

Public pedagogy for racial justice teaching: Supporting the racial literacies of teachers of color

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Summary

Rita Kohli, Arturo Nevárez, and Nallely Arteaga present an example of how a teacher professional development institute provides a space for teachers of color to name racism, confront it, and transform their schools. They show how this space of learning is different from traditional teacher training.

Rita Kohli, Arturo Nevárez, y Nallely Arteaga presentan un ejemplo de cómo un instituto de desarrollo profesional provee un espacio para maestros/as de color para que den nombre al racismo, lo confronten, y lo transformen en sus escuelas. Muestran como este espacio de aprendizaje es diferente a los programas de desarrollo profesional tradicionales.

Keywords: teachers; racial justice teaching; public pedagogy; racial literacy; professional development



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Jeremy¹ was a queer Asian American teacher candidate who enrolled in a social justice-oriented teacher education program, compelled to create transformative spaces and occupy teaching as a political position. Unfortunately, although the mission and vision of the program seemingly aligned with his goals, he felt his instructors and the curriculum only addressed equity on a surface level, catered to his white colleagues, and left him feeling unprepared to be the teacher he set out to be. The compounded neglect he felt impacted him to the point that he expressed, “it makes it hard to breathe” and left Jeremy with incredible needs. He shared,

I need to learn how to sustain myself and my fellow teachers of Color² in a system that rejects our visions, ethics, praxis, our peoples. I want to learn how schools work with other institutions to oppress communities of color, for example, to incarcerate, to deport, to otherwise criminalize... I need to see the teacher’s power more clearly so that I use it more consciously and conscientiously [because] I want to work *with* students to negotiate and to resist schooling, even as I am their teacher.

Jeremy’s experiences in teacher education regrettably echo many studies and [reports](#) about the experiences of teachers of Color (Amos, 2016; Griffin, 2018). With paywalls for critical academic scholarship, and little space or time allotted to exploring critical ideology, research and practice, most of what teachers are exposed to comes from prescribed school-based and district-sponsored development opportunities. Those spaces, while often providing useful tools for teacher learning, are rarely targeted towards the specific needs of teachers of Color, particularly those interested in challenging structural oppression. So where does Jeremy, and other critical teachers of Color get access to the theory, language, and tools they need? Where can they develop the critical, intersectional, and racial literacies needed to confront injustice in their schools and transform the educational opportunities of students of Color. In this article, we present about a teacher professional development

¹ All names included in the article are pseudonyms, used to ensure confidentiality.

² The term “of Color,” capitalized to emphasize the label as a racialized category, is used to refer to people who identify as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, Asian, Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern. It is not intended to collapse their identities, but point to the shared historical and current experience of racial exclusion in the United States.

setting called the [Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice](#) (ITOC), aimed to support justice-oriented teachers of color as agents of change in racialized school environments. Building on narratives of teachers of color who attended, we demonstrate how it serves as a form of *critical* public pedagogy—a politicized space of learning and transformation outside the bounds of traditional and formalized education that facilitates social change.

Teachers of Color and Racialized School Environments

The U.S. educational system has and continues to maintain and exacerbate racial inequity. Through overt practices of segregation and discrimination of the past to more subtle nuances of racism today, schools unevenly distribute resources (Orfield, Siegel-Hawley, & Kucsera, 2011), promote a Eurocentric curriculum that is unresponsive to the needs of students of Color (Au, Brown, & Calderon, 2016), and have a teaching force grossly under-equipped to serve ever-diversifying classrooms. These injustices over time, have resulted in school pushout (Tuck, 2012) disproportionate representation in remedial and gifted courses (Ford, Grantham & Whiting, 2008) and inequitable graduation rates (Perez Huber et al., 2015) for students of Color.

In the face of these conditions, many teachers of Color choose teaching because they want to improve the academic experiences of students of Color (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012), support the educational transformation of their own communities (Dingus, 2008), and act as racial justice advocates (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003). Teachers of Color have been found to have higher expectations of the learning of students of Color (Dee, 2005) and a heightened awareness of educational injustice and racism (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). And while there are teachers of Color who do not engage in discussions of injustice, research demonstrates that teachers of Color are more likely to frame racist and classist experiences within a broader socio-political context (Kambutu, Rios, & Castañeda, 2009).

Despite the potential that teachers of Color bring to classrooms to address racial inequity and improve the educational opportunities for students of Color, teachers of Color comprise just 18% of the teaching force (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2018). In addition, teacher education programs tend to neglect their experiences, perspectives and needs (Amos, 2010; Haddix, 2012). Studies have revealed that not only is most teacher training devoid of structural and racial analyses of inequity (Hayes & Fasching-Varner, 2015), it is also designed primarily for white teacher candidates (Sheets & Chew, 2002). Teacher candidates of Color are often ignored and silenced within classes, as well as stunted in their professional growth (Amos, 2010). Practicing teachers of Color have also reported feeling isolated, unsupported and overlooked for leadership opportunities at their school sites (Dingus, 2008), with little professional development that addresses their needs (Franquiz, Salazar & DeNicolo, 2011). Teachers of Color, who are often recruited into schools for racial equity minded reasons, are not mentored, supported, or at times even allowed by school staff to do racial justice work (Phillips & Nava, 2011).

Critical Public Pedagogy

When teacher education programs and prescribed professional development fail to provide the racial discourse required to support the socio-political needs of teachers of Color, where do they go to strengthen their racial analysis, develop culturally sustaining curriculum, and gain skills to confront racism? Public pedagogy underscores how teaching and learning take place in public spaces and venues beyond formal institutions and schools (Burdick, Sandlin & O'Malley, 2014; Sandlin, Schultz & Burdick, 2010). Building on this conceptualization, *critical* public pedagogy highlights the political rootedness of public pedagogical practice such that it serves as a key component of resistance movements for social, economic and racial justice (Giroux, 2003; Jaramillo, 2010). As purveyors of whiteness, traditional teacher preparation programs and professional development function to exclude the voices, epistemologies and perspectives of communities of Color (Sleeter, 2001). In this article, we discuss ITOC as a form of *critical* public pedagogy, a “pedagogy of unlearning” (Jaramillo, 2010) that is a refusal of and open challenge to the racial status quo in schools.

ITOC as Critical Public Pedagogy

Grounded in the belief that K-12 educators are politically and intellectually engaged actors who participate in shaping society (Giroux, 2003), ITOC acts as a space of critical public pedagogy as it offers teachers of Color access to critical theory, research, and practice often absent in traditional PD, it engages them dialogically, and supports their capacities for justice-oriented change. Teachers of Color who express interest and readiness for racial justice leadership work are brought together for three intensive days of keynotes, workshops, and working group sessions led by scholars, teachers and community-based leaders of Color with particular grounding in critical race theory (CRT) and racial literacy development. Because ITOC is also meant to support their holistic well-being in the face of racial and ideological isolation and trauma, the space is woven with community building, performance and visual art, yoga and meditation, healthy food, and specific sessions for healing.

Critical race theory emerged from critical legal studies to name institutional culpability in U.S. racial disparities (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Focused on unearthing the permanence of racism and white supremacy on multiple levels (i.e., individual, institutional, and cultural), CRT leans on the experiences and insights of non-dominant communities (Yosso, 2005), and reframes individualized, meritocratic, colorblind and postracial explanations for racial inequality by engaging in structural critique (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). There are five key tenets, outlined by Solórzano & Delgado Bernal (2001), that are central to CRT research and praxis in education: (a) the centrality of race and racism, (b) challenge to the dominant perspective, (c) a commitment to social justice, (d) a value of experiential knowledge, and (e) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches ([read more about CRT in Education](#)). For teachers of Color who aim to transform racialized

conditions (Kohli, 2018), ITOC uses CRT to reframe dominant racialized messages in education, center the voices and experiences of the marginalized, and strengthen teachers' racial literacy.

Closely aligned with CRT, **racial literacy** refers to the skill and practice of being able to understand the institutional embeddedness of racism and then process and respond to these experiences (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013). In relation to teacher pedagogy, a teacher's adeptness with guiding students in the discussion of race and racism can either ill-prepare students with problematic understandings and responses to racism, or prepare students to effectively respond to racist discourse and experiences with racism (Skerrett, 2011). For teachers themselves, developing and sustaining their racial literacy is important to helping them uncover and pinpoint the structural and systemic nature of racism (Rogers & Mosley, 2006; Skerrett, 2011), and for teachers of Color this has proven essential to their retention in a predominantly White and racializing profession. Because this is not the labor that teacher education or school and district mandated professional development traditionally takes on, teachers are often left with few tools to name, navigate, and confront the manifestations of the institutional racism they encounter. ITOC, as a form of critical public pedagogy, breaks down barriers of intellectualism, scholarship, and leadership, making these aspects central to teacher development. By supporting the racial literacy development of teachers of Color, it provides a utility for theory and research that is directly tied to their professional sustainability and their capacity for institutional change.

Methods

All three authors are former teachers of Color who now serve as teacher educators and researchers and have worked closely with ITOC for many years. To demonstrate its effectiveness as a form of critical public pedagogy, we share examples of how ITOC uses critical theory and research to strengthen teachers' capacity to 1) name racism, and 2) transform the racial climate. The examples come from a larger research project with 441 participants, all of whom applied to participate in ITOC and self-selected into the study between 2011 and 2017. The teachers in the study were diverse across race, gender, age, years in the classroom and teaching level. They came from communities across the country and taught in schools that primarily served students of Color. All the participants completed a qualitative questionnaire with four open-ended in-depth questions, and a subgroup participated in pre- and post-conference surveys, as well as self-guided digital narrative interviews that were solicited through printed prompts and related to concepts taught within ITOC. The teachers whose narratives are included in this article all taught high school, lived on the West Coast, participated in ITOC for multiple years, and expressed themes that were salient throughout the larger data set in clear and accessible ways. The narratives we share were constructed through a compilation and analysis of all forms of their participation in the study, as well as informal communication and member checking.

Strengthening Teachers Capacity to Name Racism

A teacher's workload is unfortunately often understood only in terms of what they teach, and how effective it is in increasing achievement. Less common is the belief that teachers do or should have a handle on how racial inequity exists in the broader policies and practices that govern the school. Thus, racial literacy is rarely seen as a valuable skill set for teacher training and professional development, despite the extreme impact of racial inequity on communities, students, and the teachers of Color that serve them. Grounded in CRT, ITOC exposes teachers to concepts that allow them to better name, analyze, and challenge racism, as well as understand its impact on them personally and professionally.

One such concept is racial battle fatigue, which Smith (2009) defines as "the psychological, emotional, physiological, energy, and time-related cost of fighting against racism" (p. 298). Although there is a growing body of educational scholarship that has conceptualized and/or researched the significance of this concept in education, it is mostly absent from teacher development. At ITOC, teachers are introduced to racial battle fatigue as one of the key theoretical frames to unpack the way in which they are experiencing oppression. As we do with many dense theoretical concepts: we start with a video clip, in this case of a short comedy skit video where Queen Latifah jokes about "Excedrin for Racial Tension Headaches," we then introduce teachers to William Smith's research on racial battle fatigue, and finally we offer time for them to apply the concept to their own contexts, using the theory to reframe their experiences.

One year at ITOC, a veteran Latinx teacher attended who had endured racism at her school where she and her students were stereotyped and was treated in dehumanizing ways by peers and administrators. She had broken down during the year, and had to take time off, for which she felt incredible guilt. When we presented the concept of racial battle fatigue, she stood up with tears in her eyes and said, "I thought it was just me! I can't believe this is a real thing and there is research on it." She later expressed that exposure to that theory was an important step in healing and empowerment, allowing her to reframe the narrative and understand racism and the institutional climate as a key cause of the emotional stress she was experiencing.

Mark, a middle school science teacher who identifies as Asian American, also came to ITOC feeling exhausted, and emotionally drained from his school year. He felt that having to continually teach his white colleagues about how race and racism shape the inequities at his school and his larger community was weighing on him. Learning the concept of racial battle fatigue, he began to make connections between racialized experiences at his school and his emotional and physical state. He shared,

I can recall a time when a student came into my class really upset...she said that a substitute teacher had called her a 'wetback,' and I could just feel myself, like physically, my heart and my shoulders and that flash of rage where I felt like I couldn't think straight...this was before I ever came here [ITOC], so I didn't know

the word ‘racial battle fatigue’ and I didn’t know about secondary trauma, but it just triggered me... The the best I could do was call the principal and tell her what had happened. And that whole period I was off—emotionally I wasn’t there... even right now I can feel some emotions being stirred up... Now [post-ITOC], I know that that comes from a place of trauma and triggering, reminders of substitutes and teachers who had been similarly hostile to me as a child...

Mark had a visceral response to racism. Learning about racial battle fatigue helped him identify and name the racialized context of his school as a source of the mental, emotional and physiological toll he was experiencing. A year later, Mark reflected on his experience at ITOC saying that attending and finding language to unpack and articulate his and his students’ experience made him finally feel like he wasn’t “living in a different world than everyone else.” Understanding racial battle fatigue as a construct helped teachers make sense of what they were experiencing, feel less isolated, and reframe racism as an underlying source to the emotional stress of teaching. Theoretically and critically engaging teachers of Color provides ways of explaining their realities that help them understand, heal from, and persist in the sometimes racially toxic environment of schools.

Strengthening Teachers’ Capacities to Transform the Racial Climate

Naming racism has a utility that goes beyond understanding, healing and empowerment. Learning critical theoretical concepts in an applied way also equips teachers of Color with the tools to confront and transform racial inequity in their schools and communities. A Latino high school teacher in the Northwest, Pablo was one of three male teachers of Color in his district. He came to ITOC with a similar heaviness of responsibility towards justice, expressing that, “Most of my colleagues are ignorant or dismissive of racial inequities... It feels very lonesome and I often feel disempowered.” He was seeking community to sustain his teaching, to feel empowered as a teacher of Color, and to learn how to most effectively work towards racial justice with and for his students.

During ITOC, Pablo spoke about the utility of the CRT concept of “racial microaggressions”—everyday verbal or non-verbal forms of racism that can take a cumulative toll on people of Color (Solórzano, 1998)—which he stated helped him feel more confident and empowered to call-out racist discourse and acts in his school context. In a similar fashion to racial battle fatigue, racial microaggressions was taught through examples in the media, a short comedy clip where a Korean American woman resists with humor the questions of a white man who wants to understand where she is *really* from, connections to the academic scholarship on racial microaggressions, and then space to apply it to their own contexts. Pablo shared,

I wanted to share about this [concept of] microaggressions and how nasty they are... I lost a white friend [at my school] because I stood up and I told him that [his comments] were not right, I told him I was disrespected...[At the time], I didn’t call

him racist, but the next time it does happen I definitely will say that it was a racist comment. The next time it happens to me I know better now, I know to say that people are being racist. Because of the last two days [at ITOC], I feel much more confident about these things that I can talk about, that I can go back and reference and really say ‘these things are racist’ and they’re not okay to me...

For Pablo, through an exposure to critical race concepts and a strengthened racial literacy, he felt empowered with critical language to name the everyday racist discourse directed at his students and at him. ITOC’s bridge of critical theory to praxis filled an important void in Pablo’s teacher development by supporting his racial literacy. He shared, “ITOC has been the most empowering and impactful institute I have attended in my career. I had not fully understood all that I was thinking and feeling as a person of Color until I arrived and connections were made. The validation made me whole, and increased my confidence.”

Pablo returned to ITOC three times over the course of four years, and over the course of that time, he developed not only in his skill to name racism, but also in his capacity to confront and transform the racial climate. He expressed,

Ever since my first summer at ITOC in 2015 my activism and leadership has grown exponentially. I was able to make sense of a lot of what I was thinking and feeling. Having my experience and humanity validated helped me see that I was capable and strong enough to start mobilizing and collaborating with teachers and parents that were ready to enact change in our schools.

Building on ITOC’s framing that critical educators of Color are the leaders they have been waiting for, within the convening, teachers of Color are asked to design theoretically and research informed action plans for the racial justice work they will accomplish during the school year. Pablo’s second time at ITOC, he attended with two women of Color from his school with plans to “curate spaces to undo the work of racism, oppression, hate, ignorance, and other ideas and ideals that subjugate our students and our teachers to learn in oppressive ways.” Through the following school year, they developed a teacher activist group in their region where they read critical scholarship and organized actions. He shared that through his gained racial literacy and empowerment, he is now recognized by others as an educational leader in his community, being asked to share his expertise and experiences in other contexts. He is now involved in multi-tiered efforts across his region with like-minded teachers to improve the racial climate and educational opportunities for youth and their families. The critical theoretical frames, the community, and the focus on action are all pieces of ITOC that help bridge critical theory and research to practice, supporting teachers in their efforts to name racism, confront it, and then transform schools.

Conclusion

Many opportunities for professional teacher learning are derived from teacher education and school-based or district-sponsored development opportunities. We argue that these spaces, while often successful at supporting teacher learning, rarely target the specific needs of teachers of Color, especially those interested in learning to challenge structural oppression. A lack of critical racial discourse underserves teachers of Color who are navigating a predominantly white profession, particularly those trying to challenge the status quo. Racial literacy, as a skill and practice, must be strengthened (Sealey-Ruiz, 2013) as it can serve as a tool of personal and professional survival for teachers of Color (Kohli, 2018).

In this article, we presented ITOC as a form of critical public pedagogy. Breaking down false barriers between scholars and practitioners that often leave teachers with outdated research and limited formal opportunities for intellectual engagement, ITOC supports justice-oriented teachers of Color in their racial literacy development, and growth as agents of change in racialized school environments. Through exposure to critical theory and research, as demonstrated through the examples of teachers' engagement with racial battle fatigue and racial microaggressions, they are able to strengthen their understanding and approach to their professional spaces, as well as their capacities for change.

While ITOC happens outside the bounds of traditional teacher training or professional development, there are lessons that these institutions can learn from this form of critical public pedagogy. Teachers of Color in ITOC are engaged in critical theory and tools, their trauma is acknowledged and addressed, and they are supported as a community of change agents to name racism and transform the racial climates of their schools and communities. Teachers are capable of intellectually rigorous, politically active, professional engagement. Practicing teachers should have access to critical theory, research, and scholars themselves. To effectively prepare a diverse teaching force to address the incredible challenges and inequities we continue to see in schools, teacher education programs and teacher professional development must begin to engage teachers in honest discourse on race and racism, cultivate their skills to address racialized issues, and support their overall growth as racial justice educators.

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