Radical Belonging in Racist Systems:
A School-University Partnership to Enact an Antiracist Learning Community

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In October 2020, the UW members of our team were looking for a partner school with whom to explore how to build an antiracist learning community in the context of a racist society and racist systems. Recalling related conversations with Lindbergh principal Andrea Richichi from the year before, we reconnected and developed a goal that we all enthusiastically shared: to realize an innovative partnership in which researchers, educators, and families collaboratively create and study an antiracist school. For the Lindbergh side of our team, the opportunity to be supported in this mission by scholars committed to racial equity was too good to pass up. For the UW side, the chance to work with a small neighborhood school with strong leaders committed to antiracism was equally appealing.

Between December and May, we co-planned and co-led six sessions focused on racial equity. These sessions took place on Zoom, during the monthly whole-school professional development (PD) time designated by the district for Race and Equity PD. The sessions aimed to build a shared understanding among faculty and staff of what radical belonging is, why it matters, and how students' current experiences of radical belonging are shaped by race and racism. We also aimed to build trust between faculty, staff, and the UW team members, and with that trust, capacity for conversations about racism at Lindbergh. The following summer, we built on these foundations with a two-week, six-session summer PD retreat (18 hours total, including 3 in person and 15 on Zoom), focusing on how systemic racism impacts our school policies, teaching practices, and daily interactions with students and their families, and what we can do about it. Twenty-six faculty and staff attended the summer retreat, with every grade level represented as well as English as a Second Language teachers, Cross-Categorical teachers, and other staff (e.g., school psychologist, librarian). We had planned to continue our partnership work into the fall, but these plans were postponed indefinitely in response to the district's sudden move to focus PD on the LETRS program, in conjunction with the need to manage the continually high demands placed on educators by the COVID pandemic.

In studying our partnership's work thus far, we have focused on the question: What unique opportunities for and challenges to antiracist learning exist in school-university partnerships? To address this question, we recorded PD sessions and took copious field notes, collected reflections from participants, and recorded our own meetings in which we planned sessions and reflected on our observations. In addition, we audio-recorded interviews with 4 teachers and 3 parents about their experiences and understandings of radical belonging at Lindbergh. To analyze our data, we closely examined evidence of divergent and even contradictory views about the kind of ideas and relationships required to develop an antiracist learning community, as well as evidence of progress in our ideas and relationships.

Major Findings and Implications

Despite the important opportunities to build an antiracist learning community, we faced numerous challenges. One challenge we experienced was that it took time to establish a sense that we were

"really collaborative" as "one team" (in teachers' words), overcoming an initial sense that UW team members were outside "observers." Related, while some teachers expressed appreciation for being pushed and challenged, others said they were uncomfortable being "called out" by UW team members. While none of this is surprising, we found it especially difficult to address these challenges on Zoom, with meetings spread several weeks apart. In contrast, during the summer, we met six times in two weeks, for 3 hours each time, with our first meeting in person (subsequent meetings were on Zoom). After only the second of those six sessions, a teacher said they were "feeling a bond between UW staff and Lindbergh staff I haven't felt before." Others' feedback and our own observations and documentation indicated that this teacher's sentiments were widely shared—and that the new "bond" supported our group to dig more deeply into racism and antiracism by, in one teacher's words, "hold[ing] a mirror up to my [our] motives and actions, and be[ing] humble when I [we] see my [our] own racism rear its ugly head." Furthermore, in interviews at the end of the summer, teachers had difficulty recalling experiences during school-year PD, whereas they recounted vivid memories of ways the summer PD had affected their thinking. We believe this is not only because summer activities were more recent but also because their impact was greater. Taken together, this evidence suggests that *an effective strategy for antiracist learning relies on a sustained, intensive period of time for "Race and Equity" PD conversations—during which both ideas and relationships can build strength*.

Another challenge we have found relates to our goal of inviting families into our partnership. We all agree that partnering with families is important. Yet, there has been concern that faculty and staff need to develop more trust and shared understandings with one another first. Further, it has become clearer that many teachers (especially White teachers) feel overburdened with other tasks, uncertain as to what partnering with parents of color could look like or what benefits it could have, and even fearful of parents of color, rooted in racialized and gendered stereotypes. As a result, the only involvement in this project we have had from parents and families to date is the 3 interviews we have conducted. We see two implications here for MMSD. First, consistent with our first challenge, *building relational trust among educators should be a priority.* Such trust builds organizational capacity for growth in many areas—especially for developing antiracist learning communities, which require vulnerability and deep collaboration. Second, *teachers and parents need structures and learning opportunities that support their connections with one another, to in turn support children of color and their learning.*

A third challenge we faced was reconciling our different ideas—some of which were vague and inchoate—about what we meant by "an antiracist school." The team responded to this challenge by developing the concept of "radical belonging," building on stories partners told one another during PD about our own experiences. Collectively, we co-constructed a general definition of what radical belonging is and isn't. For example, during the March 2021 PD, Lindbergh educators contributed that teaching for radical belonging *is* about "honoring differences not just superficially but centering what students bring to support learning" and *isn't* "assuming that rigor and excellence belong to whiteness" (as captured on a Google slide where everyone jotted ideas). UW team members coordinated these ideas with existing scholarship to elaborate three aspects that are necessary to radical belonging for students of color: social belonging, or feeling accepted, included, and cared for *as a student of color;* academic belonging, or feeling that one's learning affirms, builds on, and extends one's multiple identities; and democratic belonging, or feeling heard and respected as a social actor and decision maker. (We wrote a conceptual paper on radical belonging, currently under review for the journal *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*.) Based on our previous work, we believe that *without a shared understanding of the positive vision we are trying to achieve, antiracist partnerships will flounder,* although developing shared understandings of the racism we are trying to eradicate often gets more attention. *Our framework for radical belonging—and/or our collaborative process for building a shared vision—can be a useful starting point for MMSD schools.*

Works Referenced:

Louie, N., Berland, L., Roeker, L., Nichols, K., Pacheco, M., and Grant, C. (under review). Toward Radical Belonging: Envisioning Antiracist Learning Communities. Submitted to *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*.