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Talk it (Racism) out: race talk and organizational learning

Race talk and
organizational
learning

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to investigate whether race-specific language use can advance organizational learning about the racialized nature of school problems. The study addressed two questions: first, is teacher use of racial language associated with how they frame school discipline problems during conversational exchanges? Second, what do patterns of associations suggest about racial language use as an asset that may influence an organization's ability to analyze discipline problems?

Design/methodology/approach – Co-occurrence analysis was used to explore patterns between racial language use and problem analysis during team conversational exchanges regarding school discipline problems.

Findings – When participants used race-specific and race-proxy language, they identified more problems and drew on multiple frames to describe school discipline problems.

Research limitations/implications – This paper substantiates that race-specific language is beneficial for organizational learning.

Practical implications – The findings suggest that leading language communities may be an integral, yet overlooked lever for organizational learning and improvement. Prioritizing actions that promote race-specific conversations among school teams can reveal racism/racial conflict and subsequently increase the potential for change.

Originality/value – This paper combines organizational change and race talk research to highlight the importance of professional talk routines in organizational learning.

Keywords Organizational learning, Language, Race, Secondary schools

Paper type Research paper

Education researchers use a range of terms and concepts to describe the communication processes that individuals and groups use to grapple with race, racism and racial identities. For the purpose of this study, we use “race talk” as a catch-all to describe these phenomena, which encompasses concepts such as wrestling with race (Buehler, 2013), courageous conversations (Singleton, 2014), as well as the range of linguistic deployments of color-blind racism (Picower, 2009). In the past two decades, race talk research has addressed myriad education-related questions. Evans (2007) examined how leaders talked about demographically changing schools. DeMatthews *et al.* (2017) explored the ways that school leaders evoked racial language to talk about school discipline policies and practices. Irby (2018) studied the ways that race-specific data served as cues to evoke teacher's use of race-visible sensemaking about discipline problems. Teacher education researchers, such as Mason (2016), Milner and Laughter (2015) and Picower (2009), focused their investigations toward the race-evasive language practices that teacher candidates in college classrooms use to maintain white privilege. In school settings, researchers have used observational approaches to understand the role of racial language in student-teacher dialogue in K-12 school classrooms (Thomas, 2015; Young, 2016) and in school organizations more broadly (Buehler, 2013; Pollock, 2004). Beyond school settings, Villenas and Angeles (2013) explored the ways that racial language framed educational issues in the broader sphere of media related to education and schooling.

This paper considers the practice of using race-specific language as a resource for advancing organizational learning about the racialized nature of school problems. To explore whether race-specific language use is an untapped organizational resource, we conducted a study that analyzed the association between the presence of race-specific language and



teachers' collective framing of school discipline problems. We sought to determine if the mere presence of race-specific language was associated with more holistic understandings of racial discipline disparities. Our analysis revealed that the presence of race-specific and race-proxy language was associated with more comprehensive problem analysis. This research is important because it suggests that race-specific language is a potential lever for organizational learning. Thus, we argue that school leaders encourage race-specific language use as a routine of professional practice, as it holds the potential to unlock more comprehensive thinking and problem framing amongst leader and teacher teams.

Race talk and organizational learning

We initiated this research based on the premise that talk among school leaders and teachers is a taken-for-granted routine of professional practice that is consequential for organizational learning and improvement. How people within organizations talk with one another influences what they are likely to accomplish (Coburn, 2006; Horn and Little, 2010; Kegan and Lahey, 2002). Yet, many school leaders do not account for how racial ideologies and their associated racial language practices inhibit or advance dialogues about school improvement efforts (Buehler, 2013). For school leaders, understanding and shaping teacher use of racial language is important because it is likely that failure to talk about race limits the potential for change to adequately address issues of equity (Payne, 2005). Leaders who do not intentionally develop teachers' racial dialogue miss opportunities to leverage the seemingly small, yet powerful, asset of race talk as way to advance equity-focused school improvement. Leaders can gain insight into racial ideologies by listening to what teachers do and do not say about matters of race and racism. Cultivating organizational capacity to talk about race with precision and specificity is a critical skill for leaders who are committed to improving the educational experience and outcomes of children and youth of color.

Reframing race-specific language use as a routine of professional practice is important for urban secondary schools given the racial, ethnic, linguistic and socio-economic demographic changes in school-aged and public school student populations (Banks, 1996; Cochran-Smith, 2004). The demographic imperative is a phrase that speaks to the urgent need for teachers and administrators to disrupt and correct the pervasive and persistent racial, ethnic, linguistic and class-based disparities in opportunities and outcomes endemic to the USA' educational system (Darling-Hammond and Bransford, 2007). The imperative is important because the field of teacher education continues to produce a predominantly white female teaching force that is expected to teach an increasing racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse school-aged population (Gay and Howard, 2000). Education researchers concede that improving secondary schools is partially contingent upon addressing the demographic divide. Our concern is to understand if teacher use of race-specific language relates to their practice and the role that school leaders might have in diagnosing and improving teacher race talk.

The vast majority of organizations reflect racial, gender and linguistic structures of domination and inequality that marginalize people of color. They often reflect a tendency toward technical-rational thinking and assumed homogeneity of individual and collective identities and values (Popova-Nowak and Cseh, 2015). Accordingly, unless individuals and collectives within organizations deliberately engage in anti-oppressive organizational learning – communication and co-production of knowledge – that dismantles the power relations that dominate their organizational life, oppression will persist. Race-neutral discourse and technical-rational approaches to problem solving are two dominant school norms that subjugate knowledge and experiences that are essential to understanding and responding to perspectives of marginalized populations. Given the demographic imperative, we believe school leaders and teachers will become better problem solvers if they use

race-specific language while analyzing problems, which begins with how groups of people collectively frame problems. Benford and Snow (2000) define a problem analysis frame as a “shared understanding of some problematic condition or situation they define as in need of change, make attributions regarding who or what is to blame, articulate an alternative set of arrangements, and urge others to act in concert to affect change” (p. 615).

Although treated disparately, research within organizational studies (Coburn, 2006; Horn and Little, 2010; Kegan and Lahey, 2002) and teacher education (Bertrand, 2010; Buehler, 2013; Howard and del-Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Thomas, 2015) suggests that how people talk matters for how people work, both individually and collectively, and what they are likely to accomplish. Of particular interest is what problem analysis frames people draw on to promote and attempt change (Benford and Snow, 2000). Researchers in both fields share a concern for understanding the relationship between practitioner identities, talk routines, and organizational and instructional improvement, respectively. Organizational change researchers have found that establishing routines of talk-driven professional collaboration is imperative to organizational learning and improvement. School improvement researchers have found that leaders must intentionally cultivate language practices within professional learning communities to unleash the learning potential of teams (Nelson *et al.*, 2010). Nelson *et al.* (2010) argue that learning potential emerges as collaborative teams shift from sharing opinions to engaging in “deep” consequential conversations. These conversations are marked by transparency and a willingness to explore “critical questions” that examine teacher practice (Nelson *et al.*, 2010). Despite these powerful insights, organizational studies researchers have failed to account for professional talk routines as a racialized practice. They have not accounted for the presence of racial frames within collaborative conversations.

The failure to account for the racialization of professional talk renders whiteness invisible. It also subjugates the potential for race-specific talk to be understood as a powerful lever for change. Together, failure to consider how changing the way we race talk can change the way we work preserves individual and organizational immunities to change racist ways of knowing and behaving (Kegan and Lahey, 2009). Whereas organizational change and school improvement research have all but neglected the centrality of race talk in teacher professional development, the field of teacher education gives this topic considerable attention.

Teacher education research underscores the demographic imperative by seeking to facilitate the conscientization, or ability to think critically about issues of power and privilege, of pre-service and practicing teachers (Howard and del-Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Picower, 2009; Thomas, 2015; Young, 2016). It is upfront about how race, racism and whiteness shapes race talk. Whiteness is a location of structural advantage, a standpoint and a cultural practice (Frankenburg, 1993) that structures the “social and material realities operating in the present moment that perpetuate racialized inequalities and injustices” (Jupp *et al.*, 2016, p. 1154). Within organizations, whiteness manifests as a cultural practice whereby white people individually and collectively employ emotional, ideological and performative tools to maintain and enact white institutional dominance (Picower, 2009; Yoon, 2012). These practices include linguistic strategies such as framing racism as “out of my control,” proposing personal remedies to systemic problems of inequity by placing an emphasis on “being nice” (Picower, 2009), choosing silence in the face of racial discomfort, avoiding racial conflict and dilemmas or withdrawing from situations where they feel subjected to racially motivated “attacks” (DiAngelo, 2011). These race talk practices actively maintain white privilege and supremacy. Within white dominated school spaces, administrators and teachers, by virtue of their race-neutral routines, normalize not talking with racial specificity as a general routine of professional practice.

Study problem and research questions

While organizational change research omits racial considerations, and thus conceals the role whiteness plays in the continual reinforcement of a White racial equilibrium (DiAngelo, 2011), race talk in education research tends to emphasize problems associated with practitioner aversion to engage in race talk (Pollock, 2004; Bertrand, 2010; Howard and del-Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Thomas, 2015). By considering organizational learning research and race talk research in tandem, we can assert two claims. First, professional talk routines are important for building strong cultures of collegial collaboration that lead to organizational improvement. Second, teachers and administrators struggle to talk about race. Since race talk research emphasizes race-evasive behaviors, we do not know the benefits of race-conscious talk routines. Consequently, we know little about race-specific language as a routine of practice and its relationship to organizational learning and improvement. This study addressed these shortcomings by exploring the associations between racial language use and school based problem identification and analysis. We designed our study to answer the following questions:

- RQ1. During conversational exchanges, is teacher use of racial language associated with how they frame school discipline problems?
- RQ2. What do patterns of associations suggest about racial language use as an asset that may influence an organization's ability to analyze discipline problems?

Study methods

The data we analyzed for this study stem from focus groups at Douglass High School, which served approximately 800 students during the 2012–2013 academic year. The student body was comprised of a 75 percent white majority, 10 percent Hispanic, 9 percent black or African–American, 4 percent Asian or Pacific Islander and 2 percent of students identified as multiracial. The teaching and support staff of nearly 60 was almost 100 percent white. The school was located south of a small-sized city. Its catchment area included an isolated pocket of the adjacent city's low opportunity African–American community. It also served a recent influx of Spanish-speaking immigrant students whose families were attracted to recent economic opportunities spawned by the relocation of a large-scale firm that supports the US medical industry.

To answer our research questions, we conducted a co-occurrence analysis of 28 conversational exchanges from a larger data set of audio-recorded focus groups where 44 teachers discussed problems related to school discipline. Co-occurrence researchers aim to generate claims by studying the relationship of paired data as it occurs in a particular time or space. An association exists when items co-occur and increased pairing indicates a stronger association (Buzydlowski, 2015). Since we view organizational learning routines as one way to cultivate teacher racial consciousness, we designed our study to explore associations between racial language use and problem analysis frames (Benford and Snow, 2000). The conversational exchanges stemmed from focus groups that lasted approximately one hour and consisted of no more than seven participants. The focus groups were one component of the school's efforts to address racial inequities that emerged as more students of color began attending the school[1]. We anticipated that introducing racially specific data would compel teachers to use race-specific language to talk about discipline problems.

Variables and codes

Racial language. Several education scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding the shortcomings of color-blind ideology and its associated language practices. Among the

more salient themes within this body of research is that white teachers prefer not to talk about race and the impact of color-blind ideologies on teacher practice. Race talk in education researchers assert that teacher aversion to talk explicitly about race and racism stifle teacher effectiveness (Pollock, 2004; Bertrand, 2010; Howard and del-Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Thomas, 2015).

Our coding scheme focused on language use rather than language meaning. We used the presence of race-specific, race-proxy and race-mute phrases as criterion for coding passages. We coded statements with words, such as Latino, black, white, African-American, Asian and so on as race-specific. When speakers used veiled references to racial groups (Bertrand, 2010), including referencing people based on their native language, where they lived, as well as their socio-economic status and mode of transit to school, we coded these instances as race-proxy. If we did not identify instances of race-specific or race-proxy language, we coded statements as race-mute.

Problem analysis frames. Frame analysis research demonstrates that problem framing is integral to generating solutions and prompting action (Coburn, 2006). We concentrated on diagnostic frames, those that define problems and place blame on particular individuals or groups (Benford and Snow, 2000) to understand how teachers collectively made sense of discipline related problems. We applied inductive and deductive coding to generate five problem frames that reflected the ways teachers described problems, which included systemic, procedural, substantive, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Table I displays each code, corresponding definition and sample statement to which the code applied. Each frame foregrounds particular aspects of a problem, while minimizing other aspects, which influences subsequent choices and actions (Benford and Snow, 2000; Coburn, 2006).

Application of codes. As a first step, we used Atlas.ti to code for racial language use. Next, we applied problem analysis frame codes across all conversations. We were interested in how many frames co-occurred with racial language uses. Final coded exchanges looked like the following:

So, one kid [*RSpec_None*] can sit there and be a jerk all the time and nothing happens [*Prob_Procedural*], but then when the Black kid [*RSpec_Black*] did something in some other class or some other situation, they'd come to the door with a police officer. That happened twice just in one class early this school year [*Prob_Procedural*]/*Systemic*. It was very frustrating. The case manager and I were just like, "I cannot believe this" because we were working with the student on that day [*Prob_Interpersonal*]. There's just no consistency [*Prob_Procedural*].

Co-occurrence analysis procedures

To explore the relationship of racial language use and problem framing, we focused on conversational exchanges within focus groups. We delineated conversational exchanges based on episode boundaries (Horn and Little, 2010) or shifts in conversational topics or themes. Each focus group contained several distinct conversational exchanges among two or more speakers. We identified 28 conversational exchanges within five focus groups. The questions that drove our initial inquiry were "How do teachers frame discipline problems in (a) race-mute, (b) race-proxy, and (c) race-specific conversational exchanges?" To answer these questions, we generated co-occurrence tables to look at raw counts of co-occurring codes (limited to two) such as Racially Specific Language [AND] Problem is systemic. We generated a series of co-occurrence matrices that allowed us to discern how types of talk related to problem framing within the conversational exchanges. Second, we explored the prevalence of co-occurrences as a means to gain insight on the relationship between racial language type and problem frames. We computed averages that allowed us to determine if a particular co-occurrence was more or less common across the 28 conversational exchanges. Table AI provides an example of computation.

Code Names (Abbrev.)	Definition	Sample quotes
<i>RSpec_All</i> (N)	Race-specific language use	I mean there is an awful lot of segregation, I don't know if you guys have ever been down to the lunch room, but I do commons supervision. It's just crazy. I mean literally, like people of – all the African American kids all sit at the same table, almost 95% of them, and all the Hispanic kids sit at the same table, and all the – it's just so crazy. I mean, I went here 15, 16 years ago and I don't – there were not as many diverse students here, but for sure, I do not remember there being that kind of just blatant segregation
<i>RSpec_White</i>	Use of white as racial identifier	
<i>RSpec_Black</i>	Use of Black as racial identifier	
<i>RSpec_Latino</i>	Use of Latino or Latina as racial identifier	
<i>RSpec_Asian</i>	Use of Asian as racial identifier	
<i>RSpec_Multi</i>	Use of multiple racial identifiers	
<i>RSpec_Proxy</i>	Proxy language use	I feel a very big disconnect with families who don't speak or read English in terms of being able to just purely communicate with them. There doesn't really seem to be a plan or something else in place to look at how can we better meet those students' and families' need? When we can pick up the phone and call an English-speaking parent about this, but their situation has to wait until when we have an interpreter, it makes it seem less important
<i>RSpec_Proxy_Geo</i>	Use of geographic terms as identifiers	
<i>RSpec_Proxy_Ambig</i>	Use of ambiguous language as identifiers	
<i>RSpec_Proxy_Class</i>	Use of class terms as identifiers	
<i>RSpec_Proxy_Lang</i>	Use of language as identifiers	
<i>RSpec_None</i>	Use of no specific identifiers	There needs to be some real addressing of the curriculum. What do we actually have for these students all across the board, not just clubs but academically? I can see how they would feel that way. Things are changing very quickly and it's the same thing with the soccer with the academics. You've had all these advantages by the time you get to high school, obviously, and I think it's really kids are – they have a really hard time, it's hard to get kids that are kind of so disconnected interested with what we have to give
<i>Prob_All</i>	Problem frame	It reminds me of the diversity stuff I did over spring break
<i>Prob_Systemic</i>	Explains problem as related to historical, cultural, political, and economic contexts that shape US schooling	
<i>Prob_Procedural</i>	Explains problem as related to school or teacher rules, regulations, and procedures	Well, she was talking about how culturally, we have this white man's model of school and we're trying to get everybody to fit in it, and I think like culturally, I teach my children the white man's model of school at home, and so they fit in. They don't know how to play the game There's really no point in sending a kid out. Our detention rates are pretty low depending which administrator a student has to report to. The policies are inconsistent. So a student can get one sort of treatment with one administrator and a

Table I.
Coding dictionary

(continued)

Code Names (Abbrev.)	Definition	Sample quotes
<i>Prob_Substantive</i>	Explains problem as related to classroom context, content, and/or instructional practices	completely different one with another, which helps no one. There really isn't a mechanism to follow-up and do anything helpful for that kid once you've gotten past sending them out I try to have readmit meetings with the kids where if I've sent you out, I want to talk to you before you come back in my classroom to see how we are going to keep that problem from happening again. Not just 'I sent you out, but okay come back in, let's start again
<i>Prob_Interpersonal</i>	Explains problem as related to conflicts between individuals or groups	We as counselors have been trying to figure out ways to build connections with communities? We go to the community that is in Strayville and we try to meet with kids there and we try to do some of those things to try to bring the school world to them
<i>Prob_Intrapersonal</i>	Explains problem as related to internal conflicts and struggles	I don't know how I get to that level with a kid always. And sometime, they have to be willing also to have an adult come into that space. So, that's something that I just personally struggle with sometimes

Table I.

Findings

Based on our review of literature, we speculated that conversations where participants used race-specific language would also reflect comprehensive understandings of school discipline, operationalized as multi-frame problem analysis. We found that race-specific and race-proxy language use was associated with higher frequencies of problem analysis and with higher frequencies of multiple problem analysis frames. Participants in race-mute conversations talked with the lowest levels of complexity about discipline problems. Figure 1 displays pairings of racial language use and problem analysis frames for the 28 conversational exchanges we analyzed. Each numbered rectangle represents a single conversational exchange. Each exchange contains two variables: racial language use and problem analysis frames. Each exchange contains one or more racial language use type: race-mute, race-proxy, race-specific or any combination of the three. Shading denotes the problem analysis frames coded within the exchange. Darker shading indicates higher uses of multi-frame problem analysis. For example, in conversational exchange nine participants used race-specific language and multi-frame problem analysis that drew on systemic and procedural frames to explore discipline problems.

Zooming out offers a look across conversational exchanges, which reveals patterns that individual exchanges do not. Organizing our data into a matrix of paired co-occurrences enabled us to mine for patterns and several insights emerged. For example, when participants used only race-mute language they drew on fewer problem analysis frames. When participants used only race-specific language, they drew on two or three problem analysis frames. When participants combined race-specific and race-proxy language, they used four problem analysis frames as indicated by the darker shading in the bottom row of Figure 1.

While Figure 1 illuminates patterns across conversational exchanges, Figure 2 highlights patterns specific to problem frames. Figure 2 shows which problems participants

1 Proxy					2 Spec					3 Mute					4 Mute					5 Mute				
Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita
6 Mute Proxy Spec					7 Mute					8 Spec					9 Spec					10 Spec				
Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita
11 Spec					12 Proxy Spec					13 Mute Proxy Spec					14 Mute					15 Proxy				
Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita
16 Spec					17 Spec					18 Spec					19 Spec					20 Spec				
Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita
21 Spec					22 Mute Proxy					23 Proxy Spec					24 Mute Proxy Spec					25 Proxy				
Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita
26 Mute Proxy					27 Proxy Spec					28 Mute Proxy Spec														
Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita	Sys	Pro	Sub	Ite	Ita										

Figure 1. Master co-occurrence matrix

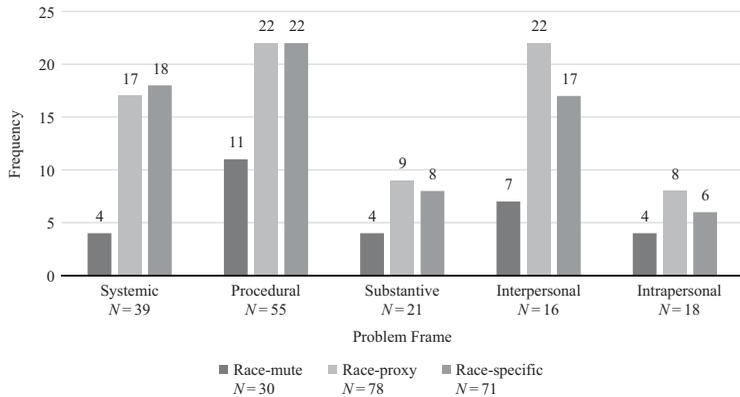


Figure 2. Racial language use and problem frame co-occurrences

discussed most and least as well as patterns across language use types. Race-proxy and race-specific language co-occurred with problem analysis framings with higher overall frequencies across all frame types. Participants used race-proxy language in 42 percent of all exchanges, which exceeded race-specific language use (38 percent) by 4 percent. Participants referenced each problem frame in the following percentage of all exchanges: procedural (33 percent), interpersonal (28 percent), systemic (19 percent), substantive (12 percent) and intrapersonal (8 percent). They discussed problems that were procedural and interpersonal in nature most often, concerning relationships among teachers, students and administrators at higher relative frequencies, which often focused on questioning the competence or pointing out ineffectiveness of administrators. On the other hand, participants referenced intrapersonal and substantive problems with less frequency, suggesting a lower inclination to discuss problems related to internal conflict or personal instructional decisions within classrooms. This was especially evident when they used race-mute rather than race-proxy or race-specific language.

Figure 3 shows that multi-frame problem analysis occurred more often with race-specific language use or in combination with race-proxy language. In total, 60 percent of all exchanges contained two or three problem frames. Participants referenced four problem frames in 21 percent of the exchanges, however, they did not reference all five problem

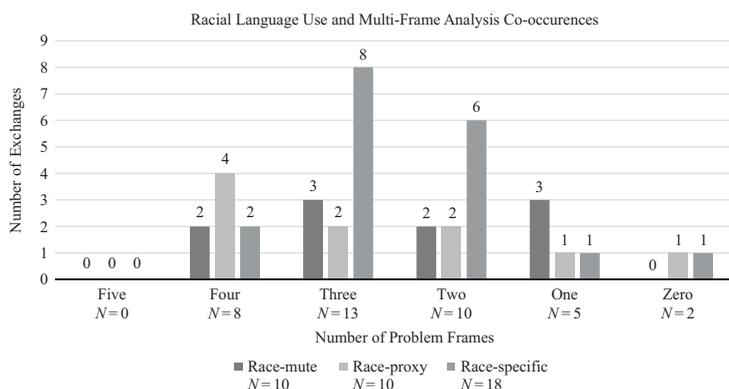


Figure 3. Racial language use and multi-frame problem analysis co-occurrences

frames in any exchanges. In all four exchanges that contained four problem frames, participants used race-proxy language. Similarly, they used race-specific language in all seven exchanges that contained two problem frames and in 80 percent of exchanges that contained three problem frames. Conversely, participants used race-mute language most often during exchanges that contained one problem frame and least within exchanges that contained two or three problem frames.

A closer look at co-occurrences: some examples

When participants used race-specific and race-proxy language, they identified more problems and drew on multiple frames to analyze school discipline problems. The first exchange below illustrates combined race-proxy and race-specific language and associated problem frames. The second is an example where teachers did not use race-specific language and where they also used fewer problem frames. In the following passage, one speaker explicitly mentions race and gives a concrete example of a classroom misunderstanding using systemic, substantive, interpersonal and intrapersonal problem analysis frames:

All kids need to know the expectations. But a majority of teachers are White and there are differences in how students experience and behave in the classroom. How White kids act in class just jives with how a White teacher teaches. For our Black kids or for our Latino kids, their rules of engagement may be different.

But then, also going along with that is just for the White students to – just understanding different perspectives because I’ve had some of the courageous conversations with students because some of my Black students may be doing something that the White student is perceiving as being disrespectful. I explain to my White students “I’m not taking it that way because I know that kid and it is not disrespectful – he’s not trying to be disrespectful and I’m not taking it as being disrespectful when he gets up and walks around the classroom. Like that’s just how he’s functioning.” But meanwhile, that White kid is sitting there like, “Oh my god, I can’t believe this is happening,” and subconsciously getting upset with this peer of theirs. And it’s like I think when you have that common understanding, and knowing it’s okay to talk about that and I don’t think we have a framework here that makes it okay to have those conversations.

In the exchange above, the speaker used multi-frame thinking while utilizing race-proxy and race-specific language. Among the 28 exchanges within our data set, only 4 of 28 (14 percent) demonstrated quadruple frame thinking as evidenced above. In all four, participants used race-proxy and race-specific language. In the passage, it is clear that racism and racial conflict shapes day-to-day classroom interactions. In the following example, three participants talked

using race-mute/proxy and one instance of race-specific language. They described students' problems of belongingness as systemic, situated in students' family and community socio-economics and, therefore, difficult for the school to address:

Female Speaker 1: Transportation is an issue and a lot of those students want to be involved. But, they can't because they have to go home and watch brother and sister or work because they need to help pay the bills. Everyone wants to feel like they are involved or supported, but I think for some, they just can't be because they need to be loyal to their family. What I think is cool about the new schedule is that those students can feel supported within the school day.

Female Speaker 2: Others are disengaged because by this point they have been defeated. They have not felt a part of the school system since probably elementary school. You play pickup basketball in your neighborhood but you can't play at the high school. The kids who make the basketball team played club sports all the way through [their school years].

Female Speaker 3: The same happens with the dance team. We have [...] [pause]. It's a group of all White girls with long blond ponytails.

Female Speaker 2: Yep. Why isn't there more diversity on the dance team? Well, because those girls all take dance lessons their whole lives. We have to find other ways or more options for people to feel connected.

In the exchange above, Speaker 1 initiated the exchange by using proxy language associated with neighborhood and class status to mark Black and Latino students. Although Speaker 1 acknowledged that procedural changes in the master schedule allowed teachers time to address student belongingness, the teachers never shifted to how they could use the new schedule or make other procedural changes to address substantive problems that would benefit the students, who they did not specifically name. Speaker 2 pivoted back to a systemic analysis by describing the cumulative effect of the students' cumulative privileges or disadvantages. The teachers' conversation framed students' historical lack of economic wherewithal as the reason they were unable to engage in school life. Speaker 3 acknowledged the racial composition of the dance team in specific terms (and was tempted to take ownership over its composition). Yet, the overall race-proxy language skirted the question of why black girls were not on the dance team.

In exchanges with prominent race-mute language, teachers offered fewer cues that allowed for multi-frame analysis of problems. The dearth of race-specific language and corresponding single frame systemic class-based analysis reflected the groups' limited capacity to think through problems in sophisticated enough ways that generated talk about leveraging school resources to cultivate belongingness for students of color. They failed to account for their own power to change criteria for participation in sports (procedural), use of additional time for advising and clubs (substantive), or inter and intrapersonal approaches to improvement.

Discussion and implications

We conducted this study because teacher education and organizational studies research points to the importance of developing the capacity of people to talk in particular ways as critical for individual and organizational improvement. Teacher education researchers argue that teacher ability to talk about race is critical for their identity development and teaching effectiveness (Bertrand, 2010; Howard and del-Rosario, 2000; Milner and Laughter, 2015; Picower, 2009; Thomas, 2015; Young, 2016). Developing the capacity to talk about race is important because teachers who are disproportionately white and female will continue to enter schools that require they teach to an increasing racially and ethnically diverse US student population (Banks, 1996; Gay and Howard, 2000). Organizational studies and school improvement researchers also make a case for the importance of cultivating professional

routines of talk as a matter of organizational learning and improvement (Nelson *et al.*, 2010). They argue that language use shapes problem identification and problem framing, which is consequential for how organizational members address problems, if at all (Coburn, 2006; Horn and Little, 2010; Kegan and Lahey, 2002).

We anticipated that race talk was a factor that may suggest something about team capacity for change and improvement (Payne, 2005). Thus, we speculated that teachers' use of race-specific language would pair with more comprehensive framings of organizational problems than those who used race-proxy and race-mute language. However, we found that teacher use of race-proxy and race-specific language co-occurred with higher multi-frame problem analysis. Our findings suggest that there is greater potential for organizational learning in groups where race-proxy and race-specific language use is a routine of professional practice. The findings confirm that the ways that leaders and teachers engage in race talk can and does shape school improvement efforts. As the example passages in our findings demonstrate, using race-specific language makes problem framing more concrete and specific. The evidenced differences between race-mute language compared to race-proxy and race-specific language shows the value in developing school leaders and teachers to use race-specific language to discuss school problems. When participants used race-proxy and race-specific language, they were more likely to express the interconnected roots of problems.

The presence of race-specific language is likely associated with a school's ability to examine the multifaceted nature of school problems. Using race-specific language, teachers were able to highlight inequity that persists in discipline and access. In one exchange participants collectively determined that transportation was a huge barrier to student attendance and participation in extracurricular activities by talking specifically about the black and Latino students who relied on a sole bus to attend school. Likewise, participants concluded that fear of upsetting black students led many teachers to accept mediocre work and tolerate misbehavior. Additionally, participants realized that the lack of rigor in ESL classes prevented Asian and Latino students from succeeding in Advanced Placement courses. Race-specific language enabled teachers to specify problems, articulate the racial dynamics at play and analyze problems in complex ways. Conversely, exchanges dominated by race-mute language turned into venting sessions that blamed students or administrators for persistent problems. These findings build on the notion that problem framing assigns blame and responsibility to particular individuals and groups (Benford and Snow, 2000; Coburn, 2006). Further, our findings suggest that race-mute conversational approaches veil and conceal practices of racial blaming while absolving white leaders and teachers (in our case) of their responsibility for addressing problems (DiAngelo, 2011; Pollock, 2004).

This research asserts that pursuing the value of race-specific language is integral to school improvement. Specifically, our findings suggest that it is important to pursue research that infers a positive relationship between what race-specific and race-proxy language may lead to and produce. Leaders who make race-specific language use a routine of professional practice will develop teams that are better equipped to address organizational problems related to race and racism than those who do not prioritize this critical aspect of leadership. Concentrating on racial language use will require a level of transparency that is rare given the predominance of race-evasive behaviors (DiAngelo, 2011; Evans, 2004; Pollock, 2004). However, we believe that making race-specific talk a routine of practice enables the emergence of racial frames that yield a more powerful capacity to see and address problems. Our data support this assertion. Race-specific and race-proxy language use is associated with higher frequencies of problem analysis and with higher frequencies of multi-frame problem analysis. Moreover, as evidenced in our sample qualitative passage, race-specific talk differs from race-mute talk because it enables racial problem frames to emerge in the course of conversational exchanges.

The differences between race-specific and race-proxy language use were not as pronounced as we anticipated. Although we did not expect race-proxy language to be as effective as race-specific language, findings suggest that it may facilitate similar kinds of problem analysis. We interpreted this unexpected finding as an indicator that the teachers shared implicit meanings of racially veiled and coded language. This may prove beneficial to groups that struggle to overcome white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011). For cultural insiders with shared meaning, race-proxy, rather than race-specific language may be interchangeable. Since a shared understanding of racial proxies existed among the group, the meaning of their statements were not lost, thus, their shared meanings of race-proxy language allowed participants to accomplish similar problem analysis without the discomfort of using race-specific language. While race-proxy language may minimize the anxiety that often arises in conversations about race, it may also isolate newcomers to a school community who will need to learn veiled language to fully participate in problem analysis comparable to insiders.

Conclusion: leading racial language communities

Although we drew study data from a suburban school setting, this study holds implications for urban secondary school leadership and research because enrollment in suburban schools, even when well-resourced, does not translate into equitable access to educational opportunities for black and brown students (Lewis and Diamond, 2015; Lewis-McCoy, 2014). Many problems in urban schools exist in suburban schools, including low uses of race-specific language (Payne, 2005). School leaders should consider the three types of race talk named in this paper in order to determine how to respond in a manner that promotes the use of race-specific language. This might include asking clarifying questions, requesting detailed examples, or suggesting that staff reference students explicitly, rather than generally. Moreover, school leaders should make concerted efforts to use race-specific language and challenge staff to follow suit in order to get to the root of school problems. See Appendix 2 for a series of questions school leaders can reflect upon.

School leaders can determine what issues warrant attention by noting which problem frames recur most often. At Douglass High School, participants described problems using the procedural and interpersonal frames often. They rarely framed problems as substantive or intrapersonal. Common frames used in tandem include: procedural and interpersonal as well as systemic, procedural and interpersonal. Participant preoccupation with rules, control and conflict amidst a changing student body may be the reason for common references to procedural and interpersonal problems. Alternatively, relatively little mention of substantive and intrapersonal conflicts may demonstrate that participants were unwilling to think or speak about classroom decisions or internal dissonance. Repeated problem frames may represent issues that warrant immediate attention in the eyes of participants, yet neglected problem frames can illuminate blind spots and biases. Unexpressed issues may reflect deeper problems within the organization. Addressing often unspoken issues may be the impetus to school improvement. Identifying and questioning patterns and themes regarding problem framing can provide valuable insights into the dynamic equilibrium that maintains the organizational status quo (Kegan and Lahey, 2002).

Future studies should explore what leaders can do to promote race-specific language use among staff to enhance opportunities for collective learning. Additional effort should be devoted to connecting race talk literature to organizational learning and leadership theory in order to design empirical studies that will reveal what conditions create the optimal opportunities to disrupt racist practice. We hope that the study questions and design will encourage education researchers to broaden their approaches to studying school effectiveness and see race and racism as key organizational factors.

Researchers can use co-occurrence methodology to gain insights into the presence of particular kinds of language communities and practices that operate in a school. For example, a study might examine the co-occurrences of racial language use types and teacher instructional quality, student engagement, teacher collaboration and even overall school performance. Such studies may elevate the importance of race talk research by better positioning the centrality of leading racial language communities as a lever for overall organizational improvement.

Note

1. Some examples of equity initiatives included: increased collection and use of data with attention to racial disparities across all areas of student experiences and outcomes. Reorganized school into house model to identify student achievement, social, emotional or behavioral problems and provide early interventions. Moved to block schedule to increase number of instructional hours, increase course offerings and give teachers more time to plan and advise students (clubs moved from after school to during day, added advisory period). Targeted recruitment to teachers and staff of color, including adoption of "Tuition Reimbursement" and "Flexibility in Salary to Diversify Workforce" board policies. Trained department chairs to redesign meeting time for teacher learning and instructional improvement with an emphasis on serving underserved students. Increased number of students of color enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. Revised school discipline policies to reduce suspensions. Adopted restorative discipline model.

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Appendix 1

Race talk and organizational learning

Questions	Computations	Systemic problem frame × Colormute talk sample
Q1. On average what was the frequency in which participants framed discipline disparities as a systemic problem (reference group)?	No. of none codes + No. of proxy codes + No. of race-specific codes = Total No. of exchanges about discipline disparities as a systemic problem (SysProb) No. of exchanges ÷ Types of race talk × 100 = Average exchanges SysProb SysProb ÷ 28 exchanges = Percent of average exchanges	4+17+18=39 (39÷3)×100=13 (13÷28)×100=46%
Q2. How often did race-mute language use occur with systemic problem framings across 28 conversational exchanges (comparison group)?	No. of exchanges coded as “none” talk AND systemic frame No. of “none” AND system frame co-occurrences ÷ total possible exchanges = Percent of none talk AND systemic frame co-occurrences	4 (4÷28)×100=14%
Q3. What is the difference between percent of average exchanges and percent average of race-mute AND systemic frame (comparative analysis)?	Percent average exchanges about discipline disparities as a systemic problem – percent average of race-mute AND systemic frame co-occurrences	46%–14%=32% points less

Table AI.
Sample co-occurrence comparison computation

Appendix 2. Guiding questions for assessing racial language communities

Considering language use:

- (1) How does our school and community context encourage or discourage race-specific language use?
 - Who uses race-specific language? When? Where? Why?
 - Who uses race-mute language? When? Where? Why?
- (2) What racial proxies do we commonly use?
 - How do these proxies advance our ability to see and solve problems?
 - How do these proxies inhibit our ability to see and solve problems?
- (3) How can I/we promote race-specific language use?

Considering problem framing:

- (1) How do our school priorities influence the way we frame problems?
- (2) What type of problems do we address in our school most often? Least often? Why?
- (3) Who do we assign blame/responsibility to most often? Least often? Why?

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