

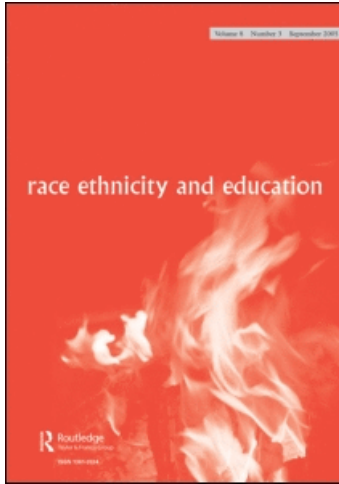
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### Critical race reflections: valuing the experiences of teachers of color in teacher education

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## **Critical race reflections: valuing the experiences of teachers of color in teacher education**

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While research has demonstrated that White teachers often must be taught about the pain of racism in order to not perpetuate it, this may not apply to racial minority teachers. Through personal experience, Teachers of Color are likely aware of the trauma that racism can cause students. Within teacher education, we must create research and teaching strategies that acknowledge racial minority teachers as insiders to the experiences of racism in school, and as valuable assets in the fight for educational justice. Using a critical race theory (CRT) framework, this article explores the reflections of Women of Color educators regarding their encounters and observations with race and racism in K-12 schools. Qualitative interviews were conducted with twelve Asian-American, Black and Latina women enrolled in a social justice teacher preparation program in Los Angeles. Their stories expose (1) the personal experiences with racism the women endured within their K-12 education; (2) the parallel experiences with racism they observe Students of Color enduring in schools today; and (3) racial hierarchies within teacher education. This data highlights a cycle of racism that continues to manifest in the educational experiences of Asian-American, Black and Latina/o youth. Additionally, the important stories and ideas revealed through the process of this research draws attention to the personal knowledge teacher preparation programs can tap into when training Teachers of Color about educational inequality.

**Keywords:** Critical Race Theory; racism; racial hierarchy; urban education; teacher-education; Asian-American teachers; Black teachers; Latino teachers; K-12 education

### **Introduction**

JoAnn,<sup>1</sup> a Latina from southern California, was born and raised in the US. Despite this fact, she has many memories from her K-12 education where she was deemed an outsider by her classmates. One day in third grade, she and her friend began to argue, like many young children do. However, to hurt JoAnn, this young White child called her a ‘border hopper, wetback’. JoAnn expressed that this racist slur made her feel ‘dirty’ and ‘inferior’. When reflecting on this, she began to cry. She shared that her emotion was less about her own experience, and more about the parallel experiences she observes with young Latina/o students in schools today. JoAnn is angry that Students of Color<sup>2</sup> are forced to endure racism in the classroom, and she is also concerned that they do not have the tools to understand or challenge it. Enrolled in a teacher preparation program in Los Angeles, she planned to teach elementary school to create a classroom space free from the racism she faced as a young student.

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As demonstrated in the example above, racism can have a serious impact on the way Youth of Color perceive themselves. The racism JoAnn experienced in school made her feel inadequate or not fully accepted in American society. It is likely that she would not have endured so much pain had her teachers monitored the racial climate of the classroom. She carries fear and anger that young Students of Color today are experiencing racism as she did, and breaking this cycle is one of her primary motivations in becoming an educator. Although JoAnn entered her teacher preparation program seeking tools to address racism in the classroom, she often felt that the program devalued her insight as a Woman of Color and overlooked her strengths as a working-class Latina teaching in a predominantly working-class Latina/o school. Teacher preparation programs have a responsibility to educate teachers to challenge racism in schools. However, it becomes difficult for programs to effectively provide strategies for combating racism when they themselves maintain racial hierarchies. While research has demonstrated that White teachers often must be taught about the pain of racism in order to not perpetuate it (Ladson-Billings 2001), as revealed through JoAnn's experience, this may not apply to racial minority teachers. Through personal encounters, Teachers of Color are often already aware of the trauma that racism can cause students. It is important for teacher preparation programs to tap into this knowledge and recognize it as a strength. By guiding racial minority teachers to reflect on racism in their own education, programs can help teachers connect their experiences to the current-day realities of Youth of Color. From this, Teachers of Color can empathize with their students and create strategies to effectively intervene on racism in the classroom.

Using a critical race theory (CRT) framework, this article explores the narratives of Women of Color educators regarding their encounters and observations with race and racism in K-12 schools. Qualitative interviews with twelve Asian-American, Black and Latina women enrolled in a social justice teacher preparation program in Los Angeles reveal powerful personal and observed stories of racial assaults against Youth of Color. Their stories shed light on manifestations of racial inequality through a multi-racial lens, as well as provide insight to the lives of racial minority teachers.

To contextualize the study I first review literature on teacher education, overview Critical Race Theory, and describe the methods of the study. I, then, highlight the findings of the study, including the racial reflections of Women of Color educators from their K-12 schooling, their observations of racism in schools, and how racial hierarchies are maintained within teacher education. Finally, I demonstrate how critical race reflections can be used as a strategy in the teacher education of Teachers of Color.

### **Building on the literature**

*Brown v. Board of Topeka* (1954) ruled that racially segregated schools were not equal, and students must integrate. Through the process of desegregation, racial minority students were able to access schools with more resources, and many dilapidated schools serving Students of Color were shut down. However, while this landmark case changed the law, it did not change a racist national climate. Because many White parents did not want their children educated by non-White teachers, a commonly overlooked side-effect of this legislation was that most Teachers of Color were fired (Bell 2004). As a result, Teachers of Color became a minority in the education of Students of Color.

In 2004, The National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force found that 90% of all public school teachers are White, and that more than 40% of schools do not even employ one Teacher of Color. This means that the majority of youth experience their entire academic career with few to no minority teachers. According to discourse focused on the increased academic achievement and college access of Students of Color, a reoccurring recommendation offered is that public schools must diversify the teaching force (Bennett, Cole, and Thompson 2000; Sheets 2001). Scholars assert the more students encounter educators from similar ethnic/racial and cultural backgrounds, the more culturally relevant and meaningful their education will be (Villegas and Clewell 1998). Considering this, the recruitment of Teachers of Color is imperative. But, it is not enough to only take into account their presence. Once they do enter teacher preparation programs, racial minority teachers have unique needs and strengths that must also be recognized.

In the 2007–2008 school year 91% of students enrolled in the Los Angeles Unified School District were non-white (California Department of Education, 2007). Simultaneously, 62% of teachers enrolled in a Los Angeles based teacher preparation program (TPP) were also racial minorities (TPP Enrollment Data, 2007). Even with these demographics, the majority of research and teaching strategies in TPP, and nationally, are written by and for white teachers. Because teacher education is so commonly geared towards educating a predominantly white teaching force, the preparation of Teachers of Color is often neglected. Preparing white Teachers and teachers of Color to enter Communities of Color cannot look the same. Research has demonstrated that while white educators often must be taught about the pain of racism in order to not perpetuate it (Ladson-Billings, 2001), racial minority teachers are typically aware of the trauma that racism can cause through personal encounters. Unfortunately, very little research or curriculum recognizes these racialized experiences and understanding. In this article, I demonstrate that the racialized understanding of Teachers of Color can be positively utilized to combat educational inequity. When considering the teacher education of racial minority teachers, I argue that programs must both acknowledge and tap into these experiences.

### **A Critical Race Theory framework**

In examining the personal narratives of the Women of Color educators, it is essential to first explain how I am using the term racism, as well as the critical race theory framework through which this study was designed. Racism, as defined by Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll (2002), exists when one group believes itself to be superior and has power to carry out racist behavior. These authors also assert that racism affects multiple racial/ethnic groups (Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll 2002). Additionally, even though racism is tied to race, it is not always acted out based on racial categories; it can also manifest as discrimination based on factors affiliated with race or ethnicity such as language, religion and culture.

CRT is used within this study to centralize the role of race and racism in the experiences of People of Color within teacher education. The framework was developed in the 1970s amongst legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberley Crenshaw and Richard Delgado to highlight race, racism, and its intersections with other forms of oppression. Over the last ten years, CRT has started to extend into many disciplines, including education. It is used within this field to heighten awareness about racism and educational inequity. CRT scholars have developed the following five tenets to guide

CRT research; all of these tenets are utilized within the design and analysis of this study (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001):

- (1) *Centrality of race and racism.* All CRT research within education must centralize race and racism, as well as acknowledge the intersection of race with other forms of subordination. This study focused on race, racism and its intersection with gender and class in the lives of Women of Color educators.
- (2) *Challenging the dominant perspective.* CRT research works to challenge dominant narratives, often referred to as majoritarian stories. This project challenged dominant narratives within teacher education that center the experiences of White teachers and leave Teachers of Color invisible. By focusing on the diverse experiences of Blacks, Latinas/os and Asian-Americans, the study also contradicts the common belief that People of Color are a monolithic group with homogenous experiences and expertise.
- (3) *Commitment to social justice.* Social justice must always be a motivation behind CRT research. Transforming the education of racially marginalized youth requires the development of a racially diverse and conscious teaching force. This can only occur, however, if teacher education is equipped to address the needs of Teachers of Color. Committed to social justice, this project suggests a model of teacher education that values the experiences and insights of Teachers of Color.
- (4) *Valuing experiential knowledge.* CRT scholars believe in the power of story. Building on to the oral traditions of many indigenous Communities of Color around the world, CRT research values the experiences and narratives of People of Color when attempting to understand social inequality. All data in this study was collected through qualitative interviews. This research project centers the experiences and narratives of Women of Color educators to better understand racial inequity in schools.
- (5) *Being interdisciplinary.* The final tenet of CRT research is to be interdisciplinary. CRT scholars believe that the world is multi-dimensional, and similarly research about the world should reflect multiple perspectives. Drawing on the fields of psychology, sociology, history and education, this project is interdisciplinary in nature. It utilizes theory, empirical research and personal narratives from all of these different fields to build understanding about racism in schools.

These five tenets are extremely useful in engaging the voices of People of Color in challenging racism. In this study CRT was the theoretical lens, and was also critical to the structure of the methods.

## Methods

Traditional forms of research typically push for understanding, but rarely insist on intervention or transformation. Instead, a CRT methodology does not allow scholars to see research participants as data sources alone (Pizarro 1998). Those who share their stories within interviews are people, with voices, complex lives and struggles; it would be unjust for researchers to take these stories for their own benefit. Instead, CRT as a method demands that research must benefit the participants, and the communities they come from. This study was designed to learn about the racialization of

Students of Color in K-12 schools, but also provided a safe space for Women of Color educators to build community, heal from their experiences, and strategize how to prevent racism in their classrooms.

This study collected narratives from Women of Color enrolled in a teacher preparation program in Los Angeles, California. TPP has a social justice mission, with a commitment to serve urban underperforming schools, and to recruit Teachers of Color. Thus, unlike many other teacher preparation programs, racial minority students comprise the majority in TPP. Individual and focus group interviews were conducted with 12 self-selected Latina, Black, and Asian-American female teachers to explore the role of race and racism within their educational experiences and observations in schools today. The women taught a range of subjects and grades, and were of diverse comfort levels and expertise in discussing race and racism.

The individual interviews encouraged the women to share experiences with race and racism from their own K-12 education, as well as connect those experiences to the racism they observe Youth of Color struggling against in schools today. Following the interview, each woman was assigned to a six-person group with balanced racial demographics for three focus group interviews. These interviews were designed as a space for the women to discuss similar issues, but in an inter-racial setting. The first focus group was a discussion of race and racism in their own K-12 education, the second addressed their observations with race and racism in the schools in which they work, and the third was a space for them to strategize how to address race and racism in their classrooms.

All individual and focus group interviews were transcribed throughout the study, and were emailed to the women after completion as a means to member check. Survey questions, emails and written reflections from the end of each focus group session were also considered as data, and were used to member check emerging themes. In compiling the findings, I read and re-read all the transcripts. I began to note reoccurring themes and themes related to the research questions, and sorted the data into categories.

While there were many important findings from the data, this article will only focus on three main themes: (1) the personal experiences with racism the women endured within their K-12 education; (2) the parallel experiences with racism they observe Students of Color enduring in schools today; and (3) racial hierarchies within teacher education. The purpose of sharing these three themes is to point to a cycle of racism that continues to manifest in the educational experiences of Asian-American, Black and Latina/o youth. Additionally, the important stories and ideas revealed through the process of this research draws attention to the personal knowledge teacher preparation programs can tap into when training Teachers of Color about educational inequality.

### **Personal experiences with racism in K-12 education**

Regardless of class, whether Black, Latina or Asian-American, and whether attending a predominantly White or non-White school, every woman in the study revealed that they experienced racism in their K-12 education. The data that I share here is representative of their experiences, but hardly addresses the breadth of racism that they endured throughout their schooling. In this section, I will highlight just three of the many ways in which race and racism intersected for these Women of Color educators within their K-12 schooling: (1) racial slurs from peers; (2) cultural invisibility in the curriculum; and (3) the attitudes and actions of school staff.

***Racial slurs from peers***

We expect that at some point in elementary, middle or high school, students might get teased or made fun of. What we do not expect, however, is that the teasing or taunting will be racially charged. From the playground to the classroom, almost every woman in the study revealed moments in which their peers used racial slurs to hurt or belittle them. These events often made them feel marginalized and self-conscious, but were also a way in which Black, Latina and Asian-American youth were taught their place in the racial hierarchy.

In elementary school, Ashley was one of the only Black kids on a predominantly White middle-class campus. Although her mom was a teacher at that same school, she had countless negative experiences with racism. Many of those incidents happened on the playground during recess. With a love and talent for tetherball, Ashley would play everyday. Whenever she would win, which was often, the White boys she beat would call her n\*gger. It happened often and was never addressed by adults at the school; so she grew to expect and accept it. Ashley shared:

I was the bomb at tetherball. I would beat these boys, and they would always call me the n-word. Regardless. And it got to the point where I would beat them, and they would look at me and I would look at them, and I knew they were going to say it. I was so desensitized from the word. I knew it was bad, but I was just totally desensitized from it that it was just like, let me go run and tell the yard duty, and hopefully someone will say something. But never do I remember hearing them being punished or talked to, or even a discussion of what that word meant and what it meant to say it.

Ashley was better at tetherball than many White boys at her school. When she beat them, and they felt stripped of their athletic prowess, they resorted to a power that they could always rely on- White power. The power of the word n\*gger comes from an intense history of White domination over people of African descent. Although the young boys at Ashley's school did not participate in that history, they still have access to the word, and thus access to the power behind that word. By using it, they continued the legacy of White supremacy by yielding psychological dominance over a young Black girl. Without intervention from the yard-duty, the teachers or the administration, Ashley began to both expect and accept these racist actions.

Several of the women in this study had similar experiences with competitive games and racism. When winning against White youth, young Women of Color were often called racial slurs. JoAnn expressed that in high school, her all Latina soccer team regularly played predominantly White teams. During those games, she was often confronted with racist attacks when using Spanish as a strategy on the field. JoAnn commented:

Our coach was Latino, so when we would play against other schools where the team members were predominantly White, our coach would speak to us in Spanish and we would speak Spanish to each other. They didn't like the fact that we spoke Spanish, so people would call us 'wetbacks'. That was our strategy, we speak Spanish; we use that. It's an asset, so of course they would get pissed and they would say, 'Don't you know how to speak English, lardo, wetback, border-hopper'.

Similar to the case with Ashley and tetherball, when the White students felt a disadvantage to the Latina soccer team because of their inability to understand Spanish, they resorted to racial slurs and derogatory statements to disable their competitors. The young women on the soccer team were using their bilingualism as an asset.

However, White students were able to use the power of racial slurs to make their Latina peers feel inadequate and inferior.

Sports were not the only space in which racist language was used within K-12 education. Many of the women shared experiences where their classmates, White and non-White alike, would 'tease' them using language like 'n\*gger', 'Black girl', or 'chink'. People of Color did not create these words and phrases, but because of the institutional power associated with them, racial slurs and epithets can have a deep impact regardless of who says them (Kohli and Solórzano in press).

Erica is a Korean woman that went to a predominantly low-income Latina/o middle school in Atlanta, Georgia. She remembers enduring racial slurs from the Latina/o students. She recalled: 'When Latino students were having trouble with... [Asian] students, they would band together and call themselves "Chink control"'. Actually, all three East Asian participants, regardless of their country of origin, had multiple experiences of non-Asian students calling them 'chink', telling them to go back to China, or pulling eyes and saying 'ching, chong, ching chong'. No matter how many generations Asian-Americans have lived in this country, solely based on phenotype, they are often perceived as immigrants or foreigners (Kim 2001). The traumatic experiences that these young women faced based on their physical appearance reiterated the message that Asian-American youth are outsiders to this country.

The stories of the women in this study reveal that Youth of Color of all different races and ethnicities endure racial epithets on school grounds. Children are supposed to grow and develop in school, and it is painful to know that kids are allowed to act in racist ways towards other kids in those spaces. We must ask ourselves, why and how is this possible? It is true that they may learn racial stereotypes and racist language at home or in the media, but shouldn't schools intervene on racism? Perhaps racism amongst youth is not being addressed because the schools themselves are reinforcing the racial hierarchy and racism. In the remainder of this section, I will reveal the manner in which schools affirm racial hierarchies through a cultural invisibility in the curriculum, and the attitudes and actions of school staff.

### ***Cultural invisibility in the curriculum***

Research has revealed that state standards and most district-mandated textbooks are written with a Eurocentric bias (Loewen 1996). Many texts neglect to mention the complex histories and realities of People of Color in this country, or acknowledge them in very marginal and superficial ways (Perez Huber, Johnson, and Kohli 2006). Almost every woman in the study reiterated this finding, and felt that the curriculum of their K-12 education was not representative of their culture or history. Promoting White cultural values and perspectives in the absence of the culture and perspectives of Communities of Color is a subtle, but powerful, form of racism. When students learn about the world through this hierarchical lens, it can have a deep impact on the way they see themselves and the world around them.

When probed about racism in school, Kimmy, a fourth generation Japanese-American, reflected on the curriculum of her upper-middle-class predominantly White high school. She revealed that her social studies classes seemed to marginalize the history of racial minorities in this country, particularly the racial inequality they have experienced. Kimmy reflected:



It was in the curriculum too, the prizing of European history and the prizing of that kind of background. If you're Native-American, then you don't exist. Or if you're Asian-American, all you're good for is that you had Buddhism. Everyone who was not White was a thing of the past. If you felt racism, you were just imagining it because today racism doesn't exist anymore. So it was this whole 'color-blind' attitude that 'Oh, we're being so understanding because we're not looking at color'. But then what about me – who feels like my identity is something so important to me? Then does it just not exist?

By prioritizing European history, and ignoring or tokenizing the contributions and experiences of non-White people, Kimmy's social studies class affirmed a racial hierarchy. Subtle or not, she was sent the message that White culture and history are important and that the identity, culture, and the history of her people are unimportant. Additionally, she was told that any experiences she may have encountered with racism could not be real because 'racism doesn't exist anymore'. In actuality, the 'color-blind' attitude that Kimmy described is a common manner by which White racial superiority is upheld. Some argue that racism cannot exist if we ignore race; however, when we disregard racial difference, we do not challenge the overwhelming presence of the dominant culture in our society and schools (Bonilla-Silva 2003).

Sonia, a South Asian Sikh woman from the Bay Area, also attended an upper class, predominantly White school. She too felt that her history classes overlooked the presence of her ethnic community. She commented:

I think having a lack of curriculum about my community made me feel like it wasn't important... If there had been any mention about my community it would have made me feel like: 'Wow! Great! People are learning about me, and I am learning about my history'. I think that is so important. I think there was one chapter on Islam and Hinduism. That's it. That was the history of India.

Longing to know about her own people, the absence of India in the curriculum conveyed a message to Sonia that her culture was insignificant. Like Kimmy, Sonia also went on to mention the neglect of race in her education. Sonia continued:

And I also remember that there was no mention of race in any of our classes. My friends never knew that I was distinct, or anything about me. It just wasn't emphasized. My teachers never asked me about my background. I was just Sonia, there was no other identity other than me being a student.

When race is not acknowledged in the curriculum, it does not erase racial differences. Sonia's rich Indian culture, her Sikh religion, and her Brown skin were all things that made her different than her White peers. These are things that should have been acknowledged and celebrated in the classroom. Instead, the class was run as though it was a homogenous space, and important aspects of Sonia's identity were ignored.

As articulated by both Kimmy and Sonia, the lack of mention of certain racial and ethnic minority groups in the curriculum can create the feeling of invisibility for many students. This was also true for Juliana. Juliana is Mexican-American and attended a predominantly Black low-income middle and high school. She remembers history being taught through a Black-White binary, where her culture and history were not even acknowledged. Because of this dichotomous representation of race, she grew up not knowing where she fit. Juliana remembered:

Within schools, history always used to be taught Black and White, and I used to think-then what am I? And I remember, I used to have a lot of Black friends and just wish that

I was Black cause it would just put me in a category. I just hated being in between, just not knowing. Like I knew I was Mexican American, but no one else perceived me as that, so it's as though I wasn't that at all. And, I remember coming to college and not knowing who Cesar Chavez was. Just really not knowing at all. I had always heard his name, but it was never even mentioned [in school] AT ALL.

Juliana did not fit into the Black–White paradigm that was constructed within her history classes. In addition, both Juliana and the students around her were not exposed to the rich history and culture of Mexican-Americans. When the histories of students are not mentioned in the curriculum, it can have a direct impact on the way they view their place and worth in society, but also the ways that their peers view them. Juliana, Sonia and Kimmy all reiterate that their K-12 education neglected their racial, ethnic and cultural identities, as well as the important contributions of their community to US society. When we consider these experiences, it becomes clear that the invisibility of diverse cultures in the classroom can have an adverse affect on the realities of racial minority students.

As the women in this study revealed through their personal experiences, when Students of Color do not see themselves in their textbooks or classroom discussions, it sends a powerful message that their culture is not important or valid. In addition, this also affirms the message that White culture is 'normal' and thus, superior. As we try to understand the racialized experiences of Students of Color and schooling, we must recognize the racial hierarchies that are constructed through a 'color-blind' curriculum. Teachers have the agency to intervene on culturally biased curriculum. When they do not challenge this racism, they in turn condone, or even affirm, racial hierarchies with their attitudes and actions.

### *The attitudes and actions of school staff*

The comments and actions of peers, and the absence of non-White history in curriculum are an everyday experience for many Youth of Color. Teachers, however, have the power and responsibility to validate students' cultures and racial identities despite the inadequacies of their curriculum. Unfortunately, many teachers are blind to the way White history, culture and values are prioritized, or the stereotypes they carry about Students of Color. Whether through low-expectations, stereotypes or apathy towards racism in the classroom, many of the women in the study described that teachers played a large role in the racism they endured within their education.

JoAnn entered a community college from high school, and was one of few students from her class that graduated college. She attributed the low academic attainment of many of her peers to the racist attitudes that teachers and staff had of the students at her predominantly low-income and Latina/o high school. She felt the adults carried many stereotypes about Latina/o students, which often translated to a culture of low-expectations. JoAnn recalled:

Some of the teachers when I was in high school, they had just low-expectations. They would let us do what we wanted. Security would let us out, and when I reflect on it, it's just low-expectations. They don't think we're going to do anything [with our lives], so they may as well let us ditch. And I can recall, teachers would say the stereotypes they thought- that all the girls were going to get pregnant... Like the school didn't think that the kids were going to amount to much. And if you did go to college, they're kind of like 'Oh, you did! How did you do that?'

JoAnn revealed that adults on her high school campus viewed Latina/o students through a stereotypical lens, and thus expected them to succumb to teen pregnancy, low-aspirations and low-achievement. These racialized stereotypes resulted in a culture of low-expectations at the school, a phenomenon that unfortunately plagues many low-income high schools serving Students of Color. When we think about high school dropout rates, and the low numbers of Latinas/os entering four-year colleges, we cannot overlook the impact of racist stereotypes on the educational pipeline for Students of Color, as teachers and counselors who may subscribe to these beliefs are typically gatekeepers to high school graduation and college access.

Many of the participants reiterated JoAnn's feeling that teachers and counselors did not believe that they were college-bound. Ashley also recalled teachers imposing racist stereotypes on her as the sole African-American in honor's classes. She commented: 'They were always surprised by my intellectual abilities, however they defined it. And I think they always tried to categorize me, or assume I wasn't going to do my work or be efficient'. Ashley's teachers treated her differently than the rest of her mostly White class. They never called on her in class, always asked her where her work was, and assumed she would not turn it in. All of these actions sent a message to Ashley that she was not as smart, diligent or successful as her White counterparts.

As exemplified above, stereotypes are a powerful form of racism. They do not always manifest in low-expectations, but can still be detrimental. Catherine, a Chinese girl at an all-White elementary school, recalled that the teachers and administrators at her school carried misconceptions about her ethnicity. The school officials, who were not exposed to the history or cultures of Asian-American-subgroups, tended to lump all Asian-Americans together. Catherine remembers a specific incident in third grade when the administrators wrongly believed that because she is Asian-American, she should be able to communicate with another Asian-American, regardless of their ethnic and linguistic heritage. Catherine said,

The school didn't even acknowledge my culture. They knew I was Chinese, but then the administration brought in this kid that was Korean – he was from a younger grade – and they asked: 'Can you speak to this kid and tell him this in Korean?' And I'm like: 'I'm Chinese'. 'But can you speak to him in Korean?' He was transferring into the school so they found the only Asian kid. They pulled me out of class, and I came out, and me and this kid were just staring at each other, like I can't [communicate with him].

How can we expect youth to be culturally aware, when the adults on campus are culturally insensitive to their own students? Catherine was the only Asian-American student in her grade, and the administration at her school believed that she should be able to communicate with any other Asian-American that arrived on-campus. By displaying minimal understanding of Catherine's cultural and linguistic identity, the school essentially dismissed it.

The past three examples have demonstrated moments when teachers actively engaged in racist behaviors. However, a more common way in which teachers affirm the racial hierarchy is in taking a 'neutral' stance towards racism in the classroom. Similar to the 'color-blind' attitude around curriculum, many teachers feel like they should not facilitate discussions around race and racism, but rather they should ignore it or shut it down. How many times have we heard a teacher say, 'we don't say that in this classroom' in response to a racial epithet, without explaining what it means or why it shouldn't be said? When teachers do not actively challenge racism, often unknowingly, they are condoning it.

Growing up Korean in Georgia, Elaine dealt with many racial stereotypes and slurs. What she remembers as the worst part, however, was that her teacher never intervened on it. Elaine commented, 'Elementary school was probably most of the eye pulling, and just stereotypes. These things would happen in school. I have really bad memories of teachers being like, "I can't do anything about it, sorry"'. It's hard to know why Elaine's teacher did not exert agency against the racism exhibited by her students, but Elaine said that it made her feel alone and powerless in the classroom.

Every child deserves to have an education where their cultural identity is acknowledged and respected. School staff must be culturally sensitive in order to cultivate and nurture positive self-images of their students. In the examples above, where teachers and administrators lacked cultural understanding, carried racialized stereotypes of the youth they taught, or just ignored their responsibility to intervene on racism, those adults were failing at their responsibilities as educators.

As we consider the work of teacher preparation programs, it is essential that we identify the way in which teachers are actors in the racism that Students of Color endure. For Teachers of Color, reflecting on racism in their schooling can help them to identify their responsibility and agency in interrupting racial injustice. In this study, personal reflection gave them the tools to ask and analyze: 'What could my teacher have done to respond or prevent my experience with racism?' And: 'Now that I am in a leadership position in the classroom, what should I do to protect Students of Color from similar experiences?' Whether they are able to articulate their racialized understanding of education or not, this data reveals that most Teachers of Color enter teacher preparation programs with a wealth of knowledge about race and educational inequality. It is essential that teacher preparation programs utilize this knowledge as a strength and tool in combating racism in schools.

### Observations of racism in schools today

As the women in this study entered schools and classrooms, many witnessed racial slurs between students and a racial bias in the curriculum similar to within their own K-12 educational experiences. However, they argued that the racism they frequently saw teachers enact was the most damaging to youth. By connecting their own experiences to the experiences of their students, the women begin to recognize that racism in schools was enacted as an continuous cycle. To develop a pedagogy that intervenes on it, they felt it was not only imperative to think about racism in their own lives, but also to critically reflect on their observations of teachers and racism against Youth of Color.

JoAnn experienced racial slurs and low-expectations as a young student. As a student teacher, she also witnessed numerous instances of school staff disrespecting students in schools today. She observed teachers at a predominantly Latina/o junior high school in east LA using racially charged and demeaning language to address students. Exacerbating the situation, the administration dismissed student complaints around these damaging actions. JoAnn explains:

One little girl told me that their PE teacher would call them 'hood rats'... [The teacher] is so disrespectful to them and sometimes the staff is very aggressive towards them... I think a lot of times if teachers are being really racist towards students or disrespectful, [when they tell the administration] they just kind of dismiss them. They don't take them seriously. I found that a lot at the junior high, where some teachers were just

disrespecting them left and right – they call them lazy, they call them all these things, and the administration and staff just dismisses it.

The physical education (PE) teacher was exhibiting racism when he referred to middle school girls as ‘hood rats’, derogatory slang commonly used to define women as loud, promiscuous and without ‘class’. Other teachers at the school were also viewing their students through racialized stereotypes when they called the Latina/o students ‘lazy’. In both cases there were no consequences, through her observations, JoAnn recognized that even when the students complained to the administration, it was never addressed. Administrators are responsible for the safety of their school site, and when they do not intervene on teachers disrespecting their students, they are condoning and normalizing this behavior. The fact that it is acceptable for adults to demean Youth of Color on school grounds affirms the belief that Students of Color do not deserve to be treated with respect, and is a very harmful form of racism.

As revealed earlier, Sonia felt culturally misrepresented within her own K-12 education; in today’s classrooms, she felt that Students of Color are also misrepresented. Similar to JoAnn’s observations, Sonia witnessed a teacher using racialized stereotypes to describe Black and Brown students. This female White teacher had very little structure or control in her classroom, but rather than reflecting on her own practices, Sonia explained that the teacher blamed the Black and Latina/o students for not wanting to learn. She described:

I went and observed a teacher, this was a White teacher, and she had a classroom that was super-chaotic. People were just bouncing off the walls. They weren’t participating; it was just craziness. And I remember, I talked to her afterwards, and she blamed the students. All I heard from her was just the typical deficit model of thinking. ‘These kids just don’t want to learn. They’re not motivated’... And I just kept thinking, ‘Oh my God! Here’s this White teacher talking about the Latino and African-American students. And just saying, ‘THEY don’t want to learn’, and not reflecting on what she was doing at all.

Deficit thinking is a framework that blames the deficiencies of Communities of Color for low academic achievement. Those who subscribe to this paradigm often believe that: (1) students enter school without normative cultural knowledge and skills; and (2) parents neither value nor support their child’s education (Yosso 2005). This is often connected to the belief that academic problems lay with the student, rather than with the system. When teachers view Students of Color through these stereotypes, this often results in poor treatment, low-expectations and low standards (Valencia 1997). Sonia very clearly points to the deficit thinking of the teacher, and framed this experience in racial terms. This White teacher, before reflecting on the quality and structure of her own pedagogy and practice, jumped to the conclusion that her Black and Latina/o students were ‘not motivated’, and ‘don’t want to learn’. It is unfortunately, a common practice for teachers to blame Students of Color before introspecting on their own abilities or classroom interactions (Valencia 1997; Yosso 2005). But we must consider what kind of education can occur in a classroom when the teacher believes that her students ‘don’t want to learn’.

Juliana had a similar critique of teachers using deficit frameworks to understand their students. As she described earlier, Juliana received a culturally biased education in her own K-12 schooling. Through the interviews, she also shared numerous examples of teachers viewing her and her peers through stereotypes and low-expectations. Reminding Juliana of her own education, teachers she observed would talk about Black

and Latina/o youth in consistently negative ways. She felt that many teachers viewed students in south LA through a one-dimensional identity of gangs. Juliana commented:

I've heard so many things said by teachers, and it just reminds me of my schooling experiences. Teachers saying things like: 'Oh these kids, they're just in a messed up situation. There's gangs in their neighborhoods, and their brothers are gangsters'. It's always gangs, gangs, gangs, like that defines the student. It's always such a negative perception. [Teachers] don't specifically say: 'This student is Mexican-American, therefore he's not going to make it'. But they say things that are kind of implied: 'Oh the situation. Oh, they're poor'. They just address the symptoms, but they don't really look at the situation, like where they symptoms are coming from.

Although gang activity and poverty are realities in particular neighborhoods in south LA, they are not the only aspects of those neighborhoods. There are many beautiful and culturally rich elements to every neighborhood (Yosso 2005). While critical educators must challenge negative stereotypes of their students and acknowledge the complexity and diversity of their lives, this lens of cultural wealth was not the philosophy for many of the teachers Juliana observed. These teachers had limited structural analysis, and often allowed deficit beliefs to shape their understanding of their students. Operating through this lens often led to comments that devalued students' capabilities and held them to minimal standards.

Jackie is a Latina pre-service elementary teacher who shared another example of a teacher with deficit thinking. When Jackie was in elementary school, although she was a fluent English speaker, because a teacher overheard her mother speak Spanish, she was forced to take a language exam or enter English as a Second language program. Reminded of her own experiences while observing an English language development (ELD) fifth grade class of Spanish speakers, she noticed the teacher interacting with the students in degrading ways regarding their language skills. For example, when preparing for the exam to test out of English as a second language (ESL) classes, Jackie felt that the teacher belittled students. She would tell the students if they do not pass it means they cannot speak English. Jackie also mentioned that the teacher would chastise the children for not understanding her, harshly equating a lack of understanding to an inability to speak English. Jackie explained:

Some of the comments the teacher makes are really harsh. If she says something and she has to repeat herself, or the kids are not catching on, she's like 'Don't you speak English? Don't you speak English?' And they speak English! It's just English as a second language so there are mistakes they're going to make.

Many California schools view 'non-English' speakers through a deficit lens. In 1998, Proposition 227 was approved, requiring that all children in California public schools be taught only in English (Gándara 2002). Over time the labels for students who come to school with minimal English skills have transitioned from ESL to 'English language learner' (ELL), and then 'English learner' (EL). Although these terms have evolved, what has remained consistent is that they center students' identities through their abilities to speak the English language. The students who bear these labels are not just English learners; they are also Spanish speakers, Korean speakers, Tagalog speakers and speakers of many other languages, with very rich cultural and linguistic knowledge.

Because the majority of students enrolled in English language development classes (ELD) are Students of Color, when schools subscribe to these English Only

models of learning, they in turn, deem English superior to the language and cultural traditions of non-White people. By framing the students' identity and worth through their ability to speak English, the teacher Jackie observed not only created a hostile learning environment, but also created a racial and linguistic hierarchy of English language superiority.

Hierarchies are not only constructed between White and non-White, or English-speakers and English-learners. Jackie's observation is only one of many instances where racial hierarchies are reinforced within education. Over the years, structures of White racial superiority and non-White inferiority have been documented across curriculum, pedagogy and resources (Perez Huber, Johnson, and Kohli 2006); but it has also been demonstrated that teachers have the agency to challenge this racism, and create positive culturally affirming classroom spaces (Nieto 1994). Teacher preparation programs should be a place where teachers can develop awareness and gain strategies to intervene on racial inequity in the classroom. To do so, however, these programs must also challenge their own racial biases.

### **Racial hierarchies within teacher education**

If we plan on recruiting, retaining and training a diverse teaching force, we must also create programs that respect and value the experiences of Teachers of Color. Unfortunately, many programs do not accomplish this task. The women in the study revealed that racial hierarchies were perpetuated within their own social justice teacher preparation program. Ashley, a Black high school science teacher, went to a meeting with all the other science teachers in her program. In a conversation about finding teaching positions, one White woman in the group argued that predominantly Black schools have more job openings because Black students are challenging. In referencing a Black middle school in south LA, Ashley explained that the teacher made the argument:

'Yeah, you know, [that school] has a lot of jobs. I mean, that's obvious because it's in South Central and it's a lot of Black kids and they can be difficult to work with', and I was just shocked... not even shocked that she said it, but that she said [it] and I was standing right there. I'm like: 'If you're going to be so just open about your ignorance, wouldn't you at least not say it when a Black person's standing there?'

The White woman in Ashley's example subscribed to the belief that predominantly Black schools have job vacancies because Black kids are 'difficult to work with'. With no acknowledgement of the structural reasons why it can be challenging to teach in south LA schools, including inadequate resources, overcrowded classrooms and testing pressures from NCLB, this teacher attributed the large number of employment opportunities to a racially charged stereotype about Black children. Because of the hostile racial climate of her teacher education science cohort, Ashley was not even shocked by this overtly racist statement. Instead her shock was tied to the comfort the White woman felt in expressing her racism in front of a Black peer. Ashley went on to explain that the others in the group, just stood there nodding in agreement. According to Ashley, many of her fellow teachers carry racist assumptions about African-Americans. What she feels is most problematic, though, is that many of these individuals are currently teachers of African-American students.

This was not an isolated incident in TPP. Many women expressed moments where future teachers and instructors participated in or condoned racist behavior. JoAnn was told by another pre-service teacher: 'I'd rather work in east LA because Latinos are

easier to work with than Black kids'. She was really angered and frustrated by that comment because she felt it perpetuated a myth of Latinas/os as submissive and silent, and also created divisions between Latinas/os and Blacks, two groups that often endure similar social circumstances. She argued:

How can you tell me that? Like [I'm] easier, just kind of dividing us – Latinos and Blacks. I think people do have this perception of Latinos being very humble and just immigrants and they're going to listen to you, but I think they don't really understand Latinos.

What was most frustrating to JoAnn, is that although these comments are made in casual conversation, they are also stated during class time. 'They say it in class too. That's the funny thing, sometimes I'm just like: "I cannot believe you said this in class and we're in a social justice teacher preparation program"'. It's just really frustrating'. Being a part of a social justice teacher preparation program, particularly one that is predominantly Teachers of Color, you would believe that professors would push back on statements that affirm racial stereotypes and divisions. However, this push back is not always happening within the program. How can teacher preparation programs that affirm racial hierarchies expect to create teachers that effectively challenge racial injustice? As the data reveals, the disrespect of teachers and administrators towards Students of Color is rarely challenged or discussed. When racism in schools are enacted or condoned by teachers, administrators and/or teacher preparation programs, a message is sent that it is acceptable to treat Students of Color as inferior.

## Conclusion

Using CRT as a framework, this article highlights powerful personal and observed stories of racial injustices in our education system. Whether in low-income or wealthy schools, or whether in predominantly White or non-White educational settings, all the women in the study experienced racism. Through the racial slurs of peers, invisibility in the curriculum, and the actions of school staff, the stories of the Asian-American, Black, and Latina women in the study shed light on the racialized reality of K-12 schools. With prompts that encouraged personal reflection, the women in this study shared, healed and gained multicultural perspectives about K-12 education. Thus the study served not only as a means to collect data, but as a pedagogical space for participants. The women's observations also reveal that racism is a cycle that continues in schools; they endured it when they were young, and Youth of Color it experience it in schools today.

To address racial inequality within K-12 education, research calls for a more diverse teaching force. It is important, however, that as we recruit more racial minority teachers, we also shift teacher education to acknowledge the changing demographics. This study revealed that Teachers of Color often possess a personal understanding of race and racism; an understanding that White teachers may not have. Teacher preparation programs can better serve their students if they recognize this knowledge as a strength and provide space, like this study did, for racial minority teachers to share and reflect on their experiences and observations. With critical race reflections, these teachers can utilize their insight as a tool to understand student experiences and to challenge racism in schools.



In TPP specifically, the findings of this study were used to design a course that facilitated reflection in the development of critical teacher pedagogy. Entitled, 'Race, Racism and K-12 Education', this course led students through a survey of historical and current day injustices within the education of Asian-American, Black, Latina/o, and indigenous students. This literature was coupled with constant self-reflection about identity and its relationship to K-12 educational inequality. For Teachers of Color, this course was a powerful tool for connecting to the racialized experiences of their students. A course such as this could be useful within any teacher preparation program with diverse teachers.

To effectively serve the increasing multiethnic population of teachers within teacher education, we must continue to explore the racialized experiences of Teachers of Color. All the women in this study had a story to tell about the racism they went through in their own education, but many of them expressed that they had not thought about such experiences since they happened. The strengths Teachers of Color can bring to the education of Students of Color are immeasurable, but must be tapped into and developed as pedagogy. Within teacher education, we must create research and teaching strategies that acknowledge racial minority teachers as insiders to the experiences of racism in school, and as valuable assets to the fight for educational justice.

## Notes

1. All names have either been used with permission, or are pseudonyms.
2. 'Students of Color' references individuals of indigenous, African, Latina/o, Asian/Pacific Islander descent. It is intentionally capitalized to reject the standard grammatical norm. Capitalization is used as a means of empowerment and represents a grammatical move toward social and racial justice. This rule will also apply to the terms 'Teachers of Color' and 'Women of Color', used throughout this paper.

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