we do not know that we do not know it. As Beatrice commented, she had taken diversity workshops and multicultural classes and never had conversations about race and educational disparities. It is quite common for our district diversity workshops and trainings to be held within a framework of Whiteness without addressing the history of oppression or power relationships. Tatum (1992) reminds us "we have a responsibility to try to identify and interrupt the cycle of oppression" (p. 4). I found that without an understanding of this history of oppression and the knowledge of White superiority and privilege infused in our professional development, we are only scratching the surface in our quest for equity and social justice. In one of the focus groups, participants praised the district for allowing time for educators to have these conversations. Participants felt that the opportunity to discuss race helped disrupt the ideology of colorblindness. Janelle commented: "I think it is good that we are finally disaggregating our data so that we can see what is actually going on. Maybe we won't be so colorblind when it comes to addressing the gap and everything that we see happening to our students." What has been frustrating to a number of equity-minded educators is the color-blind approach that appears to permeate district practices. Others were glad for the opportunity to discuss the racial achievement gap, but wanted to learn a strategy to fix it. They felt they did not know what to do about it. Many times during the first sessions of the Courageous Conversations, teachers were anxious to take something back to their classrooms,

something they could implement tomorrow. Many were used to "make and take" workshops or 1-day professional development where they left with strategies to implement in their classrooms immediately. It took several sessions for the participants to realize that this professional development was a process that enabled them to engage in critical dialogues about racial inequities. I had to constantly remind them we were on a journey together, a journey few had undertaken, and we did not know what the end would be.

When participants were asked to reflect on the opportunities they have had to engage in conversations about race or its resulting disparities in their school or work, they were eager to share. Sharon, a high school teacher, spoke about the constant open conversations in the ESL department at her school. "I always speak about the ethnicity of our students because that is who they are." Is it possible that educators like Sharon who have daily interactions with students of color found that engaging in conversations about race was more comfortable because she was more conscious of their needs? Or is the reality more that because Sharon is Latina and an English Learner herself, she was conscious of her students' needs? Unfortunately, many other educators, most of them White, have daily interactions with students of color and are not conscious of their students' needs. When I probed Sharon a little more about the conversations about students held in her department, she discovered that although she felt free to speak about her students' race or ethnicity and some of their challenges, her colleagues mostly focused on language issues. As part of her reflection, she shared,

> Oh, I hadn't realized that was what was happening. I can see now how we avoid talking about the racial identities of our students and only talk about their language, even though we know there are racial inequities going on.

This form of colorblindness and avoidance of talking about race is a dominant discourse among White teachers (Lawrence & Tatum, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 2005; Sleeter, 1993; Tatum, 1992; Thompson, 2003). Given that the public school teaching force continues to be predominantly White, this dominant colorblindness is inseparable from CRT's definition of racism. De Cuir and Dixon (2004, in Singleton, 2014) remind us that when

> educators enter their analyses of this issue seeking to determine 'how' rather than 'if' race affects the learning and teaching of all students, they can discover the blind spots in the prevailing color-blind ideology that has allowed or forced society to overlook those impacts. (p. 165)

I found that the opportunity to have conversations about race in education helps educators acknowledge students' identities and counters ideologies of colorblindness.

Janelle shared how "looking at disaggregated data was an entry point for me to discuss and bring up racial disparities. It's something we should talk about every time we look at data. I am frustrated when the district data team presents achievement data that is not disaggregated." The exercise of looking at disaggregated achievement data opens the opportunity for discussions about student performance within racial or ethnic categories. Datnow and Park (2015) remind us that we must engage in inquiry and critical reflection around data to inform a course of action.

At our early sessions, it was important for me to share the district disaggregated achievement data. I needed for participants to understand what we were dealing with. There was seldom any dispute or question of the data, just a somber realization that indeed there was an achievement gap.

For some of the participants, engaging in conversations about race would sometimes occur in different spaces and places. Mary commented that when the topic of

race comes up, whether in the Courageous Conversation sessions or at work: "you can't shut it down once you get started; it's hard to stay within our time constraints in our sessions sometimes." Mary also shared how she had begun to talk about the topic at home:

> Well, since this is so intertwined at work with me, I think we're seeing some neat things happening at home . . . with raising my daughter. You know, I've always tried to be mindful, I don't intentionally setup a conversation . . . but, I think, *OK Friday afternoon we're going to have a discussion about race* . . . but I, I, I'm looking . . . and . . . I'm thinking and I made comments, about certain things and… this last year . . . and I didn't realize how . . . much this has sunk in with my daughter. And she'll say things once in a while . . . where she gets it! Just to help her get thinking, so I feel neat, because like that process is transferring to my . . . children.

So it seemed that Mary was not only thankful to have had the opportunity to talk about race via the space of Courageous Conversations, but had created spaces at home to talk to her daughter about race. Throughout our process, we challenged the participants to practice their skills by engaging family and friends in courageous race conversations whenever the opportunity arose.

Sharon reflected on the times she too had the opportunity to talk about race:

> I think most of the time it's either an incident or a situation that comes up, or a conversation in which word choice of the other participant, usually would initiate something which would . . . I try to do the . . . explain that a little bit more, or I try to dig in a little bit to understand . . . when comments are made. I think those are the times when I use the opportunity to start the conversation.

I found that the responses from the participants, when it came to using the opportunity to engage in a conversation that focused on race and the achievement gap, were dependent on their various entry points into the process. Tatum (1992) helps us understand that people will enter a dialogue about race at different places depending on their own racial identity. Participants of color who have lived experiences of

marginalization and institutional racism may have a higher comfort level than most White participants.

Beatrice, an administrator of color who works in an affluent, predominately White school, described how she took the opportunity to start conversations about race with White parents. Her reflection shows a great deal of confidence engaging in conversations about race:

> It's when I see or hear something that I feel is out of order when it comes to students of color and their needs [that I engage in a Courageous Conversation] . . . when parents . . . come into my office and they complain about certain things-usually an issue relating to students of color, I just tell them . . . I just sit them down and talk to them. For example, the PTA president complained about what a couple students of color were doing on the playground. I just said, "you know, what you're saying and sounding like, doesn't sound like you know for sure it was the kids you are referring to" . . . it wasn't coming out right. So they say "you don't understand us, you don't know how to talk with White parents." I come out and say "So are you being racist?" And I start talking about race . . . and some parents will acknowledge their biases and say "Okay, I hear what you're saying."

Here, I believe Beatrice was demonstrating her ease in addressing race in her setting. She had come out and directly questioned the motives and complaints that parents had lodged about students of color; she was able to confront what she believed was their "racist" assumptions. When she described how her (White) parents complain about certain things, Beatrice was referring to their complaints about what the students of color were doing around the school. She challenged their thoughts and assumptions. That is why they told her she didn't know how to talk with White parents.

One of the six conditions of the Courageous Conversations protocol is to isolate race. This was a difficult task for me as a facilitator, because often the participants wanted to discuss other areas of diversity. It was also somewhat problematic for me as a Black feminist, because my other identities were just as important. While acknowledging

the intersectionality of our diversity, it was important to "isolate race while acknowledging the broader scope of diversity and the variety of factors that contribute to a racialized problem" (Singleton, 2013). This part of the process helped keep the focus on race and promoted the idea that this was a dedicated opportunity to have conversations about race. One member of the Equity department talked about her internal resistance to the conversations because she felt that all we did as a department was talk about race. I frequently used the department meetings to conduct professional development with my staff members. Our time together provided an opportunity for us to practice our skills as equity leaders. After some time, she shared with me that she could see that everyone was on a journey to becoming more conscious of the equity issues that our department addresses on a regular basis. We are responsible for a variety of undertakings, including monitoring services for English learners, providing professional development for culturally responsive teaching, engaging educators in Courageous Conversations and exposing the inequities in our district services, programs, and achievement. She could now understand why I used staff meeting time to conduct the conversations and build the skills to address these issues.

But This Is So Hard, Emotions Get in the Way!

Keyes and Kusimo (2004) reported the Public Education Network and Public Agenda's efforts to hold community conversations about education and race in eight states and cities across the nation. They stated that "the discussants found it difficult to talk openly about race, preferring code words like 'inner city' or 'disadvantaged'" (p. 2). I, too, observed a preference for coded words in the beginning of our professional development process. Participants would often use terms like "at-risk" or "west side"

when referring to our communities of color. The Four Agreements of the Courageous Conversations protocol helped us as facilitators to stay focused on race and address coded language as it came up. My focus on the tenets of CRT also drove us past coded language and other derailments. CRT's tenet of race's permanence and how it is embedded in our education system was important for the participants to grasp. Keeping the focus on race kept us on the topic we were addressing, whether it was the overrepresentation of students of color in special education or Black boys' school suspensions. Questions about poverty or language would, however, sometimes divert us. We did not intend to ignore those other critical factors such as class and language, and so explained the intersectionality of these factors, and attempted to maintain our focus on race.

Participants were at first reluctant to engage in conversations. The mention of some of the issues of racial disparities at the beginning caused visible discomfort. As I would review one of our Four Agreements, *to experience discomfort,* it was clear participants felt unease and concern for where the conversations were going.

Respondents reflected on how difficult it was to engage in the conversations at the beginning of our process. I found some hesitancy and even resistance to conversations about race in different settings. For example, one staff member of the Educational Equity department was quiet when we engaged in conversations within the department about our district's educational disparities. The department team looked at disaggregated data about achievement, discipline, or graduation so they would gain the skills to respond to questions and discussions outside of the department. As I have observed this staff member over the years, I have noticed her level of comfort in addressing racial disparities grow. Once she became more comfortable with the subject of race, she engaged. I have

since been able to use her skills to facilitate conversations.

Tense moments often came up when respondents commented about racially charged or personalized situations. A few of the respondents recalled the incident in one of the first sessions of the third cohort where the conversation about racial incidents in schools preceded our introduction of the Four Agreements, which are the protocol for engaging in the conversations. Thus, that session became contentious and tense. Singleton and Linton (2006) reminded us "to ensure personal engagement, honesty, endurance, and persistence in the dialogue about race in schools, the first formal step in the process is for educators to commit to honoring the Four Agreements of Courageous Conversations: to stay engaged, experience discomfort, speak your truth, and expect and accept non-closure" (p. 65).

The unfortunate thing was that my role in this discussion was as a participant because there was only one other person of color there to engage in the conversation. The conversation became contentious and two participants left the room angry and never rejoined the group. This was a lesson for all of us (including the facilitator for this particular activity), that this process builds upon the comfort level of the participants and that we need to be sure to set the parameters for our discussions. We considered neither of these things when we started the conversation that session. From the beginning of this initiative it was important to me as facilitator that the participants were able to see others take a risk and not get hurt, so I had to use my skills to lay and build a foundation of trust. James, one of the participants at this particular session, commented on this situation:

> It kind of paralyzed me a little bit in that moment and something you'd said, that really . . . stuck with me. You said you were kinda tired of people saying "I don't want to be uncomfortable . . . this is uncomfortable." You said "I've been uncomfortable so much in my life, and had to deal with hard conversations and

situations, and it's not easy . . . and I'm tired of people who say it's too difficult."

That was a defining moment for me as researcher and participant. I had never expressed myself in that way in public nor shared my counterstory in that manner. Although I was glad it got out, I had to spend some time repairing the situation. I apologized to the group for my emotional outburst. I felt my apology was necessary because I hadn't followed the Four Agreements when I had not been receptive to a participant speaking her truth. I also had not made it clear that I was a participant rather than a facilitator. After a conversation with the administrator of the team, I decided to go visit the participants who walked out and apologize to them. I felt that I needed to do damage control because I didn't want a few disgruntled educators to sabotage the idea. I did have several participants come to me after the session and support my emotional response and felt that sometimes someone has to have the courage to say what needs to be said. To a CRT/BFT scholar/researcher, that experience felt like a double-edged sword. I was empowered to tell my counterstory (with emotion), and yet my Black feminist leanings made me feel I had not extended my caring and compassion. The participants did not yet feel safe and comfortable in the space we had not yet created.

Another respondent, Renee, described another tense moment when a district leader (who had not been a participant in the conversations), came in to present some math data to the group. The participants had been discussing what was perceived to be tracking for seventh-grade math and were examining the practices and procedures for math placement. When the district leader was asked why the data were not disaggregated by race so that the group could have a better picture of math placement, the presenter became defensive and used the excuse that because of the sizes of some of our smaller

student groups, we didn't want to take the chance of identifying them in that way. Several participants voiced their concern for the perceived avoidance of the district to collect and use disaggregated data. This created tension between the district leader and the participants because the participants were practicing their skills of critically examining data and asking questions. Our new understandings about the racial disparities had led us to understand, as Datnow and Park (2015) said, that "looking at data quickly uncritically leads to simplified solutions to complex issues" (p. 49). It is important for us to collect and examine data on organizational conditions that support or hinder student performance.

Renee recalled a situation in her school when she had a conversation with her principal about ineffective teachers:

> I remember arguing with him about . . . he was talking about coaching . . . about ineffective teachers and coaching them up, and I remember point-blank saying "So they should be coached-up, or coached-out while we're working in a Title I school where it's full of Brown and Black kids" and his answer was.. "I don't know" . . . . He just sat there and that was tense . . . . I mean, it was often tense and frustrating when I raised questions about these issues, which was OK because they are conversations about race. So they are often tense.

Here we have an example of a principal who may not have the knowledge and understandings or the comfort level to be able to discuss race issues that could lead to the achievement disparities in his school. Renee, as an emerging equity leader, was often frustrated when she was able to use the skills she learned from Courageous Conversations but unable to get others engaged in a critical conversation about race. This frustration is likely in school settings that lack a cadre of like-minded, equity-focused educators who can support one another as they attempt to disrupt the status quo.

In addition to frustration, respondents sometimes felt afraid to offend anyone and

felt attacked. James, who eventually wholeheartedly embraced his journey towards a more critical racial awareness, reflected on how he was initially hesitant to even join in:

> I was so uncomfortable at the beginning with this, I just didn't wanna offend anyone . . . didn't want to offend . . . so I never went into those conversations, and I'm still I'm not sure when I might be offending people.

Likewise, Mike shared, "I was worried . . . and didn't want people to think that I was a racist." Feelings like these often cause some participants to be fearful of commenting on certain topics or joining in the conversation.

Early in the process, before trust was established, there were frequent moments of uneasiness and silence. James had a theory as to why:

> There were some of those early times with some of the other schools involved where other White people felt very attacked because they just took it so personally . . . and things got really . . . heated. And so a lot of people became very quiet . . . and so . . . and I definitely became quiet, cause I wasn't sure how to . . . help out with the conversation or do anything.

James' experience is common for Whites just beginning to understand White consciousness (Cochran-Smith 2004). Singleton (2015) argues that White consciousness is a way of behaving, thinking and believing grounded in White cultural characteristics: universal perspective, individualism, avoidance, and decontextualization. Singleton (2015) continues, "White privilege and entitlement lead White people to develop perspectives and reach intellectual conclusions that are unique to their race and at times create conflict for people of color and indigenous people" (p. 197). Thus when others, especially people of color, challenge those perspectives, White people may feel attacked. Because many Whites' experiences do not align with the perspectives of people of color, they may take what is said in Courageous Conversations personally.

As the conversations expanded and some of the participants were gaining skill in

addressing some of the issues, others expressed fear and worry that they would be considered racists. Participants would sometimes feel attacked or guilty as they were exposed to institutional racism and White privilege.

As I observed some of the participants in Courageous Conversations, I noticed that once they began to understand racism and deconstruct and challenge the status quo, they gained more confidence and courage to confront fear. I could see their humanity as they learned to confront their Whiteness and privilege. I remember in one of our sessions, a White male administrator asked in sincerity, "Now that I know about my White privilege, what am I supposed to do with it?" That question opened the opportunity for a discussion and input from the other participants to address his question. Mike reflected on this privilege as well:

> I felt immediately judged by the other participants . . . and this was like I was accepting my privilege. I was thinking it's not my fault. That was the thing. We had to keep talking about it . . . I think that helped keep the door open, to keep having the conversations, which is why time has to be there, the process has to be there, you've got to have a lot of time for the process.

We're in This Together: Relationships Are Forged

CRT as a framework is useful for helping to bridge understanding and move participants toward more collective agency and understanding of each other. Respondents shared that it took time for understanding and trust to develop among their colleagues who were also participating in conversations. The exception was the fellow staffers at their schools, who knew each other prior to the conversations. As my team and I facilitated the conversations, we made sure we mixed up school teams so that participants would sometimes sit with members of other school teams. The monthly agenda alternated between small group and large group discussions. An explicit attempt was made to create

a safe space for the conversations. This included affirming all views with equal weight. One participant shared that it was "difficult for me to speak at first with my principal there . . . , but it soon became easier as we became closer."

I found that these conversations created pathways for cross-racial understandings and trust to be developed. Janelle described a situation where Felicia, a participant of color, was sharing her experiences of being racially profiled at a business she frequented. As Felicia was sharing, another participant, who is White, questioned Felicia's experience:

> I mean those . . . we've got to hear from each other. And I . . . to be honest it was so painful to hear that White woman say that . . . and to have to have Felicia defend the way she was feeling . . . As if she hadn't spent a lifetime doing that anyway . . . and on top of that, I think [Felicia] was in her own process of recognizing how often this happens.

Mary also commented on that particular situation. "It was painful to hear White people deny a person of color's experience." She also reflected on another conversation when a participant of color became emotional when trying to share an experience that she had with another colleague in the office: "It is painful to hear how White people deny our colleagues of color's experiences." After one intense conversation, one of the participants of color started crying as she explained an incident that had happened to her when she was in school. Mary reflected on that conversation, "we have to . . . we have to allow people to get emotional when we engage in these conversations."

The counterstories of the participants of color were critical for the new understandings that the White participants were experiencing. These counterstories, as described by Yosso (2009), are personal reports of the experiences of persons of color and often detail the experience of racial discrimination, insults or injury.

The data from the participants show us how these conversations about racism can create anxiety, conflict, joy, pain, and the desire to engage. Whites tend to fear open discussion of racial issues for numerous reasons, including the belief that these conversations might become heated and lead to divisiveness or anger. On the other hand, Blacks and other ethnic or racial groups often feel that these conversations are long overdue (Pine & Hilliard, 1990, in Singleton & Linton, 2006). I found that trust between Whites and people of color grew as a result of the conversations that led to better understandings and relationships.

When criticisms of district leadership would come up, we were able to work through the intent and direction of the criticism as not being directed at any one person, the researcher, or a department. We recognized we were all responsible for addressing educational disparities. In these situations, there was less likelihood some participants would get defensive or take accusations personally. As participants became more proficient in the conversations, tensions lowered and barriers diminished. Building trust among them was a constant endeavor for me as facilitator. I found that to win the participants' trust, I had to acknowledge the vulnerabilities of each, actively listen and be intentional about my motives and actions.

When participants were asked how they developed trust with their colleagues, a few shared that it was difficult initially, but relationships grew stronger as the journey progressed. For example, Mike discussed how his comfort level grew with the members of his team:

> At first it was difficult. It was hard to be open and honest, especially with Felicia [my principal] there. I didn't know much about her. I didn't want to say something dumb. I had read Gary Howard's book, so I knew it was okay to talk about . . . race. So I felt I had to open up in front of my peers. I was cognitive

about my peers and it became more comfortable as time went on.

The times that I recognized the tension and hesitancy among the participants, I reminded them of our journey together, to raise our racial awareness and better understand each other and our equity issues. The metaphor of being on a journey together helped to nurture the relationship building and create safe spaces for the conversations. Janelle commented,

> I feel . . . real . . . there is this . . . this trust that we've built that we don't know everything and we're going together on this road . . . and . . . so bringing these issues out and helping each other. You can ask 'walk me through this' or 'what do you think of this' or 'and we can do this' to each other . . . and question each other . . . and I feel that we are on this road . . . . We are on the road together, we're not judging each other, we're just trying to figure out . . . Yeah! Talking to each other . . .

When we can reach the trust and safety seen in these types of conversations, the hope for change and action become closer to reality. As Singleton (2013) writes,

> Armed with continuously improving skills to engage, sustain, and deepen interracial dialogues about race, educators have a way of understanding and organizing racial meaning that is theoretical as well as practical. Brain researchers often speak about our need to establish schemas for processing complex and voluminous information. (p. 165)

James' comments add to that understanding. "Nobody left, nobody got angry, there was . . . we realized we were all passionate about it. And though we all had uncomfortable moments, we knew that we were safe you know. And that's because we were all kinda walking through it together."

There were times when the spotlight inadvertently fell on participants of color. This happened for a couple of reasons. Sometimes White participants wanted to understand an event or experience more deeply. One such time, the issue of colorism within racial groups came up and one participant, Carrie, shared her experiences growing

up with dark skin and the impact that it had on her. She explained that this was the first time she had ever talked about the impact her color had on her and reactions within her family and community. She became emotional as she shared her story. Mary reflected on that situation:

> But I have . . . I guess I think about how people of color want us to be able to have these kinds of conversations, that . . . but obvious . . . but I think that just listening to Carrie and her story was a great reminder of the importance of just having those . . . open spaces . . . listening to open dialogs, and being vulnerable.. Umm . . . I think it was good…. People of color need to be able to be emotional and say what they need to say.

For people of color, having their White colleagues affirm their experiences and agreeing to commit to space for discussions of those experiences has helped forge better interpersonal relationships and understandings. Singleton (2013) states,

> invalidating others' (people of color) perspectives, regardless of how personally demeaning or off-putting they may be, is a way of silencing them, which ensures that the dialogue will not advance to its deepest point. (p. 130)

CRT supports this idea by recognizing the centrality of experiential knowledge of people of color. Thus, it helps us understand the necessity of learning about the experiences of these participants. However, while acknowledging the centrality of experiential knowledge in the conversations, it is important for us to be cautious of Whites relying on people of color to do all the teaching or all the explaining of our experiences. These understandings can assist when creating the space for interracial relationship development.

As the participants' skills grew in having the racial conversation, trust began to develop and created the safe space for addressing tough issues and critiques of the system. Renee expressed what that meant for her:

> It was clear who was on that level of understanding . . . and those of us who were

> on that level of understanding, I developed trust in them . . . and even people who were on a different level but willing to think about it and critique the system and critique our practices and policies, and critique the status-quo . . . I . . . I have trust in people like that . . . it's people who wanna maintain status-quo that . . . I . . . don't trust.

Renee expressed the trust that developed among the participants who were engaging in the conversations and were courageous enough to critique the status quo. I found that through my facilitation, I had to find ways to encourage the participants to open up and share their perspectives with each other. This often required me to listen to and support their responses in ways that would help them deepen their understandings of racist practices and beliefs in our system. CRT provides a lens for understanding and negotiating a critique of systemic racism. It helps us examine racial inequities from the standpoint of not only acknowledging the existence of the racist status quo, but how we can dismantle it.

Participants discovered it was okay for some of their colleagues to be in a different place in the understanding and critique of our systemic inequities. What seemed important was the relationships that were being forged. James commented,

> Oh, you're okay . . . to talk about this with me . . . I can have a different experience and understandings than you have . . . and we can still be okay the next day . . . I think that's gonna be a big thing, we're learning to trust one another. That's about good relationships.

Relationship building among and between the participants was an important step in building trust and creating the comfort to deepen understandings. James continued, describing how the conversations became more comfortable and, for him, approachable. Here he described how he took opportunities to have conversations about the hard issues:

> And I think just having small conversations and kinda just bringing it up. Over time people get more comfortable about talking about it. And even if you haven't hit the hard issues in those conversations, you just . . . start talking about race.

> You start saying . . . you know people of color have it this way you know? And using some of those words that might at first, make people uncomfortable, after time they are not so uncomfortable. That's where trust comes in.

The previous sections about the Courageous Conversation identified opportunity to have conversations about the racial achievement gap, the difficulty in having the conversations when emotions get in the way, and how forged relationships helped bond participants with a feeling of being in "this" together.

A New Understanding: The Racial Achievement Gap, It's About Race and We Get to Talk About It

My critique of the vast offerings of diversity trainings and multicultural workshops has been the lack of understanding of the historical root causes for institutional racism that leads to the achievement gap. In our attempt to make everyone comfortable and feel glad they came to our workshops, we often put emphasis on how we are alike rather than our differences (Singleton, 2015). I believe this emphasis reinforces the culture of niceness that I described in Chapter 2. These well-meaning efforts reinforce the status quo and protect Whiteness.

In addition, many educators enter the educational system without an understanding and knowledge base of the impact of systemic racism on the educational institution. As Singleton (2015) suggests, throughout the conversations I used CRT to provide "a useful schema . . . for deepening their understandings about how race predictably influences our lives" (p. 36). As I worked to make these connections for the participants, they realized that they had been miseducated about some critical things. They appreciated learning more about the suppressed racial history of our country. They were anxious to gain a better understanding of our country's racist beginnings as well as

the resultant structural and institutional racism. Nieto (2002) addressed the need for dialogue on race in schools when she argued, "part of the mission of the school becomes creating the space and encouragement that legitimates talk about racism and discrimination and makes it a source of dialogue. This includes learning the missing or fragmented parts of our history" (p. 32). Some respondents shared in a focus group how surprised they were to learn aspects of our country's history about race, segregation, and discrimination that they never knew. Mike explained, "I was angry that I had never learned some of the things we learned about in our country's history. Why wasn't I taught that?"

This new understanding of the racial history of our country, as well as the skills the participants developed for having these Courageous Conversations were critical for most. They were able to make connections between our country's racial history and the current educational disparities that lead to the achievement gap.

Educators gaining new understandings and developing their ability to talk about racial matters is what I had hoped I would find in this study. I believed the Courageous Conversations could develop critical racial awareness and mindset shift. Respondents' reflections on their racial understandings demonstrated, as Milner (2003a, in McDonough 2009) described, a critical awareness of race and racism that is an ever-evolving, nonlinear process.

Sharon commented on her new understandings:

> I think it's just given me permission to be me, and to not be afraid to talk about race . . . 'cause I work with young kids, first graders. And they say what they think and so to not have to try and cover that up and I watch teachers who still do that some. It's like, *No . . . look, I put my arm next to theirs, my arm is not like their arm, our skin is different . . .* but we are the same and different in lots of ways . . . and so I think it's made more comfortable and safe. When things come

> up, when little kids say stuff, you can validate it. And you don't have to feel nervous about it.

Developing an understanding of systemic racism, how it permeates our educational system and leads to disparities in student achievement, is one way that educators begin to think critically about what is going on. My findings showed that based on respondents' reflections on their experiences in Courageous Conversations, their understanding of achievement disparities had grown and they had learned some skills for discussing race they had not done in the past. Janelle shared this reflection:

> Achievement gap . . . but we . . . what . . . I just can't . . . hit it hard enough. It's like, *Don't you guys get it?* We have to see that the relationship that we have with students and that the ownership they take for their learning, and the respect that they know we have for them, and the belief we have in them, that is what impacts this achievement gap. That's what's going to impact their scores or whatever . . . and empower them. Kinda build that empowerment … *(whispers)* 'cause in the system, they are not belonging to the system.

This shows the understanding Janelle has achieved. Her reflection demonstrates that she had moved to a critical understanding that reflects what Gay and Howard (2009) described as having the skills and knowledge for transforming their practice. As Sharon commented,

> I think [the achievement gap]'s been validated. Cause I knew it was there.. but it was always this "don't talk about it"… idea. I mean it was kinda like *Oh no,* it was always about . . . the socio-economic status, poverty. So there was always these excuses to avoid that conversation and talking about race. So I definitely think it was that, cause it was more . . . it was just validating because I already knew it!

James also demonstrated his level of consciousness of the achievement gap:

> It's huge, like I . . . I've never really . . . had the opportunity to see it that way, you know. To look at the data . . . to really pull out a lot of those . . . other . . . statistics, you know . . . like socioeconomic status, and parent involvement, and just kinda clean things away and just look at color and . . . to have it so clearly laid out? I couldn't deny it, you know . . . when it was first presented at first like . . . you guys started to bring it up and I, in the back of my head I'm still thinking

> Oh yeah . . . it's socio-economic status or it's, you know, because two parents work two jobs . . . or parents, you know? . . . are . . . overwhelmed . . . or they live on the West side . . . or they, you know? . . . And not realizing just how clear-cut it was . . . with race and . . . realizing, you know . . . you've got affluent Black people and affluent White people, and making the same amount and still there is a disparity.

Understanding the underlying causes of racial underachievement is one important step towards addressing it and creating more equitable school climate and classroom practices. As Howard (2010) argues, "learning about and responding instructionally to race, racism, and culture must be continuous processes of inquiry, discovery, problem solving, deconstruction, and transformation" (p. xx). Educators who are willing can then begin to analyze race-based inequities in their schools. Renee commented,

> I think that I understood [the achievement gap] in my undergrad program, so I don't think that that was new. What I do think developed related to that is understanding which types of policies and practices create the achievement gap. That I didn't get that in my undergrad, so I knew that race was the bottom line for institutional racism but to understand it in the real practice of schools is what I now understand.

James commented,

> I think one of the difficult things has been not really knowing how to change it . . . how to change the problem, and feeling a little bit paralyzed in that it's such a huge problem. That really can I do anything that's going to make an impact, and so . . . the feeling of . . . *(whispers)* inadequacy, but . . . I'm just little me, you know? In the big machine, you know? Is my little cog going to do anything, you know? If it changes, you know? Is it gonna make a difference?

Mike responded that "I used to think the gap was only about poverty, once we pulled the data apart it was startling to show the racial disparities."

These new understandings that the respondents have of the racial achievement gap and the educational disparities that affect it are evidence that they are conscious of the inequities and they are willing, as Singleton (2015) argues, to continue the journey to be "innovative in their search for a new solution and courageous in the face of those

resistors who wish to at least maintain and perhaps even perpetuate the status quo" (p. 13).

The following comments from James, Janelle, and Mike reflect a CRT theme of challenge to the dominant ideology. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explain, "critical race educators challenge dominant social and cultural assumptions regarding culture and intelligence, language and capability" (p. 2). James shared,

> The thing that's stuck with me is, you know that race being that social construct . . . that is something that's really been created by society . . . and it's been used so much to put one race above another. And realizing with race that White is a race too, the Caucasians, you know? Especially in the Western world, and in the world at large, because they're privileged, you know after seeing this wealth and powerful by just being White. If you travel, you see that White has somehow over centuries became a color of power . . . White privilege. Anyway, sometimes I feel I don't have the right words to describe it. Yea, it's become that some people used to place other people below, and to make them[selves] to feel more powerful, and stronger . . . and that people have used race to try to convince themselves that people are so different from them, that they are not as smart, or they are not as valuable,. Just over centuries and centuries of this stuff . . . .that now we've had such a history of that? That it's so engrained in our heads that even though people say things like "I don't see race, I don't see this or that." We kinda have to go the opposite direction and say yes, I see it, and I see it for the value that it is, and the beauty that it is.

Janelle continues trying to understand this challenge as she identifies the dominant ideology of White privilege and the messiness and complexity of addressing it:

> I've learned so much about race. I think honestly that the most important thing for me is White privilege and kinda using that as a lens. I mean the most valuable personal thing is the recognition of my own White privilege because I think it provides a better lens for looking at the world that is a multiracial world. I mean it's just tons of different things, just thought . . . the conversations helped me understand interracial relationships, identity and race and intersectionality, I think is there… and then how messy and complicated it is and how hard that is to explain or talk about. But the, I guess the messiness of it too,. but I don't know, probably later on I'll come back and go . . . I think I might even try to think about that.

As educators grapple with White privilege and gain new understandings of

educational disparities, what Janelle points out is the complexity and messiness of the dominant ideology that impacts our institutions. Our conversations about race are about more than individual teachers' understandings, they are about all of us sharing the common understanding that will help us come together to uncover Whiteness and institutional racism, and then to make a change.

Mike commented, "[race] has a way bigger role in everything, people of color have to deal with it every day-24/7. More than I ever dreamed of." James wrapped it up:

> I think part of it is wanting to know what I can do about it you know. Having tools and stuff. And I'm realizing more and more that it really is that mindset. If the mindset doesn't change, none of the tools are gonna mean anything because you won't use them in the right way, or out of the right intentions.

The powerful experiences the respondents had—realizing they could talk about race, being grateful for the opportunity, recognizing how hard it was, and finally developing a new understanding of the achievement gap--forged new relationships. These relationships, whether cross-cultural or interracial paved the way for better understandings and a sense of moving forward together on the journey.

Reflections of a Black Feminist Tempered Radical

My second research question was: What does it mean for a Black feminist educational leader to develop a pedagogy of change with predominately White educators? Reflecting on this question, especially as it related to my involvement and influence on the process of the conversations, as well as the relationships that emerged from our work together, I realized that this was indeed hard work. There were times when I looked around and felt very lonely because I was the only African American and sometimes the only person of color present. Although I, like the participants, was glad for

the opportunity to have the conversations, I knew that the journey was going to be very difficult. I constantly reminded the participants that we were in new territory, as far as engaging in these types of conversations, where not many people had ventured. I think it was the tempered radical in me who wanted to risk implementing the Courageous Conversations, but I had to remember that I was bringing my staff as well as those committed to equity along with me. At the time, I hadn't realized how risky that was, but I felt together we could make a difference. There were many times along the journey when I questioned the process, the content and our ability to make a difference. This impacted me in particular as I would reflect on each session and the conversations in my head. My passion for this work would sometime get deflected when I had to facilitate or address an angry outburst or response. One such time occurred when a participant of color made the statement that she was tired of White women who marry men of color act as if they have had the same experiences as women of color. I knew that was a bigger issue than the schooling issues that our students face, but I had to somehow find a way to help us see the connection to our conversations about oppression, power and racism. I couldn't pretend to know it all nor could I ignore the issue. On days like that, I would have to work hard to remember why we were engaging in the Courageous Conversations process.

The idea of practicing our skills as equity leaders was a concept of which I reminded the participants of on a regular basis. We did more than just talk in the Courageous Conversations. Our activities were purposeful and designed to give the participants practice in having these Courageous Conversations in their settings. I, as the facilitator, had to utilize strategies and skills that would open the conversation or make

sure the conversation would continue. Relying on others to bring up issues is one such strategy. I didn't want to always be the one who asked the questions about racism and institutional disparities, but I wanted the door to be opened to allow the space for the conversation. Data often provided the impetus to open the conversation. I would look forward to those times as I didn't have to carry the weight of bringing up the issues.

Another strategy that worked for me was to piggyback or extend on something particular that a participant would say or bring up as a current issue. I believe this helped me to not appear as if this was all about me. This strategy was difficult for me but helped in my effort to not appear as if the race issues were my personal agenda. I struggled with how far to push the participants in an effort to help them raise their racial consciousness.

Bringing in the metaphor of a journey helped them to see that we were going somewhere together. Realizing that made the journey a little easier, although it remained a hard trek for most. When I started the process, I was not aware of the length of time that it would take for mindset shifts. In fact, I was not even sure that raising racial consciousness was the intended outcome. Reflecting on this, my goals centered on educators changing their practice to address the achievement gap. My own lack of knowledge about the length of time for relationship building and trust to develop was surprising to me.

I found that developing trust within the group was a slow process, mostly due to their lack of knowledge about the journey but partly due to their fear of being called racist. When things got tough or uneasy, and there were many times when I had to ask myself if this was worth the challenge and the messiness, I reflected on my commitment to the improvement of the education of Black students in our district. That was a constant

reminder for why I was doing this work.

From the beginning of this initiative, it was important to me as facilitator that the participants were able to see others take a risk and not get hurt, so I had to use my skills to lay and build a foundation of trust. Once, a question came up about how educators of color dealt with their not-so-aware colleagues. Rather than try to answer that question from my perspective, I invited the educators of color who were present to join me in a "fishbowl" activity. We sat in the center of the whole group and had a "private" conversation. Because cross-racial dialogue is a major tool of the initiative, sometimes, due to the limited number of educators of color who served on the Site Equity Teams, I had to make adjustments and create the space for the conversations with the participants present. I usually facilitated this by either joining in the conversation or creating the "fishbowl" activities. I believe these adjustments made educators of color feel safe while accessing their lived and authentic experiences.

CHAPTER 5

DEVELOPING AN EQUITY MINDSET

In Chapter 4, I presented and discussed the findings regarding how the participants reflected on their opportunities and experiences as they began the Courageous Conversations process. Although the participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity, they also shared difficulties related to the conversations. As they continued the journey through the process, they explained how they forged new relationships with their colleagues and developed new understandings about the achievement gap. The opportunity and space to talk about race and its impact on education gave them energy, which provided an impetus for us to think about using these conversations as a starting place for professional development. Because we worked with educators in an effort to meet the needs of all students, we came to believe that shifts in attitude and mindset are necessary to create sustainable change that addresses the educational disparities that lead to the achievement gap. In this chapter, I present the findings on the participants' responses to questions that reveal the impact these conversations had on their practice. The engagement and skill development they gained from participating in the conversations led them to move toward bold and courageous practices. These practices are not what we commonly identify as the technical skills of teaching; the skills necessary for mindset shifts are adaptive and flexible, not technical.

Technical skills are necessary in the educational setting. For teachers, these include classroom management, curriculum and lesson planning, and delivery; for administrators, technical skills include plant operations and management, teacher observations, and evaluations. Growth can occur in adaptive and flexible skills. Fullan (2005) and Heifetz (2006) wrote about the complexity and sustainability of adaptive leadership when compared to the "quick fix" type of leadership. I apply this thinking to the development of a growth mindset in which attitudes and behaviors can change.

Three subthemes emerged from respondents' descriptions of their practice. The first subtheme was related to the metaphor of a journey. Participants described how they discovered an understanding of personal racism. The second subtheme that emerged was related to unpacking Whiteness and developing a racial consciousness and a mindset shift. The third subtheme was related to a call to action. These subthemes contribute to this study as indicators to help understand the process of developing an equity mindset.

I draw upon critical reflection and CRT frameworks, and an adaptation of mindset theory to analyze the data and report my findings. I also draw upon Black feminist theory's ideas of tempered radicals and critical spirituality as conceptual frames to guide my methodological approach and respond to my second question. These conceptual frames were useful to me as I reflected on my practice and facilitated conversations. As I worked to help the participants develop relationships with each other for the purpose of gaining new understanding and knowledge, it was important to me that each participant felt valued and cared for. This required facilitated discussions in which I (as the facilitator) paid attention to each participant's experiences. Using Black feminist theory, my intent was to create the space to build trust among and between the participants.

My initial thinking as I framed my research question (How do educators reflect on the impact and the challenges of participating in critical dialogues about race and educational inequity through the Courageous Conversations process?) was to ask what strategies teachers might implement in their classrooms after engaging in professional development. Indeed, the teachers who participated in the conversations understood that they would take strategies back to their classrooms. After the first few sessions, teachers would often ask, "What do we do about this?" They were looking for solutions. The administrators approached these professional development sessions similarly, based on their desire to learn about solutions so that they could help teachers improve classroom instruction.

In the following sections, I present findings organized around the three themes that emerged in my analysis: engaging in race conversations as a personal journey, feeling informed by unpacking Whiteness and developing a critical racial consciousness.

It Is a Personal Journey: Moments of Reflection

The Courageous Conversations protocol is designed so that participants begin their journey to racial consciousness by starting with their personal understanding of race's impact on their lives. Singleton (2015) argued that "many educators struggle to take personal and professional responsibility when it comes to meeting the needs of students of color and indigenous students who are not succeeding" (p. 49). Instead, they tend to focus on factors external to school rather than examining their own practices and biases. By using the Courageous Conversations protocol to assist educators "to gain access to, and then articulate their own personal beliefs and perspectives about race" (p. 29), I became convinced that the journey to racial consciousness would be a possibility.

As participants reflected on their practice, they compared their conversation experiences to a journey. They also commented about different stages of understanding and personal growth. Singleton (2015) described how these conversations can be both challenging and rewarding, as each participant engages in this journey:

> Everyone enters this dialogue at a unique place, some will take longer to arrive at a basic understanding of what race is and how it impacts their lives, and for some it will take longer to be ready to talk about how race impacts student achievement. Others may be ready almost immediately to begin examining how race impacts the classroom, program, department, or system wide polices. Everyone, however, must stay collectively engaged throughout this continuous, challenging, and always evolving dialogue. (p. 76)

It became apparent that some of the participants in the early sessions were on a journey and that they did not know where they were going. One focus group participant summed it up: "I knew this was going to be a long journey, I wasn't sure where I'd end up, or how I was going to get there. I was scared and excited at the same time." It was not until we started the second cohort of participants (in the second year) that I realized just how much of a journey this process was. By this time, the first cohort had an evident comfort level, and the participants seemed to be enjoying the conversations. Part of our protocol at the beginning of each session was to make connections between the participants based on the previous month's conversations. My goal for having these connections was to create the vision of a continuous process for the participants. It was important for me to help them understand that the journey is a continuous process and that the final destination is less important than travelling on this journey together.

The CRT lens helped me understand that one purpose of this journey was for educators to view racism as having a long lasting impact on our educational system. It was important for the participants to understand that we would not come up with explicit

solutions or quick fixes and that we should not expect to arrive at a particular destination. That was a hard concept for some educators to grasp. Because CRT helps us examine the structural barriers that students of color face in school, it requires deep reflection on and understanding of the historical root causes of these barriers. CRT requires us to question the notions of merit and equality that often get promoted as being race-neutral but that are used to mask racism.

As the conversations progressed and participants began to understand the impact of what they were learning about race, racism, institutional racism, and White privilege in our educational system, they were able to reflect about their learnings and their own personal journeys. Part of our process was reflective journal writing, for which participants reflected on prompts generated by our discussions. Along with responding to these writing prompts, participants began a racial autobiography where they could chronicle their experiences. In each professional development session, I explained the purpose, the process, and our goal to build equity consciousness in the district. I explained that this would require critically reflective practitioners who were developing their own racial consciousness. Many White teachers do not see themselves as racialized beings (Allen & Hermann-Wilmarth, 2004), and they thus tend to hold colorblind perspectives, in relation to not only their students of color, but also themselves. For this reason, the racial autobiography requirement of the Courageous Conversations process was difficult for some participants. As Mary shared, "I resisted writing my racial autobiography, I didn't see how my story was related to our conversations about race." Similarly, in one of the focus groups, a participant shared,

> My racial autobiography started out very slow and lame, I mean I didn't know where to start. I guess I never knew when I recognized the impact of race on my

> life until one day I reflected about how I had asked my students to draw pictures of themselves and one of my African students asked if I had other colors and I said, "all I have is this ugly brown color." Wow! When I had to reflect on that I felt so ashamed and had not realized the impact of my statement. I learned a lot about myself from that incident. At first, I was ashamed to write about that in my autobiography, but now I realize it was just a part of my growth process.

I, too, had difficulty writing my own racial autobiography. I shared with the participants how my racial consciousness development had started before Courageous Conversations and during our process it continued to develop.

As the conversations progressed, participants learned how to reflect on racial topics and situations that would come up. When asked to identify their first racial experience, there was some hesitancy, as most of the White participants had no idea that race had even impacted their lives. Because of this, they were unsure about how to begin a racial autobiography. After engaging in some reflective activities using prompts and knee-to-knee dialogue, they were able to gain a deeper understanding of others' experiences. As the educators participated in the dialogue, they were often challenged on their personal beliefs and their awareness of the inequities experienced by their colleagues or by students in the school system. This activity drew emotional reactions from the participants as they engaged. Mike reflected,

> At first I did not want to participate in the *knee-to-knee* activity. I thought this is dumb. The process required me to think of a racial situation that happened in my classroom. As we did our sharing exchange, I got a little emotional as I recalled an incident from my childhood.

The participants' resultant reflections about what they were learning and feeling became the beginning of their racial autobiography. This reflective process was intentional, as it was designed to move the participants toward critical reflective practice regarding their personal racial experiences.

As time passed, the participants recognized that this journey was a process that would lead to critical racial consciousness and that they, as participants, would move along the journey at different paces and enter the conversations in different places. As Mary commented, "I think that the interesting part was watching different individuals go through the process was very interesting." Here, this participant reflected about the process as she observed her colleagues engage in conversations. I noticed that it took a while for many of the participants to understand that this process was going to take time, that there were no quick fixes to the issues being discussed, and that the participants would reach different levels of understanding and comfort at different times. Beatrice commented, "Sometimes it was hard to listen to people as they were processing things and then say that they didn't understand or something. I got impatient sometimes."

Facilitating the process required me to be mindful of the participants' different places and paces. I knew that some would be impatient and that others would fear moving too fast. The need for continuity was also an issue. James shared his concern about continuing to build racial consciousness in his school, commenting about the need for his school site team (this was his third year on the team) to continue the conversations, especially with a new principal and several new teachers in the building:

> At our school . . . if we don't continue, then our team would stop, and I know that for me, you know, the easy . . . it's easy for me . . . to stop thinking about it and go back to my life . . . and I don't want that to happen, and so . . . another difficulty would be sticking in . . . even when I don't see big change happening.

James reflected that if he did not continue this journey, he was afraid that he would go back to doing things the way he always had before. I have to note here that the former principal James refers to, who was a courageous equity leader in that school, had passed away just months before Courageous Conversations were to begin for the new

year. James took a leadership role in this matter and convinced the new principal that the equity work needed to continue. As a result, the school pulled together a new site equity team for the year, and it included the new principal.

Using the journey metaphor may give some the impression that there is a final destination—a place where we can announce that we have arrived. One of the Four Agreements in the protocol is to accept—but not expect—closure. As Mary commented,

> I don't know . . . those four agreements just help you realize that it is a process and there isn't necessarily a conclusion, basically you're OK you know. It gives you a sense whatever you're feeling or whatever you're in this journey and you're OK, this is to be expected.

Along the journey, participants were introduced to critical reflective practice as a tool to keep track of their thinking. Throughout the sessions, when the conversations encouraged them to delve deeper into their own personal beliefs and understandings, the participants were asked to reflect on their newfound knowledge either by updating their racial autobiography and other journal entries or by participating in knee-to-knee (active listening) activities. They were often given a reflective question to respond to or engage with in small or large group discussions. These strategies enabled the participants to grow in knowledge and confidence and to become more proficient in understanding inequities that they may contribute to and that may lead to underperformance among students of color.

To effectively engage others in critical reflection, Milner (2003) and Howard (2004) claimed that spaces in which participants could feel comfortable conversing were important. Using their argument that teacher educators need to provide spaces for preservice teachers to express their uncertainties, frustrations, and fears, I employed that strategy as I facilitated the conversations. As Janelle commented, "it was important for

me to have the space for these discussions as this is what I feel led me to being more proficient in addressing certain topics." I also recognized that I needed to be conscious of the need to do the same as I conducted my study. I needed to create spaces for participants to talk with me and to reflect about their experiences. The participants' reflections were a critical step toward my understanding of what is necessary for the equity transformation that I was hoping for. Discovering personal racism requires critical reflection. For some participants, talking about race in their personal lives was difficult, even if they had not recognized the impact of race (i.e., Whiteness) on their lives. It was just as important for these participants to learn how they were defined and/or privileged by their racial identity in this society. This was part of the journey to developing an equity mindset.

Understanding White privilege and institutional racism helped the participants to feel more comfortable in conversations and elevate their consciousness so that they could move toward action.

Feeling Informed and Developing an Equity Mindset

To gain a better understanding of racial inequities and practices in schools, I used the Courageous Conversations protocol (Singleton & Linton, 2006) as a professional development opportunity for educators. This protocol asked participants to "first look deeply and introspectively at [their] own racial existence as a doorway to understanding the complexities of race in America" (p. 88). Opening ourselves to consistent self-reflection and self-evaluation of our beliefs and values, as exhibited through our assumptions and the influence of Whiteness, enables us to genuinely address racial disparities. Once we examine the impact of race on our personal lives, we can better

understand the impact of race on our practice and in our organizations. In this section, I report findings that show the growth that these participants made in their journey toward becoming more racially aware.

Both Janelle and Mike commented about discovering their racial identities. Janelle reflected about her learning: "I'm not just looking at race as the other. I'm recognizing my own racial identity and . . . my race and my whiteness. I've had privileges." Likewise, Mike shared, "It was not comfortable to realize my identity as a white person. I never thought of it . . . it was a given."

The research on racial identity theories provided another lens for thinking about the journey for both the White participants and the participants of color. I used White identity development as a theoretical lens to understand the participants' growth process. Tatum (1992) argued that a key component in helping Whites gain the courage and critical racial consciousness to engage in such conversation is the development of a White racial identity that involves learning about and understanding Whiteness. As participants gain an understanding of Whiteness and their own racial identities, the resultant new learnings can lead to the development of an equity mindset.

Tatum (1992) used Helm's model of White racial identity as a framework for understanding White educators' responses to conversations about race. Helm's model certainly has implications for understanding White identity development as a process for gaining critical racial consciousness; however, as I mentioned earlier, I find it much more productive to think about racial development as an ongoing, circular process. Identity development played a role as participants, including the participants of color, began to understand the impact that White privilege had on their identities. Tatum (1992) argued

that White people and people of color

> go through parallel but different journeys to discover their racial identity. Students of color, for example, often go from a discovery phase where they feel anger about being treated differently into an immersion phase where they embrace their race and reject any symbol of "whiteness." White students, meanwhile, often proceed from confrontation into a disintegration phase where they feel guilt and shame about their privileged status. (p. 23)

Educators of color were able to express what they learned about their own racial consciousness. For instance, Marta stated,

> I am from South America and we had different thoughts . . . ideas about Black people. I didn't trust them [Black people] because I had problems with them. One of them broke into our house. I never got to know anyone Black until these workshops. Now my daughter is dating a Black man. I guess I know more now about racial inequities. That will help me to understand these kinds of things better.

Marta's comment about not considering her own racial identity while holding deficit thoughts about other races demonstrates the racial identity development that people of color experience when their own racial consciousness has not been developed: "We were just Hispanics. I had not thought about it in a racial way. I mean I just never thought about it."

Marta discovered her own racial identity through this process of learning about racism. The impact of racism on our society has caused many people of color to adapt perspectives rooted in assimilation that are often blind to racism (Singleton, 2013). Once when Marta was experiencing what she believed to be discrimination against her in her school, she called me to seek my advice. After our conversation, she disclosed that she felt empowered to address the situation and that she had "found her voice" (personal communication, March, 2013).

Likewise, a focus group participant of color shared,

> I grew up in a predominantly White environment here in Utah and did not really know much about my own racial consciousness. It wasn't until I had the opportunity to work with some role models (educators of color) and learn more about racism and social justice, did I become more conscious and aware of my own sense of who I was racially.

Similarly, Sharon commented that she had "learned a lot about herself as a person of color," even though she felt that many people (including people of color) judged her because she was married to a White man and was LDS (personal communication, February 12, 2015). Although she initially was hesitant and defensive about fully engaging in the conversations, Sharon believed that her own racial consciousness development enabled her to support others in her department at her school. She shared: "I am usually the one who will bring up discussions about our students and racial issues in my department."

Learning about and understanding Whiteness and White privilege was a critical step in the participants' personal journeys. Milner (2003) discussed how we can help educators in the pursuit of racial competence; acknowledging that one never becomes competent, Milner claims that White participants may realize that they have advantages over others simply because of their race and that participants of color may become aware that they believe racial stereotypes about themselves or others. This consciousness comes from critical reflections, questions, and the development process that occurs through Courageous Conversations.

The development of critical racial awareness among the participants was demonstrated through quotes such as, "I'm starting to be comfortable talking about it," as James expressed it. I found these feelings to be common among the participants as they reached a point in the process in which they became more comfortable in the space

created for these conversations.

As McDonough (2009) suggested, we "attend to what [she] calls 'discourses of possibility': the ways in which teachers attempt to think critically about racial identity and power and become involved in social change" (p. 528). These discourses of possibility are the beacons of hope indicating that mindset changes and shifts will occur for educators who commit to thinking critically. When educators develop new knowledge about their craft with equity focused knowledge, they experience an enlightenment and a confidence in their new understanding. As one respondent, Sharon, noted, "I didn't know what I didn't know." Many participants shared declarations with similar sentiments.

By recognizing their learning, the participants began to feel more informed about the concept of Whiteness. It was important that they realized that they were learning to unpack Whiteness. Janelle commented about her learning,

> I've learned so much about race. I think honestly that the most important thing for me is white privilege—and kinda using that as a lens. I mean the most valuable personal thing is the recognition of my own white privilege because I think it provides a better lens for looking at the world, the multiracial world.

It was important with these conversations to work toward unpacking Whiteness and White privilege for all participants. Without such work, our tendency as unconscious educators would be to engage in color-blind notions that blame the victims for their educational plight. Without the time to engage in these conversations to examine the personal, professional, and institutional impact of Whiteness on institutional racism in our schools, we are left with our faulty understandings of dominance and power.

Mike recognized the connection between White privilege and institutional racism. He commented,

> One of the hardest things was wrapping my brain around Institutional racism and

> White Privilege. That was one of those things that I completely did not buy into it, for I don't know how long. But after a while I really started understanding . . . about . . . more about that.

For the White participants, to disclose what they did not know took courage and commitment, especially in a cross-racial conversation in which participants of color often expressed impatience with White participants' lack of knowledge. As Beatrice commented, "I recognize that we're on a journey and everyone has to learn how to be more critically conscious, it is sometimes tedious to help White people understand what is going on." My sensibilities as a Black feminist researcher helped me alleviate the exasperation that some of the participants of color felt because they had to teach White participants about race. Throughout my professional career, especially in my equity work, I've had to help some of my White colleagues understand the issues of racism, institutional racism and White privilege. While some of my colleagues of color feel that educating Whites is not our responsibility, I never thought of it as a burden, but felt that I was obligated to educate others about these issues. Helping educators develop their consciousness, I felt, was critical to our educational mission to educate all students.

As participants became more comfortable in the conversation and their levels of consciousness grew, examining the educational disparities became easier. The informed growth of these participants was expected, but throughout the process, I had to be mindful, as McDonough (2009) cautioned, that I did not "develop a deficit view of White teachers that mirrors the deficit perspectives we are trying to counter" (p. 528). It became important for me to constantly speak from a place of patience and to find ways to facilitate the conversations to both keep White participants focused on race and keep educators of color engaged. This is how we all tried to learn and understand about

Whiteness. While participants of color were trying to be patient but wary of feeling like they had to explain or defend their experiences, White participants needed to remain focused and to critically examine their racial experiences. For instance, Janelle commented,

> I just feel informed . . . I just feel like . . . before I started doing Courageous Conversations, I had hunches about things . . . . And I love to really be able to articulate things, I can have . . . I mean I didn't realize it but . . . I can . . . I can go in conversations with people . . . I can go in a layer deeper, and a layer deeper . . . and I'm . . . and I'm prepared for it do you know what I'm saying? So I just . . . I just . . . I feel like I still I have tons to learn . . . but I have just a deeper understanding of the underpinnings of racism and Whiteness and all that.

As the conversations progressed, the participants' racial awareness, their relationships, and their trust in each other grew stronger. This enabled the conversations to deepen; a critical racial awareness was sometimes present. Soon, the participants became aware that they were experiencing a shift in mindset—an ability to think critically about the status quo. This was the beginning of the development of an equity mindset.

A shift in mindset was instrumental in opening the conversations for discussions that previously had been difficult. For example, looking at the disparities in our data became easier. Throughout the process, I presented disaggregated data to the participants that demonstrated student performance and the disparities in the programs. Looking at data was interesting for the participants because it revealed disproportionalities and differences in achievement. For an equity-conscious educator, digging deeper into the data provides a lens for analyzing and discovering the causes of student underperformance and for uncovering what influences educational disparities.

Acquiring a commitment and a comfort level in looking at disaggregated data is

an important step in the journey toward developing an equity mindset. Browne (2012) described how "critical decisions are made when determining what data to collect and how to interpret the data to define problems contributing to [the] gaps" (p. 136). There is often a reluctance to disaggregate data and to share and examine it. Unless we analyze our data, there will be little motivation to address the problems. When Mike reflected on the impact the conversations had had on his practice, he commented on the importance of looking at data: "I definitely run data . . . Look at data differently, all the time." Janelle described how talking about race during structured times like Professional Learning Communities enabled her to ask more questions about the data: "I'm looking at data where that structure is already built in. . . . and when we look at disaggregated data and you see disparities, I usually ask a deeper question about the data." Similarly, Renee shared her comfort with looking at data through equity audits:

> Whenever we do an equity audit. Or look at any sort of data, so . . . last year we were looking closely at our Brown and Black students with disabilities, and we talked a lot about that and the differences we saw between them and White boys, we learned a lot.

These participants' comments about examining data are in line with the important work of a racially conscious educator. Examining achievement data, discipline data, and program data requires time for a thorough analysis to uncover inequities or disproportionalities (Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Looking at data in this way is necessary to inform instruction and decisions about students. Scheurich and Skrla (2003, in Theoharis, 2009) argued that

> data are highly useful for developing equitable and excellent schools. . . We need a way to mark the student learning that we either are or are not accomplishing. In addition, when we have the kind of inequities by specific student groups, like racial groups, that we currently have, we need a way to mark those differences and to mark the erasure of those differences. (pp. 64–65).

Without data analysis, we would not be able to clearly see the achievement gap. An effective analysis requires disaggregation by race/ethnicity, gender, income, and disability. Delving into data in this way helps us to monitor student growth and achievement and, therefore, to learn what needs to be done to close the achievement gap.

Another benefit of a shift in mindset is the ability to assist educators in developing important relationships with like-minded colleagues who can work together to build the capacity for equity mindsets in schools and entire districts. More importantly, this mindset shift works to build relationships with students, families, and communities. Noguera (2011) reminded us:

> When connections between school and community are weak, and characterized by fear and distrust, it is more likely that the school will serve as a source of negative social capital. However, when school and community have formed a genuine partnership based on respect and a shared sense of responsibility, positive forms of social capital can be generated. (p.1)

When the respondents were asked if these conversations had impacted their relationships with their students or with members of the school community, many stated that the Courageous Conversations had impacted their relationships in both small and significant ways. For example, Sharon commented,

> I think also it's made me much more free and open to talk with parents who are parents of color, and just like really be open about who I am and letting them I think, in return it makes them more open to be with me, and to just have that communication and that acceptance . . . that makes sense.

Building relationships with students and communities allows educators to see assets and reject deficit ideologies. James commented that this process had "changed the way I see my students. I find myself going out of the way to connect with them, to understand who they are." Understanding the importance of relationships with students is evidence of the development of a critical racial consciousness (Milner, 2003). This

consciousness can lead to understanding and to capitalizing on the assets that students bring to school. A racially conscious educator rejects deficit ideologies by learning about students' cultural values and experiences (Ladson-Billings, 2012).

Renee spoke about how she is able to speak up and challenge the status quo:

> It took lots and lots of practice . . . at debunking myths, and at challenging status-quo, and standing up for what is better for kids . . . so . . . I don't have to . . . it doesn't take me too much to process anything anymore. I just know . . . you know . . . how to respond . . . to making change.

Such responses from the participants indicate professional growth and mindset shifts that were the result of their collective engagement throughout this challenging and courageous process. Impacting participants' belief systems was a big step toward developing racial consciousness. During a focus group session, the participants described the process of rethinking their own beliefs about educational inequities. These quotes are reflective of the mindset shifts that can occur when learning new information that can disrupt a deficit belief system. I asked the participants how they would describe the changes in their thinking about the achievement gap and other educational disparities.

One female participant said,

> Oh, I get it now. I didn't know the historical perspective. I didn't know that schools have always been set up to serve white students. Kathleen, when you shared that old "Dick and Jane" poster of a typical classroom and it was so WHITE. From the bulletin board, to the textbooks, the teacher, the setting, everything. I remember you saying that was how you experienced school. How could any student of color see themselves reflected in that classroom? How can students of color feel connected to school?

Another female participant commented,

> Yeah, I've always known that our classrooms should reflect the students, but I had never taken it any further. Like I didn't realize how such environments and my relationships with students could impact their engagement and their learning.

These reflections are in line with what Hannay, Wideman, and Seller (2007)

describe as work that has to be done to develop and support a knowledge-creation approach to professional learning and school improvement. This approach integrates reflection with action, data, and collegial dialogue, and it supports teachers' abilities to learn "how to reflect." For this reason, it is important that the conversations model the same collegial relationships of respect and acceptance that we want our educators to use with our students. As I facilitated the Courageous Conversations, I worked to model the relational influence of Black feminist theory that guides me in my practice.

Educators who are developing a critical racial awareness have the language and knowledge base to engage in conversations about race and about the inequities that often lead to an achievement gap. Sustaining these conversations will lead us toward racial competence and an equity mindset. As James commented,

> If I am I gonna be able to make a difference and make it [the system] change, and realizing for me to change my mindset and get other people to change their mindset if that can continue, we'd be on our way.

Both sustaining these conversations and finding ways to build the capacity to influence mindset shifts are of concern for James and Beatrice. As members of their respective site equity teams, their responsibility was to offer Courageous Conversations to their schools' faculties in order to build capacity. This was a challenging task and was often given low priority.

Beatrice, an administrator of color who was transferred from the school where she started the Courageous Conversations with her site equity team, described the impact the conversations had on her relationships with her (former) teachers:

> I've been able to go out, and have dinner or lunch with some of my teachers, and we are not afraid to talk about race. They know that, you know . . . they can say something and if they make a mistake, I'm not going to be upset. I'm just gonna ask them for clarification and I'm gonna help them understand. So that's a

> positive thing. But then I've noticed that one of my, one of the members that was on the equity team . . . who has become the principal in that building [my old school] . . . and has decided that Courageous Conversations is not needed . . . and so the whole building culture has completely changed. I've had my former teachers call me over at my new building, and say, you know . . . that the culture of the building has changed, you know . . . they feel that . . . the kid's race is not valued, it's not important. What's important is that we get these test scores up . . . . . . you know, it's just a real . . . a different place. So, I turn and tell them this: "You're gonna have to start up those conversations up again . . . and it's gonna be hard . . ." and I say . . . "Even more so though, you're a white person . . . Having these conversations is critical for us to serve our students. And the new administrator can't come and say no, you know . . . Because now you're gonna have to do it. That's why we had the Equity Team so we can go out and . . . spread the news."

James reflected on the status of his school's site equity team and on wanting to continue with the positive change that he has experienced:

> I wanna be a part of that positive change. But not sure how, you know to keep the work going. That's why I kinda don't want it to stop at the school because we've had these three years of changing . . . some of our mindsets, but we already have four people who left from the team of eight that started three years ago.

Similarly, Janelle commented on how she cannot switch her newly developed racial consciousness on and off:

> The most difficult thing for me . . . is definitely, you can't know what you don't know . . . it's not a switch you just turn on or off . . . so in essence, not that I've lost white privilege, but I've lost that curse of ignorance.

Research on teachers who work to engage in equity practice is scarce. For the purposes of this study, the equity practice that I focus on is included in the antiracist and social justice literature. Pollock, Deckman, Mira, and Shalaby (2010) raised critical questions regarding teachers' struggles to apply theoretical and abstract ideas about race to their practical everyday work. I found out that these are abstract ideas and that they need to be transformed into knowledge that informs their practice. For example, when Beatrice reflected on the change in her practice as an administrator and what she was

doing differently, she commented,

> I had to get away from managing. And I had to allow time for my teachers to have those conversations, if you get so bogged down in the management part of your job, and you don't get in that philosophical belief in helping teachers understand why we're doing what we're doing and why we talk about race, and why it's important, then . . . what you're doing is just going through the motions, and then your teachers just go through the motions trying to please you. But if you don't get down about that conversation deeply, then they don't get down to that conversation, cause you have to model for them they have to know that it is a journey that we're on.

Her reflection and learning demonstrated the role leadership plays in creating the conditions for change. Mike shared his new practice for working with kids and how his new understanding expanded his ability to watch out for his students:

> I talk longer with kids. Trying to understand what's going on. I look for more role models for them. That are people of color. To put somehow in the school. I try to connect culturally with what's going on in our school, and their home life, like they are leaving their stuff, their culture at home and this is just school stuff, I feel that's a big reason sometimes we don't have the buy in by students of color. So looking for those kinda things, telling kids I care about them a lot. Making sure they understand that. That was a big thing for me. I felt like if I told them that once, they knew it, but I found that with kids of color, that was not the case. They need to really know it.

These changes in practice often go unnoticed, except in cases in which racial awareness has been raised and educators are focusing their practices on developing relationships and connection with their students.

More Reflections of a Black Feminist Educational Leader

Developing an equity mindset leads to an educator's ability to establish relationships with students that can lead to active student engagement. As I know what is important in adult relationships, I find it imperative that teachers in classrooms do the same. That is why it was important for me to model the process's relationships. I had to constantly listen, share, and care for each participant. I realized that it takes a lot of

energy to show concern for the participants as they progress through this journey.

This study was also guided by my Black feminist standpoint, which served to underscore my experiential knowledge, validate the counterstories of the participants of color, and offer a critique of school inequality. It was hard to see Black feminism or womanism theoretically because I embody this humanistic approach in my work and in my interactions with others. However, when I reflect on my work, interactions, and relationships, I find Black Feminist theory to be very useful in helping me understand and frame my methodological approach. When I reflect on my own pedagogy, I find that I embody womanist and Black feminist characteristics in my everyday life. My process of facilitating the Courageous Conversations protocol was a learning experience for me as both woman, Afirican American and educator. I was able to constantly share my own growth with the participants as we journeyed together. My hope for eliminating the predictable and persistent racial achievement gap has been a long time goal for me. The growth that I experienced in working with the committed educators who have journeyed with me is immeasurable. The words and inspiration of Maya Angelou (1994) sums my experiences and hopes for me: “Wouldn't take nothing for my journey now.”

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this chapter, I summarized the study that I conducted and present the findings and conclusion. The conclusion offers a discussion of the implications of the findings and my recommendations for further research.

Summary

The passion for my work is grounded in my hope for assuring an excellent and equitable education for all students. Under current school conditions, we can have a better chance of achieving this when we focus our attention on transforming school culture by promoting social justice and mindset shifts. Although the scope of the study did not focus on transforming school culture, the practices of an educator with an equity mindset can potentially help set the stage for this institutional transformation. This institutional transformation is driven by the personal transformation of educators' mindsets that result in a critical racial awareness that I have described as having an equity mindset.

Singleton and Linton (2006) argued that "the culture of a school system is based in its language and the styles and processes of communication that takes place among its members" (p. 228). They further argue that

> The way to transform school culture is to transform the language that is used. The racial achievement gap cannot be closed without talking about racial achievement disparities existing between White students and most students of color populations. But we cannot effectively talk about racial disparity without first learning how to effectively talk about race. (p. 229)

Talking about race was the purpose of the professional development offered by the Educational Equity Department to educators in the Great Lake School District. My intent for the professional development was to help educators understand the racial achievement gap and subsequently address it. Learning to talk about race was clearly a goal through this process of understanding the racial achievement gap. Examining what happens when educators learn to talk about race was the purpose of my study. Since I had offered Courageous Conversations about race as professional development for educators in the GLSD for several years, I wanted to know the impact these conversations were having on their practices and, specifically, the achievement gap. So, I decided to focus my research on examining how the educators reflected on the impact well as the challenges of participating in critical dialogues about race and educational inequity through the Courageous Conversations process, which I used to help educators understand the racial achievement disparities that lead to the achievement gap. As the facilitator and researcher of the Courageous Conversations process, I also wanted to know how I used my Black Feminist skills to influence their mindset shifts and ultimately equity mindsets.

I found that for the most part, these conversations that focused on race, racism, White power, and privilege led educators to an understanding of the educational disparities that exist in our system. This understanding may not impact instructional practices directly as I originally thought, but the impact was more of the journey we

embark on that could lead to mindset shifts. The Courageous Conversations professional development protocol was the tool that was used to influence this mindset shift that can work to disrupt the status quo. The metaphor of a journey emerged from the data and I presented it to describe the change process that the educators who participated in the Courageous Conversations protocol experienced.

The change that I was hoping for is evidenced in the data, the reflections and statements of the respondents who participated in my study. I expected, as in a study recently conducted (Palmer 2013), that the data would reveal some changes in attitudes and beliefs as well as critical understandings about the causes of educational inequities and the achievement gap. I also expected the data to reveal changes in the educators' practices as a result of these new understandings. Also, until Palmer (2013), there had not been much research documenting the experiences and challenges of educators who engage in conversations about race. What I did not expect to find was that these changes in practices that I was hoping to see were actually shifts in mindsets. I believe, as the findings showed, that mindset shifts are more profound than just changes in attitudes and beliefs. The mindset shift lays the foundation for an equity mindset that works to disrupt the status quo and challenge dominant ideologies. I believe an equity mindset is the driver of changes in classroom practice as well as in relationship development between educators and their students and communities.

In response to my first research question (How do educators reflect on the impact and the challenges of participating in critical dialogues about race and educational inequity?), the study revealed that the respondents were able to compare their experiences to the metaphor of a journey. Data from respondent interviews, focus groups, and staff

professional development sessions provide a context for understanding the challenges that educators experience while engaging in the Courageous Conversations. From the themes that emerged, the metaphor of a journey became evident. The following is a discussion of the emergent themes, conclusions, implications, and recommendations.

Yes, It Was Okay to Talk About the Racial Achievement Gap!

The respondents' reflections about being able to actually have conversations about race and the racial achievement gap revealed that engaging in conversations where the content of race was involved was subtle and expected, as it related to fear of engaging in the conversations. At the same time, their reflections were powerful as they were glad to have the opportunity to have the conversations. This contradiction helped me to understand the impact of engaging in the conversations on the participants. My findings supported the fear, suppression, avoidance, and unwillingness the educators exhibited for having race-based conversations. There was also fear of what their colleagues who were not on the Site Equity Team were saying about their experiences with professional development. I soon learned that with my support and acknowledgement of their vulnerabilities, respondents reported that they were willing to engage in conversations about the racial achievement gap. This support assisted them as they struggled to bring their colleagues at their sites along the journey with them.

I was aware that the antecedent to their feeling of safety and trust was fear. Fear involved the possibility of being considered racist and fear of the unknown regarding what it meant to be equity minded. This was the elephant in the room during the conversations until safety, trust, and relationships had been developed. The respondents recognized that part of the process of gaining critical racial awareness was experiencing

discomfort but having the willingness to continue the journey. As the facilitator, my level of discomfort was not evident externally, but internally I was not always confident about the process. As the leader of the process, I didn't have the luxury of displaying my discomfort, fear or uncertainty.

Another fear expressed was of not being supported by their principals/leaders as we worked to gain new understandings about the achievement gap. On SETs where there was principal support and engaged participation, educators were not as concerned. Many were concerned about the level of support from the superintendent and other district leadership. I felt it was my responsibility to assure that what we were engaged in was supported by district leadership. As I facilitated the process and laid the conditions for trust, their relationships with their colleagues both White and of color grew and their levels of comfort with the process were calmed.

Once educators were given the opportunity to have conversations about race and gained more skill in engaging in the conversations, they were able to counter ideologies of colorblindness and racism. Although there were some participants who did not gain the skills at the level of their colleagues, they persisted with their engagement and did not give up.

This study shows that there were different entry points that created opportunities for engaging in the conversations. Respondents identified these entry points as times outside of the professional development sessions, such as when data were presented in faculty meetings or PLCs, in social conversations with colleagues, in their schools, and at home. Conversely, I found that there was some hesitancy and even resistance in some cases where they needed the security of the other participants to feel that the space was

safe.

I had to acknowledge the vulnerabilities of each participant by actively listening and being intentional about my motives and actions to create trust between the participants and me. Gaining trust also requires participants to trust the process. This required me to encourage the participants to open up by using activities such as elbow-partner sharings and knee-to-knee dialogues. I found that through my caring facilitation and their growing levels of trust, the respondents were able to share their experiences and perspectives with each other.

Developing trust within the participants was a slow process, mostly due to their lack of knowledge about where the Courageous Conversations professional development protocol would take them (outcomes) and the uncertainty of what the journey was really about. The change process is conceptually difficult to understand if we are ambiguous about the destination. Yet, I knew that we needed to be persistent and continue the journey.

Developing an Equity Mindset: The Courageous Journey

As the participants engaged in the conversations and learned about and discussed the impact of institutional racism in education, they began to understand their practice in a different way. Rather than only think about what instructional strategies to go back and implement, we encouraged participants to first work toward listening to and understanding what each person was saying in order to establish the level of trust that we would need for genuine courageous conversations. Recognizing that race was a significant factor impacting the achievement disparities, I was convinced that creating the space for taking risks for critical reflections of these conversations was necessary. This

was what was needed in order for us to address the inequities that we saw in our schools. As a Black feminist, I believed that we could create the conditions for trust that would allow us to have these critical conversations. This establishment of trust, in order to be authentic, would grow out of the dialogues and understandings between the participants over time. To get past surface politeness and niceness and to establish relationships required a consistent effort on all parties. I used my Black feminist inclinations to guide the facilitation of this process in ways that I believed would move us forward. At times, that would mean departing from the planned agenda or format to actually delve deeper into a conversation or to go back and address a misunderstanding. All of this was for the purpose of connecting our work to addressing the achievement gap.

As a result, respondents discussed how their participation in the conversations helped their understanding of how institutional racism gets played out in the school system. It was evident that most of the participants felt that they could make a difference, although they could not articulate how. I also have to consider those who participated in the process who I don't believe developed a critical racial consciousness nor made any mindset shifts. In spite of this, I acknowledge their willingness to stay the course with their site teams and I am hopeful that one day, in retrospect, their experiences in the conversations will make sense.

Throughout this process as well as in my daily work, my sensibilities as a Black feminist educator caused me to wonder if we had the will to bring about the changes necessary. Are there educators who demonstrate the willingness, critical racial consciousness, and competency to embrace and foster equity agendas in their schools? I wondered if there was the racial awareness that would lead to one gaining an equity

mindset. It was the intent of the Courageous Conversations professional development protocol to build such equity-minded educators who would work to foster equity agendas in their schools.

Considering the data I gathered around this theme, this study shows that changes in practice happened to most of the educators as they engaged in the journey to developing an equity mindset. These changes in their practice included increased courage for establishing and/or developing relationships with their students of color, as well as the students' families and communities. The courage to talk differently about their students in the faculty room and confronting deficit views offered by their unaware colleagues about the students were the result of mindset shifts the participants experienced. Participants reported that they were able to understand their role in disrupting the status quo. This included raising questions about the inequities and disparities that they saw. I also found that, overwhelmingly, respondents felt that their understanding of achievement disparities had grown and that they had learned some skills for discussing race and the racial achievement gap. I found that without an understanding of the history of oppression and the knowledge of White superiority and privilege that is infused in our professional development, we are only scratching the surface in our quest for equity and social justice. Finally, we understand that our conversations about race are about more than individual teachers' understandings; they are about all of us sharing the common understanding that will help us come together to uncover whiteness and institutional racism to impact change. As Mike commented, "I have got to use the privilege and power I have to help change things."

Black Feminist Educational Leader: Servant Leader

In response to my second question, "What does it mean for a Black feminist educational leader to develop a pedagogy of change/transformation with predominately white educators?"

I presented my reflections at the ends of both Chapters 4 and 5. These reflections helped me answer my question about how I facilitated the conversations. Specifically, I explained how I helped educators understand how the Courageous Conversations could be useful in helping us meet the educational needs of our students, especially African American and other students of color.

My position as an African American female and Black feminist educational leader looking for the tools to bring about transformational change in the educational outcomes of so many children allowed me to view this process as a possibility. My tempered radical position along with Black feminist practices was beneficial and helped me to work within the educational system to bring about change. Engaging in the Courageous Conversation process was the vehicle through which I was hopeful transformative change would be initiated. However, I did not expect my own journey through this process to be as challenging and uncertain. The uncertainty was grounded in my fears (masked by my optimism and hope) about the success of this process. I made it a point to share with participants all along the journey that we really didn't know what the end was like or if we were going to know when we got there. I had to continue to remind myself that one of our agreements was to expect and accept nonclosure. However, my professional training had set me up to expect closure of the process. Is it possible that this journey never ends? Or is our quest for race equity for our students attainable? These and the many questions

that have impacted my reflections and experience point to the messiness of engaging in a courageous conversation process. The messiness was evident in the multiple issues and inequities that were constantly uncovered and appeared to be unresolvable.

The nature of the process of racial dialogue between people of different races and perspectives brings to the surface the issue of power dynamics. As a leader and facilitator of these dialogues, trying to be inclusive and equitable had proven to be very challenging. The tensions both within the group and around my role caused me to try different approaches to maintain relationships and create a "safe environment." Some theorists like Ellsworth, (1989), Boler, (2004) and Jones (1999) have challenged the success of these racial dialogues due to power dynamics, asymmetric relationships, and even investments in Whiteness. It is for these reasons that many attempts at conversations about race are stalled or abandoned. I faced this challenge and had many sleepless nights where I questioned my abilities to continue and wondered if this was really going to make a difference. Who was I to question investments in Whiteness that is perpetuated in our society and embodied by many educators?

For sure, I am reminded of the tradition within the African American community of struggle for education and social justice (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). This struggle has been historically analyzed and reveals that educators, especially women, have served as agents of social change, resistors to social barriers, and leaders against other inequities. As a Black feminist and womanist scholar/educator, I believed that creating a foundation for the dialogue and developing and maintaining caring relationships required some strategies that may not be commonly practiced. My own Black feminist tradition and the persistence that women leaders before me have given me the hope and courage to

continue the journey, even when it became tough. My experiences, grounded in spirituality, worked to keep me focused. One of the tenets of CRT that was useful to me as I reflected on my journey was the importance of personal experience shared via narratives of me and other people of color (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). These narratives allowed me as well as other participants of color a voice to counter the White norm and work to disrupt the status quo. Our stories and voices represent the optimistic and critical hope that I and other committed equity minded educators work to promote.

Critical hope as described by Duncan-Andrade (2009) is explained as the element of educational practice produce and sustain action aimed at resolving underserved suffering. Critical hope demands a "committed and active struggle" (p.186) against inequities. I had embraced this type of hope as motivation for leading these conversations.

Conclusions

It is no surprise that questions of "how" and "why" in relation to the racial disparities that lead to the achievement gap are seldom raised. This study gives us insights into the "how" and "why." Through the discussions and activities in which participants engaged, they were able to understand how the educational system perpetuates a racial achievement gap. Examining data, both achievement and programmatic, revealed the real disparities that are mostly overlooked and not addressed. For example, the question of why we had disproportionately low numbers of students of color enrolled in our gifted, Advanced Placement (AP), and honors classes while at the same time an overrepresentation of students of color in our suspension data and special

education programs caused educators who were developing a heightened awareness to begin to feel comfortable examining these issues. By exploring these data and understanding White identity and privilege, participants were eventually able to understand their role in disrupting the status quo. Educators who were developing an equity mindset worked to examine how their own racial identities impact their practice. They gained the courage to challenge systemic inequities, and they acknowledged the importance of developing relationships with students, families, and communities.

However, as the participants engaged in the conversations, concerns about the complexity of the issue—not only how race has or has not impacted them personally, but ways in which race has impacted their students through institutional racist practices and policies—were brought to the surface. Expanding their perspective and deepened understanding of race and racism is what had stimulated the journey, which participants would soon recognize. We recognize that what we think of as practice is more than the teaching in the classroom practice: It is the whole pedagogy of an educator that involves mindset and attitudes. Bringing about mindset shifts requires time for processing and unlearning racism.

Finally, as Milner (2014) explains,

> [A]lthough I recognize talking about race, poverty and their connection will not automatically result in transformed and transformative practices with students, acknowledging and talking about these factors can be the foundation for how educators conceptualize their work and build their practices. In this way, discourse is action (Freire, 1998) and has the potential to help educators make sense of why things are as they are and how to improve situations for students. Moreover, through conversation, educators can *build* community, and *bridge* issues of race, poverty with *what* they teach and *how* they teach subject matter. (blog)

Implications

A key question that needs to be considered based on my study is: "What are the recommended ways to think about the process for principals and superintendents working with educators who have gone through the conversations?" Palmer's (2014) study concluded that the following four specific actions "were identified by teachers in all six schools as required from principals in the teacher's development around racial equity" (p. 269):

1. Model vulnerability;
2. Create safe spaces;
3. Empower shared leadership; and
4. Have persistence over many years.

Each of these actions was mentioned in some way in this study. Building on these recommended actions related to leadership, I add that there needs to be a system-wide focus on equity that sheds light on the achievement gap and the educational disparities found within the system. A focus on equity at the leadership level will drive us to ask the question: "Do we have the will and the collective courage to ask the question about race and its impact on the (under)achievement of our students?" I am hopeful that building the capacity for addressing the disparities and achievement gap one educator at a time will be the driving force for a systematic approach to equity.

We also must have the courage to implement and engage in the conversations even when there does not seem to be support for the process. Deep sustainable systemic transformation is required to address systemic inequities. Our task as educators and educational leaders/scholars is to disrupt these systemic inequities.

Recommendations

Based on the results of my study, the recommendations below should be considered for future research and/or practice.

Leadership Development and Support

Although this study did not focus on the role of leadership in changing mindsets to focus on equity, it was evident through the responses from the participants that leadership was critical. Having the principal as part of the Site Equity team was important for both support and encouraging teachers to continue the process. While the structure of the Site Equity Teams promoted shared leadership between teachers and administrators, teachers indicated that they needed to know that their principals supported their new outlook. This support from leadership is needed as teachers communicate with their colleagues who were not part of the SET. Principal leadership at the district and building level is necessary to continue to build the capacity for developing equity mindsets and for sustaining the journey. Support at the district level, including the superintendency, is required for there to be a focus on equity. Table 2 illustrates the impact of leadership support.

Scholars such as Cochran-Smith, Albert, Dimattia, Freedman, Jackson, Mooney, Neisler, Peck, and Zollers (1999); Grogan (2000); Kincheloe and Steinberg (1995); and Shields and Oberg (2000) argued for a social justice framework of leadership that promotes a critique of educational systems in terms of access, power, and privilege based on race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, language, background, ability, and/or socioeconomic position. Skrla, Scheurich, Johnson, and Koschoreck (2001) claimed that "what is critically needed is real-life, context-specific, tactical, antiracist work in our

Table 2

What Are the Results of Overcoming the Fear of Participating in the Courageous Conversations Professional Development?

Belief	Conversation	Level of Leadership Support	Practice
Educators change their feelings and understandings about how to deal with the racial achievement gap.	Educators have conversations with each other about race, racism, and collaborate with others on how to address the achievement gap.	Consistent and significant support	Educators report a change in their practices and the courage to try new strategies. There is enthusiasm and less fear. There is a transformation from fear to purpose, openness, and determination.
		Inconsistent or no support	There is frustration, anger, and no change.

schools" (p. 239). This antiracist work is usually taken up by transformational leaders who see it as their moral responsibility to challenge the status quo and commit to the effort that will bring about the systemic changes necessary to address the achievement gap. I posit that in addition to the educators who are committed to equity, equity-minded leaders are critical to achieve the district's mission of providing excellence and equity for all students.

Professional Development

Building on Milner's (2003) work around building preservice teachers' racial competency, I now argue for this type of professional development where educators have the chance to develop a critical racial consciousness that provides the support for the

difficult work of challenging the status quo. When we build the capacity of educators to face this difficult challenge, we will likely sustain practices that can bridge theory with courageous practices.

As Pollock et al. (2010) stated, "[F]oremost on inservice teachers' minds as they begin to have conversations about race is, 'what can I do?'" (p. 211). To address the "what can I do?" dilemma, scholars Lawrence and Tatum (1997) and Sleeter (1992) (in Lawrence & Tatum, 1997) identified the need for professional development to help White educators "expand their perspective and deepen their understanding of the ways in which race and racism have affected their own education as well as that of their students (p. 163). Professional development for educators of color is also needed to support their racial identity understandings.

Finding time for such professional development is important for the sustainability of equity growth and learning for educators. In addition to finding the time for engaging in the Courageous Conversations protocol, these conversations need to be a priority at the school site as they examine their own data around the achievement gap.

Equity Needs To Be a Part of All Initiatives Within the System

Building on Palmer's recommendations and the findings from this study, I have concluded that districts with persistent and predictable racial achievement gaps need to have an equity focus on all priorities and initiatives. I believe districts have to adopt CRT as a framework for educational equity. This equity focus should be a component of all professional development.

Address the Gap Between Belief and Action

Related to the question that I posed in the Implication section, there needs to be the next level of support, including professional development and coaching, for educators who are on the path to becoming more racially aware and equity minded. Singleton argues for a call to action that involves

> help[ing] White educators move beyond guilt and rhetoric to a place of purposeful action and to support educators of color in finding the courage and language to name the individual and systemic racism around them, accept the challenge to speak their truth, and feel empowered to hold the system accountable for providing quality education for *all* children. (p. 8)

Researchers should examine McAfee's (2014) theory of the kinesiology of race where she has "reframed race as a kinetic phenomenon, one in perpetual motion" (p. 469). She has introduced a shift from thinking about race as a noun to considering it as a verb. This new theory has promise for helping us understand the incongruence between beliefs and action.

My intent with this study was not to try to provide a grand narrative or a quick fix for addressing the achievement gap, but to suggest that we seriously focus on developing the mindsets that will lead our schools and districts to fulfilling the promise of educating all of our students.

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Interview Protocol

How the information will be used:

The information gathered in this interview will be used to help me understand how educators reflect on their experiences as they engaged in Courageous Conversations and its impact on their practices. As a member of this district, I will be responsible for ensuring that this information will be used to help inform our practices and in turn help our students. More specifically, I will analyze the information and will share it as we continue to work to close the achievement gap.

The purpose of the interview:

I want to interview you because you have participated in the Courageous Conversations professional development through our school district. I am interested in your experience as you participated in the conversations and your perspective on its value and impact on your practice.

How the information will be analyzed:

I will tape record your interview and later transcribe them into written form. I will review them and look for emerging patterns and themes. I encourage you to be as honest and candid as possible. That is how I will be able to determine if this process is impactful.

Confidentiality:

Everything you say in this interview will remain confidential. I will use a pseudonym in the place of your actual name.

Think deeply and reflect on the process of engaging in the conversations

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

The interviews will be guided by the following sample questions:

1. How do you find yourself starting conversations about race with other educators/parents?
    - What seems to initiate them?
2. How would you describe the process of Courageous Conversations?
    - Did you know anything about the process before starting it?
    - Had you heard anything about CC?
3. What were some of your struggles related to the process?
4. What fears or struggles did you encounter during this process?
5. How do you develop trust for having these conversations?
6. How has your understanding of the relationship between race and the achievement gap been influenced by these conversations?
7. In what ways have these conversations allowed you to think or talk differently?
8. Can you give me examples of how your practice has been influenced by these conversations?
9. Do you think these conversations have impacted your relationships with your students or members of your school community? If so, can you give specific examples of how it has?
10. Can you describe to me any tense moments or uncomfortable conversations you've had during these critical dialogues?

11. What's been the most difficult part of being a part of the Courageous Conversations?

12. Can you describe to me what you feel you have learned about race via these conversations?

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