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## Developing Friendship and Leadership Among Fifth-grade Boys of Different Ethnic and Racial Backgrounds

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes and reflects on an intervention in a public elementary school in Vermont, in which selected fifth graders participated in a boys group, led by an African-American community member. The principal sought to create this group to build friendships, explore opportunities for boys' leadership, and to address prejudice among African, Asian, and white students. The reflections of the group's mentor reveal the inner-workings of this diverse group and its complex mission, from fostering youth development from the elementary-age self to the growing teen in society, to understanding and appreciating peers from different ethnic backgrounds, family structures, and personal beliefs. The principal shares other challenges for sustaining such interventions, such as scheduling, securing parental permission, and gaining teacher support. Practical leadership suggestions for creating school cultures of equity, justice, and inclusion are provided.

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# Developing Friendship and Leadership Among Fifth-grade Boys of Different Ethnic and Racial Backgrounds

*Infinite Culcleasure and Dorinne Dorfman*

## Leading for Equity

Attending school with a culturally-diverse population is the most successful strategy for reducing prejudice and fostering beliefs in ethnic/racial equality in youth (Wells, Holme, Revilla, & Atanda, 2004). However, few Vermont schools have a diverse student body, which poses seemingly insurmountable challenges to providing multicultural, anti-racist education. Then there are the small numbers of children of color in rural Vermont schools. In an overwhelmingly white school environment, how do adults support them? How are leadership and a healthy sense of pride developed? We consider these issues while reflecting on the successes and limitations of our shared project: creating a leadership group for elementary-age boys, in which black boys constitute the majority. We also discuss the need to expose injustice. Whose role is it to educate white children about the omnipresence of institutional racism? How do they develop friendships between white children and children of color? In Vermont's many low-income regions, who will teach about systematic inequality, when community members themselves face food, housing, and health insecurity? We wish to share learning from our experience and hope that this can inform the practices of those in key leadership positions, and to make a critical difference towards a more inclusive, peaceful, and just society. The 2019 passage of Act 1 (H.3), in which Vermont lawmakers instituted the creation of "the Ethnic and Social Equity Standards Advisory Working Group" may hold the greatest possibility of advancing this agenda.

Whose role is it to **educate white children** about the omnipresence of institutional racism?

When asking children about school, among their first responses is the social milieu, namely their peers who help form their self-concept and experience in education. Even in the best of circumstances, much content and skills taught and assessed by teachers are dictated by state and federal mandates, proficiencies and graduation requirements, throughout which social justice and ethnic/racial equality are best interwoven with, rather than an exception to, the school's established curriculum sequence (an example of an exception is confining acknowledgement to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day). Developing a healthy self-esteem and disposition of acceptance among children of different ethnic/racial backgrounds may be directly taught by school guidance counselors and frequent guest speakers, and regularly affirmed by classroom teachers. Vermont educational leaders are challenged to cultivate friendships and mentorships between children of color, white children, and within their own ethnic groups. Yet without deliberate, ongoing efforts to disrupt the mental colonization of all children caused "by media, educational curricula,

power relations, and institutional structures” (Kesson, 2019, p. 4), ignorance and prejudice will prevail unhindered for another generation.

## Launching the Group

In fall 2018, Infinite Culcleasure of Parents and Youth for Change, began a Boys Group in an elementary school in Chittenden County, at the request of Dorinne Dorfman, then the principal. The purpose was to develop healthy relationships and leadership skills in a

**Restorative Practices,** such as group norms, a talking piece, and the circle dialogue, lay the groundwork for democratic youth groups.

mentoring group where black students comprised the majority. To provide structure, Culcleasure utilized a curriculum called “Growing Healthy, Going Strong – Boys Council” (Wiser & Chow, 2009) a ten-week facilitator activity guide for ages 9 – 14. At times the group would break from the sequence, especially on occasions when something students believed was more worthy of conversation. In Culcleasure’s contract, he agreed that “no therapeutic or other service that requires approval and/or licensure by the State of Vermont would be involved,” and “Topics discussed are appropriate to upper elementary students’ developmental level (ages 9-11).” In addition, it stated, “Any topic or activity that may appear concerning will be shared with the principal before the session whenever

possible, or reported directly after the session...” These parameters brought comfort to other school staff, parents, and district administration, who could set aside concerns of potential controversy. In advance, the principal secured parental permission and each student’s consent before its soft launch.

The principal invited every African-American and African boy in fifth grade to join the Boys Group, a total of twelve children. Participation meant exchanging lunch in the cafeteria and playing at recess one day a week for an hour in a windowless, but inviting classroom with a community mentor, an African-American man possessing community organizing and youth-leadership development experience. The principal invited several other students, who were Asian or white, based on recommendations from their classroom teachers. In all, five students of color and one white student regularly participated in the Boys Group. The school English Learner teacher remained in the classroom during Boys Group sessions, who occasionally reminded them of school expectations and offered support with technology or supplies.

Culcleasure and the participants developed the following expectations in their shared mission:

- Reflect on what we learn.
- Talk about feelings and behaviors toward friends and adults.
- Learn more about leadership.
- Work on a project to better the community.

Utilizing elements from Restorative Practice methods of a circle and talking piece, they created their own rules and norms to uphold. They spent time each week reviewing these



expectations, which they affirmed was their own democratic decision and individual commitment for participation. These included:

- Not discussing video games (except when related to the topic of discussion).
- No interrupting.
- One person talking at a time.
- No being obnoxious.
- No fighting.
- Use appropriate language.
- No whispering.
- Go over group norms to get back on track.

With only an hour together, eating lunch and reviewing norms could take half a session. An entire week would pass between meetings, seemingly an eternity for elementary students, and oftentimes school was cancelled for holidays, bad weather, and inservices. When together, Culcleasure would ask each student to share recent highs and lows, and offer prompts to deepen the discussion. If students got rowdy, he or another boy asked, “If you’re not forced to be here, then why are you here?” Culcleasure led opening rituals, theme introductions, warm-up games, and focus activities. Topics ranged from social bonding and vulnerability to healthy competition and guessing games (e.g., Kahootz). They acted in role plays of bullying situations, which students especially relished. On one occasion, Culcleasure brought a colleague, Corey Richardson, to assist with icebreakers and lead dialogue in freedom of expression, anti-bullying, and personal wellbeing.

Reflecting on their norms, Culcleasure shared the following anecdote, which demonstrated the students’ increasing willingness to step up and lead the group.

The greatest moment was when they all were having a hard time calming down, and I needed to be assertive by restating an expectation. Under his breath, a student called me, ‘Dumbass.’ Another student called him out and said, “That’s messed up. That’s not okay.” The first student apologized. That was a peak experience because they managed their space the best they could, and my role had subtly moved from authority figure to supported facilitator.

During the second semester, they turned over the question, “How are we going to better the community?” Their first ideas were predictably conventional, white-normative approaches, such as picking up trash or removing graffiti. Oftentimes adults struggle as well to think beyond typical community service and charity work. Culcleasure encouraged them to do something fun, like plan and present a performance, especially since several were cast members of the school musical. They agreed to dance to an uplifting song written by Culcleasure’s brother-in-law, Marcus Hughes, which resonated for all group participants. The chorus resonated with Boys Group’s purpose:

*It shouldn't matter if your black, white or Asian, Hispanic, French, German or Haitian  
None of that should matter if we all relate, when it comes to how we feel when  
someone's hatin'  
If we come to-get-her we can separate separation, with the strength of a nation*

*When my true colors come out, it won't really make a difference to anyone who's searching with their eyes  
Because there are things that eyes can't see, like the things that make me, me  
And if you cannot see that, where your true colors at?*

Yet time constraints could not be overcome. Spring assessments, field trips, and graduation practice limited their time to choreograph and practice. Their goal to record the dance using equipment from the Vermont Community Access Media Studio was unmet.

## Reflections on Outcomes

The question of process versus product pervades education. Every group or class ultimately ends with each new semester, the start of summer break, or in our case, a change in staff. Yet we believe the Boys Group's most important goals had been achieved. In their space, they had established their own control. For perhaps the first time, they functioned as a group outside of adult demands. When students chose to sit or lay on the floor while engaging in discussion, they enjoyed a respite from adults controlling their bodies. Members of the boys' group voted on and invited new members to join, as it gained popularity among peers.

The relationships built were the greatest outcome. Most of the participants now attend middle school. Recently Culcleasure ran into two of the boys who regarded him with exceptional delight, asking "What are you doing here?" as if from another time and place of great meaning. Culcleasure felt that, while their friendships were not particularly deep, their interactions were healthy and authentic. Together they shared a yearlong, purposeful, multiracial experience.

Public elementary schools maintain a rigid routine of disparate parts, based on Vermont's Educational Quality Standards, teacher contracts, and funding, and fully pack each hour of the student day. Another pressure occasionally placed on students was to complete classroom assignments before being allowed to attend Boys Group, which grew in the last weeks of school. This was not meant to undermine the integrity of the Boys Group, but educators' priorities err on the side of school mandates. If the Boys Group met two or three times a week instead of one, much more progress could have been made, not only by adding time and reducing reminders of group norms, but by building momentum and completing the community project.

The lessons we learned from implementing the Boys Group may have larger implications for scaling up. Restorative Practices, such as group norms, a talking piece, and the circle dialogue, lay the groundwork for democratic youth groups. Traditional roles and expectations would have quickly ended our Boys Group, as participants would opt for lunch and recess with all their class, rather than subject themselves to yet another adult-directed activity. Culcleasure made the decision to deemphasize the fact that most group participants were students of color. With older students, a facilitator would engage participants in dialogue on antiracism, particularly if on the minds of participants. This was not the case for our fifth graders. What progress was made in ethnic/racial pride and appreciation of diversity is unclear, though other goals were regularly achieved. These included:

- Creating an environment, in one small part of school life, for students of color to comprise the majority
- Sharing reflections on learning
- Talking about feelings and behaviors toward friends and adults
- Learning about leadership
- Working on a project to better the community

Replicating the Boys Group or other student multiethnic/racial organization could backfire. No one wants a sentiment of, “He was chosen because he’s black” to overshadow activities. In our program, students learned about democratic processes, formed stronger relationships, and planned a community project to grow leadership skills, though the “why” was left vague. Participants did not question their shared purpose.

## Moving Forward

Responsibility for cultivating beliefs in ethnic/racial equality, developing a disposition of inclusivity, and reducing prejudice in youth lies in national and Vermont’s educational institutions. The Vermont Agency of Education, school districts, colleges of education, and other teacher-training programs articulate expectations, evaluate educators, regulate school systems, establish curricular content and skills, and require assessments. The University of Vermont’s Urban Partnership Program with Christopher Columbus High School in Bronx, NY is a significant investment in affirmative action, in which college-preparation resources are provided to low-income, high-school children of color, who, in turn, bring much-needed diverse perspectives to campus. Last year the adoption of Act 1 (H.3) by the Vermont Legislature “to create the Ethnic and Social Equity Standards Advisory Working Group” with the purpose of advising “the State Board of Education on the adoption of ethnic and social equity studies standards into statewide educational standards” was a significant move forward that can substantially revise preK-12 curriculum and other school practices. The provision for teacher training will include “how best to address bias incidents” and involve preparation for increasing students’ cultural competency and teaching “the history, contribution, and perspectives of ethnic groups and social groups” (p. 1), potentially based on new standards adopted by the State Board of Education, expected in June 2022.

Very few, if any, Vermont schools currently maintain a workforce with these skills. As in all educational reform, much of the implementation of Act 1 rests in the hands of local school administrators: developing staff capacity, supervising classroom instruction, and evaluating progress. How will those in charge become champions of this work, and not get distracted by other priorities or the latest trends? How will they learn to connect ethnic/racial justice to all aspects of the school system, and who will challenge their biases? What tools will measure educator effectiveness in cultural competence and perspective-taking of diverse ethnic and social groups? Who will be responsible for this assessment?

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Criticisms aside, the Vermont Agency of Education (AOE) will need to play a major role in driving Act 1, as when Acts 46 and 77 came into law. The Agency, guided by the Ethnic and Social Equity Standards Advisory Working Group, can revise expectations for teachers' initial licensure and renewal, offer professional development, and provide assessment tools. The Integrated Field Review (IFR), in which practicing educators and AOE officials spend a day in each public school on a three-year cycle, could be expanded to review evidence of cultural competency. Confining Act 1 to just one of the five Educational Quality Standards evaluated in the IFR, such as to "Safe and Healthy Schools," would be shortsighted. The other areas, Academic Proficiency, Personalized Learning, High Quality Staffing, and Financial Efficiencies, all can be measures of the impact of Act 1 on a school district. For

example, will the IFR expect evidence of devoting funds towards ethnic and social equity? In addition, will the State Board of Education recommend that the AOE and/or institutions of higher education complete the expansive curriculum revision envisioned by the Legislature? Or will they outsource the work to a private contractor, as occurred when considering special education reform and contracting with the Boston-based District Management Group in 2017, whose recommendations were included in Act 173 the following year. Outsourcing the creation of multicultural, anti-racist education programs and interventions risks alienating both Vermonters with pertinent expertise as well as those who oppose such school changes, and would need to be a carefully considered course of action by the Ethnic and Social Equity Standards Advisory

Working Group and the Vermont Agency of Education, the latter for which responsibility will eventually land. Looking towards the years ahead, will the Agency require that state and federal grant monies be contingent on making progress towards Act 1?

We believe that regularly involving adults of color in school life to build relationships with students and staff is essential to Act 1. Schools with predominantly white populations can connect with local and state organizations to identify qualified mentors, people of color who can support or join a school community. Our next collaboration has expanded in this direction. Beginning in January 2020, Culcleasure has devoted one day each week at Randolph Union High School as a consultant to the Racial Justice and Environmental Injustice classes. We discussed forming affinity groups for students of color, but felt this step was premature. In contrast to our approach in Chittenden County, Culcleasure made the decision to first establish relationships with staff and students in classroom settings, instead of starting a mentoring group right away. The yearlong project in the Racial Justice class – organizing the annual statewide Student Anti-racism Conference in April 2020 – will have benefitted from Culcleasure's direct input.

The lack of racial diversity across most of the state is a real problem in developing cultural competence among educators and students. Teaching America's multicultural heritage may be attainable with adequate curriculum revision and training, but developing dispositions of ethnic/racial equality in white youth requires ongoing contact with people of color. This problem also pervades more diverse regions of the country as a result of housing discrimination and opposition to school desegregation. The 2007 U.S. Supreme Court



ruling, *Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*, specifically prohibited district integration based primarily on race. Yet the need for laws like Act 1 nationally remains all too real. Last year the Southern Poverty Law Center reported a spike in the incidence of threats and violence towards children of color. Vermonters are not immune to white-supremacist beliefs. How will teachers begin to think critically about their biases? How will they confront the intersection of white privilege and poverty? Do students who don MAGA insignia harbor feelings of racial prejudice and xenophobia, and, if so, what is the school's response? What is the state's response?

Absent an ethnically/racially diverse student body and staff, Vermont's predominantly white school districts will need to look to build relationships with people of color to advance the goals of Act 1. Vermont's institutions, including the Agency of Education, teacher-education programs, grassroots organizations, and grant-giving foundations, can lead these efforts by attracting qualified and experienced people of color to work in this capacity. Social-justice activists are uniquely positioned to advise these institutions as well as school districts. Outright Vermont's success in reaching school personnel and children can be a model for implementing Act 1. Their Youth Speakers Bureau and staff have trained educators and students to advise and help create schools that are "safe, supportive, and affirming to all students regardless of their perceived or actual gender and sexual identity" (2019). Requiring districts to partake in similar staff training, with the purpose of revising curriculum to include multicultural perspectives, combat racism, and foster cultural competence, could help achieve the law's intent.

Not every community has positive feelings towards their school system. Developing trust through open communication and shared goals in other areas, such as building a new playground or ensuring all students learn to read by third grade, should come before implementing Act 1 at the school level, or run the risk of white community members blaming people of color for unwanted "radical" change. Restorative practices at public forums can offset the bureaucratic atmosphere of School Board meetings. Top-down agenda setting, limited time for public comment, and other procedural norms are not designed to promote dialogue, and thus not a conducive forum for promoting ethnic/social equity. Building bridges between the district and the community could avert potential backlash against antiracist education and the other provisions of Act 1.

Recognizing that children struggle to learn when experiencing hunger or homelessness, public schools and mental-health agencies have provided therapeutic and family services in attempts to reduce its impact. Act 1 includes a provision to challenge socioeconomic bias in schools, but not to question the institutional economic inequality that causes this disparity. Learning the history and continuation of discrimination and injustice will invariably involve students thinking critically about the status quo. While schools can impart college and career readiness, regularly involving representatives from social-justice organizations can provide students the tools needed for working towards positive change. Further, not teaching about the "history, contribution, and perspectives" of people with working class and low-income backgrounds, such as the labor movement, and the hardships and bias they endure will deepen resentment towards the mission of Act 1 and, more ominously, towards other ethnic/racial groups.

Returning to the Boys Group and our initial questions, how to support youth of color in an overwhelmingly white school environment, and how are leadership and a healthy sense of pride developed, we only offer a starting point. We recognize that, despite our ideals of peace and justice, we only made a tiny inroad for a small number of children, on which the larger impact is not known. That time and effort should not be discounted, however. Culcleaseure offered students a space of their own to set norms, envision a community project, and speak their truth on topics rarely included in the classroom. While not explicitly discussed, the Boys Group cemented friendships among the participants and directly supported students of color in a predominantly white school. Activities were not designed to develop pride in their ethnic

heritage. We also acknowledge the limits of the school itself – its very environment may cause students of color to be unsafe. Thus they may not be honest in sharing their experience, which in itself may be hard to put to words, especially for younger children. In addition, we are reminded that educators must not misinterpret students’ responses or pathologize individual students or their culture/ethnicity. Instead they need to seek out greater understanding from minority perspectives, namely, by requesting the expertise of Vermont’s institutions who collaborate with adults of color in leading Act 1. Their knowledge will also be needed in curriculum revision and to address bias and racism in the schools; white educators would be presumptuous to believe this can be managed in-house. This can begin with the Vermont Agency of Education recommending organizations for this critical work, in support of school districts making inroads and building trust in their communities. Their consultation for addressing incidents of bias and acts of racism

can also guide school leaders in taking appropriate steps for addressing the issues, utilizing restorative-justice methods, and providing diversity education for the perpetrators of wrongdoing.

Finally, it is not the responsibility of people of color to educate whites. No educator should place a student (or adult) in the position of hearing or speaking about matters of racism, inequality, and injustice in a class discussion or community meeting, without fully disclosing days in advance, the extent of the topic planned. The educator must explain the role requested for the student to fill, even if this means just attending class as usual. The educator needs to solicit the student’s consent to participate and his/her feedback on the plan. Together they must discuss concerns raised and consider other strategies that would make the student feel more comfortable with the proposed plan. Activities created by committed students, educators, and government officials to involve and benefit local families and residents can reshape climate and build the foundation that Act 1 requires. It is the responsibility of Vermont’s institutions of education and government to change people’s hearts and minds, to teach the history of injustice, and to promote the perspectives of people of all backgrounds. We hope teachers and administrators understand that, even if they feel discomfort or fear, institutional power belongs to them. We are counting on them to take risks in this work. Communication efforts with parents/guardians who lack social, political, and economic capital need to grow, especially in middle and high schools, notifying them when problems arise and seeking to alleviate the discomfort this causes. Finding effective

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alternatives to suspension is critical to support students together, particularly since children of color are suspended at disproportionate rates, despite their small Vermont population (Diaz, 2015). School staff representing multiple levels (administration, classroom teachers, interventionists, social workers, etc.) meeting with marginalized families where they are, modeling vulnerability, and taking action to improve their children's learning and social experience at school will build much-needed trust. Staff must leave behind the belief that they have all the answers and understand that, even within families struggling the most, lies the potential for untapped knowledge, wisdom, and skills that can improve educational outcomes and experiences for all stakeholders.

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