Fighting Inequities of Design:
A Conversation with Shaun Nelms

Valerie L. Marsh

Abstract

From his perspective as superintendent of the East Upper and Lower Schools in Rochester, New York, and as director of the University of Rochester's Center for Urban Education Success, Dr. Shaun Nelms shares his experience of growing up in a nearby segregated city and discusses inequitable education, his district's partnership with the University of Rochester, and the need for culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) education (New York State Education Department [NYSED], 2018; Paris, 2012) to transform structural racist school cultures, particularly in underserved communities and segregated cities. During this conversation with Dr. Valerie Marsh, Nelms's colleague and the assistant director of their research center, Dr. Nelms discusses what it takes to expand CR-S education (NYSED, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014) beyond one school and into one of the most segregated counties in the nation. In order for CR-S pedagogy to achieve true equity, it must be for all students, not just those attending school in urban areas. Dr. Nelms speaks about how he, his fellow superintendents, and others have collaborated to make CR-S theory a reality in their region (Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014).

Keywords: culturally responsive and sustaining education, antiracism, curriculum, equity, school transformation

Introduction

This conversation between urban education leader Dr. Shaun Nelms and his colleague Dr. Valerie Marsh provides insights from Dr. Nelms's history, his perspective on school transformation and education research, and his comments about the most recent initiative of the Center for Urban Education Success (CUES), which is to create an antiracist curriculum for their region of New York State. The research conducted at CUES involves urban school transformation, both nationally and at the East Upper and Lower Schools (hereafter East) in Rochester, New York. Since 2014, the University of Rochester and East have been involved in a partnership to reimagine the school, which is sanctioned by the New York State Education Department. CUES's antiracist curricular work extends beyond East and into the county, region, and country. Drs. Nelms and Marsh held a conversation to discuss this culturally responsive and sustaining (CR-S) education initiative (NYSED, 2018; Paris, 2012; Paris & Alim, 2014), systemic racism, and education's role in eradicating it.

Valerie Marsh: There are moments in our lives that can crystallize our thinking and direct (or maybe redirect) us along our professional path. Can you describe one of those?

Shaun Nelms: I often tell a story of my siblings. It was my senior year in high school in Buffalo; my sister came home as a junior and my younger brother came home as an eighth grader. We went through that same routine of pulling out our textbooks, covering them with brown paper, decorating them, talking about our classes, and my sister pulled out the same math text as my younger brother. Two kids, my brother who was being challenged as an eighth grader at a magnet school, and my sister, an 11th grader at a high school focused on business development, who was being taught math with a middle school textbook. I don't know much about business, but I do know math matters, right? It was in that moment I realized that this notion that kids are successful academically solely because of their hard work or because of the whole bootstrapping mentality—it really was not true. We were in a system in Buffalo that decided early on which kids would be challenged academically and which kids would just be given enough to meet the minimum state standards. It was a turning point for me in understanding the inequities in society, the inequities in education,

and how they are by design and not by chance. When I got into this position at East, I wanted to make sure we didn't replicate that.

Valerie Marsh: Tell me about East, the school where you are superintendent, and what led to the University of Rochester partnership.

Shaun Nelms: Twenty or thirty years ago, East was once one of the highest performing schools within the city school district, but prior to our intervention in 2015, East had become an "out-of-time school," as designated by the state, meaning they had tried multiple interventions and thrown a lot of money at the school, and none of it sustained itself in a way that gave confidence that the school would be able to progress year after year. To prevent forced closure, there was an option for the school to be overseen by an independent receiver—in this case, the University of Rochester. At the time, East had a projected graduation rate of 29%. There were other data points, like a 52% dropout or push-out rate in high school, and attendance rates in the '60s. Again, you could either say these are issues of kids and parents not valuing education, or you can say the system decided a long time before those kids entered that school who would survive and make it through, and who would not make it and would fall victim to the streets. That is not the type of environment education should be promoting. It's also not the environment the University of Rochester wanted to see continue within our city.

Valerie Marsh: Now that East and the university are more than six years into the partnership, can you give us an idea of the change that's taken place thus far?

Shaun Nelms: There are still no gates, no pre-entry requirements to come to East, and I am happy that, six years later, we've moved to an 85% graduation rate. We're once again one of the highest performing schools in the district. But I'm not satisfied with that, because if other schools aren't learning from these experiences of how to change, restructure, and transform their environments, then we will, yet again, repeat what happened to me as a child, when you had some schools being high performing and other schools left behind.

Valerie Marsh: What is the role of CUES, your research center, in all of this?

Shaun Nelms: It's critically important that the work we do at CUES is designed in a way that will push information out to other urban settings, so that any kid, regardless of zip code or historic structural inequities, will have the opportunity to receive a great education. It's what drives me now. This is my new turning point—how do I get this information out into [the] hands of leaders who want to lead change with others, but just don't know how?

Valerie Marsh: One way is through curriculum. Our center is very focused and you are very focused on antiracist curriculum, not only at East but countywide. Can you tell the story of what led up to this effort? Why now?

Shaun Nelms: I first want to honor and say that, for many communities of color, the issues that we are seeing nationally and internationally have been well-documented for decades. They've been ignored—often characterized as playing the race card, or "people are lazy," or "they're not doing [the] work." But recently there's been some acknowledgment by non-communities of color in saying, "You know what? Maybe they weren't lying this whole time. Maybe I need to rethink my role in perpetuating ignorance by claiming ignorance." So, I think our education community here in Monroe County, which comprises 18 different districts, was ready to have some honest conversations about how we look in terms of our segregation by race, ethnicity, and economics. And then we had the homicide of Daniel Prude, a Black man who was visiting relatives here. He had a mental health break and he died, unarmed, in police custody. There was video, much like George Floyd, that showed the way in which he was restrained, which ultimately led to his death, and because of it, the entire county erupted. People better understood that this community was more divided than they anticipated or than they wanted to acknowledge. I knew it was time for a disruptive process, and it was going to start with educating our youth. So, in partnership with the superintendents from all 18 county districts, we decided to do something about it. I am so sick of words with no action.

Valerie Marsh: And that action was to create a countywide antiracist curriculum. What were the framing ideas around the curriculum?

Shaun Nelms: We started by asking ourselves, "What can we do to make sure that our students, regardless of zip code, better understand our city, how it developed, and also be informed on how to change it moving forward?" We have to invest in kids, who have the ability to change the future, and not let adults drive it, because we're already at the end of the game. It's also important to say that this curriculum, centered on issues of equity and social justice, is as important for kids in rural and suburban settings as it is for kids in the city, because what happens often is that our students in rural and suburban districts leave those areas having no academic experience with different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and when they go off to college, they often do not major in topics that address those things.

Valerie Marsh: You mentioned the curriculum is locally contextual. Our city has a troubled past . . .

Shaun Nelms: Rochester was one of the first places in the country to have an uprising in the early '60s. In 1964, our city, even before Watts, was protesting against issues in housing, workforce development, and education. There were protests, there was damage, there was civil unrest, there was a police response. What has happened between the 1964 uprising and the recent Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, after Daniel Prude's murder, is what we are going to focus on. We are giving students context for Rochester within the national context leading up to those uprisings, and one of the first things we look at is how words matter. So, in 1964, was it an uprising? Was it a riot? Was it a protest? What do those words mean? What does it mean when the media portrays them differently? You can compare and see the same types of headlines in 2020 with the Black Lives Matter movement. Then, ironically, we actually have an extension activity looking at the U.S. Capitol insurrection in January 2021 and how that was portrayed in the media. You look at racial lines behind how it was portrayed, you look at class lines on how it was portrayed, and you look at political lines of how it was portrayed. Another lesson is actually going to do the same with Hurricane Katrina and how those headlines at times portrayed people as looters and at other times as survivors. So, although they are locally and temporally contextualized, these topics have national and international implications for students as they go through life and strive to analyze complex situations and how things are labeled in ways that benefit some groups and hurt others.

Valerie Marsh: The Rochester City School District is made up primarily of students of color. But many districts in the county have the reverse demographic breakdown, serving primarily white student populations. What did it take, other than timing, to build a wide coalition of educators who aim to resist the systemically racist, segregationist history of the region?

Shaun Nelms: Well, I would hate to say that this would not have happened if Daniel Prude had not died after being in police custody, but if I am honest, I will say it would not have happened if Daniel Prude was not murdered. I say that because I have tried to bring these topics up in the past. It's been a district-by-district decision, or some superintendents have leaned in and others did not. But when this issue re-emerged in Rochester around racial injustice and inequities last summer, some people were comfortable to jump right in, while others were noticeably nervous about how their communities would respond and how they would sell this to their school boards. I really went after the curricular connection to this work and said to them that we, as superintendents, control the curriculum. We, as superintendents, can make a direct alignment between our city's history and the state's U.S. history learning standards. We have to remind them this is history. This is U.S. history. This is our local city history. This is state history, and all kids should know it, understand it, and be able to discuss it moving forward. Once superintendents understood that what they were doing was something they should have been doing all along, it was much easier to lean in. Had I gone out there and said, "This is the moral thing to do," then I am putting my morality above that of others. But helping people understand content and context allowed them to move their school environments. I am just so proud of the Monroe County superintendents who are taking on the fight with their school boards and with certain community members, who are saying things like, "This is a liberal agenda" or "Indoctrination." Next, each superintendent assigned teachers or

curriculum leaders to co-develop the curriculum. That was critically important. I am not going to write this curriculum for you. Those teachers are going to be the experts who will take the capacity they've built collaboratively and then distribute that work back to their districts. That is how we tackle this, and I am excited that we began piloting some of these lessons, beginning [in] April 2021, and that all schools will have the responsibility to teach them in grades 8, 11, and 12 by April 2022. We are excited about that, because this has never been done before.

Valerie Marsh: How are you supporting districts with implementation?

Shaun Nelms: Districts that have a progressive and strategic superintendent need less support because they have already been doing work around creating equity, whether it's in special ed or in Title IX issues or whatever it is, right? For them, this is just part of their overall plan. For districts that are just getting started, they may need more support, because they may be in communities where the school boards may bring pressure, calling this antiracist instruction a "liberal agenda" or "socialism." So, if I'm working with a district where many are scared to say the word "racist" or "antiracist," I have to build capacity with them over time. That's a level of engagement, understanding, and support that our research center can definitely provide. CUES is well positioned since we work so closely with East—a school that has been doing this culturally sustaining work for years. At this point, CUES is leading this work, by example and in consultation with districts to support their leadership development with CR-S curricula (NYSED, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2014). We have the experience of bringing people along, learning, and understanding their processes and their progress while maintaining curricular standards throughout, and so we can help districts that are already there, as well as districts that are just getting started. But we cannot assess where people are. That has to be an internal process.

Valerie Marsh: There's a second project the research center has been working on—the elevatoreducator.org website. Can you speak about that?

Shaun Nelms: We developed elevatededucator.org, which shares some of East's emerging lessons and units that meet CR-S education (NYSED, 2018: Paris & Alim, 2014) expectations, as well as state learning standards. They are pulled from our curriculum and are open-sourced so that folks can access them and get started. The platform provides content for subject areas beyond U.S. history. We have lessons for art, music, science, and history, as well as English and math, and we show examples of how educators can implement a culturally sustaining pedagogical framework in every classroom.

Valerie Marsh: Culturally sustaining education honors a tradition of advocacy, resistance, and scholarship for our students (Paris & Alim, 2014). How do you see the instruction that is being developed in Monroe County and curricula at East as honoring those traditions?

Shaun Nelms: Well, I believe that the curriculum we are developing has a strong student voice. The inquiries are focused on and developed to give kids context first, and then we facilitate conversations that allow them to discuss, argue, and dissent. Then the extension projects have students think about how to pursue their ideas in the world. For example, in a U.S. history unit on resistance to colonization, the final assessment has students explain what further actions a specific oppressed group (of their choosing) should take next in the fight for resistance. This type of assignment is different from students sitting in a classroom, where they are receiving information and taking a test. Instead, these become actionable plans written by kids who choose to take their understandings and beliefs beyond the classroom.

Valerie Marsh: Education scholars are recentering the concept of love in education. I am thinking of Bettina Love (2019), David Kirkland (National Council of Teachers of English, 2020), [and] our own Joanne Larson (2014), for example. What is the place of love in this work?

Shaun Nelms: I had one student say she was sitting in her classroom reading the work of Marcus Garvey and comparing it to Malcolm X. She was listening because her dad, who is Jamaican, always talks about Marcus Garvey. It was the first time that she saw something her dad was talking about at

home being taught in school. She was listening to see if her teacher was correct, but also to be able to correct her father if he was wrong about Garvey's writings. That teacher, knowing that kid was of Jamaican descent, as many kids in the school were, intentionally chose to use Marcus Garvey in comparison to Malcolm X, which showed her loving appreciation of those students and what they needed to see in that lesson that was relevant to them. That's a display of love—knowing your kids, honoring who they are, and going the extra step to have them see themselves in the lessons, in the curriculum, and in the assessment. But love is also fighting against systems that do the complete opposite. If you are truly focused on the development of a child yet you allow systems to damage, hurt, and disenfranchise them, then I would say you are perpetuating hate, right? So, at East, to create a system that perpetuated "the haves and the have-nots," to select kids who were "worthy" of their education and to leave other ones to fend for themselves, like my sister, would not be a display of love. But to fight (at times) against other superintendents, school boards, or community members who want to perpetuate the notion that some kids deserve this while others do not would have gone against everything I morally, ethically, and academically believe in.

Valerie Marsh: You mentioned earlier that maintaining ignorance is a way for people to stay comfortable amidst racism, which perpetuates harmful systems that hurt actual, real children and people. Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (2019) writes about this stance as being racist and the difference between being racist and antiracist. Dr. Love (2019) talks about the difference between being an ally and a co-conspirator. In a recent talk she gave at our university, she said, "What a co-conspirator understands is, *I got to give something up, I got to take a risk*" (Love, 2021). So, I ask you, where's the risk? Where's the skin in the game for this new curriculum and this whole project of urban school transformation and all school transformation?

Shaun Nelms: Let me answer this way. I think people have to give up the excuse that they have been using. I think that, in the past, people have said, "Well, I just didn't know," "I was unsure," "Had I known . . ." or "Hey, how can a white teacher know this?" I say, "In the same way that a Black teacher knows it." To make the assumption that race is the definitive measure of knowledge on a particular construct is ridiculous. But you have to engage in ways that allow you to experience your own ignorance for the purpose of changing it, right? I encourage teachers here [at East] to make a new mistake every single day. As people allow themselves to be vulnerable and ignorant—and in ways that position them to be more competent and effective later on—we have to welcome that, which means you have to give people space and grace in that process. You have to allow people to mess up, to maybe say the wrong things, to ask questions that may seem trivial to you, but to them could be the definitive moment of understanding one perspective over another. From a university standpoint, we have to acknowledge that, perhaps those who have been responsible for leading our education initiatives, their focus needs some retooling. They need to get in the spaces we are trying to support—in schools, in communities—which allows them to create a loving relationship, not just between them and the theory but between them and the practice.

Valerie Marsh: So maybe this next one seems obvious, but what gives you hope in this work?

Shaun Nelms: I think that when you grow up a person of color, you're reminded of inequities since birth—you see it everywhere you go, and you may not be able to explain it or to describe it as a youth, but you see it. You know something is not right. Then, you go to college and you see the same inequities at a different level. It's who has access to college and how they will be influenced professionally moving forward. Then, as an adult, you are reminded, yet again, that these inequities exist, from job promotions or just from professional acknowledgment, or from being marginalized in meetings and a continued sense of being inadequate and being an imposter in these settings. What gives me hope is that I think white folks feel like imposters right now. They are in spaces that they've seen and known were wrong, but they didn't acknowledge it or know how to navigate the situation. What gives me hope is that people who are not from marginalized communities are willing to be imposters and to not remain comfortable in their own ignorance. They are giving it a try. Within their communities, they are supporting and challenging one another. I talk to my friends, and you are one of them, about the conversations, the hidden conversations. People are asking tougher questions. They are not letting ignorant comments just lie there and then waiting to talk about it on

the drive home from the party. They are calling them out in the moment and being supported by others in that moment who agree with them but didn't feel empowered to say something before. We want to do for our kids the things that, as adults, we are shy to do, and that's to call out inequities in the moment. We want our kids to be empowered, positioned, and prepared to change society in the moment and not to pass on that responsibility to the next generation.

Valerie Marsh: Related to that, I will share a piece of advice you gave me this summer, which I return to often. It's deceptively simple. You said, "You're going to feel uncomfortable and you need to stay with it." What I'm starting to realize is that feeling uncomfortable, this discomfort—which previously was my privilege to avoid—now that I feel it, is not going away. I'm just always going to be uncomfortable now, and I've accepted that. I share your advice with anyone who listens or reads this.

Shaun Nelms: Well, that describes the life of many people of color. We have lived the life of being uncomfortable. It's the real work, and I truly believe we can create a community of learners, kids, and adults whom we entrust our kids to, to be empowered to have these uncomfortable conversations—however they want to take them up—but to no longer ignore the racism that is obvious or that is obvious to some of us. I think we'll be a much better society than before.

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Since Drs. Nelms and Marsh had this conversation, the Monroe County curriculum project has gained momentum and expanded. Several new districts joined the effort, drawn by the timeliness of the antiracist content of the units. In preparation for a 2022 rollout of the curriculum, Nelms and his team have trained more than 200 teachers from across the county. What began as 18 participating districts have grown to 22, including rural districts outside the county that have signed up for summer training. To meet the demand of district participation, CUES has hired additional trainers. Excited to implement what they learned during the first round of training, several teachers began piloting the curriculum in their U.S. history classes in spring 2021. CUES has begun measuring teacher readiness, student engagement, and conceptual understanding of the content through pre- and post-assessments. Simultaneously, the elevated educator website continues to add more standards-aligned CR-S lessons and units. All of this work—both the countywide curriculum and the website—are provided at no charge to the community.

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