Article

Got Skillz? Recasting and Negotiating Racial Tension in Teacher–Student Relationships Amidst Shifting Demographics

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Abstract: This paper reports on a curriculum designed for Black students whose school teachers and administrators sought to address concerns about students' academic underachievement and behavioral challenges. In order to design the curriculum, we examined Black students' reactions to race- and academic-related stress as a result of their interactions with mostly White teachers and peers in an increasingly diversifying predominantly White, middle-class community. Grounded in principles of Racial Encounter Coping Appraisal and Socialization Theory (RECAST), a paradigm for understanding the racial coping strategies utilized by individuals to contend with racial stress and well-being, the study sought to elucidate racial tensions found in schooling relationships that foster racial disparities in classrooms. Specifically, our team conducted focus group sessions with Black parents and students which were guided by our use of the Cultural and Racial Experiences of Socialization Survey (CARES), a racial and ethnic socialization measure that elicits responses from students about the kinds of messages students receive about race and ethnicity from people parents and teachers. Data from the sessions subsequently informed the design of *Let's Talk?* (LT), a racial conflict resolution curriculum for Black adolescents. In this paper, we share what we learned about students' school experiences and coping mechanism through their participation in LT.

Keywords: education; racial justice; racial socialization; teacher education; Black children; middle school

1. Introduction

US schools play a central role in socializing students into racial hierarchies and maintaining racial stratification (Feldman 2018; Morris 2016; Darling Hammond 2015; Lewis and Diamond 2015; Hammond 2014; Stevenson 2014). Among the host of school contextual and interpersonal factors contributing to academic achievement and overall school success, the teacher–student relationship is one of the most influential and proximal (Hamre and Pianta 2001, 2006; Pianta 2006). For Black students in particular, teacher–student relationships are essential to Black students' development of healthy academic and

behavioral outcomes (Leff et al. 2016; Meehan et al. 2003; Bentley et al. 2009; Thomas et al. 2009; Thomas and Stevenson 2009; Zaccor 2018). Unfortunately, the racial, social, cultural, and class distance between Black students and the mostly White teaching force presents complications for the development of healthy teacher–student relationships. Many of these relational tensions have deep roots in the United States' long history of racial oppression of Black people.

For Black students, stereotypes of their group can obstruct social, educational, and economic mobility, as well as their physical safety (Reyna 2000; Swain 2018). Black students face stereotypes of their group that frame them as lazy, unintelligent, devious, and lacking full humanity (Anderson and Stevenson 2019). If teachers view Black students through the lens of these stereotypes, it can lead to teachers devaluing students' abilities (Dee 2004; Downey and Pribesh 2004; Oates 2003) and misinterpreting (and thus mismanaging) behaviors (Gregory et al. 2010; Morris 2016; Thomas and Stevenson 2009). When some Black students perceive teachers to be unfair or judgmental in their disciplinary practices and use of authority, they may feel incompetent and emotionally distressed (Cole 1990, 1991). As a result, expressions of this stress can be observed through poor school attendance, classroom disengagement, and/or behaving defiantly and less cooperatively with teachers (Ripski and Gregory 2009; Thomas et al. 2009; Yoon 2002) even when one takes into account children's characteristics and school contextual factors (Bentley et al. 2009).

Scholars have chronicled the cautious, nonverbal, and physiological reactions people have to racial stress with meticulous specificity (Apfelbaum et al. 2008; Harrell 2000; Harrell et al. 2003; Richeson and Trawalter 2008). While resisting and avoiding racial interactions is common, such a response to experiences of racism and discrimination in schools undermines the performance and acceptance of Black youth across different grade levels (see Brown and Bigler 2005; Seaton et al. 2010; Greene et al. 2006; Pachter et al. 2010; Sellers et al. 2006; Szalacha et al. 2003).

Both teachers' and students' buy-in to negative stereotypes not only affect the development of interpersonal relationships but can also play an essential role in shaping educational outcomes. While some Black students may respond to racial discrimination in the classroom and threats of academic failure with increased help-seeking resilience and productivity, others respond with a diminished sense of academic self-efficacy that is fueled by stereotypes of racial or intellectual inferiority (Nussbaum and Steele 2007; Steele 1997, 2003). Combined with racial stress, feelings of frustration in school can result in lower self-confidence, disaffection, and other disruptive behaviors (Gregory et al. 2010; Miles and Stipek 2006) further fueling the disturbing gap in discipline referrals across racial and ethnic groups that disproportionately disadvantage Black students from grades K-12 (Gregory and Ripski 2008; Gregory et al. 2010; Gregory and Weinstein 2008; Noguera 2003; Skiba et al. 2002; Thomas and Stevenson 2009). Nicolas et al. (2008) suggest that academic withdrawal is the mechanism some Black youth employ for coping with racially motivated maltreatment by teachers in academic environments.

Thus, it is Black youths' coping efforts—their attempts to manage the thoughts, emotions and behaviors that accompany racially stressful experiences within precarious racial climates (see Compas et al. 1988)—which might lead to external negative performance indicators such as lower grades and lower scores on standardized tests (Lewis and Sekaquaptewa 2016; Steele 1997; Steele and Aronson 1995; Waaserberg 2014). Academic disengagement, in these cases, is not an accurate reflection of student academic ability (or lack thereof) but rather a strategy students use to resist humiliation and damage to their self-esteem (Steele 1997; Steele and Aronson 1995). In these situations, it can become difficult to distinguish Black student academic performance from teacher racial competence. Yet, the consequences land at the feet of the students, particularly when Black student underperformance confirms the already held stereotypes that set this cycle into motion.

Given this punishing dynamic, one of the protective mechanisms Black students can carry into schools is the Racial/Ethnic Socialization (R/ES) they receive at home as well as through programs that specifically counter mainstream narratives of Black inferiority.

Racial/Ethnic Socialization (R/ES) includes the intellectual, emotional, and behavioral coping skills that individuals acquire to compensate for or counteract racial tensions in relationships (Stevenson 2014). R/ES has been linked to academic and psychosocial adjustment in the school setting for African American students across different grade levels (Brown and Tylka 2011; Caughy et al. 2002; Neblett et al. 2006; Stevenson et al. 2002; Thomas et al. 2009; Thomas et al. 2003; Thornhill 2016). Historically, Racial/Ethnic Socialization (R/ES) includes the verbal or nonverbal messages parents communicate to youth, which youth, in turn, confirm they have acquired (Bentley et al. 2009; Hughes et al. 2006; Neblett et al. 2006; Thomas et al. 2009). While racial socialization research has origins in family health and functioning, the theories hold for educational settings as well (Stevenson 2014, 2017; Byrd 2016).

This article provides insight into Black middle schoolers' experience participating in Let's Talk? (LT), a R/ES curriculum designed to improve the quality of students' educational experiences by directly teaching and practicing the skills they need to successfully navigate the racial stress they face in schools. We report on our analysis of students' qualitative responses as they participated in the curriculum. Racial stress refers to the "race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism, and that are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being" (Harrell 2000). Without R/ES skill building, individuals may resist engaging with racism-induced tension because of the burden it places on one's own personal and communal supports, as well as on one's emotional health. In the classroom, racial stress becomes a prominent unspoken and influential agent upon achievement.

2. Literature Review

Among the host of school contextual and interpersonal factors contributing to academic achievement and overall school success, the teacher–student relationship is one of the most influential and proximal (Hamre and Pianta 2001, 2006; Pianta 2006). Teacher–student relationships are essential to Black students' development of healthy academic and behavioral outcomes (Leff et al. 2016; Meehan et al. 2003; Stevenson 2008; Thomas et al. 2009; Thomas and Stevenson 2009; Zaccor 2018). Unfortunately, the racial, social, cultural, and class distance between Black students and the mostly White teaching force present complications for the development of healthy teacher–student relationships. Many of these relational tensions have deep roots in the United States' long history of racial oppression of Black people. In fact, scholars argue that US schools are central to socializing students into racial hierarchies and maintaining racial stratification (Stevenson 2014).

Beyond schools, mainstream narratives about various racial groups also affect how those groups are perceived by others. In particular, stereotypes of Black people as lazy, unintelligent, devious, and lacking full humanity get in the way of social, educational, and economic mobility and even their physical safety (Reyna 2000; Swain 2018). Both teachers' and students' buy-in to negative stereotypes not only affects the development of interpersonal relationships but can also play an essential role in diminishing educational outcomes. For Black students, both the knowledge of stereotypes and experiences of being stereotyped can lead to stereotype threat, which can hinder the performance of Black youth such that they underperform academically (Aronson et al. 2002; Steele and Aronson 1995). According to Steele et al. (2002) stereotype threat is the disruptive preoccupation felt when individuals are wary of confirming a negative stereotype about their social identity group. Black youth, as well as other students of color who are minoritized are particularly vulnerable to stereotype threat due to the ways in which their identities are perceived to be linked to low cognitive abilities (Taylor and Walton 2017; Steele et al. 2002). The deleterious performance-related effects of stereotype threat stem from various psychological (e.g., devaluation and disengagement) and biological responses (e.g., cardiovascular risk; Gootsby et al. 2015) related to race-based stressors. However, low academic performance does not translate to low educational aspirations (Adams-Bass and Chapman-Hilliard n.d.).

While some Black students may respond to racial discrimination in the classroom and threats of academic failure with increased help-seeking resilience and productivity, others respond with a diminished sense of academic self-efficacy that is fueled by stereotypes of racial or intellectual inferiority (Nussbaum and Steele 2007; Steele 1997, 2003). This coping response can result in academic disengagement and disidentification. Academic disengagement is a strategy that students use to resist humiliation and damage to their self-esteem (Steele 1997; Steele and Aronson 1995). Yet, unfortunately, this can often lead to less exposure to essential classroom knowledge, learning resources and practice of basic study habits. In these situations, it may be difficult to distinguish student academic performance from teacher racial competence concerns, especially within schools where discussions of racial tension are avoided.

Racial stigma often looms large within racially dissonant teacher–student relationships. If misinterpretations of Black students take place, such as in teachers' devaluing perceptions of abilities (Dee 2004; Downey and Pribesh 2004; Oates 2003) and mismanagement of behaviors (Gregory et al. 2010; Thomas and Stevenson 2009), they can create challenges between Black students and White teachers. Unfortunately, the literature is missing sufficient discourse around culturally focused curriculum tailored to address these racial tensions in classroom settings. While racial stress management for teachers and students may be necessary, it is not possible without explicit teaching on racial conflict resolution or socialization.

Historically, Racial/ethnic socialization (R/ES) has been defined as verbal or nonverbal messages parents communicate with youth, and their admitted acquisition of those parental messages (Bentley et al. 2009; Stevenson et al. 2002; Neblett et al. 2006; Thomas et al. 2009). Racial socialization is an important protective factor for academic and psychosocial adjustment in the school setting for African American students across different grade levels (Brown and Tylka 2011; Caughy et al. 2002; Neblett et al. 2006; Stevenson et al. 2002; Thomas et al. 2003, 2009; Thornhill 2016). As such, R/ES represents individuals' acquisition of intellectual, emotional, and behavioral coping skills to compensate for or counteract racial tensions in relationships (Stevenson 2014). While racial socialization research has origins in family health and functioning, the theories can be applied to educational settings (Stevenson 2014, 2017). This article documents middle schoolers' responses to Let's Talk? (LT), a R/ES curriculum designed to improve the quality of Black students' educational experience. The LT curriculum sought to improve relationships between students, teachers, and administrators and peers from different racial backgrounds. Additionally, the curriculum was designed to reduce Black middle school students' academic underachievement and emotional paralysis due to racial stress.

2.1. The Vulnerability of Black Students' in Racialized Schooling Experiences

Scholars have chronicled the cautious, nonverbal, and physiological reactions to racial stress with meticulous specificity, and information on how different racial groups react to racial interactions in schools and other contexts and social situations is growing (Apfelbaum et al. 2008; Harrell 2000; Harrell et al. 2003; Richeson and Trawalter 2008; Bentley-Edwards et al. 2020). While resisting and avoiding racial interactions is common, experiences of racism and discrimination experiences in schools undermine the performance and acceptance of students of color, and for Black youth in particular, across different grade levels (see Brown and Bigler 2005; Seaton et al. 2010; Greene et al. 2006; Pachter et al. 2010; Sellers et al. 2006; Szalacha et al. 2003).

Harrell's (2000) definition of racial stress, "race-related transactions between individuals or groups and their environment that emerge from the dynamics of racism, and that are perceived to tax or exceed existing individual and collective resources or threaten well-being," explains how individuals may resist engaging in racism-induced tension because of the burden it places on personal and communal supports, as well as on emotional health. In the classroom, however, racial stress becomes a prominent unspoken, yet influential agent. Despite the unspoken racial political discourse of school reform efforts to close the

achievement gap, the quality of teacher–student relationships has been associated with the greatest academic outcomes for Black students (Adams 1978; Bennett 1976; Chang and Sue 2003; Clark 1965; Coates 1972; Cooper et al. 1975; Keller 1986; Meehan et al. 2003; Murray 1996; Oates 2003; Richman et al. 1997; Thomas and Stevenson 2009; Zirkel 2005; Puchner and Markowitz 2015; Gershenson et al. 2016). Even with the promise of positive academic and behavioral outcomes from supportive teacher–student relationships, the subtle disruption and mismanagement of racial stress in those relationships remains an understudied phenomenon.

The research on Black students' racialized experience of schooling is mixed (Dee 2004; Ferguson 1998, 2003; Jussim and Harber 2005; Noguera 2003; Oates 2003). Dee (2004) found in a randomized field trial that Black students learn more from Black teachers and White students learn more from White teachers, even when one controls for teacher quality in delivering lessons. Dees' (2004) work begs for an examination of the literature on Black students' underexposure to supportive classroom learning experiences. Achievement gap literature shows that differences in academic achievement between racially minoritized students when compared to white students "is a matter of race and class" (Ladson-Billings 2006). In fact, scholars have argued that the achievement gap has been mischaracterized and instead points to an opportunity gap (Carter and Welner 2013) and discipline gap (Monroe 2005), acknowledging the role of systemic issues and teacher bias in student outcomes. Thus, according to Martin (2009), to not consider race in schooling is to be dishonest and mask the role that racial politics play in undermining student success.

It stands to reason that teacher avoidance of racial conflict is maladaptive and may represent a lack of racial negotiation skills development that could hinder supportive relationships with Black students. The impact of racial conflict avoidance by teachers is particularly salient in the US national context in which 82.6% of all teachers are White. Many Black students go through grades K–12 without ever learning from a Black teacher. While not all White teachers are avoidant of racial conflict—or cross racial engagement that could potentially lead to conflict—many White teachers are. The research on White Racial Socialization (Bartoli et al. 2016; Hagerman 2016; Hamm 2001) suggests that White people tend to be socialized to be colorblind or colormute, essentially ignoring race, racial conflict, and racial politics, which leads to an underdeveloped consciousness of the ways in which racial dynamics may impact student success or failure as well as an unwillingness to entertain that awareness.

When students of color are faced with relentless difficulties to achieve, academic frustration can result in lower self-confidence and subsequent frustration, disaffection, and other disruptive behaviors in school (Gregory et al. 2010; Miles and Stipek 2006). As a result, researchers have also documented a disturbing gap in discipline referrals across racial and ethnic groups that disproportionately disadvantage Black students from K–12 grades (Gregory and Ripski 2008; Gregory et al. 2010; Gregory and Weinstein 2008; Noguera 2003; Skiba et al. 2002; Thomas and Stevenson 2009). Even preschool Black boys are more likely to be disproportionately expelled from classrooms in 48 states, even though they do not misbehave more than other students (Gilliam 2005; Gilliam et al. 2016). When some Black students perceive teachers to be unfair or judgmental in their disciplinary practices and use of authority, they may feel incompetent and emotionally distressed (Cole 1990, 1991). As a result, expressions of this stress can be observed through poor school attendance, classroom disengagement, and/or behaving defiantly and less cooperatively with teachers (Ripski and Gregory 2009; Thomas et al. 2009; Yoon 2002) even when accounting for children's characteristics and school contextual factors (Thomas et al. 2008).

2.2. Let's Talk About Fixing the "Race Problem"

The difficulty of integrating racially segregated schools has been researched extensively (Bischoff and Tach 2020; Quinn 2020; Rotberg 2020). Less is known about developing school-based racial negotiation curricula for daily racial conflicts between administrators, educators, parents and students in neighborhoods that experience dramatic changes in

racial composition post–integration. This paper highlights the challenges that arise when Black urban youth integrate a suburban school district, Lexington Township, that had been historically White and middle-class. Shifting demographics—caused by an influx of Black families from the local urban community who desired for their children to receive a quality education—created unexpected challenges for White teachers, students, and administrators.

However, the tensions were not one-sided. Black parents saw disparities in assessment data and disciplinary trends between Black and White students as indicative of racial and social forces detrimental to their children's academic success and emotional well-being. As a result of these concerns, Black parents sought support from the local chapter of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Attention from the NAACP prompted mostly White district leaders to reach out to our research team for support in addressing the district's challenges with its new and growing Black student population. Our team was one part of a multi-pronged approach to improving Black student achievement in the district.

We began our work with the district by first meeting with school-level administrators and teachers at the Corryton Middle School as well as Black students and parents. Our team conducted focus group sessions with Black parents and students which were guided by our use of the Cultural and Racial Experiences of Socialization Survey (CARES), an R/ES measure that elicits responses from students about the kinds of messages they receive about race and ethnicity from important people in their lives like parents and teachers. Additionally, we met with parents and caregivers to understand the kinds of experiences they believed their children were having at the school. Data from the sessions subsequently informed the design of LT, a racial conflict resolution curriculum for Black adolescents. In this paper, we share what we learned about students' school experiences through their participation in LT. We also document the kinds of emotional responses racialized experiences invoked for Black students. It is important to understand the ramifications of these experiences on young people, as expressed by young people themselves, and to develop interventions specific to Black students' unique concerns and contextual demands.

As our team began working with the Corryton Middle School faculty, it was clear the invitation to fix their "race problem" meant fixing Black students rather than assessing how the school climate shaped student experiences and outcomes. It appeared that our potential for helping the school deal with the comparatively "low-performing" and "unruly" Black children assuaged any concerns that would have otherwise arisen from allowing a majority Black research team into the Corryton school building to address their "race problem." In preparation for our work with students, we interviewed concerned parents and their children about their daily interactions with other members of the school community. Through focus groups and observations in classrooms, hallways, and extracurricular activities we recognized many complexities that shaped the experiences of Black students at Corryton.

As a prelude to designing the curriculum, we examined Black students' reactions to race- and academic-related stress as a result of their interactions with mostly White teachers and peers. Grounded in principles of RECAST (Stevenson 2014), which explains how racial coping and well-being is hampered by racial stress, we identified how racial tensions in schooling relationships contributed to disparities in classrooms.

While we fully recognized that the context was, in fact, the problem and not the students, Black children and youth have long endured the undue burden of having to internalize R/ES strategies that guide them in navigating racialized encounters (Bentley et al. 2009; Hughes et al. 2006; Neblett et al. 2006; Stevenson 2014, 2017; Thomas et al. 2009). By examining students' experiences and responses to racial stress, we were able to systematize Racial/Ethnic Socialization (R/ES) practices, bring discussions that typically occur in homes and communities to the school, and align the content with students' developmental characteristics and the contextual realities of their school experience.

Through participation in LT, it was expected that students would develop their Racial/Ethnic Literacy, which includes self-awareness, stress appraisal, stress reappraisal management, conflict engagement, conflict negotiation and conflict resolution, all in the context of Racial/Ethnic encounters. Specific Racial/Ethnic Literacy skills are not purely intellectual; they involve both emotional and behavioral components as well (Bentley-Edwards and Stevenson 2016). Racial/Ethnic Literacy for Black students is developed through exposure and emotional reattachment to Black history, including the contemporary and historical experience of racial inhumanity, survival, and triumph (Chapman-Hilliard and Adams-Bass 2015; Chapman-Hilliard et al. 2019). It includes the very practical approach of role-playing and practicing racial literacy skills until they are competently applied to resolve daily racial and achievement conflict in school. The LT curriculum prioritizes navigating teacher–student relationships because the quality of teacher–student relationships has been associated with the greatest academic outcomes for Black students (Adams 1978; Bennett 1976; Chang and Sue 2003; Clark 1965; Coates 1972; Cooper et al. 1975; Keller 1986; Meehan et al. 2003; Murray 1996; Oates 2003; Richman et al. 1997; Thomas and Stevenson 2009; Zirkel 2005; Puchner and Markowitz 2015; Gershenson et al. 2016).

2.3. Let's Talk?

Let's Talk? (LT) is a racial socialization-infused stress and coping curriculum that uses a racial conflict negotiation curriculum to help students make meaning of their racialized experiences. Unlike other programs designed for programming with Black children, LT is a novel curriculum that applies cognitive-behavioral strategies to teach youth information deconstruction techniques, relationship-building, identity development, and styles-expression skills for the purpose of resolving conflicts in racial/ethnic interactions. With repeated racial socialization skills practice where the use of mindfulness, storytelling, journaling, debating, participation in focus groups, and role-playing activities are integrated, individuals will not simply become more confident (racial coping self-efficacy) but competent in reading, recasting, and resolving racially stressful encounters (racial coping ability).

The primary goals of LT following RECAST included (1) assessing and helping students and teachers to accurately appraise stress and threat reactions during academic work and racial conflicts and then reappraise those interactions as challenges rather than threats; (2) increasing academic and racial negotiation self-efficacy and competence; and (3) tracking shifts in threat and controllability reappraisals to determine their influence on teacher–student relationships; youths' self-efficacy and agency; student's academic engagement, achievement, and overall school conduct. The stronger one's sense of racial coping self-efficacy, the less likely the individual will be to use avoidance to cope with racially stressful interactions. "Racial literacy" is the term for racial competence skill-building is and includes racial literacy and is the ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful interactions (Stevenson 2014). Racial literacy development enables individuals to identify racially stressful moments, positively appraise and reduce the stressfulness appraisal or impossibility of these moments (recasting) and engage them more directly (resolving). As a mediating and buffering function, racial literacy helps youth and teachers face unexamined fears of academic and racial rejection within the classroom, navigate racial politics and barriers successfully, and take appropriate risks to problem-solve under duress (see Bentley et al. 2009; Hughes et al. 2006; Stevenson 1994).

As a psycho-educational curriculum, LT's (LT is also designed to train teachers, in this article we focus on our work with students.) use of R/ES concepts for enhancing racial literacy development is based on previously researched culturally relevant violence prevention and curricula for middle and high school African American youth (Stevenson 2003; Cassidy et al. 2003; Cassidy and Stevenson 2005). LT strategies were constructed with attention to culturally unique experiences of Black students in schools and also included traditional evidence-based intervention principles, including theory-driven risk and protective constructs. The five constructs introduced in LT are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Protective constructs introduced in Let's Talk.

Protective Construct	Consisted of
Information deconstruction	- critical discussions - appraisal of media - recognition of societal (mis)representations of race - analysis of stereotypes and hierarchies - addressing the implicit meanings and assumptions related to stereotypes
Relationship building	highlighting characteristics of and strategies for how to engage in healthy racial communication practices
Identity development	- providing support to question and construct confident racial identities - teaching historical racial knowledge - connecting history to current events and change agents in the Black community - role modeling through Black instructors with strong, positive racial identities
Style expression	the acknowledgement, exploration, and encouragement of Black cultural expression in participants' forms of communication, music and poetry
Stereotype countering	building assertiveness towards challenging negative racial stereotypes of one's racial group in public discourse and social engagement

2.4. The Art of Recasting Racial Stress

Stevenson (2014) developed Racial Encounter Coping Appraisal and Socialization Theory (RECAST), a model of racial stress and coping. Based on the work of Lazarus and Folkman (1984), racially stressful encounters (anticipated or actual social interactions between persons) are assumed to influence racial coping (Folkman and Moskowitz 2004; Lazarus 2000). Some teachers and students appraise these racial interactions as overwhelming, which results in maladaptive coping (e.g., teacher abuse of power or increased implicit bias; or student academic disengagement and classroom noncompliance), while others appraise these situations as manageable and cope adaptively. Adaptive coping strategies enable individuals to regulate their emotions and respond by asking intentional questions or going into deeper discussions about racially contentious topics (Carter Andrews 2012). These appraisals are influenced by previous experiences as well as the emotional and tangible resources available to address situations as benign, awkward or onerous (Folkman and Moskowitz 2000). Thus, Stevenson (2014) suggests that the relationship between racial stress and coping is mediated by racial coping self-efficacy or the belief that one can engage racial conflicts directly. In RECAST, R/ES increases racial coping self-efficacy. Figure 1 provides an overview of goals, strategies, and R/E literacy outcomes for LT participants.

Figure 1. Let's Talk goals, strategies, and outcomes.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Context and Participants

This paper reports on data related to the experiences of Black students at Corryton Middle School, a public school located in a middle-class suburb adjacent to New Kensington, a moderate-sized urban city in the northeast United States. The racial makeup of the Corryton student body was 47.6% White, 41.8% Black, 3.2% Hispanic, 7.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.3% American Indian. According to local residents and Corryton teachers, Corryton was one of few middle-class communities in the area that embodied such diversity, making the neighborhood highly sought after by many liberal White families.

Black middle- and working-class families had been moving to Corryton so that their children would have access to good schools and had been paying hefty property taxes to help subsidize the district's educational expenses. On average, families in the Corryton School District made approximately USD 80,000 per year (US Census Bureau 2019) and although the middle-class base of the community had been maintained, the racial make-up of the district was undergoing drastic changes as the number of White residents decreased and the presence of Black families increased.

Although all racial groups at Corryton Middle School made what was considered adequate progress on standardized tests, 63.2% of Black students met the state target in reading and 56.8% in math. However, White students significantly outperformed Black students with 90.8% of White students meeting state standards in reading and 86.4% in math—almost 30 percentage points higher than Black students in both subjects. This discrepancy, as well as disciplinary disparities, set off a series of complaints about race and schooling in the district.

We conducted one focus group session with Black parents and one with students which were guided by the use of the Cultural and Racial Experiences of Socialization Survey (CARES), a racial and ethnic socialization measure that elicits responses from students about the kinds of messages they receive about race and ethnicity from important people in their lives like parents and teachers (Bentley-Edwards and Stevenson 2016). Our focus group sessions helped us to understand the kinds of experiences parents believed their children were having in the school and the experiences students expressed having. Data from those sessions subsequently informed our design of LT.

After initial focus group discussions, we recruited seventeen Black students who volunteered to participate in LT. This included 12 seventh-grade students and 5 eighth-grade students. Out of the 17 participants, 10 were girls and 7 were boys. The LT classes met two times per week on Tuesdays and Thursdays for 75 min for a total of 20 sessions over a five-month period. We also gained access to classroom spaces, sports teams, and other extracurricular activities and the cafeteria, where we were able to get a holistic picture of the school context as well as student–student and student–teacher/administrator interactions. Ethnographic observations and notetaking occurred during each session focus

group session, LT session, and throughout the school building. Additionally, recordings of focus group and LT sessions were transcribed and coded.

LT Sessions: Processes and Procedures

Each LT session focused on three learning outcomes for participants presented in the following order: (1) Self- and Other-awareness Learning; (2) Self- and Other-Awareness Expression; and (3) Self- and Other-awareness Action. Self- and Other Awareness Learning involved teaching racial socialization knowledge topics. These LT curriculum topics focused on storytelling of personal and societal historical and contemporary racial macro- and micro-aggressions and included deconstructing how different racial groups are positioned socially and politically, how that leads to racial trauma, and students' emotional angst in engaging stories of trauma. Self- and Other Awareness Expression involved helping students to express through journaling, small group communication exercises, and large class discussions, their feelings about the curriculum knowledge presented. Here, our goal was to have students share how they felt about the content presented in the Self- and Other Awareness Learning part of the session, they would also argue their position on previously discussed racial dilemmas. Self- and Other-Awareness Action involved using roleplay to have students practice skills they could use to negotiate racial or academic conflicts within school settings. These roleplays included classroom interaction scenarios from the participants' own daily schooling experiences.

Cognitive behavioral strategies like exposing youth to positive black historical and contemporary images, monitoring racial negotiation learning in classrooms, sought to increase students' confidence in using healthy racial coping skills (i.e., stress appraisal and assertiveness) for racial encounters (Stevenson 2014). LT homework assignments were meant to challenge students to gather relevant data about local neighborhood and school demographics that affect their educational experiences, academic remediation in areas they are struggling, and to practice application of academic engagement and race relations coping skills in school classrooms, hallways, cafeterias, and extracurricular activities.

Applied R/ES research involves developing social justice agency among youth to support racial literacy skills and coping. Students in LT were expected to report back to the staff about how they used LT skills in classroom, community, and extracurricular spaces. LT staff members also visited classrooms and observed LT teacher–student relationships as well as observed students engaging in classroom activities. When possible, LT staff planned with and prompted students to apply skills and agency within specific classroom topics and projects. For example, if a student shared that they were not being called on in class, LT staff would roleplay with students to help adjust their typical responses of frustration and withdrawal to instead speaking with his/her teacher to request they be called on in class more often.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

Our primary methods of data collection included the documentation of group discussions in the form of CARES focus groups and LT sessions. Focus groups, as a form of data collection, allow for an interactive level of analysis and can be instructive in addressing critical issues where both silence and voice are central to meaning making and where acts of resistance can be cultivated (Kook et al. 2019). Additionally, social context is often essential to how minoritized group make sense of their experiences. Kook et al. (2019) state, "Focus groups not only allow for the collective construction of meaning and knowledge, they also acknowledge the importance of not isolating the research subjects from their social context" (p. 87).

Audio recordings of focus group data were transcribed and then coded by three members of the research team. However, ethnographic notes were also taken during focus groups and LT sessions to help account for meaning that can be missed from a mere transcript of words and can help account for nonverbal ques like body language and emotional expression. Parameswaran et al. (2020) argue that

The level of non-verbal interaction (head nodding, laughing, sarcasm, inflection); verbal representation such as minimal encouragers ("mhmm," "yeah, right"); instances of cross-talk and the data translation (i.e., "K" vs. "Okay," words spoken in another language, phrases that are unintelligible) can be burdensome for qualitative researchers [to capture]. (p. 632)

However, we recognize the salience of these gestures in conveying meaning, particularly for Black people as verve and affect are essential components of many Black people's communication styles (Boykin and Toms 1985).

Thematic analyses were used to identify recurrent themes in the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The process of coding and analyzing data was ongoing throughout the project as we used initial analyses to inform the ongoing development of the LT curriculum. Thus, coding was a recursive, non-linear process that included cycling between data, themes, and literature (Gioia et al. 2013). In fact, coding the data actually served as a form of analysis (Packer 2018). Our research team met weekly to discuss emergent themes and analyses and to address issues of intercoder reliability. According to O'Connor and Joffe (2020), "[Intercoder reliability] assessment can yield numerous benefits for qualitative studies, which include improving the systematicity, communicability, and transparency of the coding process, promoting reflexivity and dialogue within research teams . . . " (p. 1).

Themes were developed in response to the following research questions: (1) How did the CARES focus group and the LT curriculum elicit responses about Black students' racialized school experiences? and (2) What are the range of students' responses to experiences of racial injustice in school? Codes were derived from two overarching themes: (1) students' descriptions of racialized experiences and (2) responses to racially charged incidents. Direct quotes which reflect these themes were grouped under thematic headings (see Table 2), to provide a clear illustration of each theme and the types of responses participants gave. Student reactions to racial encounters are important because they help to identify what supports are needed for them to successfully navigate these occurrences while remaining academically engaged and preserving a healthy self-concept and racial identity.

Table 2. Themes and codes.

Themes	Codes
Identifying racialized experiences	• Unfair discipline based on race • Disparate course offerings (materials and activities) and academic expectations • Disparities based on intersectional nuances
Responses to racial injustice	• Emotional impact on students • Coping strategies (e.g., apathy, disregard) • Seeking parental support

4. Findings

Our analyses of data led us to unearth the deep complexities inherent in getting Black children to open up and discuss issues of race and racism in their school and broader society. From the initial parent focus group, it was clear that Black parents preferred that we address the school's racial challenges by working with teachers. Parents appeared apprehensive about the burden being placed on Black kids to address an issue they did not create, and they also appeared wary of our ability to safely guide racially sensitive conversations within an already hostile school context. It was clear that both Black parents and students recognized that having conversations about race could potentially increase their level of vulnerability, but they also saw this as an opportunity to address challenges that were making students and parents' lives more stressful.

Ultimately, parents considered the potential benefits of Black youth having a space to collectively discuss their schooling experiences. Learning from the students themselves was seen as a potentially pivotal step in addressing the challenges in the district. It is

often the case that programs geared towards addressing racism and cultural competence in schools, often fail to solicit guidance from Black parents and students (Byrd 2016).

4.1. Reading Race at School

Despite initial reservations, students grew to value the time spent at LT. The research team learned a tremendous amount about how Black students at Corryton were reading and analyzing race relations at their school. Students were quite insightful about both implicit and explicit manifestations of racism and its impact on their emotional well-being. However, students primarily attuned the ways in which race shaped experiences with discipline and academic. During one session, Sanaya, a seventh grader, shared the following:

Sometimes in my class, I get after-detention, but most of the other people get lunch detention or they just get one.

A: Who are the other people? What do the other people look like in your class?

Sanaya: They look like other people. Most of them are White.

A: Are they White or Black? Male or female?

Sanaya: Well the females, they just get, most of the people in my class they just get lunch detention, but we got after-school detentions, in-school suspensions, and stuff like that.

A: Who are we?

Sanaya: The males.

A: The boys. Okay.

W: The Black boys or the White boys?

Sanaya: In my class it's more of the Black boys.

Students were adept at systematically examining the kinds of infractions for which students were being reprimanded and teachers' responses. One student explained that her determination of whether an incident was racist was dependent upon her keen observation of the situation and possible explanations for the individual's behavior. She coupled that with observations of whether specific behaviors were repeated by the individual. These examples demonstrate that students had developed strategies for identifying racist behaviors that went beyond singular incidents or misguided assumptions.

Students recognize the role of race in how discipline played out in school, and they also recognized various intersections in how race worked with other characteristics such as gender, social, class, and academic ability. These observations reflected students' sophisticated understanding of their experiences with race and racism. These understandings helped the LT engage students in conversations about how intersecting minoritized identities shape Black people's experiences more broadly.

Bobbie, a male participant in LT recalled:

Yeah. Okay so I was on the baseball team. They didn't really treat me bad . . . but they were mostly scared of me because I'm Black, well yeah, because I'm Black. They were asking me like, "Are we allowed to call you the N word" and stuff like that and like, "What would you do" if they called me that.

A: How did you respond?

Bobbie: I said I would beat them up. [nervous laughter] Because they were asking me for like stupid reasons and it made me mad.

Students noticed that the severity of reprimands were dependent on students' identities, but they also recognized that the classrooms were segregated by race and that students were having different educational experiences within the same building. Kumar, shared that there was an overrepresentation of Black boys in his class despite the fact that Black and White students made up approximately 40% of the student population. These

kinds of disparities were also apparent beyond the classroom and included extracurricular activities.

During LT sessions, students shared information like:

Student: You see more White kids in the honors classes and like I said you see one or two Black kids and you'll see all White kids. And it's like flipped the opposite way for like . . .

A: Mark you were saying something.

Student: It's certain things. My whole class is White except for like three people.

A: You had something to say?

Student: Like my English class is all Black but it's only like one White kid though. And it's like we get like treated differently.

A: How do they treat you?

Student: Because like all the other classes they do projects and stuff and we don't do projects, we just kind of read. They read like books and we read out of other types of books.

Another student, Jeffrey, described an in-class experience of one of his peers.

Yeah, there was this one time, the kid just entered the class, he didn't say anything, and she still sent him to the office. He was kicked out of the class like every single day and half of the time he didn't even do anything. She would blame him. She just doesn't like him. And she would blame him for anything that happened. And the health and computer room they're separated not by a cement wall but like a binder thing and people would bang on it and she would blame him instead of other people in the class. She would blame him, and he would deny it the whole time and then she would just tell him to get out and go to the office.

Beyond classroom composition it was also clear to Black students that they were receiving a different kind of educational experience. Jonathan shared his insight regarding this issue stating that " . . . all the other classes they do projects and stuff, and we don't do projects, we just kind of read. They read like books and we read out of other types of books." Jonathan had been noticing differences in the instructional materials that were being used as well as the instructional strategies that were employed. These observations sent clear messages to Black students that they were not worthy or capable of deep academic engagement.

Corryton gave students a crash course in learning to identify racism, but it also demonstrated the nuanced relationship between social class and race. While many of the Black students at Corryton came from solidly middle-class families who lived in elaborate homes in the neighborhood, there was a subset of Black students from working-class families who lived in the only apartment complex in the district. The apartments were considerably more expensive than renting in the neighboring city but provided what parents saw as an opportunity for their children to attend better schools. What they did not expect was the stigma that would come along with living in Middleton Village. In Tamara's explanation of teachers' treatment of Black students, she mentioned that:

[The teacher] treats the White kids a little better sometimes. Like he told this one girl, but we had picked partners for our book project and . . . he said, "Why would you choose her because she's like dumb" or something like that. But he calls on the smart White kids, well . . . the smart Black kids [too], but he don't really call on us. He just think that we can't do stuff right.

The "smart Black kids" were generally Black students whose families had lived in the district a long time and whose kids had attended district schools for a number of years. Those students tended to adapt to the academic demands of Corryton more readily, while those who came from the neighboring urban district were often tasked with having to catch

up to their peers and were often written off by teachers as incapable of academic success or lacking proper cultural dispositions related to language, dress, and comportment.

4.2. Responding to Race at School

4.2.1. Emotional Impact

With regard to the second inquiry regarding students' emotional responses to experiences of racial injustice in school and their willingness to report emotional reactions to and experiences with school or classroom unfairness from teachers and students, most of the participating students were eager to share.

Black students ongoing reflections on how race played out in Corryton took up cognitive energy that could have been utilized in completing academic assignments. This is especially true if these issues are left unresolved over a long period of time. The students also described interactions with teachers and peers to explain their disengagement from classroom activities. These are rejection sensitivity or retaliation responses, and they illuminate how race and gender dynamics play out in racially stressful school encounters.

> Student: I was like, "What" I don't talk like that.
>
> A: And what do you say when they approach you like that? How do you feel when they . . .
>
> Student: We joke about it. It's a joke.
>
> W: You said they're joking around. Do you feel like it's funny?
>
> Student: It depends on who it is. I mean if they're doing it . . . Because it's not them or . . . or something then I'll get mad . . .
>
> Student: I feel like I was treated different and I just feel awkward. We had this one class. In honors classes, it was me and one or two other Black people. It was in my math class because she actually put us all in one area and I just thought it felt weird.
>
> A: How do your classmates feel? Do they feel uncomfortable too?
>
> Student: Yeah
>
> A: Do you guys ever talk about it? What do you guys say?
>
> Student: Well, we'll joke about it.
>
> A: What do you say?
>
> Student: . . . well like two Black kids in a corner.

An important finding is that the LT created a safe space for students to negotiate issues and offered perspective and support rather leaving students to figure out how to manage school-based racial encounters on their own. Some students were very aware of the racial politics of schools and could deconstruct these politics without hesitation. For instance, a recurring theme was observed harsher punishments for Black boys compared to White boys and girls (all races) for similar infractions.

LT established a safe space with opportunities to talk about experiences and to manage racial stress. These experiences were across multiples contexts, as noted in the quotes below:

> I think it's a good program, you can learn a lot, and have open discussions about the issues that go on in our world today. And, it's very informative, cause you learn and you give what you know. So, it's a win–win type program.
>
> Well, I had heard a lot of racial comments about me and . . . I couldn't focus on anything. Well, as soon as I came to "Let's Talk," like, I, I got to tell my story, and I feel comfortable and I could study more easily without being stressed out.
>
> I hope they come back next year because it was fun and I probably can help. I'll, we could all help out in one or another way to get people to come to "Let's Talk."

4.2.2. Coping Strategies

One of the girls who participated in LT, Nia, provided the latter student with helpful feedback in response to his expressed maltreatment and sense of helplessness in this cross-racial encounter in the classroom. Below, she assertively explains how the habitués of racial inferiority is sculpted within the invisible classroom dialogue:

Don't give up because you can still trace up to your homework. You know what I'm trying to say . . . "You don't have to answer me now so I'm gonna prove you wrong, like I got everything right." So, don't give up, don't. Because then you'll be what they expect. They still determine your future, you gotta play both sides. "Yeah, I'm smart. I shouldn't have to prove it to you, but I am going to prove it to you. Because without you, I can't get to where I want."

The last student quoted continued to talk about how the research team learned from them—the students—and how they learned from us. Students are often experts in different things and so the classroom should be a place where everyone has the chance to be an expert at some point.

Students' admission of paralysis to racial insults, hostility toward the topic of race, or surprise at learning new knowledge about Black history were reactions that reflected an underexposure to racial coping strategies that included a lack of experience to (1) define racially stressful incidents as traumatic rather than inconsequential to one's emotional well-being; (2) identify feelings attached to the shame of long-standing stigma pain; (3) express the range of feelings regarding racial hostility without denying the tension or endangering one's academic standing and losing one's reputation as tough and unafraid; and (4) practice appropriate emotionally, culturally, and personally congruent rebuttal skills and statements that would vindicate one's dignity and defend against the internal shame that accompanies the insult. These skills are helpful for students, but they do not address the institutional and systemic racism that make racial coping necessary.

This feedback reflects the goal of LT to teach racial negotiation coping skills and the rationale for such an endeavor. However, without an explicit focus in discussing racial conflict, these personal narratives are unlikely to have been disclosed or addressed. Instead, they are likely to have been experienced in silence, like other forms of trauma, internalized, and susceptible to intrapersonal processes that are antithetical to help-seeking resilience, self-efficacy, and productivity in the academic setting (Nussbaum and Steele 2007; Steele 2003).

4.2.3. Seeking Parental Support

The second important finding is that parents serve as protectors and sometimes actively model how to manage racial encounters. When discussing racial encounters, students vividly described occurrences outside of school when their parents were actively protective or intervened to address racial encounters they had experienced. When students spoke of school-based encounters, parents or other adult caregivers appeared to offer suggestions as to how the students could manage racially biased encounters independent of their caregiver's presence, as evidenced in the following excerpts:

Sometimes, she [mother] tells me, "Don't worry about it and don't let it bring me down. Just go on with my day."

She [grandmother] would get mad and tell me to fight or something. Not fight [physically] but get mad and go up there and like protest and yell at the people and stuff.

5. Conclusions and Implications

Racial tension in teacher–student relationships is the elephant in the classrooms of American schooling that researchers have also avoided to address (Stevenson 2008, 2014). In this study, support was found for the basic assumptions that racial tension is stressful for students as they matriculate through middle school. Moreover, results suggest that

guided practice of racial/ethnic conflict resolution in specific relational interactions in the classroom provided an opportunity for students to analyze and negotiate student coping and lessen their stress in facing these dilemmas.

Our findings suggest that guided practice of racial/ethnic conflict resolution in specific relational interactions in the classroom provided an opportunity for students to analyze and negotiate the dilemmas they were facing as a coping and stress reduction strategy. Students' lack of experience in utilizing these racial coping skills is not the cause of their academic and behavioral challenges in school. Experience and competency in these skills can be seen as a tool to relieve some of their stress caused by the systemic racism that made racial coping skills necessary.

As we work with Black parents, there is no doubt that they will express the importance of their children being excellent in literacy and writing and proficient in other formal operations that are indicative of scholastic growth. However, skills development in talking about and negotiating matters pertaining to race may be just as vital (e.g., Apfelbaum et al. 2008; Richeson and Trawalter 2008). If the social construction of race were not a real and powerful phenomenon, there would be no need to understand how it affects children's learning and their development in other areas, which has been the basis of a sizeable body of research expanding several decades (Bennett 1976; Clark and Clark 1950; Cooper et al. 1975; Murray 1996; Oates 2003; Quintana and McKown 2008; Tatum 1997; Zirkel 2005). However, despite its social construction, race is not only real, stressful racial encounters can be debilitating for youth of all racial backgrounds—including White students (Trent et al. 2019).

The application of RECAST to racial stress management and racial literacy development in the classroom involves using culturally relevant strategies that are used in counseling to teach R/E stress management and negotiation to Black students and learning how each student makes meaning of that stress. It involves appreciating youth's reactions, their specific racial/ethnic worldview, history of race-related social interactions, and coping skills.

Finally, integrating RECAST theoretical perspectives to racial stress management involves teaching Black youth to critically think about ways to effectively identify racial/ethnic conflicts that exist in the learning contexts and develop skills related to information deconstruction, relationship building, identity development, and style expression. The utilization of this approach for the acquisition of these skills is not exclusive to Black students. The theory can be applied to other racial groups, but the curriculum will require an extensive investigation and knowledge of the subgroup's history and culture as it is expressed and lived within the local and national politics of race and racism.

Subsequent investigations of "Let's Talk?" will entail a series of qualitative and randomized field trials in order to clarify and advance present findings and include direct training with teachers. Improving "quality time with teachers" for Black students across the ethnic spectrum is a necessity, as well as an unquestionable demand given their immense risk of overexposure to racial politics with some teachers that may undermine aspects of classroom quality for these students, their perceptions of trustworthy, fair, respectful, and caring authority (Greene et al. 2006; Gregory and Ripski 2008; Lewis and Kim 2008) and their potential for positive academic and behavioral outcomes (Noguera 2003; Thomas and Stevenson 2009).

We assume that racial negotiation self-efficacy in students could increase and promote closeness rather than distance in Black teacher–student relationships, resulting in academic gains and healthy psychosocial adjustment for Black students in their classrooms. We would like to measure whether acquiring racial negotiation skills has a significant influence on the academic achievement of middle and high school students. Likewise, will the acquisition of these skills impact Black students' relationships with teachers and peers and their concomitant conduct in classrooms and other situations in school settings? Answers to such questions may enrich our understanding of the utility of culturally specific curricula that directly target racial dynamics operating in classrooms between teachers and Black

students and encourage additional discourse around serious cultural tensions entrenched in schools (Byrd 2019; Butler-Barnes et al. 2019).

A research agenda that targets critical cultural consciousness and racial negotiation self-efficacy holds more hope than despair in solving what some perceive to be the intractable nature of the achievement gap. We contend that the intentional development of students' self-efficacy trumps the impact of problematic self-fulfilling prophecies, and that these are learned skills and dispositions not determined psychological outcomes. In order to improve Black student achievement and psychosocial functioning in schools, curricular programs and teacher training regarding racial coping are essential.

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