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Critical professional development and the racial justice leadership possibilities of teachers of colour in K-12 schools

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ABSTRACT

Research has noted that teachers of Color are disproportionately called upon to address racialized issues in schools serving students of Color. And although many teachers of Color enter the profession wanting to advocate for and with students and their families and are strongly positioned to do so, these responsibilities should not rest entirely on their shoulders. Navigating institutional change as collective work is not something taught within teacher preparation or traditional professional development (PD). But what would happen if critical teachers of Color—those with a structural analysis of oppression and who are committed to social and racial justice—were actually supported and provided leadership development work towards racial justice at their school sites? How might this type of development affect their sustainability in and impact on the field? Using a framework of critical professional development (CPD)—emergent and often grassroots teacher development spaces that frame teachers as politically-aware individuals who have a stake transforming society—this paper will explore the impacts of a racial affinity CPD space, the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice, designed specifically to promote the retention, growth, and activist leadership of teachers of Color in K-12 schools.

There is a growing body of literature on social justice school leadership that has pointed to teachers as an important resource in rethinking static and hierarchical approaches to change (Lopez 2014, Baker-Doyle 2017, Rojas 2018). Research has also shown that although teachers of Colour are often overlooked for leadership roles, they are needed in this leadership work (Pizarro and Kohli 2018, Kohli 2019, Gist 2019). Unfortunately, navigating institutional change is not something typically taught within teacher preparation or traditional professional development. What would happen, though, if critical teachers of Colour were actually developed and supported as leaders to collectively address racial inequities at their school sites? How might this form of development affect their professional growth, sustainability, and impact?

Using a framework of critical professional development – teacher development spaces that frame educators as 'politically-aware individuals who have a stake in teaching and transforming society' (Kohli *et al.* 2015, p. 9) – this article explores the possibilities of a racial affinity critical professional development space, the Institute for Teachers of Colour Commited to Racial Justice (ITOC), which is designed to foster the retention, growth, and transformative leadership capacities of teachers of Colour in K-12 schools. Specifically, we share three cases of justice-oriented teachers of Colour who

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build upon their experiences in ITOC as they work towards social justice in their educational contexts: 1) on a curricular level, developing lessons that are more culturally and community sustaining, 2) on a school-wide level, creating spaces and structures for students and teachers of Colour to thrive, and 3) across the district, organising teachers of Colour to resist policies and practices that foster harmful conditions for communities of Colour. Together, these narratives offer lessons on how critical approaches to professional development can strengthen the social and racial justice leadership capacities of teachers of Colour in their efforts for enduring change.

Context for teachers of colour

Many teachers of Colour choose teaching because they want to serve students of Colour and transform educational conditions for communities of Colour (Irizarry and Donaldson 2012, Gist *et al.* 2018). Teachers of Colour have been shown to have higher academic expectations for students of Colour (Cherng and Halpin 2016), are more likely to embody culturally sustaining pedagogies (Brown 2009) and, while not all teachers of Colour are politically engaged, because of their positionalities, teachers of Colour are more likely to recognise racial inequities (Dingus 2008; Dixson & Dingus, 2008). However, while students of Colour now comprise more than half of students enrolled in US public schools, teachers of Colour make up just 21% of the teaching force (US Department of Education 2016). Thus, with the assets that they bring to the profession, schools and districts are beginning to focus on their recruitment (U.S. Department of Education, 2016, Haddix 2017).

Within the predominantly White profession, though, teachers of Colour experience racial harm themselves (Dingus 2008, Pizarro and Kohli 2020), and have disproportionately high attrition rates compared to White teachers (Ingersoll and May 2011). While teachers of Colour need support to navigate their racialised realities (Kohli 2019, Mensah and Jackson 2018), it has been noted that typical approaches to teacher learning tend to neglect race, structural inequities, and the knowledge and perspectives of communities of Colour (Cochran-Smith *et al.* 2015). In addition to primarily centring White teachers, typical models of professional development pay little attention to the racial and socio-political dynamics of schools and neglect the experiences, needs, and agentive capabilities of teachers of Colour. In this article, we bridge research on professional development and on the transformative leadership potential of justice-oriented teachers of Colour to explore how critical professional development can support them in leading justice-centred change at their schools.

Critical professional development

Traditional approaches to teacher professional development (PD) often focus on technical notions of teaching (i.e. grade level planning, literacy growth, classroom management). And while growth along these aspects of teaching is foundational, critical educators rarely have access to professional growth opportunities that centre their political visions. Out of a need for this learning, there has been an increase in critical professional development – development spaces that support the political orientations and critical pedagogical needs of justice-oriented teachers. Built upon models of community organising and teacher inquiry groups (Ritchie and Wilson 2000, Rogers, Kramer & Mosley, 2009), critical professional development centres teachers' roles in transforming schools and society as they are 'designed to provoke cooperative dialogue, build unity, provide shared leadership, and meet the critical needs of teachers' (Kohli *et al.* 2015, p. 11). Critical professional development ranges in structure and purpose – from regular meetings of a small contingent of teachers to larger annual convenings – but they all afford space for complex reflections about structures, policies and practices that guide social and school based in/equities. In this article, we use the case study of ITOC to explore how teachers of Colour have taken up racial justice leadership in their schools when engaged and supported towards their critical visions.

Institute for teachers of colour committed to racial justice

The Institute for Teachers of Colour Committed to Racial Justice (ITOC) selects participants through an application process that assesses their racial justice leadership capacities and potential. The space is structured to attend to the impact of racism that teachers of Colour experience through models of self- and community-care, to address their racial and ideological isolation by facilitating a sense of collectivity, and to provide opportunities for culturally sustaining professional growth. For three intensive days, teachers of Colour are exposed to theory, models of practice, and leadership tools to strengthen their ability to name and disrupt institutional racism. They are cultivated as a professional community of critical educators poised to challenge policies, practices, and belief systems that marginalise communities of Colour (Kohli and Pizarro 2016). Over the past ten years, approximately half of the attendees have been Latinx, approximately 20% Asian American and Pacific Islander, 20% Black, and 12% of participants have identified as multiracial or other. Reflective of the teaching force, 78% of participants were women, and 22% were men. Approximately half of participants have been novice teachers, having taught less than 5 years, one quarter have taught 6–10 years, and one quarter were veteran teachers having taught more than 10 years. They ranged in age from their early twenties to mid-sixties and have taught subjects across the spectrum, from elementary through high school. In a given year, an average of 30% of ITOC attendees are alumni to the programme.

Methods

In previous studies, we have explored the impact of the three days of ITOC on teachers of Colour, focusing on how feelings of isolation or racial stress are addressed by the convening (Kohli and Pizarro, 2016, Kohli. *et al.* 2020). Here, we extend this exploration to understand the impact of ITOC on the leadership practices of teachers who attend and, in turn, on their contexts. We are a collective of: 1) two educational researchers who are also former teachers of Colour – one a Chicano former elementary educator and the other a South Asian former middle school teacher – and are co-directors of ITOC, and 2) four teachers of Colour – a bi-racial Afro-Latina middle school teacher, two Latino high school educators (one who was transitioning into the role of a professor/ academic), and a Latino elementary educator – who have attended ITOC at least twice. After the 2017 or 2018 convenings, three of the teacher-authors applied and were selected as Racial Justice Teacher Innovation Grant recipients, receiving a small stipend and support to build upon their learnings at ITOC work towards a transformational vision in their classroom, school, or district.

For this article, we engaged in a method of narrative self-study (Clandinin and Connelly 2004). Narrative inquiry builds upon participants' experiences across time, interaction, and location. Narrative self-study allows the data to extend beyond what was experienced and observed by allowing participants to frame their narratives through their personal insight and knowledge. This has been an increasingly utilised method to centre non-dominant teacher experiences in research (Endo, Reece-Miller, Santavicca, 2010), and as a pedagogical tool to raise critical issues with other teachers (Milner 2010). We use this approach so teachers of Colour, through their own standpoint, can be understood as central to the transformational work of schools, and in the knowledge-creation of educational research.

The teacher-authors were tasked in this collaboration to write a short narrative of their professional experiences, guided by the question, 'how has the critical professional development of ITOC supported the racial justice leadership capacities of teachers.' We co-designed the prompt as a written reflection where they were to pay attention to their vision, professional struggles, what they gained from ITOC, and the impact of their leadership work. We also wanted each narrative to include specific moments and details, as they grounded theory in their practice.

The research-authors of the paper read all the drafts, providing feedback to the teachers focused on moments of leadership and themes that cut across the narratives. After several rounds of reading and analysing the narratives through the lens of our question, key themes began to emerge related to the

impact of the critical professional development on their efficacy as transformational teacher leaders in schools, and we formed the narratives into three case studies, which we include in the next section. The research-authors then reflected on the collective lessons of the case studies, which is included in the discussion.

Strengthening teacher of colour racial justice leadership

To demonstrate how ITOC serves the agentive possibilities of teachers of Colour, we present three cases. In the first case, we share two narratives – the first written by Luis, an arts educator who taught high school in his own community and worked to affirm and sustain the cultural and linguistic strengths of his students (Paris and Alim 2014, 2017). An experienced critical educator, he shared his pedagogical approach and arts lesson at ITOC in a workshop for other teachers of Colour. The second narrative in the case study was written by Lisa, an educator from an entirely different context and discipline who attended the workshop and was inspired to adapt the curriculum in her classroom to help build community with middle school students in authentic and relational ways. The success she experienced with the lesson then led to her teaching the approach to other educators. In the second case study, Michael, a high school English teacher, narrates his response to the school's alienating school culture by re-centring Latinx students; and in the third case study, Juan, an elementary school teacher, reflects on his leadership work organising with teachers of Colour across the district to challenge racist policies and practices. Overall, we saw that teachers of Colour served as relational and community-engaged knowledge creators, shifters of school culture who demand spaces of belonging for students of Colour, and as collective learners and organisers towards district change. Representing different layers of the work of K-12 teachers – at the curricular, schoolwide, and district levels – the narratives demonstrate how a critical professional development space supported the collaborative leadership development of teachers of Colour as they enact change in schools.

Curricular leadership: developing culturally sustaining classrooms

La Lotería in an arts classroom
While art teachers traditionally are guided to draw on the resources of privileged museums – spaces often irrelevant or disconnected from the lived experiences of students of Colour and their communities – I (Luis) have always understood that some of the most impactful art movements have developed from the political circumstances of communities of Colour. Teaching in the school I once attended, and wanting to provide an education I wish I had as a young person, I aim to use the arts as a way for students to understand their world and explore how historical systems of oppression have affected the well-being of our communities.

My school is in South Central Los Angeles, an Industrial section of the city that before 1948 was the only place in the area where African Americans were allowed to own property, and thus became a cultural and artistic hub that maintained rich African American history. In recent years, with the growth of large im/migrant populations, the region is now a shared Latinx and African American space.

Several years ago, I was teaching a unit on family that included students creating portraits focused on their parents' occupations. On my way to work one day, thinking of different ways that I could extend the unit, I drove past my old home and the bench where my mother would catch the bus for work each morning at 4am. As memories flooded back of my single, working mom and my experiences as the eldest of my siblings, I remembered the time my Spanish teacher used the game of La Lotería in class (a game similar to Bingo often played in Latin America, that displays cultural images with titles and riddles instead of numbers). The rules of the game are explained by Zambrano (2013, v):

> There are fifty-four cards and each comes with a riddle, un dicho. There is a
>
> traditional set of riddles, but sometimes dealers create their own to trick the

players. After the dealer "sings" the riddle, the players cover the appropriate

spots on their playing boards, their tablas, with either bottle caps, dried

beans, or loose change . . .. You can win by filling a vertical line, horizontal,

a diagonal, the four corners, the center squares, or blackout.

Seeing La Lotería in school was one of the few times I felt a clear connection to home in school, and I wanted my students to experience that same authentic connection. I knew that teaching students about European artists or centring technical learning was not going to help them navigate the socio-political dynamics of their marginalised community. So I decided to build upon the game in my class in a way that challenged systems of power and reflected their community cultural wealth – forms of 'capital' traditionally unrecognised by school that are the foundation upon which Latina/o/x students and their families successfully navigate hostile systems (Yosso 2005).

As we discussed the history of La Lotería, I prompted students to critically analyse the images, unpacking stereotypical representations of race, class, or gender. I then asked students to re-create a Lotería card in a way that honoured their parents' occupation. By doing this, I was acknowledging their home and communal knowledge as a form of capital and used it to challenge the images in the game.

For example, students made references to El Valiente (see image 1) as someone that is coura-geous or brave. Others talked about how the image reflected someone that was a macho, critiquing

El Valiente from the game of La Lotería.
By Don Clemente, Inc.
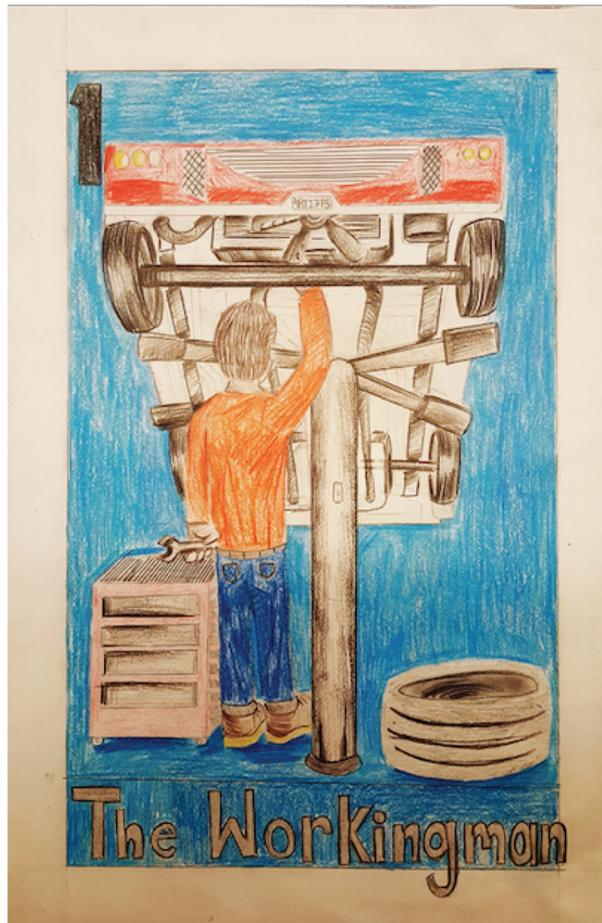
Student re-created Lotería card.

machismo because it reinforces gender stereotypes that some students lamented were reflected in their homes. One student felt that the image of El Valiente was not aligned with his interpretation of being brave. He thought his dad was an authentic Valiente and wanted to challenge this visual narrative of a macho looking man with a knife. He explained:

> In my eyes, my parent – the mechanic – is the *Valiente* for the long hours he works, sometimes with no days off, to make sure we can pay the rent and have something to eat. I titled my card, "The Workingman," because the working man is the tough guy and the only weapon he needs are his mechanic tools.

This family unit allowed students to challenge current stereotypes, gender roles, and issues of race and class that shape their environments, while also enabling them to acknowledge their parents' occupations as a valuable source of capital in their lives. Through this method, we developed an understanding of the socio-economic circumstances and strength of their parents, even when their occupations are often undervalued by society.

I wanted to share this model with other teachers of Colour, so in 2017 (and again in 2018) I facilitated a workshop at ITOC called 'La Lotéria and Art Education as Creative Resistance: Embracing Working Class Occupations in our Classrooms.' While most of the participating teachers were not arts educators, my emphasis was on how the arts could build upon the cultural wealth that students bring into their classrooms to facilitate critical thinking and cultural

affirmation. I wanted critical teachers of Colour to experience recreating Lotería cards as essential tools for themselves and their students, so I encouraged them to draw from their students' knowledge to build their own curriculum. This is exactly what we achieved. Several teachers who attended this workshop have adapted this lesson and approach into their own context, sharing a heightened understanding of the vitality of the arts in developing culturally sustaining practices that foster the critical consciousness of students of Colour. Through my own growth as a school leader and by being centred as an expert in ITOC, I was able to support the leadership development of many other teachers of Colour.

La Lotería to build relationships

When I (Lisa) began teaching middle school English and English Language Development three years ago in the Fruitvale neighbourhood of Oakland, I was excited to be teaching a population that reflected my identity. In World War II, African American and Latinx immigrants came to the port town to benefit from war-related work. During a period of 'urban renewal' in which a major freeway was built through the primarily African American portion of West Oakland, East Oakland became Black and Latinx and was a centre of both Black Panther and Chicanx Revolutionary activist group activity in the 1960s and 1970s. The Fruitvale, now primarily Latinx, remains a site of Latinx and Chicanx pride and activism, even as Oakland is increasingly gentrified.

When I started at the school, as a mixed Black and Columbian person, I just *knew* I was going to connect with my Latinx students. I couldn't wait to show off the Spanish I had been bettering through summer trips to Latin America. I knew I needed to learn about my students and their families, but I thought I had a special head start as a Latina. I was shocked to find myself completely disconnected from my students' experiences as recently arrived (or the children of recently arrived) Mexican and Central American immigrants. I was not surprised that students were reluctant to share their migration stories with me, but I was disappointed to see that even in my classroom, students seemed ashamed to speak Spanish despite growing up in a primarily Spanish-speaking area of Oakland.

After that tough first year, I realised that while supporting my students' growth in reading and writing English, I had to change my curriculum to also affirm my students' identities, languages, and experiences. I knew what I wanted: a language-, reading-, and writing-curriculum that valued their experiences as Latinx immigrants. I had no idea how I was going to do that.

That summer, I attended ITOC and participated in a workshop by Luis in which he presented how he had used the traditional Mexican game of chance, La Lotería, to teach high school students to celebrate, critically interrogate, and re-write their culture. I was inspired. After seeing how Luis used La Lotería to teach students about community cultural wealth and funds of knowledge through arts integrated teaching, I realised this is what I was looking for to make my curriculum more culturally sustaining for my students.

I gathered with a group of other educators from my school who were also at ITOC and planned a 3-week unit that would serve as an introduction to my class, to middle school reading and writing, and to identity sharing through Lotería. In this unit, I wanted to purposefully highlight and use Spanish in my classroom. I made sure students were reading grade level texts about the history and cultural significance of Lotería. I engaged students to examine the Lotería cards – which have issues of colourism and sexism prevalent in them – with a critical eye and lens, and write about their analysis of the cards. Lastly, building from Luis' lesson, I asked students to create a brand new Lotería card related to their personal identity and write an essay comparing and contrasting that Lotería card to a traditional Lotería card in the deck.

This unit is now a highlight of the school year. Playing the game with students brings an element of joy and fun to the classroom that is so necessary in building relationships, and it allows for organic moments of students sharing family histories. Supporting them to critically examine a game that was an important part of childhood for some can be eye-opening as they: realise that they do not have to blindly accept the world around them, and reflect deeply on the messages that are contained in

seemingly innocuous games and media. Most importantly, this process encourages students to be engaged in reading and writing through topics that are culturally and personally significant to them.

I asked a few current students (two 6th grade boys and one 6th grade girl), how they felt about the Lotería unit. Kathy explained, 'I really liked the curriculum. I wish we could have played black out to take longer, but I feel like the unit connected to my Mexican culture.' Jaime said, 'Oh yeah, I liked it, because that game is from many parts of the world. And since one place was from Mexico and I'm from Mexico, I like it. And my family plays it.' Lastly, Steven, who identifies as Black and is not Latino said that he enjoyed playing the game and learning about a culture different than his own.

After teaching the curriculum for a year, I presented this work at the next ITOC, and my fellow educators of Colour were encouraged and inspired. A colleague asked me to present the curriculum to her graduate class at a nearby university, and I was excited to share my learnings and lead other educators in creating their own Lotería cards. I also heard from a colleague in Southern California who adapted the curriculum for their classroom in Southeast Los Angeles, where they learned about cultural wealth in their community and created Lotería cards to represent that wealth. This teacher stated that the Lotería project was their 'favorite project of the year.' I was grateful to have the opportunity to learn from and with Luis and then, growing as a leader, to be able to apply that learning and pass it on to others in the ITOC community. I am extremely proud of this work and have immense gratitude to ITOC for creating the space that allowed opportunities for leadership development between and among educators of Colour to be the fertile ground for the blossoming and continued nurturing of this work.

Schoolwide leadership: reframing school culture

I (Michael) attended ITOC for four years, the first time being in between my credential programme and my first year teaching. It has been the professional development I needed as it thoughtfully and critically acknowledged race issues I had experienced and continued to witness in education. Although just three days each summer, I have learned far more about racial justice education than I did my entire college career, and ITOC has continued to influence my approach to resist and reimagine a school culture that is responsive to my students.

I am an English teacher at a high school in San José, California that serves predominantly White and middle class students, with little support or spaces for its growing emergent bilingual and Latinx students. In this multi-racial community, students have experienced racism throughout their education. One of my students gave an example,

> My 3rd grade teacher once told me that I needed to be quiet or I'd turn out like them. She was pointing to my friends in the corner. She had separated me from them in order to help me "not go down the wrong path." I knew they weren't bad kids, so it didn't make sense. Eventually, I got in trouble for hanging out with them, and ever since I always just assumed that we were bad. I still feel that way sometimes here at this school, the way they target us.

I struggled to hold back tears of anger as the student shared this story, knowing that this type of behaviour from adults in positions of power was something I too had once endured as a young person. I went to this same school, and as early as my first few weeks on campus, I felt the full weight of the oppressive educational system thrown ruthlessly back upon me. It was traumatising to walk the same halls, enter the same classrooms, and see the same populations of teachers and students that I had 15 years earlier. Although I had changed drastically since then, it seemed as if nothing else had, and thus I felt as I did when I was in 9th grade: marginalised. That feeling was still all too common at our school; many Latinx students on campus have said that they feel disconnected from the school and their peers, expressing that they feel 'alone' on campus and that their teachers 'didn't understand them.'

I was wrestling with how to be a teacher that centres belonging and cariño (love and care) in an environment that is as alienating to Latinx students as my own education was to me. Although

a new teacher, knowing that there were few spaces for students of Colour to feel like they belong outside of my classroom, I agreed to advise the Latinx Student Union (LSU). I wanted to grow LSU into a club focused on racial justice, specifically for Latinx students and so I drew from my experiences organising in college and what I learned from ITOC, and the students and I focused on using LSU to shift our campus culture so Latinx students felt welcomed in school.

My first year at ITOC, I attended a workshop that was run by teachers and students together, presenting their work using Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) strategies. It was inspiring to see what these high school students were able to do, and most importantly the projects all came from the students. One student had done her project on complex post traumatic stress disorder and how it had affected her neighbourhood in Los Angeles. To witness students doing research not for the sake of skill-building, but to understand important aspects of their own lives and their community was amazing. Building upon this learning, I knew I had to include the students as equal stakeholders in the club to make LSU an effective support for Latinx students and myself.

During my second time attending ITOC, I learned about Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, and in my third summer, I attended a workshop with Luis on La Lotería. With all of the theoretical backing of ITOC, I have been able to shape LSU into a space that serves Latinx students at my school through student-led initiatives, reflection, and consistent growth.

Two years ago I was selected as a Racial Justice Teacher Innovation Grant recipient. With the support of ITOC, LSU developed a district-wide Latinx conference and leadership programme, and we have garnered awards and recognition for helping other Latinx students in the district to build their own LSUs. Most importantly, by creating an active community that has become central to student life and engagement on campus, we have shifted our campus culture so that Latinx students do not feel as invisible as they once did. Teachers have seen and even acknowledged the impacts of LSU, letting us know that it has created a sense of safety for students, and also referring students to us so that they can benefit from the sense of belonging and leadership development LSU provides. Staff have also seen this shift and have sought to become involved in LSU, while also clearly learning from our work. The ASB Leadership advisor, for example, has been making a concerted effort to include more students of Colour, and has on more than one occasion reached out to us to ask for assistance or recommendations. Of all the ways we have shifted the culture on campus, it is the fact that the students themselves tell us they now feel safe and accepted in LSU that matters most. School can oftentimes be hostile towards people of Colour, so I am most proud of the work that has gone in to create this space of belonging. Our numbers have grown each year, and with that so has our presence. With my own cycle of racial justice growth through teaching and ITOC, I have been able to bring back my newfound knowledge to my community and LSU, and together we have grown into a respected club on campus that is built on a foundation of racial justice. This leadership development model continues to grow and benefit an expanding circle of students, staff and teachers.

District leadership: organising sustainable teacher collectives

On the day I (Juan) started my Masters in Teaching, I entered a room packed with mostly white women, which sent me on a flashback to my days as a middle school student just learning to speak English. Once again, I was one of the few students of Colour, yet this time in a teaching preparation programme that boasted a focus on culturally responsive practices and social justice. There were bright spots in my training, like the few instructors that saw our needs as students of Colour and supported us in weekly lunch gatherings where we caucused and shared our experiences. However, we were navigating spaces that were filled with aggressive colleagues, oblivious instructors, and a curriculum that dismissed our value as emerging teachers of Colour. Our literacy instructors used mentor texts that had rich content from Latinx culture, however they focused on teaching the

strategy for reading and content without providing context or connection to Latinx authors or characters that reflected Latinx community cultural wealth.

My experience during my teacher training was revealing in the ways that teachers of Colour were sought for the diversity we bring to the classroom, while our actual funds of knowledge were undervalued as we were not provided culturally sustaining practices to develop as teachers of Colour. In addition, there were no spaces or resources that would help us maintain our health in this predominantly White profession. But our commitment was tied to the communities in which we were teaching, and thankfully, we had parents and students who expressed their love and respect for our presence. We brought experiences and identities that reflected their lived experiences and had expertise that could better support the growth and development of their children. And reciprocally, they offered us authentic support by affirming our value in the classroom.

Building on the power of community, when I started teaching, I sought out a network of teachers of Colour that more closely shared my commitment to culturally sustaining teaching and organising for change. I facilitated monthly gatherings where teachers of Colour drank tea, unpacked our experiences, and shared our expertise and resources. Being in community with other like-minded educators invigorated me and gave me the understanding and hope that allowed me to come back to teach the next day. Our time together was validating, and yet, we also struggled to find ways to support each other. As the school year continued, our capacities decreased and priorities shifted. Our gatherings were less frequent and our attendance decreased as well. While I knew these connections were essential to lasting in the profession, I realised how difficult it was going to be to have a group of teachers of Colour who were available to support each other consistently. This pattern continued for a few years, with educators of Colour appreciating the space but finding it hard to commit. I was looking for support and models for coordinating this work.

The first time I heard about ITOC was from a professor that I met during my teaching preparation programme, after I shared with him the ways in which I wanted to organise with racially reflective peers. He said, 'You should apply for this conference in California, dedicated to supporting teachers of Colour.' I was fortunate to be accepted in the summer of 2015. The professional development I experienced at ITOC was unexpected. Up to that point in my career I had normalised sitting and listening to speakers talk about everything teachers had to do to be successful. This was the first time I felt that the presenters, concepts, and language were giving voice to what I was feeling and had not previously been able to name. Learning about the secondary trauma teachers of Colour endure, and how we feel greater exhaustion and hurt because we more closely empathise with our students' experiences was validating and helped me make sense of what I was experiencing as a teacher. I was learning the concepts, framing and tools that I had been missing. I left ITOC that year feeling energised, seen, and knowing that my feelings and experiences were valid. I felt that I could speak up and push for change. When I returned to ITOC two summers later with a small group of colleagues, we were inspired as a group by the power of a space filled with teachers of Colour who were developing critical consciousness. We engaged in conversations with other teachers of Colour who had developed workshops for colleagues that encouraged critical thinking in welcoming spaces, and we committed to working together to mirror that work in our own community. That summer we applied for the Racial Justice Teacher Innovation grant with the goal of setting up meetings for teachers of Colour to come together and build a community and grow as critically conscious educators. Our goal was to create a space where we could feel the same ways we felt at ITOC, building on the ITOC tools and leadership development strategies. We felt that replicating this space would be invigorating to our work.

ITOC provided a template through its comprehensive model of developing teacher-leaders of Colour, including culturally sustaining community building, tiered professional development, focused growth, and a working group model of building racial justice action plans. Through support from the leadership team and the network of educators, we designed and facilitated monthly home meetings where we shared food, stories, engaged in scholarly readings, increased our capacity, and

left with validation and new knowledge and skills to combat racism and hostility in our workplaces. The personal/professional connections we built at ITOC helped us maintain our collective passion in the different projects we were leading. As teacher activists, we were all involved in some sort of organising within our schools, unions, and communities. We recognised the urgency of taking action in making sure our students, teachers, and families had agency in decision making, learning, and teaching. We knew the power of the system and so we also knew we had to take action, even if it meant longer days and shorter weekends; and ITOC provided us a model and the tools to grow as leaders who could support each other.

Having a space where we can share the work we are doing and get feedback and support has been tremendously valuable and we continue to seek each other out. The resources and space we shared have helped us become stronger advocates in our individual projects and we have networked to make connections across schools and districts. We find each other in union gatherings and hold space together to learn collectively. We lean on each other to advocate for resources and call out injustices within our teaching spaces. There are barriers to achieving our goals in this work: we are in different districts, our priorities vary, and our differences (such as years of experience, as well as shifting and distinct emotional, psychological, and professional needs) limit our organising and ability to provide mutual support. Still, our work is evolving as we use our monthly gatherings to continually reflect the needs and wants of the participants, just as ITOC taught us. We are now planning activities that re-energise us and help us connect with our humanity. We have organised gatherings to: make art in collaboration with a local art museum, participate in restorative circles, practice yoga together, and continue home get togethers. Building on what we learned and how we were supported through ITOC over multiple years, we are developing authentic relationships based on a shared racial justice vision and the need to be in community with each other so that we can continue the work individually and collectively for the rest of our professional lives.

Discussion

These four teachers had racial justice visions for education that built upon the assets of students and their families and were culturally sustaining. Unfortunately, their leadership skills, as is the case for so many other teachers of Colour, are often neglected by limited definitions of school leadership and change work (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). At ITOC, however, they were able to engage in models of collaborative leadership development that valued their insights, knowledge, skills and creativity in building transformative schooling for students of Colour.

Because they rarely have like-minded colleagues, critical teachers of Colour are often left to develop curriculum in isolation (Martinez 2017). Building upon his childhood experiences, memories of the cultural responsiveness of his own teacher, and his own critical approach to arts education, Luis developed curriculum attending to his students' critical consciousness (Friere, 1970) – something uncommon in high school Arts education. When he was provided an opportunity to present his work at ITOC, he was excited that the transformative impact of the curriculum could be seen and adapted by like-minded peers. Lisa, who attended his session, saw power in Luis' work – not as a 'best practice' to be implemented 'as is' for student achievement (Patel 2020), but instead as an approach that could strengthen the humanisation, joy, and cultural sustainment of her pedagogy. Through contextually responsive coaching, Luis supported Lisa as she adapted the unit to her middle school English class and to her students' needs. Similar as it had been for Luis, the success of the curriculum and the opportunity to then present on her process developed her confidence not just as a teacher, but as a leader and expert among her peers. ITOC provided space for racial justice leadership through collective peer learning/teaching.

Critical scholars have argued that a teacher's role is political and agentive, and the reach of racial justice teacher leadership can extend across and even beyond schools (Giroux, 2012 2010). ITOC offered a community of support, tools for racial justice leadership, and space for critical teachers of

Colour to dream. Although isolated at his institution, Michael met educators at ITOC who not only shared his vision for education, but had engaged in justice work through YPAR and culturally sustaining pedagogies. He learned of the transformative possibilities of working alongside students to create systemic change (Cammarota and Fine 2010). This exposure influenced what he believed was possible on his campus, and fuelled his leadership to build a space of belonging and activism with Latinx students that quickly shifted the culture of his school. Seeking a similar approach with teachers in his district, after attending alone, Juan invited other colleagues to attend ITOC. By returning together, they developed shared racial literacies and leadership tools to combat their isolation and numerous racialised obstacles as they built a collective and enduring vision for activism across their district.

Conclusion

School leadership is often narrowly defined and prescribed, and is typically understood as individualised or hierarchical work. Additionally, teachers of Colour are profoundly under-valued in a predominantly White profession and schools steeped in institutionalised racism. This can limit their ability to create the cultural shifts they know are needed at their school sites. The leadership-efficacies of teachers of Colour flourish, however, when their culture, language, and epistemologies are valued, and they are supported to collectively reimagine the boundaries and possibilities of education. While each teacher-author in this article embodied racial justice in distinct ways, together, their narratives show the transformative power of critical professional development for teachers of Colour when collaborative approaches to learning and visioning racial justice are at the heart of school change. When community-oriented teachers of Colour are centred as leaders, they support other teachers of Colour in developing as leaders, and there is great power in collectively reimagining what schools can look like – in the curriculum, in school culture, and through teacher organising. ITOC demonstrates how critical professional development can be designed to circumvent the isolating and silencing of critical teachers of Colour, and can both re-inspire and support them to work together towards racial justice in their classrooms, schools, and across their districts.

Disclosure statement

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