Race, Repair, and Youth Participatory Action Research in one Rural School

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This qualitative study examines the progress of a rural New Jersey school in addressing longstanding racial conflict after implementing a Youth Participatory Action Research project two years prior. Here we take up the thread as students continued to develop activities meant to increase awareness of ongoing issues, and as adults used professional development time to model best practices in managing racialized interactions. Eight teachers and staff not originally involved and nine students who had been directly involved were interviewed and a student focus group conducted. All participants agreed that progress had been made though issues around curriculum and discipline remained. Both the adults and the students engaged in considerable self-reflection about their roles. Adults reported the impact of hearing the students' voices on school practices, and students discussed how their roles as researchers and peer leaders had contributed to their standing as experts.

The racialized violence of the past few years has not left rural schools untouched. Several days after the death of George Floyd students from the school discussed here joined a nearby march in support of Black Lives Matter. They were met with a reenactment of the killing by two local residents (Shanahan & Tully, 2020). The violence played out before the marchers was also a reenactment of historical violence in the county, where intimidation by some White residents has continued to shape attitudes and practices in both community and school. Although racialized violence in rural areas does not usually receive prominent attention by the national media (Simpson, 2020; Cook et al. 2018), this incident starkly and publicly revealed the racism in the community that underlay continuing inequities in the disciplinary, academic, and cultural practices in the school. Deerfield High School is situated in rural southern New Jersey, where centuries-old habits of thought and interaction have continued to isolate Black students. In this study we describe the impact of an equity-based project conducted over several years in the school. Like other small school districts Deerfield often enacts the habits and values of its community, and it has not been immune to the crescendo of discriminatory actions and speech, even when both had seemed to sink back into the shadows.

Previous to our study a student group worked with outside university researchers to determine the extent of inequities within the school and to set in place processes to remedy the inequities they found (Zion, 2020). The impetus for that initial project was a racial incident that quickly led to a review of school data demonstrating clear racial inequities in academic placement. A student voices group was implemented; after reviewing the school-wide data students developed a survey to which about 500 students responded (Zion, 2020). The student group worked with researchers to analyze the responses and then presented the results to faculty and staff at a staff in-service. Adults who had been reluctant to acknowledge issues in the school were finally willing to listen as they heard students themselves detail continuing experiences of social and academic discrimination (for example, a dearth of African American students in high-level courses and over-representation in special education). The findings also included substantial occasions of disparate discipline by race for lateness and other infractions and faculty reluctance to respond to racially offensive speech in hallways and classrooms. To address the inequities and the "lack of trust in administration/staff to respond to discrimination" (Zion, 2020) the students presented policy proposals which the school board approved. These included curricular changes, student inclusion on the equity council, peer education for all students, and professional development for faculty and staff.

Our purpose two years later was to assess the extent to which that project had changed the school policies, processes, and interactions and second, to gauge the perceptions of adults and students on the project's effectiveness. In order to trace the lingering ways in which a school with a history of racial conflict constrains its students of color and how it can

also begin the process of repair, we asked the following research questions:

1. To what extent did adult and student participants have similar views of the equity issues?
2. How did the students and adults assess the project's effectiveness two years in?
3. To what extent had policies and interactions changed?
4. How did participants conceptualize their own roles and the roles of others?

Historical Discriminatory Policies

The Deerfield High School participants in this study were working to remedy a history that continues to reproduce structures of the colonial state and nation from its beginning occupation by the Dutch, who brought their enslaved people with them to as they made their way through South Jersey in the early 1600s. Unlike the highly urbanized northern section of New Jersey, much of South Jersey is rural; parts are very sparsely settled. Its history has often been entwined with that of the southern states of Delaware and Maryland, and it frequently adopted their stance on race. Although an 1881 New Jersey law forbade "the exclusion of any child from a public school because of religion, nationality, or color," segregation continued to increase in South Jersey (Wright, 1953a, 1953b). The region has frequently undercut its Black citizens who have worked in various ways to seek educational parity. This history of race in rural South Jersey underlies how communities interact 400 years later and how their schools serve them. Though often invisible to casual White observers this history is periodically, and emphatically, revealed in times of social change.

Deerfield is within a few miles of a major path on the underground railroad (Wright, 1988) and of several historically Black communities. Its population of students of color has remained about 25%. The school is heir to a legacy of racial segregation: its district, adjacent areas, and the county in which they lie have enacted frank segregation policies (Hunter, 2015; New Jersey Urban Colored Population Commission, 1945; Tucker 2019; Wright, 1954); have engaged in de facto segregation (Hunter, 2015); and are embedded in areas where Klan activity periodically sweeps through (Tucker, 2019).

The segregatory policies that historically promoted a stark divide between the White and Black populations increased during the twentieth century. High schools were largely desegregated, but segregation in elementary schools grew. Statewide in 1930 approximately a third of Black students attended segregated schools (New Jersey State Board, 1933; lists by race later disappeared from the reports). Sixty communities in New Jersey had at least one segregated school and higher teaching loads for Black teachers than for White teachers (Hodges, 2019; Jensen, 1948). Although the northern part of the state gradually desegregated its elementary schools, Wright (1988) noted that: "between 1910 and 1940…from Princeton south every city or town with an appreciable black population supported a dual system of elementary schools" (p. 68). By 1930 nearly twice as many African-American students in Deerfield's county attended segregated schools as those who did not, and nine buildings were "used exclusively for colored people" (New Jersey State Board, 1931, p. 425). Although the 1948 constitution required the desegregation of all schools, the policies on elementary schools often continued to promote segregation even in high schools. The New Jersey Division Against Discrimination (1948) found that in "43 districts, largely in South Jersey…'there were definite segregatory policies in operation.'" (p. 122). Although only 3 districts remained segregated three years after the constitution (Alnutt, 2018), two elementary schools in the Deerfield district remained formally segregated until 1960.

By 1968—twenty years after the 1948 constitution—some schools in the Deerfield and surrounding districts still remained de facto segregated; several were deteriorated (Hunter, 2015). At Deerfield long-standing racial tensions about athletics led to protests that set off increasingly large protests and then riots throughout that part of the county (Hunter, 2015). The Klan, which had been a relatively minor presence for a time, reasserted itself. In the 1990s there were cross-burnings throughout the area, and "a house owned by an interracial couple" a few miles away had a firebomb thrown at it (Tucker, 2019, p. 81). In 1993 in the Deerfield district there was a cross burning "at the home of a white …family known to have black friends," and racial epithets were stuck on the door of a local church (Tucker, 2019, p. 81). Despite systematic discrimination and intimidation Black communities in South Jersey found ways to support their students by establishing their own church-related schools (New Jersey Historic Trust, 2020) and by developing

welcoming school climates in their segregated elementary schools (Wright, 1971; Tucker, 2018).

Community memories like these inform a school's racial climate and can have a pronounced impact on student engagement and academic progress (Griffin et al., 2017). Racialized discipline, one remainder of segregation, is especially disempowering (Freeman & Steidl, 2016; Mccray et al., 2015). In our case at Deerfield the students of color perceived first, that they continued to be excluded academically despite apparent qualifications; second, that they were subject to discriminatory disciplinary policies; and third, that interactions with some peers and teachers were tainted with racism.

Active Student Engagement, Student Voice, and YPAR

The initial project was an example of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), a framework that embodies culturally responsive education (CRE) tenets and is a special case of student voice, a protocol that uses adult-youth collaborations to conduct Action Research. CRE is an active response to the passive stance students, particularly students of color, are frequently asked to adopt. It includes constructivist frameworks that build on students' own experiences and link them to their classroom work; inclusive curricula; and unmasking oppressive school and community structures and taking their knowledge beyond the classroom (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Student voice initiatives (Mitra, 2008; Zion, 2013) provide a pathway for youth to contribute their knowledge and perspectives to the adults in their schools and in so doing to influence school culture. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), is Action Research (Stringer, 2013) is a collaborative iterative process in which problems are defined, steps decided on and taken, progress assessed, and next steps chosen, with each further change managed in the same way. These cycles of continual reflection, evaluation, and development thereby not only drive change processes but, importantly, require participants to go beyond one-and-done solutions, since the changes require participants to continually adapt their thinking and approaches. Because of the inseparability of action and reflection, as Freire (2000) argues, and because it is a decentralized and inclusive process, Action Research is a powerful tool for social change.

YPAR draws together the assumptions and methods of Action Research and CRE and does so with a clear social justice focus (Ozer et al., 2020). It conceptualizes youth involvement as one part of a partnership with adults in the school (Means et al., 2021; Zion, 2020) that emphasizes the voices of students (Anderson, 2018; Sussman, 2015) while acknowledging the inevitable power differential between adults and students. Like the student voices framework (Mitra, 2008; Zion, 2013). YPAR is employed to ameliorate dysfunction in educational systems, particularly at the K-12 level, and it engages students as researchers and translators of student perceptions (Mitra, 2008; Zion 2020). YPAR's roots in CRE make it both an effective lens through which to view the structural issues that promote discrimination and an effective tool to define problems and work for change. Where projects become part of the continuing institutional discourse they are opportunities for establishing goals of teleological change (Kezar, 2001) which is both long term and intentional, and for initiating models for further change.

Participants in such long-term projects have the opportunity to move beyond simply becoming "acclimated" to new tasks, instead gaining "competence" in understanding the foundations of the domain in which they are working (Alexander, 2003, p. 10-11). Where a situation encourages students to use their competence to produce new knowledge, they achieve expertise (Alexander, 2003), and when they learn enough to evaluate and respond to evolving situations they have acquired adaptive expertise. This adaptive expertise (Alexander, 2003; Bransford et al., 2000; Hatano & Oura, 2009) in turn promotes the engagement of participants at a deep level, providing opportunities for cognitive development (Hatano & Oura, 2003) and for responding to new situations with novel solutions (Carbonell et al., 2014). Students who have conducted research on peers' perceptions of discrimination in their school may acquire expertise that adults do not have; in fact, their solutions may "closely parallel those proposed by professional organizations and commissions" (De Fur & Korinek, 2010, p. 15). Adults in turn may then confirm the students as more knowledgeable, conferring on them a new standing as more expert others. This reversal of novice/expert roles (Jacoby & Gonzales, 1991) can be useful to all participants because it allows for fluidity and flexibility in developing and managing the changes. All participants thus not only enact but

also develop roles other than those usually ascribed to them. As Delpit (1988) notes, "the teacher cannot be the only expert in the room" (p. 288).

Rural teachers, however, may have difficult challenges in navigating expert/novice roles. First, as Azano and Biddle (2019) point out, rural teachers are often the locus of community memory, may have grown up in the community or taught multiple generations of students (as was often the case at Deerfield), and the community and school may expect them to maintain an unchanging sense of place. Second, when teachers and students are of different races there can be additional tensions that carry over from the community into the school, especially if the community is relatively isolated. The social interactions around race in the community can be reproduced in the school, constraining teachers from listening effectively. In such cases students may have nowhere to go with their concerns. Third, as Neri et al. (2019) argue, teachers asked to examine the structures in which they participate may have concerns about risking their standing even when they agree with the goals. However, some of these challenges may be offset by the deep connections teachers in rural settings can have to their students; such connections may be leveraged into partnerships (Kryst et al., 2018). However, challenges in responding to racial issues are most often studied in urban schools; how rural communities and schools face racial conflict is, we argue, important and understudied.

Method

The present study took place to years after the student voices initiative began. The goal was to gauge the extent to which the changes agreed to by staff and students had been effective. Thompson conducted interviews with eight teachers and staff. As a White woman, she had worked with student voice in other settings but was an outsider in this one. Although one teacher played a role once the initial project began, she had been asked to simply be a faculty presence in the room while students met. The other staff were "outsiders" without direct participation. The intention of this second phase was to gather perceptions of visible changes in school climate and processes. The hope was that respondents would speak freely as the researcher and second author had no previous involvement in the school and were not constrained by relationships with school staff or university collaborators. Some staff were

selected for interviews on the basis of role (e.g., administrators who knew about the initial project but had not participated, program advisors); snowball sampling led to others who were selected to reflect some diversity in subject area. A focus group was conducted with nine students who continued to participate regularly in the student voices group; interviews were subsequently conducted with five of the nine but were halted on March 9, 2020, as the schools were shut down.

Prior to the study IRB permission was sought and granted. The focus group and all interviews used semi-structured questions and were conducted at the school from July 2019 until just prior to the physical closure of schools in March 2020. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Both adults and students were asked to identify the problems that prompted the project and to describe their sense of the project impact, any difficulties they saw, what they had learned, and their opinions on future directions for the project. Adults were separately asked to discuss their perceptions of the impact of student presentations and following work on school culture. Students were separately asked to describe their roles as researchers and peer leaders and the extent to which they had seen interactional and policy changes as a result.

Coding of all interview and focus group transcripts was accomplished with a two-stage process. In the first cycle each researcher developed descriptive codes; disagreements were resolved by discussion between the authors and codes were refined. We then used pattern coding to establish the larger themes, after which both researchers wrote analytic memos.

Findings

There was substantial agreement by adults and students about the equity issues that had prompted the initial phase of the project. Most also agreed that the processes in place afterward had already had some impact on school culture, that discipline was still racialized to an extent, and that administrative and faculty support played a major part both in making the project work and in changing the interactional habits in the school. All interviewees reflected on their roles at length. In general, their roles predisposed them to emphasize aspects of the project differently. The adult interviewees had watched the original presentations by the students at the in-service and were sometimes present when

students were leading peer workshops. Although their roles as teachers conferred expert status on them, most acknowledged that they were novices in understanding the students' difficulties. The students, originally novices, had by the time of this later study gained substantial expertise. In the next section we present the perspectives first of the students and then of the adults.

Student perspectives

The semi-structured questions addressed to students were specifically targeted to elicit responses describing their roles in the project over the previous two years, what went well and what didn't; project value and impact; how students and adults worked together; the knowledge they contributed and what they learned the most from; and their thoughts on useful future directions.

Roles as researchers and peer leaders. The students talked at length about their roles as researchers and peer leaders, which they linked closely to their own development and growth and to the impact of the project. Several described themselves as formerly disaffected but drawn in by the opportunity to have a role in righting a situation they saw as damaging, and in the process becoming visible leaders. As one student said, "Before I was in this group, I sort of just went to school without purpose. At least now I can say that I have some purpose here. I'm doing something. And I'm at least trying to change it a bit before I leave." Another described the sense of fun in doing the research, "because we actually are making a difference," but also mentioned the value of learning to present to a large audience: "I didn't really like presenting that much. But then I got used to it more, and especially when we presented to the teacher in-service [and] to the large crowd at the college." A third student credited the group with helping them develop "a lot of insights to what people are actually going through." And still another recognized her own growth in understanding not only the extent of the problem in the school but also how the group could work to find a solution:

> This year I heard like a lot of situations that were kind of, like opened my mind to different issues going on…that made me think like, Oh, this this group is like really like significant in like solving those problems, like different types of discrimination like racism.

Although the students were clearly interested in correcting situations that made their own school experiences difficult, there was also an altruistic goal that gave them a sense of larger purpose.

The recognition the students earned in their new roles as researchers, presenters, and peer leaders gave the students a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018) that was further enhanced by having found a group of equally engaged and like-minded peers. As one student reported, "You can see and understand things more and you think, these are my people and we have things in common." Another added,

> …we can all like have a safe space to share fears and our experiences and I think that is what makes us who we are as a group of students who can be like sharing our voices…I think I built myself up from just sitting in meetings to sharing my point of view. I know that there's people who can relate to me, are just like me going through the same things I'm going through.

The student voices group was thus a useful testing ground for the students that promoted considerable self-reflection about their own development.

As peer leaders the students were responsible for leading character lesson activities in homerooms. As new teachers inevitably learn, one of the ways to really learn something is to teach it; and the students came away from these activities having learned something about both the activity and themselves. One peer leader described an occasion of self-revelation when conducting an activity in which participants wrote something unsigned about themselves that they could share with the class:

> I think there's a good amount of people who took this activity seriously. And like, it helped *me* to self-reflect because that was the whole goal of it. I think it's like, benefits a lot people especially me because I've never told people how I feel on the inside, all the time. And even though my name wasn't on the paper. It almost felt like I was like putting it all on my cards on the table.

Another activity asked people to step over a line if they knew people who had had certain experiences. Describing it as "eye opening," a different student commented on its emotional power: "people went back into their homerooms and we had discussions, some of the discussions with people crying and, you know, they opened up to people that they usually wouldn't have talked to." A third student mentioned that taking on a role as peer leader

> hasn't just changed how I think of myself but how I act and react to certain situations. It's made

me more thoughtful and insightful, I guess, like…because I realized that, now I'm in a position of responsibility and leadership, so I have to be.

Students clearly valued these opportunities both to enact new roles and for self-reflection.

In addition to what they helped produce and then witnessed in their peer-led workshops, students' comments on the project impact often concerned interactions with the adults in the school. Discipline had been an issue that initially prompted the project two years prior to this study, and the students' perceptions were of uneven resolution. One student asserted, "I really want to see progression in the entire school as a whole, not just in one room…I want to see *everything* get better." The students saw three continuing issues in particular: teacher uncertainty about managing situations, racial disparities, and the need for adults to respond to discipline issues as teachable moments rather than simply issuing punishments from which students learned little. On the one hand, one mentioned,

> That's one thing I really hope can change so that like future generations that come here so that when they feel like there's an issue they feel comfortable reporting them to the teacher, and are confident that it's going to be addressed, and not just [by] punishment, like detention, but understanding.

Another further discussed the reluctance of some adults to address issues:

> The resistance of some teachers I hope that, hopefully the issue of staff and administrators not responding to situations, I hope that changes because that has been a big problem in this school for a *long* time. God willing, I believe that we're on our way to working out different things

A third student, however, had seen some teachers "take more initiative," adding:

> I've seen progress in teachers, taking steps into like not being afraid to like, tell a student *Hey you shouldn't say that!* Because I know there are certain teachers, a lot of teachers in the school that didn't really know how to address certain situations, so they just *wouldn't* address it which is never the right answer. So now they kind of have an idea of what they should say in certain situations, which is amazing. That means the presentation that we gave initially and like all the stuff that we've been doing, they've been paying attention and picking up on and supporting us for

the most part. Some teachers are still not all the way there, but that's how it always is.

Importantly, however, the students overwhelmingly credited the administrators and teachers, especially those involved in the program, as being very supportive and helpful. They reported that their trust in the adults had increased, one noting:

> I would say that my level of trust in teachers has gone up, because I see them addressing certain situations, I'm like, okay, well I know that they know how to address a situation. I can trust them to if anything happened for me that they'd be able to handle it in the way they're supposed to be handled.

Another student noticed posters about minority achievement in one classroom; others commented that feeling able to talk to teachers had made it possible to ask questions and keep on top of their studies. These new interactions between faculty and students seemed, as one student said, to be "making [the school] less of a facility and sort of more of a family."

Teacher and Staff Perspectives

The interview questions addressed to the adults asked them to describe their understanding of the reasons for the project, how it worked, what they had learned, the response from other adults in the school, changes the school made, what the future of the project should be, and whether other schools might benefit from a similar project. Several questions also asked the adults to describe the work accomplished by the student participants or to assess their growth. We found 12 major areas that staff addressed within the study (see Table 1). Surprisingly, since curriculum and disciplinary inequities had been a major concern in the initial student survey (Zion, 2020) and were the subject of major policy changes, there were somewhat fewer explicit mentions of either. (However, the curriculum was just at the beginning of redevelopment.) The largest focus was on the adults' sense of their own roles in needing support, in supporting students, or in witnessing colleagues and administrators as supporters.

Adult perceptions of the project and its impact. The adult interviewees discussed the project impact most frequently in terms of what they had learned by hearing the voices of their students. As one said, "when those educators heard from their students, experiences that they've had in this school

district, I think it makes way more of an impact than then whatever resource they read, or whatever documentary they watch." Interviewees saw the continuing project as both valuable and sustainable, noting that other schools attempting these changes often went through revolving programs that lost focus and engagement. They were clear that the project was both collaborative and student-centered:

> We were going to work with the students to come up with authentic solutions, whether that be a change in policy, a change in procedure, educating staff, we also committed to having the students do a lot of that work. The students were the ones who were sharing the findings, the students were the ones who were educating the staff.

They acknowledged the impact of the project on the school at large and on themselves and other adults in the school and saw clear benefits for the students who were directly involved. The students had experiences and growth they could not otherwise have had, but the process also had its challenges:

> It's really rare for high school students to be given freedom to speak their truth, and then actually have someone hear them and do something about it. So I think…they didn't realize how hard their work was. Because social justice and you know, advocating for, for equity and access, it's really difficult. And so…a lot of kids dropped out when they got down to the business of rolling up their sleeves and doing the work.

The benefits, both to the school and the students, more than made up for the challenges. One teacher, voiced pleasure in watching the students "find a voice they didn't know they had," an observation repeated in various ways by several others, and it is indicative of the appreciative listening in which many adults were now willing to engage.

Adult roles as supports for students and each other. As had the students, the adults focused at length on how roles were enacted at all levels, from administration to student. The adults uniformly noted the importance of administrative support in all phases of the project. For example, one interviewee noted the administration's desire for a

> totally student run group facilitated by committed and caring adults. And we were going to be open to whatever they found, and then committed to working toward addressing their findings, which is not always an easy thing to do.

> Because you think to yourself, what are they going to find? Is it going to be something that I can authentically and realistically address? But we committed from the start that we weren't going to shy away from it just because it might have been controversial.

Coupled with the uncertainty of what the students "might find" was knowing that administrative support was necessary, but by itself insufficient. One interviewee noted that previous administrative pushes for reform had gone unheard. "When it was just administration saying we need it," one pointed out, "they [many faculty] weren't listening."

Because the YPAR project was designed around student research and voice, it was hoped that hearing directly from students would engage faculty in a collaborative effort to make changes in the school culture and climate. One interviewee recalled, "Once the kids said, 'you really aren't getting it,' then they started to listen." Another interviewee argued, "No matter what you think, when it comes from a student, it's hard to dismiss that…, I hear staff members that might not be happy with some of the stuff…but they can't argue with how a student feels." This perception was echoed by another adult, who emphasized the importance of the students' comments: "I know that teachers were affected by the presentation that kids did at the beginning of the school year, last year, where what they did was read actual comments that some of the kids had put on their surveys." A third interviewee observed surprising teacher behaviors:

> I know that it has made people open up…I watched teachers I didn't think would ever thank the students for presenting, go thank them and hug the kids. I know…how positive a lot of the feedback was.

Although the interviewees saw most of their colleagues as supportive, they also pointed out that the support was not universal: "And there's always the few that think that, you know, they're [the students] just looking for attention or you know, whatever." One assessed the support of the adults in the school as "mixed…some faculty that again have closed their mind to it," while another mentioned a group of colleagues who continued to adopt a negative stance toward the project; that interviewee wondered if some other colleagues might be presenting themselves as more supportive than they really were. A more optimistic interviewee estimated faculty support at around 90%.

If the support was also complicated by the fact

that some faculty had experienced the same bias as the students, the support of administrators and students was helpful in finding a way forward:

> There was definitely some pushback because we actually had students in the voice committee talk about bias and we had some staff members including myself talk about bias and how we've experienced bias. I think it's such a hard climate right now, politically and socially, that there is always going to be some pushback and there was, but it was very much supported on what our students did and what our staff did was supported by administration and that really helped.

In this interesting excerpt it is possible to see the reciprocal relation between adults and students supporting each other.

Support for teachers also came in the form of professional development that modeled handling classroom racial issues. As had the students, the adults understood that some colleagues might ignore—and many might be uncertain how to respond to—intimidation. "Our teacher training," one observed, "doesn't give us training on social emotional [issues] at least it didn't, you know, 15 years ago, 20 years ago." An in-service that used situations of "unfairnesses students had felt in the classroom" was therefore particularly useful. "In small groups we said, 'Okay, what would you do with this with your class? How would you prevent this from happening?'" The resulting toolbox was not only useful for repair, but also an opportunity for collegial collaboration.

Adult perceptions of student growth and development. Not all interviewees thought they had close enough relations with the students to assess their development, but having watched the presentations and subsequent peer workshops most were impressed by the work the students had done. As one argued, they had permission to finally ask for what they needed:

> They were introduced to the concept of equity, and it helped them to understand, I think, things that they've tolerated in their atmosphere for a long time and didn't understand that it was inequitable, how understanding equity helped give agency to students.

Another adult interviewee pointed to the professionalism in the presentations, noting that the issues were "our" issues and not those only of the students: "I was so impressed with how professional

and poised they were…with how well they were able to articulate what our issues are." That articulation rang true for still another adult:

> I feel like the students, I had these hunches, but they're, they're high-level hunches about what isn't working for kids. And as students were able to really bring it down to those small chunks, yeah, we could fix X, Y, and Z that would go a long way.

The students' original presentations had contained specific examples of discrimination when the adults were now beginning to think just as specifically about their part in possible solutions.

Impact of race and culture on curriculum and discipline. Several adults mentioned the role community demographics played in the school. As one remarked, "it's a very white community, and as far as what I was told, is that, like, the community wants it to stay that way." Others noted that "a lot of the teachers here went to school here," and that stability was a double-edged sword, with persistent racialized views on student ability and discipline. For example, one interviewee argued, students had internalized their teachers' estimates of their suitability for higher-level coursework:

> Students weren't encouraged to take honors or AP classes, or their teacher didn't, or they themselves didn't, think they were smart enough to take the honors, or AP. Or they said, they felt like they didn't belong. Staff members are making an effort to help with changing policies that will rectify these concerns.

To address the many disparities in the curriculum, the school was working with the university researchers to "rewrite" it and "add more equitable lesson planning."

Interviewees also discussed the alignment of their own data on discriminatory discipline practices with that of the students, particularly the "definite disparity" in how Black students, especially males, were treated. They echoed the students' concerns that current detention policies just required students to "sit there and stare at the wall." One interviewee enthusiastically endorsed the students' suggestions for more appropriate responses such as empathy training, saying, "I love that idea. And that they have to, you know, write an essay about, you know, some barrier that they face and do some sort of self-exploration while they're in internal [detention]." This statement indicates the adults' growing awareness of the racial inequities in discipline and

the ineffectual policies that had guided discipline practices.

Discussion

This study is a snapshot of the Deerfield project two years in, just before the work was paused by the pandemic. The YPAR structure was both productive and durable, and it successfully drew together many parts of the Deerfield High School community along with university researchers. The university researchers played the role of Greek chorus, commenting on and guiding the process; one adult interviewee described the importance of this "outside point of view…sometimes it's hard to see what's inside your own house." The project structure, from the initial student presentations of data and ongoing peer-taught workshops to teacher in-service workshops encouraged considerable reflection by the entire school community on the necessary changes. Because Action Research, and in this case YPAR, has built-in structures for both collaboration and continual reassessment, both the adults and students reported how they had developed expertise in new areas and adapted it to the changes under way.

The interviewees universally saw the value in the project, the changes accomplished, and the hard work that remained. Perhaps the biggest change was the adults' growing awareness of how old discriminatory practices underlay many school structures and its culture. The largest number of responses by the adult interviewees' largest concerns were about their own roles and those played by the other adults, and it is possible to argue that the project had its greatest impact on them.

The adults viewed administrative support as crucial to the sustainability of the project (Kirshner et al. 2020). As many of the adults recognized, previous professional development activities had not been addressed including students in advanced courses, curricula that reflected all students, and interactions between all members of the school community. PD activities had centered around reading about others and were usually adult-centered and distanced; there was often no pathway to apply whatever was learned to the school. The students' voices, on the other hand, were both immediate and deeply personal. Indeed, on a professional development feedback survey, respondents had overwhelmingly pointed to power of the students' voices and the examples of discrimination they laid out. The adult interviewees in this study reported that other adults in the school,

if not always in agreement with the process, were aware that the student voices group, the administration, and many teachers had begun to make changes

Among the changes are work on both curriculum and discipline. With regard to curriculum teachers had recognized their roles in encouraging students to join AP and Honors courses. They also were beginning to work on establishing a more inclusive curriculum. As one interviewee noted, "They're breaking into curriculum, that absolutely has to be done." With respect to discipline the interviewees noted the importance of modeling ways to handle classroom discipline and hallway racism.

The students found the SV group to be a place where they had like-minded peers, adults who cared about them, and ways of taking on new roles as researchers, presenters, and peer teachers. The students also saw beginning changes in access to advanced classes, and to changes in how some faculty interacted with them. Discipline remained an issue, however, and the students saw it as very much a work in progress. Their views on the peer teaching activities were that although peer teaching had been institutionalized into the school calendar, some problems remained. For example, activities were presented in homerooms, and some spaces like the gym did not lend themselves to interaction. The peer leaders also needed to depend on the homeroom teachers for support that was not always forthcoming. However, the interviewees said that these research and leadership opportunities would be useful to them as they moved forward into college or jobs. Students mentioned continuing to find research opportunities, and one had decided to become a teacher. Although both students and adults understood the project to be a permanent part of the school structure, both groups had concerns about how to manage its future. The students hoped to hand off the responsibilities to incoming students, and the adults were considering the best ways to include the rising ninth-graders, some of whom had experience of a similar initiative in their middle school. The intent was to create a continuous set of Student Voice practices beginning middle school and continuing through high school.

Conclusion

Because of its focus on research a YPAR project can enable five important results. First, conducting research adds to the skills students learn. Second, because students collect and interpret the data they

see things that adults may not. Third, these data can reveal hidden school structures that drive conflict and inequity and undermine the idealized public institutional face. Fourth, YPAR offers a protocol for collaboration between adults and students that allows all participants to take on expanded roles and experience things they otherwise could not. Finally, these efforts can promote deep connections between students who have felt isolated.

Our project is like others on student voice and YPAR in finding value in adult-student collaboration that promotes a focus on data rather than blame. The Deerfield students, like Mitra's (2007) played valuable roles as interpreters of school experience that both promoted relationship-building and also teacher "accountability" (p. 22). This was clearly the experience for many adults at Deerfield, who began to be supportive of students in ways they had not previously been. As Kirshner (2007) points out and as was true at Deerfield, collaboration also reduced adversarial positioning. The resulting fluid expert/novice interactions allowed teachers and students to think of each other as colleagues. Like other "cross-age" (Kirshner 2007) groups, ours demonstrates the interdependence of the students, school administrators, teachers, and other staff in making goal-oriented change

As is also the case in other YPAR/student voice examples, the research itself is critical for the institution to beyond anecdotes that are often dismissed. Such anecdotes are frequently perceived as pertaining to only to certain individuals; instead, as Tilly (1998) argues, the inequality is "actually the consequence of categorical organization" (p. 15) that data can reveal.

Like other student voices projects (Parham & McBroom, 2015; Sussman, 2015; Kirshner, 2007) Deerfield's aims for policy changes and continuous improvement. By implication such projects are often extended over school years and sometimes beyond. Such efforts need to be carefully tended as unanticipated externalities arise. Although some projects (e.g., Warren & Marciano, 2018)) extend into the community the researchers and staff chose to limit the Deerfield project to in-school work. Although the adult interviewees mentioned their hope that at some point in the future the community would be brought into the YPAR process, they acknowledged that it was still too early to do so. YPAR, however, would be an apt model to use in response to the community conflicts that inevitably find their expression—intentioned or unintended—in the school.

When asked what they would tell other schools contemplating such a project, the adults and students uniformly made the following recommendations. As one adult said, "our kids will be honest, so start with your kids…find out what the issues are from them." Second was the idea of support. The adults said that administrative support was crucial to doing the work. As one mentioned, without support, "it won't work, because the administration is the one that tells the faculty that they must listen to the kids…if their administration's not buying it, the kids are going to need to work really hard to convince the administration" in order to move forward. The students knew that the support of administration and teachers was critical to both the SV group and to the changes they hoped to make in school culture.

Finally, both adults and students looked forward to a clear relation to the middle school and its SV project that would allow the uncomfortable conversations and racial repairs to begin earlier. To be effective such projects would need structures that acknowledge the differences in maturity levels of the students. A group is already underway at Deerfield Middle School, and it will be a promising way to move forward.

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