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Counternarrative as strategy: embedding critical race theory to develop an antiracist school identity

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the purposeful use of counternarrative to develop an antiracist school identity. Based on a seven-year ethnographic project at an elementary school in the southeast U.S., it illustrates how counternarrative can be employed as strategy to embed Critical Race Theory (CRT) into school equity discourse and, in doing so, help public schools disrupt majoritarian narratives that deny the salience of race. It argues that by developing counternarratives rooted in the perspectives and knowledge of teachers of color, and then using those counternarratives specifically for the purposes of strategizing, schools and researchers can help CRT achieve its activist function in K-12 school contexts.

INTRODUCTION

I recognize that most of what can be said about racial issues in this country has been said, and likely more than once. Over and over, we have considered all the problems, tried many of the solutions, and concluded—reluctantly or with relief—that, while full racial equity may some day be achieved, it will not be in our time. Developments in the civil rights field have been dutifully reported and analyzed in the media. And scholars have not been silent. Library shelves creak under the weight of serious studies on racial issues … (Bell, 1987, p. 4).

When I read this quote from Derrick Bell, written over 30 years ago, I think about how many books and articles (and now blog posts and Twitter threads) have been written about the quest for racial justice. I imagine if we narrowed it down to just education or even just Critical Race Theory (CRT) in education (my own field), the number would still be quite high. With that sentiment in mind, in this article I discuss the significance of counternarrative in pursuing racial equity in public school settings.

Counternarrative is a way CRT scholars react to majoritarian narratives on race, but as I will explain, it can also be practiced proactively to lay the groundwork for activism. In this way, counternarrative is not a product, but rather an integral part of critical race praxis. Using the example of City Elementary, a racially diverse school in a small city in the southeast U.S., I focus on the role of counternarrative in embedding CRT and antiracism more foundationally in school identity. I first give background on counternarrative in relation to CRT and outline its various functions, with a focus on the function of activism. I then use the example of City Elementary to show how counternarrative as a proactive form of strategy—one rooted in critical race methodology—can help embed critical race praxis in racialized school spaces. As such, counternarrative can create school spaces that ‘focus on the humanity, the history, the psychology, the undeniable...’
vibrancy, the embodied beingness of black and brown peoples’ (Patel, 2015, n.p.). I end by coming back to the work of Bell (1987) to discuss the implications for strategizing.

Critical race theory and counternarrative

CRT is a scholarly tradition that uses an interdisciplinary approach to analyze the embedded nature of racism in U.S. society (Ladson-Billings, 1998). It engages a variety of analytical tools from fields such as law, sociology, critical pedagogy, and ethnic studies to uncover how racism becomes normalized in U.S. institutions like education (Lynn & Parker, 2006). This process of normalization is sustained via a set of majoritarian narratives that deny the ongoing salience of race as a factor in people’s lives. Some of these narratives proport ‘that racism is no longer a barrier to equal opportunity’ (Dumas & Ross, 2016, p. 430). Others use colorblind logic to paint racism as only existing in exceptional, individual, or intentional cases while simultaneously defending practices that systemically maintain racial advantage for white people (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Still others take on deficit perspectives, framing racial disparity as a result of cultural practices within communities of color themselves (Alemán, 2017). These narratives also affect the way solutions to racial disparity are framed, i.e. in ways that are post-racial (arguing that less focus on race will lead to less racism), individualistic (focusing on convincing individual people to be less racist), race-neutral (focusing on initiatives that help all people regardless of race), or deficit-focused (developing interventions to change the behavior and practices of individual people of color). CRT counters these narratives by illuminating how race is a fundamental component to ongoing national issues of legal injustice, residential segregation, and health and educational disparity. ‘The goal is to place race at the center of scholarship and to focus attention on race and racism rather than understanding race as a comparison for White normative assumptions’ (Atwood & López, 2014, p. 1144).

One way that CRT disrupt these majoritarian narratives on race is through counternarrative. Counternarrative is connected to the central CRT tenet of the unique voice of people of color to understand racism. This tenet ‘holds that because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, black, American Indian, Asian, and Latino writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know’ (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 11). In educational contexts, CRT ‘focuses on the racialized, gendered, and classed experiences of students of color’ because ‘it views these experiences as sources of strength’ (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 24). These experiences are often shared via storytelling. The valuing of stories acknowledges that ‘... those who lack material wealth or political power still have access to thought and language, and their development of those tools... differs from that of the most privileged’ (Matsuda, 1995, p. 65).

While often ‘the terms counter-narrative (counternarrative), counter-story, and counterstory have been used interchangeably’ (Rodela & Rodríguez-Mojica, 2020, p. 316), I want to make a slight distinction between counterstory and the broader idea of counternarrative, i.e. between individual narratives/counterstories and counternarrative as methodology, of which individual counterstories can be a part. As a white researcher, I can use my researcher positionality to support broader counternarrative methodology of the schools I work with—of schools telling their stories in contrast to the racialized, dominant stories told about them—but educators of color have to lead that work. It is their counterstories that must drive it. Those individual counterstories include what we think of as story-telling—alllegories, chronicles, parables, dialogues, other fictional forms’ (Delgado, 1989, p. 2438). Those stories are purposefully told in contrast to majoritarian narratives, and in the field of education they have been used by a variety of scholars across a variety of educational settings.

One area where this scholarship has been particularly productive/insightful is on Black³ public school teachers (e.g. Dingus, 2006; Hayes, 2014; Hayes et al., 2014; Hicks, 2018). These studies
show how Black educators model critical race praxis, using their experiences with and knowledge of structural racism to more effectively understand and provide culturally relevant education for Black students. Another area has been in public school educational administration (e.g. Hernandez & Murakami, 2016; Rodela & Rodriguez-Mojica, 2020). The counterstories of administrators of color show how personal experiences of racism make them more responsive to students of color and more able to challenge deficit perspectives used against those students. Another line of counternarrative work is in higher education, which has focused on the experiences of both faculty and students. For example, with regard to faculty, counterstories by scholars such as Doharty et al. (2021) and Matias (2020) expose the contradictory claims universities make about their own commitments to equity, critically analyzing how institutions use certain diversity programs and hiring initiatives focused on faculty of color to both resist broader institutional change and take advantage of the labor of faculty of color. With regard to students in higher education, counterstory examples highlight the ongoing harm that daily racism causes students of color (e.g. Hubain et al., 2016; Roby & Cook, 2019). Those counterstories challenge institutional claims that students of color are valued in those educational spaces. In addition, CRT educational scholarship has provided example counterstories of K-12 students and families (e.g. Flores, 2018; King & Pringle, 2019). These studies challenge the discourse of students of color as being ‘at risk’ or in need of remediation, positioning them instead as informed learners and agentic in the face of institutional and cultural racism.

The CRT work in education also uses these stories to counter how majoritarian narratives have been used in specific ways against particular racial groups. For example, scholars have challenged master narratives of Latinx people as alternatively criminal or needy (e.g. Flores, 2018; Hernandez & Murakami, 2016). Others have countered dominant, deficit narratives about Black males and fatherhood (Hayes, 2014; Hicks, 2018). Still others have challenged reductive portrayals of Asians as alternatively model minorities or as only smart in limited ways (Kolano, 2016). Furthermore, CRT scholars use counternarrative in an intersectional way, i.e. using it to challenge how racist discourse intersects with issues of ableism (e.g. Tefera et al., 2019), heterosexism (e.g. Aguilar-Hernández, 2020), and religious identity (e.g. Snipes, 2017). Common in all the above work is an interrogation of whiteness. The emphasis on critically analyzing whiteness is important because it is by exposing historical and ongoing white supremacy in schools that educators of color have been able to enact transformative pedagogy and critical race praxis and offer up alternative visions of education (Hayes et al., 2014).

Also common in the above work is that it shows that, as a practice, counternarrative upholds the CRT tenet of revisionism, or revisionist history. ‘Revisionist history reexamines America’s historical record, replacing comforting majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that square more accurately with minorities’ experiences’ (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 25). Towards this aim, counternarrative specifically disrupts majoritarian narratives that perpetuate myths about meritocracy for white people and victim-blaming and deficit arguments about people of color. ‘Majoritarian stories function as master narratives and re-inscribe the myths of meritocracy and colorblindness, purport neutrality and commonsense, and invoke stereotypes that vitiate people of color as dim, criminal, and depraved and exalt whites as intelligent, lawful, and moral’ (Alemán, 2017, p. 75).

For white people, in particular, these master narratives reify in our minds the sense that U.S. society is fair and becoming more progressive in terms of race and that we ourselves are innocent of complicity in racism (Bell, 2003). By clinging to and retelling these stories, we are less likely to challenge the embedded racism of the institutions we are a part of. On the other hand, people of color are much more likely to perceive these institutions more critically (Bell, 2003). Counternarrative as strategy, then, is way to purposefully center these more critical perspectives and epistemologies of people of color with regard to embedded racism.
Functions of counternarrative

The CRT literature offers four overlapping functions of counternarrative:

1. Providing new (often untold) narratives to understand power.
2. Deconstructing majoritarian narratives on race.
3. Serving as a cure for silencing.
4. Fostering activism.

Delgado and Stefancic (2017) specify the first three in their work, but the wider body of CRT scholarship also includes the fourth function of fostering activism. I briefly elaborate on these functions and provide examples of each.

Providing new narratives to understand power

Counternarrative helps us understand racial power differently. That is, it specifically frames race not as a neutral concept but one that is always about power. Likewise, it frames racism an issue that is not abnormal in society or reduced to merely individual or exceptional actions. Central to this systemic framing of race and racism is an analysis of white supremacy. ‘CRT hopes to demystify the notion of a racially neutral society and tell another story of a highly racialized social order: a story where social institutions and practices serve the interest of White individuals’ (López, 2003, pp. 84–85). Majoritarian narratives on race normalize white superiority. In education, they not only sustain the practices that marginalize students of color but also make that marginalization appear to not be based on race. ‘The stories, or narratives, of the dominant group justify its power and privilege by the creation of, “a form of shared reality in which its own superior position is seen as natural” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2412)’ (Cook & Dixson, 2013, p. 1239). Counternarrative offers new perspectives to show that white advantage is not natural but rather the result of policies and practices designed specifically to serve white people.

For example, in Delgado’s (1994) eighth Rodrigo chronicle, he uses narrative to not only refute the idea that Black people are more prone to commit crime but also to illustrate where that perception came from. Through the conversation between two fictional characters—Rodrigo and the Professor—Delgado lays out historical cases that led to the equation of Black people with criminality. Furthermore, he explains how the creation of that master narrative on Black criminality served a societal purpose—in the face of Black societal advancement, white America needed to re-inscribe white superiority. In this way, the master narrative about blackness and crime served to buttress white supremacy.

In an education example, Cook and Dixson (2013) use composite counterstory to provide more contextual race-focused understanding of school reform efforts in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. Counter to the master narratives that used deficit perspectives to portray New Orleans public schools as being in disarray and unsalvageable before Katrina, the authors use the stories from Black teachers in the district to 1) situate the school problems not in teacher or administrator practice but in larger systemic racism and 2) convey the value of Black educators in the lives of New Orleans students. In sharing this counternarrative, Cook and Dixson expose the racialized power dynamics of school reform, challenging interpretations of that reform as colorblind or not harmful to students and communities of color.

Deconstructing majoritarian narratives of race

In illuminating the relationship between race, racism, and power, counternarrative also serves a destructive function. Counternarrative is not just an alternate interpretation of racial disparity but an attempt to tear down those master narrative accounts that normalize white supremacy.
Milner and Howard (2013) explain, ‘A counter-narrative provides space for researchers to reinterpret, disrupt or to interrupt pervasive discourses that may paint communities and people, particularly communities and people of color, in grim, dismal ways’ (p. 542). Similarly, Atwood and López (2014) explain that counternarrative is ‘…a tool for conducting policy analysis by challenging normative assumptions of race and politics that go unnoticed or unquestioned’ (p. 1138). As analysis, counternarrative specifically deconstructs the idea that racial disparity as a result of normal or justifiable occurrences.

For example, Berry and Stovall (2013) deconstruct the master narratives that frame young Black men as being prone to criminality. In their article, the authors provide an alternate ending to the death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teen who was killed by white self-appointed neighborhood watch person George Zimmerman when Martin was walking home to his father’s house. In Berry and Stovall’s contextual re-telling of the account, they expose the master narratives that link young Black men with criminality. In their subsequent counterstory of the confrontation between Martin and Zimmerman, Martin lives. In the end, the authors argue that argue that if people like Zimmerman had access to counterstories that refute and offer alternatives to the master narratives of young Black men being criminals, stories by young Black men themselves, that it would disrupt how people like Zimmerman see and treat people like Martin. They argue that in this way counterstory can disrupt dominant forms of curriculum that ignore or deny the salience of race in U.S. society.

In another example, Martinez (2014) uses counternarrative to disrupt dominant narratives about the fit of Chicano students in the academy. She provides a counterstory that details the racism that Chicano students face when trying to pursue graduate degrees. In doing she is able to ‘expose, analyze, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege’ (p. 38) in the academic pipeline. Her intended audience is academics with power in the academy, so they might challenge their own complicity in systemically racist practices that impede inclusion.

### Serving as a cure for silencing

Another function of counternarrative is that it serves as a cure for silencing (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). ‘A majoritarian story distorts and silences the experiences of people of color and others distanced from the norms such stories reproduce’ (Martinez, 2014, p. 51). Majoritarian narratives often come in the form of stock stories that depict the U.S. as inherently racially equitable and, in doing so, ‘erase the struggles and fortitude of people of color who have challenged and still challenge the USA to live up to its democratic ideals’ (Cook & Dixson, 2013, p. 1243). As an antidote to that silencing, counternarratives ‘serve creative purposes, like building solidarity amongst members of disenfranchised groups, nurturing community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2006), adding to collective memory, and strengthening resources for resistance and survival’ (Alemán, 2017, p. 76). Counternarrative is one way communities can respond and build affirmation and solidarity. It helps affirm the daily experiences people of color have with racism and resist attempts to gaslight their racialized narratives, thus serving as a means of ‘psychic preservation’ (Cook & Dixson, 2013, p. 1243).

For example, Roby and Cook (2019) use counternarrative as a form of bonding and liberation. They relate their experiences as Black women in the academy and use their narrative accounts to explain how they survive in academia in ways that are specifically in contrast to the whitened ways expected in academic spaces. They share how they were purposeful in expressing themselves as Black women (rather than in de-raced ways) and in expressing their care, love, and support for and by other Black women academics. In this way, they counter the narrative that survival and success come through hiding those racial and gendered aspects of their identities and use their own narrative practice to develop fellowship and care.
Latinx scholars have used testimonio in a similar fashion. Sosa-Provencio et al. (2019) explain that testimonios are ‘narratives of struggle and resilience to structural oppression at intersections of race/ethnicity, class, gender, language, sexuality, and residency status’ (p. 212). Those authors use testimonio to resist isolation and oppression in the academy and validate their own experiences as Chicana scholars. Similarly, in response to the anti-Latinx, nativist sentiments conveyed to them daily in the academy, Urrieta and Villenas (2013) use testimonio to nurture ‘convivencia (co-living) and cariño (critical caring)’ (p. 553) with their colleagues. Each of these scholars shows that counternarrative not only makes heard what was previously silenced but also serves as a source of ‘fulfillment and communal empowerment’ (Alemán, 2017, p. 75).

**Promoting activism**

A fourth function of counternarrative, one that I want to focus on more in this piece, is that it inspires activism. Because they are based on collective experiences, counternarratives can empower people to act against racial oppression. Bell (1987) explains that ultimate function of storytelling is ‘to promote clinical activism to achieve racial justice’ (p. 211), a sentiment that is echoed in the work of many of the scholars I have already cited and is explained clearly by Berry and Stovall (2013) who say that counterstory is for ‘designing and implementing action for the purpose of preventing or counteracting normative racist practices’ (p. 597).

At the same time, the scholarship on CRT in education does not present many specific examples of counternarrative actually being used to promote activism in daily K-12 educational contexts. Some scholarship does explain the potential of counternarrative to affect educational policy analysis in ways that can bring about change. For example, Milner and Howard (2013) argue that CRT narratives are valuable for the analysis of educational policy and practice and themselves use narrative to disrupt some of the dominant narratives in teacher education. Also, in K-12 contexts, there are some examples of CRT as more embedded practice. For instance, though they do not use counternarrative specifically, Rogers and Mosley (2006) show how CRT analysis can be used to inform elementary school literacy instruction and disrupt dominant and inaccurate narratives on race and the pursuit of racial equity. Then, Amiot et al. (2020) use CRT to disrupt dominant narratives of race and specific institutionally racist practices at their school. In their efforts, they did use counternarrative to ‘document the everyday lived patterns of racial discrimination experiences of students of color’ (p. 7), which gave them a lens to frame their equity work.

Because ‘a CRT methodology should demonstrate a response to challenging subordination and oppression’ (Hylton, 2012, p. 35), more examples of CRT being used to promote activism in K-12 schools would be useful. Therefore, in this piece, I extend the kind of work above, showing an example how counternarrative can live up to its activist function in K-12 settings by being taken up as a form of strategy.

**Counternarrative as methodology**

Based on the case of City Elementary, I explore the idea of counternarrative as a strategic part of critical race methodology and ethnography. Duncan (2005) explains that critical race ethnography involves ‘the analysis of the various ontological categories that inform the way race functions as a stratifying force in school and society’ (p. 95) Importantly, for counternarrative to effectively analyze the categories that continue to stratify schools, it must be guided by the tenets of CRT—e.g. racial realism, interest convergence, the importance of experiential knowledge, etc. It is these tenets that help expose how racial categorizations are normalized and maintained in settings such as schools. Furthermore, because the goal of counternarrative is to disrupt normative assumptions, it must be guided by the tenets of ‘integrity, authenticity, sincerity,
righteousness, and justice’ (Atwood & López, 2014, p. 1135) in order to present an alternative, more racially just narrative.

To create a narrative rooted in racial justice, I suggest that counternarrative can also, in addition to being reactive to dominant narratives, be practiced proactively. In a quote I often like to use, John Calmore (1992) explains that the purpose of CRT is ‘to construct a social reality and direct operation within it’ (p. 2167). Counternarrative can help construct such a reality, and below I show how City Elementary has learned to use counternarrative proactively for that purpose. The narrative is still born out of resistance to dominant narratives, but it has also helped the more racially conscious faculty and administrators operate within racist educational structures more on their own terms. In this way, counternarrative is not only analysis but also a form of strategizing that can ‘contest, refute, and offer a different reality from that which is offered under the realities of White supremacy’ (Stovall, 2016, p. 282). In fact, because the tenet of racial realism posits that racism is inherent in U.S. society (i.e. it will never be eliminated), strategizing against specific instances of white supremacy in specific contexts is a major goal of CRT methodology (Alemán & Alemán, 2010; Bell, 1992; Blaisdell, 2018a).

Methodology

In the following sections I explain the setting for this project and discuss the inherent tensions of my positionality as a white researcher. Next, I discuss how a dialogic approach to critical race ethnography was used to conduct the research, and how that approach helped me mediate whiteness in the project in general and in forefronting the counternarratives of educators of color in particular. I then discuss the data analysis process.

Setting

City Elementary is a racially integrated public school in the urban center of a small city in the southeast United States. Because it is close to other urban areas, major industrial hubs of health care and technology, and several large universities, the city is more affluent compared with others in the region. At the same time, it also suffers from among the highest rates of wealth and income disparity in the state, disparity that affects the population of both the district and the school. In terms of race, City’s student population is 44% white, 22% Black, 17%, Asian, and 14% Latinx; and its faculty has, depending on the year, ranged from 40 to 60% white and 40 to 60% people of color (the majority of whom are Black).

For the past seven years, I have been working with City on a critical race ethnographic project. I was brought in because of prior racial equity work with the district (where I was previously a teacher and then part of district-wide professional development team) and with the principal at another school. I write about various aspects of this work in other publications (Blaisdell, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2020a, 2020b). To summarize, I have worked with the administration; grade-level teams; individual teachers; and, especially, the equity team, a group of faculty and administrators that leads ongoing racial equity efforts. The team and I meet at least monthly (and usually more often) to plan schoolwide professional development on racial equity, which includes training sessions at faculty meetings and guiding grade-level teams through specific action items. I also meet with the administration and smaller groups of team members several times a year to reflect, plan, and strategize. Some of our successes over the years have been creating a more racially affirming workplace for faculty of color, building an antiracist collection of library and classroom resources for students and teachers, reducing in-class racialized tracking, and reducing the school’s discipline gap. Recently, we have also started documenting the other benefits our work has had for students of color.
While everyone on the equity team has played a role in the project, several team members have been key participants in building the school’s antiracist identity. Sonya, Black school principal, has been pivotal throughout. She has been particularly strong in asking critical questions, pushing team members to come back to race-focused analyses, and developing the team’s racial literacy. Dawn, Black school administrator, has been particularly effective in capturing the team’s language to help us develop a concise and wieldy racially conscious narrative. This has helped the team frame and drive both our work together and our schoolwide racial equity efforts. Angela, Black Latinx teacher and previous team chair, has been effective in calling out white discourse and using counternarrative to directly counter specific instance of that discourse. Erica, Black teacher and team chair, has also been strong in creating and expressing counternarratives to specific instance of race-evasive discourse and in shifting conversations back to using a race-focused lens. Together, these team members of color have been effective in showing how it is possible to create and perform a school identity in contrast to majoritarian, race-neutral narratives about school. Two white team members, Katie and Sarah, have also been key participants. Their strengths have been centering the perspectives of team members of color and using their white positionality to intervene in race-evasive discourse, especially from their white colleagues.

While the data in this piece comes from faculty across the team and school, most comes from these key participants, and as I will explain in the Methods and Data Analysis sections, it is their collaborative work that has helped the school develop a school-wide narrative based on antiracism.

White researcher positionality

Before I discuss the research methods and how the team came to engage in and use counternarrative as strategy, I need to address my positionality as a white researcher. I have written about my positionality in my work with City and other schools (Blaisdell, 2016, 2018a, 2018b). First, I have discussed my missteps, using the literature from CRT on the role of researcher racial identity to confront how my white epistemological standpoint (Pillow, 2003) caused me to fail to see the unique perspective and knowledge educators of color have in understanding and analyzing racism (López, 2003). In those instances, I was falling into the unseen danger of researchers—and particularly white researchers—of adopting a race-evasive epistemology in determining what kind of information and perspectives are privileged in the research process (Milner, 2007). Specifically, in conversations on race my white perspective at times led me to appeal to order over content, privilege the discourses of resistant white teachers, and interpret discomfort as a negative rather than necessary part of those conversations. Second, in response to claims by school personnel that my whiteness enables me to reach white teachers in way educators of color cannot, I have shown that it has actually been the racial knowledge and expertise of teachers and administrators of color that has been most effecting in reaching both white teachers and teachers of color.

These points remain salient as I continue my work with City. I must continue to be aware of how my white epistemological standpoint affects my role, and the racial knowledge of key personnel of color continues to be central to the effectiveness of the equity team. I must be particularly cautious, then, as the team works with counternarrative. The work of two researchers has been helpful to me in framing my role in that effort. The first is David Stovall (2013), who in his work in building a school with educators from different racial and linguistic backgrounds explains, ‘I continually challenge myself to engage my own theories and praxis in the hope of remaining accountable to community members, community organizations, teachers, students, and administrators … ’ (p. 571) and ‘I understand humility as key to this type of work. In recognizing the historical colonial relationship between communities and universities, I enter the process understanding that my work would be impossible without the community’s blessing’ (572).
The second is my doctoral mentor, George Noblit (1999), who explains that critical ethnographic work is an act of committing to the people and communities we work with and to the commitments we forge together. Therefore, in my ongoing work with City, I must continually balance my racial and researcher positionalities with my commitments as a community member and fellow educator.

Towards that end, I specifically do this work in my own community. City Elementary is located in the community where I have lived for the past 20 years, worked as a public school teacher, and been involved with antiracist educational community organizations. Through relationship building with local educators over that time, those educators and I have dialogically co-constructed our goals for racial equity. While I cannot write a CRT counterstory from my white perspective, and while I must be vigilant about the harm my white epistemology can cause, I can as an act of committing to the people and the work use my position as critical race researcher and community member to support the work of my colleagues at City in telling their collective narrative. To do so, I introduce language from CRT so the team can build a common framework for the work they want to do. I cannot lead the work on narrative, but I use the tools of my position to give the team the time and space needed for reflection. In line with Stovall’s (2013) approach, I can serve as a documentarian to make sure the narrative the school is creating is captured, so they themselves can use it to strategize to achieve their own goals. When doing so, I must, as Milner (2007) argues, also research myself in relation to the participants, i.e. I must pay close attention to how my racial positionally affects what stories I find important to document and how I document them. I explain more on how I attended to this in the following methods section.

Methods: a dialogic approach to critical race ethnography

The research method I have used with City—and especially the key participants—is a dialogic approach to critical race ethnography. Critical race ethnography uses CRT analytical tools to uncover how racial categories maintain racial and societal stratification (Duncan, 2005). Early on, the team and I decided that the school’s main barrier to equity was white supremacy. To counteract the school’s complicity in white supremacy (via curriculum, instruction, and discipline practices), we have used CRT—concepts such as whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) and racial spaces (Calmore, 1995)—to collaboratively analyze how white supremacy is normalized via day-to-day school practices. Our goal has been to use CRT to build the racial literacy necessary to intervene in how—despite ongoing efforts—white supremacy adapts and reappears over time. In doing so, we have tried to sustain critical race praxis, an ongoing cycle of using CRT to hone practice and practice to inform theory with the intention of working towards racial equity in specific contexts (Berry & Stovall, 2013; Yamamoto, 1997).

In addition, I engaged in those methods in a dialogic approach to ethnography, which is when researchers balance their knowledge and perspective with the knowledge and perspectives of the participants so as to develop unified goals around justice and engaging collective strategies to achieve them (Madison, 2005). In the case of City, both the participants (in this case, the team members) and I have brought our knowledge and perspectives to the table. Importantly, we also used a CRT framework to collaboratively hone our collective goals and strategizing. This has been helpful in two ways.

First, it has helped us maintain vigilance in mediating whiteness in the team meetings, of making sure that the epistemological standpoints of the white team members (myself included) do not dominate our efforts. Some white team members—though very committed to racial equity in general and the team’s efforts in particular—have made the same missteps I have. By embedding CRT concepts and faculty of color knowledge in a dialogic fashion (Madison, 2005), we have been able to make team meetings spaces where we counter white discourse. When
white team members have promoted white perspective on race (e.g. privileging the discomfort of white teachers or denying the salience of race), we have made an agreement not to resist when team members of color name our re-centering of whiteness. Furthermore, as a team we made an agreement that white team members also had to take on that interventionist role with each other.

Second, using CRT dialogically helped use collectively honor the tenet of the unique voice of people of color in understanding racism. Team members of color were not required to take on all the work in disrupting whiteness or have all the answers on how to promote antiracism—but we as team could make sure that their narratives were what drove the team’s work. We particularly utilized the racial knowledge of Sonya, Dawn, Angela, and Erica as their voices have been most effective in disrupting dominant narratives on race schoolwide. Their insights enabled the team to deconstruct narratives by white parent and teachers that positioned white students as more deserving of access to better educational resources or that framed students of color either as less deserving of that access or as more deviant (Blaisdell, 2018a, 2018b). In addition, similar to how their perspectives helped us mediate whiteness within team meetings, they helped us disrupt the practice of privileging white discomfort to resist racial equity efforts (Matias, 2016). In the end, a dialogic approach rooted in CRT was useful for white researchers like myself—and white team members like Katie and Sarah—to have a role in developing and communicating the school’s antiracist identity but also in assuring that the knowledge of team members of color led that effort.

Therefore, when I document the data from the study, I at times include my own input as well as input from the key white teammates. Milner (2007) explains that including ‘both researchers’ and research participants’ voices, perspectives, narratives, and counter-narratives (pg. 396) is important in race-centered research. He explains that including both the dominant narratives and the counternarratives can be especially useful in conducting research with people of color because it can add an extra, educative layer of context to the data. For this study, that extra layer of context helps more fully document what counternarrative can look like in cross-racial settings like City.

**Data analysis**

The narrative data presented in this article come from formal, informal, planned, and impromptu one-on-one and group conversations I had with teachers, administrators, and the equity team in my over 200 visits since 2013. The formal conversations were all audio-recorded and transcribed, and I took fieldnotes and/or journaled for the informal ones, resulting in over 2000 pages all together. I have analyzed that data in a variety of ways for different purposes. Here, I specifically looked for narratives that showed how the team learned to resist dominant narratives on race and how they learned to forefront a school identity centering antiracism. I looked for narratives that people told over and over, that surfaced on multiple occasions, and that were told as turning points in building the school’s antiracist identity.

As the inquiry and intervention process for this project drew heavily on CRT, I also used CRT for the analysis. Specifically, I asked questions as to how the four functions of CRT counternarrative were exhibited in the data. To explicate how those functions were evident in the team’s work, I used several key CRT tenets: a critique of liberalism, racial realism, and interest convergence. I also used CRT’s critique of the features of white discourse (Leonardo, 2002), such as the personalization of race and privileging white comfort. This analysis has revealed how the team became better at adhering to a CRT approach over time, which helped us better realize the activist function of counternarrative. Therefore, I organize the representation of the data as a narrative journey, a story of how an equity team progressed in our capacity to use CRT to
develop a school identity rooted in antiracism and also of how the strategic use of counternarrative was important to that effort.

To present the most ‘authentic’ (Atwood & López, 2014) retelling of that journey, I involved the key equity team members in validating the data analysis and representation. I continually discuss with them what I am seeing in the data and how I frame the write about our work together. They give me feedback on if those perceptions ring true or if alternative analysis is needed. I have also met specifically with Sonya and Dawn to discuss how I tell the story of City and shared a draft of this article with all of the key participants to get their feedback. Their insights helped me in my role as documentarian to honor my commitment to the team and to our joint, dialogically constructed work and goals.

Counternarrative as strategy at city

In the next four sections, I present the narrative journey of how the equity team learned to use counternarrative as strategy using a combination of counternarrative and more traditional ethnographic representation. In the first section—’We’re afraid to tell people things’: Engaging counternarrative to disrupt whiteness—I use composite counterstory, which involves ‘fictionalized narratives drawn from interview transcripts, field notes, memos, and other research data’ and creating characters that are ‘representative of several participants rather than just a single participant with a pseudonym’ (Cook & Dixson, 2013, p. 1246). I use example conversations across the third and fourth years of the project, condensing them into a single representative conversation. This allows me to document the type of specific counternarratives that team members of color used and highlight how their counternarratives were essential to shifting the narratives used by the team and eventually the school. While I was the one to organize the narrative on the page, it was reviewed by the key participants to make sure it authentically represented their voices. I include voices of white team members—including myself—in that section to follow Milner’s (2007) recommendation that including dominant narratives along with counternarratives can give the fuller context in which those counternarratives exist. The resulting composite counternarrative, therefore, exhibits the first three functions of counternarrative—providing new narratives to understand power, disrupting majoritarian narratives on race, and a cure for silencing. It specifically disrupts liberal notions of incremental change and white discourse on racism—such as privileging interpersonal rather than structural notions of racism—and exposes the cost of those narratives to faculty of color.

In the second, third, and fourth sections, I use a more traditional ethnographic representation of the data, drawing on critical race ethnography to provide examples of how the counternarratives from the key team members of color helped the team learning to better embed CRT concepts into our work. Those sections do not engage counternarrative directly but show how the team learned to forefront those counternarratives to shift the culture and identity of the team and the school. In other words, while not counternarrative presentations, they show how counternarrative can be used as strategy.

In the second section—’What about another perspective?: Forefronting counternarrative—I discuss how we as a team began to better use the counternarratives in direct response to dominant narratives. The examples in that section show how the team as a whole started to become more effective in utilizing counternarrative’s disruptive and cure-for-silencing functions. They specifically exhibit the team’s ability to disrupt colorblind and race-evasive discourses and to privilege more racially literate perspectives in schoolwide conversations on racial equity.

In third section—’This is who we are’: Embedding counternarratives into school culture—I show how the team was able to further promote an antiracist school identity by more proactively embedding counternarrative into school structure. The examples show how by again disrupting whiteness and dominant narratives on antiracism—such as de-raced discourses about ‘all
students’—the team started to employ counternarrative’s activist function. We were able to prevent interference with our efforts and lay the groundwork for more productive antiracist work.

In the fourth section—Gaining control of our narrative: Success and cautions in sustaining an antiracist school identity—I discuss the effect that the strategic use of counternarrative has had at City. I share how the key participants have explained the value of our work in their own terms. I explain the limitations of that work but also how engaging counternarrative as strategy has laid a foundation from which to sustain antiracism.

Then, in a summary analysis section, I revisit the functions of counternarrative and tenets of CRT to review how CRT became embedded in the team’s work and the identity of the school. I also summarize how being vigilant against whiteness was necessary in that effort.

‘We’re afraid to tell people things!’: Engaging counternarrative to disrupt whiteness

I start the narrative journey in the third and fourth years of the project. By that time, the equity team had been leading professional development sessions to help teachers identify how day-to-day discipline, instruction, and curriculum practices unintentionally sustained white supremacy. In our attempts to carry out this work, it was not uncommon for some white teachers to respond to our efforts with dominant narratives on race. Among those narratives were calls for action without reflection on systemic racism (e.g. ‘just tell me what to do’); liberal approaches to change (e.g. ‘we are all at different levels,’ ‘people might not be ready for this’); and a combination of personalizing racial analysis and privileging white emotions over those of people of color, which I discuss more extensively in two other publications (Blaisdell, 2018a, 2018b). What is common about these narratives is that they call for incremental approaches to change and focus on the personal rather than structural aspects of racism. CRT scholarship directly critiques such liberal (rather than critical) approaches as they fail content with the condition of racial realism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Guinier, 2004). As a team, we sometimes let those dominant narratives influence our work, and it was counternarratives from our more racially conscious team members of color that helped us better counter them over time.

To capture how we began to shift our narrative as a team, I present data from conversations from our equity team planning meetings. Specifically, I use composite counterstory to construct a dialogue between team members: Michelle, a Black teacher and team leader; Tammy, a white teacher and team leader; Deborah, a Black teacher; Susan, a white teacher; Gloria, a Black school administrator; and me, a white researcher. Except for myself, these characters are all based on a combination of team members. Cook and Dixson (2013) explain that composite counterstory helps capture the shared history that people of color have with racism, so this counternarrative captures the shared experience that teachers of color had specifically with master narratives on race at City.

Tammy: The tendency in a lot of schools, when there’s an equity meeting, is for everyone to go, ‘Now I’ve got to hear why I’m an awful white person.’ It’s hard not to take it personally. It’s an individual journey to get to the point that you can work on equity without it being a personal thing. We have a very novice staff, so we want don’t want them to feel like we’re here to tell you about all the things that you’re doing wrong and all the ways that you have no idea about how white you are. You know? So why not to start off on a positive note?

Michelle: But if that’s the thing we’re doing, people just got to suck it up. God, sorry! How many baby steps do we need? As a teacher. I want my kids to buy in, but there’s a point where I just got to tell them what to do, you know? Like, I mean, we can give them positive things, but then now we also need to focus on what’s actually happening.

Ben: It’s a conundrum of the situation. One of the agreements we use is to lean into discomfort, right? My tendency was to think about how to appease it. The question is, do I need to appease it? Is there a productive way to address the discomfort so it doesn’t just come up as discomfort and shut people down but also doesn’t let people off the hook for going deeper into the analysis of whiteness, which I think is what we want this conversation to lead to?
Gloria: A question that will be helpful for us as a team to think through is how much do we want to interrupt the system? The reason I say that is because part of the system is that white people feel comfortable. It’s a part of the institutions in which we live. If we’re saying that we really want to interrupt that, we either need to be thinking about the steps we’re taking to get there, or we need to be honest with ourselves and say we really don’t want to interrupt the institution? Because at some point, that is part of the reality is that the institutions in which racism thrives, it thrives on white people feeling comfortable.

Deborah: So that’s the issue, that tension between leaning into discomfort but not to the point that people shut down and you don’t make progress with them.

Tammy: So, I’m still at a loss. What is the problem with sharing a success story with students of color? Even if it is not the right success story, then we as the mediators can guide it, say, ‘Okay, tell me more. How is this deracializing the space in the classroom?’ We maybe acknowledge them, acknowledge their effort and then see how we can take it further. We don’t shut them down, but we encourage them to keep on trying and maybe ask for suggestions. If that’s how we start [our faculty meetings], I don’t see why it should be a negative Nancy kind of meeting.

Susan: I agree. I think that people are, from my perspective, looking for something to do, kind of. There are people who just plain don’t get it, but there’s also people who are like, ‘Okay, we talked about it. What do you want me to do?’

Tammy: Give them something to do. Some of them just want to be told what to do.

Michelle: You know, we can’t tell them what to do! Seriously. People say that they want something to do and the minute someone tells them what to do, they start kicking and screaming, ‘Why should I have to do that?’

Susan: I think they need something more concrete. Could we ask them, ‘What do you want? How do you want to move forward?’

Michelle: I hear a lot that people want to know, ‘What do you want me to do in my classroom? Give me a concrete thing I can do.’ But there isn’t always a concrete thing.

Deborah: People don’t understand that you being aware of whiteness is the first step in changing your classroom.

Ben: And as Michelle said, the concrete things we give them to do – the things that would actually make a difference – would most likely be resisted.

Michelle: We’re afraid to tell people things! And I am personally fatigued at telling people what to do. Like, straight up. I’m just fatigued at the conversation. I’m fatigued at these meetings. I am tired. I just don’t even want to hear it anymore. We’re spinning our wheels. We’re saying a lot of bull that we’re not really getting anything done. We’re not going anywhere. We’re making people comfortable, and we’re not really getting very much done. When are we going to do the damn work? Because I’m getting angry at people not doing it.

Deborah: Boom! We’re making people comfortable. I don’t want to be comfortable.

Gloria: We’re doing a lot of comforting, but at what cost?

Michelle: And I’m not comfortable. I’m shaky. I get shaky. I’m ill after these meetings.

In these kinds of conversations, white team members like Tammy and myself often waivered on how much we wanted to push faculty, especially white faculty, when we thought they would become uncomfortable. On the other hand, Black team members like Gloria and Michelle clearly pointed out the connection between appeals to discomfort, white supremacy, and school structure.

Sticking with these types of conversations through both the third and fourth years of the project helped the team as a whole shift towards the more critical perspectives of faculty of color, which in turn helped us better forefront those perspectives schoolwide. In the next section, I show how we moved away from privileging white discomfort and the more resistant white teachers and started to use insights like Michelle’s to change how we carried out our work.
What about another perspective?: Forefronting counternarrative

By the end of the fourth year, the team utilized the lessons from conversations like the one above to sustain a shift in our narrative as a team. We first made a commitment to actively name racism and white supremacy more frequently, whether it be in one-on-one interactions, small group meetings, or our faculty training sessions. Then, we designed our faculty trainings and racial equity efforts with the interests and perspectives of faculty who most wanted to engage in the work. With this re-framing, we employed specific strategies to counter race-evasive narratives and forefront a more racially aware one. I discuss some of these strategies in other publications (Blaisdell, 2018a; 2018b). Here, I want to focus on how, especially in larger group conversations and faculty meetings, we learned to use the strategy of purposefully redirecting conversations so they followed the narrative we wanted to tell. While some strategies involved engaging vocal resistance, this one involved giving it less airtime. Sonya, the principal, initially used this tactic the most often. In response to race-evasive comments intended to disrupt our equity work, she would often say, ‘That’s one perspective. What about another perspective that’s not at the table right now?’ or a similar phrase. With her guidance, the rest of us on the team began to do this as well. Here are just three examples from faculty meetings in the fifth and sixth year.

1. The team was running an activity where the faculty would collaboratively create a curriculum about race, racism, and whiteness:

   White teacher: Do we have to use these terms with kids? I think we should just talk about fairness, and if it’s fair to treat people that way. We don’t have to mention whiteness or race. Those terms are harsh.

   Dawn: I understand not everyone is comfortable with this, but we as a school have decided this is important. Can someone explain how these terms can be used with our students?

2. The team led an activity where the teachers analyzed examples at the school that involved racial disparity in discipline:

   White teacher: I don’t think this is necessarily about race. I feel like we’re always making things about race.

   Sarah: Ok. You’re allowed to feel that way. Does anyone in here feel differently about this?

3. The team presented the school’s new belief statements on cultural equity (which the district had encouraged all schools to do), and ours focused on addressing white supremacy:

   White teacher: We don’t all believe that. I know I don’t.

   Erica: You can have that perspective, but this is what we as a school have decided, and we’re going to move forward with them. Can someone tell me why this focus is important to them?

   In each example, the team member acknowledged the comment but then redirected the conversation back to one that centered the significance of race. In the first example, after that interaction, the rest of the meeting focused on how to make these terms comprehensible for elementary school students. In the second, several teachers used the terminology we were working on (whiteness as property and racial spaces) to analyze school-based examples. In the third, some teachers explained how anyone could be unintentionally complicit in white supremacy, so it was important to be honest about it. The meeting then proceeded to our next set of activities.

We would still engage with race-evasive comments when we felt they would be productive, e.g. in one-on-one or small groups discussions about how daily practices could be complicit in
white supremacy. However, when we wanted to push the work further—e.g. when the entire faculty worked collaboratively to develop an antiracist curriculum for students—rather than engage the resistance, we quickly acknowledged it but did not let it take over the discourse of the moment. Instead, we immediately moved on to the narrative we wanted to forefront. In doing so, the team began to shift the identity of the school to one that was more explicitly about antiracism, getting us closer to building the reality we wanted to work within. Team members—and especially Dawn and Erica—began explaining that their colleagues needed to ‘step it up’ and ‘get with the program’ if they wanted to be part of it.

‘This is who we are’: Embedding counternarratives into school culture

As mentioned above, in the fifth year of our work, we created a set of belief statements for the school with regard to equity. There was initially some talk about using phrases such as, ‘we believe that all voices are important,’ and ‘we believe that all students are capable of success.’ As I heard those suggestions, I recalled previous comments by Sonya about needing to be explicit about naming white supremacy in our work. So, I ultimately asked the question, ‘Do you think you would get flack if you named on white supremacy directly in your belief statements?’ Several team members quickly responded.

Sonya: ‘I don’t see why. That shouldn’t matter. That’s what we’re focusing on.’

Angela: ‘Isn’t that what we’re saying we’re about?’

Erica: ‘If we’re going to be about the work, let’s be about the work.’

The initial ideas about all voices and all students show how liberalism can dominate school discourse even when in they are engaging in race-focused equity work. Luckily, the key participants on the team questioned the race neutrality of those statements, explaining that we had made a commitment to be race-focused in our equity work, and to specifically focus on whiteness. So, this is what the team created:

1. We believe that white supremacy impacts our classrooms and school. Therefore, we are committed to interrupting white supremacy within our classrooms and school.
2. We believe in racially affirming marginalized students throughout our school.
3. We believe in having open, honest dialogue which recognizes racial history and power.
4. We believe in holding each other accountable to these beliefs.

With these statements, we constructed the school beliefs on our own terms, in effect embedding our counternarrative into school structure. In the sixth year of the project, the principal began sharing them at the beginning of all faculty meetings; in communication about the school to the district office, school board, and community; and by the seventh year, in beginning-of-the-year email messages and in-school presentations to parents.

In that seventh year, I also interviewed the team members about what we were doing well on in terms of equity. They all brought these belief statements up and spoke positively about the forefronting of our antiracist identity.

Sarah: I like how we started the year. People have to get with the program.

Katie: It is important that we were forming of unified vision of school based on a collection of stories primarily from teachers of color.

Dawn: I appreciate how we started, leading with the focus on white supremacy, making sure it’s at the forefront. Making sure there’s no question of what we stand for. Putting our beliefs on the letter [to parents at the beginning of the year], stating it in our meetings; it’s clear what the expectation is and what we represent here. Either you’re on board or this is not the place for you.
Using the belief statements to help build the narrative that being antiracist is a central part of our school identity has helped us further embed antiracism into school practice and culture. Most recently, this has involved implementing a schoolwide antiracist curriculum, which itself has involved ongoing professional development to deepen teachers’ racial literacy. In addition to experiencing much less resistance to our work than we had in the past, our faculty trainings have been more cohesive and productive. Again, the team members have viewed this shift very positively.

Dawn: I like the boldness of it. Making clear it’s not an if not a possibility, it’s not a maybe/maybe not. This is who we are.

‘Gaining control of our narrative’: Success and cautions in sustaining an antiracist school identity

The stories above show how we learned to forefront the perspectives of our colleagues of color to better understand the power and effects of racism and whiteness. By engaging with their perspectives and CRT concepts, we also learned how to disrupt the narratives that sustain that power. Furthermore, we learned how to develop a collective counternarrative and organize around it, thus better living up to counternarrative’s activist function.

Another effect is that, schoolwide, teachers have been able to maintain difficult conversations on race and racism. The team has been especially happy with how more teachers are finally beginning to verbalize how white supremacy is normalized in daily school practices. Team members have shared that they can discuss whiteness and white supremacy more frequently and with more positive responses from their colleagues.

Students and families—and especially families of color—are also responding positively to the school’s overt focus on antiracism. This is not to say there have been no complaints—but just a handful of white parents—but that more parents are expressing to the teachers and administrators that they appreciate what the school is doing. Some have even asked if they could help with the equity work or be involved in the training themselves (which the team has started to plan for). Also, while we are still assessing the impact on students, team members consistently report that students of color express more pride in the school and are feeling more affirmed, and graduated students have reached out to them to tell them how much they miss City.

For these reasons, the district and community have used the school as an example of racial equity work going well. The school and team have been asked to present their work at school board meetings, regional conferences, and other schools in the area. When personnel from the district’s equity office come to City, they express their appreciation for what the school is doing and explain that they are ‘here to learn.’

These successes have helped serve as a counterweight to past narratives about the school. Since City opened, there has been some resistance, primarily from white families, about sending their kids there. It is in the historically Black neighborhood of the town, has had a large percentage of Black faculty and staff, and even though the largest group of students are white, also has the largest Black student population in the district. There have also been concerns over test scores, which are admittedly on the low end for the district. Most direct comments from white parents to the administration are comments such as, ‘I wonder if City is the right place for my child.’ The large majority of white parents have kids in the school have actually been supportive, but as a white parent in the district myself, I hear negative comments about school from other white families.

City also faces actual obstacles to racial equity. Like every other school in the district, it still needs to follow a standardized curriculum that does not recognize the breadth of knowledge and skills that students bring with them to school. Like most schools in the nation, it still has to resist dominant narratives about students of color that result in the hyper-labelling, disciplining,
and surveillance of Black and Brown bodies (Annamma, 2017). Also, even with the work it has done on being an affirming place for students of color, City faces the issue of what happens to those students once they leave. While very happy to hear from students who have graduated, team members are concerned with what those students are experiencing in their new schools. Students have explained that they’re not getting the same support, their new schools are not as affirming with regard to their racial and cultural identities, they don’t feel like they belong in the same way, and their perspectives are not as important. While that speaks to some of City’s strengths, it also begs the question about what we can do to prepare students for racial realities once they move on.

At the same time, the equity team has created a landscape from which to address these inequities, and this work has helped create a positive school environment. Team members and teachers of color continue to talk about City as a place they want to work, a place where their voices are not silenced. White members of the team also report feeling pride in the school. In general, the teachers, teaching assistants, office personnel, and other support staff also talk about working at the school in terms of joy. According to the team, this positivity is not in spite of the school’s antiracist identity but because of it.

Therefore, the school being able to tell its own story on its own term has been important to the team, and especially the administration.

Dawn: That’s one thing I’ve really been wanting for us. Within these walls and also for the district, people know who we are. We are putting that message out… Our tweets are getting retweeted by the district. We are now gaining control of our narrative and now it’s going beyond the scope of just our families who follow us. Everybody follows the district Twitter. How many more people can we get to talk about City from what City has said?

To paraphrase Calmore (1992), Dawn’s comments speak to the idea that the team has been attempting to create its own school reality—one that centers antiracism and operate within it on its own terms.

**Conclusion: Analyzing the narrative journey**

The previous sections show how the team’s work has engaged the functions of counternarrative. The composite counternarrative depicts the type of discourse that was common in our team meetings, showing how the team started identifying and disrupting white narratives of liberalism, personalization, and comfort. It also depicts the way our dialogic approach helped us use a CRT framework to be vigilant about disrupting the white epistemology that white team members like myself sometimes engaged in during our work. We had at times personalized race (Leonardo, 2002) and privileged the discomfort of white teachers, in effect exhibiting the principle of interest convergence, where progress towards racial equity only occurs continues to favor and secure the interest of white people (Alemán & Alemán, 2010; Bell, 1980). The composite counterstory also shows how the team members of color engaged the first three functions of counternarrative in response. By naming how whiteness was maintained via appeals to white comfort, they offered up a new narratives to understand power. By challenging approaches to equity work rooted in liberalism, they disrupted dominant narratives. By sharing stories about the harm those discourses have causes them and their colleagues of color, they provided a cure for silencing.

The subsequent ethnographic data sections—‘What about another perspective?’ and ‘This is who we are’—show how the team used what we learned from the counternarratives from our colleagues of color in more deliberate and purposeful ways. When white teachers engaged in dominant narratives on race—e.g. colorblindness, personalizing race, and a refusal to name the contours of racism (Leonardo, 2002)—the team was able privilege more racially literate narratives. When some team members reverted to narratives of antiracism rooted in liberalism—e.g.
narratives about ‘all students’—the rest of the team was able to use their understanding of how such race-neutral discourse only serve to maintain racial inequity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017) and, by naming white supremacy directly, promote narratives that exhibit an understanding of racial realism. Those sections show the team learning to use counternarrative more proactively and strategically, thus engaging its activist function.

Finally, the section, ‘Gaining control of our narrative,’ shows the effect of centering more racially literate counternarratives. It shows that by using counternarrative strategically, the team was able to create a schoolwide antiracist identity. The journey shows how schools can easily revert back to white, liberal, colorblind discourses on race—even when working on racial equity—but also that by embedding CRT and ensuring that narratives from educators of color lead joint goals for racial justice, it is possible to foster antiracist school identities even in cross-racial contexts.

Implications for strategizing

I opened this piece with a quote from Bell’s (1987) And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice, so I want to end with one as well.

With the realization that the salvation of racial equity has eluded us again, questions arise from the ashes of our expectations: How have we failed—and why? What does this failure mean—for black people and for whites? Where do we go from here? Should we redirect the quest for racial justice? … Rather than offering definitive answers, I hope, as law teacher rather than social seer, mainly to provoke discussion that will provide new insights and prompt more effective strategies. (p. 3)

In the context of racial realism, counternarrative by itself won’t eliminate systemic racism in schools like City, institutions that are subject to larger social practices and broader dominant narratives about race. Based on the work of the equity team, however, I argue that schools can utilize counternarrative to sustain critically race-focused discussions that create space for on-going strategy. By drawing on the tenets of CRT—and racial realism and interest convergence in particular—schools, scholars, and educators can collectively engage counternarrative to identify and deconstruct the master narratives that impede racial progress in specific contexts, thus working towards its educative and disruptive functions. They can also develop and employ counternarrative to help create more equitable, racially affirming practices within the larger context of systemic racism, thus helping it serve as a cure for silencing. Finally, practicing counternarrative proactively, with a purposeful attention to its activist function, can serve as a rallying point for strategic action and for building school identities that center antiracism.

Notes

1. All participant and specific place names are pseudonyms.
2. I explain more about counternarrative as methodology and on my white positionality in sections below.
3. I capitalize Black and Brown when referring to Black and Brown people. However, in direct quotes from the cited material, I maintain the original style used in that material.

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