

Confronting Racism in Teacher Education

Counternarratives of Critical Practice

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20 The Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice

Cultivating Community, Healing, and Transformative Praxis

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I finally feel like I'm not the only one. This is the first time in a long time that I don't feel crazy. I needed this space to heal from the constant assault on my intellect and spirit that I have experienced as a teacher.¹

In our work at the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice (ITOC), my colleagues and I have heard words like this shared by teachers of Color who span the entire country. From small towns in the South to rural communities in California, and from the urban schools of Philadelphia, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Oakland Asian American, African American, Latina/o, and Native American teachers have shared these same feelings. Working in public schools and being committed to racial justice demands a constant battle against a dominant racial ideology built on the deficit framing of communities of Color, feeding on a steady diet of unacknowledged racial microaggressions, and resulting in the undermining and often failure of both students and teachers of Color.

ITOC, an intensive professional development offered each summer, exists to support teachers of Color who strive to use their vocation to help youth, schools, and communities of Color to succeed in school and achieve racial justice. It was developed to address the reality that teacher education does not prepare teachers for this work and that there are few, if any, professional development opportunities built around racial justice (Brown, 2014). For six years, ITOC has centered racial justice research and approaches to schooling and organizing to affirm, support, and enhance the transformative work of teachers of Color. ITOC's unique focus requires that participants have an advanced racial literacy and an assets-based approach to working with students of Color (assessed through an application that all participants must complete). This design is a response to the fact that there are many teachers, including teachers of Color, who are not ready, nor willing, to confront the dominant racial ideologies in the schools and communities in which they work. While supporting teachers who need the opportunity to develop basic levels of racial literacy is important, it is not part of the work of ITOC. The benefit of focusing on teachers with an assets-based, advanced racial literacy

is that it allows us, the ITOC organizers, to deeply support these teachers who seek a space in which they do not have to take the inordinate amount of time required to expose the role of White supremacy to those who refuse to acknowledge its dominance in U.S. schools. Being immersed in an environment in which the radical, racial justice epistemology of teachers of Color is centered transforms these teachers' relationship to their vocation (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016).

Dominant racial ideologies that demean the intellectual abilities and contributions of teachers of Color and their students are so pervasive and deeply woven into the fabric of daily school practice that teachers of Color with a commitment to racial justice find themselves feeling like they are the crazy ones. They work in a "racial matrix," where the intergenerational inertia behind dominant racist ideologies and their corresponding policies and practices make it invisible to those who accept our current, dramatic racial inequality as natural. This is reflected in the reality that K-12 schools continue to focus on the achievement gap, without acknowledging the education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). It is experienced by teachers of Color in charter school networks and Teach for America, both of which emphasize a commitment to reducing educational inequality without recognizing the fundamentally racist underpinnings of their focus on addressing the supposed deficits of communities of Color. The racial matrix is embodied by the countless progressives in schools who define themselves as allies to communities of Color, but who nurture the popular discourse that disparages students, families, and communities, rewarding teachers and students who do the same.

The hidden role of White supremacy in schools is like the air we breathe, unseen and unacknowledged but a fundamental and necessary part of life as it is. This is the racial matrix in which racial justice-minded teachers of Color find themselves, which is why they come to ITOC. Despite the strengths they bring to the classroom, teachers of Color committed to racial justice are challenged as troublemakers and incompetent (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). Isolated and unsupported in their schools, these teachers of Color often do not have the tools to confront this complex set of forces.

These opening paragraphs deliberately paint a harsh image of the experiences of teachers of Color committed to racial justice in 2016. This portrayal mirrors the angst, anxiety, turmoil, and spiritual anguish that teachers of Color share with us every summer. When they join us at ITOC, they often spend at least two days unloading, finally exhaling after holding their breath for nine months, having tried their best to avoid the toxic air hanging in the halls of their schools. These teachers seek a space where they can breathe and heal, but also acquire the tools and the community they need to return to the racial matrix and help both their students and colleagues actually see it, deconstruct it, and begin to transform and transcend it.

Since our challenge to mainstream racial understanding is so severe, we strive to make ITOC a space fundamentally distinct from other professional

development opportunities for teachers. It is focused on: 1) community building, 2) racial justice healing, and, 3) praxis-oriented tools for confronting and transcending the racial matrix.

Community Building

Given the isolation that so many of the ITOC teachers experience, building a community of peers and mentors who share an advanced racial literacy is essential to their persistence in the profession. This sense of community is achieved in a number of ways. Working groups create an intentional community for ITOC teachers that lasts long after the summer, often with the teachers staying in contact and offering support throughout the next school year. Social media becomes a mechanism for maintaining this sense of community with many sharing ideas, questions, and opportunities related to racial justice practice in schools.

Meals are shared and teachers are encouraged to get to know each other and to build on the conversations initiated in different sessions. A community dinner is held at a local restaurant, as well as an after-hours social gathering at another local venue, leading to ongoing informal community building throughout ITOC. In addition, different artists (poets, singers, comedians, and storytellers) share their work with the group, and the affirmations this provides the teachers as a collective help concretize their sense of connectedness. Finally, and many teachers say most importantly, we have a DJ who plays music throughout ITOC, always finding a way to bring the teachers together, often choosing songs that remind them of their shared commitment to racial justice, and at other times just making them bob their heads as a community, creating a sense that racial justice work does feel good.

Each year, we are struck by the sense of community that develops in just three days and when we close our circle at the very last session, giving everyone the chance to exchange goodbyes with each person, the time this takes clearly reflects the meaning of our collective to the teachers. For many, the interracial nature of this newly formed community is truly transformative. Many of our teachers come from and teach in areas that are heavily dominated by one racial group. Becoming connected to other teachers from regions that they often know nothing about provides a new sense of community that is revelatory. Recognizing that the racial justice work they are pursuing is connected to that of colleagues who teach Filipino students in San Francisco, Mexican American students in Phoenix, African American students in Baltimore, and other communities across the country solidifies their sense of purpose and challenges the isolation they are made to feel in their schools. A critical component of the ITOC approach is that teachers recognize that their racial justice work has to be done in community, even when they may be the only teacher with a commitment to racial justice in a given school. We want them to understand that the racial matrix thrives on teacher isolation and so the racial justice planning that they complete at ITOC

includes their ongoing consultation with other ITOC participants, as well as racial justice colleagues and allies wherever they find them.

Racial Justice Healing

Each year, ITOC begins as a space into which teachers of Color from around the country step cautiously. Accustomed to conventional professional development opportunities that preach equity but support practices that maintain and even further inequity, these teachers are well versed in disappointment. As we demonstrate our engagement with racial justice practice by grounding ITOC in the most compelling and visceral racial issues of the moment (such as institutionalized racial violence, racial battle fatigue, and the erasure of the epistemological power of teachers of Color in our schools), a sense of relief and comfort sets in. Often, in the first day or two of ITOC, we find that teachers begin to relax, let their racial guard down, and share their challenges. Inevitably, the teachers highlight the liberation of not feeling that they are crazy (referenced in the opening), as they often feel in the schools in which they teach whenever they challenge “normal” school practices that demean and disenfranchise students and communities of Color.

The stories that teachers begin to share as ITOC continues reveal the impact that the racial matrix has on them. As we have found through our research with the ITOC participants, many are experiencing racial battle fatigue (RBF) (Pizarro & Kohli, forthcoming; Smith, 2004; Smith, Yosso, & Solórzano, 2006; Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). The incessant drumbeat of dominant ideologies that reinforce White supremacy through school policy and practice have intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and physiological effects on teachers of Color. These teachers so often have to approach their daily entry into the school as if they are preparing for battle, strapping on their emotional and intellectual armor to protect themselves. Over the course of weeks, months, and then years, the effects of this struggle can be severe. For this reason we have approached our work as a practice of racial justice healing. We acknowledge the racial matrix, recognize the effects it has on them, and provide them the opportunity to build a community of support that affirms both their strength and their right to access that support (something that many have no outlet for in their daily lives). Specifically, we: 1) share a racial justice framework that affirms their experiences (such as highlighting the way that “Whiteness as property” [Harris, 1993] shapes school practices), 2) encourage them to share their stories as part of our work to continually develop the framework through the eyes and daily experiences of teachers of Color, and 3) provide specific workshops that center healing as a vital part of effective racial justice teaching (e.g. *Nurturing Critically Compassionate Classrooms: Integrating Trauma and Healing Informed Strategies with Students of Color*). We encourage them to understand this healing process as ongoing work in which they must always be engaged as

part of a community and which they can begin to model for and with their students and communities.

Praxis-Oriented Tools for Confronting and Transcending the Racial Matrix

The racial justice healing practices of ITOC are powerful for the teachers, but to pursue their racial justice goals in their schools, they need and seek concrete tools that can be used in their daily practice at any number of levels.

Each year, after reviewing the teachers’ applications and the challenges and needs they identify, we design a set of praxis-oriented tools that teachers can apply to specific aspects of their jobs. These are integrated into keynote presentations from racial justice leaders who bring their research and experience to the teachers. In addition, we plan four sets of workshops that complement the keynotes and organizers’ sessions and hone in on specific needs of teachers (considering topics from racial justice curriculum development to teacher organizing, and from restorative justice practices to creative writing for student healing and growth). Finally, we integrate working sessions in which the teachers organize in groups around themes that are most pressing to them. These groups integrate the tools acquired in the rest of ITOC and end with well-mapped plans to address their focal issues with both timelines and identified support people to help them achieve their goals.

The explicit focus on nurturing praxis-oriented tools in a multi-tiered process provides racial justice-minded teachers with a support system for pursuing their goals through realistic strategies, practices, and daily habits. Embedded in a culture of transformation in ITOC, the teachers who work with us appreciate both this pervasive shift in their thinking about their practice and the focus on how they can sustainably confront and counter the racial matrix in which they teach.

Conclusion

Actively working for racial justice in the U.S. today demands a commitment to struggle for the rest of our lives. It also typically results in a feeling that our sanity is being questioned and often directly challenged by our colleagues and supervisors. ITOC was created to address these realities and provide an ongoing space in which racial justice-minded teachers of Color can be supported in a community that provides them with praxis-oriented tools to help them find healthy ways of sustainably pursuing racial justice.

Sadly, these are not objectives that are shared in teacher education. Each year, ITOC participants reference the fact that we provide the training that they wished they had in their teacher education programs and in their ongoing professional development opportunities. The reality is that teacher education typically lives so deep inside the racial matrix that those responsible

for it do not see the ways in which the dominant paradigm defines even their efforts to be racially conscious. Furthermore, so many ITOC participants describe battles with instructors and administrators in teacher education, who rather than providing a space for them to explore the critical issues described here, challenge their perspectives, belittle their contributions, and compound the effects of RBF. Teacher education programs that truly hope to confront racial inequality have to earnestly unpack the racial matrix, their role in it, and the fact that White supremacy has been ignored in their programs in ways that lead excellent and much-needed teachers of Color to feel that they are crazy.

Note

- 1 Through the project described in this chapter, we have collected narratives from hundreds of teachers. They cover many themes. I have summarized the most prevalent themes in this opening.

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