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Doing Our Work: Addressing Racially Based Conflict in Communication Sciences and Disorders Programs

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For many Black Americans, the year 2020 can be accurately described as a pandemic within a pandemic (Sanders, 2020). In Sanders' description, the first pandemic refers to racial violence towards Black people, most notably the killings of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, and Breonna Taylor, whereas the second refers to the COVID-19 virus that disproportionately harmed and killed Black people. The events of 2020 sparked advocacy, activism, and demands for justice, particularly for Black people, by people across the United States and beyond. Many professional organizations and companies followed the public interest and issued statements denouncing racism.

The American Speech, Language, Hearing Association (ASHA) was one of the professional organizations that issued a statement about racism in May 2020. In fact, ASHA issued two statements about racism. The first public statement by ASHA was not well received by members of the Communication Sciences and Disorders (CSD) academic and professional community who pushed for ASHA to issue a clearer anti-racism statement and acknowledgement of the historic underrepresentation and marginalization of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) students and professionals. These demands led to a revised statement by ASHA in June 2020, listening sessions, focused conversations, panel discussions, and presentations by ASHA and other organizations to discuss racism in the profession and the need to recruit more diverse student populations in academic programs. A recurring theme in these discussions and presentations was the historic underrepresentation and marginalization of BIPOC students in CSD professions and academic programs and the need to recruit, admit, support, and graduate more of them.

The historically low enrollment of BIPOC students in CSD undergraduate and graduate programs has been well documented in the literature (Bellon-Hard & Weinbaum, 2017; Ginsberg, 2018a; Ginsberg, 2018b; Saenz, 2000; Saenz et al., 1998). The ASHA Education Survey Data (ASHA, 2020) shows that approximately 31% of undergraduate students were BIPOC in 2019-2020. In 2019-2020, the percentage of BIPOC students was lower in graduate speech-language pathology (SLP) and audiology programs (23% and 18%, respectively). In Mississippi, where we are, the low enrollment of BIPOC students mirrors ASHA's national data. For example, in 2019-2020, 27% of undergraduate students were BIPOC. In the graduate programs, just 12% (11 of 92) of first year SLP graduate students and 10% (1 of 10) of first year audiology graduate students in Mississippi were BIPOC. Of the total enrollment, 11% (21 of 179) of SLP graduate students and 15% (5 of 32) of audiology graduate students were BIPOC (ASHA, 2019a).

There is also an extreme shortage of BIPOC faculty members in CSD programs. According to ASHA's most recent profile of ASHA Members (2019b), approximately 85% of ASHA members that have a Ph.D. and work at colleges or universities are white. Approximately 7% are Asian and less than 6% are Black or African American. Very few are multiracial and American Indian or Alaska Native and none are Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. Finally, shortages of BIPOC individuals have been documented in ASHA leadership positions. Muhammad (2020) reported that over 75% of the leadership roles (e.g., board of directors, presidents, academic department chairpersons) in ASHA and ASHA-affiliated CSD programs are held by individuals who are white.

The events of 2020 and the profession's awakening to historical inequities in our academic programs have inspired professional organizations to make plans or continue plans to address systemic racism and the underrepresentation of BIPOC students in CSD academic programs. For

example, ASHA's 2021 Public Policy Agenda, which "identifies the top public policy priorities for CSD professions of audiology and speech-language pathology in the areas of health care and schools, as well as issues impacting professional practice and workforce, and patients, clients, and students" includes "recruit and support a diverse population of undergraduate and graduate students" in CSD programs as a priority (ASHA, 2021, p. 10). Likewise, other affiliated organizations have strategic plans (e.g., Council of Academic Programs in Communication Sciences and Disorders 2018-2019 strategic plan), task forces and planned activities that involve exploring the diversity of applicants and student populations in CSD programs. Additionally, academic programs have planned or implemented initiatives that promote more diverse student bodies (e.g., holistic admissions, waiving Graduate Record Examination scores). It appears that the coming years will involve more intentional efforts to recruit and enroll more BIPOC students in CSD programs. These efforts will likely lead to increases in the enrollment of underrepresented students in at least in some programs.

Conflicts based on race and ethnicity have been documented in CSD programs. For example, Ginsberg (2018a; 2018b) documented that microaggressions and marginalization were commonly experienced by Black graduate students in CSD programs. Anecdotally, racially based conflicts experienced by BIPOC students were detailed in the listening sessions sponsored by ASHA in July 2020 so there is documented and undocumented evidence that conflicts based on race occur in our programs. Even with people's best efforts to be anti-racist, racially based conflicts are likely to continue to occur in our programs because racism is systemic, coded and has been normalized by long histories of inequitable practices. As academic programs prepare to admit and educate more diverse student populations, particularly at a time when the country is largely divided, it is important for programs to anticipate the occurrence of racially based conflicts and to provide its faculty members with tools to address conflicts that may occur between students. The purpose of this paper is to discuss racially based conflict management strategies that can be applied to CSD academic programs and perhaps, CSD work settings. In this paper, we describe a specific incident in our CSD graduate program, detail how we addressed it, and reflect on what we learned with the goal of helping other programs who may have similar situations.

The Context

Of the four graduate SLP programs in Mississippi, three are Predominately White Institutions (PWI) and one is a Historically Black University (HBU). The program at the HBU, Jackson State University (JSU), enrolls the highest number of Black students, making our graduate program in SLP the most diverse in the state. Founded as a private church school for 20 newly freed slaves, the now public, research-intensive university has a historic mission of educating a diverse student population. Likewise, the SLP graduate program has a commitment to preparing future speech-language pathologists from diverse backgrounds. The program was erected and initially funded through funding from a multimillion dollar lawsuit against the State of Mississippi for unequal funding to the state's HBUs. Embedded in the Ayers lawsuit settlement were expectations for enrolling racially diverse populations in the new programs. Both the university and the department's unique origins show a particular interest in intentionally educating diverse student populations.

The department's graduate program is a traditional, full-time program that enrolls cohorts that typically include 15-20 students. A typical cohort includes students who are Black (approximately 40% based on the most recent enrollment data) and White (approximately 60% based on the most recent enrollment data) who are from all regions of the country but mostly from the South and particularly from the state, and from Historical Black Colleges/Universities and PWIs. Typically, students in the program are in their early to mid 20s but there are usually a few non-traditional students who, in most cases, are pursuing SLP as a second career. The majority of the students have undergraduate degrees in CSD but each cohort usually has a few students who have undergraduate degrees in other areas.

The Conflict

The racially based conflict in our program began with a Facebook post by a white student directed toward a group of BIPOC students who attended a march in the capital city. The post led to noticeable division in the classrooms and in other spaces shared by the students. For example, classroom spaces that were once integrated now had BIPOC students on one side and white students on the other side. The issue carried over to an off-campus social event attended by the students at some point after the Facebook post. Individuals unaffiliated with the program but were knowledgeable of the march and Facebook post also attended the social event where the issue escalated to an act of aggression towards several BIPOC students. Upon returning to school, no apologies were offered to the BIPOC students which further escalated the situation. By the time the program director was informed about the situation by one of the involved students, the ensuing issues were already threatening to divide a close-knit program.

How We Addressed the Situation: Our Work

Once the program administration became knowledgeable about the situation, immediate action was taken to utilize campus resources and minimize harm to students and the program. This included connecting BIPOC students with the university's counseling center to address the harm that racism causes and engaging with the university's chief diversity officer to plan how to address the issue within the program. Together, along with the faculty, the chief diversity officer (2nd author) and the program director (1st author) devised a plan to bring students together in a series of activities that included open, honest conversation. The first action taken by the program was to implement a seating chart in the classroom setting. The seating chart was not intended to be punitive but to foster collegiality within the classroom, minimize marginalization of certain students, make the teaching and learning space more comfortable for faculty and students, and create an environment that reflected our university's and program's core values. The second action taken was an email by the program director to the cohort of students acknowledging the conflict, its impact, and a plan to address it. The content of the email is in the Appendix.

We coined the steps that we took to address our issues as "our work," inspired by a television show, *Iyanla: Fix My Life*, that was popular at the time. This show features a life coach and a relationship expert who helps people fix problems in their life. The steps that they take to resolve their problems are referred to on the show as their work. Without too much contemplation, we thought this to be appropriate nomenclature because like those on the television show, we had work to do to fix the problems that we had. For the next month and a half, we planned and

implemented activities that were designed to intentionally engage our students in dialogues about racism and foster collaboration and cooperation.

Although most of the activities of “our work” were faculty designed, they were implemented and led by the students in the cohort. The program director’s role in each session was to frame the work, introduce the activity and remind students of the intended goal. The success and meaningfulness of the work, though, was largely the students’ responsibility. The program director and faculty members were, by design, not present during the activities and discussion in order to promote honest and open communication between the students. Each session ended with the program director returning to hear an update from the students as well as their progress towards their goals and to provide information about the next session. For all of our sessions and activities, we adopted some of the ground rules provided in Horton-Ikard, Muñoz, Thomas-Tate and Keller-Bell (2009) to ensure that the discussions were authentic but respectful. These ground rules, taken directly from the article, included:

- You should complete the assigned readings and assignments before the class during which the material will be discussed. Be prepared to describe the readings, as well as provide insight and interpretation about the readings.
- I ask that you treat each other respectfully and maintain confidentiality on any personal issues or opinions shared in class, and I will do the same.
- During classroom discussions, try to speak from your own experience instead of putting your own spin on someone else’s experience. Avoid personal attacks on someone else’s beliefs and values.
- You should respectfully ask any questions and make any comments in class that will help you better understand the material.
- It is okay to have diverging opinions on controversial topics but always respond critically and analytically to the literature and readings assigned for the course.
- Please monitor your body language and nonverbal responses as they may convey disrespect in the same manner that words can.

Our month-long intervention included five major activities: (1) Teamwork Inventory, (2) Use of Social Media and Rules of Engagement, (3) Campus Scavenger Hunt, (4) Movie Day and Discussion, and (5) Advocacy. These are described next.

Teamwork Inventory

In our first session, we provided a teamwork inventory to the students for each student to complete. The inventory asked students to indicate their level of agreement for various statements such as, “All of the students in my cohort feel comfortable expressing their concerns to other students in the cohort.” No guiding principles or commentary were given to the students as to not influence their perception of the dynamics in their cohort. After each student completed the inventory, student leaders in the cohort were selected to compile results and present them to the class. The students were then instructed to use the results to establish goals for “our work” or areas of focus.

The Use of Social Media and Rules of Engagement

Given that our issue involved a post on Facebook, we thought that it was important to include a session that focused on social media. We invited Dr. Rachel Powell, a former president of the Mississippi Speech-Language, Hearing Association and a SLP representative on the ASHA Advisory Council to our program to do a presentation on the appropriate uses of social media. The presentation was designed to help students think more intentionally about what they post on social media platforms.

Following the presentation, the program director introduced the Rules of Engagement activity. In short, the activity involved the students having discussions about how they wished to treat each other, be treated, communicate, participate, cooperate, and support each other. After a discussion in which all students participated, the students were tasked with coming up with fully agreed upon Rules of Engagement. The students – based on their discussion – established Rules of Engagement for the following areas: communication, social media, classroom decorum, showing mutual respect, group celebrations, professional development, and group projects. The Rules of Engagement were presented to the program director (when she returned), and then were typed and signed by all students to indicate agreement. Copies of the rules were supplied to each student for future reference. The students were informed that if issues arose that necessitated modifications of the Rules, they were responsible for reconvening and modifying the Rules to the agreement of all students. The Rules established by the groups are as follow:

1. **Communication:**
Communication will take place on a common platform in a timely manner ensuring that all classmates are informed (e.g., Buddy system).
2. **Social Media:**
THINK and Scroll on!
3. **Classroom Decorum:**
Be present both physically and mentally.
4. **Showing Mutual Respect:**
When we differ, always find the common ground.
Always keep an open flexible mind when people introduce new or different ideas.
5. **Group Celebrations:**
Be humble enough to inquire about others' accomplishments and don't get lost in comparisons.
6. **Professional Development:**
When one looks good, we all look good.
Know when to be silent.
7. **Group Projects:**
We will strive to be present, honest, open, flexible, and available group members.

We will delegate task at the beginning and set a deadline.

As shown, the students created rules that addressed some of the conflicts they were having including communication that typically excluded BIPOC students, social media use, respect for differences, collaboration and cooperation, and competition.

Campus Scavenger Hunt

BIPOC students in the program expressed a desire for all students to learn more and show greater appreciation for the history and status of the university as an HBU. Anecdotally, we have heard from BIPOC students over the years that it is offensive when non-BIPOC students attend HBUs without showing care or reverence for the history and historical designation of the institution. To foster knowledge of our HBU and to work towards the program's goal of better cooperation and collaboration, a campus scavenger hunt was designed. Students were assigned to groups, making sure to give students opportunities to work with students with whom they normally do not work and given start and end times. Upon reporting to the department, students were given riddles to solve to lead them to various locations on campus and instructions (e.g., take a group picture at each location that you find and email it to the program; start and end times). Groups worked together to solve as many riddles and submit as many on-location photos as possible. The winning group received a prize provided by the program. Submitted pictures were used to create a slideshow, which was shared with the cohort as a keepsake. Examples of the riddles are below.

The oldest building on campus,
Houses the MJW Center.
The Dr. Rod Paige exhibit is there too.
Rock in the white chairs before you enter.

- *Take a group picture here.*
- *Email the photo to: commdisordersgrad@jsums.edu*

This center celebrates civil rights.
Located right on the edge of JSU.
1017 JRL Street is where it is.
Its name sounds a bit like Kung Fu.

- *Take a group picture here.*
- *Email the photo to: commdisordersgrad@jsums.edu*

Have you heard of MADDRAMA?
A nationally renowned performance troupe.
Find the stage on which they perform.
And then go google the group.

- *Take a group picture here.*
- *Email the photo to: commdisordersgrad@jsums.edu*

Movie Day and Discussions Centered Around Diversity

For this activity, we showed the movie *Hidden Figures* (2016) and used a discussion guide titled, *(un)Hidden Figures Discussion Guide*, published by The Ohio State University (n.d.) to guide the students' discussions. We selected questions and prompts to help students to reflect on the notions of *hidden* and *invisible* and how these intersect with race and gender. The movie successfully sparked discussions about racism, privilege and the role of allies, among other topics.

Advocacy Activities

We ended “our work” with a final session on advocacy. We circled back to Dr. Rachel Powell's presentation in which she discussed how she uses her social media to primarily advocate for professional issues important to her. We began the final session with a discussion about common interests. We asked students to think about and share issues about which they are passionate. For the final activity, we assigned students to groups with the task to use resources on the ASHA website to find common issues that were of interest to all group members. After identifying issues, students worked together to learn more about their issues and to plan advocacy activities. Issues included increasing professional diversity and cultural understanding, the use of culturally appropriate assessment tools for clients from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, affordability of higher education, forgiveness of graduate student loans, early hearing detection and intervention, and autism awareness. As shown, without being prompted, students were attracted to issues that impact BIPOC people and individuals with differences or disabilities. Advocacy activities selected by the students included using social media to share accurate information, not perpetuating fake news, getting involved in local organizations, writing and submitting an op-ed, contacting state or federal legislators, among other actions.

Did It Work?

While we did not collect formal data to measure the effectiveness of our conflict management strategies, informal feedback from the students indicated the sessions were successful in accomplishing our intended goal. Faculty and students remarked that the sessions led to noticeable steps towards restoration in our program. The students showed high levels of engagement in each activity and appeared to enjoy the activities. Several of the activities had lasting impacts. For example, the Rules of Engagement were embraced by the students and governed their interactions throughout their time in the program. It was common to see students leave complimentary notes for other students on the whiteboard in the students' workroom – reflecting their rule #5. The Rules of Engagement were so successful that the faculty created its own set of rules that year, and the activity was incorporated in the program of the next several cohorts. The scavenger hunt activity was reportedly enjoyed by the students. Students reported that they enjoyed working with their classmates to complete the activity while learning more about the university. The students also appeared to enjoy the *Hidden Figures* activity. Most students had not seen the movie before the class activity and were reportedly moved by it and the following discussion. The advocacy activity was memorable. After doing “our work,” our students were able to continue to cooperate and collaborate with each other to focus on their areas of advocacy. As part of their autism advocacy, a student purchased an autism awareness bracelet for each student in the cohort. The picture below shows each student wearing their bracelet. As a symbol of unity, the students decided

to pose for the picture with their arms outstretched in a circle symbolizing wholeness and restoration.



Reflecting on What We Learned from Our Work

We end this paper with lessons learned from doing “our work” with the hopes that our experience will help other programs. After reflecting on our racially based conflict, we offer the following recommendations to programs that may experience racially based conflicts among their students.

1. ***Commit to anti-racism.*** Programs should explicitly commit to anti-racism by explicitly condoning racism (e.g., through official statements; see the University of Minnesota’s Department of Speech-Language-Hearing Sciences for an example), advocating for anti-racist policies and programs with CSD educational programs, incorporating the topics of race and racism into CSD course content, teaching from an anti-racist pedagogical approach, and linking anti-racism activities to the larger community (Kishimoto, 2016).
2. ***Anticipate and be ready.*** It is not uncommon for conflicts to emerge when people who have differences are brought together. Our situation showed us that the likelihood of conflicts may increase during politically heightened periods in the country such as

presidential elections and demonstrations. Programs should prepare to respond to racially based conflicts by offering ongoing trainings for faculty or maintaining relationships with university resources such as the chief diversity officer or the counseling center.

3. ***Foster trust and create a welcoming environment for all students.*** We realize that we would have not been able to intervene if one of the BIPOC students did not feel comfortable enough to disclose the conflict. This was possible because we created a welcoming environment for the students in the program, checked in with them often and asked them to check in with us. Black students have reported feeling socially isolated in CSD graduate programs (Ginsberg, 2018a; Ginsberg, 2018b) or feeling that faculty members are unapproachable (Saenz et al., 1998). In order for BIPOC students to feel comfortable reporting racially based conflicts that they experience, they must trust that they have genuinely supportive faculty and staff members in the program. Programs must recognize that all students need to have a sense of belonging and work to foster trust and create welcoming environments for all students.
4. ***Align actions with core values.*** An appreciation for diversity is one of the core values in our program so it was important that the steps we took to address the situation aligned with our values. Ignoring the situation would have been incompatible with our values. If a program and university have a core value of appreciation of diversity, faculty members in programs should make sure that how they respond to racially based conflicts aligns with an appreciation of diversity.
5. ***Move beyond silence.*** It is difficult for some people to talk about racism or conflict. We knew that if we would have kept quiet and ignored the situation, it would have further harmed students and the program. Programs must be committed to recognizing conflict and addressing it. When conflict arises, it is how we respond that determines what happens next in our programs.
6. ***Name it.*** Part of addressing conflict involves naming it. We were not afraid to describe the conflict as being racially based. We were not afraid to use words like racism, bullying, and white privilege. It is important for programs to use precise terminology when addressing conflict as to not minimize the conflict or the impact that it has on BIPOC students.
7. ***Consider the role of social media in racially based conflict.*** With the increasing use of social media, it is likely that conflicts will be buried in social media as was ours. This makes it more difficult for programs to be aware of conflicts between students. Shortly after our situation, our program adopted a social media policy for the graduate program. The social media policy has clear expectations for what is considered as misuse of social media and violations of the University's code of conduct. Programs may want to consider creating a social media policy that clearly identifies racial bullying and intimidation as misuses of social media.
8. ***Use activities and resources that are tailored to the needs of your students.*** We believe that our success in addressing our conflict was tied to the design and use of activities and resources that were tailored to the needs of our students. The faculty worked together to identify issues and goals (i.e., what we hoped to accomplish) and planned our sessions based on those. Certainly, there are kits and packaged activities available for programs to use but programs should consider making sure that the activities address the needs of its students.
9. ***Use conflict as a teachable moment.*** We used our conflict to teach our students about racism, systemic racism, discrimination, implicit bias, and inequities and privilege. It was

important to discuss these concepts in the context of the situation and provide students with the terminology to describe what they were experiencing, witnessing or participating in.

10. ***Involve students in the planning.*** Admittedly, we quickly – but intentionally – planned our activities to address an issue that we feared would threaten the collegiality of the cohort if left unaddressed for too long. Our intervention was largely faculty-designed and as we organized, we did not involve students in the planning. If we find ourselves in a similar situation in the future and have to do this again, we plan to engage student leaders and include them in the planning process for greater assurance that the activities and strategies would have the intended impact with their peers.

While we were not thrilled about the occurrence of the racially based conflict in our program, in the end, we are proud that we did “our work.” We are especially proud that as a result of the conflict that we experienced in our program, our program has become more intentional about articulating our anti-racism position and aligning our program activities, expectations of members of our program, and our conflict resolution strategies with our core values that center around diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice.

Disclosures

Brandi L. Newkirk-Turner and Thomas K. Hudson are both salaried employees at Jackson State University.

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Appendix

Program Director Email to Students

I greet you with pride and an unwavering commitment to your educational experience here at Jackson State University. It has been a pleasure watching each of you develop in your speech-language pathology knowledge and skills. It gives me pride to know that you have entrusted us to be good stewards over your education and that we have. When I reflect on the core values of Jackson State University and on the certification standards of the American Speech-Language Hearing Association, I undoubtedly believe that our role as faculty members is to help you to use your head (your knowledge, intellect, the talents of your mind), your hands (your clinical skills), and your heart (humanity, respect, integrity) to become the best speech-language pathologist that you can be. I believe that so far, my colleagues and I have provided you with rigorous and challenging coursework (head) and solid clinical experiences (hands).

The “heart” work has been a little more difficult. We have been challenged this year by external and internal issues and incidents that have exposed shortcomings, lapses in judgment, inflexibility, and indifference to the feelings of others. These issues and incidents have caused pain and discomfort for some members of our department – including faculty and staff members. Turning an eye or an ear is not the answer. Even a seating chart is not the answer. We must dig deep within ourselves and work – harder than we have ever worked – to be the culturally sensitive, kind, compassionate, cooperative, and collaborative professionals – who value and promote diversity – that we are called to be.

So, let’s roll up our sleeves and get to work! I have worked with members of the faculty, the Dean’s office, and the larger JSU community to plan activities that will foster teamwork, collaboration and cooperation, awareness, and cultural sensitivity. Over the next few weeks, all students will participate in various *required* activities and learning experiences. Each activity and experience is designed to cultivate a more comfortable learning environment for students in your cohort and to help you to demonstrate ASHA’s required knowledge and skills related to cultural competence.

Please clear your schedule for the next three Fridays (July 14, July 21, July 28) for required department activities. Let us not consider this to be extra work. Let us consider this to be very necessary, important work that is integral to our professional preparation. More information will be forthcoming. Be on the lookout for the emails.

Thank you for your assistance and for an open mind and heart.