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**Reactions to Contemporary Activist-Scholars and the “Midwestern Mystique”:
A case study utilizing an evolving methodology in contentious contexts.¹**

Abstract

Local communities react to the processes created to study them; thus, action research in contentious contexts requires the use of self-aware, evolving methodologies. During the 1999-2000 school year, a School Climate Survey (SCS) was distributed to all public school students (grades 3-12), parents, and school staff in Champaign, Illinois. The School Climate Research Team (SCRT), in collaboration with community members, created the SCS to document the climate of the local schools and facilitate constructive change in the public schools’ racial climate. Two educational audits that found racial inequities in the local school district were the impetus for the SCS. This paper provides a qualitative analysis of the local context – documenting many of the major themes in the responses to the survey. Secondly, the community response to the SCS process and the strategies used by the SCRT to address this reaction provide a case study of community reaction and help illustrate how action researchers can navigate the difficult political topographies in contentious settings where they work. The local community’s reactions to the SCS and the successes, shortcomings, and changes in the SCRT’s methodology in response to and in anticipation of these reactions are detailed.

Keywords: racial, school climate; community reaction; evolving methodology

“It is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak truth and expose lies.” – Noam Chomsky, 1966

¹ Additional information about the project, technical reports, and copies of the surveys are available from the project’s website: www.psych.uiuc.edu/climate.

Introduction

A long history of scholars' work documenting racism in post-segregation public schooling exists (see United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1976). Authors have examined pedagogical practices integrating race (e.g., hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994), the need to change educational praxis to be more liberating (e.g., Freire 1970/1993), and even differential perceptions of racial inequities across race (e.g., Sigelman & Welch, 1991). However, very little has been written on the reactions of communities to efforts to document inequities, and the differential experiences and perceptions of communities to the process of investigating such inequities. The purpose of this thesis is to add to this literature by documenting one community's reaction to a school climate survey conducted at the turn of the millennium. This paper provides both in-depth examples of different constituencies' reactions to the School Climate Survey (SCS) process as well as exemplars of pivotal moments in the survey process where the School Climate Research Team adapted the methodology to suit the political context. This thesis orients action research practitioners, utilizing a case-study approach documenting these reactions to help illustrate the difficulties in working on contentious issues within divided communities.ⁱ Finally, what the School Climate Research Team learned over the course of the SCS process is discussed.

Within an action-research framework, a community's reactions to the research process, rather than being viewed as an artifact to be minimized, should be utilized as a tool that informs the researchers' methodologies. Within contentious contexts, reaction itself may be used to inform the phenomena under study; and the variance in reactions can provide useful clues about the contexts surrounding the research and the pluralistic nature of the "realities" being investigated. An action-researcher would begin with an initial methodology, and as reaction to

the project or intervention became apparent and was documented, the methods used by the researcher would be purposefully changed by the researcher(s) to better document and measure the phenomena of interest. Brydon-Miller (1997) addresses many of the pitfalls and questions that have arisen concerning action research; however, as she mentions, several issues remain unresolved. In her conclusion she states:

Integrating Participatory Action Research into our [psychological] discipline will require flexibility and reflection. It will require us to reconsider what constitute valid forms of knowledge generation, and to acknowledge the inherent political nature of all the work we do. It will demand greater involvement and commitment on our parts to our own communities and to addressing issues of social justice around the world (p. 664).

Conducting fieldwork within an Action Research framework is often both highly political and personally relevant (see Emerson, 1995); Brydon-Miller's call to action concretizes the tension within Action Research between affecting social change (and thus eliciting reactions) and documenting the phenomena under study. Within an educational reform context, Oxley (2000) sums up the issue of the role of action researchers:

Researchers have not only the school reform agenda to consider, but also the ecological impact of conducting the research itself...Action Research provides the opportunity to observe the social system's dynamic operation. Researchers' examination of the schools' response to their presence and reaction and long-term adaptation to the intervention may provide greater insights into school ecology...The researcher is not present to record the impact of a program passively, but to help the program realize its potential.

Conceptual frameworks within the field have focused on contextual analyses and dynamic processes. As Tseng, et al. (2002) argue, promoting social change necessitates placing "prior, current, and future understandings of the social issue within their political, cultural, and

temporal contexts” (p. 409) and emphasizing “dynamic processes, not end-states or outcomes” (p. 412). Furthermore, the authors state, “this may mean that we, as community psychologists, will have to relinquish some control of the process” (p. 422). As action researchers following in a similar vein, the School Climate Research Team defines the methodological process to include everything from problem definition and the creation of the measurement tool, to analyses of the data, information dissemination, and post-intervention (in this case, post school climate survey-administration) follow-up. In talking about how to best create opportunities for social changes, Tseng, et al. conclude:

We suggest that the framework itself will evolve over time. This is one step in a process that can continue to be advanced through an iterative process of practical application and theoretical development...We hope that others continue to reevaluate and rethink the language and framework for promotion of social change (p. 424).

Following this advice, this paper draws from the experiences of the School Climate Research Team, formulating a framework for both catalyzing social change and documenting the impacts and reactions this change elicits within a community. Finally, Rappaport and Seidman (2000) state that understanding community reaction and effectively utilizing this reaction to inform the process is most effective when the nuances and intricacies of the local environment are taken into account. Thus, this analysis incorporates, focus group, public meeting, and individual interview field notes as exemplars of the empirically documented racial themes uncovered during the School Climate Survey process.

The qualitative data presented below provide an eye-opening window into the racial climate of the Champaign School District. Future researchers engaged in school climate analysis and interventions will find the information illuminating; as a case study, this work provides both

a cautionary tale as well as a call to action. To better organize all the necessary information, the thesis is divided into nine parts. First, background information and the local Champaign community are discussed to help orient the reader to the general context in which the School Climate Survey was conducted. Second, the background of the School Climate Research Team is presented to help illustrate how entrée into the community was facilitated. Third, issues of who the School Climate Research Team was serving (i.e., “Who is the client?”) are documented – illustrating the sometimes fundamentally opposing perspectives held by different local constituencies. Fourth, some of the initial successes and positive outcomes facilitated by the School Climate Survey process are mentioned. These successes help counter-balance the overwhelmingly negative (and often acerbic) feedback the SCS also produced. Fifth, general reactions to the School Climate Survey process are presented. This is followed by three sections which supply more in-depth illustrations from each of the three phases of the SCS process: pre-administration of the survey, which focuses on initial reactions to the survey process; the survey’s administration, with a focus on the process used by the School Climate Research Team and the comments of survey participants; and report dissemination and follow-through, which focused on post-survey initiatives to address the issues raised by the SCS and media coverage following survey administration. Finally, fostering constructive change and the lessons the SCRT learned while engaged in the SCS process is discussed.

Background

Before one can appreciate the racial climate within the local school system, it is necessary to understand the social-historical context of the community. When Howard Zinn wrote The Southern Mystique in 1964, he eloquently expressed his need to be an academic teacher and

scholar as well as a participant-activist in the Civil Rights movement. He described the metamorphosis he felt after his move from Columbia University in New York City to Spelman, a historically Black college in Atlanta, Georgia. After the move, Zinn became increasingly aware of extreme social and racial injustice and felt an intense need to act to rectify these wrongs. Through his writings, Zinn set out to demystify the South and expose the “vault of prejudice locked inside the mind of the white Southerner.” During the School Climate Survey research process, it became increasingly apparent that in the community the School Climate Research Team was studying, a similar “Mystique” existed. As shown below, beneath the stereotypical Midwestern warmth and friendliness a highly charged, reactionary racism exists. This racism is institutionalized within the educational system in ways that protect the privileges of the White majority (e.g., tracking students into different ability levels; “ghettoizing” substandard teachers in the majority-Black elementary school; disproportionately suspending minority students). Thus, it is important to attend to both the surface characteristics of the community, but also to delve beyond this façade to see what lies behind.

Since Zinn’s exposé, expressions of prejudice and racism have changed – not disappeared, but been transformed into new and just as insidious forms (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986). Institutionalized racism, defined as “the collective effect of practices and behaviors that prevent a targeted group from fully realizing the benefits of their own efforts or from sharing in publicly supported opportunities and activities” (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory Equity Center, 1999), has replaced the stereotypical White bigot yelling epithets from his porch (see Dovidio & Gaertner’s 1986 analysis, pp. 1-34). Racial profiling has replaced outright

lynching by our police forces (see Speed, 2000; Sherman, 2001).² And intra-school tracking and “ability” groupings contribute to de facto exclusion of minorities from upper level and honors courses despite the abolition of de jure segregation in our school systems (Weiler, 1998).

The School Climate Research Team’s experiences working in the Champaign, Illinois Public School District (District) deeply affected many Team members’ perceptions about the extent of institutional racism in the United States. In Champaign, Illinois, many Whites continue to believe that racial equity in the public school system has been achieved and that lingering racial discrepancies in academic outcomes are due to individual failings and deficiencies in minorities’ families and communities. However, the majority of African Americans maintain that the contemporary school system is still fundamentally unfair to minorities (Aber, Meinrath, Johnston, Rasmussen, & Gonzalez, 2001).

Champaign is a city of about 70,000 residents. Together with its twin city, Urbana, and the University of Illinois, the Champaign metropolitan area contains roughly 150,000 people. Contemporary housing patterns are highly segregated. African Americans are concentrated in the area north of the railroad tracks that run east-west about one-half mile north of downtown. Whites, on the other hand, are most concentrated in the area south of downtown and in the newer subdivisions in the southwest area of the city (www.census.gov). These housing patterns and attendant infrastructure (e.g. neighborhood schools, libraries, different supermarkets) minimize contact between African Americans and Whites and may help exacerbate and maintain the discrepant viewpoints in the community. Though the population of Champaign is roughly one-

² This broad statement does not do justice to the many contemporary victims of police brutality in our country. In April, 2001, people in Cincinnati rioted in protest over the police killing of an unarmed African American man (the 15th in the last decade), and in New York in 2000, police fired 41 shots at Amadou Diallo, an unarmed immigrant, hitting him 19 times and killing him. While premeditated murder of civilians by police is now almost unheard of, the

third minority, governmental bodies, the press, the business community, and educational institutions, have historically been dominated by the White majority, with little to no minority representation.

The School Board election is one particularly relevant example of an institutional process that under-represents minorities. In Champaign, School Board candidates are elected at-large rather than from neighborhood-based districts, resulting in the consistent outvoting of minority candidates by the White majority. It is not surprising, then, to find an all-White School Board in an ethnically diverse school district. The school board, in turn, appoints the superintendent of schools, and together, with the Board of Education, the superintendent hires other district administrators and recommends future principals. This voting system creates radiating effects throughout the school system hierarchy that maintains White domination of the school district's administration and attending power structures, thus perpetuating the silencing of minority perspectives and voices (meeting with community leaders, field notes 10/13/99, 10/15/99; meeting with district administrator, field note 11/19/99; Champaign School Board meeting, field note 03/20/00; personal communication from district administrator 09/22/00). For example, one African American community leader explained that the School system "hides" information about certain schools and that the district is "only integrated on paper" but not at the "classroom or social group level" – and that this integration is perpetuated by those in positions of power as a tactic to "balance resources" across buildings while the classrooms remain unequal (field note 10/13/99). Another African American community leader stated that while schools do elicit feedback from the community, once this feedback is given, nothing is done with it. This leader

continued spontaneous police killings of unarmed minorities is indicative of the nature of prejudice and racism today.

was active in his school's Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and found that the school administrators set the PTA's agenda rather than the parents themselves, and that if parents sought decision-making power, they would "probably get dissonance from principals" (field note 10/15/99). However, because these inequities and silencing are perpetuated through seemingly democratic rules and procedures, few Whites see racism at work (meeting with community leader field note, 10/08/99).

Until the results from the formal audit of the school system were reported in 1998, many Whites felt that racial discrepancies simply did not exist in their town. When the Champaign School District's own Equity Audit (see Peterkin & Lucey, 1998) documented racial inequities, the dominant White narrative changed from a denial of the existence of inequities to an assertion that the inequities spring from wider social problems which schools can neither be held responsible for nor fix. The Champaign school population is roughly 40% minority. However, a majority of the White community sees no need to change the school system to be more representative of the community as a whole (Aber et al, 2001). Most Whites see no need to change a district with an 85% White staff, one minority principal, and no minority representation on the school board (Aber et al., 2001).

Following the 1998 audit, the Champaign School District resolved to address racial inequities. The SCRT was commissioned by the School District to identify problems in the schools' climates, with an emphasis on evaluating the creation of equal educational opportunities for all students. Many White parents, teachers, and community members had opposed the School Climate Survey (SCS) project from its beginning. While African Americans had been overwhelmingly supportive of the SCRT, the "White" perspective dominated both news

coverage and discourse until the public release of the SCS results. While many community members eventually came to acknowledge that racial inequities in climate perceptions and educational outcomes exist, many continue to believe that no one is responsible for them and that they cannot be eliminated. Furthermore, attempts to address racial inequity concerns had often been met by opponents who use a rhetoric feigning interest while simultaneously mounting active resistance. To paraphrase one African American community leader's description of this "Midwestern Mystique," "In the past racism was overt and in-your-face. In the Midwest we have racism with a smile."

A History of Inequity

This "Midwestern Mystique" has led to ongoing legal problems. Since 1996, the Champaign School District has been under steady legal pressure to lessen racial disparities. However, the battle to create changes in Champaign's educational system has been fought since well before the 1960s. In the case of the local schools, activists had demanded for decades (interview on WBCP 1580AM talk radio, hosted by Bob West, field note 05/25/00; comments by school board and community members during school board meeting, field note 02/19/01) that the school district lessen and eliminate racial disparities in its programs (e.g., talented and gifted and special education classes) and disciplinary actions (e.g., suspension and detention rates; Peterkin & Lucey, 1998). Since the integration of the school system in the 1960s, a continuing grievance of the African American community is that desegregation has been accomplished by the displacement and forced bussing of African American students to majority-White schools (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 1998). In Champaign, the bussing program was itself tautologically justified by systematically closing schools in minority

neighborhoods and then building and opening new schools in the southern, majority-White, areas of the city (Peterkin & Lucey, 1998).

Unfortunately, without continuing outside intervention, it is doubtful that meaningful changes will take place. In fact, during school board elections of 2000, the two members most in favor of addressing racial inequities were replaced by individuals who had been vocal in their opposition to the process.³ As documented below, the context within which the SCRT worked on the SCS project was rife with subtle, and often not-so-subtle, prejudice, bigotry, and inequity.

SCS and SCRT Background

To understand the School Climate Research Team's role in the School Climate Survey process (and some constituency's reactions to SCRT), one needs to have a good grasp of both the SCRT's background as well as the immediate antecedents to the SCS. In 1997, members of the local African American community filed a complaint with the Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights (OCR), alleging racial disparities between Black and White students in access to school programs and educational outcomes. At roughly the same time, and independently of the community complaint, the OCR conducted its own audit of the Champaign school system to assess racial equality in access to programs. Both the OCR audit and outside experts hired by the school district in response to the original community complaint found racial inequities in the public school system. As is often the case in the United States (see Gordon, Della Piana, & Keleher, 2000), these discrepancies were all to the detriment of students of color – especially African Americans (Peterkin & Lucey, 1998). In a resolution agreement signed by the

³ As a postscript, on April 1, 2003 two African American candidates were elected to the school board, becoming two of only a handful of African Americans ever to be elected to the position. Many of the candidates' campaign supporters were active supporters of the SCS and the SCRT. In addition, one of the two SCS supporters ousted in 2000 was reelected.

community plaintiffs and District officials, the District agreed to conduct a school climate survey stating “a school climate which promotes learning and success and encourages students to support each other is essential” in order “to ensure equal access for African American students to its educational programs” (United States Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 1998).

A “Planning and Implementation Committee (PIC)” consisting of community members and District officials was created to oversee the District’s reforms. The PIC recommended the hiring of the SCRT to create and carry out a climate survey. The SCS was created with a mandate to explicitly address the importance of school environment in promoting racial equity. Given the specific problems facing African Americans that were identified by the Equity Audit, the SCRT chose to focus on how minority and White students, staff, and parents might differ in their perceptions of their schools’ climates.

A Race-Salient School Climate Measure

A review of the school climate assessment literature yielded few articles investigating racial differences in general school climate perceptions among and between teachers, students, and parents (see Wilson, Pentecoste, & Bailey, 1984; Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1997) and almost no articles explicitly investigating schools’ racial climate (but see Green, Adams, & Turner, 1988). Despite many general school climate measures (e.g. Haynes, Emmons, & Comer, 1993; Finney & Moos, 1987; Trickett & Quinlan, 1979), in order to assess racial climate it was necessary to create a new type of climate survey.ⁱⁱ

By minimizing the importance of race to students’ school experiences, some educational theorists believe that social scientists have done a disservice to our students, our communities, and our field. While the pragmatics of working in public school systems place enormous

pressure on action researchers to ‘de-politicize’ their research (Sarason, 1990), by ignoring the racial climate of public schools, one is turning a blind eye to one of the fundamental issues in contemporary schooling (Pratkanis & Turner, 1999; Carter & Goodwin, 1994; Ogbu, 1990).

While more feasible in the politically charged arena of the public education system, innocuous school climate measures have codified school climate in the psychological literature in ways that ignore the importance of race and racial experiences in forming school climate perspectives.

According to educational theorist Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994), “By claiming not to notice [color], the teacher is saying that she is dismissing one of the most salient features of the child’s identity and that she does not account for it in her curricular planning and instruction. Saying we are aware of students’ race and ethnic background is not the same as saying we treat students inequitably (p. 33).” From this perspective, by refusing to acknowledge race and therefore purporting to be non-racist one is, in fact, further marginalizing minority students.

Racism, and especially institutionalized racism, has been documented at all levels of public school systems (Gordon et al., 2000). Cultural hegemony and assimilation are the norm, not the exception, in many schools and school systems (hooks, 1994; Spivak, 1993). It is thus interesting that the social science literature turns up such a dearth of school climate measures where racial climate is a focus of the measure – one would expect that racial salience would be a larger factor in school climate measures. All too often, racial climate is operationalized as one or two (or at most a handful) of overly broad, inoffensive questions (e.g. “Students of all races are treated well at my school.”; Haynes, Emmons, & Comer, 1993).⁴ While questions of this type

⁴ Social climate has been defined as the quality and frequency of interactions among and between adults and students (Emmons, Comer, & Haynes, 1996). A school’s social environment, far from being static, is seen as involving “reciprocal transactions between individuals and their environment” (Kuperminc, Leadbeater, Emmons, & Blatt, 1997; see also Meinrath, 1997).

are a good starting point, because race-salient questions are not a priority (i.e., there are very few questions directly asking about racial issues), generalizing from these measures to the “social climate” of a school setting only helps reinforce a de facto color-blindness in the school climate literature (see Ogbu, 1990). These concerns cannot be fully addressed by the SCRT’s work alone; however, the SCS offers a meaningful step in the direction of explicitly addressing the salience of race in school climate assessments.

Several dimensions on the SCS have been measured by other general climate surveys (e.g. fairness, trust, respect; e.g. Haynes, Emmons, & Comer, 1993; Trickett & Quinlan, 1979; Finney & Moos, 1987); however, many other dimensions are unique to the SCS (e.g. appropriateness of disciplinary actions and policies, conceptualizations of integrated schools, stereotypic expectations and attributions for misbehavior). These new dimensions represent a new perspective on social climate that explicitly acknowledges the impact of race and racial climate on the perceptions of students, staff, and parents (but see Wilson, Pentecoste, & Bailey, 1984; Slaughter-Defoe & Carlson, 1997). Although previous social climate surveys included individual questions concerning race, the SCS is the first assessment tool to address the multidimensionality of racial climate among students in elementary-, middle-, and high-school, parents, and school staff, and make these domains a main focus of the survey.

To create the SCS, the SCRT met with numerous community members, including students, parents, teachers, school board members, district- and school-level administrators, Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and Illinois Federation of Teachers (IFT) officials, local activists, and community leaders, over a six-month period in 1999-2000. These meetings included focus groups, small-group discussions, one-on-one interviews, and interactive

presentations to large groups. During this process several concerns were voiced repeatedly. These included the importance of fairness in discipline across races (e.g. student focus group field note, 08/05/99), the need to change the District's treatment of minority students (e.g. interview with African American parent field note, 10/15/99) and the importance of community and parent participation in schools' decision-making processes (e.g. presentation and discussion with Champaign PTA Council field note, 12/02/99). African American stakeholders also mentioned that their own opinions might anger constituencies that did not believe racial inequities existed (e.g. interview with African American activist field note, 10/08/99). Further ideas mentioned by multiple participants in these dialogues included, the lack of "black activities" (e.g., student focus group field note, 08/05/99); the need for accountability concerning inequities in academic outcomes (e.g., meeting with community leader field note, 10/13/99); issues of internalized or institutionalized racism (e.g., meeting with community activist field note, 10/08/99; and meeting with district administrator field note, 11/19/99); and the problem of inequitable hiring practices by the school district (e.g., meeting with Illinois Federation of Teachers union representative field note, 03/03/00). A common theme running through much of the feedback the SCRT received was that race and racial climate were important concerns that connected many of the problems the school district was facing. Thus, focus group discussions and interviews underscored the importance of assessing racial climate and provided the foundation for many of the survey's questions.

While every attempt was made to address as many different concerns as possible, space limitations did not allow incorporation of all constituency-generated domains into the survey. When necessary, preference was given to minority and disenfranchised viewpoints. Given the

nature of the original OCR mandate and the racial inequities addressed by the resolution agreement, particular attention was paid to the views espoused within the local African American community. As will be seen later, the result of the process of giving voice to traditionally silenced constituencies created a backlash from many White parents, teachers, and administrators; and the SCRT was described as having a “political agenda,” being “biased,” “slanted,” and “racist” (staff comments, surveys #0628, #1093, #0903, & #0663).

The School Climate Research Team

The differing ethnic, cultural, and experiential backgrounds of members of the SCRT, combined with an action-oriented research approach, have formed the basis for the methodologies utilized. The SCRT consisted of over a dozen African American, Latina, White, and bi-racial members with an array of experiences garnered working in public schools and other educational settings. The ethnic and cultural diversity within the SCRT provided a starting point for discussing the development of discrepant perspectives. Research team meetings often focused on how personal experiences inform our own opinions on contentious issues. The SCRT often incorporated each other’s politics, experiences, and knowledge into a shared dialogue about racial issues.

Members of the SCRT also had a strong and continuing history of community involvement. Personal friends, acquaintances, and allies in the community had helped to overcome much of the reluctance to cooperate on a project initially perceived as yet another example of the “Ivory Tower” using the local community as a research subject without any commitment to improving the lives of the people involved. As active participants in the

community, the reputations of the members of the SCRT had made many local activists and residents natural allies of the SCS process.⁵

Who is the Client?

The SCRT worked in a highly politicized environment where multiple stakeholders had differing (and often contradictory) perceptions of the loyalties and research mission of the SCRT. Because these perceptions were themselves changing in response to new information (e.g., newspaper articles about the SCS and SCRT, radio shows SCRT members were guests on) it was often necessary for the SCRT to adopt new tactics to address the changing concerns and perspectives of different constituencies (e.g., focusing on public relations, creating avenues for public discussion, creating an on-line presence for the SCS project). The goal of these strategies was to lessen negative perceptions about the SCS and increase the dissemination of the survey's findings and recommended solutions.

The SCRT's hiring process by the school district helps explain the differing ways the SCRT was originally perceived by various constituencies in the Champaign schools. The Office of Civil Rights mandated the assessment in the first place; however, the Planning and Implementation Committee was the group that recommended hiring the SCRT specifically. Finally, the SCRT was paid directly by the School District through the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. While the mandate was "to identify problems with District programs," many different parties assumed the SCRT's allegiance was with one of these four structures (i.e., the University of Illinois, Office of Civil Rights, Planning and Implementation Committee, and

⁵ Without personal and often longstanding relationships it is unlikely the SCS would have gained the trust and acceptance of many community members – especially among African Americans. Had this rapport not been established, it is doubtful the SCRT would have gained as much insight into the variety of community concerns, affecting both the validity of the measures and the influence of the survey results.

the School District) and thus doubted the SCRT's motivations and loyalties to their own community constituency.

The OCR mandate led many White parents to perceive the SCS process as part of a "political agenda" set by local African American activists, as exemplified by this parent's statement: "I expect that this survey will demonstrate that African-Americans perceive a racial problem that White-Americans do not...My opinion is that this survey will do more to advance a political agenda than to arrive at a true understanding of underlying reasons for the racial inequities mentioned in the survey (survey #3259)." The support of the PIC on behalf of the SCRT made some district administrators fearful that they would not be able to control the results of the survey and that these results would then be used to sue the School District (field note, 10/15/99). This led to pockets of resistance among some District administrators to the SCS process. And the fact that the District funded the SCRT made many African Americans leery that the SCRT was a tool of the White-dominated School District (field note 11/19/99). Because the SCRT is affiliated with a research institution, some community members questioned the motives for undertaking the project (e.g., WEFT 90.1 talk show field note, 06/11/00). To further complicate matters, because of the SCRT's involvement with OCR, PIC, and the District, many teachers and school administrators feared that the SCRT would evaluate school staff and that the results of the survey would be used to blame teachers for discrepancies in how students perceive their schools (field note 1/3/00).

In order to balance the many differing demands and concerns about the SCS, the SCRT was constantly evaluating the current effectiveness of its intervention, examining different options for improving the process, and changing its tactics in response to these appraisals. This

strategy of moving between community reaction and methodology used is reminiscent of the process of consulting the nomological net while formulating psychological experimental procedures. The SCRT's documentation of community reactions and evolving methodology parallels the construct-observation synergy theorized to provide evidence of construct validity (see Cronbach & Meehl, 1955).

Initial Successes

The SCS project had several notable successes following the School Climate Survey's dissemination – creating opportunities for positive changes in the overall racial climate of the school district. First and foremost, critical discussions of race and racism entered the mainstream dialog and began to be addressed as important areas of concern locally. During and after the SCS was administered, forums were set up where members of the community could discuss their feelings concerning the climate of Champaign schools. On May 15, 2001, the School district held its first “Community Dialogue on Race Related Issues.” The purpose of this first community dialogue was fourfold: first, to create a face-to-face exchange of ideas, values, and perspectives regarding how people are affected by race and racism in the school district; second, to create short, medium, and long-term goals for improving race relations and school climate in the school district; third, to create building level responses and interventions to address the issues; and fourth, to create a timeline and format for future community dialogs (D.P. Henry, personal communication, April 24, 2001). In addition, District African American staff members, who previously felt isolated within the school system, began holding social events to network with other minority educators to discuss areas of mutual concern and gain support.

Furthermore, because the SCRT report and recommendations were distributed widely in the local community and entered into the public discourse, it seemed unlikely that the results from the School Climate Survey would become yet another “report gathering dust,” with little or no meaningful impact. On November 19, 2001, the District hosted a second community dialog on race-related issues with the goal being “to create building level responses and interventions to address the issues [raised by the SCS].” However, in Spring of 2004 a follow-up report on the District’s continuing racial inequities was released and the long-term commitment of the school district to addressing racial inequities remained questionable. After these first two dialogues, no further “Community Dialogues on Race Related Issues” were held. Following the initial Peterkin & Lucey (1998) educational audit, subsequent reports on racial inequities in the Champaign Schools documented little change in racial inequities over the following four years (Peterkin & Lucey, 2002); and, the main administrator who worked to address racial inequities was demoted by the school board in closed hearings based on evidence that was not made available to the public (field notes 10/29/02 & 10/30/02).

Reaction to the School Climate Survey Process

Comments by students, parents, and staff to the School Climate Survey were themselves important illustrations of the level of denial among White respondents that racism existed in the Champaign School District. Given these reactions, and the District’s historical propensity to ignore the politically contentious critiques of the education system from African American constituencies, the SCRT felt it necessary to be involved in the follow-up to the survey administration and remain active advocates for addressing the concerns that the results of the SCS raised. As documented below, the level of anger expressed about the SCS and the SCRT’s

role in making racial inequities salient helped inform the quantitative results from the SCS. These reactions also underscored the need for the SCRT to actively collaborate with media reporters and District administrators to ensure constructive follow-up to the survey itself.

Facilitating educational improvements within the charged political context of the Champaign School District was difficult. However, according to news reports, as more information was publicly released documenting the existence of racial inequities in Champaign's schools, and as the general population learned about the extent of these inequities, support for addressing these concerns grew (see Pickerill, 2002). As documented in the SCS itself, a large percentage of the local population still felt there was no need to change the existing educational structures to address racial inequities. However, given the SCS's goal, "to improve the quality of education for all students in Champaign's public schools" (from <http://www.psych.uiuc.edu/climate>) by documenting the social climate, it seemed inevitable that the SCRT's work would "ruffle the feathers" of certain constituencies.

In addition to finding ways to incorporate discrepant political perspectives into the School Climate Survey, the SCRT also had to deal with the difficulties of bringing the discussion of what these survey results mean beyond the academic setting and into the community. The general reluctance of African Americans to "stick their necks out" during public meetings, combined with the often-times victim blaming attitudes of Whites, made it difficult to foster public debate after the SCS was administered and as community members attempted to make sense of the survey results. However, strategies for addressing these concerns were developed and venues created for limited public discussion.

The SCRT worked under the mandate of the Office of Civil Rights equity audit and subsequent resolution agreement. Because the equity audit focused on racial inequities affecting African Americans, the SCRT chose to focus on these same areas. While the OCR mandate allowed the SCRT leeway concerning what aspects of the District's social climate to focus on, it also meant that some constituencies were actively opposed to complying with the survey. Thus, while the School Climate Survey's focus on the racial climate in the local school system necessitated an oversimplification of a much more complex social climate; it also had the potential to directly and positively affect educational outcomes of minority students (see Ogbu, 1990; Peterkin & Lucey, 1998, 2002; Aber et al., 2001).

To help understand both the community's reaction to the SCS and the SCRT's adaptations and subsequent evolution of the SCS process, it is useful to look at each phase of the project in turn. The SCS process can be broken down into three relatively distinct phases: 1) pre-administration; 2) administration; and, 3) report dissemination and follow-through. Each phase of the project created opportunities for engaging community members, gauging reaction from different constituencies, and changing the SCRT's methodology to address concerns raised by the community. Each of these three phases is briefly discussed below.

Phase I – Pre-Administration

Despite the SCRT's efforts to include as many stakeholders as possible, the SCS received a strongly negative reaction from many White community members before it was even administered. This section documents some of these reactions. Opponents of the survey made repeated attempts to delay the survey's distribution and vigorously objected to the straightforward way the SCS addressed racial problems. While the SCRT initially expected to

spend most of its time on survey construction, after initial negative responses in early meetings with various constituencies, the SCRT changed its focus to become more involved in information dissemination and public relations. The high degree of organized White opposition to the survey was surprising; and the SCRT spent several months allaying fears and coaxing different groups to cooperate with the project.

The first serious attempt to postpone the survey process came soon after the SCRT met with the teachers' union council in January 2000. Members of the IFT council wanted to see the survey before it was administered "to ensure that questions are appropriate for each grade level" (field note 1/3/00). However, according to teachers sympathetic to the goals of the SCS project, and as teacher comments on the survey itself showed, many staff did not want the SCS to ask any questions about race, and barring that, wanted the survey not to be administered at all.

According to one parent who talked at the February 19, 2001 Champaign School Board meeting, within several days of our January 2000 meeting with the IFT Council, members of the Council made a request to the superintendent that the survey be postponed until the beginning of the next school year (field note 2/19/01).

Rather than mandating that the survey be conducted as scheduled, the superintendent delayed the administration of the SCS until the end of the 1999-2000 school year.⁶ The superintendent's hesitation may explain the later stalling tactics and opposition that continued to affect the survey process in that it emboldened opponents of the SCS by demonstrating a

⁶ Several important reasons for conducting the survey during the 1999-2000 school year included: first, the original date set for the survey was the 1998-1999 school year and, for various reasons (including the recommendation from the SCRT that more time be spent on survey construction), the survey had already been delayed for over a year; second, school climate perceptions measured at the end of the year (as opposed to during the Fall) allow respondents to reflect on their experiences from the entire school year; and third, given the reactance already uncovered, the SCRT was concerned that pushing the date back would allow more time for those opposed to the survey to organize, thus lessening the likelihood that the survey would be conducted at all.

wavering commitment to administering the survey (see U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1976 for a discussion of the importance of leadership in dealing with desegregation and racial issues). Members of the IFT talked with the superintendent and demanded to negotiate the release of the survey results. A group of teachers petitioned the District administration not to “give credence to a flawed survey by determining, using, or publishing its results” (letter from teachers, April 10, 2000). Another illustration of organized efforts to derail the survey process came within four hours of our initial delivery of the surveys to Champaign’s schools when a group of principals met and decided to refuse to give out the survey. Only after further negotiations between the assistant superintendent, school administrators, and the SCRT was the survey distributed. Nevertheless, some school staff continued to boycott the survey. Three predominantly White schools in particular had very low staff response rates.⁷ Because of these reactions, the SCRT began an intensive campaign to meet with key School District administrators to discuss the importance of not having the survey results get caught up in political wrangling. The SCRT stressed that it was important that the survey process was perceived as independent from pressures that might adversely affect the scientific validity of the SCS results. In particular, the SCRT had to maintain its independence from the District – thus, on several occasions the SCRT underscored its independence in meetings with district officials. In these cases, the intervention was to explicate the OCR mandate and the SCRT’s role in the community.

While some changes in the administration process of the survey were made (see the section below on administration), overall control of the survey process was maintained by the SCRT. For example, school principals held that their elementary students did not recognize or

⁷ Whereas the average staff response rates across all schools was roughly 75%, these three schools had response rates of 57%, 44% and 43% respectively. This staff comment may indicate why: “As a staff we decided not to complete

understand “race” as a concept; thus measuring racial climate among these students did not make sense; furthermore, the principals held that their students might be traumatized by having to take the survey. The SCRT reviewed the psychological literature and found evidence that by 3rd grade, students were generally race-aware. However, little conclusive work had been done on children in younger grades (i.e., kindergarten through second grade). Focus group participants also reported being cognizant of race by 3rd grade. In response to the principals’ concerns, and in order to de-escalate the conflict, the SCRT decided to drop second graders from the survey and committed to creating explicit opt-out instructions for any student or staff members who did not wish to take the survey for any reason.

The local context and the initial survey construction (through its focus on race-salient questions) led to strong negative reaction following meetings with several constituencies (e.g., the Parent Teacher Association and the Teachers’ Union Councils). Given this reaction as well as the SCRT’s desire to maintain the racial salience of questions on the SCS, it was necessary for the SCRT to refocus its energies on adopting strategies and tactics whose goal was conflict resolution. While some staff and parents believed that discussing race would create problems where none existed, “I feel this survey is offensive and racist...these surveys may be planting ideas of racism in the heads of students that may not have been present prior to the surveys (staff comment, survey #980).” Another possible reason for the reaction was that many Whites felt that the survey was just “beating a dead horse.” “Everyone, especially the students, is sick of this issue! It has become reverse discrimination in some cases! (parent comment, survey #9061).” Other parents simply were uninterested in the survey’s content. “I do not like the tone of this survey. I’m tired of hearing about racial inequities (parent comment, survey #521).”

Insert Figure 1 about here

Thus, as summarized in Figure 1, following meetings with the Champaign Parent-Teacher Association and Teachers' Union Councils it became clear to the SCRT that a refocusing on public outreach was necessary to ensure the success of the SCS project. This refocusing took the form of multiple informational meetings with reporters from local media outlets. Though many of these press members did not publish anything at this time, this intervention helped set a more positive agenda for future news coverage. Despite the continued opposition of some community members, the SCS was administered with only slight delays. However, opposition to the survey grew substantially once it was conducted, necessitating further changes to the SCS process and the SCRT's methodology.

Phase II – Administration

The School Climate Survey was administered to all Champaign public school staff, students in grades 3-12, and parents in the spring and summer of 2000 and reaction to the SCS was both swift and vitriolic. This section documents some of the themes that were present in the reactions, using participants' own words to illustrate them. These themes and attendant quotes provide a rich source of data for understanding the complex interplay between institutionalized racism and the perspectives held by some segments of the school community.

Staff surveys were distributed at each school from the principal's office (as requested by school principals). Student surveys were administered in their classrooms during regular school hours. Letters sent to all teachers asked them to explain the stated purpose of the survey, explained that participation was voluntary, and that students could refuse to answer any questions

they wished. Teachers read the questions aloud while students read along silently and marked their answers. Parents of each child in the District were mailed a parent survey with a cover letter describing the background and purpose of the survey and explaining that parent participation was voluntary. The letter also stated that they need not answer any questions they were not comfortable answering. Parent surveys were returned directly to the University of Illinois in postage-paid, pre-addressed envelopes provided for that purpose. If parents did not respond to the first mailing, a second survey was sent to them.⁸

Insert Figure 2 about here

In the months surrounding the survey administration, the SCS received fairly negative coverage in the area's major daily newspaper. Often, articles focused on negative reactions from community members (see Puch, 2000a, 2000b; Heckel, 2000), leading to an overestimation in the media of the number of people who objected to the survey and a political climate where District administrators were reluctant to move forward with the SCS. Cleveland Jefferson, the Champaign County NAACP President, summed up thusly at a February 19, 2001 School Board meeting, "Some white people didn't want this to happen, and it almost got pulled." As demonstrated by the following comments, the SCRT realized that given the vitriol of the responses that the SCS process elicited, that a concerted effort at increasing public exposure to positive media coverage was necessary to counteract the ingrained prejudices of some

⁸ Survey respondents included approximately 90% of students in attendance on the days the surveys were administered in the designated grades (1916 completed from 3rd-5th graders, 1516 from middle schoolers, and 2195 from high schoolers), approximately 75% of all school building staff (814 completed surveys), and 35% of all families (2012 completed parent surveys), distributed evenly across schools and grade level. With the exception of three schools where staff response rates were particularly low (57%, 44% and 43%) student and staff response rates were high and fairly consistent across schools. Parent responses, while considerably lower, were also consistent across schools.

constituencies. As with most agenda-setting media interventions (see Bennett, 2003), the main point was both to make information more widely available, and also to ensure that future news coverage would include the SCRT's perspective on the issues.

Despite an administration process that was explicitly designed to be open and voluntary, this phase of the project received the most vitriolic response from the White community, and almost led to the cancellation of the survey itself. Student reactions were also highly interesting – in order to save space, the student surveys, unlike the staff and parent versions, did not have a comment section. However, teachers organized students to write to the SCRT to describe their (almost unanimously) negative reactions to the survey. Entire classrooms sent letter packets with the completed surveys.⁹ The more benign comments mentioned that the survey was perceived to be rude, intrusive, and offensive. “You should not right about [the] color of people’s skin. Because it is very, very rood and insulting. If you right that again I will tear it up you punks”; “I think your survey was VERY offensive to blacks and whites you were very nosie. Please don’t do it again. You don’t need to know about our color and if we have black friends. Although I’m white I was very offensive.”

As shown in the following three quotes, White students’ comments from all grade levels mirror the dominant White narrative concerning racism, namely that racism no longer exists, that discussing race issues is racism, and that “reverse-racism” is rampant. Student’s personal narratives often presented racism as a historical problem – one solved long ago. Perhaps even more disconcerting is the obvious ignorance of history that students with this perspective espoused, as exemplified in the following quote:

⁹ Student comments, unlike those of staff and parents, were sent in separately, thus, they cannot be associated with a student survey number.

I think whoever wrote this test about racism is very ignorant because this test is very racist to both color black and white. For example what our great, great, great, great grand parents, and our relatives did to the blacks is not whites and black kids [fighting]. It was the presidents fought, because if the president would stop the white people abusing black people, using them as slaves. I think that Martin Luther King Jr. should have been the president because he tried to stop slavery. If the president stop slavery long time ago this world would be treated equally. And the people who are racist is the KKK's. (student comment #2968)

Students also conflated asking about race and racism, and racism itself. Adopting a “moral” tone in their responses by being personally offended by the survey’s content, these students claimed to be protecting the student populace from what are interpreted to be racist questions and inappropriate survey content.

Most of the questions asked were racist. They were aimed mostly towards black and white students. Personally, as a 14 year old white female student, I think people who ask questions like these are racist and they shouldn’t overstep their boundaries like you have. Most of these questions were offensive and very disruptive. At this time, I would like to thank you. You have truly made an eye opening experience for me and my peers. This is as real as it must get. Thanks a**holes! (comment from an anonymous student at Robeson school, classroom 13020)

Students also perceived the dominant educational experience to be race-neutral, claiming that existing foci on Black History Month, Martin Luther King Day, and other multi-cultural holidays is racist or privileging African Americans over whites.

Question 33¹⁰ is one of the questions that bothered me because teachers don’t teach about white history just black. I’m not racist but that is a stupid question to ask. They have all these holidays for blacks but none for whites. You [are] making African Americans feel that they should be treated the best and whites should be treated like trash and African Americans can pick on whites and hit them and push them around and call us prejudice names and get away with it but if we do that we get suspended. You people are stupid. You made me and a girl cry. You [are] bad and racist. Why would you even do something like this and involve us in stuff that our ancestors did. (comment from an anonymous student at Robeson school, classroom 13018)

¹⁰ Question 33 on the middle school version of the SCS states: “My school should spend more time teaching about non-White cultures.”

Another theme that emerged from students' letters was their assumption that racial inequities cannot exist because if they did, the school district would have already dealt with the problem. "If there was actually a racism problem in our school, I'm sure it would have been bad enough that our school would have taken care of it by now." By this argument, racism is not only a problem of the distant past, but one that 'logically' cannot really exist because no one is trying to fix it. The irony of these comments is that the only reason the Champaign School District was conducting the School Climate Survey in the first place was because of a mandate passed down from the Office of Civil rights because of blatant, documented racial inequities within the educational system. Thus, one particularly salient intervention area might be to educate the local populace about the racial inequities that had and continued to persist in the Champaign School District's educational system.

The students who sent in blatantly racist comments expressed a highly sophisticated racist worldview that was surprising to find among middle school students. Their letters demonstrate that racism is perpetuated from generation to generation as students reiterate many of the themes present in adults' comments.

I think this survey is a big joke. I'm white and everyone is treated the same. Except for this one time supposedly I called a black girl a stupid Bitch. Mr. Eaton¹¹, assistant principle (black) gave me a Saturday school. I went to his office the next day with one white and one black boy and we are all witnesses of that black girl cursing all the time. He, Mr. Eaton, called the girl down to the office and told us if we would have come sooner he could have done something. (I think it was because she was black). I think more suspensions come from blacks because of their parents. I see so many blacks on free lunch, I've only seen one white. I think more blacks come to school with hundred dollar shoes while they're on free lunch! I'm on full pay and my parents are paying for those people to get food and stuff. It is wrong. I'm sick of blacks and a few whites getting what they want all the time. My parents are paying for them to buy clothes, shoes,

¹¹ Mr. Eaton is a pseudonym.

etc. We could be rich without having to pay welfare for people that were born just because their parents wanted to have sex. More black parents don't care about education. (letter from an anonymous student sent to the SCRT).

This is a joke! And a waste of paper and my time. Children do poorly in school because of many issues. Their parents aren't well educated and don't value education. Until people start parenting their children, nothing will get any better. WHY DOESN'T THIS SCHOOL DISTRICT HAVE THE GUTS TO SAY THIS? (staff comment).

Finally, many comments can be summarized as angry diatribes against the survey and the SCRT.

“You people make me sick to my stomach. Black are treated just as well as white if not better. I don't think this has any importance to anyone. How are we supposed to learn with you making us fill this ‘thing’ out. You are f***ing sick. I hate whoever made this survey, just to let you know. What is this going to accomplish anyway. It's more racist than a redneck, oh wait you are one!”

Given the similarities of student letters within classrooms and the common themes and vocabulary expressed in student and teacher comments, it is likely that there was discussion within classrooms prior to writing, and even possible that some students were actively coached by their teachers about what to write. Many of the comments students composed utilized some of the same language and concerns as we found in teachers' comments to describe their reactions (for example, many classrooms of elementary students stated that they felt the survey was “inappropriate” to give to elementary-aged students). Furthermore, by reiterating the themes in the teachers' comments, the student letters were seen by some constituencies (e.g., African American community leaders SCRT members talked with, some teachers and parents who spoke at public meetings, as well as some members of the SCRT) as confirming the teachers' objections to the survey. For example, in some classrooms the language used in teachers' survey

responses was almost identical to that of students. In a few occasions, teachers admitted to facilitating the writing of these letters; for example, “I only provided the paper, and helped them with the spelling of a few words. I have not read the letters.” (teacher comment from classroom 05001). In this same classroom, over 70% of the survey responses mentioned the content area of the SCS being “none of our [the SCRT’s] business” – a strange serendipity if there was no coaching involved. In another 5th grade classroom, over 70% of the respondents stated that the survey was “offensive” – as one response put it, “We (the children of Mrs. X’s class) Find you survey very ofensive, personal, and rude. We should not have to answer such personal and very rude questions. I think you should recall the survey and be much more considerate of black’s and colored peoples Feellings.” Perhaps most telling was the fact that teachers felt it appropriate to send sometimes incredibly “inappropriate” student comments and personal attacks to the SCRT when it is doubtful that they would have forwarded such extreme language and swear-filled commentary to other professional groups.

In addition to the themes raised by students, adults consistently made several points. Many White respondents stated that the SCS project was a waste of money and that the funds would be better spent in other pursuits. “I believe that this survey is a complete waste of time and Unit 4 money! My child’s school has had to have tremendous budget cuts next year, and yet we are forced to go through this activity which is costing a great deal of money (parent comment, survey #3833).” Other participants engaged in “victim-blaming” rhetoric.

This survey is a waste of taxpayers’ money, money that should have been spent on improving education, decreasing class sizes and providing better educational materials for our youth. This is another way to play “victim” instead of being responsible for one’s own actions; it’s easier to blame social problems on someone else than working to better oneself. Unequal representation by race in special education or disciplinary action may just be due to lack of parental

supervision and support, not racism. I do not support affirmative action in classrooms, because students placed inappropriately due to race interferes with my own child's education. This is reverse discrimination and is just as wrong as racism. If certain races are over-represented in discipline action, why is this always attributed to racism? Why is it not due to individual students who have parents who don't know where their children are, how they are doing in school or even care? Let's stop blaming everyone else and deal with our children's problems as parents should (parent comment, survey #7467).

Still others believe that Whites are actually the oppressed group in the public schools.

Sadly, in this day and age there is discrimination against the average white male student. If the quota numbers are not just right in percentage of minorities the average white male student will get passed over. This occurs even if the student meets all other criteria indicated. Even if he works hard, achieves good grades, conducts himself in a proper social manner, he may not get placed in a certain program, due to the color of his skin. This too, is discrimination and we've seen more of this in the past decade (parent comment, survey #585).

Numerous staff and parents claim to "not see race" when interacting with minorities and strongly believe that "color-blindness" is the only way to be non-racist. "I teach gifted students. I don't look at their color. If they are qualified black, white, green or blue they should be in the program. Maybe the reason more black children aren't in the program is for the simple reason they don't have the background experiences, knowledge to qualify. No prejudice in that statement! (parent/staff comment, survey #4079)."

Although some respondents acknowledged that racial inequalities exist within the schools, they attribute them to broader social problems (e.g. poverty) that are beyond the reach of the school district to address.

The school cannot be responsible for fixing all of the problems with society. I do not deny that some students come with more hurdles to overcome – poverty, neglect, broken families and more. The school may be the only constant in some students' lives. Therefore, the school must be the place students learn that the past can't be changed, but the future [is] in their control. Accountability is extremely important (parent comment, survey #8796).

Such a perspective, while appearing sympathetic to disadvantaged students, effectively excuses inaction on the part of the school district.

African Americans, on the other hand, were overwhelmingly supportive of the survey, although a few mentioned that they would have liked to see additional race-relevant questions asked. “The survey should have items on how black parents are treated when they volunteer to help on PTA and other [sports] events. Because, when we volunteer we are overlooked or not taken seriously. [That’s] why more black[s] won’t volunteer (parent comment, survey #8210).”

African Americans expressed skepticism that the SCS would result in meaningful change because Whites are afraid of true educational and economic equity.

I just hope and pray something is done about the inequality problem between races. I think one of the problems may be white[s] are intimidated of blacks getting more of the American pie than they are. Why has there never been a Black American history taught by a black American[s], but there is U.S. history or white history that only teaches about Martin Luther King. There are thousands of other important Black Americans other than Martin Luther King. I honestly think if there were an equal amount of black American teachers as there were white teachers and administrative staff members, our schools would be better schools (parent comment, #6690).

Taken together, the comments by students, parents, and staff demonstrate a remarkable level of denial among White respondents. Given these responses by community members, the SCRT realized that while the results from the SCS would create a stir in the community, they were less likely to yield meaningful change in the school district unless the SCRT remained actively engaged as advocates for addressing racial inequities.

Until the SCRT became actively engaged in co-constructing the media response to the SCS process, the press had been highly negative. The SCRT’s involvement helped both to balance negative perspectives and aid in information dissemination. As example’s, when the

SCRT went on two radio talk-shows – one on the local community radio station, WEFT, and the other on the local “Black” station, WBCP – the goal was both to educate the public as well as to make public an alternative narrative about the meaning of the SCS. In this regard, the audience was the general public as well as District officials, community leaders, and press. While we may never know if District officials or the press heard the shows, community leaders did comment on the show. Over the several months following the survey’s administration, the SCRT began working increasingly with local media outlets to gain more positive public discourse concerning the SCS.

Phase III – Dissemination & Follow-Through

The SCRT learned from the vehemence of the reaction to the administration of the SCS. This section documents some of the tactics and strategies the SCRT used to follow-up after the School Climate Survey was administered and help ensure that the results from the survey were not swept under the rug. The SCRT wanted to create dialogue around issues of racial climate in the School District; but also knew that this discussion was only a first step towards affecting meaningful change in educational outcomes. This public conversation was seen as only one facet of the solution – policies and practices, as well as social and role relationships (which would be affected by the dialogue) also needed to be addressed. The SCRT’s role evolved from that of a stereotypical researcher to one where the team became actively engaged in forwarding a particular interpretation of the results (that they were meaningful and pointed to serious concerns within the educational system) and advocates for the SCS project; thus the SCS process continued to evolve based on the local context and reaction to better fit the needs of the local community. The School Climate Research Team realized that if the results were to receive a fair

hearing from the press, simply releasing a report would be an inadequate intervention within a community with serious, long-standing racial inequities. Because the SCRT's goal was to foster constructive change in the District, the SCRT felt a responsibility to ensure that the survey was given serious consideration by the School Board and White community. Thus, in the weeks leading up to the meeting date when the SCS results were to be released, the SCRT launched a public information campaign to directly encourage people to attend. This campaign grew out of the community reaction to the SCS process and represented a concerted effort at direct action that had not been originally envisioned as part of the SCS project.

In the weeks leading up to the release date, the SCRT contacted friends and acquaintances throughout the community. The SCRT also contacted multiple media outlets to cover the event. By utilizing personal contacts, the SCRT brought out allies to the meeting where the School Climate Survey results were publicly released. As a result, over 130 community members attended the School Board meeting, which usually brings out less than a dozen audience members.¹² The supportive climate in the meeting supported many audience members in feeling safe telling their personal stories of racial harassment in the Champaign public schools. The event also marked one of the few times that an outpouring of personal tales and experiences from those with a different perspective dominated the public narrative. While some individuals in the audience were still dismissive of the SCS, the overwhelming public response at the meeting was supportive both of the validity of the survey's results and of the need for continued efforts to address the racial inequities in the school district.

¹² The standing room only school board meeting was considered by many community members to be the best-attended in the history of the school district.

Following the February 19, 2001 public unveiling of the SCS results, and based on previous experiences with community reaction to the SCS, the SCRT decided to proactively engage District staff members (e.g., teachers, teaching aids), the media, and school district officials (e.g., school board members, administrators) in discussions about the ramifications of the survey's results. The SCRT also created and actively monitored an anonymous electronic discussion board for people to ask questions and post their opinions about racial issues as well as a website with resources (e.g., surveys, reports, news coverage links) for community members to access (see Figure 3). In essence, the SCRT's role in the community evolved as the SCS process unfolded – becoming more actively engaged in organizing responses to the SCS results and helping to facilitate constructive solutions to the persistent problem of continuing racial inequities throughout the educational system.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Following the administration of the SCS, the SCRT prepared school climate reports that were clear and accessible to all stakeholders and easily obtained by all interested community members (see Aber et al., 2001). In addition to traditional avenues for disseminating the reports (e.g. at School Board meetings, distribution to school staff), the SCRT also posted the reports on the project's website where they could be downloaded. While only about 70% of households had access to a computer with Internet capacity, the project's website has logged almost 9000 hits (as of March 2004) from across the globe (including researchers from England, South Africa, and Australia) since the surveys and survey results were made available online.

Initially, the SCRT was perceived as a typical University of Illinois research group. However, as the SCRT continued to push for the School District to address the results of the

SCS, some constituencies (both hostile and supportive of the SCS) came to perceive the SCRT as more of an advocate for addressing racial inequities. Since releasing the results of the School Climate Survey, the SCRT has worked to facilitate a discussion of positive solutions to the racial inequities in the school system. In facilitating this dialogue, the SCRT has had to balance the roles of advocacy and engagement – both pushing for racial climate problems to be addressed, while still bringing diverse constituencies to the table to dialogue. In addition, the SCRT continued to learn how to utilize the media more fully and to actively support the creation of spaces where traditionally silenced perspectives could be voiced.

The first news story on the topic, in a weekly newsmagazine, stated that the SCRT was hired “to neutrally document racial perceptions from students, parents, teachers, staff members, and administrators, (Racial-Climate, 2000). However, the local media quickly began searching for more incendiary news stories. One of the first stories to appear in the area’s daily newspaper began, “A survey intended to help Champaign schools improve their racial climate is drawing fire from parents who say some of the questions are leading. Karin Imlay, who has four children, including two that attend Garden Hills School in Champaign, said she found the survey ‘offensive’” (Puch, 2000a). The SCRT’s initial stance as “neutral observers” was quickly undermined. Extremely angry, negative perspectives were published without any attempt to balance the reporting with the views of those who supported the SCS process. The SCRT learned that unless the team worked with reporters, the stories would be written from a perspective that was opposed to the SCRT’s goal of addressing racial inequities and fostering dialog concerning racial climate issues.

As the public release date for the School Climate Survey's results grew closer, the SCRT spent an increasing amount of time talking with the media, explaining the importance of taking findings seriously, and presenting a position that addressed many community members' concerns and undermined many of the most vitriolic attacks on the survey process. In essence, the public relations aspects of the project grew in importance and were added to our methodology to ensure that opponents to the SCS did not dictate the public reception of the SCS results. The SCRT worked with certain key media (i.e. the local daily newspaper and the Independent Media Center) to make the survey results a community-wide concern. Increasing time and energy were spent creating an anticipatory interest in the survey's results; and, in the end, every major news outlet in the area covered the school climate survey release. Because the overriding goal of the process has been to lessen existing racial disparities in the school district, the SCRT's role as advocates and researchers was a natural evolution from our original objective. This attention to media coverage was not part of the initial plan for conducting the SCS – but given the initial problems caused by negative media coverage, this facet was added to our project scope to help facilitate institutional change to address the issues the SCS made salient.

As a result of the SCRT's advocacy for addressing racial inequities, reaction to the project became more supportive. According to the local daily newspaper, many people began anticipating changes being implemented by the School District (Haag, 2001a). In addition, as local media outlets became more supportive (or at least less negative) of the project, the community expressed more willingness to address these problems (e.g., Haag, 2001b, Malik 2001, Daily Illini, 2001). However, as the school district turned to work more directly on racial inequity issues, some community members became increasingly hostile:

Once again the irresponsible members of our black community, and those who would blindly support them, want to lay the blame for the disgraceful conduct and resulting repercussions of that conduct on the shoulders of the “red eyed white demons” who continue to oppress them. If the parents of these little heathens would take control at home and teach their ill-mannered young how to behave both at school and out of it, their kids wouldn’t have the problems they have now. That would leave our beleaguered school officials to deal with the true minority of students white and black that have serious emotional and social problems. If black people and their advocates keep using the racial trump card at every opportunity it will become so devalued no one will pay any attention when a true instance of discrimination occurs. Contrary to popular opinion the majority of white people do care deeply about racial equality. If they didn’t we would still have an institution called slavery, you know the institution that tens of thousands of whites died to abolish, remember that war? (Anonymous comment on the SCRT electronic discussion board, 2/23/01).

As this comment makes clear, prejudice and denial of the extent of the racial inequities are still present in Champaign. In 2002, the main proponent for addressing racial inequities in the school district administration was removed from her job by the Champaign School Board only weeks after a new study of the school district documented continuing inequalities of almost the same magnitude as existed four years earlier (see Peterkin & Lucey, 2002).

Fostering Constructive Change: Solutions & Conclusions

The School Climate Research Team learned a tremendous amount both about racial climate and about working in contentious settings. The data collected during the School Climate Survey process provide a rich case study for action researchers. If one goal of action research is to create positive change through collaboration with the community members directly affected by social problems (Brydon-Miller & Tolman, 1997; Tandon, Azelton, Kelly, & Strickland, 1998), the solutionsⁱⁱⁱ the SCRT formulated through constructive dialogue concerning racial issues are one way to bring about changes in the education system that both addresses community concerns and reduces prejudice among discussants. Aboud and Fenwick (1999) conducted three studies

investigating the effects of discussions concerning race on middle school students' racial tolerance. They concluded, "attempts to reduce prejudice in students may be successful if they incorporate talk that is specifically known to reduce prejudice and that is directed to the listener's concerns" (p. 784). The SCRT's work and the SCS process offer windows into both the racial dynamics at play in one school district and how action researchers can utilize qualitative data to better document the complexity of this phenomenon. While this paper utilized qualitative data the School Climate Research Team collected, the racial divide in responses to the survey parallel the empirical analyses of the School Climate Survey results.^{iv}

Given the discrepant views of the District's social climate in general and the racial climate in particular, the process used to bring school staff and administrators together to discuss these issues was of utmost importance. The School Climate Research Team has worked hard to ensure that discrepant viewpoints are tolerated and supported and that the culture of silence that existed for so long is acknowledged. Unfortunately, the Champaign School District still has a long way to go to eliminate racial inequities and some community members continue to demonstrate a marked inability to see things from the point of view of those fighting to address these inequities, "Being white and having a son who is rarely in trouble and is certainly not a discipline problem I realize I am not the targeted population, but if I were black I would be upset about the way the questions were phrased" (parent comment, survey #04024). However, as demonstrated by the large turnout at several town discussions, an ample number of staff, students, and parents are responding to the survey similarly to this White Hispanic mother, "I am so glad you are doing this review. I feel there is great reluctance to discuss racial issues or racism in general. The reaction to this questionnaire just proves it! I hope cultural differences are

addressed not only rhetorically but in practical, concrete ways. Thanks!” (parent comment, survey #02317).

The success of the SCS project resulted from the School Climate Research Team's ability to rapidly respond to changing conditions and situations within the local community and adapt our methodology to this changing socio-political landscape. Within the Champaign School District, collaboration with community members necessitated continual reevaluation of the SCS process. The perceptual gulf and power discrepancies separating minority and White constituencies required multiple methodological changes and a careful balancing act of the differing desires voiced during the multiple years the SCRT was involved in the Champaign School District.

Supporting Institutional Change Through an Evolving Methodology

Insofar as the School Climate Survey was created with an emphasis on including the viewpoints of cultural minorities and the discussion process would provide a forum for the empowerment of traditionally silenced perspectives, it is an important first step toward institutional reform – a step that evolving methodologies are quite suited to achieving. Bennett & LeCompte (1990) state, “Throughout the history of American schooling there has been a constant tension between those who believe in schooling for assimilation and those who believe in *cultural pluralism*” (p. 219; *emphasis original*). Researchers should take up a call to action to address this tension – learning from the experiences of the SCRT and other action researchers and developing processes that help lessen the racial inequities in our public education systems.

Over the course this study, the School Climate Research Team learned several important lessons. First, measures of racial climate must directly address real-world, locally-salient issues.

In particular, measures of racial climate should incorporate the issues and perspectives of traditionally ignored or silenced constituencies. Second, the process of collecting multiple viewpoints should lead investigators towards a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional racial climate construct. Third, one should also expect and anticipate that this amplification of concerns will lend itself to immediate reaction from other constituencies. In the case of the SCRT, African American concerns and racial inequities detrimentally affecting minorities were revealed during the SCS process. As was documented in this paper, this process caused an immediate reaction among certain constituencies. And fourth, future researchers will benefit from anticipating this reaction and proactively working with the media, community leaders, and school district staff ahead of time.

Unfortunately, many action-research projects that work to foster educational reform fall far short of affecting meaningful change (see Sarason, 1990; Friere, 1970/1993). As Kozol (1991) argues in Savage Inequalities, “The solutions that innumerable commissions have proposed...seldom asked for ‘equity.’ What they mean, what they prescribe, is *something that resembles equity but never reaches it*: something close enough to equity to silence criticism by approximating justice, but far enough from equity to guarantee the benefits enjoyed by privilege” (p. 175; *emphasis original*). The development of the School Climate Survey and the dialog and actions resulting from it exemplify a methodological process that short-circuits many of the pitfalls undermining successful institutional interventions in education (Oxley, 2000). By actively engaging in a process that disrupted (and had the potential to transform) the Champaign School District, the SCRT leveraged the School Climate Survey results to open up avenues for constructive change. While the results of the School Climate Survey process have been, at best,

mixed; this intervention has helped put racial climate on the radar of school reformers and has broken open the previously taboo subject of racial climate – setting the stage, at the very least, for future educational reformers to work on this institutional problem.

Hopefully, public discourse on racial climate will increase as more community members look for solutions to racial inequities in the local school system. Over 1,000 respondents indicated in their School Climate Survey responses that they would be willing to work to end inequities; and they represent a significant group pressing the school district to make meaningful changes. Community members have shown a willingness to attempt new solutions, such as revamping curricula and teaching to a variety of learning styles. However, creating an atmosphere of acceptance for school reform will be a continuing process requiring further unexpected changes in implementation and strategy and building upon the School Climate Research Team's work. Considering previous discourse on race and education – which has been dominated by problematic ideas of “color-blindness,” a denial of institutionalized racism, confusion over the difference between racial awareness/acknowledgment and racism, and ongoing questions about the purpose of both education and reform, it seems unlikely that meaningful change to lessen existing racial inequities will be forthcoming without the continued intervention of a dedicated group of reform activists. Thus, it is not surprising that an educational audit, whose findings were released in 2004, found very few changes in the previously documented racial inequities (Peterkin, Lucey, & Trent, 2004; see also, Cook, 2004 for a discussion of the audit results).¹³

¹³ Lawrence Bobo (1999) states, “The decline of full-blown Jim Crow racism, however, has not resulted in its opposite: a thoroughly antiracist popular ideology based on an embracing and democratic vision of the common humanity, worth, and place in the polity for Blacks alongside Whites. Instead, the institutionalized racial inequities

Since implementing the School Climate Survey, the School Climate Research Team has engaged stakeholders using a variety of strategies including: talk radio shows, town meetings, staff socials, and personally responding to e-mails, website inquiries, and phone calls. The Coalition on Racial Equity and Excellence in Education (CARE3), a community-based group formed to discuss the climate results and strategize tactics for continuing to pressure the School District to abide by the equity agreements, was also formed. Since 2001 CARE3 has been active in hiring a new superintendent; identified, supported, and helped elect three new Board of Education members; and held multiple community forums to maintain the community's voice in the equity process. Many of these interventions were unplanned and/or ad-hoc additions to the initially conceptualized methodology. However, because they were specifically created and refined to be effective within a rapidly changing local context, they helped make possible an unprecedented opportunity for institutional reform.

Within the action-research framework utilized by the School Climate Research Team, the local community's reactions to the School Climate Survey were not viewed as simply artifacts, but were used to inform the methodology utilized. This process of incorporating concerns and revamping the action-research process was an important part of the School Climate Survey process and generalizable to other settings and research. These reactions helped the School Climate Research Team to understand the racial climate in the Champaign School System, and provided highly informative clues about the context within which the SCRT worked. As a result of the feedback and reaction the School Climate Survey elicited, the methods used by the SCRT evolved to better document and measure the racial climate within the District. This multi-

created by the long slavery and subsequent Jim Crow eras are now popularly accepted and condoned under a modern free market or laissez-faire racist ideology.” (pg. 464; see also Bobo & Smith, 1998).

faceted, evolving methodological process helped foster a better understanding and acceptance of diversity within the local public schools, thus fostering momentum to reform the Champaign educational system.

The School Climate Research Team's experiences creating, implementing, and following through with the School Climate Survey project, provide an important case study for utilizing an evolving methodology within a highly contentious setting. The lessons learned will help future researchers to: avoid some of the pitfalls the School Climate Research Team faced; better anticipate areas of conflict; and, proactively set a media agenda that will help facilitate constructive institutional reform. For action-researchers working within educational settings or studying racial climate, the School Climate Survey itself, as well as the process surrounding its administration, provide both a tool and a methodology for successfully measuring this complex construct. Future research will be able to build upon the foundation laid by the School Climate Research Team, and by so doing, support positive educational reform efforts in our public school system.

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Figure 1. Background and Phase I critical events and methodological change timeline

Background

- 1997 – Equity complaint filed with Office of Civil Rights by concerned community members
- Office of Civil Rights investigates the Champaign School District for equity violations
- 1998 – Equity audit conducted by Champaign School District
- Resolution Agreement signed by community members and Champaign School District
- Resolution Agreement Planning and Implementation Committee created
- 1999 – School Climate Research Team hired

Phase I begins: Pre-administration

INITIAL METHODOLOGY FORMULATED

- 08/05/99 – SCRT begins meeting with community members
- 12/12/99 – Meeting with Champaign PTA Council
- 01/03/00 – SCRT meeting with Teachers Union Council

Focus changes from SCS construction to fostering public acceptance of the survey

- January 2000 – individual informational meetings with reporters
- 01/28/00 – Positive news coverage of SCS in weekly newspaper

Figure 2. Phase II critical events and methodological change timeline

Phase II begins: Administration

03/09/00 – SCS delivered to schools – principals meet and refuse to distribute the survey

Survey methodology changed to exclude second graders
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03/20/00 – School Board meeting held – many teachers and parents complain about SCS

March 2000 – Negative news coverage of SCS in daily newspaper; student responses to SCS

04/10/00 – Letter sent from teachers to School District requesting SCS results not be published

Methodology changed to focus more on public exposure and media coverage

05/25/00 – WBCP 1580AM radio show

06/11/00 – WEFT 90.1FM radio show

December 2000-February 2001 – SCRT organizes community attendance at SCS results unveiling

Figure 3. Phase III critical events and methodological change timeline

Phase III begins: Report dissemination and follow-through

Methodological focus on community organizing and direct action

02/19/01 – SCRT releases report of SCS results
02/20/01 – Positive news coverage of SCS in daily newspaper
03/03/01 – Positive news coverage of SCS in daily newspaper

SCRT website and discussion board created

05/15/01 – First “Community Dialogue on Race Related Issues” held
11/19/01 – Second “Community Dialogue on Race Related Issues” held
Fall 2002 – main administrator who supported the SCS is demoted from her position
12/01/02 – School District releases equity follow-up report documenting little change in inequities
04/01/03 – African American elected to the Champaign School Board

ⁱ Data for this thesis was garnered from field notes and hundreds of comments that the School Climate Research Team received concerning the School Climate Survey. Specific quotes were chosen to illustrate the quantitative findings (see Aber, Meinrath, Johnston, Rasmussen, & Gonzalez, 2001). These quantitative findings aggregate by – and compare school climate perceptions across – race. Within each racial group, school climate perceptions were dissimilar; however, significant racial differences exist when these perceptions are averaged within each racial group. Likewise, while much of the qualitative data reflects the racial norms seen in the quantitative findings, it would be an ecological fallacy to assume that individual members of each racial group have similar perceptions. While most of our comments by self-identified Whites were negative towards the School Climate Survey and most comments by self-identified African Americans were positive, a few Whites were supportive and some African Americans dismissive of the School Climate Survey. The comments contained in this analysis illustrate specific points; but should not be taken as an exhaustive representation of the respondents' racial groups.

ⁱⁱ The SCS was created to assess racial climate in the particular context of the Champaign schools. This multidimensional assessment tool has five different versions (parent, school staff, high-, middle-, and elementary school students). The parent, school staff, high school, and middle school versions contain 112, 110, 65, and 64 items respectively and measure: influence (perceived impact on school operations and decision-making); understanding (whether individuals feel their point of view is understood); trust (how trusting respondents are that school staff will follow through on promises); respect (how respected respondents feel by school staff); need for change (perceptions of the need to change the school system to better address racial matters); attributions for misbehavior (rationale for why students get in trouble); fairness regarding discipline (perception that discipline is fair); fairness regarding academic and social opportunity (perception that access to the talented and gifted and special education programs is fair); fairness regarding general treatment (perception that all students are treated fairly); appropriateness of disciplinary actions and policies (perceptions of reaction to student misbehavior and the interference with education caused by disciplinary actions); teaching (perceived appropriateness of teaching styles); stereotypic perceptions and cultural misattributions (perceived teacher expectations of students); achievement expectations (academic expectations for students); comfort (how comfortable respondent feels in their school); and experiences of racism (how often a respondent has experienced racism). Furthermore, the parent and school staff versions also contain school-parent contact (quality of the contact between school staff and parents), and conceptualizations of integrated schools (what respondents view as necessary for a racially integrated school)

subscales as well as parent involvement (the different ways parents are involved in their children's schools) and barriers (reasons why parents are unable or choose not to become involved in their children's schools) sections.

ⁱⁱⁱ The SCRT formulated 8 recommendations that built "on the sources of support for change and recogniz[ed] the nature of the resistance to change...to address the climate concerns identified [by the School Climate Survey]": first, increase the cultural competence of teaching staff; second, create forums in the schools to discuss the climate study results and make recommendations to address issues raised by them; third, hire more African American regular classroom teachers; fourth, develop incentives to reward teachers who teach students of diverse backgrounds well; fifth, develop incentives for teachers to learn from colleagues who demonstrate success teaching students of diverse backgrounds well; sixth, reduce and eventually eliminate all "ability based" tracking; seventh, establish goals and strategies to reduce the overall number of disciplinary and special education referrals; and, eighth, implement in-school educational programs for students focused on issues of race, culture and ethnicity.

^{iv} Across all samples, the largest and most consistent differences in perceptions appeared on six climate dimensions: General Fairness, Disciplinary Fairness, Academic Fairness, Cultural Understanding, Qualities of Desegregated Champaign Schools, and Need for Change. Racial differences were found on each of these dimensions in every sample. African American respondents were, depending on sample, between 2 and 23 times more likely than their White counterparts to believe the schools are unfair, between 2 and 4 times more likely to disagree that teaching styles are personally and culturally relevant, between 3 and 9 times more likely to perceive a need for change in their school to address racial inequities, and between 7 and 11 times more likely to rate as very important various issues found in previous research to foster positive school climate for African American students in desegregated schools, such as hiring African American teachers and administrators in similar proportions to those of African American students in Unit 4 schools. All of these differences were significant, $p < .05$ (see Aber et. al, 2001).