

“Our school is always saying ‘*Lean into discomfort,*’ ...
but as soon as that happens, people shut down.”

Black and White Students’ Experience of Teacher Support
at an Independent Boarding School



Annie Buenaventura ‘17, Maddy Schwartz ‘17

Miss Porter's School

- All girls independent 9-12 boarding school in Farmington, CT
- 320 students: two-thirds boarding, one-third day
- 2016-2017 tuition: \$58,730 boarding, \$47,285 day
- 42% of students receive financial aid

“Miss Porter’s School educates young women to become informed, bold, ethical, resourceful global citizens. We expect our graduates to shape a changing world.”

Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives (CSBGL)

Consortium of independent schools and scholars from the University of Pennsylvania, dedicated to Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR).

“CSBGL is a call to schools and others to embark on a search. A search for a better understanding, better school curricula, better family practices, better community policies - to offer boys and girls a better world.”



History of YPAR

1946 Action-Research (Lewin)

1988 and 1991 Participatory Action Research (Tandon and McTaggart)

1990's-2000's Youth Participatory Action Research

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Challenges for YPAR

- Power dynamic
- Anecdotal bias
- Student confidentiality
- Continuity

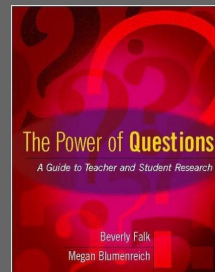
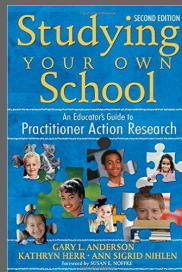
Turn and Talk

How do you think YPAR would work in your school? Would you come across some of the same issues? What excites you about this work? What concerns you?

In a few minutes we will share with the group.

YPAR Resources

- Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives - csbgl.org
- Texts: Anderson & Herr, Falk & Blumenreich, Maxwell
- Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) - gardnercenter.stanford.edu



john w. gardner
center for youth and their communities

YPAR at Porter's

- Studying Youth Participatory Action Research
- Carrying out a research project at Porter's
- Conducting a literature review
- Meet 5 hours a week
- Juniors and Seniors
- 1 research coordinator (teacher/administrator)



A Typical Research Methods Class

- Strengths Inventory / Kiersey's Temperaments
- Writing a Researcher Identity Memo or journaling
- Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning (YELL) Activities
- Discussing literature review
- Skyping with our Research Director and Assistant at CSBGL
- Drafting and piloting interview and focus group scripts
- Coding data
- Preparing presentations

Why it works at Porter's

- Support of Administration
 - Legitimacy
 - Trust
 - Agency
 - Time and Resources
- Application Process
 - Continuity
 - Diversity

2015-2016 Research

Survey sent out to the student body (Fall 2015)

- “What structures positively influence your feelings of success at school?”
- “What structures negatively influence your feelings of success at school?”

Fresh Check Program	Wellness Center	Assignment Center	Advisory	TLC
Sit Down	Check In / Lights Out	Family Weekend	Weekend Activities	College Planning
Grades / Report Cards	FirstClass	Daisy	Mountain Day	InterMission
Required Meetings / Assembly	Clubs	Teacher-Coaches vs. Pro Coaches	Alliances	Gardening / Composting
Academic Schedule	Old Girl / New Girl	Test Days	Morning Meeting	Dining Hall
Official Notes	Traditions	Junior Advisors	Affinity Meetings	Nova Nine
Convocation (Awards)	Study Hall	Afternoon Program	House Directors	Give It Away Week

2015-2016 Research - Initial Stage

Survey sent out to the student body (Fall 2015)

- “What structures positively influence your feelings of success at school?”
- “What structures negatively influence your feelings of success at school?”

Findings

- Official Notes = ad hoc electronic teacher comments that had replaced formal report card comments
- Official Notes a negative for Black / African American and Hispanic / Latinx students

2015-2016 Research

Research Questions

- What are students' experiences with Official Notes?
- In what ways do these experiences differ based on race and class?

Methods

- Interviews with 24 students

Findings

- Students prefer personalized feedback as well as detailed feedback
- Feedback \longleftrightarrow Relationships

Action

- New system of Student-Teacher Dialogues and return to end-of-semester comments

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Turn and Talk

Does your current system of teacher feedback support student success? Who is the primary audience for teacher feedback at your school (students, parents, other faculty members)? Do you have questions for us so far?

In a few minutes we will share with the group.

2016-2017 Research

- How do Black and African-American students' experiences of faculty support differ from those of White students?
- What are the differences in Black and African-American students' versus White students' experiences of the student-teacher relationship and how do they occur?

Comprehensive Assessment of Student Life

- CASL
- Given every two years
- Measures the student experience
- Six key areas:
 1. *Citizenship and Student Voice*
 2. *School Social Environment*
 3. *Faculty Support of Students*
 4. *Peer Culture and Student Self-Confidence*
 5. *Student Emotional Well-Being*
 6. *Student Academic Self-Perception*

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“I feel like my teachers try to get to know me as a person.”

Comprehensive Assessment of Student Life

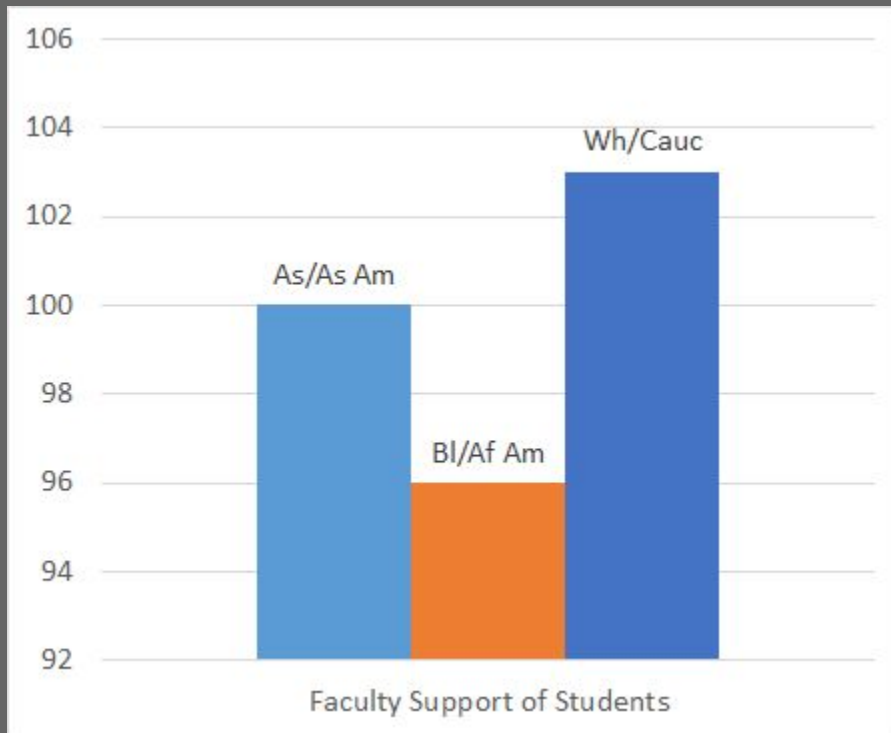
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“I feel that I have to act in certain ways to avoid being teased.”

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CASL Survey - “Faculty Support of Students” Factor



Sample Items:

- The teacher feedback I get here helps me be a better student.
- My teachers try to get to know me as a person.
- My teachers create an environment in class where all students' opinions are respected.
- I feel comfortable asking for help in my classes.

Methods

- Artifact analysis
- Focus groups

Artifact Analysis of Official Notes

Who

- 4 seniors who identify as Black / African American
- 4 seniors who identify as White, matched by GPA with Black students
- Names and other identifying information removed from Official Notes

How

- Categories:
 - Positive known / noticed
 - Generic / factual
 - Negative specific

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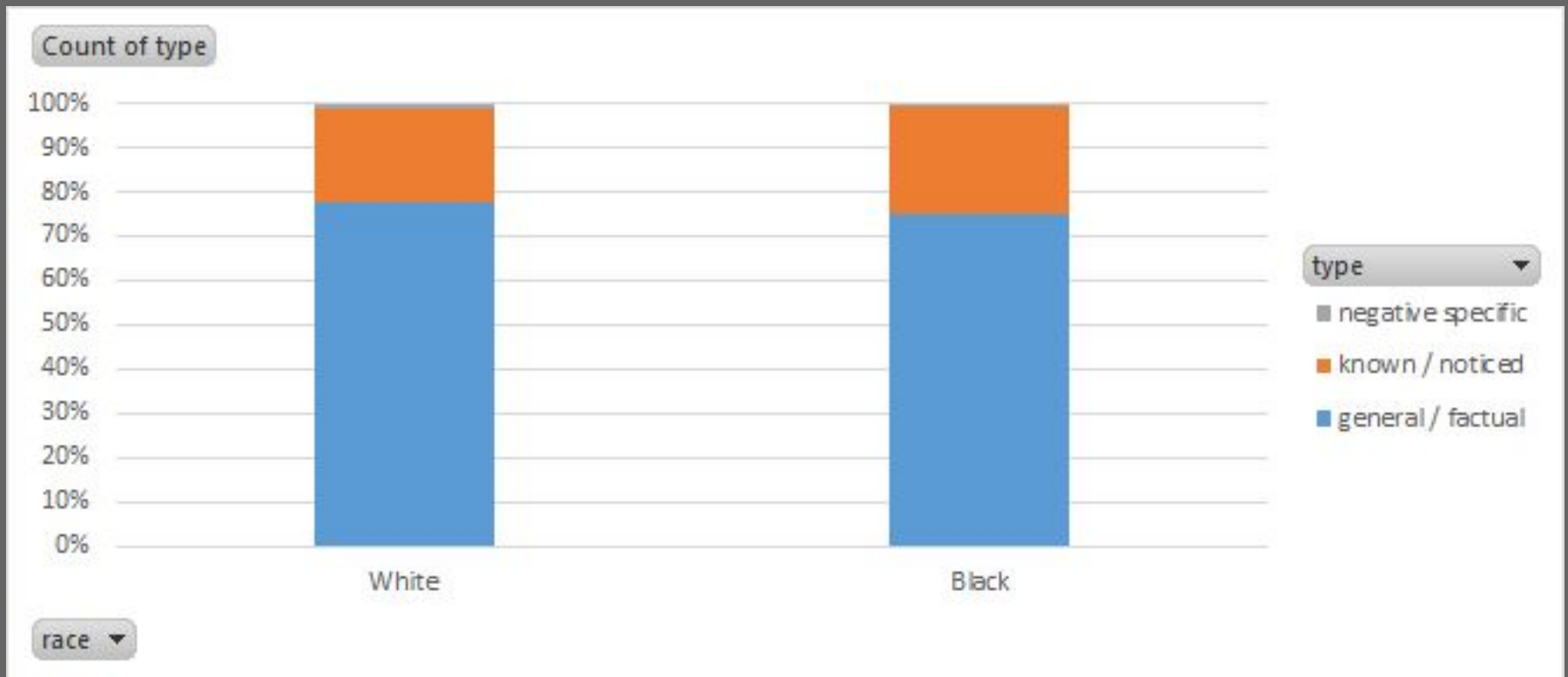
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Results of Official Notes Analysis



Back to the Drawing Board with Official Notes

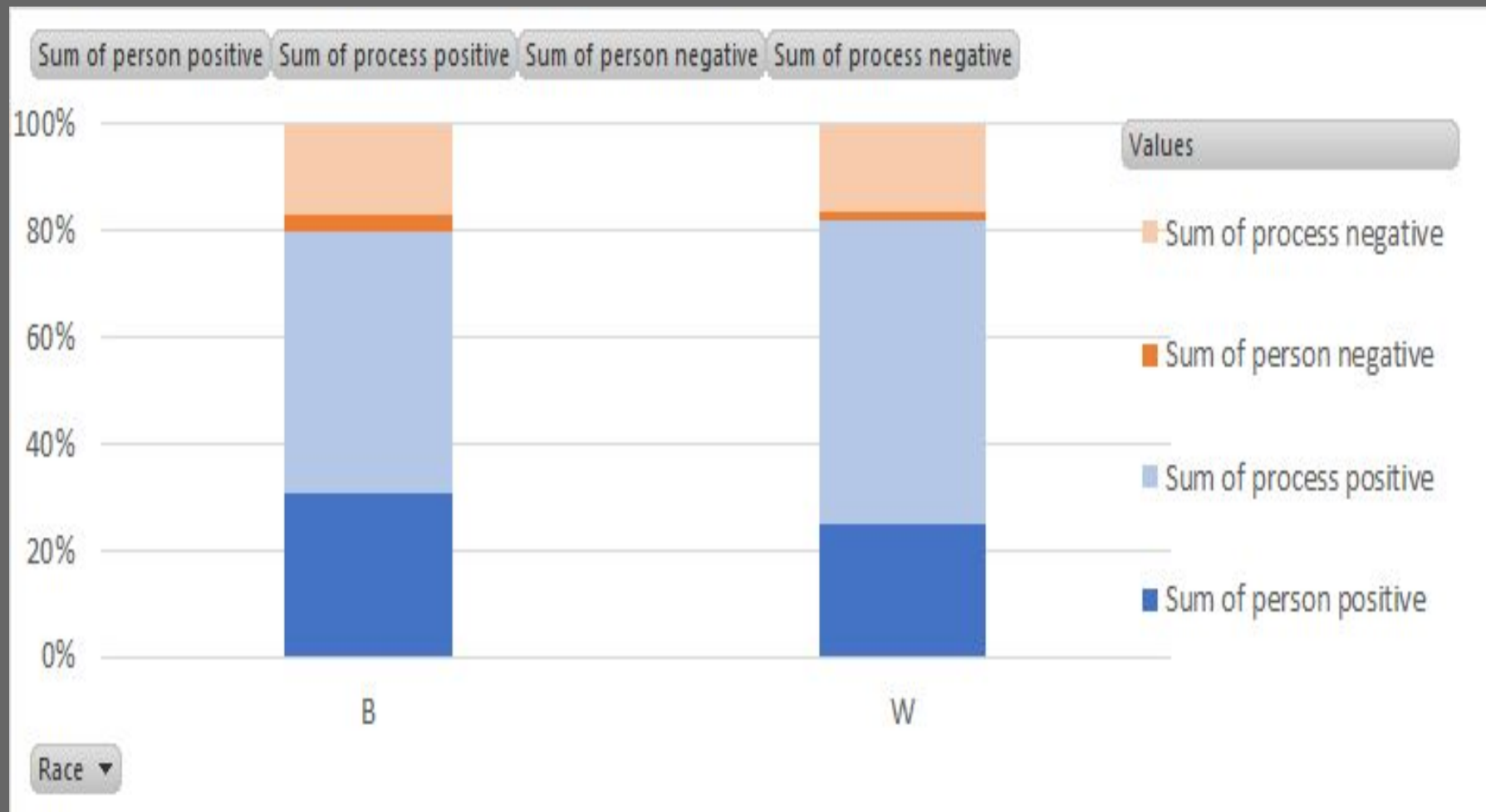
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How

- New categories:
 - Person or Process
 - Positive or Negative

Results of Second Official Notes Analysis



Turn and Talk

Would your school be willing to take on a race-based analysis of teacher feedback? What do you think your results would look like?

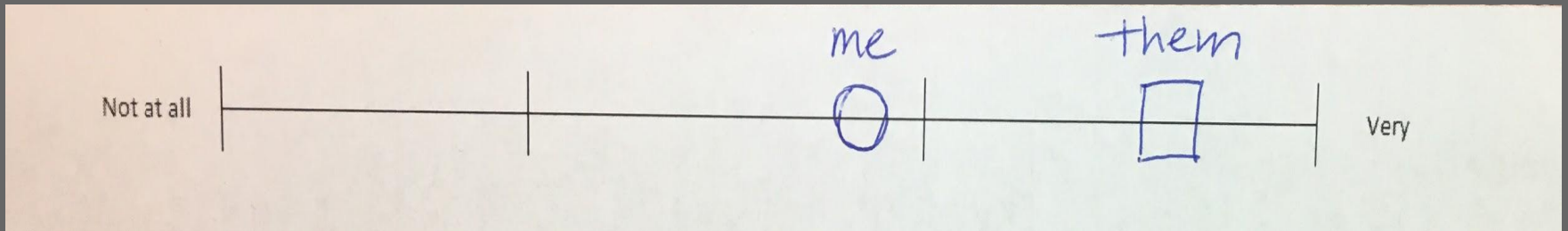
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Focus Groups

- White students (new and returning)
 - Chosen from our advisory groups
- Black students (new and returning)
 - Emailed to ask for volunteers

Focus Groups

- Activity→ How comfortable are you in the classroom?
How comfortable are your peers?



- Questions→ Academic environment, typical classroom discussions, positive and negative teacher relationships, and self-identity in the classroom

Preliminary Findings

- **Naivety**
 - White students become more aware of their own “comfortability” as they get older
- **Under-representation**
 - Of the Black experience in the curriculum, in the faculty, in the student body
 - Racial issues can be taboo in the classroom
 - Leads to a lack of understanding of the unique difficulties of the Black student experience
- **Competitive environment**
 - Need for black students to work harder in order to prove themselves
 - Competition amongst peers-- intragroup v. intergroup competition or lack thereof
- **Teacher support**
 - Role of the teacher in the classroom-- engagement in discussions and ability to relate to all students
- **Culture of niceness**
 - Not speaking up for fear of making others uncomfortable and changing their perceptions of you

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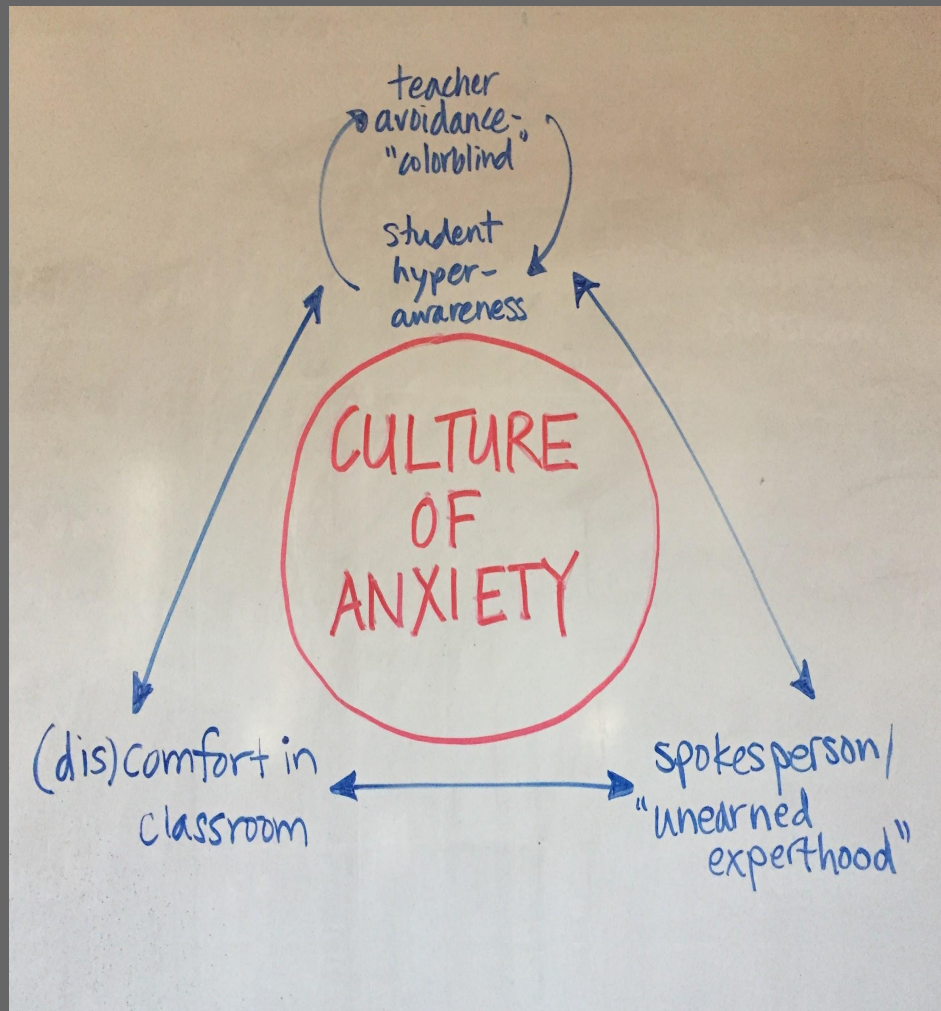
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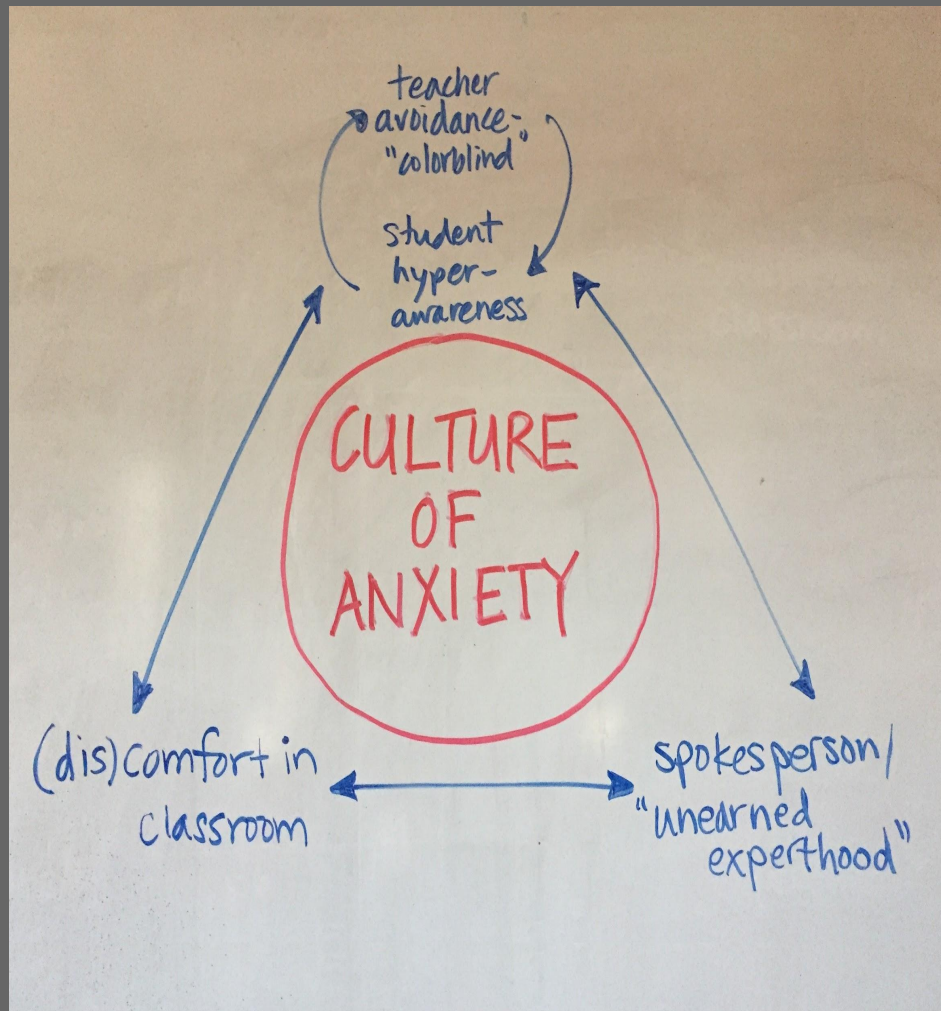
Conceptual Model



Conceptual Model

“I used to think it wasn’t my place in class to speak up about race because I’m white and I might be stepping on someone else’s toes or speaking over someone. But what I didn’t realize was that by not speaking I was putting a burden on the one Black student in the room, and hurting her rather than helping.”

Conceptual Model



Conceptual Model

We are asked as a community to lean into discomfort, but we do not necessarily know how. There is not an attitude of forgiveness and education and openness, but rather an attitude of anxiety and pressure to be perfect.

Conceptual Model

When a race-related topic arises in a classroom, we are busy making internal observations: about our own racial identity compared to that of our classmates, about what our role in the conversation should be based on that comparison.

Conceptual Model

Black students:

- *feel the burden to propel the discussion*
- *carry the burden of being a spokesperson*
- *feel pressured to be a “good representative”*
- *are expected to be an expert on race-related issues*

Conceptual Model

White students:

- *step back and do not participate*
- *fear offending classmates or appearing ignorant*
- *are anxious about making mistakes*
- *don't respond to a hurtful or ignorant remark in class*
- *talk about the comment outside class*
- *are quick to police one another for “being racist”*

Conceptual Model

Teachers:

- *allow certain students to opt out*
- *avoid difficult conversations from fear of “getting it wrong”
(and being policed)*
- *have a “color blind” orientation*
- *unintentionally put more burden on their black students*

Conceptual Model

Teachers:

- *allow certain students to opt out*

“I remember in class, she was like, ‘If you don’t want to talk you don’t have to,’ ... but usually in class you should be talking, since it’s a history class, it’s mostly participation, ... for her to say ‘Well, if you don’t want to talk you shouldn’t,’ it... was starting a precedent that if you feel uncomfortable with something just don’t say anything...”

Conceptual Model

Teachers:

- *avoid difficult conversations from fear of “getting it wrong”
(and being policed)*

“In English we're reading Frankenstein, and it's mostly a book about white people, but I just remember comparing the relationship between two characters to something that's going on in society about race, and the room was just silent. Everyone was just like nothing, and I was like hello, uh well I guess I shouldn't have thought about race in Frankenstein, but whatever.”

What's Been Tried? And What's Next?

- Past Solutions

- Community meetings to discuss race-related problems
- Individual teachers creating classroom norms
- Speakers/committees

- Our Plan

- Present this work to our Committee on Equity and Inclusion
- Present to school community followed by break-out groups
- Establishing classroom norms
- Activities to help individual classes bond and become closer
- Share these results with outside facilitators

Literature Review

Calarco, J. M. (2011). "I need help!" Social class and children's help-seeking in elementary school. *American Sociological Review*, 76(6), 862–882.

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