

CONDUCTING RACIAL JUSTICE RESEARCH: PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS

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Abstract

Anti-racist research is mostly ideological, with few operational frameworks to combat racism or focus on systems-level change. This article uses the activism-learning-action trifecta (Shah et al., 2024), an anti-racist approach to leadership, to address this gap. Using a qualitative methodology, this study explored professionals' experiences with racial justice research. Results reveal professionals' desire to learn and be included in academic scholarship. Study findings have implications for social institutions pursuing racial justice.

Conducting Racial Justice Research: Perspectives of School and Community Partners

Conducting racial justice research is vitally important to understand the systemic causes of racial inequality and subsequently advocate and build coalitions to challenge systems' perpetuation of harm on communities. Addressing racial injustice requires coordinated efforts from those working within and outside of institutions, acknowledging the need for anti-racist practices and the role they play in leading systemic changes (Shah et al., 2024). University faculty who are interested in conducting school and/or community-based research face several challenges unique to the school setting that must be overcome to be effective (Mishna et al., 2012; Powers, 2007). These challenges include gaining direct access to students/residents as participants, dealing with continual school staff turnover, or renegotiating project details due to changes in district and school-level leadership (Pincus & Friedman, 2004). If research does not have a clear tie to student academic performance, schools may also be less likely to condone student and staff time to engage with such efforts (Powers & Swick, 2017). Similarly, if community partners do not buy into the study, researchers cannot conduct community-engaged research in community settings. Unfortunately, conducting research with school and community partners became even

more complicated with COVID-19, as school/community-family interactions changed drastically (e.g., transition to virtual learning), and it has long-lasting impacts even now.

The double pandemic of COVID-19 and anti-Black racism of early 2020 presented unexpected challenges for educational and other social science researchers. The murder of George Floyd ignited outrage and sparked a global social justice movement wherein combatting racial injustice became trendy for many organizations. This trend quickly waned, particularly after the 2020 and 2024 U.S. presidential elections, when a rise in anti-equity sentiment could be felt across the nation. Nevertheless, conducting racial justice research post-2020 election was seen by many in higher education as a necessity to demonstrate a sustained institutional commitment to anti-racist work. Researchers, however, quickly realized that the pandemic, with the added component of conducting racial justice research, was a double barrier to community engagement for research.

Confronting the fallout from the 2024 election, researchers are facing additional challenges such as funding being pulled from any federal initiatives that mention diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as the chilling effect of addressing the needs of certain communities (e.g., low income, Black) (Gretzinger et al., 2025). At a time when the backlash to racial justice work will be felt by all sectors, there is an even greater need to uplift this work and demonstrate what can be accomplished when we work together to challenge the power structures (e.g., laws, organizational rules, social discourse).

Study Background

Like many institutions across the country in 2020, our university sponsored small grants to fund racial justice research projects. The racial justice research study we focus on in this paper was an outgrowth of a study examining racial disparities among custodial grandparents during COVID-19 in South Carolina (i.e., the grandparent study). The grandparent study required recruiting participants (e.g., grandparents raising grandchildren) via school and community partners to participate in a survey and, if the participants were willing, an opportunity to participate in a one-on-one or focus group interview.

Over the course of 2020, we had difficulty recruiting participants. First, we struggled to recruit participants using only school partners in our initial study. Our research team quickly pivoted to recruiting participants through state agencies and community organizations. Fortunately, our team had extensive relationships with statewide community partners due to past research partnerships and community engagement efforts. Extensive efforts were made to reach out specifically to agencies that served grandparents or kinship caregivers. However, it was not clear whether the recruitment challenge was due to COVID-19 or because we were explicit in our desire to address racial disparities among this population. As such, we concurrently undertook an additional research project to understand the perspectives of schools, state agencies, and community partners from our study and whether the topic of race played a role in participants' involvement (or lack thereof). The findings of that additional research project question are the focus of this paper.

Our research study provides a unique perspective on school-university-community partnerships. University researchers sought to engage those within schools and community agencies in a conservative Southern state that may not be as receptive to explicitly anti-racist work due to possible risks to their institutional reputations during

heated culture wars (Hall et al., 2021). Our work recognizes the need for universities, schools, and communities to play a role in thinking/theorizing about racial injustice, promoting activism, and implementing anti-racist structures and practices.

Activism-Learning-Action Trifecta

The present study is informed by the Activism-Learning-Action Trifecta. Activism as articulated by Shah et al. (2024) focuses on identifying and dismantling injustice and creating new possibilities. Learning, as articulated by Shah et al. (2024) and Kumashiro (2017), recognizes that learning and un/learning (i.e., unlearning what one had previously learned as normative) is a continual process and requires that we not only analyze and critique but also imagine new possibilities. Action as articulated by Shah et al. (2024) is the reform of intersecting justices (e.g., racial, SES) that take place within institutions.

According to Shah et al. (2024), all three components of the activism-learning-action trifecta are required for racial justice transformation to occur. Ideally, this trifecta is happening in schools, universities, and communities. Through intensive school-university-community partnerships, each entity must understand and value each aspect of the trifecta and know what role they play in enacting it.

According to Shah et al. (2024), we can deepen the work of racial justice research by focusing on the activism-learning-action trifecta. For partnerships to thrive, each entity (i.e., universities, schools, communities) must individually value and understand the role they play in the larger movement towards racial justice. Mutual engagement across sectors benefits those with a shared agenda by being attuned to what is happening in other contexts (e.g., banning books), who is best situated to advocate, and when to support the work of those best positioned to advance racial justice. Thus, our study's focus on the facilitators and barriers of racial justice research was best explored by understanding how professionals in different contexts saw their work in relation to advocating for racial justice and their overall perspectives on research.

The inclusion of social work academics and practitioners with educators from the academy and local schools among our research team and research participants provided greater insight into our study topic. An acknowledgement that various disciplines have explored anti-racist work on micro- and/or macro-levels is indicative of the need for not only interdisciplinary collaboration but also university-school-community engagement. An emphasis on what changes need to be made at the systems level across various sectors to address racial injustice is the main reason we chose to use the activism-learning-action trifecta. Additionally, the emphasis on the role that communities play is paramount. Communities must find ways to leverage and wield power that allows them to contend with social institutions such as universities, schools, and state agencies. The trifecta clearly articulates how communities can shape and transform racial justice conversations when organized and focused on their mission.

Necessity for Racial Justice Research

Racism is pervasive in American society, impacting our social institutions' culture, structure, norms, and functions. Vaught and Castagno (2008) warn that "racism adapts to socio-cultural changes by altering its expression,

but it never diminishes or disappears.” As such, critical race scholars have questioned whether American educational institutions are even in a position to advocate for racial justice (e.g., Abrica et al., 2020; Baber, 2015). Noted critical race theory (CRT) scholar Derrick Bell advanced the concept of interest convergence, meaning that the interests of Blacks will only be recognized if they converge with the interests of whites (Bell, 1980). As such, researchers advocating for racial justice research within social institutions that uphold white supremacy logic must be aware of the institutional challenges they might face and be ready to unequivocally assert the value of this research.

Broader Stakes

This study has many real-world implications, some of which are particularly evident in the professional lives of our study team. One author of this study is particularly well-situated to uplift and address racial justice efforts in an impactful way. The first author recently assumed an executive-level leadership role at her institution, focusing on community engagement efforts. One of her charges is to develop and execute an initiative for her institution to deeply engage with K-12 schools, but this takes place in a statewide education climate in which groups such as Moms for Liberty have taken over school board seats and pushed for books highlighting racial justice to be banned from public schools. As a community-engaged scholar with racial justice commitments, how she chooses to navigate the political and cultural landscape will have long-term implications for not only the outreach and engagement of her institution but also the resulting impact on the students who may or may not be served if place-based engagement is not tailored to meet the needs of those most underserved and under-resourced. As the flagship institution for the state and a leading anchor institution in the city, the university is often looked upon to take the lead, begging several key questions: what example will the university model for others? What responsibility do education leaders like Harrison have to continue to advocate for racial justice in times of increased scrutiny? The authors of this study believe her work, and the work of others in similar higher education leadership roles, would be catalyzed by the presence of outspoken allies in schools, state agencies, and community organizations willing to advocate for racial justice alongside her.

Study Purpose

This study sought to gain the perspective of professionals in schools, state agencies, and community organizations on participating in racial justice research, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our aims were to understand facilitators and barriers to engaging in racial justice work by examining the concerns professionals had about engaging their constituents in this research, their thoughts on existing racial disparities among their constituents, and their ability to support racial justice work from an individual and institutional level. Results of the study may have implications for research in today’s political climate and in the post-COVID landscape.

Methods

Research Design

The present study was purely qualitative. Our research design and interview questions stemmed from our team's own desire to understand how race impacted the research process from the perspectives of school and state agency administrators and community partners.

Data Collection

For this study, we purposefully selected school and state agency administrators and community partners who expressed a willingness to participate in qualitative interviews. Of the four school districts, two state agencies, and three community organizations that we recruited participants from in our initial study, four school district representatives (two of the representatives were from the same school district), three state agency representatives (two of the representatives were from the same state agency), and two community organization representatives agreed to be interviewed, with a total of nine participants. All interviews were conducted via Zoom, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were semi-structured, and the questions posed to partners related to their perspectives on engaging in racial justice research. For eight of the interviews, two researchers interviewed one interviewee, and one interview was conducted with two researchers interviewing two interviewees. All interviews lasted anywhere from 30 to 70 minutes. All school and state agency administrators and community partners were offered a \$25 Walmart e-gift card for their participation; however, some were unable to accept the incentive due to restrictions on accepting monetary gifts as a school or state agency representative. For participants who did accept the e-gift card, it was with the intention to distribute it to their constituents.

Key Interview Questions

Researchers formulated eight interview questions based on their own experiences and hunches. The following are examples of interview questions we posed to participants:

1. What motivated you to help/what dissuaded you from wanting to conduct a racial justice research study?
2. As a [school or state] administrator, what were the barriers and challenges to your schools' or agency's participation in this study, and what were your concerns?
3. As a [school or state] administrator, what made you decide to engage with this study at this time?
4. There have been increased calls from the governor and superintendent to disrupt and stop schools' engagement with topics of race, equity, CRT, etc. What role, if any, did this have on your decision to engage or not engage with us on this survey?

5. What changes, outside of your control, would you like to see to better support racial justice research?
6. What effect has recent legislation in states around the country to discourage/penalize discussions of race/gender/sexuality had on teachers/administrators in your school and their willingness to discuss these issues in any capacity?

Data Analysis

During our data analysis process, two authors independently coded a single interview transcript to create an initial codebook. The codebook was then shared with two additional researchers who independently coded the same transcript. Additional codes were added to the codebook, and modifications of existing codes were made to reflect the perspectives of the research team and study participants. These insights prompted the addition, merging, or redefinition of codes to better reflect the nuances of participants' experiences and perspectives. Our codes were designed to capture components of the activism-learning-action trifecta (Shah et al., 2024) as observed by participants in their everyday work and as a result of engaging in the present study: 1) activism (e.g., centering marginalized voices, creating opportunities); 2) learning (e.g., analyzing, critiquing, theorizing); and 3) action (e.g., aligning human and financial resources, redressing historical and present injustices). Once the codebook was developed, we reviewed the remaining transcripts by conducting thematic analysis using Dedoose software. One researcher coded all transcripts and distributed three to four transcripts to each of the other three researchers. Subsequently, those three researchers provided memos to their assigned transcripts, sharing additional thoughts and insights. This subsequent analysis generated new subcodes, which were added to the codebook. Regular debriefings ensured that coding was consistently aligned with the evolving understanding of the data, enhancing reliability. Finally, we assigned pseudonyms to participants to protect confidentiality.

To enhance the rigor of this study, data saturation was also assessed continuously across interviews. It was considered achieved when no new findings in responses emerged across multiple interviews. When we coded transcripts, we used analytic memoing to track theme occurrence and density, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the dataset. This process confirmed that additional interviews were unlikely to yield new insights.

Results

Study Participants Characteristics

Nine school and community partners participated in an interview (see Table 1 for a comprehensive demographic description of all participants). Most participants were women, with four identifying as Black, four identifying as white, and one identifying as Hispanic. The ages of participants ranged from 38 to 51, with all having at least a bachelor's degree and two having doctoral degrees.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Participants	Race/ ethnicity	Gender	Age	Education	Community or School partner
Cindy	White	Female	38	Master's degree	School partner
Sandy	White	Female	42	Master's degree	Community partner
Trevor	White	Male	39	Doctorate degree	School partner
Vicki	Hispanic	Female	51	Master's degree	School partner
Clara	White	Female	46	Master's degree	Community partner
Kylie	Black	Female	46	Doctorate degree	Community partner
Edith	Black	Female	34	Bachelor's degree	School partner
Julia	Black	Female	43	Master's degree	Community partner
Layla	Black	Female	43	Bachelor's degree	Community partner

Note: All participants were non-Hispanic or Latinx unless otherwise noted.

Insights on Aspects of Activism-Learning-Action

The following are insights from our participants representing each aspect of the Activism-Learning-Action trifecta.

Activism. Activism as articulated by Shah et al. (2024) focuses on identifying and dismantling injustice and creating new possibilities. Trevor, a 39-year-old white male, pointed out racial disparities he notices in the education workforce and does not seem dissuaded from telling the truth as he sees it. He stated:

It just bothers me because we don't really, we don't have a teacher shortage. We have a Black teacher shortage. That is the issue. Like, that is where our problem is. If we solve that, we're good. There's no teacher shortage. We need more Black and brown people in our schools, and we've created that problem for ourselves.

This participant has unlearned what has been constructed as normative—that is, a primarily white, female teaching force—pushes back against productive power (i.e., legitimizing some forms of knowledge). While Trevor has been intentional with his own learning as a K-12 leader, he will have to navigate the complexities of creating the necessary conditions within his school district to empower teachers and other administrators to do their own unlearning.

Activism also requires holding systems and structures accountable and was a common theme touched on by participants. Edith, a 34-year-old Black female, stated:

At the beginning stages of the virus, you know, there were all these studies about how it's impacting Black communities more. And so, when you're making these decisions, "Okay, are masks required in schools? Are they not required in schools?" And then you also know that masks or the pandemic is impacting Black

families and Black people more than white families. So those decisions are all interconnected, you know what I mean? And so, we make those decisions based on politics rather than science and studies, then you are hurting the families that, you know, could be negatively impacted.

Edith's critique of schools' decision-making during the pandemic and whose concerns were considered valuable points to how larger systems and structures are often informed by those in power rather than marginalized groups. She points to the need to challenge the status quo, particularly when its interests are not in the interest of the most vulnerable. Edith went on to share that the pandemic also highlighted the need to create opportunities to support students differently. For example, she said, "...if the students, you know, can't get online, then that means that they can't be successful academically. And so... we've got to make it happen. We've got to work together to make it happen." When virtual schooling during the pandemic became the norm, schools, technology companies, and government at all levels started to invest in supporting high-speed Internet access and digital devices for use at home. Arguably, these investments in education should have been made before a catastrophic event like the pandemic.

Like school partners, community members (i.e., those working in non-profits and state agencies) also noted opportunities to dismantle injustice. One of the more common shared aspects of activism was their willingness to speak the truth about what they saw as the major impediments to achieving racial justice. For instance, Kylie, a 46-year-old Black community partner, said:

If the majority of [human service professionals] will start doing like-minded [work], then we can move this needle. Will we forever be talking about it? Yes, because there are going to forever be issues because we all live with prejudices.

Another participant, Layla, a 43-year-old Black community partner, stated, "...people's attitudes would have to change. Um, when you just continuously have people raising children the same way they were raised, then certain prejudices are never going to end." Kylie and Layla both acknowledge the need for professionals as well as laypeople to resist institutional power such as hegemonic knowledge. In essence, to avoid tackling issues surrounding race is to acquiesce to the status quo and to further entrench whiteness and racism as systems that perpetuate inequity (Milner, 2017). As such, professionals must also challenge productive power (e.g., social discourse) regarding how we view communities, which may result in seeing those communities through a deficit lens. Further, we all have a responsibility to hold systems to account. Kylie, a 46-year-old Black community partner, said, "You can't say, 'Oh, I didn't know that the people in [county] didn't have internet.' You know, after March of 2020, you can't say that anymore." In the spirit of activism, Kylie calls her representatives when problems are ignored, because she wants them to know she expects them to do their jobs and serve all communities, which is a compelling example of addressing structural power by advocating for all people.

Learning. Learning, as articulated by Shah et al. (2024) and Kumashiro (2017), recognizes that learning and unlearning is a continual process and requires that we not only analyze and critique but also imagine new

possibilities. Several reflections from school partners reflect the ongoing nature of learning around racial justice. For instance, Trevor, a 39-year-old white male district administrator, effectively analyzes how students are disparately impacted in the education system by explicitly naming race as a factor while speaking to the intersectionality of racism, which incorporates class struggles. He states:

You know, we have poor kids of all colors, but there is an alignment there or correlation between race and poverty. And so, we did see that on a variety of levels. We saw it with grades, you know, as well. Of course, we saw it with our [district] virtual program, where most of our students of color were using that.

Trevor was willing to acknowledge and further analyze how race and class played a role during COVID. This points to how administrators can use data and feedback to learn from their community constituents in ways that allow them to challenge institutional power from within and make informed decisions on where to invest human and financial resources.

At the same time, school leaders must be mindful of how institutions are also implicated in systems that can perpetuate harmful practices. Trevor goes on to critique his own school district, stating, “We’re not good at family engagement, you know, and now we have got to make time to be better at it and talk about our shortcomings. It’s a challenge... and it makes—to me, it makes a massive difference.”

Within this framework, learning also requires a belief on the part of the practitioner in the importance of scholarship conducted by academics. Cindy, a 38-year-old white female school administrator, shared:

So, for me as a principal, you know, knowledge is power, right? So as for being researchers and what would be helpful, I believe to somebody in my position is having more information that enables me to be more educated on that topic.

In the spirit of learning, Cindy emphasizes that the relationship between university-school partners is key to making sure information is disseminated to practitioners who can use it in the field to make a substantive impact in real time.

Community members also spoke about how they use learning to lend weight and specificity to their activism. For instance, Clara, a 46-year-old white female who works at a community organization, states, “I love to have, you know, research to help when I’m talking to organizations and the powers that be, even my personal, like, legislator, you know, that kind of thing.” For those individuals in proximity to leaders that can affect change, having information they can confidently use to challenge productive power through unjust policies and laws is key. To challenge dominant narratives, policies, and practices that reinforce racial inequities, it is imperative that professionals have a level of critical awareness (Jayakumar et al., 2015). This is often developed through learning.

Action. Action, as articulated by Shah et al. (2024), is the reform of intersecting justices (e.g., racial, SES) that take place within institutions. During the pandemic, many school personnel found themselves doing direct outreach to families to help meet their needs. Edith, a 34-year-old Black school partner, shared that many families

were struggling to connect their children’s digital devices. Edith would first try talking families through their tech issues, but if that did not work, she stated, “Okay, that’s not working. I’ll show up at your house.” Edith recognized that her willingness to spring into action and serve as technological support for families was a needed service.

Another example of school personnel taking action, this time through verbal resistance, was conveyed by Trevor, a 39-year-old white male, who explained a recent decision in his school district to turn a historically Black school into an alternative school. He shared an argument he got into with a colleague, saying:

I have, like, a sliver of power, like, a little bit of it and what I’m doing right now with you is I’m trying to make it clear, with the limited influence I have, that what you’re doing is not okay.

Trevor demonstrates the need for school leaders to be willing to address historical and present injustices. While his current actions have only included conversations with people in positions of power, these conversations must eventually lead to policy changes that confront structural power. For instance, Trevor could work with local community members to lead collective action to save the school for a purpose that focuses on uplifting the community (i.e., a resistance strategy that portrays a positive narrative of marginalized groups).

Like our study’s school partners, participating community partners noted the ways in which their activism and learning translated into action on behalf of those they serve in their professional roles. For instance, one community partner reflected on how she centered the concerns of her clients in her work. Kylie, a 46-year-old Black community partner, stated:

My client needs a solution to her problem. So, what steps do I need? What resources do I need to make sure she has this? And I think if we start looking at the racial injustices as that, right? I see this issue. Okay. I’m going to call my legislator. And I’m going to let my legislator know, “This is what I see.” If my call don’t move you, okay. Well, let me call the radio station or let me call this person here. Well, let me call the NAACP.

From her efforts to understand the racial injustices faced by her clients (learning) to her willingness to engage on behalf of them (activism) to her pursuit of multiple avenues for finding solutions and raising awareness of said injustices (action), here Kylie exemplifies the activism-learning-action trifecta. Ultimately, she demonstrates beautifully how professionals should keep the most marginalized centered in the fight for racial justice in our society.

Participants’ Recommendations for Supporting Racial Justice Research

There were two main recommendations provided by our participants, both centered around the need for continuous education. The first recommendation was a request that university researchers share knowledge about

racial justice research with community members. We believe this highlights a common critique of the academy, that knowledge tends to be hoarded and not freely shared with those outside of the academy. There is a need for university researchers to consider the various ways they can be intentional about sharing knowledge with participants prior to, during, and following research studies. The other recommendation was a desire for institutions (e.g., non-profits, schools, state agencies) to invest in the professional development of their staff members around topics related to racial justice. Some of our participants shared that they had been exposed to concepts related to racial inequities and disparities when they were in graduate school or through their professional associations. However, there is a need and desire to have continuous professional development at their workplaces relevant to the concerns in their local communities as well.

These recommendations are exemplified in the following quotes. Kylie, a 46-year-old Black female, said:

... racial justice is not something that I've studied but I know the importance of it. So those who are studying it, I have to be willing to...understand that and help us move that social will, if you will, along.

Kylie speaks to a desire to learn and collaborate with those with expertise in racial justice to progress her own work and move society forward.

In response to our question about what changes participants would like to see to better support racial justice research, Clara, a 46-year-old white community partner, responded:

The biggest thing I could think of is, like, promoting understanding because I believe that there tends to be a backlash. I can't believe there's this sense that people don't really understand why we focus on communities of color, like why [understanding] the disparities are important.

Clara's sentiment speaks to a need to have educational opportunities available to professionals that focus specifically on why racial justice matters. We cannot aim to dismantle unjust systems and structures using the same logic that put them in place. Part of the work of racial justice is also unlearning to bring about change.

Discussion

Author Subjectivity /Positionality

Understanding how we arrived at this study is central to understanding our perspectives and analysis because "the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection" in qualitative research (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). The four authors of this article comprised the research team. The principal investigator is an Asian woman who has conducted extensive research on kinship families. Her scholarship aims to reduce disparities among children in kinship care and their families. The co-investigator is a Black woman who has worked over 13 years in higher education administration, focused primarily on community engagement. At the time of the study, she was also

a PhD candidate who completed advanced coursework in CRT prior to the start of this research study. The two co-authors are also women, one Black, who has conducted research on youth development and health equity, and one white, who has an interest in culturally responsive evaluation. The primary and co-investigator co-conducted all interviews with school and community partners, while the two additional authors supported research efforts during the data analysis and interpretation phase of the study.

Our positionalities and biases as higher education faculty, staff, and administrators and their application to our research and community work (Kishimoto, 2018) played a role in initiating and engaging in a racial justice research project involving K-12 partners. We recognize that, in pursuing this racial justice research study, we reflected higher education institutions' culture of prioritizing research over practice, perhaps without adequately accounting for the broader contexts of politics, race, and power in which our K-12 partners and community agencies are situated.

As stated by Kumashiro (2003), "it is often difficult for researchers to acknowledge their own complicity with other forms of oppression, especially when they are trying to challenge multiple forms of oppression" (p. 63). We recognize that research is a powerful tool to advance racial equity, and yet universities reproduce cultures and structures of privilege and power (Hall et al., 2021). It is our aim in doing racial justice research to attend to these realities so that our work moving forward does not simply reflect the spirit of anti-racism but does real work through our actions.

As a multiracial team (i.e., Asian, Black, white), we discussed how our own racial identities may impact our interview participants (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008); as a result, we ensured that participants were interviewed by a diverse pair of researchers. We used our own lived racialized experiences to develop our interview protocol and codebook, which informed how we applied the codebook and interpreted the data. Our research team met every other week during the data analysis stage of this project and monthly with the whole research leadership team.

Contributions of the Study

This study contributes to our understanding of perspectives of school and community members on racial justice research within institutions; challenges such as refusing to use data and feedback that can explicitly be tied to race disparities to make equity-informed decisions, stifling honest discussions about educational concerns, and failure to push back on normative constructions of the white teaching force. Many participants in our study reported that it was difficult for them to engage in conversations about race and racial disparities for fear of backlash from their colleagues or communities. At the same time, those participants that seemed to have a supportive work environment as well as an awareness of the racial disparities that exist among their constituents were much more likely to express it during their interview. They also shared how they navigated challenges in their work environment.

The study also offers the potential benefit of strategies such as racial justice professional development opportunities for school and community leaders and co-collaborating with schools, state agencies, and

community organizations to facilitate conversations with community members to understand why researchers focus on race when examining disparities and highlighting institutions that value and openly support racial justice.

This study also contributes to the limited research on racial justice and anti-racism research at the institutional level. Similar to findings of prior studies (Shah et al., 2024; Shah et al., 2022; Diem et al., 2024), our research suggests there is substantive work that needs to be done at the institutional level to bring about anti-racist practice. First, racial politics and tensions within institutions that are particularly pervasive must be named to effectively move forward with racial justice work. Second, there is a need for greater collaboration and partnership among various institutions (e.g., schools, universities, non-profits, state agencies) committed to racial justice work. Third, institutions must find value in and commit to providing deep and meaningful continuous professional development that encourages members to be critically reflective. Lastly, leaders of institutions must push to dismantle unjust systems within and across their institutions.

Recommendations for Conducting Racial Justice Research in the Future

This study's recommendations have implications for not only university researchers but also K-12 administrators and community partners invested in racial justice research. There are three potential aspects that may exponentially increase school and community partners' awareness and engagement in racial justice research.

The first is to develop and advocate for professional development on racial justice. As suggested by Villavicencio et al. (2022) and Jayakumar et al. (2015), organizations' policies and practices can change if there is intention on the part of organizations to develop staff's racial acumen. Educators and administrators with an interest in learning more about how to effect change should be key partners in advocating for and advancing professional development workshops within their workplaces. We offer the findings of McManimon et al. (2018), who suggest professional development should give context to how schools, and we offer all social institutions, function within larger systems of power. Professional development should center the lives of participants as they make meaning of professional development content and how it relates to their own experiences. As suggested by Yamamoto (1997), researchers may learn more than they could ever imagine in their academic silos by engaging practitioners who work on the front lines in meaningful conversation on crafting anti-racism professional development initiatives.

The second recommendation is to provide opportunities for school and community partners to co-create relevant research projects. As mentioned previously, researchers can be strategic in tailoring their research projects to address the interests and concerns of school and community partners. Taking it a step further would be to engage not only educators and administrators in the research design process but also the populations of interest (e.g., grandparents). There can be varying levels of engagement from the community based on researchers' epistemological lens. Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR) recognizes that

expertise does not just reside in the academy, but often the findings of those in the academy are what is legitimized and valued (Fine, 2018). Those most impacted by the unjust policies and procedures that produce racial disparities have their own unique lens from which to articulate the consequences and best frame the problem.

The third recommendation is to address how we educate future professionals; graduate-level courses must attend to the changing social and political landscape by emphasizing professional self-reflexivity, critical examination of our social institutions, and political advocacy (Strickland & Sharkey, 2022). As suggested by Garces et al. (2017), during this time of “retrenchment and renewed forms of racism,” we must try new approaches to address racial inequities in education, which are emblematic of societal inequities and must be addressed concurrently. Critical theorists and social science researchers have demonstrated how both education and social work practice uphold white norms in both curricular and co-curricular settings (Becker et al., 2021; Evans-Winters & Hoff, 2011). Deans and graduate program directors must recognize that embedding anti-racist interventions in pre-service teachers’ and social work students’ course curricula are one method for training up critically conscious professionals. Researchers have shown the effectiveness of using coursework and field placements to expand students’ knowledge and capacity for anti-racist work (Beasley et al., 2023; Aronson et al., 2020), yet we also know the model of offering coursework or one-off professional development workshops on race does not lead to sustained behavior change (Randi & Zeichner, 2004). Further, less empirical research has been done on the implementation and efficacy of anti-racism training in schools (Villavicencio et al., 2022). We must find ways to provide ongoing, long-term professional development that is intimately connected to the everyday experiences of practitioners so that it is context-specific and relevant to their lives. We must also encourage more implementation and assessment of anti-racism training not only in schools but also in professional settings. Graduate programs should consider offering continuous professional development for alumni and follow up with teachers and social workers to best understand how graduates are applying what they learn in the field.

Directions for Future Research

We have identified several potential directions for future research based on the study results. Because this study was strongly associated with our grandparent study and conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to understand what challenges (e.g., communication, institutional support) persist in racial justice research projects that target other populations and are conducted without some of the strict confines that were in place during COVID. This is particularly needed considering the 2025 presidential executive orders intended, in part, to place a strong chilling effect on all work related to racial justice. To date, we do not fully know the ramifications of anti-equity legislation, which continues to be introduced in our state legislature. As such, researchers committed to racial justice research must identify strategies to navigate the new political environment that is impacting our work within and beyond our institutions.

The fact that our initial population of study were elderly adults who were disproportionately and negatively impacted by COVID compared to the general population may have significantly impacted their willingness to participate in a research study under those conditions. However, it would be interesting to know if others who conducted racial justice research projects during COVID-19 with other high-risk populations (e.g., children with obesity, immunocompromised) experienced a similar lack of participation.

Additionally, more research needs to examine the institutional-level (i.e., organization or system) impacts on racial justice research. A case study of a school, state agency, or community organization may reveal how various levels in a hierarchical leadership structure impact a school or community partner's decision to engage in a racial justice research project. Some questions might include, who are the key decision makers, are stakeholders such as parents included in decisions regarding racial justice research partnerships, and what are the perceived benefits or repercussions of engaging in racial justice research partnerships?

While some institutions (e.g., education) have been stifled by anti-equity legislation in their respective states, other institutions (e.g., private businesses) have furthered their anti-racism efforts via professional development trainings and workshops. It will be important to see how these respective institutions strategize to combat potential backlash, whether from employees, outside entities, or threats to pull funding in furtherance of racial justice. As Jayakumar et al. (2015) suggests, understanding which groups or sectors have the most clout within their spheres of influence and the strategies they employ can help us in being strategic in our own efforts to support work towards a common racial justice agenda.

Conclusion

Our study examined the perspectives of school and community members seeking to partner in racial justice research. Results suggest the need for higher education institutions to invest in graduate and postgraduate study as spaces that facilitate racial understanding and sustain this emphasis through partnerships with workforce professional development initiatives that encourage open and honest conversation on race and racial justice research projects within institutions. Despite challenges posed by pursuing racial justice research, we need to establish and sustain strong school-university-community partnerships that prioritize racial justice issues and disseminate findings broadly (i.e., well beyond the academy) to combat ongoing efforts to thwart the creation of a more equitable society.

In conclusion, all social institutions must contend with the vestiges of racism that pervade their schools, agencies, and community organizations. Institutional leaders in education and social work must also support the work their employees aim to achieve—equity. There is an opportunity for higher education researchers to partner with school and community partners who see the impact of racial disparities on the families they serve. Researchers can leverage their access to participants and tap into their passions both personally and professionally to co-construct research projects, professional development workshops, and co-design new curricular and co-curricular components for graduate study with school and community partners as equal experts.

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