Raised (Counter) Voices: the Power of Sponsorship and Culturally Relevant Teaching

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As the adoptive mom of a daughter from Ethiopia and as a high school public speaking teacher, both my private and academic lives necessitate a deep dive into race in America. While the urgency of this need only crescendoed in 2020-21, the seeking and discovering began as a child. I remember being an elementary student in a gifted program at an urban school confused by the differences between the White and Black kids. When I asked my mom about it, I remember her gently leading me away from judgement toward greater understanding. Next, I recall being horrified as I watched the LA Riots of 1992 motivated by the acquittal of LA Police Officers after their savage beating of Rodney King caught on video. Several years later, I was intrigued by Spike Lee’s commentary about race when I first watched Lee’s film Do the Right Thing as a college student. Still later, I prepared for our adopted daughter’s arrival from Africa and began noticing what I had taken for granted all of my life: the cards, dolls, and children’s books did not have many characters that our Black child could see herself in. I reflected on this even more when I read Harvard professor Marguerite Wright’s I’m Chocolate, You’re Vanilla and realized that the colorblind mentality I had carried all my life was only making things worse as, in part, it didn’t allow Whites to grapple with the realities that most of the Black community knew all too well. This awakening further developed after the shooting of Trayvon Martin and the protests in Ferguson, MO and the vitriol that resulted from the kneeling of Colin Kaepernick during the National Anthem. I was on a racial reckoning journey; however, while all of these examples helped me along toward allyship, nothing could have catalyzed my personal quest toward anti-racism like what happened in the Summer of 2020.
Less than a month after the murder of George Floyd at the knee of a Minneapolis police officer, Penn-Harris-Madison, the school system where I teach, received a petition and open letter from past and present Students of Color. It included 36 pages of narratives describing incidents of racism within the school system and over 1,100 signatures. The soul-searching that was already taking place in my life was only exacerbated after the open letter was published. Specifically, I remember hearing about the letter from a colleague and sitting in shame as I read one particular statement calling me out for a musical decision I made years previously involving a Black high schooler being cast as a maid. I defensively reasoned, “But that didn’t have anything to do with race! That was because of x and y!” But then, less than a week later as I read White Fragility by Robin DiAngelo, I realized that it didn’t matter what my intentions had been. Not realizing the historic implications about my decision was, perhaps, even worse than an overt racist act. While I was filled with guilt and felt incredibly exposed, I had a burning sense of wanting to do the right thing. So I took a bold step: I reached out to the former student and asked if we could talk. When she replied yes, I called her, explaining my epiphany and asking for her forgiveness. The resulting connection due to her grace and my newfound understanding and subsequent repentance is even better than I could have hoped for. In fact, the former student and her Mom ended up coming over to my house the next week (at their request) so that we could talk about what happened more in an effort to gain greater unity and understanding between us. This experience not only will shape my future decision-making, it also affirmed what I had sensed in the weeks leading up to it; I, and White people like me, need to do a better job listening, advocating, and making amends with the actual People of Color in our lives. Perhaps most
importantly and throughout this above process, we need to be humble. Consequently, I continued to call, text, and invite people to our home for the express purpose of listening and learning. This, along with reading and marching, served as important steps on my journey toward a more equitable existence, and as a result, meant that I tried to live my life in a way that actionably displayed what I now knew to be true: that for real racial justice to come from such tragedy, both systemic and individual change must take place. In the case of the open letter, this meant that the more people who did their part and followed through on the writers’ petition to hear their stories and act on them, the more welcoming, inclusive, and self-aware our school environment could be.

Allowing the open letter to guide me, at the start of the new school year I approached members of the Black Student Union, a fledgling organization in its first year at Penn High School, as well as its faculty sponsor and my friend in the Early College Academy where I am leader. From this partnership, several students agreed to participate in order to help me, a White educator, understand and implement a more just school environment. It is hard to understand the lives of our students if we do not know their stories. Therefore, these students graciously told me some of theirs, which furthered the efforts of the open letter authors. The latter group, with their voices raised, served as sponsors and thereby provided the impetus to trouble, educate, and upraise the cultural aptitude of our corner of America as more and more students began following suit with sharing their own stories. I also conducted a survey of the five hundred students currently enrolled in our Early College Academy to gather a broader range of experiences and narratives. The survey, entitled “Making My Voice Heard,” resulted in a wealth of
additional reflections on the school environment and on our efforts to improve (See Appendix 1 for a copy of the survey, discussed at length below).

These experiences, both personal and throughout the school community, became the foundation for this project. It was clear that events similar to those at Penn High School were echoing across the current American landscape and that they were historically all too familiar. In addition to my efforts for the students, then, I felt it was urgent to bring more research to bear, to gather scholarly contexts for understanding and addressing the work of structural racism in our community. This project is both an ethnographic account of how we, as a school community, tried to identify and address the problems in our organization and culture and it is a further attempt to hear and amplify the voices of the students who dared to speak out. In this project, I revisit the students’ open letter in order to follow through on the writers' petition to hear their stories and act on them. I also draw on the “Making My Voice Heard" survey responses to include additional thoughts and experiences from current Students of Color within the Early College Academy at Penn High School and to build on the already established (counter)narrative being shared. Finally, I scrutinize not only the current cultural climate at Penn High School (PHM’s only high school) to evaluate if new anti-racism efforts have been effective, but also to name steps that still need to be taken in order to create a more welcoming, inclusive, and self-aware school environment. All of these research goals are implemented through the frameworks of literacy sponsorship, Critical Race Theory, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, and Funds of Knowledge scholarship to establish connections between our particular case study and larger conversations about combatting structural racism. I am so proud of the students at my school for enacting a
more diverse cultural literacy right where we live through their voice sponsorship, and I hope this project serves to amplify their voices and forward their efforts to be catalysts for change.

Deborah Brandt developed the concept of literacy sponsorship to rectify shortcomings in the field of literacy studies, which tended to analyze literacy acquisition within communities without taking into account the economic forces at work in those communities over time. She defines sponsors as “any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy” and uses the concept to highlight the direct interplay between those structural forces and any given individual’s access to multiple literacies over a lifetime (Brandt 556). While Brandt’s study has been worthwhile in exposing the social and economic forces at work in shaping individual literacy access and acquisition, I believe her language can be extended using the term “voice sponsorship” to emphasize both the power of joined voices and the value of audiences willing to listen to and learn from those voices. In this way, both positive and negative voice sponsors can be viewed through the lens of airtime, or, how voices are either suppressed or amplified. While Brandt points out that sponsors are often people of power and influence, this is not always the case. Leading up to the open letter to PHM Schools, those People of Color and their White allies who told their stories were not set apart as powerful individuals; however, by envisioning and bringing to fruition the letter that raised awareness for so many in the community, they unequivocally became voice sponsors, even though the authorship was anonymous and the names of perpetrators of racism within the letter itself were all redacted. The letter, in fact, was a sort of mutiny, as described by Paulo Freire,
the result of marginalized peoples not having a voice and deciding to do something proactive to make their voices heard for the betterment of the community at large (46). The letters’ original creators specified three goals: “We share these stories in solidarity with victims of racism and to acknowledge the problem and work towards a better school culture and future.” These past and present Penn Students of Color (here forward denoted as SoC) knew there was power in telling stories, and that promoting counternarratives encouraged more and more voices to speak out and be heard. By sharing their own stories and providing a place to collect and give voice to others, they lent credence to those events and experiences that had to this point been largely kept in the shadows or only spoken of in the safety of Black, Latinx, Asian, or other minority groups’ living rooms and around their kitchen tables. Many individual voices joined together in an amplified, communal call for racial justice, one that refused to accept PHM’s silence and the status quo culture related to racism.

It’s disheartening how a single voice or small group of voices without a sponsor can be ignored. As documented by the open letter writers, this is what seemed to happen over and over again. One student reported that she was “taunted, yelled at, and laughed at by 4 boys IN FRONT OF [teacher name redacted] AND HE DID ABSOLUTELY NOTHING AT ALL...he continued to look at his computer as if he couldn’t hear what was going on. We were the desk closest to his.” Unfortunately, this was not the only example. The open letter recounted dozens of experiences where “nothing happened,” “Teacher had never done anything to stop this...” and “nothing came of these reports [of racism].” It wasn’t until these sponsors shone a spotlight onto the racial injustices already
occurring that there was more notable action taken. I argue that this would not have come without these voice sponsors for racial equity.

Another step toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion that came as a result of these voice sponsors occurred in my own classroom. In the fall after the events of Summer 2020, I entered my public speaking class with some new curriculum ideas pushing for greater racial awareness and justice. Even so, I didn’t suspect how ready students would feel to share their own racialized stories. Up to this point, I never remember any student of color speaking about their own experiences with racism, or about unique aspects of their experience or culture in comparison with the 80+% of White students in my classes. Things were different, though, in September of 2020. I started hearing unique introductory speeches about everything from both a Black and biracial students’ struggles with learning to love their hair, to another student’s pride about her Mexican heritage, or a quiet girl’s battle to accept the darkness of her brown skin. I was struck by this change and what it could mean, especially since I had been teaching speech for three years previously! One possible answer is in the reverberations of voice sponsorship - both those that had become advocates at PHM and those who were fighting against a monolithic Whites-only viewpoint around the entire world. Without the empowerment that voice sponsorship brings, I would argue that these counternarratives would not have risen up, whether in the classroom or the larger community.

Storytelling itself has been studied extensively, and the benefits are vast. They include a greater likelihood to open up personal conversations (Parfitt 11), find meaning individually and collectively from different life experiences, promote empathy, and disrupt stereotypes (Lawrence 66). Chimamanda Adichie, however, points out that
“single stories” themselves are not enough. They are, in fact, incomplete and serve to
disenfranchise whole peoples who begin to give precedence to the indignities recounted
as a monolithic cultural experience. Citing her fellow Nigerian author Chinua Achebe,
she argues that a balance of stories must be present to empower and humanize. Such a
balance of stories relies not just on the common, expected stories, but also on
counternarratives (or counterstories) which allow those on the margins of society the
opportunity to tell their own stories, thus “exposing, analyzing, and challenging the
majoritarian stories of racial privilege” as well as shattering complacency (Solórzano &
Yosso 22). Critical Race theorist Richard Delgado begins by describing how
counternarratives allow us to “sharpen our concern, enrich our experience, and provide
access to stories beyond the stock tale” (109). So not only do the increased feelings of
freedom and openness that were established after the open letter empower SoC to share
their own stories; in sharing, these students cultivate classmates’ collective empathy and
enrich their educational experiences, along with the personal benefits named above.

Counternarratives such as these are becoming more prevalent than ever, and while
some may question this definition of counternarrative, there is precedent in the literature
and a growing interest in this methodology of counter storytelling to fight racism and
highlight voices of color. In their seminal work on Critical Race Theory, the framework
that highlights the tenet of counternarratives, Delgado and Stefancic state, “Stories can
give [victims of racial discrimination] a voice and reveal that others have similar
experiences. Stories can name a type of discrimination (e.g. microaggressions,
unconscious discrimination, or structural racism; once named, it can be combated” (51).
This is exactly what happened in the case of the open letter to PHM. Students and
families no longer felt completely powerless when "Penn-Harris-Madison...repeatedly fails to support their students of color." Instead, they took action, sharing their counternarratives and using them as a catalyst to fight for change. One example of this comes in a counternarrative describing a valedictorian’s desire to share a personal story of experiencing racism and administration’s subsequent attempt at silencing this story because not everyone listening could personally relate. Recognizing the power in counternarratives, the letter expounds, “[Administration ignores] the fact that there are many people in the audience that do relate to these experiences and ignore the value of diverse ideas and experiences. It is vital that these realities and stories are shared with those who may not otherwise hear them, no matter how difficult it may be for the audience; if people of color can live through them, then white people can listen.” This pressure that often serves to silence marginalized voices no longer holds as much sway due to the collective power of counternarratives through voice sponsorship. By welcoming counternarratives, educators are actually serving to empower their students toward greater understanding and empathy. It is hard to understand the lives of our students if we do not know their stories. In this way, educators can even become voice sponsors themselves.

While critical race theory work sometimes threatens to be discouraging and hopeless (as illustrated in the founder of CRT Derrick Bell’s complex *Faces from the Bottom of the Well*), it also offers power to the disenfranchised through, among other opportunities, counternarrative expression. The growing power and presence of counternarratives can be seen not only at Penn High, but in the ethnographic studies of Black adolescents vlogging about their hair (Phelps-Ward), Latino youth of migrant
workers sharing their counterstories (Hernandez), Black college students and their allies fighting back against racism on their Midwest college campus through hashtag activism and counternarratives (Reynolds) and anti-Blackness narratives in urban school settings (Coles; Smith), as well as in countless other studies, projects, programs and mediums, including those voices within the PHM community who not only expressed themselves in the open letter, but also on the news and to teachers and administrators. As someone committed to forwarding the work of anti-racism, I was concerned that the momentum inspired by the open letter might fade and that the attention of the school administration might shift away from the hard work toward racial justice.

Since shifting momentum wasn’t an option in my mind, I requested two meetings - one with Dr. Jennifer Sears, PHM’s Director of Social-Emotional Learning and Mental Health; Dr. Heather Short, PHM’s Assistant Superintendent of Instruction; and Derrick White, our newly hired Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer; and the other as a follow-up with Mr. White separately. The purpose of these meetings was both to offer my passion to the corporation and to brainstorm what more could be done in the fight for racial equality. Knowing that I was the Academy Leader of Penn’s Early College Academy, Mr. White and I determined that surveying this more diverse group of students would be a good next step. Therefore, with his encouragement, I helped design and distribute the “Making My Voice Heard” survey after listening to various students and staff of color at Penn and making survey adjustments accordingly.¹

The Early College Academy at Penn High School was established in 2014 to cultivate higher academic performance and create greater opportunities - both present and future - for those students that historically operated by “just getting by,” paying particular
attention to marginalization contributors such as race and socioeconomic status.

Providing a wide range of supports, the ECA prides itself on the relationships between the staff and students, creating a family feel within the school walls. Creating more room for building those relationships, Early College leadership hand selects teachers for its Academy who align with a more invested approach; these same teachers also regularly cycle through courses with their students, having the same teens anywhere from 1 to 4 consecutive years. Between the above factors as well as more bonding activities outside of the classroom (like attending extra-curricular events, planning more field trips, and scheduling more supportive events such as Parent University three times a year to support students’ families, as well as after school tutoring programs) and inside the classroom (such as curriculum and teachers themselves who are more invested in a culturally relevant pedagogy that will be described later), students in the Early College Academy have a much greater likelihood of greater achievement academically. While Early College cannot solely take credit for this, it does play the largest factor in why from 2013 to 2014 (when EC was founded) the College and Career Readiness percentage at Penn High School jumped 10% to 66% of the student population. Another 11% achieved Readiness status the following year, and college and career readiness from the second year of Early College’s inception to today remains in the mid to high 70th percentile.

When Mr. White and I determined Early College would be our audience, I wanted to further the efforts of the Academy by asking questions related to the school’s focus: Rigor, Relevance, Relationship. To that end, the questions I developed related to the academic challenges students face (Rigor); the social-emotional lessons the school provided this year, with special emphasis on those lessons geared toward
Race/Anti-Racism (Relevance); and the student relationships with other students and the adults in their life (Relationship). Of the approximately 500 students now enrolled in the Early College Academy grades 9th - 12th, all were given the opportunity to take the survey. Of those students, 379 responded, with 354 agreeing for their data to be used beyond my eyes only. While the survey strove to look at all of the aforementioned areas for growth and improvement, the topics of racism and marginalization as a whole as well as counternarratives were front and center. For instance, of the respondents 46.4% identified as marginalized based on multiple criteria, with 13.5% naming race specifically. When asked if any of these students had counternarratives to share, a significant number spoke up, sharing moments of disempowerment, hate, and ignorance against them based on religion, ability, race, gender, and sexuality. These often-painful narratives had much wisdom and grace to share. For instance, one Muslim student shared, “Most people think that if you are a Muslim you are a threat and that's not true...One person doesn't identify a thousands of people. We all are different in our own unique way.”² Clearly a victim of that single story fallacy described by Adiche, this Penn sophomore still gleaned a universal truth, striving to pass on to others that just because a student is Muslim (or Black, Gay, etc.) doesn’t mean they are not an individual with unique thoughts and traits. Another sophomore respondent displayed both vulnerability and internal conflict in his/her struggle: “As an african american student who does attend a predominantly white school I feel like sometimes it's hard to be myself because if I act a certain way people make think i'm ghetto or if I act another way i'm trying to "act" white.” As a minority, being free to express yourself comes with its own set of complications that is valuable for all to hear and process. Similarly, another Black male
student shared an exchange with a person of authority at the school as well as the increased negative attention he receives based upon his clothing choices: “a security guard ask me for my ID and ask am I suppose to be here or skipping im like im suppose to and im just leaving and then he says I sound like the rest of them.” While these stories reveal pain and struggle, as well as injustice, they are a key part in creating change. As SoC are asked and feel comfortable sharing, and as others hear their powerful words, empathy can more effectively transpire between humans, and the result of this is often a desire to become more inclusive and work toward even greater equity for all, including those marginalized.

Not all students, however, feel comfortable sharing their stories or even value the stories of others, preferring, rather, to focus on their personal beliefs or even a more fatalistic view of things, “most people aren't racist and the few that are, are stuck in there ways and won't change just because you ask them to.” Several other students expanded on this idea, expressing that they didn’t feel comfortable sharing because they didn’t know who would be reading their words. Others felt that talking about things would stir up “too much drama.” This aligns with an experience I had this winter in my Comm 101 classroom after teaching a lesson modified from Teaching for Black Lives dealing with the topic of police violence toward African-American men. At the end of that lesson in an effort to both reflect and learn from one another, I had students complete an exit ticket letting me know how they felt about the lesson. A White female student emailed me privately (instead of answering the questions in the public comment section most students used) about feeling uncomfortable dealing with this “sensitive topic” because of people’s strong opinions. She ended the email with, “I am not trying to be mean this is just how I
feel.” Students on all sides of issues feel unsure and awkward trying to talk about racism and need the help of adults leading the way with bravery and vulnerability. My response to that student to (hopefully) encourage her to think differently about her hesitancy? “I'm glad you shared with me...I think uncomfortable conversations and topics are really important, but I also want to facilitate them well.” If we don’t lead well as teachers, open to the mistakes we’ll make with humility, we’ll never be able to encourage students toward those same ends.

The previously mentioned expectation of higher rigor coupled with EC’s added supports and desire to deeply know students, also impacts the mutual bond held between students and teachers. For instance, one student elaborated in the ‘Voice’ survey, “I like the connections and accountability we have from all of our teachers even when it's an assignment from a different class.” Another concurred: “You guys are very communicative and I love how the teachers actually care how we are doing mentally.”

Finally, one senior offered this encouragement that the EC Academy was accomplishing its goal by responding, “I genuinely love just about every teacher I have had in this program. If there is one thing...that the program is doing well, it's hiring educators that really do care about what they do and want us to strive and succeed as not only students but young adults. I think I can truly say that every EC teacher I have had, has truly cared and wanted the best for me and helped me reach that point to the best of their ability.”

When students feel valued for who they are and where they’re from, they can achieve even greater things, whether academically or in life as a whole, which is, of course, one of the Academy’s most lofty goals. As far as statistical support for the program’s success rather than narrative data alone, in the ‘Voice’ survey, of the 379 EC students who
answered, 72% said that teachers had helped them this year, higher even than parents at 68.6%.

While even the simplest of counternarratives as those outlined from the survey above serve as crucial tools in combating monolithic stories and making sure all voices are heard, it was the seminal work of Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate and expanded by scholars such as Geneva Gay, that moved CRT into the educational landscape fully. All of these educational scholars’ works echo the idea that “the better we combine our resources, the better all of us will be. I will teach better and you will learn better” (Gay 272). This is possible through relationships between teachers, students, and parents and the mutual respect that flows among them. Using this as a starting point, an asset-based rather than deficit-based mindset is achieved so that teachers become co-researchers and learners with the students they are teaching (Roe 6) and can push students to even higher levels of rigor, another essential piece of culturally responsive pedagogy (Murff 4). One particular framework with this same philosophy focuses not only on what students can teach, but specifically what learning can take place when educators reach out to not only students but also their families. Funds of Knowledge (FoK) was first defined by Luis Moll and Associates in 1992 to describe “historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well being” (133). Their claim was that in studying families with an asset-based mindset which is continually looking at what can be learned by educators, teachers will be able to be more effective at reaching and teaching students. Some of this takes the shape of culturally relevant teaching which will be explained later, but Moll et al also examined stereotyping and the predisposition of
teachers to blame poor performances from students on various deficit-oriented explanations (Daniels 3). While delving deeper into FoK by utilizing field experiences within Penn High School wasn’t developed for this project, it could be an important aspect of future study. This approach effectively teaches educators the flaws in blaming educational shortcomings on the very students and families teachers are trying to serve (Ladson-Billings 105). Whether in the classroom or when examining capitalism, FoK decries deficit-based thinking that belies that if people are weaker, poorer, less educated, etc. then they are to blame, not the system(s) (Zippin 180). Moreover, FoK creates room for dialogue between schools and communities in order to (re)distribute resources and conversations more equitably (Funds of Knowledge… 40). In fact, there is research to support teaching from a FoK framework can even shrink the achievement gap that so often exists between SoC and White students, particularly when texts are used that resonate with SoC’s own experiences (Risko 99).

Experientially, I know this to be true as well. When I did a Cafe Conversation using expert and student-created poetry related to police violence, I was met with some uncomfortability from less marginalized students (as described earlier), but I also met a majority of positive responses (over 90%). One student response demonstrated a craving for more depth in education: “I like covering these topics and having true conversations about them. We should not shelter ourselves from what is painful. I love that you refused to let us sit idly this class.” Another student elaborated on the content and the small group conversations saying, “I thought that it was a great way for everyone to participate in the groups. Yes what we read was very emotional and hard to read but this is something that happens in the world. I felt like reading these poems kind of showed us how many people
view the world. We finally get to connect sorta to what these stories that we were reading.” This same vein of thought is seen in the ‘Voice’ survey by multiple students. From a question regarding the recent anti-racism SEL lesson at Penn High School a student shared, “I love them, I think it is really good to talk about and inform people on these things. I hope it makes people uncomfortable, because it is not an easy topic.” And another reiterated the same theme: “I think it is very important to educate people on the topic. If we dont have open conversations about it we wont be able to stop it.” The students know that the more we learn and accept that racism is atrocious in all its forms, the better life will be. Students are craving depth and relevance, and they need teachers to lead them down this path toward greater meaning in education. In this way, classrooms and entire schools come closer to achieving a better culture, just as was called for in the PHM open letter.

This approach of addressing topics in the classroom from teachers who have “bought in” to a more diverse and inclusive educational environment is important, but it is not enough. While a piecemeal approach based on individual teacher ideology will increase the relevance in those classrooms, there needs to be more system-wide professional development of educators and more accountability so that all students have these same opportunities to learn about and confront racism. Even larger in reach, changing current federal regulations to allow for a more just distribution of resources and curricula is beyond the scope of this project, but worth studying for as W. E. B. Du Bois shared about the education of Black youth, “a powerful movement, the rise of another ideal to guide the unguided...it was the ideal of ‘book-learning’; the curiosity...the longing to know. Here at last seemed to have been discovered the mountain path to Canaan” (12).
The problems experienced within PHM represent one of many thousand school systems with similarly themed issues and should be further studied as such. However, as far as our school system and others like it, without a more wide scale approach with needed support and development for the staff, teachers are unprepared when the topic of race comes up in their classrooms. For instance, in the case of the formerly mentioned SEL lesson, Penn High School administration and leaders conducted professional development prior to the event so teachers were more prepared, but it was not enough. As a result, one student reported, “In my class there was confusion though. It was suggested that we be "colorblind" and that concept was encouraged by the proctor.” Clearly, more teaching of teachers needs to take place. Even the above student knew this response was wrong sharing that this “made me roll my eyes,” but the teacher was only newly educated in the best way to teach the lesson and, therefore, when she went off script, she wasn’t equipped with what she needed, which could be helped by more teacher training. Even toddlers can have educated teachers who teach equitable lessons that empower children of color and grow all toward a more equitable world (LeeKeenan); however, it’s going to take a systematic approach. For instance, if the teacher trying to lead the above lesson on Racism/Anti-Racism had gone through PD using Stephen Brookfield’s book *Teaching Race*, she would have learned in chapter 11 all about “Teaching Against Color Blindness” and this mistake could have been avoided. Not only that but intentional training and conversations are essential to any organization’s successful growth toward anti-racism (Dalavai), even outside of the education setting. Without proper training and greater school-wide buy-in, students will continue to get conflicting or even completely incorrect messages.
Racism and anti-racism training is not the only type of professional development that needs to take place in education. Teachers, with administrators leading the way, need to better familiarize themselves with the culturally responsive teaching (CRT) philosophy and its practical applications. Culturally responsive (or relevant, depending on the literature) teaching requires a funds of knowledge framework, but also encompasses other aspects. At its core, CRT necessitates that educators value listening to and learning from students in order to create the best possible learning environments for all.

Ladson-Billings first defined culturally relevant pedagogy with this crucial aspect as well as emphasizing the importance of academic success, ethnic/cultural awareness, and an awareness and ability to critique current social inequities (Muniz 9). This framework was expanded still further through Geneva Gay’s origination of the actual term culturally relevant teaching from Ladson-Billing’s initial work, focusing on teacher strategies and practices. Brain research supports the tenets of CRT since it actually builds student intellective capacity which grows brain connectivity and opens people up to learning (Hammond 16). At the heart of this is making connections (“But That’s Just Good…” 162) and helping our vulnerable students feel safe and happy (Hammond 47).

That continuing effort for teachers to connect to students includes an understanding of not only the culture of students, but also the role of humility and a commitment to learning through listening. First defined in 1998 by Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia, the term cultural humility was developed in the context of the medical field, and particularly medical educational programs, to take cultural competence to a different level so that professionals could serve their diverse patients and families to the best of their abilities. This is possible, said Tervalon and Murray-Garcia, when
practitioners engage humbly with self-reflection and self-critique, grapple with the power imbalances present in their fields, and become advocates through mutual respectful and dynamic partnerships with community members (118). Many of the Early College teachers are committed to this kind of hard work, and it shows in their relationships with students who feel they not only have a voice, but also that their voice is both heard and valued. Health scholars Ella Green-Morton and Meredith Minkler further differentiate between cultural humility and cultural competence, expounding that both are crucial. Cultural competence, while similar to cultural humility, is sometimes separated from the latter term as being based not only on deep self-reflection but also in acquiring knowledge of cultures and persons different from ourselves, as well as an appreciation for them. “Both/and” cultural competence and humility allows us to “more effectively partner across a wide range of barriers and divides to work collectively toward racial, social, and health equity” (Greene 135). While both terms were coined outside of an early or middle educational setting, their implications for the field of education at large still holds sway. Whether it’s by attending professional development workshops related to culture and bias or just getting to know their students from all backgrounds, EC teachers show an asset-based, culturally competent and humble mentality that values all students. In fact, teachers embracing these differences have been key to the success of students individually and the EC program as a whole these past seven years.

There’s always more to do, however, to make the program even stronger and more equitable. Drawing from the ‘Voice’ survey again, for instance, only 23% of students surveyed said they had read even parts of the open letter. Because of this, while 15.8% of students said that Penn-Harris-Madison is doing a better job of listening to SoC and their
allies since the open letter (4.7% said they weren’t and 26.1% said they didn’t know), 53.3% said that since they didn’t even know the open letter existed, they definitely didn’t know about an answer as far as the school system’s growth since the letter was delivered. While there may be blame to place elsewhere, as educators, making sure students are informed about important parts of their community is crucial. Also, we faculty in Early College need to work even harder having the tough conversations that many students want to have and do our part to bring students to greater empathy. For instance, one SoC shared that the Anti-Racism SEL lesson seemed “white washed” and “downplayed” and another commented, “I wish they would hear our concerns and not ignore them. I wish they would know that its not something we can just get over or let slide. Hold students accountable for the things they say...” Other students shared that they didn’t think their peers took the SEL lesson seriously, even though they should have, such as this Black student’s comment that “I wish they would tune in more and see how it affect people of race.” Still others declared that their teacher hadn’t done the SEL lesson at all. If it wasn’t just an oversight, but an intentional removal of the curriculum, these teachers need to internalize what anthropologist Mary Catherine Bates tried to convey about having tough conversations: “The encounter with persons, one by one, rather than categories and generalities, is still the best way to cross lines of strangeness" (81). Not only this, but teachers owe it to their Students of Color to prioritize these conversations, no matter how challenging they are. Said one Black student: “I feel we don't talk about these issues in school enough, because some teachers feel uncomfortable. Why? I don't know. But I always feel uncomfortable, so talk about it!” Another SoC admitted her own struggle with conversations about race in a school context but also her courage and wisdom: “It
makes me uncomfortable sometimes but it's important to talk about.” If Students of Color are asking us to lead in this area, no matter our level of comfort, educators and school systems as a whole owe it to them to do it. In a one-on-one meeting with a junior Student of Color at Penn she went even farther: “Acknowledgement is what we really want.... Our experience is different than our white counterparts. We’re minorities. We don’t have the luxury to not take into consideration the majority’s perspectives...I look around and feel so different.” When teachers aren’t willing to discuss hard topics and risk failing, Students of Color are the ones that suffer most. Majority students are deprived as well because they don’t have the opportunity to hear from marginalized students.

Thankfully, many teachers are cooperating and diving into the hard lessons and conversations, and students do notice. For instance, one student reflected back on this year (when asked in the survey about anything we could be doing better as EC teachers), “Not really the teachers are trying the best they can for the situation, and i applaud them for their inordinate amount of effort.” Coming from a sixteen year old, this speaks to the relationships cultivated between adults and students, the highest of priorities in culturally relevant teaching. The process of cultivating young people by “truly listening” to them (as one ‘Voice’ survey respondent iterated) is not free of messiness, but it is necessary (Stovall 239). In fact, without it Penn-Harris-Madison school system is merely playing at justice, instead of seriously seeking it.

Returning to sponsorship, Brandt theorizes that both parties, the sponsor and sponsee, are in a reciprocal relationship where both have something to gain (557). In the case of the Open letter to PHM School Corporation, the stakes are incredibly high for said gain: Students of Color seek to gain a wider audience and validation of their stories
of racism which results in true change toward greater diversity, equity, and inclusion, whereas PHM could gain more culturally responsive spaces and classrooms where SoC and their families feel genuinely supported by administration, teachers, and peers alike, in both the short and long game. In the case of students in the EC program, with 46.4% of those surveyed saying that they feel marginalized, Penn has a ripe opportunity already within its midst to practice true listening and support of its marginalized population, whether on the basis of gender, race, sexuality, ability, or other categories. The more diverse student voices are listened to and their concerns acted upon, the greater force for equity the school (and system) can propel.

Since the open letter, multiple steps have also been taken system-wide to bridge gaps and create more inclusive, diverse, and equitable spaces. Many of these are in direct response to the voices of the open letter itself. In fact, of the twelve demands articulated, seven of those have clearly been improved upon. These include the hiring of a DEI Officer, a PoC himself, to help pave the way toward a more just educational space for all; monthly professional development at the leadership level among staff of Penn High School related to DEI; professional development system-wide on issues such as implicit bias, microaggressions, and racism/anti-racism; and staff book clubs at the middle and elementary schools chosen from DEI literature. They include student-centered socio-emotional lessons (SEL) at all educational levels related to issues of race; greater celebration and awareness of traditionally marginalized groups (e.g. Hispanic Heritage Month, Women’s History Month, Black History Month, Autism Awareness Month, etc.); curriculum days at the high school focusing on examining and discussing current literature being taught within the English department and making changes based on a DEI
focus and highlighting marginalized voices; and monthly meetings of the Superintendent's Advisory Council made up of community members, PHM system leadership, parents, students, and teachers, who bring action items to system administration related to topics of culturally relevant learning and instruction, discipline practices/policies, diversity in recruiting/hiring practices and professional development, and high ability/honors/AP/ACP. While all of the above demonstrate the current commitment by PHM schools to make good on the demands of the open letter, there is still fear that this progress will cease when the eyes of the community at large are not as fixed on issues of race and justice, and PHM in particular. As such, true change to the system needs to happen now and continue happening into the future with accountability. Further study and subsequent change needs to occur regarding the efficacy of specific pedagogies and curricula related to culturally relevant teaching as well as other areas such as procurement and retention of teachers of Color, professional development programs designed to create a greater voice for students and faculty of Color and more conversations around DEI, as well as using equity as a lens to continue to study the issues highlighted above from the Superintendent's Advisory Council.

There is another crucial area where I believe the system is currently falling short. Repeatedly throughout the first hand counternarratives within the open letter as well as in my one on one meetings with SoC, there was a common theme of a lack of listening and follow up when specific incidents of racism were brought to administration at the school or to other adults in authority. Even if situations were, in fact, addressed and consequences administered, if the SoC who brought the situation to the adult’s attention isn't aware of those consequences, then they feel like nothing was done, as demonstrated
by this statement in the open letter regarding an incident where Torah and Chinese Club posters were torn down at the high school: “To this day, we do not know if the perpetrators were punished and neither do the students directly affected by this incident.” While issues of privacy do require attention here, clear followup and good communication must take priority so that students know their voices have been heard and acted upon. This is also the case with positive practices like restorative justice, which the schools have started implementing. When I shared the importance of this in a meeting with the SEL Director, Assistant Superintendent, and DEI Officer (more staffing in order to implement more equitable practices), no assurances were made, although neither was the request denied. However, research on the implementation of such initiatives proves this aspect of execution essential. For example, in the National Education Policy Center’s brief on Restorative Practices, they specified, “Implementation research emphasizes the need for full adherence to program models, which can take considerable time, commitment, and resources. One study showed that partial implementation of a comprehensive restorative initiative differed little from no implementation” (Gregory 14). So while the leadership of PHM may have their hearts in the right place (another essential piece of equity implementation in schools) it’s going to take more than equity ideology to create a better school culture and future for all (Gorski 60).

Much has taken place in the Penn-Harris-Madison School System and in my own pedagogy and personhood since June of 2020. Many of those events and conversations show positive growth toward a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable existence for the students of Penn. Some of the most promising practices are coming out of the work taking place in the Early College Academy, but there is still a long way to go in all
spheres. As one of the students I interviewed shared, “A lot of people don’t feel heard. [At the time of the open letter] we didn’t see teachers responding - we got a letter from the school that just felt like it was saving face/their reputation. [It] didn’t feel sincere as a whole. [Certain teachers] seem to get it. But others don’t…” These SoC (and their families using the Funds of Knowledge model) deserve a place at the table, their voices must not only be present during this most tumultuous time but also echoe far into the future. And when those voices move on, new voices must take their place. School systems, especially suburban, rich, White school systems, cannot afford to become complacent or settle for the current state of affairs. Rather, they must keep pushing forward to show an even deeper commitment to justice. That is possible only when we refuse to settle for that single story and humbly listen, learn, and act from the voice sponsorship of those People of Color gracious enough to share their stories and wisdom with us. As another SoC emphasized, “[White students] really don’t know how bad racism was in the past...but they need to know. Just like we need to know because we still have to deal with the after effects.” All students will benefit from more education and more action regarding racism. This, and other areas for growth outlined in this article will require more time, passion, and financial resources by the school system, but it is both necessary and worth it. And the students will notice and benefit, which is what education is all about - benefiting our students. When we invest in becoming true allies in the fight against racism, students say things like, “Thank you for reaching out! It’s good to finally have our voices heard and for somethings to be brought to attention! Hopefully the students after us get to reap the benefits of the change!!” When we invest in becoming
true allies, we join with People of Color in becoming voice sponsors and culturally relevant teachers who truly better the culture and climate for all.
Endnotes

1. Please see Appendix 1 for the specific survey questions

2. All letter writer and student comments have been quoted without corrections or emendations in order to let their voices be heard without an implied evaluative context.
Appendix A

Making My Voice Heard
This year it's been hard to feel connected, something we're proud of usually doing a
good job of in Early College! That doesn't mean we don't want to give each of you a
voice - an opportunity to be heard. Here's your chance...please be honest with me so we
can make the Early College Academy an even better place!
(Names will only be disclosed to EC teachers with your permission)
* Required

1. Email address *

2. Which describes you and schooling this year? Check what applies. *
Check all that apply.

I'm home full-time, but I wish I was in school
I'm home and happy about it
I've been hybrid, but now I'm here more (or will be soon)...and overall, I'm happy about it.
I've been hybrid, but I wish I was virtual!
I've gone back and forth between fully virtual and hybrid

3. How would you say you've coped with this weird year of school (1 being awfully, 5
being terrifically)? *
Mark only one oval.

1
2
3
4
5

4. Which adults have helped you during this year? (check all that apply) *
Check all that apply.

Parent(s)
Teacher(s)
School counselor(s)
Counselor (outside the school environment)
Extended family
Other adults
I don't feel like any adults have helped me this year

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1g_mA3Ji-Ofzcr79xY5V5aTBJFzy3fIClgvObDw/J80/edit 1/4 4/20/2021 Making My Voice Heard
5. What's something you wish your teachers and/or administrators knew about you? *

6. Is there anything you think we could be doing to support you and your family in EC that we're not doing already? *

7. Is there anything that we are doing that you really like or think is working well? *

8. How well do you feel listened to by the adults in your life? (1=never, 5=whenever I need) *
   Mark only one oval.
   1
   2
   3
   4
   5

9. How could we, EC adults, do a better job listening?

10. How much do you pay attention during SEL lessons? (1=not at all, 5=all the time) *
    Mark only one oval.
    1
    2
    3
    4
    5

11. Is there anything that would make SEL lessons better?

12. What did you think about the SEL lesson on Racism/Anti-Racism this week? *

13. What do you wish your teachers or classmates knew in regards to your feelings on the subject of racism/anti-racism?

14. I would consider myself marginalized based on my (check all that apply): *
    Check all that apply.

           I am not marginalized
           gender
           race
           sexuality

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeULce7QbdY5Va78JFzy3f0CItvOObDwjbB0ledit 2/4 4/20/2021 Making My Voice Heard
ability/disability
political affiliation
socio-economic status (e.g. being "poor" or "rich")
other (please explain in the "anything else" question below)

15. Counternarratives are (true) stories or examples that are different from the "usual" - especially stories told by people that might be marginalized (not as readily accepted in society based on gender, race, sexuality, ability, etc.) Do you have any counternarratives to share? 

16. Have you read any of the Open Letter (petition itself or stories) sent to PHM in June 2020 confronting racism? *
Mark only one oval.
Yes
No

17. Do you think PHM is doing a better job of listening to Students of Color and their allies since the Open Letter/Petition this summer? *
Mark only one oval.
Yes
No
I don't know
I didn't even know about an Open Letter, so I definitely don't know about this question!

18. Anything else you'd like to share (about ANYTHING)?

19. What is your ethnicity? *
Mark only one oval.
American Indian or Alaska Native
Asian
Black or African American
Hispanic or Latino
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
White
Mixed ancestry
Other:
20. Grade? *
Mark only one oval.

9
10
11
12

21. Name (optional)

22. I am okay with my responses being shared with EC teachers, not just Mrs. Black.*
Mark only one oval.

Yes
No
Yes, but anonymously
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Danielle Black

Education

JUNE 2016 - PRESENT
Indiana University/South Bend, IN
English Graduate Student
Current GPA - 3.9

1995 - 1999
Taylor University/Upland, IN
BS in Communication Arts Education major, English minor
GPA - 3.79

1997
Daystar University/ Kenya, East Africa
Semester Abroad

Experience

AUGUST 2013 - PRESENT
Penn High School, Mishawaka, IN - Teacher, Early College Academy Leader
• Piloted Early College Academy designed for a potentially marginalized student population
• Led weekly cross-curricular meetings to better support students
• Planned and led Parent University meetings where parents could learn and be better involved with their child’s education
• Developed standards-based English, Speech & Capstone curricula for 9-12 grade students

JANUARY 2011 - PRESENT
Awake & Alive, Inc., Goshen, IN - Co-founder and Board Member
• Co-Created an organization that provides education and economic empowerment.
• Coordinated with Ethiopians and Americans to develop short and long-term plans for the success of an Ethiopian kindergarten and after-school primary school: Bright Future Academy; now supporting over 200 children
• Supported team members in developing The Kechene Women's Empowerment Project which gives women of some of the children at our school, job and financial training, as well as providing a stable income in a slum area of Addis Ababa where women especially do not have much opportunity
- Organized various meetings and events to raise awareness and fund raise including, but not limited to, a wine-tasting at Fruit Hills Winery and Orchard, speaking engagements at Epic Church, dinner with local African families, 44 Campaign, and speaking on-air multiple times at Chicago and local radio stations
- Built a board of directors who met quarterly for visioning and planning purposes.
- Launched a website, blog, and facebook page to share the mission and vision of Awake and Alive and get people and communities involved.
- Led and co-led teams of Americans to Ethiopia to educate and support the children, Ethiopian staff, and themselves

OCTOBER 2009 - JUNE 2012

Indianapolis Algebra Project, South Bend/Elkhart, IN - Tutor
- Developed individualized curriculum for 1-6 grade students
- Served as liaison between students, their parents, and the schools, including home visits
- Cultivated relationships in small group settings at urban schools with struggling students

DECEMBER 2003 - JUNE 2005

Crossing Educational Center, Goshen, IN - Curriculum Developer and Teacher
- Developed High School English curriculum in accordance with State Standards for the launch of the Educational Center's first school during its first year of operation
- Cultivated relationships with students who did not fit in with a traditional high school setting through weekly group “family time” and individual chats
- Facilitated small groups of students in a one-room classroom setting with both instructional and computer-driven curriculum

Awards, Accreditations & Activities
- 2021 Teacher representative at the monthly Superintendent Advisory Council on Diversity
- CELL (Center of Excellence in Leadership of Learning) Presenter: various venues including live at networking meetings and through a webinar format, 2019-Present
- 2020 Co-Presenter at Indiana Future’s Conference
- 2020 Diversity Presenter at Superintendent’s Advisory Council
- 2019 Social Emotional Learning Conference Presenter
- 2019 Technovation Presenter
- Indiana Teacher Certification (Grades 5-12), 1999 (renewed in 2006, 2011, and 2016)
- 2018 Finalist for Indiana Teacher of the Year
- 2018 Penn-Harris-Madison Teacher of the Year
- 2017 AdvancED Presenter (Early College Focus)
- 2017 Finalist for MBA for Educators Fellowship through Indiana University’s Kelley School of Business/Woodrow Wilson Foundation
- Homeowners Neighborhood Association President, 2014 - 2016
- 2014 Women to Watch nominee, South Bend, IN
- Musical Director at Penn High School, 2014 - Present
- 2004 Realizing the Dream Award Recipient
- Alpha Psi Omega Theater Honor Sorority, 1999 - Present