

Using Dialogue to Close the RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

By John Landesman



I often get a blank stare when I tell people that I organize and facilitate dialogue for a living. It sounds like a touchy, feely job with no real outcomes. But as Communication scholars know well, dialogue, when done well, is an essential tool to solving our most intractable problems.

Consider the issue of police/community relations, for example. I was writing this article during the last few weeks of August. Michael Brown, a Black teenager, had just been killed by a White police officer. Images of White police and African-American protesters were all over the media. Most Americans were shocked and sad, but they had vastly different views on what should be done. A nationwide poll conducted the week after Michael Brown was killed showed that 80 percent of Black respondents said the shooting of Michael Brown "...raises important racial issues that need to be discussed..." In that same poll, 47 percent of Whites responded that "...race is getting more attention in this case than it deserves." Strategies to address this issue would most likely fail without understanding these different perspectives. An effective dialogue-to-change program should be a first step to understanding the full breadth of the issue and to cooperatively working together for change (see sidebar).

While the circumstances surrounding Michael Brown's death and the achievement gap of African-American and Latino students in our public schools are different, our perspectives, opinions, and proposed strategies for addressing both are impacted by personal beliefs and experiences.

With this in mind, leaders in Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS), a large, diverse school district in the Maryland suburbs bordering Washington, DC (see sidebar), decided that the school district needed to better understand issues contributing to the racial achievement gap and create the partnerships that would help close the gap. Like many other school districts, MCPS struggled with a persistent gap between African-American and Latino students and their Asian and White peers. MCPS decided on a dialogue-to-change model called Study Circles, promoted by the national organization *Everyday Democracy*. The program engages diverse staff, parents, and students in facilitated dialogue and problem solving. Since 2003, more than 8,000 stakeholders have participated in 430 Study Circles.

HOW STUDY CIRCLES CAN BE USED TO DISCUSS TWO RACIALLY CHARGED ISSUES

Below are statements that have frequently been said about two issues: Michael Brown's killing *and* the achievement gap in schools.

Rank these statements in order of relevance or truth for you...

1 = most relevant/true

4 = least relevant/true

MICHAEL BROWN'S KILLING

- Michael Brown did something wrong.
- Michael Brown's death was simply a tragic mistake.
- The police officer is a racist.
- This case is another example of American institutions failing the African-American community.

RACIAL ACHIEVEMENT GAP

- Parents and students of color need to take more responsibility for their education.
- It's sad that some students are falling through the cracks, but not every student can be successful.
- Teachers have low expectations for students of color.
- Schools and school districts are set up to teach White students and not students of color.

- How someone prioritizes these statements will determine how they develop strategies to address the issue.
- Often, how someone views an issue is based on their own personal experience and the experience of people with whom they spend time.
- Study Circles help participants hear one another's experience and develop a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the problem. They can then develop more effective strategies.

THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

- 154,000 students
- 202 schools
- Students: 36% White, 27% Latino, 21% Black, and 14% Asian
- 35% of students receive Free or Reduced-priced meals
- More than 20,000 students are in classes for English for Speakers of Other Languages.

TYPES OF STUDY CIRCLES

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES/ INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP TEAMS

Participants:

Staff, school leaders, administrators, and central office personnel.

Format:

Two-day retreats with coaching sessions throughout the year. Possible summer follow-up retreat.

Objective:

To create a learning community or leadership team that has the trust, awareness, and skills necessary to confront the personal attitudes, practices, and policies that impact the racial achievement gap.

PARTNERING WITH PARENTS

Participants:

Parents, teachers, administrators, staff (and students when appropriate).

Format:

Six two-hour sessions, usually in the evening.

Objectives:

To build a unified group of diverse parents, teachers, and students that understands the challenges and benefits of a diverse school.

To create personal and group action steps that address racial and ethnic barriers to student achievement and parent involvement.

To encourage an environment in which racial and ethnic issues are talked about openly and productively.

SPANISH LANGUAGE

Participants:

Parents, teachers, administration, staff (an interpreter is provided for participants who do not speak Spanish).

Format:

Six two-hour sessions, usually in the evening.

Objectives:

To create an ongoing Latino Parent Committee.

To use the lessons learned in the Study Circle to help staff change their practices and policies.

STUDENTS

Participants:

Students, staff, and administrators.

Format:

Three three-hour sessions.

Objectives:

To understand the students' experiences and perceptions on race, and how race impacts their education.

To help students and staff talk together about racial barriers to achievement.

The mission of the Study Circles Program is to identify, examine, and eliminate institutional barriers to African-American and Latino student achievement in Montgomery County Public Schools. The program engages parents, students, and staff in facilitated dialogue and problem solving. It provides a structure for diverse stakeholders to:

- Develop trust.
- Confront perceptions and beliefs.
- Develop a shared understanding of a problem.
- Collaborate on actions that impact attitudes, practices, and policies.

For example, when Diane Morris became Principal at William H. Farquhar Middle School, she heard parents say "Farquhar is racist. The teachers don't care about our children. Our children don't receive the same opportunities as White students. The administration is targeting children of color and giving them unfair consequences." The Principal decided to create a principal's advisory committee composed of teachers and the parents who had expressed concerns. She started with a Study Circle and wrote this about her experience:

"The Study Circle allowed us to get to know each other on a more intimate level and share our experiences with one another. It provided a safe environment where we could really begin to discuss student achievement and perceptions. By the end of the Study Circle, we were looking at data and the comments/perceptions soon began to change. The group suggested a number of action items that were easy to implement, showed the parents that we cared, and had a positive impact on our students...all of them. As a result, the number of students enrolled in advanced classes has increased, and the number of students taken out of intervention classes has also increased. My role as a leader has become much clearer, and my ability to understand different perspectives has really changed my focus and actions. At a follow up meeting a year later, parents said 'Wow, Farquhar is really doing a lot to support our children and we appreciate the efforts.' I honestly attribute the success of my first year as Principal to the Study Circles Program."

Based on the needs and suggestions of participating schools, the program expanded its work to include new types of Study Circles to meet the needs of different audiences (see sidebar). Schools use a combination of these formats to engage different stakeholders. Eugenia Dawson, former Principal at Earle B. Wood Middle School, explained how she used Study Circles at her school:

“In combination with other initiatives, the Study Circles Program contributed greatly to change at our school. It helped to create a climate of trust among staff, students, and parents, and it provided a structure for opening honest dialogue about the barriers to student success in our school. Only then were we able to develop the strategies for success.

“Our student Study Circles helped us understand what students see as barriers. We brought back their experiences to the staff and included it in staff development. The year we did the all-staff Study Circle opened up the door for our whole staff to develop the trust and awareness that we needed to tackle the achievement gap and to discuss the difficult issues of racial barriers to achievement. It also helped us to hear the concerns of the students and parents. Each year, the ideas from the Study Circle are fed into our School Improvement Plan.

“Some examples of change include a dramatic decrease in referrals and suspensions and just as dramatic increases in parent involvement. In the four to five years that we have been doing Study Circles, referrals have decreased by 91 percent and suspensions by 89 percent. This means that students are in the classroom where they have an opportunity to learn. The Study Circles helped us to drop the barriers to connecting with parents of color so we can partner together for our students. Parents trust us more, and staff are less intimidated and see the value in working with parents.

“Finally, our Spanish-Language Study Circle led to an active and ongoing Hispanic Parent Group that continues to meet monthly with a large number of Hispanic parents. This has led to a strong partnership between school staff and Hispanic parents. We now work together and are able to provide parents with strategies for supporting and advocating for their children.”

As more and more schools embraced the Study Circles concept, principals began to realize that their leadership teams did not always have the cohesion necessary to effectively address the challenges and ideas they were receiving from the Study Circles. In fact, leadership team members consistently say they had neither the trust required to talk about race, nor the collective skills required to support teachers who struggle to teach African-American and Latino students. Scott Murphy, Principal of Watkins Mill High School, described his experience:

“In my 13 years as a school administrator, our work with Study Circles was the best professional development for the leadership team that I have ever experienced. Not only did we develop a community of leaders who is now able to talk about race and the persistent achievement gap at our school, but we came together as a strong, cohesive team to a degree that we had never experienced. We got to know each other’s stories and brought levels of trust, commitment, accountability, and shared leadership to new heights. This unintended outcome has strengthened the [team] more so than I ever envisioned, and has launched us into a renewed commitment to confront issues of race and work together to close the achievement gap.”



Little by little, participants see that they can have honest and respectful conversations about their different experiences with stereotypes, skin color, and racism.

PROCESS

While some of the specific questions and activities are different, all Study Circles follow the same steps:

Step One: Develop Trust and Begin to Understand Each Other's Experience

Participants go through a series of activities that help them develop a foundation for honest and productive dialogue on racial barriers to achievement. A mix of small and large group activities helps participants hear one another's stories. Comments after Step One include many like the following:

- "I learned about peoples' perceptions and beliefs, what defines who they are, and where they are coming from. This activity opened up a window."
- "I feel like a wall was knocked down."
- "The facilitators created an openness to tell our stories and show our vulnerability and empathy."

Step Two: Explore Different Racial Experiences and Viewpoints

Step Two builds on the trust established in Step One to help participants talk with one another about racial barriers to achievement. Participants are taken through activities that start easy and slowly get more difficult. Little by little, participants see that they can have honest and respectful conversations about their different experiences with stereotypes, skin color, and racism. The activities are designed to highlight their different experiences. Then, facilitators help them question and hear one another, and talk honestly about their beliefs and experiences.

Evaluations from a recent high school Study Circle with parents, staff, and students included comments from three participants:

- "Given that the topic of race and education most often results in confrontations and little real conversation, the facilitators created a respectful space where 20 people, who hardly knew each other, could share their most personal thoughts and experiences."
- "...we were able to really LISTEN to each other and therefore gain valuable insights into the issues."
- "Many of the conversations were painfully honest, and I am amazed that in less than two days, we were able to build the trust necessary to make these difficult discussions positive and productive."

Step Three: Collaborative Action

Collaborative Action looks very different, depending on the format and participants. However, Step Three of each Study Circle provides a framework for participants to identify the beliefs, practices, and policies that led to the racial achievement gap in their school. They are then able to develop action steps that lead to change. For example, a middle school held a Study Circle composed of Latino students who are in classes for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and diverse teachers and staff. Using the framework, they realized that most of the teacher practices were to push the students to use their accommodations. Most of the students, however, felt that the teachers were embarrassing them in front of their peers when they were pushed to use their accommodations. So, they refused to use them. Together, they came up with different age-appropriate strategies to get students the support they needed.



BEST PRACTICES

After 430 Study Circles, we have had enough successes and made enough mistakes to have identified some best practices.

Move past talk to action

Some dialogue programs never get past the dialogue stage. While there are always benefits from building relationships and awareness, people get frustrated if they don't see the program start to move toward change.

Understand the culture of the organization in which you are operating

Every organization has its own unique culture. Before starting a dialogue, figure out where change can happen and what the challenges are to getting participants to the table.

Take time to reach out to the audience you want

The Study Circles Program spends a lot of time helping the schools reach out to parents in different ways to ensure their participation. Almost every parent Study Circle has a participant who says that this was the first school meeting he or she had ever attended. Study Circles start with an information meeting. Flyers, personal letters from the

principal, personal phone calls, and reminders are standard for parent Study Circles. Some Study Circles have included door knocking or greeting parents as they put their kids on school buses.

Address power dynamics

Every Study Circle has power dynamics that need to be addressed. Principals, teachers, students, and parents all have different levels of power that may keep some participants from opening up. The early activities help get people on the same level. But, facilitators will need to monitor the dynamics and make adjustments when necessary.

Train the facilitators well

Facilitators are the most important part of the Study Circle. Their job is to create the opportunity for others to engage in dialogue. Study Circle facilitators participate in a minimum of 22 hours of training. They are each given opportunities to observe Study Circles and then co-facilitate with a more experienced facilitator. Every Study Circle has at least two facilitators who reflect different racial/ethnic backgrounds. ■



JOHN LANDESMAN has almost 20 years of experience developing and organizing dialogue-to-action programs that address the effects of racism and racial barriers. He is currently Coordinator of the Montgomery County Public Schools Study Circles Program, an initiative that engages diverse students, parents, staff, and district leaders in facilitated dialogue to impact racial and ethnic barriers to student achievement and parent involvement. Landesman also serves as a Senior Associate for Everyday Democracy, consulting with school districts, foundations, and companies to create dialogue programs to dismantle structural racism in these institutions.