Creating Brave Space: Middle School Students Discuss Race

Beth A. Beschorner, *Minnesota State University, Mankato*
Kathleen Ferrero, *Lake Forest College*
Robbie Burnett, *MinnState System Office*

Abstract

Racial disparities must be addressed in every sector in the United States (e.g., healthcare, education, incarceration, etc.) (Skiba et al., 2001). Mary, a middle school principal, created a series of conversations designed to help a small group of students begin to have more productive conversations about race. The purpose of the current study was to explore how educators create a space for middle school students to have inter- and intra- racial dialogues. Results suggest: (a) a demonstrated need and demand for spaces that support inter- and intra-racial dialogues; (b) the importance of strategic planning; and (c) the vital nature of developing relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Now is the Time for Middle School Students to Gather and Talk about Race

"This is a critical time in our world, in our nation, and certainly in public education" (Hackman, 2005, p. 103). Although written over 15 years ago, this statement remains relevant today. During this time when opinions on topics such as vaccines, trust in law enforcement and other governmental entities, and racial equity fall along racial and partisan lines, educators must find ways for antiracist education to move beyond a mere catchphrase and instead become the operating core principle throughout all schools. This is critical in part because when schools provide students from differing backgrounds the opportunity to participate in facilitated conversations surrounding race and social justice, the students can develop their racial identity and become more racially conscious (Banks, 2001; Griffin et al., 2012). When students engage in this type of setting, it can provide opportunities for both real and significant change to advance anti-racist education.

Kendi (2019) explained that being anti-racist goes beyond equity and instead requires questioning the status quo and pushing against the systems which create racial disparities. Both White supremacy and racism fuel educational disparities as well as the inequity present in healthcare, the prison system, indeed throughout every sector of the US (DiAngelo, 2012; Skiba et al., 2011). This inequality perseveres in part because racism is normal and can be difficult to discern (Milner, 2017). However, it also continues because White, middle-class females predominate the teaching corps and they quite often have experienced very few relationships with Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) (Matias & Mackey, 2016). Additionally, they have grown up in families that believed in meritocracy and where White privilege was never acknowledged (Delano-Oriaran & Parks, 2015). In fact, many White people contend that they are colorblind (DiAngelo, 2016) and that they live in a post racial society (Delano-Oriaran & Parks). Because White people seldom acknowledge racism, they rarely participate in productive discussions surrounding race; rather they fall prey to White fragility often resulting in silence or tears (DiAngelo, 2011).

In an effort to combat this silence, intergroup dialogues promoting racial literacy and exploring topics such as racism could prove useful, albeit differently depending on racialized lived experiences. For example, high school students in Michigan engaged in intergroup dialogue, facilitated discussions between those of different social identities. These discussions demonstrated that students developed positive relationships with one another and developed skills which allowed them to move beyond the identification of racism in their schools toward imagining solutions (Griffin et al., 2012). Because one of the primary tasks of adolescence is to establish one's identity (Erikson, 1968), employing these dialogues in middle school about the ideas of race, racism, and anti-racist ideology is appropriate. Additionally, activities which promote racial literacy, using race as an

"analytic tool" allow White students to move from a colorblind ideology to being able to acknowledge their own race and its effect on others (Rogers & Mosley, 2006). Thus, the purpose of the present study is to highlight the efforts of a principal, Mary, who created opportunities for middle school students at the school she led to participate in constructive conversations around the topic of race through a series of both inter- and intra- group dialogues. The research questions that guided the current study were: How does a group of middle school students and adult mentors designed to facilitate inter- and intra-racial dialogue take shape? What are the experiences of the students and adult mentors?

Review of Literature

One of the initial steps toward vigorous discussions of racism requires students to understand that race exists (Tatum, 1997). This process likely differs depending on the color of a student's skin. Being White in America has typically meant that one does not have to think about race or how it affects everyday living (Biewen, 2017), so for White students they must first understand that they have a racial identity – they are members of a race (DiAngelo, 2016; Howard, 2010; Solorzano, 1997; Tatum). Once White students can accept that proposition, they have made a step toward undoing the racist colorblind ideology which has been pervasive in the US since the 1960s (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). This position of colorblindness has allowed Whites to claim that they do not see race, yet in reality they still view BIPOC as other and culturally inferior (Kluegel & Smith, 1986, as cited in Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000). Throughout this process of racial discovery, it is not uncommon for White people to experience fear and guilt (DiAngelo, 2019), which must be addressed in order to move toward accepting the presence of structural racism (Hackman, 2005). Many BIPOC students are well aware of their race and the negative stereotypes associated with them (Howard, 2008). Therefore, for BIPOC students, the opportunity for cross-racial discussions can provide an opportunity to share their unique voice of color as well as their stories and counter-stories (Delgado & Stefanic, 2017; Howard, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These conversations can also be an opportunity to move beyond simply acknowledging race and instead shifting toward disrupting systemic racism and turning toward social justice.

The research which has been done regarding the benefits of inter- and intra-race dialogues has focused primarily on college classrooms. The approach of utilizing intra-race conversations has become a common practice which allows students to examine their similar experiences and racism as manifested for that single racial group (Ford, 2012). One danger associated with White only groups is leaving the interpretation of the lived experiences of marginalized groups to the oppressors (hooks, 2003). Yet for both White and BIPOC students, these groups do provide safe places to process and vent (Rich & Cargile, 2004). When creating interracial dialogues one must be cautious if the groups focus on altering the beliefs of White people toward BIPOC, because often the leaders rely on the BIPOC to do the educating (Omi, 2001, as cited in Ford, 2012). Despite these potential problems, students can use the Courageous Conversations About Race (CCAR) Protocol (Singleton, 2015) to name, describe, and begin to process their racialized experiences. The CCAR Protocol includes rules for discussion that include a compass, four agreements, and six conditions. The compass describes the ways that people enter into conversations about race and include thinking, believing, feeling, or acting. Whereas, the four agreements include staying engaged, experiencing discomfort, speaking your truth, and expecting and accepting non-closure. Finally, the six conditions explain that people should keep their ideas personal, local, and immediate, isolate race in discussion, encourage multiple racial perspectives, establish parameters for the conversation, use a working definition of race, and examine the role and presence of whiteness.

These moderated interactions provide numerous benefits including increased awareness of race and institutional racism as well as reduced fear surrounding racial conflict (Sorenson et al., 2009, as cited by Ford, 2012). Providing this opportunity for middle school students represents a time for students to disrupt traditional practices in ways that can work toward creating an antiracist environment.

Program Development

When developing a program for middle school students to tackle complex and emotional topics like racism and White supremacy, educators should create caring relationships with adults in a safe and secure environment (Alder, 2002). This place of culturally responsive caring and

support can help promote healthy human development (Thurber & DiAngelo, 2018). Additionally, an understanding of two other important ideas should also inform any programs developed for middle school students. First, during this period of adolescence, peers begin to expend a great amount of influence (Cillesen et al., 2004, as cited in Jansen & Kiefer, 2020) which means that middle school represents an optimal time to discuss important topics like racism and privilege with classmates. Also, according to Erickson (1968) this time of adolescence is a critical time for identity formation. One part of this identity formation relates to the development of ethnic and racial identity. A key component of developing a youth's ethnic identity relates to the engagement with both same ethnicity and different ethnicity peers (Kiang et al., 2007, as cited in Umana-Taylor et al., 2014). During this period of adolescence, with its increased social-cognitive ability, students can begin to understand how their race can impact and be impacted by others (Umana-Taylor et al.). Taken together, this information suggests that middle school represents a critical juncture to bring about necessary social justice change.

Mentors

Mentors and leaders represent an essential piece of any middle school program designed to provide a space for not only racial dialogue, but where students can learn how to disrupt systemic racism as well as conceiving of a world where all people, cultures, and races are respected and honored (Darder, 1991; Freire et al., 2018). BIPOC students may feel more comfortable with BIPOC mentors because they should be able to understand the language and culture of the students with whom they are working (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Tintiangco-Cubales et al., 2014). However, it is important to note that it is not enough to simply share the same race; successful mentors must also be a credible part of the community so they can interact with the students honestly and with authenticity (Tintiangco-Cubales et al.). Additionally, BIPOC mentors may more readily recognize and appreciate the cultural wealth each student brings from their home to the group (Yosso, 2005). So, because not all people of one racial group necessarily share the same lived experience due to intersectionality, mentors should be chosen with prudence and care.

There is significant research about programs that utilize Black mentors, especially with Black males. One such group, Project Avalanche, embraced Urban Youth Culture in the classroom and yielded positive social and academic results for 12 Black males in New York (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2010). Similarly, in California, both the Omega Boys Club and Simba, community-based mentor programs, successfully provide both academic support as well as instilling a sense of social responsibility and community in its mentees (Noguera, 2009). Very little research exists surrounding the use of mentors within the Latinx community; in part, because there is no universal American experience for students throughout Latin America (Noguera).

Discussing Race

Over the past several decades, numerous strategies have been highlighted as effective ways to both discuss ideas of race and racism while also moving students toward working for social justice. Successful programs begin with defining terms critical to the discussion, such as race, ethnicity, racism, prejudice, and stereotyping (Solorzano, 1997) and using those terms in a precise and consistent manner (Peek et al., 2020). Another necessary step involves identifying stereotypes and curating examples which challenge the stereotypes (Solorzano). Early on in the process, ground rules should be developed and discussed to help create a safe learning environment (Peek et al.). The creation of a safe environment also allows students to feel free to critique society (Ladson-Billings, 1995) as well as analyze various issues of oppression (Hackman, 2005).

As students engage in deep and thoughtful discussion, microaggressions may occur and hurtful words will likely be spoken, but rather than calling out students, they should be "called in" to reconsider what was said (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014, as cited in Thurber & DiAngelo, 2018). This practice reinforces the idea of self-reflection which is essential in this work (Hackman, 2005; Peek et al., 2020). More specific teaching strategies include: race-reflective journaling (Hackman, 2005; Milner, 2003), utilizing current events (DeLeon, 2006), and using targeted questions to infuse social justice into the classroom curriculum (Brown & Brown, 2011). This study describes a middle school principal's efforts to create both inter- and intra-race conversations during a time when much of American society struggles to

acknowledge the racism present in our everyday world.

Conceptual Framework

The researchers viewed this study through a resource pedagogy lens while also acknowledging the importance of racial identity theories. Educators employing a resource pedagogy understand the wealth of information that students bring to the classroom from their home (Paris, 2012). They also move beyond simply building bridges between home and school and instead create meaningful experiences which honor the knowledge each student brings and allows all students to have the space to explore and grow (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris). Within the spectrum of resource pedagogy, we chose to focus on reality pedagogy, which requires teachers to immerse themselves in the culture and community of their students and then bring those artifacts into the classroom (Emdin, 2017; Sirrakos & Fraser, 2017). This constructivist worldview urges teachers to utilize cogenerative dialogue in order for teachers and students to reflect upon lessons together as well as to improve learning in the future (Emdin, 2017). Additionally, students should be encouraged to take on the role of teacher, using their strengths and unique knowledge to affect change in the classroom (Emdin, 2010). Another key point in this framework consists of ensuring that all students have an opportunity to speak and that no one's voice is more important than another (Emdin, 2017). Finally, in order to create racial justice and equity, reality pedagogy calls for teachers and students to thwart school structures which do not reflect the world in which all students live (Emdin, 2017). It is important to note that Emdin's work often focuses on large, inner-city, underfunded school settings and although Pleasantville does not meet all those markers, the diversity of the student population as well as the importance of the city in regard to the surrounding area, his work remains relevant.

Of equal importance in framing this research are a variety of racial identity models which explain how people move toward an understanding of themselves as racial beings (Helms, 2020). For White people, that requires not only acknowledging that they have a race, but also moving toward an anti-racist disposition (Helms). For White males, socialized to attach personal value to achievement (Robinson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000), they must also accept their natural reaction to protect their privilege, because racism focuses on a competition for scarce goods (Giles & Evans, 1986). Racial identity models for those who identify as racially minoritized often focus on understanding developing pride in one's cultural identity outside the normalized White experience (Poston, 1990). For those of mixed race, the model must also address integrating more than one racial identity (Poston). Healthy racial identities and self-awareness allow people to acknowledge and begin to address racism and move toward equity.

Methodology

The present study was conducted as a single case study (Yin, 2014), because case study is a useful methodology when in-depth investigation is needed (Tellis, 1997). Case study provides “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (Merriam, 1998, p. xiii) and was most appropriate for the present study because the researchers sought to describe the context for the intervention as well as the intervention itself (Yin, 1994). The case study was conducted as an exploratory case. The bounded phenomenon, or the unit of analysis, of the case study was the Brave Space group. It is important to note that these conversations took place during the 2019-2020 school year, which predates the global pandemic and the current furor of some regarding the teaching of critical race theory in the classroom. This is important to note, because it is possible that the well-funded political efforts that aim to cease racial equity work and maintain White supremacy within schools across the US may have influenced Brave Space. However, it is difficult to determine what the impact may have been because the group stopped meeting as classes shifted online as the result of the global pandemic.

Context of the Study

The study took place within a city in the Upper Midwest with a population of ~50,000 at Pleasantville Middle School, which serves ~1,100 students, 71% who identify as White, 12.7% Black, 8.4% Latinx, 5.1% Biracial, 2.2% Asian, .5% American Indian, and .1% Pacific Islander. Approximately 39% of the school population qualifies for free or reduced lunch. Pleasantville Middle School was built four years ago as a result of growth in the community.

The principal, Mary, a White woman, was in her first year as principal after three years in the role as Assistant Principal. Mary completed her principal preparation at a university that takes up issues of race, racism, and anti-racism throughout the curriculum. In the program she interrogated her own racialized experiences and began to consider how to be a racially conscious leader. Mary shared that her instructors consistently "challenged us to figure out what it looks like in our buildings when we are trying to lead for racial equity." When revisiting that idea of racial equity leadership, she determined that it went beyond professional development for teachers and that it must also provide space for students to discuss issues related to race, racism, power, oppression, and justice.

Therefore, she developed the idea of Brave Space, a group of 30 kids and 6 adult mentors, as a first step to engage kids in these types of conversations. This approach was one that she felt that she could manage in her first year as principal. She opted to select students for this optional group that she knew well and whose families she thought might be interested in having their child participate.

The 30 kids that were selected were in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade and were assigned into race and gender alike groups of five students each (i.e., five White females, five Black males, etc.) and one adult mentor. Mary intentionally selected the students to participate and had conversations with each of the students' families to explain the group, answer questions, and acquire permission for students to participate. Mary initially defined the groups as Black, "Hispanic," and White and male and female. However, after one meeting, the adult mentor for the group that Mary had identified as Black females shared concerns over her ability to facilitate the group because all of the girls identified as biracial and most had White mothers, whereas she identified as Black. The adult mentor did not feel that she could identify with children who had one White parent. Mary followed the adult mentor's advice and recruited a new adult mentor, a Teacher's Aide who worked at the middle school, who identified as biracial.

Mary planned and facilitated the group, which met once a month for one hour to have inter- and intra-racial conversations using the CCAR. The initial meeting provided an explanation of the CCAR Protocol and definitions of terms (e.g., race, culture, etc.). Subsequent sessions often included videos, articles, or storytelling as the content that students would discuss. For example, during one meeting the students watched "*Because I'm Latino, I Can't Have Money?": Kids on Race* (WNYC, 2015), a video where several BIPOC middle school students share their experiences as BIPOC children, and discussed their responses both in intra- and inter-racial groups. Brave Space was in its initial year and met six times before COVID-19 resulted in instruction shifting to an online environment. Although Mary and other school leaders have good intentions to bring the group back, it will likely not occur until all instruction is consistently delivered face-to-face and the pressing needs of the pandemic have passed.

The researchers for the study were two White women and one Black woman. The Black female researcher assisted with research design and data analysis. One of the researchers served as the facilitator of the White girls group while the other White researcher conducted observations. Both of the White researchers organized and led the student and facilitator interviews.

Participants

Participants for the study included Mary, 5 of the adult mentors (the sixth mentor declined to participate in the study) (Table 1), and 12 of the ~30 students that attended Brave Space (Table 2).

Table 1
Demographics of Adult Mentors

Pseudonym	Race	Gender
Andrew	White	Male
Anna	Latinx	Female
Beverly	White	Female
Brittany	Biracial	Female
Peter	Black	Male

Table 2

Brave Space Student Demographics

Pseudonym	Race	Gender	Grade
Abby	White	Female	6th
Angelica	Latinx	Female	6th
Ava	Bi-Racial	Female	7th
Avery	Bi-Racial	Female	8th
Bella	White	Female	8th
Bill	White	Male	7th
Bob	White	Male	7th
Callie	White	Female	7th
Calvin	Black	Male	7th
Erik	Black	Male	6th
John	White	Male	6th
Samantha	Latinx	Female	8th

Data Sources

Data sources include field notes from meetings, transcriptions from meetings, artifacts (e.g., videos shown, Power Points including discussion prompts, etc.), and audio recorded interviews with both adult mentors and students that were transcribed verbatim. For example, both students and adult mentors were asked questions like, "How would you describe your experience in Brave Space so far?" and, "What was the most memorable thing that has happened in Brave Space so far? Why was it so memorable?"

Data Analysis

First, all of the data were read and data were annotated with descriptive notes (Patton, 1990). Each researcher wrote a memo following their initial read (Saldaña, 2014). Then, researchers met to discuss their memos, initial impressions of the data, and to inductively generate an initial list of codes. Codes were applied by each researcher independently using Nvivo and then another memo was written by each researcher. Next, the researchers met to revise and refine the codes when they overlapped or were too general. Key concepts from the initial analysis were discussed to generate tentative themes (Miles et al., 2014) that included racial consciousness, time, collaboration, power/control, and uncertainty. Finally, these themes were further developed and defined to include sub-themes and more precise definitions (Table 3). The researchers used these themes, sub-themes, and definitions to re-code the data.

Table 3

Definition of codes

Initial Theme	Refined Theme	Definition of Refined Code
Uncertainty	Uncertainty in relationships Uncertainty as a result of lack of preparation	Uncertainty in relationships- Were not sure of how to communicate in the group, would say it felt new Uncertainty as a result of lack of preparation- Mentors and leader unsure of how to proceed or address a situation
Time	Lack of Time • Time for collaboration • Time within the session	Time for collaboration- time for planning and reflection for adult mentors Time within the session- constraints of time within the session

Racial Consciousness	Evidence of developing racial literacy Colorblindness or lack of racial literacy Application of racial consciousness/literacy Racial consciousness as a continuing endeavor	Developing racial consciousness- Discussion of learning, using appropriate terminology, and identifying experiences both similar and different to their own Colorblindness or lack of racial literacy- evidence of colorblindness Application of racial consciousness/literacy- Participant uses their own racial consciousness to name, explain, and/or describe an event or phenomenon Racial consciousness as continuing endeavor- Participant does or does not act in ways that demonstrate continued development of racial consciousness
Important/Positive Feelings	Affirmative • Positive feelings • Important	Positive feelings- Enjoying the sessions Important- Understanding and communicating the value of Brave Space broadly
Control/Power	Control of Planning Control of Session Lack of Power	Control of Planning- Evidence of little planning Control of Session- Rigidity in structure and facilitation. Whiteness underlying the facilitation Lack of power- Suggestions ignored
Collaboration	Scheduling Conversations	Scheduling- Decisions about when to meet and the influence of those decisions Conversations- Evidence of discussion about Brave Space

Results

Analysis of data yielded several themes, as indicated in the previous section. These themes will be woven through the following sections, which answer the first and second questions respectively.

Research Question #1- How does a group of middle school students and adult mentors designed to facilitate inter- and intra-racial dialogue take shape?

Brave Space was Mary's idea and she was excited to begin Brave Space at the beginning of the year. She had conversations about the idea with the Assistant Principal as well as several teachers and staff members, who all agreed to serve as adult mentors. She also purposefully selected students to participate and made a phone call to each of the families to invite their child to participate, to provide information about the group, and to answer questions. Although she did have written documents printed to send home, she did not think that sending a sheet of paper home would yield high participation and might leave many questions unanswered, so even though the phone calls were time consuming, she felt they were valuable and necessary.

As explained earlier, Mary identified the student's racial identity rather than having the students identify their own racial identity. After switching adult mentors for the group that she had labeled "Black" to a biracial female, she shared that she should have approached grouping students differently and allowed their own description of their racial identity to guide the ways she created groups. For example, several of the White mothers of the biracial girls tried to explain to her during their initial conversations about Brave Space that they were not sure that their daughters would identify as Black, which is how Mary had identified them. They believed their daughters may actually identify as White or biracial. However, Mary continued to identify them as Black girls. After a few group meetings, Mary realized that she should have allowed students to describe their own racialized and gendered identities. Because none of the students identified themselves racially, it is possible that other incorrect assumptions were made.

Planning Sessions

Initially, Mary held one formal meeting of the mentors where she described her plans to bring the group together and the logistics which she had decided upon (i.e., the groups of students with race and gender alike identities, hour long sessions, etc.). She shared later in an interview that she planned to draw the content for the sessions largely from the materials she was using for the professional development she was doing with teachers and staff within the school. However, it became apparent to her after the first two sessions that using the materials that had been created for adults was ineffective. "I thought I could use this content that we've used with staff and bring it in and use with students as well. It totally did not work out that way!" During both formal and informal interviews, Mary described planning the sessions as excruciating. When parents and mentors requested that they receive the Powerpoints the night before the meeting, Mary indicated that she laughed, "Half an hour before the session I am still finishing up! I am trying to get better at that, but that has been a little bit of a challenge."

The first two sessions focused primarily on content related to the use of the CCAR Protocol and defining words like race, culture, and ethnicity, but the subsequent sessions were more focused on discussing bias and racism using videos and other materials that allowed students to use the CCAR Protocol to discuss their own thoughts, beliefs, experiences, etc. The students would all watch the same video or listen to/view the same content, but the adult mentors facilitated each intra-racial conversation. Therefore, although students of different racial identities were talking about the same things, their conversation was different based on the facilitation by the adult mentor. The adult mentors often used their own racialized experiences to guide the direction and content of the intra-racial discussions.

Mary would often have brief conversations with the adult mentors directly following the sessions to discuss what went well and what might be important for planning in the future. For example, in one session that seemed to be particularly powerful for the students, they watched a video that demonstrated various people's responses to a White teen-aged boy, a Black teen-aged boy, and White teen-aged girl attempting to steal a bike in a park that one of

the White researchers suggested using (VladCantSleep, 2010).

Abby, one of the White students, responded to this video by explaining that it really stuck out to her as an experience in Brave Space because of "how different they treated all three of them." Samantha, another White student, shared that the video was powerful to her because it was clear that first when the White person tries to steal the bike, they are ignored, but then when it is a Black person, they start telling him "don't steal and they start calling the cops." However, Ava, a Latina, described that the video made her feel irritated and confused, because she did not "get why like people just separate people by their skin color and race…I don't get why we should be treated differently."

While the use of this video highlights an example of collaborative planning, Mary planned most of the sessions independently and, therefore, she missed opportunities to engage multiple racial perspectives in the planning for and delivery of the sessions. For example, Anna, a Latina, shared a video with Mary of a Latinx man that was in the news as a result of a racist interaction at a school board meeting where a Latinx man was told by a White man to go back to Mexico. Anna had hoped that Mary would use the video during a session, because "that's been my whole life." She believed that the video would resonate with the Latinx students who often remained quiet during Brave Space. However, Mary did not show the video and this type of multiracial planning did not occur.

Facilitating Sessions

The hour-long sessions were planned in the middle of the school day when the adult mentors' schedules allowed their participation. The students were excused from their classes to attend the sessions. Those students whose lunch was disrupted because of the timing of the session, ate after the Brave Space meeting. Mary facilitated all of the sessions. She typically stood at the front of the room, expected students to sit quietly and raise their hands for whole group discussion, and had students identify partners for discussion early in the session before they were actually having discussions. The content for the sessions (e.g., terms, videos, discussion questions, etc.) was included on a PowerPoint that Mary created. As Mary used the PowerPoints to facilitate the sessions, she also used storytelling to model the CCAR. For example, she often told stories of what it was like for her to grow up White in a small majority White town. The intention of Mary's use of the CCAR was to provide an example of how to use the protocol, and demonstrate vulnerability to the students and adult mentors.

Time Within Sessions

One aspect of facilitating the sessions that was particularly challenging was time. Since students were all coming from different locations across the school, it took several minutes at the beginning of each session for students to arrive, find their name tags, and to get settled and ready for discussion. Once students had arrived, some time was spent at the beginning of each session reconnecting with one another through small group discussion, partner conversation, or a whole group sharing time. Andrew shared, "We needed more time with that one [a video shown during a meeting] to be able to challenge them in a way that would've pushed their thinking." Similarly, Brittany, the biracial female adult mentor explained that she often has to tell her group "we'll talk about it next time," because it takes so long to "gear up to actually get into a good discussion…it takes a while, so I wish it could be a longer thing." These comments suggest that time constraints challenged the group's ability to dive deeply into topic and lack of time often prevented serious, sustained cross-racial dialogue.

Another aspect of time that influenced the sessions was staffing. Mary planned the time of the session based on the availability of the adults. The Assistant Principal was not able to attend every session because he sometimes got pulled away for other administrative tasks. Additionally, some of the other support staff who served as adult mentors reorganized their typical duties on days when Brave Space met. This presented several logistical challenges for both the students and their adult mentors. For example, Brave Space met when some of them would typically be having lunch.

Research Question #2- What are the experiences of the students and adult mentors?

Brave Space was a unique experience for students and their adult mentors. They explained this experience by first explaining the value that they placed in having a place to discuss race and racism with others.

Importance of the Meetings

Participants, adult and student, resoundingly shared that they believed that the conversations that occurred during Brave Space were important. Ella, a White female student shared that she "learned what's actually going on and not what I think is real." When asked what she meant by that statement, she explained that in talking with students from other grades, races and genders, those she only met in Brave Space, she discovered that racism and prejudice existed in the real world and that it was not "only in the movies." But Ella was not the only White student who was transformed by this experience. Callie shared the following:

> I've learned that it (racism) can really hurt people's feelings because I knew, but like I didn't really know to an extent and now I've learned that, um, how people's perspective on, um, like Black people's perspective on getting like, like getting those racist comments and, um, it makes me feel kinda sad.

Callie went on to discuss how during one meeting a female BIPOC discussed how people "think she's a bad kid based upon the color of her skin." But Callie only knew her as a straight A student who stayed out of trouble and never skipped class. Callie was not yet sure how those two pieces of information fit together, but Brave Space provided her with the opportunity to explore the conundrum.

Adults, too, described the usefulness of these sessions. Anna, the Latina adult mentor, shared that she was:

> One of the only teachers of color that are here, so to be able to relate with some students that I have in Brave Space is really cool…they can see like, um, that I work here. I did hard work to get here and I just kinda want to pass that on.

Peter, the Black male mentor, stated that:

> I think it's been one of the best experiences I've had at Pleasantville Middle School…it's brought a different perspective to the younger kids and we gained a different type of relationship building with them.

Moreover, many students that were not in Brave Space indicated that they would like to be included. Peter stated:

> I think it is one of the best experiences that I have had at Pleasantville and I have had a few…with regard to the kids, like more kids want to come, you know. There were kids asking, you know, every couple of weeks, Hey, how can we be a part of this?

Some of the BIPOC students also shared that their friends wanted to be invited to participate in the group. Avery, a member of the Black female group, said, "I told them [my friends] about it and they were like I wish I was in it."

Positive Feelings. In addition to describing the importance of Brave Space, both student participants and adult mentors shared that they enjoyed being in the space and hoped the program continued and expanded. Adult mentor, Beverly, explained, "My belief is that one of the biggest benefits for the White girls that were in my group was to be able to hear the stories of people that have different racial identities than their own." Similarly, Brittany shared, "I think it's important that it's [Brave Space] happening here where it's a very…we have a lot of diversity here, but it is very Whitewashed." Bob, one of the White students, said, "It's been fun. It's like really released me into deep conversations that I would really have never thought of if I wouldn't have gone to Brave Space." Similarly, Bella, a White female student said:

> It's been…it's cool and it's like kind of when you're talking to other people that don't really know about the difference in cultures and races, it's different because you don't really…I don't really do that in school…I don't really have other friends that are of a different race.

Adult Mentors' Uncertainty

The adult mentors explained that they often felt hesitant while facilitating discussion. This was likely at least partially because, as explained earlier, planning for the implementation of Brave Space did not include professional development. Therefore, as students learned about the Courageous Conversations about Race, four of the six adult mentors were learning about it simultaneously. This often resulted in the adult mentors feeling uncertain about the

facilitation of conversations about race with middle school students. Adult mentors shared that they did not always know what to say and were not confident that they were asking the right questions. For example, Beverly, the White female adult mentor, stated that she:

> Didn't know the questions to ask to get them to think about, like, okay, so where you are in a class and Trey, who's also in Brave Space, is in a class, what, what are the likely assumptions? You're being given the benefit of the doubt all of the time as a White female…They could see race as an experience that someone else was having…I couldn't figure out how to get them to think about race as something that they were experiencing every day. I didn't know how to do it.

This uncertainty was sometimes exacerbated by the adults' own racialized trauma. Anna, the Latina adult mentor, explained this by sharing:

> Everything I say, they just agree with and I don't want them…I want them to think for themselves and like sometimes I ask them a question and they're really quiet and I have like a really good answer and so I share it, but I don't want their opinion to be my opinion and so I'm fine with just sitting in awkward silence but then I'm like, I want to keep asking them questions, but I don't know if it is too many questions…My group is quiet…I have to ask myself why am I okay with just being quiet?

Even though the adults often seemed tentative, it seemed as though students were developing some racial literacy.

Students' Developing Racial Literacy

Student interviews and observations of the session suggested that students were thinking about race/ism, both what it is and how it functions in society (Horsford, 2014). For example, Callie, a White female student, explained that:

> I was talking to, um, this girl in a different group and she talked about how…people suspect that she's a bad kid based on the people that she hangs out this and like the color of her skin and stuff, but she's not. Like- she has all As and she's never tardy.

Similarly, Avery, a biracial female student, talked about watching the bike stealing video by explaining that:

> It wasn't really surprising to me that people thought that the Black male was, um, like doing the stealing and like just making assumptions and, um, just thinking that they're doing something bad and with the White girl, um, it surprised me that they decided to help her and with the White male, it just seemed normal.

While Avery was not surprised by the way that the Black male was treated, her comments suggest that she was thinking about how the White girl was treated in ways that indicate she was considering the role of White privilege.

Beverly, the adult mentor for the White females, shared:

> One of the biggest benefits for the White girls that were in my group was to be able to hear the stories of people that have different racial identities than their own. Many of the things that they would bring up in the discussion were related to recognizing that, you know, like, I think they came in with a belief that racism was something that happened a long time ago.

Peter, the Black male adult mentor, said that some of the activities were really meaningful. He explained that:

> Some of the videos we were watching painted a picture for the kids because they have maybe not been through that situation, but they have seen that situation and it kind of hit home to them…I thought that was meaningful to the kids.

Relationships. Several of the students shared that initially the conversations in Brave Space were awkward because they were talking with students and adults that they did not know. For example, Bella, a White female, shared that "it's sometimes awkward talking to other people, um, but yeah, it's cool how like you can get like lots of different groups together in one place to talk about race." She went on to explain that it has been "like nerve racking to like [talk] because you don't really know if you should say this or you shouldn't say this." Similarly, Calvin, a Black male student, said, "Sometimes it kinda awkward. I don't know how to talk about it

sometimes…I think it has gotten a little easier talking to some people."

However, Peter, the adult mentor for the Black males, indicated that a unique mix of students and mentors did initially keep conversation to a minimum, but "every time we were in there, it was a learning- fun- experience for the kids, like kind of being out of their groups." Anna, the Latina adult mentor, shared that her group was very quiet at first, but "I really appreciate the group, because… I feel comfortable in that environment."

Discussion

There are several strengths and limitations of this study. First, there is very little research that explores racial literacy development in middle school specifically. Thus, the focus on middle school students is a strength. Moreover, the structure of the meetings can provide other school leaders with a starting point for creating a similar group within their own context. However, the present study cannot be used as an exemplar, because although Brave Space created a space for students to discuss their experiences related to race/ism, it often fell short of truly enacting reality pedagogy because structures of power for the group, where the principal did the planning and facilitation, did not encourage cogenerative dialogue and did not push against the current school structures (Edmin, 2017). As the facilitator, Mary relied on instructional norms that centered whiteness (e.g., one person speaking at a time, an adult facilitator who generated the content for the sessions, etc.) and upheld power structures both between adults and students, but also racial power structures, because it was the White female that was "in charge" of the group. One way to change the dynamics within the planning and facilitation of the group might be to collectively plan and deliver the sessions' content in ways that elevate students' ideas and voices (Beschorner, Burnett, & Ferrero, 2021). Collaborative planning could help to decenter the whiteness and might allow for teaching and learning that is more congruent with reality pedagogy.

While Mary and her Brave Space sessions may have fallen short in consistently creating a culturally responsive environment, they did provide an opportunity for all the participants to consider their own racialized experiences as well as the experiences of their peers. The use of the CCAR Protocol for discussions provided a useful structure for conversations that might be helpful in other contexts (Beschorner, Burnett, & Ferrero, 2021). Yet, students' intersectional identities likely influenced the ways that they experienced those conversations in important ways that were not examined. For example, the content of the sessions and the corresponding dialogue provided a chance for White students to begin to grapple with how their lives are affected by race. Conversely, the BIPOC students shared their racialized experiences with other BIPOC students, some of whom had never done so, and built connections with their peers and an adult mentor who worked at the school.

Rather than encountering a colorblind classroom (Kluegel & Smith, 1986, as cited in Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000), students learned not only the appropriate definitions and distinctions between race related terms, but also had an opportunity to begin to solidify their own racial identity. One of the White male students, Bob, shared the following, "We talked with other people and how their points of view are as a different race." He was able to acknowledge that all the people had a race and that their race could be reflected in their actions and ideas. Another White student, Abby, shared that the Brave Space group:

> Helps me understand how much the world treats Black people differently than White people and how mean they are. Because before I didn't notice that much of it, but now watching the videos and hearing them (the BIPOC students) talk about, I notice that it happens a lot more often than I thought it did.

It was clear that some of the BIPOC students were also still developing their racial identity. In an activity where the students were asked to choose a percentage which accurately reflected the amount race affects your life, one of the Black males indicated that he chose 10%. Even after discussion with his group, his sister, and his mentor he shared that, "It (race) doesn't really affect us." Overwhelmingly students shared that they enjoyed talking with one another once they got to know all the group members and if this group had not been halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we believe it would have continued to play a significant role in allowing these middle school students to explore their racial identity in a safe, caring space.

Another feature of the Brave Space group included utilizing same race and same gender mentors. Research has demonstrated that especially for BIPOC students, encountering leaders that look like them may allow them to feel more comfortable and therefore able to work through tough topics such as race, racism, and becoming anti-racist. So, Mary's idea to employ mentors as she did proved to be powerful and the mentors agreed. One of the BIPOC mentors indicated, "I think it's important that this is happening here where it's a very, we have a lot of diversity here, too, but is a very white wash as a state and as a town." Yet, it is not enough to simply have mentors of the same race, they must also truly belong to the community in order to create genuine, powerful connections with the students. When the mentor for the Black female group shared stories that did not seem to acknowledge the lived experiences of some of the students' interactions between police officers and the Black community in this Upper Midwest town, she may have lost some credibility with her charges. Although she shared a similar racial identity, her lived experiences, or consciousness of those experiences, likely did not connect with the experiences of the students in the community.

While the findings of this study do reveal considerations for initiating similar groups that could be influential for educators, scholars, and policy makers, the current political climate brings about a whole host of new challenges. Talking about race in the US has never been particularly easy but with seven states banning the teaching of Critical Race Theory as of July 2021 (Ziesloft, 2021), it is clear that the political battle continues to be heated and educators may need to carefully consider how the discussion of race can most effectively be introduced in the school setting. Yet, the resistance to teaching about race and racism in schools demonstrates precisely why it is critical to do so. As educators determine how to move forward with developing students' racial literacy during this time of increased attention, they must support each other in the face of resistance and not lose sight of the importance of presenting the history of the US as thoroughly and accurately as possible. This quote from the White female group's adult mentor clearly demonstrates the gravity of this task.

> I think they came in with a belief that racism was something that happened a long time ago. I think that in one conversation, one girl even said it's not like we drink from different water fountains any more. So being able to hear the stories of the people of color, I think that helped them recognize…Wow, this didn't just happen a long time ago. Racism is continuing to exist.

References

Alder, N. (2002). Interpretations of the meaning of care. *Urban Education, 37*(2), 241-266. doi:10.1177/0042085902372005

Banks, J. (2001). Citizenship, education, and diversity: Implications for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 52*(1), 5-16.

Beschorner, B., Burnett, R., & Ferrero, K. (2021). Creating space for middle school students to discuss race. *Voices from the Middle, 28*(4), 65-68.

Biewen, J. (2017, July 12). Retrieved from https://www.sceneonradio.org/episode-42-my-white-friends-seeing-white-part-12/.

Bonilla-Silva, E., & Forman, T. (2000). "I am not a racist, but…:" Mapping White college students' racial ideology in the USA. *Discourse & Society, 11*(1), 50-85.

Brown, K., & Brown, A. (2011). Teaching K-8 students about race: African Americans, racism, & the struggle for social justice in the U.S. *Multicultural Education*, 9-13.

Darder, A. (1991). *Culture and power in the classroom: A critical foundation for bicultural education*. Bergin & Garvey.

Delano-Oriaran, O., & Parks, M. (2015). One black, one white: Power, white privilege, & creating safe spaces. *Multicultural Education*, 15-19.

DeLeon, A. (2006). Beware of "Black" the Ripper! Racism, representation, and building antiracist pedagogy. *The Social Studies, 97*(6), 263-267.

Delgado, R., & Stefanic, J. (2017). *Critical race theory: An introduction*. New York University Press.

DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, 3*(3), 54-70.

DiAngelo, R. (2012). Nothing to add: A challenge to white silence in racial discussions. *Understanding and Dismantling Privilege, 2*(1), 1-17.

DiAngelo, R. (2016). *What does it mean to be White?: Developing white racial literacy*. Peter Lang.

DiAngelo, R. (2019). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books.

Emdin, C. (2010). Affiliation and alienation: Hip-hop, rap, and urban science education. *Journal of Curriculum Studies 4*2(1), 1-25.

Emdin, C. (2017). *For white folks who teach in the hood ... and the rest of y'all too: Reality pedagogy and urban education*. Random House Inc.

Erikson, E. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. Norton.

Ford, K. (2012). Shifting white ideological scripts: The educational benefits of inter- and intraracial curricular dialogues on the experiences of white college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 5*(3), 138-158.

Freire, P., Ramos, M., Macedo, D., & Shor, I. (2018). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Bloomsbury.

Giles, M., & Evans, A. (1986). The power approach to intergroup hostility. *Journal of Conflict Resolution, 30*, 469-486.

Griffin, S., Brown, M., & warren, n. (2012). Critical education in high schools: The promise and challenges of intergroup dialogue. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 45(*1), 159-180.

Hackman, H. (2005). Five essential components for social justice education. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 38*, 103-109.

Helms, J. (2020). *A race is a nice thing to have*. Cognella.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. Routledge.

Horsford, S. (2014). When race enters the room: Improving leadership and learning through racial literacy. *Theory into Practice, 53,* 123-130.

Howard, T. (2008). Who really cares? The disenfranchisement of African American males in preK-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record, 110*(5), 954-985.

Howard, T. (2010). *Why race and culture matter in schools: Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms*. Teachers College Press.

Jansen, K., & Kiefer, S. (2020). Understanding brain development: Investing in young adolescents' cognitive and social-emotional development. *Middle School Journal*, 18-25.

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. Random House.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465. doi:10.2307/1163320

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education. 11*(1), 7-24.

Matias, C., & Mackey, J. (2016). Breakin' down whiteness in antiracist teaching: Introducing critical whiteness pedagogy. *Urban Rev 48*, 32-50.

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study application in education*. Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M., Huberman, M., & Saldanã, J. (2014). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Milner, H. (2003). Teacher reflection and race in cultural contexts: History, meanings, and methods of teaching. *Theory Into Practice, 42*(3), 173-180.

Milner, H. (2017). Opening commentary: The permanence of racism, Critical Race Theory, and expanding analytic sites. *Peabody Journal of Education, 92*, 294-301.

Noguera, P. (2009). *The trouble with black boys: And other reflections on race, equity, and the future of public education*. Jossey-Bass.

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher, 41*(3), 93–97. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244

Patton, M. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Peek, M., Vela, M., & Chin, M. (2020). Practical lessons for teaching about race and racism: Successfully leading free, frank, and fearless discussions. *Academic Medicine, (95)*12. S139-S144).

Poston, W. (1990). The biracial identity model: A needed addition. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 69*, 152-155.

Rich, M., & Cargile A. (2004). Beyond the breach: Transforming white identities in the classroom. *Race, Ethnicity & Education, 7*, 351-365.

Robinson, T., & Howard-Hamilton, M. (2000). *The convergence of race, ethnicity, and gender: Multiple identities in counseling*. Merrill Prentice Hall.

Rogers, R., & Mosley, M. (2006). Racial literacy in a second-grade classroom: Critical race theory, whiteness studies, and literacy research. *Reading Research Quarterly, 41*(4).

Saldanã, J. (2014). Coding and analysis strategies. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qualitative Research* (p. 581-604). Oxford University Press.

Sealey-Ruiz, Y., & Greene, P. (2010). Embracing urban youth culture in the context of education. *The Urban Review, 43*(3), 339-357. doi:10.1007/s11256-010-0156-8.

Singleton, G. (2015). *Courageous conversations about race: A field guide for achieving equity in schools* (2nd ed.). Corwin.

Sirrakos, G., & Fraser, B. (2017). A cross-national mixed-method study of reality pedagogy. *Learning Environ Res, 2*0, 153-174.

Skiba, R., Horner, R., Chung, C., Rausch, M., May, S., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race is not neutral: A national investigation of African American and Latina disproportionality in school discipline. *School Psychology Review, 40*(1), 85-107.

Solorzano, D. (1997). Images and words that wound: Critical race theory, racial stereotyping, and teacher education. *Teacher Education Quarterly, 24*(3), 5-19.

Tatum, B. (1997). *"Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" and other conversations about the development of racial identity*. BasicBooks.

Taylor, E. (1998). A primer on Critical Race Theory: Who are the critical race theorists and what are they saying? *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 19*.

Thurber, A., & DiAngelo, R. (2018). Microaggressions: Intervening in three acts. *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work, 27*(1), 17-27.

Tintiangco-Cubales, A., Kohli, R., Sacramento, J., Henning, N., Agarwal-Rangnath, R., & Sleeter, C. (2014). Toward an ethnic studies pedagogy: Implications for K-12 schools from the research. *The Urban*

Review, 47(1), 104-125. doi:10.1007/s11256-014-0280-y.

Umana-Taylor, A., Lee, R., Rivas-Drake, D., Syed, M., Seaton, E., Quintana, S., Cross, W., Schwartz, S., & Yip, T. (2014). Ethnic and racial identity during adolescence and into young adulthood: An integrated conceptualization. *Child Development, 85*(1), 21-39.

VladCantSleep. (2010, May 27). *What would you do? Bike theft (White guy, Black guy, pretty girl)* [Video]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ge7i60GuNRg

WNYC. (2015). *"Because I'm Latino, I can't have money?": Kids on race*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C6xSyRJqIe8

Yosso, T. (2005). Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth, *Race Ethnicity and Education, 8*(1), 69-91.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. Sage.

Ziesloft, B. (2021, July 29). *Map: Critical race theory bans by state*. Campus Reform. https://campusreform.org/article?id=17892