

Northwest University

The Significance of Reflection:  
Providing Racial Mirrors for Students of Color in Sun Public Schools.

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Integrative Project II, GLST 5973

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24 April 2022

Thesis Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in International Community Development.

Some material included in this thesis project was previously submitted to meet the requirements for the following ICD courses: Community Development, Culture Studies in a Globalized Context, Peacemaking and Reconciliation, Project Management, Research for Social Change, Social and Environmental Justice, Social Entrepreneurship and Design Thinking, Fieldwork, and Integrative Project I & II.

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## **Introduction**

Let me set a scene for you: no matter where you go you hear or see a combination of English, Spanish, Russian, Chuukese, American Sign Language, Arabic, Vietnamese, Ukrainian, or Japanese. You find yourself interacting with people who are Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Islander. You engage in small talk and meaningful conversation with those around you. You find yourself learning from them and they from you. Where are you? This might sound like a scene from the United Nations or an airport. However, that is not the scene that I just set. This scene in particular is the site of my fieldwork research: Sun Public Schools.

Now that the scene has been set, let me ask you a different question. What do you think of when you think about elementary school? Stop for a second and see what comes to mind. Do you think of colors? Smells? Laughter? Teachers? There are no wrong associations. Everyone has different views when it comes to memories and what is associated with elementary school. Some of those memories and associations are great and some are not.

Elementary school is foundational to a student's academic career. What a student learns in elementary school will go with them throughout their educational journey. It is imperative that elementary schools equip all students with the tools they need to thrive in the moment and in the future. To accomplish this and help students cultivate the tools they need to be successful both in and out of school, elementary schools must be intentionally inclusive. Because one association that should come to mind, that should be synonymous with elementary school, is belonging. This sense of belonging will not only help students cultivate the tools they need to succeed but help transform the current educational landscape.

Elementary school is a unique microcosm of society. It is a diverse community coming together with different languages, races, abilities, interests, and opinions at a transformative and impressionable age. A student's educational journey should reflect that beauty and honor that responsibility. The academic journey a student takes, starting in elementary school, includes failures and successes, mental health, friendship, learning, growing, innovating, and so much more. If belonging is not foundational to elementary school, we are not giving students all the tools they need to thrive as they go through this journey. How we do things and how we view things as educators then, must be reimaged. One crucial reimagination is how elementary schools incorporate racial mirrors into their programming.

### Racial Mirrors

A racial mirror is something that is often talked about within the adoption community, but rarely outside of that community (What are Racial Mirrors). In fact, being a part of the adoption community is how I first came across the topic. But what exactly is a racial mirror? Simply put, it is a form of representation. It is being able to look at someone and see yourself in them, specifically when it comes to racial or ethnic make-up. It is a form of representation. It is an accessible, visual reflection of your own race. This reflection, if implemented well, has the power to signal belonging.

Like “manifestations of culture”, racial mirrors can come in many forms, from movie characters to action figures to your high school English teacher (Hofstede et al.). As a biracial woman who grew up in a predominantly White community, I clearly remember the moment when the importance of racial mirrors began to resonate with me. I was walking through Walmart with some college friends around Christmas time and happened upon a Barbie display in one of the middle aisles. As we walked by, I stopped as I noticed that there were Black

Barbies prominently featured in the display. I could not stop staring at the dolls. I made my friends stop and we talked about how amazing and accessible these dolls were. I still think about that moment, and I still feel the same emotions. I had never seen myself represented so tangibly before and it deeply mattered, even as a twenty-one-year-old college student. The significance of racial mirrors cannot be overstated.

As a biracial adoptee, adopted by white parents, understanding the importance of seeing and knowing someone who looks like you is critical. However, that same understanding is lacking within many education systems. Studies show that children of color “who did not conform to white middle class norms in terms of appearance, behavior, or family structure were judged by their kindergarten teachers to be less likely to be successful at school and received less teaching time, attention, and reward directed behavior” (Wright et al. 84S). Students begin to internalize their teacher’s low expectations which externalizes as having “lower academic achievement and more disruptive behaviors [by] second grade” (Wright et al. 84S). This sobering reality calls for drastic change. The lack of understanding and implementation of racial mirrors in elementary school can have detrimental effects on students of color in school and in life.

### **Thesis Statement**

To better provide racial mirrors for students of color, Sun Public Schools (SPS) must work to understand the significance of racial representation and intentionally implement programming that creates accessibility to professionals and community members of color, starting in elementary school. SPS currently has a few programs that focus on racial mirrors for students in middle and high school, however, elementary schools have largely been left out of the conversation. On average, 58% of the student body of the three largest schools in SPS are

students of color while teachers of color represent only 9% of those same schools (Report Card). This project portion of this thesis will create a blueprint for programming that allows for SPS to be intentional about ensuring that students of color see and understand that they belong in all spaces; an understanding that they will take with them throughout their educational career and into adulthood.

### Contextualization

Located in Vancouver, Washington, Sun Public Schools (SPS) currently educates 21,964 students. Almost half, 46%, of those students are students of color. However, only 12% of the 1,404 educators in the district are people of color. Such racial singularity in educators leaves thousands of students with no racial mirrors. This only serves to perpetuate the outsider status of almost half of the SPS student body. In order for SPS to make meaningful change, they must design and implement programs that speak “to the particular cultural characteristics and inherent resources” of their students (Inslee). This centering of the student and decentering of the predominantly white self challenges educators to begin the processes of identifying their own biases and blind spots.

My thesis project, attached at the end of this thesis as the appendix, aims to address the racial inequity experienced in SPS schools by identifying the issue of the lack of teachers of color, exploring the significance of these racial mirrors, and offering schools a realistic intermediate solution to getting adults of color within the walls of our elementary schools. This intermediate solution is a tailored approach to interactive experience labs during the day that will give students access to professionals of color in an interactive, and meaningful way. These experience labs will allow students to see a representation of themselves in professions they may have never known were available to them, like medical, entrepreneurial, and law professions. In

the appendix, I further explain my methodology, results, and provide analysis, while this paper will connect to other research and theory on racial mirrors and representation.

It is only through intentionality that SPS can embody inclusivity, honor, and support for all students regardless of race or ethnicity. SPS must include the provision of racial mirrors for students of color through the implementation of programming that creates accessibility to professionals and community members of color, starting in elementary school. This is something SPS has the capacity to implement with efficacy.

## **The Problem**

### Bias, Prejudice, and Racism

Assumptions, stereotypes, biases, and prejudice all serve to hold firm to the status quo. Beverly Tatum, author of *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, gives us this definition, “Prejudice is a preconceived judgment or opinion, usually based on limited information” (78). She follows up by asserting that “we all have prejudices, not because we want them but simply because we are so continually exposed to misinformation about others” (78). The best way to combat biases and prejudice is to be exposed to the truth. Racial mirrors for elementary schools offer tangible opportunities for both students of color and White students to engage with adults of color and gain new understandings.

Racism on the other hand, creates an imbalance of power along racial lines. The insidious nature of racism is that more often than not, people are “taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on [one] group from birth” (McIntosh 1). If we want effective and sustainable change, we must start looking at the implications that bias, prejudice, and racism have on how students experience education. We must seek social justice within our schools, starting in elementary school. The only way a school community can do this is for educators to confront their own biases and racism in order to acknowledge some uncomfortable truths.



In *Unveiling Privilege to Broaden Participation*, authors Rachel Scherr and Amy Robertson contend that these uncomfortable truths include understanding the privilege that comes with being White, which includes:

The privilege to avoid spending time with people whom one was trained to mistrust; the privilege that one's children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race. . . Overall, White privilege involves unexamined racial identity, including the privilege of seeing oneself as an individual, rather than as a member of a group. . .

In education, White . . . privilege manifests partly as the notion that education has nothing to do with cultures and heritages. Educators and administrators often do not recognize that there are cultural underpinnings to our systems of instruction and assessment. . . Few teachers 'have adequate knowledge about how conventional teaching practices reflect European American cultural values' and many believe that 'good teaching is transcendent,' or 'identical for all students, settings, and circumstances. Education is seen as an 'effective doorway of assimilation into mainstream society' for students from diverse racial, ethnic, class, and other social groups, rather (than for example) as a means for students to engage meaningfully with a variety of cultures. (395)

There must be a shift in this narrative for meaningful change to happen. With the majority of SPS staff being White, we must come face to face with our ideas of what is considered normal and understand how that idea of normal may be complicit in the perpetuation of the structural evil of racism (Moe-Lobeda 2). However, simply understanding is not enough. Once we understand and recognize structural evil, we must act. We must make it a point to dismantle systemic oppression and disrupt its perpetuation. To do that, though, there is an often-uncomfortable self-adjustment that needs to take place. Only then can there be the hope of a shift in practice.

### Within Vancouver

Vancouver has a history of systemic and institutional racism. The criminal justice system of Vancouver disproportionately stops, searches, uses both force and deadly force against, arrests, convicts, imposes higher and more frequent fines on, imposes longer sentences on, imposes the death penalty on, and generally has harsher treatment for Black and Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC) (Race and the Criminal Justice System). People of color are often viewed, even if subconsciously, as a threat.

### Within SPS

For years, SPS has had a glaring lack of partnership with families and communities of color which has resulted in a disproportionate number of students of color being disciplined, many to the point of exclusion from school (Report Card). In 2019, SPS was found to be out of compliance with state guidelines regarding their “use of discipline and its impact on students [of color]” which led to their shifting practices and creating more equitable policies. Within the last year, SPS underwent their own equity audit and has since announced its plans to address “issues of inequity, institutional and implicit bias and racism” (Equity Initiative). Diversity must be reframed and better understood within SPS.

Often quantified, diversity in SPS assumes significance in relation to how many students of color attend the school or how many staff members of color there are. In many schools, this quantifiable diversity is “celebrated” from time to time with a few posters hung in the halls or a 15-minute celebration or presentation for Black History Month or Hispanic Heritage Month. Rarely, however, does it go deeper than that.

The act of only celebrating those that are diverse, those that are other than the rest without acknowledging what got them to where they are, creates complicity in the reproduction

of racism. The “problem with this sort of ‘uncritical diversity discourse’ or ‘shallow multiculturalism’ is that participation in it has the potential to reify, or construct as real, who is ‘ethnic,’ who has ‘culture,’ and who is ‘normal’ while ignoring how racial hierarchies and power actually work” (Hagerman 47). Steven Furtick, pastor of a large, multicultural church, says it well, “If I celebrate the diversity but don’t address the disparity, to me, that’s hypocrisy” (A Conversation). SPS must shift the narrative on how diversity is understood within their schools.

SPS now clearly outlines their mission of excellence in education on their website: “In partnership with home and community, Sun Public Schools provides an innovative learning environment that engages and empowers each student to develop the knowledge and essential skills to become a competent, responsible and compassionate citizen” (Our Story). This new zeal to become the most equitable they can be, has been met with an overwhelming tension. While many educators and community members are ready to engage in the work of becoming more equitable for all students, the district has also been met with anger and pushback. Black teachers are being taunted off the stage at school board meetings when they express a view that suggests SPS has implicit bias against people of color, which has been proven by extensive auditing practices (Equity Audit). Parents and community members have taken to social media, school sidewalks, and board meetings to say their white children are being discriminated against and treated less than other students because they are white and “have a father that loves them and a mother that loves them and they want to take care of them” (Baker). While these specific examples happened at one of the many school board meetings I attended, they are not unusual occurrences. The tension in the school board meetings exemplifies that “when you are accustomed to privilege, [equity] feels like oppression” (unknown). It is evident that systemic racism is painful to disrupt. SPS is seeing that:

Teaching occurs in the context of the school climate, and the school exists in the context of community and society. Oppression and privilege are structurally embedded and affect everyone. The dynamics of oppression and privilege are grounded in social constructions of race, and racism is manifest and the outcome of systems. Racial School climate matters for all students as it informs how children experience their school and where they are likely to be positioned in relation to social constructions of middle-class whiteness.

(Blitz et al. 97)

As SPS strives to disrupt these inequities, this thesis work aims to aid them in their pursuit of becoming more equitable.

### **Personal**

I am Black. I am White. I am adopted. However, race was never really talked about in my family. My parents, who are White, had a color-blind approach when it came to raising me and my sister, who is also adopted and multi-racial. This same color-blind approach was echoed in the walls of the church, most social circles I found myself in, and the Christian school I attended. While this approach seemed to be favored by many, I am not entirely sure to whose benefit. It left me without a space to navigate the experiences I had because of the color of my skin or how my hair looked. Authors Sharan Merriam and Elizabeth Tisdell assert that it is often “out of personal, practical experience that research ideas can be found” (74). My research into how to better provide racial mirrors for students of color in Sun Public Schools is personal to me on numerous levels.

I never had a racial mirror in elementary school, in fact, I cannot remember ever having a racial mirror on my educational journey. Many of the things I experienced could have been

mitigated or worked through with the advocacy of a racial mirror. Not only do racial mirrors allow you to see that you belong, they also act as an advocate.

I remember the first time another student petted my hair and the first time a classmate asked me to ‘talk black’. More specifically, I remember walking into a college class one day with straight hair, which is a noticeable difference from the kinky coils that I normally have. The professor looked at me and jovially expressed how professional I looked with straight hair. Although they meant no ill-intent, their words echoed through my entire being. I still have to push back against that idea to this day. Had I had a racial mirror in elementary school, I would have already had the opportunity to see that I could be professional in any setting just as I was. Had I had a racial mirror in college, I may have been able to unpack what had been said to me and have an advocate throughout that process who understood what I was experiencing. I remember those firsts vividly as I remember not knowing what to do with them as I had no racial mirrors to help me navigate those experiences.

I also understand the importance of racial mirrors as I am an employee of Sun Public Schools, the subject of my thesis and case study, which makes me one of the district’s few employees of color. I have seen and experienced first-hand the lack of racial mirrors in this district. I have had many teachers come to me to ask for advice on how to connect with students of color. I have had teachers send students to me because they would not stop asking about the teacher who looked like them. I have seen the effect on students of color when a teacher acknowledged something about their culture or heritage. My current role has given me the chance to interact with many different teachers, students, and families across the district. I see and feel the need within our communities of color and within SPS schools.

Although I never set out to be a racial mirror, I am one. It happened organically. As I look back on how and why it happened, I see even more clearly the need for racial mirrors. I will never forget the student who was having a rough day in his class and asked his teacher if he could go talk to the teacher who had skin like his. That was me. I was the only staff member of color he had access to. Racial mirrors, in the form of intentional and meaningful representation, deeply matter.

### **Historical Background**

I have heard countless times that ‘there are just more White teachers’, in justification of why many schools, like the one I work at, have few to no teachers of color. This broad assertion is rooted in privilege while being oblivious to the history of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (Brown)*. Brown, the encompassing “name given to five separate cases that were heard by the U.S. Supreme Court concerning the issue of segregation in public schools” in 1954 and 1955 (History), was led by Thurgood Marshall and the National Alliance for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). While heralded as a landmark decision:

“Brown also had an unintended consequence, the effects of which are still felt today: It caused the dismissal, demotion, or forced resignation of many experienced, highly credentialed black educators who staffed black-only schools. After the decision, tens of thousands of black teachers and principals lost their jobs as white superintendents began to integrate schools but balked at putting black educators in positions of authority over white teachers or students. (Will)

I see and feel these consequences in SPS. I have heard countless reasons and excuses as to why there are so few teachers of color. However, they never move beyond excuses. Little has been done to affect change.

We often participate in and perpetuate systemic injustices because we fail to look past the surface. We choose not to examine the ideas and behaviors we hold, which were passed down to us that we then pass on to the next generation. It is not as clean and straightforward as ‘there are just more White teachers’. And while it is difficult to reconcile with, we cannot allow privilege to let us ignore the fact that:

We decimated the Black principal and teacher pipeline. . . [that] prior to Brown, in the 17 states that had segregated school systems, 35 to 50 percent of the teaching force was Black. . . [and] now, no state has anywhere close to those percentages. . . According to the most recent federal data, about 7% of public-school teachers and 11% of public-school principals are Black. (Will)

We are doing a disservice to our children, to our future, by operating out of unchecked privilege; no matter what that privilege is.

## **Fieldwork Research**

### Sun Public Schools

My research is a case study into Sun Public Schools that was mainly qualitative in nature. The scope of my fieldwork, while encompassing the district as a whole, did not include current students. I observed school board meetings and daily interactions. I interviewed educators, alumni, district leadership, and parents of SPS students. During these interviews, I focused on three guiding questions and let the conversation take shape from there:

*What is your experience when it comes to race and equity in SPS?*

*What are the strengths and weaknesses of SPS when it comes to race and equity?*

*Should elementary schools provide racial mirrors for their students?*

As I invited voices from all areas of SPS to speak, I began to see themes of staff needing more training opportunities and a lack of racial mirrors for students.

Doing research within Sun Public Schools (SPS) was an easy decision. I work in the district and am part of the school community. I am invested in its students, families, and staff as well as the betterment of its practices and outcomes. After talking with peers across the country who had done research in their school districts, I knew I wanted to work with SPS. This would be a great opportunity to support SPS in their efforts to become a more inclusive and equitable district.

However, I quickly found that SPS was abnormally difficult to work with, especially in the beginning approval stage. What should have been an approval process of one form and a relatively quick review by an administration board turned into a process that took weeks to complete with an uncertainty of approval. Eventually my research was approved, however, it took two forms, over twelve pages of research and explanation, three separate emails from a data analyst that included lists of questions about particulars, ignored requests to meet to help finalize the process and answer any lingering questions, five phone calls, direct communication from my graduate program director to the district, among other obstacles put in my way before I even obtained approval. The obstacles put in my way became so apparent that numerous principals, team members, and supervisors began to ask me how I was holding up. A few of them began to investigate why my research was being treated in such an ugly manner. It became so bad that at the behest of the department chair of my graduate program, I was two days away from pulling my research request from SPS to begin elsewhere as I had become behind in my graduate program due to the delays and obstacles presented by SPS. The extent of these barriers is extremely uncommon when requesting approval for graduate-level research.



There was something about the nature of my project that seemed to worry some in SPS leadership. Was it that qualitative research is harder to control than quantitative? Was it the theme of my research? Was it me? I will never fully know why I was presented with the obstacles I was. I do, however, know that it highlights the necessity of the racial equity work being done. It is not easy work, it will agitate some people, but it must be done.

### Educators

After talking with educators in SPS, it sunk in even more how divisive a topic racial equity can be within schools. Stephanie Regence, who has been teaching in SPS for over a decade, described the basis for much of this division, “whether or not it is recognized, the white savior complex is real and there are a lot of teachers who are clinging to it. They are essentially saying look at what I do! Look at me saving the kids in poverty! And that is how they like it. There are a lot of teachers, and admin, who don’t actually think that there is a problem.” This sentiment is one that showed up numerous times while talking with educators. There is a pervasive idea that there is no racial injustice or inequity happening within our schools, which exemplifies that the belief that nothing needs to change still must be rooted out.

Molly Blaker and Carrie Young, two SPS elementary school educators of color, express that while it is nice to see that SPS is taking steps to become more equitable, they are not yet convinced that things will truly change. They say this in part, due to implicit racist views that are deeply held by many teachers and administrators who seem to not want to change. However, they are finding hope in the work that is coming out of the district’s equity department. When asked about racial mirrors, they both asserted “we need more racial mirrors for our students! Even if it is not staff, we need our students to see themselves represented. We can’t do it by ourselves. It is exhausting. There are not enough [people of color] in the district!”

## Parents

The interactions I had with elementary school families show that parents with students of color believe that having racial mirrors in leadership positions impact their children in great ways. I will never forget the words of one Black mother after seeing that the associate principal of her children's school was Black. She looked at me and with an enthusiastic and almost shocked sincerity exclaimed, "Girl, she's Black!" She went on to express, "This is what my kids need. They need to see people who look like them in leadership positions in their schools. It makes such a difference." In her student's elementary school of almost 800 students, there are now four adults of color, which is more than most SPS schools have.

I have had parents express heartbreak as they share that their child no longer likes attending school because they do not feel like they belong. They cite that there is no one who seems to really accept them or try to understand what they wear. They feel like they have to change their culture and identity to belong. They feel like they must assimilate to Whiteness. Instead of feeling proud of who they are, they feel disconnected and isolated from their peers and educators. The boundaries set by their school community have positioned them as an outsider.

## Alumni

Emmy Falto, a Latinx graduate of SPS schools, shared that she wishes there had been a racial mirror for her while she was in elementary school, "I did not have any teachers who looked like me or really understood me and my culture until maybe high school, and even then, there was only one. I wish I would have had more." She recounted stories of staff assuming her family was poor while attempting to assimilate her experiences to their own context of "normal", like bringing a Halloween costume to school for her to wear because they assumed her family either did not care enough or have enough money to buy her one. Emmy, feeling like she must be

obedient, puts on the costume for the school day even though she did not want to wear a costume and the costume itself was not something that was relevant to her in any way. Yet the adults loved it. Unfortunately, I have heard stories like this over and over. Experiences like these could have been avoided, or alleviated, by having a racial mirror who could have helped other staff understand cultural nuances and advocated on her behalf.

## **School as Community**

### Developing Community

In order to develop community within local schools, SPS must hold to the understanding that school, like family, “plays an essential role in shaping children’s development. Schools have an important and lasting impact on not only academic knowledge, but also social and emotional growth and who children ultimately become in life” (Grover et al. S79). Taking a holistic approach to the development of each school community will have far reaching effects for students and the school.

In *The Art of Community*, Charles Vogl discusses seven principles that form community. These are indicators that help determine who is an insider and who is not. One of those principles is the boundary principle. While boundaries should help create a safe space for everyone in the community, in this case, an SPS school, boundaries are often used to keep “outsiders out” (Vogl 33). Boundaries are formed around trust and perceived values. Trust is created when members of a community know who values the same things and a mistrust is created, often unintentionally, when it is perceived that someone holds different values. For example, in the book *White Kids*, this trust vs. mistrust is explored. Raymond, who coaches a soccer team, expresses concern and indignation when he talks about the “lack of father figures in these [Black] children’s lives” (Hagerman 156). Raymond goes on to emphasize that these “absent black fathers . . . don’t care

about their kids” (Hagerman 156). This shows that Raymond, and his community, place significant value on a visibly present role in the upbringing of children. If this boundary is breached, you will be considered an outsider in Raymond’s community. This is a type of boundary that I see at play within SPS schools. It often sounds like: Is it that hard to come to a Parent Teacher Conference? I am more like a parent to this student than their parents are. Their parent never comes to school events, it is so frustrating. If they cared about their child’s education, they would show up on time or at least call me back. These action items almost always fall within the parameters of the educator’s cultural context, with no thought given to the context of the family in question.

During her TED Talk entitled “The Danger of a Single Story”, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie shares “the story of how she found her authentic cultural voice -- and warns that if we hear only a single story about another person. . .we risk a critical misunderstanding” (Adichie). If being a disengaged or ill-equipped parent is how we as educators view, and talk about, our families who traditionally seem uninterested in their student’s education or whose parenting style is divergent from our own, we begin to create a dangerous single story. If being sassy and disrespectful is how we view and talk about young Black girls, we begin to create a dangerous single story.

These types of single stories serve to keep many families and students “locked in a feeling of victimization” that strips them of dignity (Kuenkel 111). Educators must intentionally work to shift that narrative. However, that narrative will not change unless community is formed with educators and those they serve. Only through true community will it be understood that it is not that the parent in question does not care about their child’s education, rather, it is that they work two jobs to ensure that child has food and a roof over their head and that it is not that the

parent is ill-equipped, rather hard-working and protective of their family when it comes to a system that failed them as a child. Only through true community will educators begin to see that what they view in their culture as sassy and disrespectful is considered energetic, creative, and childlike in the culture of that young Black girl. Schools must replace negative frameworks with positive ones. The question that must be answered then, is how to change that framework. The answer lies in neighbor-love.

### Neighbor-Love

What is neighbor-love? Simply stated, it is actively wanting the best for those around you. This thesis work, on the significance of racial mirrors within elementary schools, focuses on disrupting systemic racial injustice in the education community by creating a visible and physical signal of belonging for students of color as an extension of that love. Ensuring that there are racial mirrors is an act of neighbor-love. Neighbor-love, in the context of a school community, “actively serves the well-being of those who are loved. . . is not perfect. . . is mutual. . . builds community. . . is especially blocked by the love of wealth and prestige. . . pertains to whomever my life touches directly or through social or ecological systems. . . seeks justice. . . [and] is political” (Moe-Lobeda 186). At first glance, these attributes seem simple. However, putting others first and genuinely wanting the absolute best for them can be both complex and controversial.

My entire post-college career has been one of serving families who are often considered disenfranchised. However, there is a significant difference between serving and actively serving the well-being of others. That is the crux of neighbor-love. If I am actively serving, I am continuously changing, pushing my static ideas of privilege, advantage, oppression, and injustice, while learning from and building community with those I serve. Otherwise, I am

simply pushing an agenda onto those I claim to serve, inadvertently (or perhaps intentionally) participating in and perpetuating systemic oppression.

Racial privilege, also in the context of neighbor-love, is critical to recognize. The specific elementary school that I work at averages 726 students. Out of those students, 45% of them are students of color. On average, there are 49 teachers on staff at this school. Over the last five years, less than 3% of those 49 teachers have been teachers of color. Currently, there are no teachers of color at this school (Report Card). This leaves 327 students with no racial representation other than that of the majority. This systemic inequity creates a social disadvantage for those 327 students of color, which over time, perpetuates the larger social and economic disadvantage experienced by adults of color.

It is only after recognizing our own privilege, which is often wrapped up within our largely homogenous contexts, that we can begin to reframe the narratives in which we see, talk about, and engage with students and their families (Schaffer and Skinner). It is more challenging and sinister to uphold systemic inequities when we understand how we have been a part of the problem. Out of love for neighbor, the SPS community must look inward and help each other address personal blind spots. Then with eyes wide open, we can work together toward the “changing of institutions, systems, and patterns of behavior which . . . destabilize society. Social justice . . . aims at correcting any oppressive and alienating trends within the community” (McBrien). It is as a community that we will be able to address and disrupt racial inequities within SPS more effectively.

### Copowerment

Every SPS student has a local community and culture that shapes how they view and interact with the world around them. SPS, while located within these communities, has

historically done a poor job of working with and integrating the local communities into the educational system. When it comes to community development, as well as pursuing the integration of racial mirrors into the school setting, the concept of copowerment must be a guiding principle. Copowerment asserts that all stakeholders, including the school, the students and their families, and the community at large have resources and abilities that work to strengthen the weaknesses of the other. Copowerment should be understood as the “dynamic of mutual exchange through which both sides of a social equation are made stronger and more effective by the other” (Inslee). It also requires that “each side. . . views the other as equally able” (Inslee). SPS will remain at a deficit until the talent, expertise, and ability of greater Vancouver community is acknowledged and tapped into. And the greater Vancouver community will remain at a deficit until SPS pours out of their ability and expertise into the community.

### Collaboration

Collaboration, like copowerment, is another tenet of community development that must be central to the implementation of racial mirrors within SPS. It must be understood that “Collaboration entails frank acknowledgement of organizational limitations, the affirmation of another group’s capacities, and the joining of abilities and resources in pursuit of mutually established goals” (Inslee). It is together that Sun Public Schools and the community will be able to better serve students. When school and community join forces, the possibilities are beautiful and endless (Tackling Complex). Both copowerment and collaboration require a decentering of self in order to operate out of a holistic perspective.

### Belonging

When I stopped in the middle of that Walmart as a twenty-one-year-old college student, there was an unfamiliar feeling of belonging. I felt seen. I felt known. Meaningful representation

creates a powerful sense of belonging. For example, Julie Jacob identifies roadblocks to black men entering medical school. Specifically, Jacobs cites the lack of representation of people of color accessible to students in elementary, middle, and high schools. The lack of representation of people of color within our elementary schools has devastating effects that ripple far past the walls of the school.

Educators must do everything they can to ensure that students know and understand that they belong in all places. I have had parents tell me that their Black child does not believe they can be a doctor or a teacher because they have never seen a Black doctor or teacher before (Bradford). I have seen students sobbing and hiding under tables because they hate the color of their skin and want to look like everyone else in their classroom. It is clear that “not having [diverse] models of intellectual authority and leadership in schools is detrimental to children. . . All children deserve to have diverse models of intellectual authority in the classroom via their teacher, or diverse models of leadership in schools” (Will). Racial mirrors provide a visible, physical representation that signals belonging.

As a society, we need all children to know they belong in all spaces, not just the spaces that people with their same skin color were once relegated to. However,

Creating belonging doesn't just happen. . . it requires carefully considering the experiences that young people have and recognizing the unique value of these experiences. It's also about ensuring that young people see themselves reflected in a place or a situation and actively listening to what they have to say to continually reinforce that they matter and that this environment is designed to support them and help them thrive. (Annie E. Casey)

If we fail to do this, there will be no hope in changing “the global wealth gap, [which] like wealth inequality in the U.S., is shaped around color lines. Worldwide, people of colors other



than white are overwhelmingly among the economically impoverished” (Moe-Lobeda 34). In order “to experience liberation from what for many is an oppressive economic system, we need to listen and respond to the voice of those oppressed” (Schut and Aristide 129). That listening can and should happen within our schools.

### Innovation

Whether it is trying new things in the classroom or with SPS families in the community, on their turf, it is time to get creative and try things that may not be the norm within SPS schools. New ways of thinking and engagement can be found in strategies that do not always come naturally (Tough 91). I recently had a conversation with Meredith Ravoe, who works in a neighboring school district. She explained that some of the schools in her district had found remarkable success in going to the families instead of forcing families to come to them, “Parents who normally don’t engage with the school attended this event that was not on school property.” I was caught off guard at how much this idea resonated within me. What would happen if we met our families where they are? It might look like going into a library or community center to hold parent meetings or workshops. It might look like having a meal in a community park where staff and families come together in mutual humanity. SPS must begin to think about student and family engagement in new ways.

SPS already has relationships and buy-in from many families and organizations in the communities they serve. SPS also works with a multi-faceted group of stakeholders that “are constantly interacting with and influencing each other” (Joynes and Mattingly 3). These symbiotic relationships are areas that SPS could build on. By bringing all the people they have relationships with together, SPS could holistically begin to reimagine some of the processes they currently use to find more equitable practices.

## **Implications of this Study**

### Implications Within SPS

Ensuring that students of color have racial mirrors is a crucial step in working to address systemic racial inequities within SPS. When school staff are able to approach their work with students “with honesty about [their own] experience and curiosity about the humanness of the” families they serve, true change can happen (Lederach 82). When this happens, authentic relationships can form, helping create a safe learning environment where students feel as though they belong. The more students of color feel that they belong, the more their academic and health outcomes improve (Walton and Cohen). Improved academic outcomes help create more opportunity for students of color once they complete their educational career.

The Search Institute has a Developmental Relationships Framework which contends that “Developmental relationships are the roots of thriving and resilience for young people, regardless of their background or circumstances. Through these relationships, young people discover who they are, cultivate abilities to shape their own lives, and learn how to engage with and contribute to the world around them” (Developmental Relationships). These relationships aid students in connecting and contributing to the greater community when not in school.

### Implications Within Vancouver

The greater community of Vancouver is a secondary beneficiary to SPS intentionally providing racial mirrors for students of color. Developmentally, elementary-aged students are working to balance new information coming their way with what they already know to be true (Sociology of Childhood). When students understand that they are welcome in all spaces it makes room for a radical shift in their development. As they begin to more deeply understand that they are wanted and belong in all levels of education, they take that understanding with them

as they interact in their communities and families. They then can better understand that they have talents to contribute to all areas of life and community. By addressing systemic racial inequities within SPS, students will have more confidence to go out into their communities and make meaningful contributions.

## **Conclusion**

### *Personal Insight*

*My journey through this International Community Development program has awakened a heightened response to racial systemic inequities within SPS and even more so has brought a new awareness to how I interact with humanity as a development practitioner and a global citizen. My desire is to be fully intentional about constantly learning to understand how the stories of others intersect with my own (Meyers 13). I must understand and take responsibility for how my life and actions intertwine with those in my local community as well as how they impact the global community.*

*However, my newly found individual response must be joined with others in collective action for meaningful change to happen. I must be intentional about creating space for the identification of mutual humanity to happen through “strategic storytelling, dialogue, and active listening” (Salter McNeil 79). This is how communities strengthen and develop, through relationship and intentionality. This is how we find a path forward. The oppressed can only be truly free after that which is oppressing them is identified and banished (Smith 103). That act of identification, however, has proven to be a painful, albeit necessary, process. I cannot expect others to identify and uproot areas in their lives that need improvement without first doing it myself.*

*Personal transformation, while necessary, is only the beginning. In order for the communities I am a part of to find wholeness, both individual people and systems must be just. (Rocke and Van Dyke 73). It is imperative that personal and communal change work in tandem to disrupt oppression (Framework 45). My own transformation is futile if it stops with me; I must live it out in and with my community. Sustainable, life-giving development systems are formed when personal transformation is paired with the transformation of the community (Myers 225). That is where I hope to find myself, among the community, creating meaningful and lasting change.*

### SPS Insight

The significance of racial mirrors in elementary schools cannot be overstated. Sun Public Schools is working to dismantle systemic racism in their schools and providing racial mirrors will aid in that process. To better provide racial mirrors for students of color, Sun Public Schools must intentionally implement programming that creates accessibility to professionals and community members of color, starting in elementary school. *Even understanding the significance of racial mirrors is a powerful step in “taking ownership of each other’s stories. . . where former strangers begin to create a new community. It’s where people create a true community” through seeing themselves in the story of another (Salter McNeil 79). When time is taken to truly listen to and understand the stories of students of color like alumni Emmy, SPS has the potential to combat the “message that White culture is ‘normal’ and thus, superior” (Kohli 10). This is the type of systemic disruption that must begin to happen for significant transformation to occur.*

Although systemic oppression is a daunting enemy, it is not insurmountable. It is true that “social systems or structures are created by people over time. *What is constructed by human*

*decisions and actions is subject to human agency. That is, it can be changed or dismantled by other decisions and actions” (Moe-Lobeda 11). That is something that gives me hope that this can happen. While there is a lot of work yet to be done when it comes to systemic social advantage and disadvantage in relation to education, it can be done, Sun Public Schools can embody inclusivity, honor, and support for all students regardless of race or ethnicity by intentionally providing racial mirrors for students of color, starting in elementary school.*

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## Appendix

### Introduction

It is not uncommon to hear, or see, upwards of eight different languages within the course of a typical day in a Sun Public School (SPS) elementary school. It is also not uncommon to have over eight different races or ethnicities represented within the student body of an SPS elementary school. The diversity found with the SPS student body is a beautiful tapestry. However, the staff within SPS elementary schools remains quite singular with the majority of staff members being White. This singularity leaves hundreds of elementary school students with no adults acting as racial mirrors. What are racial mirrors? They are a physical, visual reflection of your own race. This reflection, if implemented well, has the power to signal belonging.

Data collection reveals that racial mirrors in SPS elementary schools is an emergent need. This realization is essential. Over the last few decades, development practices have shifted. This means that development and social change are no longer tied to a tradition of “homogeniz[ing] populations [which] included ignoring large sectors of the population, in particular children. . .” (Willis 155). If SPS truly wants to create a sustainable environment shift, it must work to understand “two variables: the needs of the world you are seeking to change and the dynamics of the [student body]” (Lynch and Walls 25). To understand these two variables, the voices of SPS students and their parents must be heard, and their expertise must be welcomed.

The purpose of this proposal is to provide SPS with an innovative and realistic path to address this need in a culture-honoring and community-owned way. It offers SPS a path for expanded Experience Lab programming that focuses on ensuring students of color have access to racial mirrors within elementary school. Experience Lab programming currently offers students in very few schools access to new opportunities, like classes coding, gardening, and cooking.

This proposed programming will outline the significance of racial mirrors, how racial mirrors can become a part of Experience Labs, how to gauge what will work for individual schools, and how to determine if the project is successful.

In order for Sun Public Schools (SPS) to ensure that students of color have racial mirrors, it must intentionally implement programming that creates accessibility to professionals and community members of color, starting in elementary school. SPS currently has a few programs that focus on racial mirrors for students in middle and high school; however, elementary schools have largely been left out of the conversation. This blueprint for interactive programming focused on providing racial mirrors will enable SPS to ensure that students of color see and understand that they belong in all spaces, which they will take with them throughout their educational career and into adulthood.

### **Significance**

Expanded Experience Lab Programming with a focus on racial mirrors fits directly into the district's equity work. Historically, "early developmental psychology assumed white families and children to be 'the norm' to which families and children of color were compared and often found to be inferior. Rather than [solely focus on] white families [we must] critically [address] the role that [we] play in the production and reproduction of white racial power" (Hagerman 4). This is not easy work, but it is necessary.

Expanded Experience Lab programming will directly support two of the six goal areas found in the district's strategic plan: *Instructional Quality* and *Safe and Supportive Schools*, as well as the district's commitment to equity work.

### Instructional Quality

In order for VPS to holistically create an environment and conditions to personalize learning in the area of instructional quality, we need to understand and prioritize the role of racial mirrors in a child's education. This understanding will aid the district in realizing the goal of Instructional Quality, which is to "ensure that School Improvement Plans (SIP) identify differentiated and individualized pathways to meet the needs of each student" (Design II). Expanded Experience Labs gives voice and belonging to our populations of color, something that is largely missing from our elementary schools.

### Safe and Supportive Schools

The Safe and Supportive Schools goal asserts that the district intends to "Analyze discipline disproportionality data and develop and support the implementation of practices that ensure all children, youth, and adults experience a culture of respect and belonging in our school community" (Design II). It has also been identified that one of the next steps is to "Articulate and embed equity goals within the safe and supportive schools work plan [as well as] . . . work with stakeholder groups to create an action plan that responds to the equity audit findings" (Design II). Racial mirrors must be a part of that conversation. If we truly want all of our students to feel like they belong in our school community and that there is space for them here, we must examine how we use racial mirrors and how we can do so better.

### Equity Work

Expanded Experience Lab Programming will provide SPS elementary schools the opportunity to intentionally incorporate parents and community members of color within the school's learning environment in a safe, structured, and engaging way. This directly supports the equity audit findings that SPS must work to "align financial investments to ensure that all

students have access to high-quality learning materials and academic programs, culturally responsive teachers and culturally diverse learning environments" (Findings and Key Actions).

## **Demographic Information**

### City of Vancouver

Vancouver, WA, has a population of 190,915 people. Of those people, 20% are people of color (*Quickfacts*).

### Student Body

SPS has a student body of 21,964. Of those students, 46% are students of color (Report Card).

### Teaching Staff

SPS employs a teaching staff of 1,404. Of those teachers, 12% are teachers of color (Report Card).

## **Experience and Perspectives**

### Personal

As an employee of Vancouver Public Schools and a woman of color, I have seen and experienced first-hand the lack of racial mirrors in this district. I have had teachers come to me to ask for advice on connecting with students of color. One teacher expressed, "I just don't know what to do or how to help" (Nettle). I have had teachers send students to me because they would not stop asking if they could "talk to the teacher who has skin like mine" (Drach). I have seen the affect of students of color change when presented with an adult who looked like them racially. My role as Family Community Resource Coordinator allowed me the chance to interact with many different teachers, students, and families across the district. I see and feel the need for racial mirrors within VPS.

I will never forget an interaction with one Black student. He struggled in class to connect with his teacher and peers, often expressing hatred for the color of his skin due to it being different from everyone else's. After consulting with the teacher, I worked to find a Lunch Buddy for this student, but not just any Lunch Buddy. I worked to find a professional, Black male to be his Lunch Buddy. More specifically, I searched to find a Lunch Buddy whose skin color matched the student's. As you might imagine, finding a Black professional with dark skin who is also willing to take an hour out of their week to spend time in an elementary school is challenging but not impossible. This student's demeanor shifted the moment he saw his Lunch Buddy. They remained Lunch Buddies until one moved out of state. There was significant value in this student seeing someone who looked like he did not only as a successful professional but also within his school environment.

### Educators

I recently sat in a conference room with a group of SPS educators of color who expressed a desire to see more adults of color within the walls of their elementary schools. One teacher stated that "the district has cut a few programs recently; one was an early learning preschool that had a considerably diverse staff. It is unfortunate because these preschoolers were connecting to this diversity in a beautiful way" (Yalay). A Black educator joined that discussion explaining that she has had numerous Black parents and students thank her for being at their kids' school after being worried that their child would not feel like they fit.

### Parents

A White teacher and parent of children of color expressed that they wish the district would be more intentional about diversity within SPS schools. He shared that one night before bed, their family was asking what their son wanted to be when he grew up. He said that his son

stated, “Well, I know I can’t be a doctor, so I guess I’ll do something different.” When asked why he could not be a doctor, his son poignantly stated, “There aren’t Black doctors. I’ve never seen one.” (Bradford).

### Alumni

A Latinx SPS alumna sat down for coffee with me and shared that she remembers how excited she was that one staff member in secondary school who was a person of color. She expressed that having a racial mirror in elementary school would have been a “game-changer. All of these White moms decided they needed to take me on as some kind of charity case. They didn’t understand my culture or heritage. It was humiliating for me, but they never knew that or bothered to try to understand. And the school wasn’t any better” (Falto). Unfortunately, stories like these are not uncommon.

### **Programming Breakdown**

#### Intent

Currently, only one elementary school in the district is offering students regular Experience Labs. This proposal intends to build upon and expand current Experience Lab programming. Expanded Experience Labs not only provide opportunities for students to engage with racial mirrors in a tangible way, they also offer an opportunity for often disenfranchised parents and community members to be involved with their local elementary school. This engagement works to strengthen student success by creating more robust and healthy bonds between parents and school, school and home, and student and home. This programming will only be successful if there is intentional collaboration and copowerment between school, home, and community (Bronfenbrenner).



### Program Purview

There are a few options for who would be responsible for Expanded Experience labs. It could fall under the direction of the district's race and equity office, which would give it the needed authority to be implemented without pushback. Or it could fall under the direction of individual elementary schools to implement as they see fit. While the latter option provides more flexibility, it also lacks a uniformity that is important for efficiency and sustainability.

### Trial School

The initial Expanded Experience Lab programming would begin with one elementary school for the first year. In the second year, programming would take place at four schools. Year three would be assessed after the second year.

### Possible Presenters

While Vancouver is a predominantly white city, there is a wealth of experience, strength, and skill found within its community of color. The local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), and Our Place – Nuestra Casa Multicultural Center are three organizations that will be drawn from for Expanded Experience Lab presenters.

Expanded Experience Labs will also draw upon the experience and expertise of SPS parents and guardians. There are people of color who are a part of our local elementary schools who are entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, engineers, artists, etc. Expanded Experience Labs will give schools a needed way to invite people of color to be a part of their local schools.

### District Protocols

All presenters will go through the district background check and volunteer screening process. They must meet all district requirements. All presentations will go through an approval process to ensure that all Experience Labs are appropriate, relevant, and engaging.

### Sample Schedule

Each Expanded Experience Lab will include a minimum of 12 sessions. Individual schools can decide how those 12 sessions will be arranged within the school year. This may look like one 12 session set, two six-session sets, or three four-session sets.

### Review

Mini-reviews will be conducted after each session set and a final review will be completed at the end of the full 12 sessions to maintain focus and relevance. School administration will be asked to fill out a brief survey after the full 12 sessions to help reframe and adjust programming.

### Cost analysis

It will take money to operate Expanded Experience Lab programming, especially as some organizations charge a fee. However, while there will be a cost associated with this programming, it should be minimal. During the first year, the rotation of 12 sessions will cost approximately \$1250. A grant will be applied for from the Foundation for Sun Public Schools. A conversation has already been started with the Foundation, and they are very interested in partnering with Expanded Experience Labs.

### **Conclusion**

Data shows that parents of color often feel as though they are not welcome in their child's school or that they simply do not belong, which in turn creates an unwelcoming environment for many of SPS' students of color (Equity Audit). Since misunderstandings often take place when

an educator is unfamiliar with the background, culture, or race of a student, it is imperative that educators become familiar with the unfamiliar (Dray and Wisneski). Differences must be embraced and understood rather than ignored and cast aside. Expanded Experience Lab programming provides White staff with the opportunity to learn from those who are different from them, which has the potential to aid in better understanding and more culturally responsive education.

Expanded Experience Lab programming with a focus on racial mirrors offers a creative and innovative path to providing learning environments that are welcoming to all, create a sense of belonging, and set our students up for success in school and life. In order to ensure that students of color have racial mirrors, SPS must intentionally implement programming that creates accessibility to professionals and community members of color, starting in elementary school. Expanded Experience Labs is a practical, fun, and creative way to lean into the expertise of our local community while dismantling a broken system that traditionally gives advantage to those in the majority.

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