Won't You Be My Neighbor?
Stories of Keeping the City Out of the Suburbs

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My intent in writing this article is to practice using Pinar's *currere* method of autobiographical storytelling (Pinar, 1975, p. 474) to merge my educational experience with a handful of "curriculum fragments" (Poetter, 2017, p. 1) into a coherent counternarrative to challenge the traditional Whiteness of the suburbs. My "curriculum fragments," which will serve as a phenomenological data source, will be acquired by flashing back to my educational experiences as a young person living in a primarily White, yet demographically-shifting suburb (called Central Crossing[1]), which is adjacent to a large Midwestern city (called Principal City). Another layer of data will be attained via my current "lived experiences" of residing in a relatively diverse (a much higher percentage of African-Americans compared to adjacent areas) suburb (called Northfield) adjacent to a "hypersegregated" (Massey & Denton, 1989) Midwestern city (called Golden City). Two final layers of data were obtained through conversations with former colleagues who have conducted consulting work in two neighboring school districts to Central Crossing (called Western Station and Thriftville). These layers of data will hopefully help me to paint a picture of why African-American students are supposedly "underachieving" in our public schools across the country—the result of historical as well as contemporary structural, systemic, subtle racism (Sue et al., 2007).

Positionality

This manuscript was written as an ongoing project for me as a privileged, White male to come to terms with the nature of race, racism, and power in America. Growing up, as I was raised in neoconservative, White, suburbia, conversations of race were neither necessary nor profitable. I now fully realize race is salient more than ever in the age of expanding White nationalism. Over the course of the past twenty years, I have become aware that I possess significant White privilege as well as various forms of implicit bias. Having studied science in college and graduate school, I was trained to intuitively think within the positivist, scientific-realist paradigms, so it has been more difficult for me to fully leap into autobiographical storytelling than perhaps scholars with other forms of training. My early academic training in the sciences rendered the usage of the first person off limits. More recent explorations with using first person storytelling resulted in one of my submitted manuscripts receiving harsh criticism for "self-promotion" due to fact that I used the word "I" in my writing. This manuscript may appear to contain evidence of scientific storytelling through data, references, dictionary-like flow, and a subdued writing style; please bear with my steep learning curve as I figure out how to personalize my academic voice in the first-person. Readers with more advanced skills in autobiographical, creative writing, I invite your criticism, feedback, and help in further developing my storytelling abilities.

Stories of Racism

After looking for signs of subtle racism (implicit bias) for one school year at Northfield High School, which will be introduced later in this manuscript, many instances

surfaced. One of my African-American teaching colleagues, Donna, who I interviewed as a study participant, described the blatant and subtle racism (implicit bias) in public schools as making her "angry" and "tired." After hearing a White colleague angrily berate an African-American student in the teachers' lounge, the words "insensitive" and "mean" came to my mind after thinking about the dialogue that took place. A student (Betsy) told me that one of my colleagues, who I will call Mrs. Stevenson, does not like her because of the color of her skin. Betsy pointed at her skin during the conversation to indicate racism instead of speaking it out loud. In the month of June, at an unexpected place, a White parent told me about a "loud" African-American woman with whom she argued during the recent graduation ceremony; after telling me the story, she said, "[Northfield High School] has *changed* [emphasis added]." Later, I thought to myself, "How has Northfield High School changed?" The parent must have been lamenting the fact that more and more African-Americans are moving into the City of Northfield; however, she would likely argue that her use of the word *changed* certainly does not have any racial connotations, because she does not see race. Much like many Whites, "colorblind" is a "trump card" that can be used to shut down authentic conversations about race, racism, and power. There is neither time nor space for me to detail all of the instances of implicit bias observed in and around Northfield High School, as well as other nearby school districts. My year of looking for implicit bias in multiple school districts left me with a notebook full of examples.

JUST IMAGINE

Having grown up in a suburb with limited racial diversity, specifically few African-Americans, I want my son to experience the full range of possibilities America has to offer. I hope my son will be a proud Filipino-American someday; somebody who hopefully speaks multiple languages. I imagine a future for my son where public school teachers are fully committed to authentically celebrating diversity in every form. I envision public schools as places where families can congregate together to openly discuss issues of race, racism, and power via interracial dialogue. In the future, I sincerely hope that White people in America, of all socioeconomic backgrounds, will humbly acknowledge and discuss how our public education system has historically discriminated against African-Americans and other people of color. Without honesty and racial humility, the racial domination and oppression will indefinitely continue. Also, I hope that our educational researchers in America will change the school improvement/reform paradigm from a so-called value-free, implementation-based, scientific, systems-centered version to one more subjective, tentative, holistic, humanistic, and reflexive. This new research paradigm will empower those in government, higher education, and public policy to disclose (and research) the real reasons for African-American "underachievement" in our public schools. The nature of school reform and new lines of academic inquiry will eventually open as the result of this imagined future. I feel truly blessed to have had this opportunity through dialogue, education, interaction, life experiences, and reflection to realize that White privilege and systemic racism has caused and continues to drive the "racial achievement gaps" in our country. As activist, practitioner-scholars we must work beyond writing about these issues and confront them in the public square.

RESEARCH

In what has been called the "Great Migration," between 1916 and 1970, African-Americans moved from the South to Northern cities to secure stable employment and

pursue a better way of life (Tolnay, 2003). Between 1940 and 1970 approximately 4 million African-Americans left the South for Northern cities (Boustan, 2010), including Gold City and Principal City. After World War II (in the period roughly between 1945-1970), the expansion of roads and the construction of houses in the suburbs as well as the "exurbs" (prosperous areas beyond the principle suburbs) in many Midwest cities was followed by Whites moving far from the urban cores, which has often been referred to as "White flight" (Bogue & Seim, 1956). Research suggests there appears to be a quantitative relationship between the arrival of African-Americans from the South and the movement of Whites into the suburbs, much like a cause-and-effect type of association (Boustan, 2010). The suburbs were once considered to be a mostly White phenomenon, but African-Americans as well as other underrepresented peoples have since moved away from the city into the suburbs. Studies have shown that Whites now live in more racially diverse suburbs than ever (Lee, Iceland, & Farrell, 2014); however, Whites are becoming segregated within these diverse suburbs in new ways, limiting the usefulness of viewing racial integration through a traditional binary lens (Lichter, Parisi, & Taquino, 2017). For example, Whites are more likely to be concentrated in higher-value neighborhoods within diverse suburbs (Lichter et al., 2017). In a sense, African-Americans and Whites live "together but apart" (Lichter et al., 2017, p. 229) in modern diverse suburbs.

The Early Years

During the first eighteen years of my life, I lived in the same village to which my grandfather returned in 1937. Since my grandfather relocated from Principal City to the village of Central Crossing, my entire extended family has considered this village as our home, as well as a "regular" place to live. Central Crossing was an almost entirely White suburb of Principal City, with essentially no African-American diversity for the first 50 to 60 years of my family's narrative.[2] To me, what made Central Crossing such as special place to live was the fact that my grandfather was the mayor for 25 years. My grandfather worked tireless hours above and beyond two primary jobs, first as a street commissioner, then a councilman, followed by mayor, to make Central Crossing a hospitable and safe place to call home. My grandfather worked in a factory about 35 minutes away in Principal City, which was likely considered quite a long commute back in the 1930s through the 1950s. He must have had a strong desire to raise a family and live far from the city to make this commute every day. The factory where he worked was such an important place for bolt production during World War II that he escaped the draft more than once. His metalworking skills were exceptional enough that his boss could not replace him without wartime operations at the plant being seriously impacted.

As I understand the history, Central Crossing was separated from Principal City by thousands of acres of farmland between the 1930s and the 1980s before suburbanization began to consume the countryside, much like how a clearcutting effort in a forest devours trees. There were no major highways connecting Principal City and Central Crossing even into my father's high school years in the early 1960s. As a child, I can remember when stores, houses, restaurants, and businesses began being built in proximity to Central Crossing as the city "encroached" upon the village. The small shop and store owners in the village center began to complain about losing customers because places like Kroger and Home Depot offered greater selection and lower prices than they could ever replicate. Eventually, the IGA supermarket in town closed followed by the True Value hardware store as well as other locally-owned businesses. Many people in the village were upset about the changes taking place, especially those who had resided

there for many decades. Looking back, I was upset because my family was unhappy about the situation. I did not truly understand what the community was fighting against.

As I recall, grandpa, and perhaps other local politicians, wanted to use municipal policies to try to "contain" Principal City from annexing land around Central Crossing. The most discussed option was to annex land in two directions to "landlock" Principal City from consuming more farmland. The problem with this approach was that state law required local villages to offer utility services to residential dwellings within annexed areas. Since Central Crossing, at the time, was an underfunded village, there was not enough immediate funding to offer utility services to hundreds of new residents, so the annexation plan never materialized. (It is interesting to note that Principal City is still not a landlocked city, and this status has resulted in the City growing at an unprecedented rate compared to other large cities in the country.) Principal City eventually annexed enough farmland to border Central Crossing on one side, thereby, having a direct impact upon the local school district through its zoning approvals and designations. This "border zone" between Principal City and Central Crossing is marked by a two-lane road, much like a major artery connects two important parts of the human body. The "border zone" will be called Connector Road, because it has served like a passageway gluing the big city to the irritated village residents of Central Crossing.

Although a wide swath of land on Connector Road is within the Central Crossing School District, most of this area now resides within the incorporated limits of Principal City. Back in the 1970s or 1980s Principal City reached a "win-win" agreement with the Central Crossing Board of Education about future housing developments being proposed along Connector Road. The agreement basically stated that the new residents along Connector Road would attend Central Crossing School District, but Principal City would provide the water and sewer services. The village of Central Crossing benefited through the agreement because they would not have to expand utility services with a limited budget. The school district would benefit because there would be an increase in the number of students, which would boost available funding.

Despite the apparent "wins" for Central Crossing, many people in the community were outraged with the "win-win" agreement, because of the assumption that "low income" kids from the City would eventually enroll in the local schools. There was a community uproar to say the least. Some residents viewed the incoming students as those who were moving from the City because they were in trouble there. Unfortunately, what reinforced this discriminatory, even racist, viewpoint was the fact that developers did build some low-income housing units along Connector Road. As I recall, residents claimed to have heard gunshots as well as other disturbances in the new housing units on Connector Road, which fueled further complaints from residents. Although the housing units may have been under construction in the 1990s, there was not a significant increase in the size of the school district, including the number of African-American students, until perhaps the 2000s, well after I left the village for college. The number of African-American residents in the village of Central Crossing grew modestly between 1990 (20 residents) and 2010 (365 residents). There is likely a greater level of African-American diversity on Connector Road, which is actually within the incorporated limits of Principal City, so this is not truly reflected in that data.

Discussions of Race

Growing up in Central Crossing, I don't ever recall discussing race with my family or at school, in any real depth. I do remember my parents taking my brother and me to an African-American comedic play at an historical theater in Principal City. My family

members and I were the only White people in the entire place. I suppose my parents wanted me to feel what it would be like to be in a "minority," although such an experience is temporary and a privileged way to be a "minority." Central Crossing seemed to be a "regular" place to live where discussing race was not necessary or relevant for our lives. Looking back now, I realize that the residents of Central Crossing, including my family members, were isolated from African-Americans by choice. I can honestly only remember one African-American student, perhaps two, at Central Crossing High School, a young man named France and a female whose name I am unable to recall. There was an absence of ideas and understandings of culture. Once Central Crossing began to grow, new people began to move into the community, including African-American families and students. The African-American population gradually grew in the mid-1990s to late-1990s.

As I recall, White students would sometimes inquire between one another, "Why do the African-American students sit together?," without ever thinking about the opposite version of the same question, "Why do all of those White students sit [live] together?" At times, students would also ask, "Why are the African-Americans walking down [moving down] Connector Road?," which again could be reframed as, "Why are Whites not moving up Connector Road toward Principal City?" Unfortunately, I didn't learn the power of dialectical questioning and reasoning until much later in life. Dialectical questioning, I believe, can be a useful technique to reframe new starting points for counter-narratives about racial interactions as well as the lack of racial connections.

In retrospect, the apparent "crisis" of people from the City moving into the suburbs should have been viewed as a blessing bestowed upon the isolated White people in Central Crossing. Research demonstrates the value of racial diversity upon businesses, communities, peoples, and improved problem-solving (Ayscue, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2017). Whites living in geographic isolation, in respect to African-Americans, mixed with a faulty, collective, "colorblind" frame of reference, end up producing a completely contradictory, paradoxical view of reality for Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). "Colorblind liberalism," which is the ideological frame used by Whites to explain most aspects of race in America, does not logically hold up when it is dissected and interrogated for its logical rigidity (Bonilla-Silva, 2017). "Colorblind liberalism" is not the only ideological or theoretical paradigm inhibiting the advancement of African-Americans today; so-called value-free implementation science and system theories that guide school reform efforts, which will be discussed in the next section, cause educators across the country to treat the symptoms of racism via educational interventions, to change the so-called "racial achievement gaps," while ignoring the "root cause" of educational inequality in America.

CLOSING THE "GAP"

Standardized tests are laden with racial biases and prejudices, so they can't truly determine what all students have learned inside of public schools. Many well-intentioned White educators believe that standardized tests, in conjunction with formative assessments, when properly coupled with high-leverage instruction and differentiation, can help to improve the academic achievement of African-American students. However, standardized testing, school report cards, as well as other accountability measures, have levied great harm upon African-American students by setting undifferentiated goals (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Accountability measures, I believe, set up certain performance criteria that result in many African-American students being labeled as "underperformers" compared to Whites (Steele & Aronson, 1995). This testing causes

great harm to African-American students (Steele & Aronson, 1995). My treatment of discussing assessments, which are aimed to alter instruction to close the so-called "achievement gaps," is meant to review the status of educational "reform" in America. In the next several paragraphs, I will attempt to briefly summarize the status of nationwide school improvement/reform efforts before covertly peeking at the "root cause" of so-called African-American "underachievement" in the next section.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (DOE), between 1990 and 2007 only four states narrowed then so-called "racial achievement gap" between Black and White students in 8th grade mathematics (Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009). Decades of federal school reform initiatives have mostly failed to narrow the persistent, so-called "racial achievement gaps." The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 mandated states and school districts report subgroup, performance data for African-Americans, English Language Learners (ELLs), Hispanics, students with disabilities (SWDs), as well as other groups (Ravitch, 2016). NCLB also banned the reporting of average performance scores of all students to avoid masking the underperformance of subgroups (Ravitch, 2016). The DOE has also noted that the NCLB benchmarks mandated the implementation of "one-size-fits-all" interventions in low-performing schools, which resulted in its failure to recognize the local needs of the schools as well as students (Vanneman et al., 2009). Educators across the country complained about, even resisted, the NCLB Act of 2001 and its negative impact upon student learning (Poetter, 2013), so our elected officials have now supposedly "fixed" the problems through another legislative effort, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

ESSA of 2015 has more recently provided states with greater flexibility to waive certain elements of NCLB in exchange for the adoption of "evidence-based," rigorous, comprehensive, state-developed improvement plans, interventions, and processes to close the so-called "racial achievement gaps." Many states have adopted or will be adopting, systems-based school improvement processes grounded in systems theory, as well as implementation science research (Fixsen, Blase, Duda, Naoom, & Van Dyke, 2010). These so-called value-free, scientific, school improvement, processes and implementation science frameworks do not adequately address the current or historical root causes of inequalities in public education/society. They still fail to recognize the power of cultural/geographic differences in schools as well as the role of implicit bias/unconscious racism in reproducing social inequalities within the public education system as well as broader society (Klaf & Kwan, 2010; Sue et al., 2007). Without addressing the "root causes" of social inequalities, systems theories and implementation science will at best make superficial, temporary changes in the so-called "racial achievement gaps," thus, continuing the status quo in education, allowing persistent inequalities to continue unabated. Improvement plans and systems that ignore the "root causes" of inequality build a false faith that, with enough time, training, and the right, "evidence based" strategies, educators will permanently close the so-called "racial achievement gaps."

TAKING A PEEK

Central Crossing is not the only suburb of Principal City that has experienced a significant demographic shift in the past 20 years as the result of widespread suburbanization. Another suburb directly adjacent to Central Crossing is Western Station, which has a slightly lower population than Central Crossing. A second suburb, although not directly adjacent to Central Crossing, is called Thriftville, which will be briefly mentioned in this section. The major theme of all three suburbs (Central Crossing, Western Station, and Thriftville) is that Principal City has significantly grown in the past

several decades, so new residents have flowed from the City into areas adjacent to the City. Due to the outflow of people, all three suburbs have quickly grown and experienced an increase in African-Americans. Due to new state and federal accountability measures discussed in the previous section, school district administrators are aware now, more than ever, that they must improve the academic "achievement" of African-American students without an understanding of what the real problems are.

Western Station is another interesting place to inspect because the city school district has a much higher level of diversity than Central Station, because it is closer to Principal City and contains different types of housing. An area just outside of the Western Station School District contains a large mall, which was a busy place to shop back in the 1970s and 1980s. People from across Principal City would drive to the Western Mall to shop up until the 1990s and 2000s, when the demographic shift started to take place. When this happened, people began to become cautious of going to the Western Mall to shop, because they thought they would get mugged or robbed. Now, the Mall is in slight disrepair and some of the stores are empty. Sears, JC Penny, and other major retails stores have left. There are newer, trendy malls in Greater Principal City where people now go to shop. Many of the storefronts adjacent to the Western Mall in both directions are now empty. This same "boom and bust" cycle of commercialization and de-commercialization, which is often connected to racial integration in the suburbs, appears in large cities across the Midwest.

According to the state's Department of Education, the Western Station School District is "underperforming," with an overall letter grade of "D." The number of African-American students has significantly increased in the past couple of decades, thereby, also increasing the number of students enrolled in the school district. A major, Midwest-based foundation has taken an interest in both the Western Station School District and the Thriftville City School District due to the large amount of diversity in these traditionally White suburbs. The foundation has sponsored consulting work at Western Station High School and Thriftville High School to help the administration better serve the African-American student populations. One of my friends, who must remain anonymous to protect his work interests, has conferred with me about the situation in both high schools, because he is not familiar with the history of the communities. He asked me, "Why do the White teachers [at Western Station High School] refuse to look at the African-American students when they are talking with them?" My response was, "I suspect that these White teachers have worked at the high school for many years, and they have witnessed the demographic shift as well as the expansion of Principal City. The teachers do not like what is happening." Another comment I received, "The administration at Thriftville High School are all Whites. I certainly don't expect the school district to just [blindly] hire an African-American, but I wonder how there couldn't be an African-American in administration with such a high level of diversity there?" Unfortunately, I am convinced, through my personal experiences, that my friend's observations may be common occurrences in White suburban school districts.

MY PRESENT SITUATION

Currently, I live in the Northfield City School District, which is a sizeable suburban district next to a "hypersegregated" city in the Midwest (Golden City). Golden City was once a much larger city, but deindustrialization as well as "white flight" left the urban core depopulated with a large concentration of African-Americans. The suburbs are notably either White or African-American with a relatively low amount of interspersion of people groups, except for Northfield, due to its relative concentration of African-Americans. Much like the previously discussed suburbs of Central Crossing, Western

Station, and Thriftville, Northfield has experienced a demographic shift due to African-Americans and Hispanics moving from Golden City. There are additional population groups, mainly as the result of recent immigration, residing in Northfield, including but not limited to Africans, Asians, Eastern Europeans, South Americans, Arabs, and Central Americans. My street in Northfield is diverse; my neighbors are Caribbean-Americans, Hispanics, African-Americans, a Filipina, Mexican-Americans, Russians, Whites, Turks, Arabs, and Chinese people. Although there is White resistance and even some resentment over diverse peoples moving to Northfield, the school district administration understands the importance of diversity. For example, the Northfield City School District Superintendent openly highlights, even brags, about the diversity of the school district. Diverse speakers have given professional development at Northfield School District about diversity and "implicit bias," including an Associate Professor of Curriculum/Culture at a local university and a nationally-known African-American school principal who is also a noted author.

There is "implicit bias" (mostly unconscious) in Northfield City School District, like most suburbs across America, but the district administration is working hard to address these issues. There are at least three African-American district-level administrators at Northfield City Schools. Professional development in the district has focused upon the issues of race, racism, and power in schools. Northfield, despite its shortcomings, is a place, unlike other suburban areas, where racial integration is slowly moving forward, not backward. In a political climate like we are experiencing now in America, we need more suburbs and suburban school districts, like Northfield, to demonstrate that our great country embraces diversity, immigrants, and new ideas.

AN IMAGINED FUTURE

A future for public education without implicit bias would benefit every stakeholder, including but not limited to students, parents, teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, the community, school-business partners, and others. If implicit bias were eliminated, teachers would have accepting and positive views of all students. Students' attitudes, performance, and views of learning would be improved across the board. There would be fewer discipline referrals in every subgroup category. Administrators would have an easier job running the school; administrators would suddenly have more time to conduct instructional coaching instead of calling parents all day long. Teachers would have better interactions with students. Students would be more respectful of teachers, administrators, and school property. Perhaps the custodians would be cleaning up less graffiti, particularly the type where teachers' names are attached to four-letter cuss words. The so-called "racial achievement gaps" would narrow to the point that conversations about students' performance during teacher-based teams (TBTs) may begin to change to discussions of how much they enjoyed teaching a particular lesson plan. An "imagined future" for public schools where implicit bias is eliminated is something that is worth discussing and pursuing, because it would be in all stakeholders' best interests for this to happen.

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Endnotes

[1]All names used are pseudonyms.

[2]All population data was retrieved from the U.S. Census Bureau. Further citation is not provided to protect the identity of study participants.