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CELEBRATING EDUCATORS OF COLOR: A RADICAL DISRUPTION OF THE STATUS QUO

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INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 2020-21 school year, we (authors) left our respective classrooms in the same district after teaching elementary school for 17 years (Monique) and high school social studies and students identified as English Language Learners for four years (Amira). Monique moved into a position in the district's new grow-your-own program in the teacher-to-administrator track. Amira moved into a staff position at a local public university in the college of education to strengthen the college's K-12 school partnerships and programs in the state and to support the retention of teachers in the state. Against the backdrop of anti-DEI legislation in the state, the heightened political landscape, and the looming "teacher shortage" including a state task force to recruit and retain teachers of Color, we found ourselves in moments of heavy reflection.

Each time we got together, we would recall our own experiences as Black women teachers over the past tumultuous year in our classrooms, following the racial reckoning in the summer of 2020. In particular, we noted the district-provided professional development that we were asked to endure was meant for the masses, not for us. We deeply felt the need for a space for us educators of Color (EOC) to come together and to be in community, especially in the face of intensifying educational injustice and inequity in our state and in the U.S. Thus, engaging in fugitive pedagogies (Givens, 2021) and a pedagogy of insurgency (Au, 2021), we co-created a statewide one-day conference to celebrate, connect, and provide professional development and personal support for EOC in our state where 97% of public school teachers are white. The conference included a keynote speech from the National Teacher of the Year, a roundtable session where all participants were invited to interact and connect with each other, a resource fair that included tables from a variety of community organizations that support communities of Color, and breakout sessions led by K-12 educators and community organizers. Breakout sessions included Q&A with the National Teacher of the Year, a self-care fitness and meal prep session, and a circle for educators to heal, restore, and revitalize. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the creation of our conference from our practitioner perspectives using frame analysis. In this paper, we focus on the following key questions:

1. What methods of framing were most effective in conceptualizing and organizing the conference?
2. How did the collaboration between stakeholders contribute to the success of the conference?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Even before entering the profession, research has demonstrated that preservice teachers of Color (TOC) often experience feelings of isolation and/or marginalization within their teacher preparation programs (Brown, 2014). Once

in the classroom, across the U.S., TOC are working in schools with a racial mismatch among colleagues because the teacher workforce is predominantly white (Grooms et al., 2021). TOC also face pervasive forms of racism in K-12 institutions that are dominated by whiteness (Bettini et al., 2022; Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). Research has highlighted the disproportionately higher attrition rates for TOC compared to their white counterparts (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Kohli, 2019). Researchers have identified retention efforts that could influence the persistence of TOC such as support from administration, opportunities for advancement, and adequate salary (Farinde et al., 2016); yet many teachers of Color do not feel as though they are receiving those supports (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018).

With regard to professional development, research has documented the inadequate professional development supports (Bristol, 2015), the need for more “teacher of Color-centric learning spaces” (Lee and Pham, 2022, p. 215), and the need for more professional development supports for TOC that address racial issues that TOC commonly face (Rogers-Ard et al., 2013). Kohli et al. (2015) have theorized a model of critical professional development (CPD), which “frames teachers as politically-aware individuals who have a stake in teaching and transforming society” (p. 9). In contrast to antidiologic professional development (APD), Kohli et al. (2015) note that CPD is “designed to provoke cooperative dialogue, build unity, provide shared leadership, and meet the critical needs of teachers” and that rarely is CPD a formal part of districts or schools, often emerging “in direct response to oppressive practices” (p. 11). The scholarship illuminates the inadequacies in professional development for TOC and emphasizes the need for more supportive, racially-aware, and dialogic professional development models to address systemic issues and promote leadership development.

FRAME ANALYSIS

Our work in this paper is rooted theoretically in Goffman’s (1974) work on frame analysis which he defined as the study of “organization of experience” (p.11). Both individually and collectively, frames serve to interpret experiences and guide action (Goffman, 1974). We use framing processes here as a type of analysis to systematically examine our own subjective experiences. Diagnostic framing problematizes an issue, examines how others understand the issue, focuses attention on who or what is responsible, and identifies the desired outcomes (Cress & Snow, 2000; Spillane & Anderson, 2014). Through conversational analysis, we use visionary framing (Eddy, 2003), walking the frame (Eddy, 2003; 2010), and symbolizing the frame (Eddy, 2003; 2010), to make sense of our experiences creating the Celebrating Educators of Color (CEC) conference in our state.

METHODS

In 2021, the authors began conceptualizing a vision for the first conference celebrating EOC, and in the spring of 2022, the first conference occurred with 45 EOC in attendance. Since then, the authors have worked year-round to plan, grow, and improve the annual conference. As educators and leaders, we (authors) gathered to write a conference proposal to share our work with goals of providing a framework for other educators and leaders to enact this work in their own geographies and contexts. As we worked on our conference proposal, it became clear that our vision and framework for developing the CEC conference should be further explored.

Below we present our semi-structured conversation, edited for clarity, that we had in-person where Amira had developed pre-written questions to ask Monique guided by visionary framing, walking the frame, and symbolizing the frame. Prior to our conversation, we collaboratively reviewed frame analysis, engaging in in-person discussions about shared readings. This process highlighted the importance of incorporating Eddy’s (2003, 2010) and others’ concepts of framing to guide our discussion and analysis. We chose to have this conversation in-person because the immediacy of in-the-moment discourse is interactional in ways that writing together does not offer. Our in-person conversation offered a stronger sense of collaboration and connection, as well as a natural flow of conversation that allowed for spontaneous ideas and insights that might not have emerged in written exchanges. Additionally, this in-person conversation served to maximize equity and accessibility, allowing both of us to fully participate in the analysis and contribute our voices to this piece. The conversation lasted about one hour. As Monique responded to the pre-written questions Amira asked, Amira typed Monique’s responses verbatim. We intentionally blur the lines to connect our conceptual framework, methodology, and findings to conversationally analyze our vision and process for creating the CEC conference.

VISIONARY FRAMING

Eddy (2003) referred to “visionary framing” as frames that focus on “creating a sense of possibilities as opposed to concentrating on current realities” (p. 329). This type of framing most closely reflects Nadler and Tushman’s (1989) “vision principle” which is described in the context of an organization’s reorientation from one state to another. Nadler and Tushman (1989) describe effective visions as likely including the following points: rationale, stakeholders, values, performance objectives, organizational structure, and operating styles (p. 198). According to these authors, effective change initiatives require a “fully developed description of the desired future state ... a vision of what the organization hopes to be once it achieves [change]” (p. 198). In essence, having a clear and inspiring vision is imperative to guide successful organizational change. Below is our conversational analysis guided by visionary framing.

Amira: Thinking about visionary framing emphasizing future possibilities (Eddy, 2010), what was the vision in creating a conference celebrating EOC?

Monique: My vision primarily was to create a network of EOC that would reduce the feelings of isolation that we feel in our respective districts and to provide a safe space for EOC to meet in a professional setting. Some EOC are the only non-white adults in their building, others are the only teachers of Color in the building because there may be non-white support staff, custodians, or paraprofessionals. We intentionally set an inclusive definition of the word ‘educator’ to include all employment categories within a school setting. Finally, we wanted to highlight the community resources, primarily the minority-owned community resources that help sustain us while dealing with the isolation of being isolated.

Based on my personal experience, professional development for me had always been geared toward the majority which were white women in my school. So even the pseudo-democratic processes of voting for professional development (PD) topics that the staff would find relevant or making decisions about the efficacy of a PD meeting drowned out my voice because I was the only one saying something was unhelpful. Even after making direct appeals to the district to provide me with PD I needed, I was told I needed to support leadership in figuring out what that was. Beyond accepting the invisible tax of being an EOC, by performing a variety of unpaid tasks to meet the needs of our communities, we needed to create a space that was intentional from the beginning for EOC so that it wasn’t an afterthought like I was experiencing in my district.

Amira: You and I were both union members as teachers and held leadership positions within the local association—you being vice president of the local for many years and me serving as a building representative. The State Education Association was and is one of our biggest stakeholders. Visionary framing focuses on the future and “creating a sense of possibilities as opposed to concentrating on current realities” (Eddy, 2010, p. 329). When we were trying to get this conference started, how did we communicate our vision about this conference to our key stakeholders, especially the union (education association)?

Monique: We used data about how few EOC there are in the state; we cited multiple districts having recruitment and retention goals for EOC and were then able to connect to their own recruitment and retention goals, mainly for the University and the State Education Association. We were able to show them how what we were trying to do connected with their existing frameworks.

Funders are key stakeholders such as the University and the State Education Association. For the State Education Association, I went through the State Education Association’s Multicultural Committee because I have been a member for several years. I went to our Chair and Association staff liaison to share that I had this idea for an event just for EOC in the state because I had spoken to our staff liaison before about getting a grant for bilingual students to get multicultural books they could read with their families at home during the pandemic. I made it clear that this event would be open to union members and non-members, which was a stated goal of the multicultural committee, not the State Education Association. One common refrain from non-

members on why they don't join their professional organization is because they don't see how they will benefit from it. Knowing that no other organization was offering this state-wide space for networking and professional development is an excellent recruitment tool and a powerful statement of support during that time of racial unrest.

Then, I spoke to the State Education Association president and executive director to talk more specifically about the event being run by EOC, for EOC, so one of the items we had to clearly discuss was the role of white members at the event. In order for our participants to feel safe and supported, we needed our white allies to not take up space. We had a designated time during a whole group convening for them to speak to the room and during our community connections time, we asked that they wait at their table for people to engage them in conversation, not go up to people. It did come up in this conversation that they would send a staffer of Color if they had one, but they didn't have one, so that's why we had to have the conversation about how white people might show up in this space.

Amira: Because of your involvement in the union and the local, state, and national levels, you were the one communicating with our state association to gain support for this conference. What were the specific goals we had associated with our vision for the conference and how did you communicate those goals to the State Education Association?

Monique: I talked about how it's an event for members and nonmembers; the State Education Association could see it as a recruitment event to get more members into the union. The National Education Association (NEA) has a strong commitment to racial and social justice and over the last few years, I have worked with our governance committees to get this language in our state documents as well. I talked about our union value of leading our profession and this being an opportunity for the State Education Association to lead in a time where many people were afraid to acknowledge that racism exists and that complicity with the status quo is a hindrance towards social progress. Connected with that is a "put your money where your mouth is moment" where you [State Education Association] have stated goals in the resolution and bylaws, I know because I put them there, where you [State Education Association leaders] say you believe this, and our union is not beholden to the state legislation that kept school districts from wanting to pursue specific activities that are just for EOC. So, I did what I could to align what we were doing with what they had stated in their documents.

Amira: How were our goals and vision received by the State Education Association staff?

Monique: Overwhelming commitment to get this done with the stakeholders that I was talking to. The one concern I had was broadcasting to everyone what we were doing. So, we had the conversation about *not* heavily promoting that the State Education Association was funding this event, because typically that's an expectation that they get video or press coverage. So, we talked about how that would be detrimental to our goals and they were understanding of that piece, which I appreciated. We as EOC often have to worry about our emotional safety. I personally have experienced the backlash when I was a classroom teacher from parents, colleagues, and administrators who have maybe said in one space that they support the equity work I'm doing and are then leading the charge for disciplinary action when they are aware of it. For instance, I initially had support for my class reading diverse books. However, when one parent complained, those who had previously expressed their support were suddenly absent during the investigation.

Amira: What was the vision for how districts and specifically for districts' human resources departments would react to your sharing this information about the conference and asking them to provide professional leave for EOC to attend this conference?

Monique: The vision was for districts to be overwhelmingly enthusiastic that they have an opportunity for PD that satisfies their stated tension of wanting to do more but not being able to do more because of state legislation. Districts would be given an out because they have policies of approving professional leave for PD that the district could not easily provide. However, I was

met with confusion and disinterest in using the stated district PD approval process for this event in particular.

Amira: You were the person that reached out to districts across the state to promote our conference. How did you communicate the vision to the districts?

Monique: I communicated an acknowledgment of a tension that exists because what used to be allowed before [recent state legislation] was now no longer allowed which left districts confused about how they could move forward in their recruitment and retention efforts for EOC. My district was unsure if they could send an email with a flyer promoting the event to their EOC, and it didn't happen until very close to the conference. The question was, "Can we send an email targeting only EOC?" which had been done before, but only for district social events.

I have a list of human resources (HR) directors in districts across the state. I send them a targeted email about how their employees have appreciated coming to the event in the past. I also acknowledge other districts who have publicly stated their support to help give them cover, so that they are not out here on a limb by themselves, they have other districts that are supporting this. I worked with them on the best way to communicate this conference to their employees. In some districts it was appropriate for HR to send an email, in some it was not appropriate depending on their community. I also talked directly to employees about having them ask their district about taking a professional leave. I reached out to a dozen HR directors and the responses were majority gratitude that we have the event and a communication that they would send it out to their staff, and I was able to troubleshoot with the two or three that were unsure how to move forward.

Amira: How did you communicate the goals associated with the vision to districts across the state?

Monique: We talked about the data about how many EOC are in the state. I found each district's recruitment and retention goal on their website and talked about how this event meets the needs professionally and emotionally and that I was confident that their employees would have a positive professional and emotional experience in attending the event. I also had to put my credentials in terms of my years working in the state and I added that we had significant funding from the State Education Association and the University to give them significant cover if someone were to ask why they are doing this, to give them the ammunition they would need when they would face backlash for promoting this event, sending EOC, and paying for it by paying substitutes for the attending EOC. Some districts chose to see our conference as a recruitment tool for themselves to poach employees, as like a job fair for them.

WALKING THE FRAME AND SYMBOLIZING THE FRAME

According to Eddy (2003), "framing a vision requires extensive verbal, nonverbal, and written communication, but communicating through symbolism can be especially effective" (p. 326). Walking the frame is one method of conveying a message that involves leaders leading through example, "acting in ways that are consistent with the leader's message" (Eddy, 2010, p. 321). Walking the frame can occur in informal conversations with colleagues and stakeholders, with the aim of spreading the message. Symbolizing the frame includes metaphorical or literal symbols to get people to understand the vision (Eddy, 2010). In this section, the concepts of walking the frame and symbolizing the frame guide our conversational analysis.

Amira: What are some of the ways you informally spread the message to stakeholders and to EOC across the state?

Monique: One of the informal ways I spread the message was texting and having informal conversations as opposed to having a lot of emails. I think it's best practice to not have a paper trail if there is a sensitive topic you want to discuss so as to not invite backlash. Outside of the State Education Association, I tried to have in-person communication as much as possible with

community donors I was engaging with. When I did send an email, I would put my picture on there to convey who I was with background and context.

In recruiting participants, I leaned into the duality of the event by saying it's a celebration, we want to celebrate you, it's a party, I want you to network with other people; and telling them that we are granted this day of celebration because we are telling people this is a conference, this is PD, this is professional learning that needs to happen during the school day. This provided them with language they could share with others. Depending on who they were talking to, they could choose to talk up the celebration angle or the conference angle to get the day off from their district.

Amira: Let's talk about symbolizing the frame (Eddy, 2010). I know one of the first conversations you and I had was about the name of the conference and landing on "Celebrating Educators of Color" and correcting people who said it was a "*Teachers of Color*" conference because we wanted the name of the conference to communicate that this was for all folks of Color working in education. What symbols did we use to get people to understand the vision?

Monique: Talking to the State Education Association's Multicultural Committee was very much us having conversation on Zoom with EOC from across the state. When I'm talking with them, I don't have to start from square one: the why, because they are living the why. We were able to jump right into how we are going to communicate this to others, how we are going to bring people with us from other districts to this conference. We were able to start our conversation with the idea of "educators" of Color, having a conference for EOC and who is considered an "educator." They all confuse us anyway, this idea of "educators" is because secretaries, paraeducators, teachers... We are all educating. It was important to not have the hierarchy. I communicated that by elevating the different job groups, making clear that it's a diverse group in the room. Validating paraeducators specifically, with the acknowledgement that they are teachers. Before the event, I was informally talking to the people of Color in my buildings and in my district and there, the adults of Color in the buildings are mostly not teachers—they are paraeducators, secretaries, and custodians. My experience working with paraeducators, especially the multilingual paraeducators, is that they are called in to do unpaid translation; they are doing the work of educators.

I like the word "celebration" because school is a place of harm for students of Color but not always acknowledged as a place of harm for the EOC in the space. So, knowing that this is a professional development opportunity, that it is happening during contract hours, it's a completely radical idea for an EOC to be celebrated. Because a lot of people show up with blinders on ready to emotionally protect themselves, accepting that we pay the invisible tax of doing the extra work to make sure the students of Color are fine, that we don't take the time to celebrate our work or each other. And that the word has been co-opted by districts to tokenize or ornamentalize our contributions through district awards, social media posts that will highlight an outcome we were able to produce without acknowledging or compensating all of the work that went into it. Our event is a reclaiming of the word, of what it means to be celebrated in a non-tokenized way.

We get the pseudo-compliments of "you're so articulate" and these are the ways that we are typically celebrated; this is an example of what it is to be celebrated from people not in your community. So, it means something different to be celebrated by people in your own community because we know how to celebrate each other without the microaggressions.

DISCUSSION

Through our collaborative partnerships with districts across the state, the local university, and particularly the State Education Association, we were able to create a conference celebrating EOC across our state. Looking back on planning our first annual conference to celebrate EOC, we illuminate the importance of visionary framing, walking the frame, and symbolizing the frame in order to get our stakeholders to understand the vision to create a space for

celebration and professional development designed specifically for EOC. Our planning for this first annual conference came following our departure from our classrooms and state laws banning the teaching of structural racism.

Through our conversation reflecting on our planning, we analyze the ways in which our communication with the State Education Association and outreach to districts across the state became successful in getting 45 EOC from six districts across the state to attend. Through visionary framing (Eddy, 2010) our vision of the conference included “vision principle” elements (Nadler and Tushman, 1989) such as our objectives, rationale, values, and stakeholders. We used the concepts of walking the frame and symbolizing the frame (Eddy, 2010) in our communications to ensure the sustainability and growth of the conference, including ensuring resources and support from the State Education Association and districts as well as in protecting the conference space as insurgent pedagogy (Au, 2021) and CPD (Kohli et al., 2015). Following that first annual conference in spring 2022, we created a monthly newsletter that is sent out to EOC across the state to maintain connection. In spring 2023, we held the second annual conference with nearly 100 educators in attendance from 12 school districts across the state. In spring 2024, we held our third annual conference which saw the largest attendance yet: 145 EOC from across 17 districts in the state.

The community connection that this conference provides is a means of sustaining EOC, especially with the contentious political environment in our state. Having emerged in direct response to our own experiences with antidialogic professional development and creating a space to organize for justice through teaching, our frame analysis illuminates the CEC conference as CPD (Kohli et al., 2015) and as insurgent pedagogy (Au, 2021). Frame analysis illustrates how our vision and collaboration with stakeholders contributed to the conference’s success in terms of meeting the critical need of EOC in our state. Our grassroots effort to create and sustain this conference celebrating EOC is a radical disruption of the status quo facing EOC in our state which illuminates the need for systemic changes in professional development that recognize and address the needs of EOC. Moreover, the celebration itself serves as a transformative act of resistance and empowerment. By celebrating EOC, we not only affirm our value and contributions but also challenge oppressive structures, fostering a sense of unity and collective empowerment that can drive meaningful change.

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