Tough Nuts to Crack: Initiating an Imperfect Racial Justice Accountability Process Within One School of Social Work from One Perspective

Elspeth Slayter

Abstract: This narrative reflects my journey as a White woman who is part of a team of leaders in a school of social work while developing and implementing an inwards-facing racial justice accountability initiative. This initiative was focused on developing an institutional strategy for confronting, addressing, and dismantling racism within our School of Social Work at Salem State University.

Keywords: accountability, anti-racist practice, data analysis, racial justice, reflection, reflexion

Introduction

Dr. Ibram Kendi had just spoken at our university's Martin Luther King Jr. Day celebration as the spring semester of 2020 started, renewing in me my commitment to being active as an anti-racist practitioner. I had taken in his Dr. Angela Davis–inspired credo, "there is no neutrality in racism … the opposite of 'racist' isn't 'not-racist' but 'anti-racist'" (Kendi, 2019, p. 33). As a new interim chair for my department, I wondered how I might infuse some aspects of this credo into my leadership work during my term. I felt excited and invigorated by his talk. Reflecting back on this, I wonder if there was a bit of a "white savior" bravado impetus in my motivation at the time, but at least it was part of what helped to get the ball rolling for the efforts I am about to describe.

A few days later, on a chilly January morning, I sat with the interim dean of the School of Social Work at the time (a woman of color) to talk about priorities for the semester. We reflected on the reality that a disproportionate number of MSW students of color had been dismissed the previous semester due to low or failing grades, although it is important to note that numbers were very small. We acknowledged and recognized that systems can disadvantage historically marginalized groups if they are not examined and addressed, and we sought to do just that. This topic had been raised within our School of Social Work community before, but pushback about the need for academic standards had obfuscated the conversation about equity each time. I also felt frustrated about the data my dean had shared with me, but these feelings of frustration were quickly overshadowed by my need to act, to do something in response to the data. Although I recognized this sense of urgency as a tenet of white supremacy, I still leaned into it. I turned to an area of comfort for me, data analysis, and the belief that data-driven arguments can move even the most stalwart of audiences to act. I might have even let this blind me to other options that may have been before me, but this is the direction I took.

I felt grateful that due to our history of working together on racial justice community organizing projects within our university, the dean and I shared some trust that had developed as a result. We decided to initiate a commitment to racial justice accountability work in our School by devoting a large segment of our faculty and staff meetings to racial justice work monthly.

Without this personal history, our plan would likely not have emerged. I remember reflecting that, as usual, so much of what racial justice work gets done depends on the personalities in leadership at any given time—and that we might as well take advantage of that reality to get the job done while we could, even if it was a top-down maneuver.

I felt enthused, emboldened, and on a mission to crack the tough nut which was getting our community to look at racial justice matters within our School. Little did I realize that the journey was also about cracking my own personal tough nut of racism open as well. The micro mirrors the macro. Regarding emergent systems, adrienne maree brown (2017) writes "small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies … emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for" (p. 3). My school's journey mirrored my journey, and vice versa. This essay is about my personal journey towards changing myself as one member of my School of Social Work while simultaneously co-leading the School on a similar journey.

As I looked at what was ahead, the goal for the School was twofold: to foster better reflective and reflexive practice as it relates to the dismantling of racism in our School and to build the capacity of our staff and faculty to do better for students of color. Reflective practice is about unearthing the actual truth embedded in what professionals do, versus just what they say they do (Schön, 1983, 1987). Reflexive practice, by contrast, is the ability to look inwards and outwards to recognize how society and culture impact practice as well as how we ourselves influence practice; as Slayter et al. (2023) note,

> the reflective and reflexive social work practitioner will want to ask, "How do I create and influence the knowledge about my practice that I use to make decisions?" In embracing reflectivity and reflexivity, social workers move beyond "just knowing" how well practice is going, which is a form of implicit evaluation that is subjective by nature. (Pre-Engagement section, para. 2)

And as we crafted this new process for the School, I was re-starting a simultaneous, parallel journey of my own vis-a-vis my own racial justice awareness that at first was too centered on data and not centered enough on my connection to what was behind those very same data points.

Developing an Accountability Initiative

We initially framed our ideas for the School's accountability work in the context of our strategic plan, feeling lucky that we had it to lean back on. We focused specifically on strategic initiative three, which was to advance human and cultural diversity, social justice, and human rights. We decided to feed race and ethnicity data back to our faculty and staff as an accountability mechanism and, hopefully, we thought, as a motivator for action on racial justice equity. Coming from a research background, my instinct was to go to the data in order to present information to faculty and staff as a way to engage in evidence-based practice. I remember feeling almost mechanical and logical at this point, buying into the positivistic paradigm. I thought, "how could people not want to act on patterns of racial and ethnic disproportionality if they see the data?" It was my view that while we had worked hard on the diversity of our

curriculum over the years as a faculty, we had not yet turned the lens inward to look at our own institutional processes, to consider where structural racism and implicit bias had potentially made their marks on our School.

As I look back, I can remember myself saying things like "Sitting with the discomfort of these data as an entire School is so important," but I'm not sure I let the real discomfort of those words sink into myself, even though I was an architect of the project. Was I sitting with discomfort myself as it related to my work as a teacher and as an administrator? In retrospect, no, not enough. Not enough at all. It was still an abstract idea that I knew to be right in practice, but which I could not fully implement on a personal level.

Drawing on Data as an Impetus

One of our primary ideas was to report on racial and ethnic patterns in program dismissals and in academic probation letters. It was easy enough to report on program-level data because that was separate from myself by a few spheres. But another idea we had was for me as a White person to model good practice for faculty by standing up and showing my own grading data vis-a-vis whether there were racial or ethnic disproportionalities (or not) in my grading. I thought, if I can do this as a White person, and show that it is okay to, essentially, "throw myself under the bus" in confronting what is and is not happening in my classroom vis-a-vis racial and ethnic disproportionality, maybe other people would step up to do the same. Doing this work involves thinking about the implications of unearned advantage or disadvantage for the students in courses. One might ask how confronting a professor's own patterns relates to the realities of how those patterns were experienced by students. Also, important to note is the fact that context matters, as well. Since this activity doesn't tell us about causality, even if we find disproportionality, we don't fully know all the influences but must be willing to reflect on potential sources of what we find.

I remember being ready to do all this but also being somewhat devoid of feeling about it at the same time. It takes a lot to "fall on your sword," so to speak, in front of all of your colleagues, especially when you are about to admit that your grading patterns exhibit a potentially racist pattern. I felt oddly at ease about this idea, yet oddly disconnected from the emotion of it at the same time. I felt absolutely fine admitting that it was 100 percent likely that there would be racist patterns in my grading data, because we live in a racist society, and I have been raised up as a teacher in that racist context, so why wouldn't I see those patterns in my work? But I didn't feel the sad or embarrassed feelings that should have gone along with that. That is in some ways a strength, and in some ways a detriment. I couldn't make sense of my emotional detachment, but I kept pressing forward.

Engaging the Group

As we prepared to present the individual- and program-level racial and ethnic findings to our colleagues, we strategized about faculty and staff engagement tactics, a primary worry. We had the sense that this work might feel like additional work on top of our already large pile of things to do and to pay attention to during a busy semester. We noted the importance of integrating this

work into the normal course of business so it would feel less cumbersome to our staff and faculty. We knew that we had to make this work feel worthwhile. Although I recognized this as a fellow busy faculty member, I also privately somewhat resented that my co-workers needed to be cajoled to do this work. I did not have ready answers about how to proceed, but continued to hope that the data would be an important hook in the engagement process along with the notion of helping people shift from a diversity frame to an equity frame.

Borrowing from the Council on Social Work Education's (2020) commentary on the matter, we decided to talk about how this shift can be seen as moving from asking "Who is in the room?" to "Who is trying to get in the room but can't?" or "Whose presence in the room is under constant threat of erasure?" as well as "What conditions have we created that maintain certain groups as the perpetual majority?" This consideration led us to learning about Dr. Bensimon's (2006) equity-minded practice framework, which we merged with Dr. Kendi's (2019) credo about non-racist vs. anti-racist practice to inform our own conceptual framework for our data-driven processing activities.

We posited that equity-minded practice calls on social work educators to use data to inform their understanding of social identity inequities. This can inform the building of a network of equity-minded practitioners who want to learn what works and what we could do better to close equity gaps in their practice settings. We noted that equity-minded practice called for using official meeting time to do this work, building it into organizational cultural norms. In operationalizing what equity-minded practice would look like for us in our initial efforts with staff and faculty, we identified three actions.

First, on the individual level, we needed to view the classroom and advisement appointments as racialized spaces; second, we needed to reflect on the racial and ethnic consequences of both individual and institutional practices; and third, we needed to exercise agency to produce racial and ethnic equity through individual and collective action. Our consultation with our university's Office of Inclusive Excellence (focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion) suggested that we were on a good, but somewhat uncharted path. I felt proud of the framework we had crafted and was hopeful that our community would buy into it as we began the work. I remember thinking that I was pushing a rather top-down process, but felt it was the only way to actually get something like this to actually happen. Any other approach felt like capitulation.

Sitting with My Own Data

Having set up the conceptual model for this work, the time had come for me to sit with my own data. I went ahead and developed a simple mechanism to assess for racial and ethnic disproportionality focused on students who had received low grades in my courses (operationalized as less than a B) in order to answer the following research question: Are students of color disproportionately represented in low-grade groups within one professor's courses? My analyses revealed that students of color were disproportionally represented in the low-grade group over the past two years, with variation from course to course across the semesters.

These data left me with much to reflect on (despite the fact that disproportionality analyses do not connote causation). I was surprised that I found myself disconnected and detached from the data, without a lot of emotion about the negative findings before me. I had a hard time being truly reflective and reflexive about what, exactly, my role was in those grade outcomes for students of color. How much of this was my implicit bias? Where, exactly, was my hand in these outcomes? It's really hard work, being reflective and reflexive about one's own racism. I had known that intellectually, but when faced with the task of actually doing the work, it was hard to do more than draw a blank. I found myself favoring the question "How much of this is related to structural racism beyond my control?" and allowing that to be the excuse that explained all the data away. "Nothing to see here, nothing I can do," I thought at my worst times. I also knew, however, that implicit bias had to be a part of the picture as well—all of my reading and studying on racism told me this had to be the case. But I put that aside at first, because it was easier, even though I knew better. It was only later that I came back to the work of chipping away at my implicit bias, when I was more ready to face myself.

When the time came for the presentation of the data to the larger group, I had a pretty easy time standing up and showing people the pretty significantly terrible pattern of disproportionality presenting my individual grading, but it was harder to talk about what it meant—so to be honest, I blithely skipped past that, and nobody really challenged me on that, as it was likely uncomfortable for them as well. At first, people in the audience were completely silent, and I worried that nobody would talk, but after posing some of our pre-planned questions to the group, things began to loosen up for some in the room. But the fact is, we were speaking in generalities. I suppose that is the best that could be expected for a starting place in our accountability process. The questions for reflection we had chosen to pair with our data were:

- How frequently do I differentiate instruction based on race and ethnicity?
- Do scoring rubrics give advantages for certain ways of knowing and expression?
- Do I allow culturally based differences in language, speech, reading, and writing to shape my perceptions about students' cognitive ability?
- Are there opportunities for different methods of assessment I am not considering?

Sharing my data did seem to achieve the purpose of jumpstarting a conversation about these questions, but the truth is as the discussion meandered along over the course of that semester and beyond, I've been stuck ever since with these individual-level questions since this initial sharing time. I'm not sure I'll ever be done figuring out the answers to these questions. I suppose, though, that I should never be done with them as an anti-racist reflective and reflexive practitioner. The work of a reflective and reflexive anti-racist practitioner is never done.

While our School continued along a (slow) path of exploring racial justice topics from this point onwards, suggesting that the nut had been cracked open some, my own personal path took a turn in its own direction as well. Our subsequent School-wide workshop on implicit bias showed me a beginning image of some truths about myself that made me need to look deeper into myself. I realized that I was going to need to look hard at where my own racism existed inside. I didn't exactly know how to go about this.

Later on that year, after the murder of George Floyd, I had an unexpected change to enter into this work much more intensively. I began to co-facilitate a weekly group for White students, staff, faculty, and alumni who were interested in developing their White racial identity, considering their White privilege, and addressing their White fragility. All of this was towards the goal of making whiteness more visible. Through this experience, I began to feel more free to critique myself with respect to how I had worked with my students and colleagues of color in the past. I faced some painful memories. But it wasn't until later that summer when I participated in the intensive six-week process run by Academics for Black Survival and Wellness (https://www.academics4blacklives.com/) that I had a really big turning point. This program helped me to break through the disconnection I was feeling between the intellectual connection to anti-racism work and the gut connection I deep down knew that I needed with this work.

Academics for Black Survival and Wellness (2023) helps "to foster accountability and growth for non-Black people and enhance healing and wellness for Black people" (About Us section) through the use of a step-by-step program designed by Black scholars from around the US and Canada. Working with a group of White allies, this bi-weekly program led by Black scholars allowed me to look at my own anti-Black racism, especially as it relates to my work in the university context. This gut-wrenching work caused me to face aspects of the Black experience I was not aware of previously, allowing me to sit with it, and to reflect on how I could act on the knowledge it brought me about myself as a White professor functioning in a racist society. I often felt raw and upset and at the same time powerful and proud for looking at the ugliest and most ignorant and racist parts of myself and my academic and personal world.

After completing this program, connecting with what was behind my individual grading data was a lot easier. I could recognize the stereotypes I placed on my students of color and my White students without being aware of them consciously. I noticed the categories I placed my students into in an automated sort of way. I identified the differential grading patterns I engaged in when looking at the work of students of color, for example. I began to see the ways in which my assessment mechanisms were likely biased. It was all much clearer to see if I pushed myself to adjust my lenses towards an equity framework. I realized that I absolutely engaged in implicit bias, and I had unearthed it: It had been hidden in plain sight. Now, my tough nut to crack had started to split open too. The question was, was I brave enough to share this experience openly with my social work colleagues in order to help them along in this process as well?

I see my primary work from this point as shepherding both myself and my School towards some sort of ongoing and renewable accountability process. On the individual front, I'm not exactly sure how to be accountable to my current or former students of color in my grading process, but I'm on a journey to figure that out every single day. I'm trying out oral exams to replace written exams for my statistics interpretation exam, for example, as I did not need to assess writing, I needed to assess the capacity to interpret data for social work practice. This was spurred on by a pattern of racial and ethnic disproportionality in last fall's final exam, which was written. And I knew that those students could do the work, because they could talk me through statistics, but writing about statistics proved a challenge. I had to re-assess what the most important thing to assess about this work was. Other aspects of the course had assessed their writing as it would

apply to report-writing, grant-writing, and the like, but in terms of data interpretation, an oral examination would be just fine. What I have come to in my personal journey is summed up well by the inimitable Grace Lee Boggs, who says "we have to change ourselves in order to change the world" (Democracy Now, 2015, para. 25). This process related to another series of conversations that our School had engaged in about our students' writing, general preparation for practice, overall standards, and the use of a deficits vs. strengths lens, among other topics.

And that leaves me to report where we are on the program front. We are making a number of efforts that are guided by a few of us who are pushing the envelope. We are headed into a series of retreats for our own community. We hope to work together to craft a school-wide accountability process based on our data as well as an anti-racism statement that will guide our process in the future. And, of course, that will need to be scaffolded with systems for responding to and being accountable for acts of racism as well. I'm anxious about how well we will be able to do that work, and how long it will take to get there. At this point I can see that the sharing of our School's racial and ethnic disproportionality data with our students and alumni in a thoughtful and productive way can also be done in a respectful and healing way. I'd like to support this action as a step towards the goal of making our community a responsive and better place for all who are part of it. Facing these data will likely be a painful process for me and for our community, and a process that we will all need help with engaging in. Yet this will be a process that we will all need to be brave about, and will need to lean into if we are truly to embrace the work of anti-racism and keep on cracking those tough nuts we all seem to be holding on to.

Afterword

As schools of social work begin to grapple with how to embark on a data-driven process of racial justice accountability, I recommend that they follow the principles of Dr. Estela Bensimon's equity-minded practice approach (Bensimon, 2006; Bensimon & Associates, 2021). First, the educator should develop a keen awareness of their racial and or ethnic identity as it relates to their work in and around the classroom. Second, drawing on both qualitative and quantitative data, the educator should develop a keen awareness of racialized patterns in and around the classroom, acknowledging that the classroom and the academy are racialized spaces. In choosing metrics to consider, it can be especially important to take a strengths-based approach, focusing on course success rates, honors program completions, and field placement rates, as well as topics such as rates of placement on academic probation and program dismissal, for example. Third, the educator should engage in regular reflection and reflexion about the racial consequences of their actions in and around the classroom. Fourth, the educator should engage in agency to produce racial equity (Schön, 1983, 1987). Specific techniques for tracking disaggregated racial and ethnic student data can be found in the presentations "Equity-Minded Teaching & Data Use" and "Instructions for Race-Conscious Grade and Attendance Mapping" from Bensimon and Associates (2021a, 2021b).

In terms of recommendations for future research on racial and ethnic outcomes in our student data, I have two primary recommendations. As our field moves forward with becoming accountable in the realm of racial justice, we must not lose attention to the importance of race and ethnicity as salient factors in higher education outcomes while simultaneously needing to

honor the role of intersectional analyses (looking at disability and nationality, for example). It is vital to consider experiences and outcomes within groups so that the differences within groups are clear. For example, the experience of one Black female student raised in the United States in a home led by college graduates may be completely different than that of a Black male student with a disability raised by African immigrant parents without college educations. While institutional research offices usually have easy access to the racial and ethnic identifications that students share in their applications data, gathering data on students' nationality of origin, disability identification, or socioeconomic status might not be as easy, leading this to be a more involved research effort.

Acknowledgements

References

Academics for Black Survival and Wellness. (2023). *Home*. https://www.academics4blacklives.com/

Bensimon & Associates. (September 13, 2021a). *Equity-minded teaching & data use* [PowerPoint presentation]. Racial Equity Data Discovery Workshop, Racial Equity and Justice Institute, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA. https://bensimonandassociates.app.box.com/s/jttpg2c3vopudga1q4prngjs3en6hkgp

Bensimon & Associates. (September 13, 2021b). *Instructions for race-conscious grade and attendance mapping* [PowerPoint presentation]. Racial Equity Data Discovery Workshop, Racial Equity and Justice Institute, Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA. https://bensimonandassociates.app.box.com/s/3qtubbsfzqpnt06itp55pi70ajzor3rb

Bensimon, E. M. (2006). Learning equity-mindedness: Equality in educational outcomes. *The Academic Workplace*, *1*(17), 2–21. https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.usc.edu/dist/6/735/files/2016/01/Bensimon_Learning-Equity-Mindedness-Equality-in-Educational-Outcomes.pdf

brown, a. m. (2017). *Emergent strategy: Shaping change, changing worlds*. AK Press.

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). (2020). *Equity-minded competence in higher education*. https://www.cswe.org/Centers-Initiatives/Centers/Center-for-Diversity?_zs=J4G4f1&_zl=BP0U6

Democracy Now. (2015). *Remembering Grace Lee Boggs (1915-2015): "We Have to Change Ourselves in Order to Change the World"* https://www.democracynow.org/2015/10/6/remembering_grace_lee_boggs_1915_2015

Kendi, I. X. (2019). *How to be an antiracist*. One World/Penguin Random House.

Schön, D. (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner*. Temple Smith.

Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. Jossey-Bass.

Slayter, E., Singh, R., & Johnson, L. (2023). A model for social work practice with disability communities: Connecting critical cultural competence, intersectionality and anti-oppressive practice. In E. Slayter and L. Johnson (Eds.), *Social work practice and the disability community: An intersectional anti-oppressive approach* (pp. 33–65). Pressbooks. https://rotel.pressbooks.pub/disabilitysocialwork/chapter/chapter-2/

***About the Author*:** Elspeth Slayter, PhD is Professor, School of Social Work, Salem State University, Salem, MA (eslayter@salemstate.edu).