Breaking the Cycle
of Racism in the Classroom:
Critical Race Reflections
from Future Teachers of Color

By Rita Kohli

As a resource specialist in a middle school in Oakland, California, I worked with many students who were labeled "learning disabled." Contrary to the label, these students were critical of the world and challenged it in brilliant ways that have forever changed my life perspective. My first year teaching I had an African American student named Eddie[1]; he was a talkative and confident sixth grader who struggled in math. Learning how this young man saw the world pushed me, more than anyone had to that point, to reflect on cultural biases within education. Since then, I have learned a lot about this subject, but I also realize how invisibly the dominant culture can penetrate the way we see ourselves and the world around us.

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To highlight the impact that cultural bias in schools can have on Students of Color, this article articulates themes that emerge from the personal narratives of nine Women of Color[2] enrolled in an undergraduate education program in Southern California. Through qualitative interviews, these future Teachers of Color reveal discriminatory experiences in their own education; as well as convey advice on how to prevent and break cycles of racism in classrooms of today's

youth. The voices of Teachers of Color are often invisible from education discourse; however, this study adds a much needed perspective to teacher education, and can provide a model of pedagogical reflection that, I believe, should be replicated in programs serving prospective Teachers of Color.

Whose Standards Are the Standards?

One day, a few months into my first school year as a teacher, I was in the hallway during lunch talking with the English teacher, Ms. Wright. Eddie came up to us and asked, "Ms. Wright, I don't got no lunch money, can I sit in your room and use the computer?" Ms. Wright was a seventh year White teacher who received a lot of respect for the high academic standards that she held students to at this under-performing school. Ms. Wright immediately responded, "I am not going to answer that question until you speak correctly. How can we say that in proper English?" We both looked at Eddie, waiting for him to rephrase his words, but instead he calmly replied, "Maybe not in your house, but in my house that *is* how we speak correctly." Ms. Wright and I were both caught off guard and a little speechless, and Eddie just stood there un-phased, waiting for us to let him use the computer.

That incident stuck in my head for the next few days. Eddie, with his direct comment, had pointed out something that I had been taking for granted as a teacher. I knew that Oakland was the center of the 'Ebonics' debate. I was also aware that there is controversy over how to address differences that exist between the language that students come to school with and what they need to know for most U.S. colleges and professional jobs. But what I was not conscious of, until Eddie so confidently pointed it out, was that although differences exist in the structure of African American Language (AAL) and Standard American English (SAE), at this school, we were actually teaching a hierarchy of those differences (Faires Conklin & Lourie, 1983).[3] I began to reflect on how many classrooms I had walked into where daily oral language, an exercise for students to work on SAE grammar, involved a teacher asking a class of predominantly Black students to "correct" a sentence that was written in AAL. I began to think of all the times in which I had "corrected" students' speech and writing from AAL to SAE without thinking twice. Rather than teaching youth that languages and dialects have *differences*, and that SAE is something that we often have to know in order to access academic and economic mobility, I was teaching children that SAE was *correct* and AAL was *incorrect*.

Soon after Eddie's comment in the hallway I began to read about teaching cultural differences, and my pedagogy began to reflect my newfound awareness (Perry & Delpit, 1998; Yosso, 2005). This was a huge lesson that I learned from my 11-year-old student, but I was still not settled around this issue. What I continued to struggle with was the fact that, like Eddie, SAE was not the primary language in my own home growing up.

My family is from India, and Hindi is the first language of my parents. In my

house, my parents speak what I like to call *Hinglish*—a fluid blend of Hindi and English. So I was perplexed: Why was someone like me, someone who comes from a non-SAE home, so quick to uphold the standards of the English language? Why did I assume that Standard English was the best way to express things? What happened in my life that led me to, consciously or not, hold dominant White culture superior while teaching Youth of Color?

Growing up, I lived in several cities and small towns around the country. Although my parents spoke Hindi around us all the time, I could understand it but never was able to speak it. A rare privilege, in college I was able to study the language, but it was not until studying abroad in India that I finally felt fluent. When I have asked my parents why my brother and I never learned Hindi as children, one story they tell makes me reflect on how much power teachers have in reinforcing cultural hierarchies.

I was born in Dayton, Ohio, in the late 1970s. At that time, our family was one of few immigrant families in this mid-western city. As my brother was beginning pre-school and I was just a baby, a teacher told my mother that she had two Persian children in her class the previous year that spoke Farsi. Her analysis was that because their primary language was not English these children had trouble making friends and were often confused at school. This White teacher emphasized that my mom should make sure to teach her kids (my brother and I) only English, so that *we* would not feel excluded or confused. As a new mother and recent immigrant my mom listened to this Ohioan teacher, and she and my father began to censor their Hindi around us. Because language acquisition happens most easily at young ages (Carroll, 1999), this Ohioan teacher's advice was a large reason why I was unable to speak Hindi for most of my life.

White Cultural Dominance in Schools

Unfortunately, what Eddie and I have experienced is not unique or new. For years, theorists have argued that education has been used as a tool of oppression to teach People of Color that their culture is inferior to the dominant White culture (Woodson, 1933; Freire, 1970; hooks, 2001). In 1933, Carter G. Woodson wrote *The Mis-Education of the Negro* to argue that schools miseducate Blacks (and Whites) to believe that Blacks are of less value than Whites. He claimed that education was used to maintain White dominance by socializing Whites to believe they are superior, while simultaneously internalizing a self-hatred within Black students.

In 1947, Kenneth and Mammie Clarke conducted a study on racial preferences of African American children to test the notion described above. Placing both black and white dolls in front of Black youth, and asking them to choose the one they liked the best, the researchers found that the children consistently chose white dolls. Clarke and Clarke's (1947) research proved that many Black children have a racial inferiority complex regarding whiteness. The scholars claimed that the self-hatred of African American youth was learned from the conditions of schools during racial

segregation. This study was used as a key piece of research in the case of *Brown v. Board of Topeka* (1954) as evidence for the need to desegregate.

In the United States, Woodson's and Clarke and Clarke's discussion may seem out of date because, since 1933, race relations have improved and schools have legally been desegregated. Although *Brown v. Board* has proven significant for People of Color to access educational opportunities, including higher education (Hunter-Gault, 1992), what also resulted was the closure of non-White schools. Districts fired Teachers of Color because it was deemed socially unacceptable for them to teach White children. Mostly White teachers were left educating Youth of Color, often not because they wanted to, but because they had to (Bell, 1983, 2004). Transitioning to a predominantly White teaching force often had a negative impact on the psyche and/or educational attainment of non-White youth (hooks 2001; Bell, 2004).

Research by Oakes, Rogers, and Silver (2004) reveals continued segregation today. As of 2004, 41 percent of public schools are predominantly non-White, including students of African, Asian Pacific Islander, and Latina/o descent. This research also reports that majority non-White schools have poorer conditions, fewer resources, and higher rates of unqualified teachers than schools that are predominantly White (Oakes, Rogers, & Silver, 2004). Other studies also show that much of the curriculum and teaching styles in public schools are not culturally relevant to Students of Color (Delpit, 1995; Menchaca, 2001). The continual segregation of White and non-White children in schools, the conditions in which Students of Color are forced to go to school, and the curriculum used to teach them are all components of an education system that privileges both White students and White culture.

Breaking the Cycle

Reflecting back on my own education, there have been numerous moments when teachers made comments or acted in ways that prioritized White cultural values over my own. Whether in regard to my language, my religion, or my traditions, I have been taught in both subtle and blatant ways that the cultural knowledge of my family has less worth than that of the dominant White culture. What is even worse is that, as a teacher, I carried this learned perspective with me into the classroom and was instilling a hierarchy of White cultural superiority into the minds of my young students.

I strongly believe that for Black, Latina/o, Asian American, and Native American youth to succeed in this nation, we must have strong Black, Latina/o, Asian American, and Native American teachers. I also know, however, that many of us have been socialized through racially biased educational systems and carry skewed perceptions of ourselves, our communities, and other non-White racial or ethnic groups. When we talk about increasing the numbers of Teachers of Color, it becomes important that teacher education programs begin to encourage these teachers to reflect on their own educational experiences and how the belief in White cultural superiority may have penetrated their values or worldviews.

Recognizing what I experienced as an injustice, but also as *racism,* has been an important healing process for me. It has also helped me to consciously work with Youth of Color to resist feelings of inferiority. As I enter the field of teacher education, I find it imperative that teacher education programs provide the space for Teachers of Color to reflect, as I did, on racism within their own educational experiences before they enter the classroom. To move in this direction, I used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework to conduct qualitative interviews with Women of Color enrolled in an undergraduate education program in Southern California. With their narratives, I hope to highlight the cultural biases and racism that many Students of Color face in K-12 and the impact that this can have on them as people and as teachers. By reflecting on these issues, I also hope that teacher education can begin to adopt practices similar to those in this study, in order to push educators of today's youth to become more conscious in identifying racism and fighting against it.

Race, Racism, and Critical Race Theory

Race, racism, and CRT are central to the analysis of this study; thus it is important to provide clear definitions of these terms. Race is a social construct that changes over time. For example, individuals who were once considered Jewish or Italian are now viewed as White; and Arabs, who might identify themselves as White on the census, could simultaneously be racially categorized as non-White Middle Eastern when getting on a plane or applying for a job. Although it is often thought of a simple social category, race is most often used to create hierarchies of power and dominance (Omi & Winant, 1994). In the United States, race has consistently been used to include and exclude certain groups from equal participation, resources, and human rights.

Solórzano, Allen, and Carroll (2002) argue that racism exists when one group believes itself to be superior and has power to carry out the racist behavior. These authors also assert that racism affects multiple racial/ethnic groups (p. 24). Although the power of certain racial/ethnic groups has fluctuated over time, People of Color have never consistently or significantly possessed power in this country and thus are often targets of racism. Even though it is tied to race, this racism is not always acted out based on racial categories. It can also manifest against factors affiliated with race or ethnicity such as language, religion, and culture.

Critical Race Theory was developed in the 1970s among legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberley Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado. The framework was constructed to acknowledge race and its intersections with racism as a first step to combating the daily oppression of racial injustice. 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.

Guided by five principles, research in CRT in education (1) centralizes race and racism and its intersections with other forms of oppression (e.g., gender, class);

(2) challenges dominant ideology; (3) represents a commitment to social justice; (4) values lived experience; and (5) uses interdisciplinary perspectives, including education, sociology, and psychology (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). These elements provide an important framework to engage minority voices in identifying as well as challenging racism. I utilized all five of the tenets to develop and guide the research questions, design, and analysis.

Methods

Data for this article were collected as part of a study of the role of race and racism in the educational experiences and perspectives of Women of Color Educators. Participants were selected from an undergraduate education program in a public university in Southern California. Soliciting students in an education course that focuses on inequality, I recruited nine Women of Color who had the goal of becoming a teacher for interviews: three African Americans, three Latinas, and three Asian/Pacific Islanders. Through approximately hour-long individual interviews, this self-selected sample of future teachers were asked to discuss (1) if they had experienced or witnessed racial, cultural, or linguistic discrimination in their elementary, middle, and high school education; (2) how these experiences might have impacted their cultural perspective, including their relationship to school and their family, and their self-perception; and (3) what they might do to prevent those moments from occurring in their own future classrooms. In addition, for the education course that they were recruited from, each student had to write an education autobiography where they were asked to examine their educational experiences through the lens of race, class, and gender. Excerpts from these written autobiographical narratives were used to supplement the data.

The interviews were transcribed and, along with the written narratives, were coded for reoccurring themes. Through this process, three major themes emerged: (1) Whether subtle or overt, all the women in this study unfortunately had a story where they experienced racial, cultural, or linguistic discrimination in their K-12 education; (2) almost all participants revealed that those experiences with racism led them to internalize a racial, cultural, or linguistic inferiority to White culture or English; and (3) these young women had very powerful ideas of how to structure classrooms that validate student cultures.

The voices of these future Teachers of Color can shed some light on what Students of Color have gone through and continue to go through in U.S. public schools. Select quotes have been drawn from the data to represent a multi-racial perspective of these topics. These quotes have been framed and analyzed to high-light both individual and institutional forms of racism. Additionally, the important stories and ideas revealed through the process of this research draws attention to a pedagogical model that teacher education programs can use to better address the needs of Teachers of Color.

Critical Race Reflections

Student Experiences with Racism

I want to believe that when youth enter classrooms, educators will nurture and teach them. This is not always the case; unfortunately, there are teachers who act irresponsibly with the authority and influence they have over young minds. A Chicana[4] from the Los Angeles area described an experience she had in her high school chemistry course. Her White male teacher outwardly made racist comments that revealed low expectations and a lack of respect for his students and Latinas/os generally. She explained,

> It was my first day in Chemistry class in 10th grade. The teacher, the first thing that came out of his mouth was… "Not many of you will be able to pass, because the trends are that mostly," I don't remember the exact words, but it was like, "your type of people don't do well." And when someone wouldn't get the stuff or understand, he'd be like, "What are you, burros [*donkeys*], or something?" He'd use, kind of, our own language against us. (Interview, 2005)

The teacher that this young Chicana describes began the school year setting up an expectation of failure for many of his students. In addition, his blatant disrespect across racial/ethnic and linguistic lines conveyed a message of cultural and intellectual inferiority to his Latina/o students. This young woman remembered the first day of tenth grade chemistry well into college, not because it was a positive day, but rather because of her teacher's racist actions.

Racism, however, is not always consciously conveyed. A Pakistani woman from Southern California, although born in this country and a native English speaker, revealed that teachers made many assumptions about her language skills because she did not fit their perception of what an English-speaker looks like. She described the day in high school when she was taken out of class to be tested for the English as a Second Language (ESL) program.

> "Please describe the picture using complete sentences," the lady asked as she pointed to a picture of a dolphin playing with a beach ball. After being summoned out of my history class, I sat in confusion as to why I was in the ESL room. The lady explained that since I was of South Asian background, I needed to pass the ESL test to continue taking regular classes. The fact that I was born and raised in California, and currently had the highest grade in my *honors* English class obviously did not make a difference. (Written narrative, 2005)

Although this action was not malicious like the previous example, this South Asian student was still a subject of racial assumptions. Based on factors as basic as her appearance and name, she was being forced to prove her place in honor's classes—a college-bound track typically closed to ESL students. Unfortunately, racialized messages like these are often sent to Students of Color about where they belong in school.

Racism can hurt and feel disempowering in the moment. However, its impact is rarely isolated to that moment. It can have a lasting effect on the self-perception and worldviews of its victims, especially when those victims are youth (Cross, 1971, 1991; Perez Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006). In this study, I asked the future teachers to discuss how they felt after the incidents they described, and if the racism they witnessed or endured had an effect on the way they or their peers saw themselves or the world around them. Unfortunately, many of them were able to make connections between experiencing racism and beginning to view ones' self as inferior and/or culturally subordinate to White cultural values.

One African American future teacher expressed that many of her teachers, fueled by racist stereotypes, had low expectations of the Black male students at her predominantly Black, over-crowded public high school. She spoke passionately about how her teachers' perspectives had negative influence on the way many students felt about their abilities, as well as their post-high-school aspirations. She gave the example,

> My 11th grade shop teacher used to tell me about the Black male students in the class "They better learn this material, you know, better learn how to do this 'cause otherwise they are not going to have anything to do with their lives. And how they'll be on the street, selling drugs or be in jail and this was the only thing that anyone will ever teach them to do right, so they better learn it now." (Interview, 2005)

The teacher in this example believed the future of his own students was limited to jail, selling drugs or car repairs, and that they did not have options beyond that. This young future teacher revealed that, unfortunately, this experience was not an isolated one. She felt strongly that there was a connection between the lack of academic engagement of her male counterparts and the racist stereotypes teachers had about Black males as students. Additionally, she argued that the internalization of racism greatly limited their academic and career aspirations and trajectories.

The racism that students endure and internalize does not always occur by individuals or in overt ways. Resource inequalities tend to exist between mostly White schools and schools serving Students of Color (Oakes, Roger, & Silver, 2004). This reality is a manifestation of structural racism and can have an extremely negative affect on the educational opportunities of non-White youth (e.g., access to libraries, Advanced Placement courses, and even college), but also in the way they learn to see themselves. A Mexican American woman from the Central Valley, California, explained that there were no Honor's classes in her predominantly Mexican town. She remembers how she felt when she was bused into the predominantly White middle school in the next town over. She commented,

> I always felt that if I raised my hand to voice my opinion about something, or even responded to a question about the material I would say something wrong, and the White students would say "Oh, it's the Mexican girl." Although I was aware that

I was in an honors course because I was academically advanced, I still assumed that just because I was Mexican and lived on the poor side of town I was not as smart as them… There was always a feeling of inferiority when I was around White students during my schooling experience. (Written narrative, 2005)

The structural racism of this student's schooling had a negative impact on the way she saw herself. With no Honor's classes in her neighborhood school, a school serving mostly Latina/o children, and by having to enter a White community to gain access a rigorous education, she internalized the message that Whites were intellectually superior to her (and other Mexicans) and she began to doubt her own abilities.

Similar to this young Woman of Color, I too internalized the racism in my education. From the hierarchy of value placed on English and Hindi, to the neglect of my cultural or religious practices in school, by middle school—I hate to think it now—but I was embarrassed to be Indian. I cringed when India came up in class and I was used as a resource, because I wanted to blend in. I knew it saddened my parents when I would try to wipe my forehead if I had to wear tikka [*a red mark placed on the forehead in Hindu religious ceremonies*] on Hindu holidays, but I did not want to get questions or look "weird" at school. I even stayed up late one night in elementary school memorizing Christmas carols, so when we sang them in music class I would not look like an outsider. As I look back at the cultural biases in my K-12 schooling, and the schooling of these young women, I firmly believe that when we prioritize White culture above others, we are being racist. Whether conscious or unconscious, when we teach dominant cultural norms, we are often teaching students to think less of themselves, their culture, or their people.

Strategies against Racism

Teachers of Color are a small minority of the population of educators in the United States. The National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force (2004) collected statistics on the racial demographics of teachers and 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. As we increase the diversity of the teaching force, we are helping to validate the various rich cultures of youth in this country. But is it enough to just put Teachers of Color in front of Students of Color? As revealed in this research, through racism, many non-White students have been taught to perceive the dominant culture as better than their own. If we want effective socially and racially conscious Teachers of Color, it is fundamental to provide spaces for them to reflect and heal from the racism they have endured. In addition, we must also give them the room to develop strategies to consciously interrupt racism.

To just begin scratching the surface of this problem, in the last section of the interviews I urged future teachers to speak on what they will do in their own classrooms to combat and/or prevent the impact of racism on Youth of Color. One African American participant revealed that many of her teachers throughout K-12 had misconceptions and stereotypes about the Black and Brown students she went

to school with. She felt that a great deal of the teachers' negative perceptions were developed through ignorance and a lack of interaction with the actual communities they were teaching in. To break this cycle, she advised, "It's always good to be able to connect with different people in different communities and get different perspectives. I think once you do that you are able to change your perspective, and then you are able to teach that to others" (Interview, 2005). This young woman had made a commitment to break out of her comfort zone to connect with and learn from diverse groups of people. By doing this, she believed that she would broaden her outlook, and in turn, would be better prepared to affirm her students' identity within our extremely multicultural society and schools.

A Latina student remembered a White teacher in her elementary school who she felt was Americanizing her predominantly Latina/o class. Through music, dance, and a celebration of culturally White holidays, she felt forced to choose between her home culture and success in school. She also shared an instance where her non-English-speaking friend asked her a question in Spanish and they got in trouble. After that, she felt pressure to not speak in Spanish, and to no longer speak to her friend. These experiences, she commented, made her feel uncomfortable and disconnected from others in the class, and from her culture. When asked what she would do in her own classroom, she responded,

> Looking back, or in current experiences, there is no real sense of community in most classrooms; I always felt that I was really uncomfortable in the classroom. I will try to make a community in which students feel comfortable… I feel like that is one of the most important things- that a student could feel comfortable in where he or she is learning. (Interview, 2005)

Reflecting on discomfort within her own education and its impact on her learning and her identity, this student was committed to making her classroom a safe space for students. She saw community building as a means to create an atmosphere of unity, trust, and respect.

Conclusion

Racism is not uncommon in schools. Every day, Youth of Color are subjected to indignities, including low expectations, stereotypes, inadequate resources, and a curriculum that privileges White cultural values (Johnson, Manuscript; Perez Huber, Johnson, & Kohli, 2006). Within these educational conditions, many of these youth internalize negative messages about their own culture. 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 these things since they happened. Only now, as adults, had they begun to realize how deeply it affected them. Although barely scratching the surface in the process of healing, these interviews functioned to bring voice to oft-unheard stories of Women of Color within education. They are also a way for the participants to try and turn their experiences with

racism into proactive means to think about culturally relevant, racially conscious teaching strategies. Teacher education programs often lack strategies and curriculum that speak to the needs of Teachers of Color. The process that future Teachers of Color underwent within this study proved important, and should be viewed as a possible model to be incorporated into teacher education.

It takes great strength to have pride in our culture when degraded, and to stand up against cultural biases and racism. We must teach our students to, like Eddie, resist believing the message that People of Color are inferior. To do so, however, we must also heal from the wounds of our own education. Fighting racism is a difficult and uphill battle, but the more that we believe in the immense value of diverse cultural knowledge, language and rich traditions, the more equipped we will be create spaces that educate and empower our children.

Notes

[1] All names used in this article are actually pseudonyms, used to protect privacy and identity.

[2] "Women 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 to empower this group and represents a grammatical move toward social and racial justice. This rule will also apply to the terms "Teachers of Color,""People of Color" and "Students of Color," used throughout this article.

[3] It is important that we recognize why Standard American English has become the *standard.* Faires Conklin and Lourie (1983) argue that SAE is not the standard because it is correct or more useful than any other language or dialect. Instead, it is the standard because it is the language of the powerful, and those who wish to be part of upper and professional classes must speak like the powerful. They argue that because those with social and economic power speak SAE, SAE is seen as grammatically and aesthetically superior to all other languages and dialects.

[4] Ethnic labels are self identified by participants in the study.

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