The danger of siloing equity work in one person

By: Dr. Sophia Bolt

Institutionalized racism and systemic oppression are the building blocks of the U.S. with lasting and powerful effects persisting today. Yet in 2020, amidst the beginnings of a global pandemic, the country was boldly reminded just how dangerous and inequitable a place our society continues to be for Black and Brown folx and others who hold historically excluded identities. The murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmuad Arbery, among countless other Black lives pushed many folx of varying backgrounds, including some white folx, to lean into antiracist work for the first time, some recommitting to fostering justice, and some others wanting to publicly show a commitment to anti-racism. Many schools, organizations, companies, and other institutions felt pressure to demonstrate how they were committing to fostering antiracism within their own respective spheres of influence. As our inboxes were inundated with statements of solidarity from brands we'd used in the past or from communities of which we were a part, the new question became whether these commitments were authentic and action oriented, or simply performative. With this, as Erica Buchanan-River (2020) explains, many leaders considered taking action in the form of developing positions devoted to and responsible for their organizations' diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and anti-racist work.

While certainly more action-oriented than a hollow statement of solidarity, creating a role to hold the DEI and racial justice work for an entire school, district, organization, or institution can itself easily become performative. Without great intentionality, collective accountability, and institutional access and decision making power given to this individual, this role can serve to perpetuate systemic racism and inequity, rather than dismantle it. As Jamila Dugan (2021) explains in discussing equity traps and tropes in education, "Siloing equity leads us to believe

that equity is separate from instruction, which is separate from culture, which is separate from every other aspect of student experience and learning." If this position exists in your district or organization, this person must be seen as a resource, yet not the source of equity and racial justice work. Instead, collective action is a necessity, leading to shifts in both minds and systems. A DEI director can play a guiding role in this, but with the understanding that they are supporting collective work that is held by all members of the community, from senior leadership to hourly staff.

When implementing this position, Buchanan-River (2020) urges leaders to understand their why. Speaking directly to school and district leaders, she writes:

Reflect on what diversity means to the school or district. How do educational leaders define equity? When you think about antiracist work, are you only thinking about racist incidents that may have made their way to social media or are you thinking about racism in its most subtle forms and the proactive work that is required to eradicate it? Are you also thinking about the intersections of identity (e.g. gender, class, religion, etc.)?

In most instances, a DEI coordinator or director holds the task of examining the conditions needed to foster equity and inclusion in the space and community and illuminating barriers to the work in the past. However, if those who hired them expect their work to be felt only through hosting diversity events and celebrations, the work has already halted before it can begin. As Buchanan-River explains, "Hosting an international festival on a Saturday evening is not going to eliminate racism when students return to school on Monday morning." Nor can this work be understood as a list of boxes to be checked off. Examples of check boxes may include conducting an equity audit, racial equity training for leadership and staff, and developing an explicit equity policy. While these practices are useful and important, they alone will not drive transformative change without sustained action and continuous reflection. Racial equity work is ever-evolving, ever-continuing, and involves accepting that the status quo must be challenged. Thus, the DEI director must be encouraged to and institutionally supported in disrupting the status quo.

An eye towards DEI roles in schools and districts

Take for example, that the status quo in a school or district may be (and often is) that students can receive disciplinary referrals for subjective infractions, such as being disrespectful, disruptive, insubordinate, or defiant. While objective disciplinary infractions are largely defined as verifiable actions with a permanent product (e.g., vandalism), subjective categories are based on perceptions (Annamma et al., 2019). These perceptions are informed by one's own social identities and implicit bias - negative associations of others that people unknowingly hold that affect attitudes and actions (Staats, 2016). Research (e.g.,Gibbs & Harrison, 2020; Hassan & Carter, 2021; Martin & Smith, 2017; Morris, 2016; Neal-Jackson, 2020) shows that students of color, particularly Black students, are disproportionately cited for subjective disciplinary categories. Historically negative narratives about Black people have put Black students under constant surveillance in school, criminalizing their behavior (Martin & Beese, 2017). For instance, Black female students being "too loud" are viewed as disrespectful, and even

threatening, resulting in disciplinary action while their white male classmates' similar behavior is dismissed as "boys being boys." If a DEI director recommends that a school or district redefine how they both understand and enforce subjective behavioral infractions, leadership should back this action, despite pushback that may come.

In fact, DEI directors should be members of the leadership team. And this leadership team must conspire to curate the conditions for their DEI director to be impactful. This includes publicly acknowledging the disparities underscored by the DEI director with transparency, vulnerability, and owning that addressing disparities is not the role of one person but of all who support children. As Buchanan-River (2020) explains, "Every person who interacts with children in a school system plays an integral role in dismantling racism. To think anything different and lack ownership, personal growth, or responsibility perpetuates the problem."

To that end, the person in a DEI role cannot be the only one holding folx accountable. In fact, it is often impossible for them to hold others accountable when they often do not supervise other school and district leaders but rather have a sort of insider/outsider status on the district leadership team. This ambiguity disinvites accountability and enforceability of what these DEI coordinators and directors know to be required in this work. The agency (or lack thereof) of folx in these roles matters greatly. While this person may come to have influence on practices and policies, such as the change to disciplinary practices mentioned above, they alone cannot ensure every educator in the building applies an anti-bias, anti-racist lens to their disciplinary practices. Other district and school leadership must ask themselves how they plan to create, uphold, and participate in mechanisms of accountability. A DEI director can, for example, organize professional learning opportunities, but how are district and school leaders holding themselves and others to account for applying the knowledge they have learned? How are anti-racist practices embedded in evaluation procedures and feedback opportunities? And perhaps most importantly, are there mechanisms in place to hear from those in the community most harmed in the past to share if and how they are experiencing positive changes? And when this sharing takes place, who is listening and who has opted out of the conversation?

Furthermore, to ensure racial justice work does not live within one person or role, the creation of a district equity team and building level equity teams can help facilitate a long-lasting and sustainable impact by fostering essential stakeholder buy-in. The district-wide committee should ideally include district and school leaders, BOE members, educators and staff, students, families, alumni and community members (Childress et al., 2009; Smith & Brazer, 2016). Similarly, school-based teams should be composed of school leaders, educators and staff, students, families, and community members and have representatives from most, if not all, grade levels and content areas (Childress et al., 2009; Smith & Brazer, 2016). These teams can extend the efforts of the DEI director by having a dedicated group of folx meeting regularly in each school building that works to increase the district and individual school communities' capacity around racial equity and justice. This can look like groups increasing social consciousness around systems of oppression, supporting their school communities' abilities to co-create, enact, and evaluate new equitable practices, policies, and procedures, and establish authentic forums to engage young people in transforming their schools into more equitable and inclusive spaces. A DEI director cannot be everywhere, but school-based equity teams can serve as localized efforts

that push forward the work, such as ensuring the progress towards goals of building staff capacity around promoting equity and fostering culturally responsive educational practices.

Moreover, in a space where adults are participating in critical reflection and doing the work to build their own capacity around equity and racial justice, the creation of student-led equity squads can serve to center and uplift student voice by directly involving youth in the school's equity work and decision making processes. These squads can also serve as a way for adults to stay accountable to their equity commitments as these squads form a direct line of feedback from students about the state of their school environment. In this way, the DEI director, their role, and the work is institutionally significant (not simply performative) and supported with other intentional agents of change working throughout the community. It is this collective action that will work to foster sustainable institutional change where goals of racial justice and a sense of belonging for all in the community can be realized.

Because racism and inequity for so long have been the status quo, communities in schools, even if guided by a DEI director, must collectively define success, uplifting the voices of the most harmed folx. In this way, a community will both know success when it occurs and be able to measure it with a racial equity lens from multiple angles (e.g. qualitative data such as climate survey results, community conversations, and other forms of story gathering + quantitative data such as school discipline data, school club enrollment numbers, and graduation rates). Much of this analysis can be spearheaded by the equity teams who commit to frequent and transparent communication with their school communities. Ultimately, equity and racial justice efforts must center a community's well being; members must be able to contribute their brilliance under the freedom of being able to bring their full selves to the community. When this happens, the health of the institution will improve.

Lastly, DEI positions are often filled by BIPOC individuals. If this rings true of your organization's DEI position, you can be almost certain that this job is an emotionally taxing one, if not at times a dehumanizing one. As Rann Miller (2021), head of DEI for a Philadelphia charter school district wrote in early November of this year:

I recognize that the perspectives of Black people aren't always valued within a white institutional space. Therefore I know my role, with its freedom, comes with the steep cost of always looking over my shoulder — knowing that at any time, my district can change course, I could be out of a job, and our students devoid of an advocate.

If you truly intend for your DEI director to initiate change, they will be making people uncomfortable, especially if they are working in a predominately white space. As you are asking them to help repair the community of generational and historical harm, ensure you are providing them with support as well. Support can look like a lot of things: access to and time off to receive mental health resources, access to and support of their participation in racial affinity spaces, and work timelines that are responsive rather than reactionary to the weight of the work at hand. Most importantly, support looks like letting them share what they need from you to succeed and defining that success for themselves. Most importantly, as Buchanan-River (2020) underscores, they need to know they are not alone in this work; those who hired them must also be doing the

work of critically examining how they show up and how they will use their positional power to foster equity and racial justice while holding others to do the same.

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