

Leadership: A Journey to Enacting Change

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Abstract

Leadership development is a journey that occurs as circumstances change. In the dual pandemics—COVID-19 and heightened awareness of racism—and beyond, leaders must continue their development journeys by listening, reflecting, learning, and acting against racism and racist systems and practices. This article by the vice president of programs and strategy for the National AfterSchool Association features the voiced perspectives of field leaders who identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color that may help you shape your journey.

Key words: anti-racism, equity, leadership development, professionalization

Introduction

Much like the cycle of continuous program quality improvement used in youth development,—leadership is a cyclical journey—one of determination, listening, reflection, learning, and action. Not only is leadership development a journey, but it is also a responsibility for those in our field and a lifelong endeavor impacted by systems and circumstances. Circumstances in 2020—commonly thought of as the intersection of two pandemics: COVID-19 and racism—further exposed inequities in systems that prioritize White people and have negatively impacted Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) for years. This intersection has been a loud wake-up call for leaders—especially White leaders—including me, who have a lot to learn to help enact necessary change.



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Beginning the Journey: Self-Awareness and Personal Development

The work of dismantling these systems has been a long time coming. Leaders who are beginning this journey must embrace the role—not of experts—but first as listeners, then as amplifiers, and in the longer-term, potentially being considered allies and accomplices by people who identify as BIPOC. With that in mind, this thought leader commentary amplifies the voices of BIPOC leaders from the after-school and youth development fields who recently shared perspectives as contributors to National AfterSchool Association's (NAA) *AfterSchool Today* magazine.

Lissette Castillo, the director of Amigos Community School for the City of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and managing director of professional learning for The BlackPrint Inc., recently put forth thoughts on what is needed, and not needed, from leaders. Castillo (2021), who has a steadfast commitment to the liberation and self-determination of African and Indigenous peoples and is zealous about challenging and fighting racial inequalities in education, posits:

We do not need "experts." We need people who see the humanity of others, who see children as their own. We do not need "White saviors." We do not need or want Descendants of African and Indigenous People (DAIP) who think they have nothing to learn. Instead, we need leaders to do internal audits of themselves for biases and prejudices before they ever attempt to lead anyone else. (p. 47)

The youth development field encompasses professionals and leaders with lived experiences and perspectives that show the importance of—and the pathway to—becoming anti-racist leaders and dismantling White supremacist systems and the pervasive culture that supports them. It is beyond time for White leaders to listen to and learn from these experts and their collective knowledge without putting the burden of teaching on them. Becoming an anti-racist leader is an individual responsibility with a commitment to the collective that requires deep and ongoing personal work. Director of Youth Programs for the California School-Age Consortium, Zakir Mckenzie Parpia (2020) indicates, "Noticing and naming this pervasive, toxic culture, with eyes and hearts courageously wide open, is the first step to developing a strategy to unlearn and uproot it" (p. 5). Stepping back to listen and reflect with openness may be a challenge for some leaders but it is a necessary initial part of the journey toward anti-racist leadership.

In 2020, Jimena Quiroga Hopkins and Ruth Obel-Jorgensen, from equity consulting agency, Thrive Paradigm, suggested leaders "boldly start this journey by examining barriers and exploring solutions to advance equity" (p.26). Quiroga Hopkins and Obel-Jorgenson call out that

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this honest self-examination exploring both the conscious and unconscious ways we build barriers and sustain them can be very uncomfortable. Personal development, including listening and reflecting, is only the beginning of this journey.

Recent circumstances have caused leaders to reflect on personal privilege and biases, explore professional positional power, and learn how to change organizational cultures and systems that perpetuate paternalism and White supremacy. "We are witnessing a collective 'waking up' to White supremacy in all its pervasiveness and violence" (Mckenzie Parpia, 2020, p.5), finally seeing that centuries-old systems and structures by design intentionally persecute and prosecute BIPOC. Mckenzie Parpia (2020) notes that as we collectively work to eradicate these systems and structures that we must examine the White supremacy culture so ingrained that it can be nearly invisible and redesign a culture that values human dignity and innate connectedness. As a leader makes personal progress, learning must be applied more broadly to organizations, systems, and others' development.

Continuing the Journey: Expanding Development

To advance equity and continue their leadership journeys, leaders must think about building their capacity, their organization's capacity, and systemic change. Quiroga Hopkins and Obel-Jorgensen (2020) share, "There is an unwavering sense of urgency felt more deeply and by many more as the country reckons with its systemic oppression. Out-of-school time leaders are vocalizing their alliance against racism and doing more to address inequities. Dismantling systems of oppression requires a commitment to the long haul—a sustainable and transformative organizational way of being" (p.26). As leaders, we are responsible for being mindful of the elements in our development journeys and the journeys of those we lead and those we lead alongside.

The additional attention and urgency created by the two pandemics have resulted in increased awareness and accessibility to resources related to recognizing and removing white supremacy culture. One such resource by Tema Okun (n.d.) lists commonly suggested antidotes to eliminate these White supremacy culture characteristics that show up as societal and organizational norms. Mckenzie Parpia (2020) advances the idea of youth development and its accompanying behaviors and practices as an antidote for White supremacy culture, "Youth development and social-emotional learning best practices mirror the antidotes to White Supremacy Culture, positioning us all to be skilled architects of anti-oppressive learning spaces"

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(p. 5). Identifying youth development as an antidote to White supremacy culture provides an explicit learning connection that could be a helpful entry point for those who have internalized youth development principles and practices and are looking toward doing the same with anti-racist and culturally responsive practices.

There is a saying in youth development, “nothing about us without us” which is used to guide inclusive planning and practices. As leaders move through the cycle of leadership learning and work on creating anti-racist organizations, efforts—like in youth development—must be authentic, intentional, and inclusive. Susie Estrada, the out-of-school time & early childhood education director with Dual Immersion Academy in Salt Lake City, Utah, recently indicated the importance of leaders intentionally making space for others. Estrada (2021), the proud daughter of immigrants from El Salvador and Guatemala, shares her firsthand experience that there is a demand for leaders of color and simultaneously a lack of space:

Conversations about people like me are aplenty. From research projects to hiring practices (that some claim is my only reason for employment and not my education or experience), there is great interest in my seat at the table. Unfortunately, I've learned that "advocacy" can often be a false promise of allyship. I've learned that my seat at the table takes space in a room that was never built for me. The table is too small, people won't scoot over, and the microphone is never handed over. I've spoken many times only to be spoken over, ignored, or have had my ideas rebranded with someone else's name. Diversity benefits everyone, but without the space for authenticity, we will continue to ask how to keep leaders of color. (p. 12)

Mckenzie Parpia (2020) indicates that even well-intentioned, esteemed leaders and organizations perpetuate White supremacy norms that prize "conformity and control over authenticity and expansiveness" (p.5). Successful leaders will continue the journey with determination, including learning and action that acknowledge and create space for others.

Call to Action

A leader's journey is continuous and therefore never fully complete. Leaders must keep listening, learning, reflecting, and taking action to meet current and new circumstances. Saydum and Quiroga Hopkins (2021) assert and challenge our field as a profession and our professional association, indicating we still have work to do: “NAA has committed to helping to

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eliminate the racial leadership gap and advancing equity in the profession. What will you do to enact change?" (p. 11). This challenge is now written on a sticky note above my desk.

No matter where you are on your leadership journey, there is something here for all of us to learn from if we listen. Along with the wisdom of the leaders cited above and guidance from an NAA board of directors committed to leadership development, diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, the question about enacting change continues to inspire my leadership journey. In 2021 I am excited to have the opportunity to put my new knowledge into practice and continue learning as I work with those who have lived experience and other critical, valuable expertise to act with projects designed to support youth development professionals and leaders with planning and intentionality of their journeys:

- Equity Review and Update **of NAA's Core Knowledge and Competencies (CKCs) for Afterschool and Youth Development Professionals**
- **Equity Strategy Session Series** building the capacity of NAA state affiliates, city intermediaries in the Every Hour Counts network, and other youth development organization leaders.
- Creating **The Afterschool Leader's Guide to Equitable Hiring Practices**
- **The Afterschool Guide to Culturally Responsive Practices**

Conclusion

In your role within youth development, you inevitably lead by example, regardless of title. With this role comes great responsibility. Going forward, you absolutely must be intentional about your leadership development and the development of others. A vibrant future for the youth development profession is dependent on skilled leaders who continue to listen, reflect, learn, and take action to create equitable spaces and systems. So, finally, I leave you with this same question: "What will you do to enact change?" Perhaps you, too, will want to add it to a sticky note above your desk to inspire and guide your leadership journey.

Acknowledgement

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Development. These leaders continue to give generously of their time and energy to support the leadership journeys of others—including me—and I am extremely grateful for their work with me and the broader field.

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