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“They Hate on Me!” Black Teachers Interrupting Their White Colleagues’ Racism

Kristen E. Duncan

Black teachers have long been aware that Black students face racism in multiple forms throughout their lives. As racism has consistently been present throughout the history of the United States, Black teachers have used education as a platform to work against that racism, adapting their strategies through different periods in American history. Although Black teachers who taught in the Jim Crow era of legally mandated segregated schools taught their students how to deal with the racism that they faced outside of the school building, those who teach in diverse schools today find themselves preparing students to deal with the racism they experience beyond school and helping students navigate the racism they experience within the school building. The purpose of this article is to examine the ways in which Black teachers work to interrupt the racism that their White colleagues inflict upon their students. Findings indicate that efforts to protect Black students from White teachers’ racism led Black teachers to engage their students in emancipatory pedagogies and serve as interceders on behalf of their students. The teachers also found themselves on the receiving end of their colleagues’ racism. Any effort to recruit or retain teachers of color must first consider the experiences of contemporary teachers of color, and the findings reported in this article help researchers further understand the experiences of Black teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Although many Americans recently have believed the United States to be postracial (Love & Tosolt, 2010; Speri, 2015), only to have that fallacy shattered during the presidential campaign of 2016, Black scholars and teachers have long understood that Black students will face racism in multiple forms throughout their lives. As racism has had a constant presence throughout the history of the United States, Black teachers have used education as a platform to work against that racism, adapting their strategies to the different ways racism has presented itself throughout various periods in American history (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1990, 1991, 1997; Gundaker, 2007; Irvine & Irvine, 2007; Milner, 2014; Walker, 1996; Williams, 2005). Although Black teachers in the Jim Crow era of legally mandated segregated schools taught their students how to deal with the racism that they faced beyond the doors of the school building, Black teachers in schools today find themselves...
preparing students not only to deal with the racism they experience beyond the school building but also for the racism they experience within it.

The research findings presented in this article resulted from a larger study that focused on Black teachers who worked to help Black students navigate systems of White supremacy. Although I sought to understand how Black teachers prepared Black students to understand and respond to racism, the data revealed that Black teachers spent a lot of their time and energy responding to the racism their White colleagues exhibited. The purpose of this article is to examine the ways in which Black teachers worked to interrupt the racism that their White colleagues displayed toward their Black students. In a US public school landscape where students of color constitute a majority but teachers of color comprise a mere 18% of the teaching force (USDOE, 2016), many states have begun large-scale efforts to recruit teachers (Camera, 2018). If we are serious about these recruitment efforts, we must first understand the experiences of teachers of color.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Benefits of Black Teachers

Although the body of research focusing on Black teachers is growing, there have not been nearly enough research studies that center Black teachers or teachers of color more generally. In the research literature that focuses on Black teachers, researchers have found that Black teachers are invaluable to the educational experiences of Black children. Recent research studies have found that Black teachers have higher expectations of Black students than White teachers do (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). Teacher expectations are critical, because they affect students’ perceptions of their own academic abilities (Rubie-Davies, 2006), ultimately impacting student achievement. Researchers have also discovered that Black students are more likely to be academically successful when they have Black teachers (Gershenson et al., 2017), and Black students are less likely to be suspended from school when they have Black teachers (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Additionally, researchers have found that Black teachers are more likely than their White counterparts to recommend Black students for gifted and talented programs (Grissom & Redding, 2016).

Emancipatory Pedagogies

In addition to studying the academic and disciplinary effects of Black teachers, researchers have also studied the ways in which Black teachers have incorporated emancipatory pedagogies in their classrooms. Rooted in the scholarship of Cooper (1930), Ellis (1917), Woodson (1933), and Du Bois (1935), emancipatory pedagogies are teaching methods by which teachers (a) hold high expectations of their students, (b) make their students knowledgeable of the positive contributions of their race, and (c) work to help their students develop a critical lens or consciousness to examine the root causes of their oppression and develop ways to end it.
As an umbrella term, emancipatory pedagogy encompasses concepts like *culturally relevant pedagogy* (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and *Afrocentric pedagogy* (Asante, 1991).

Lynn, Johnson, and Hassan (1999), studied an exemplary Black teacher who sought to help his Black students develop a critical consciousness, finding this teacher’s practices aligned with African American prophetic practice (West, 1988), a uniquely Black American form of resistance that encompasses “deep-seated moralism, beneficent opportunism, and healthy pessimism” (Lynn, Johnson, & Hassan, 1999, p. 49). David Stovall (2006) studied his experiences teaching a high school social studies class wherein he guided students in using hip-hop lyrics as a springboard for discussing topics related to schooling that included deception, oppression, and authority. Stovall and his students also used hip-hop to critique the social studies curriculum. Lynn (1999) conducted a study of Black educators who “expressed a commitment to issues of social justice and had a fairly well-defined sense of political, social, and ethnic/racial identity” (p. 612), finding that they made commitments to teach Black students about Africa, helped students develop a critical consciousness, engaged students in self-affirmation exercises in an effort to empower them, and, in some cases, confronted school administrators about issues of justice and equity. Milner (2014) added to the research literature on Black teachers with social justice aims by studying the ways in which a Black social studies teacher worked to help her students develop a sociopolitical conscience. He found that this teacher saw both teaching and learning as a mission-oriented responsibility, and she made an effort to help her students think about the role of race in the United States both contemporarily and historically. Further, she connected the role race has played historically in the United States with contemporary race relations. Esposito and Swain (2009) found that although the Black teachers in their study used the prescribed curriculum materials required by their schools, they also incorporated multiple perspectives, taught students to be critical consumers of textbooks, and added aspects of Afrocentrism to their courses in an effort to help students gain a sense of agency.

**Responding to Racism**

Although the body of research on Black teachers is growing, there appears to be a minimal amount of research available on the ways in which teachers of color respond to issues of race and racism. Wilkins and Lall (2011) studied the experiences of Black and other racially marginalized preservice teachers, finding that they experienced overt racism from their colleagues, particularly in school placements; Woodson and Pabon (2016), found that Black male teachers were further marginalized by others’ perceptions of the stereotypical characteristics associated with Black manhood. Amos (2016) added that preservice teachers of color were silenced by Whiteness and the fear that their White peers would retaliate against them if they spoke about race in their teacher education courses, as Bristol (2018) found that Black male teachers who were overwhelmingly outnumbered in their schools reported that White teachers had a greater influence on school policy than teachers of color did. Kohli (2018) studied urban teachers of color who were racial-justice oriented and found that their schools served as hostile racial climates, as most of her participants’ students were young people of color, but their
colleagues were predominantly White. This article contributes to the research literature dealing with the ways Black teachers respond to the racism of their White colleagues, particularly as they work to achieve their own social justice goals with their students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical race theory (CRT) provided the theoretical framework for this study. CRT emerged from the field of legal studies in the 1970s, as legal scholars began to see that the gains of the Civil Rights Movement had been incrementally stripped away (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Foundational CRT scholars, including Derrick Bell, were critical of the liberal approach used in the Civil Rights Movement and understood that opposing racism would require new theories and strategies (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Ultimately, critical race theorists want to transform the relationship between race and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

CRT encompasses several tenets, but three of those tenets were of particular importance to this study. The first of those is CRT’s first tenet, that racism is commonplace in American society and “so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears normal” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Essentially, racism is so common that it is often unrecognizable. This notion extends into schools, where policies that are frequently perceived to be colorblind affect different racial groups disproportionately.

The second CRT tenet that served as the theoretical framework for this study is the notion of racial realism. Derrick Bell (1992) understood that racism would always be a part of life in the United States. He also believed that Black people would permanently occupy a subordinate status in American society. Because of the permanence of racism, Bell (1992) explained that Black Americans needed to adopt a mindset that “requires us to acknowledge the permanence of our subordinate status” (pp. 373–374). He also noted that racial realism would help us “avoid despair and implement racial strategies that can bring fulfillment and even triumph” (Bell, 1992, pp. 373–374).

The CRT tenet of counterstory was also vital to this study, and it was essential for the data presented in this article. Counterstories tell stories of experience that differ from that of the grand narrative (Delgado, 1989; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2009; Zamudio, Russell, Rios, & Bridgeman, 2011). According to Solorzcano and Yosso (2009), counterstory is “a method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told” (p. 138). Counterstories, therefore, speak of the realities of people of color and allow us to name those realities for ourselves. Counterstories also aid in “psychic self-preservation” (Delgado, 1989, p. 2436). This is the case for those who are able to tell their counterstories, but it is also true for people of color who have the opportunity to hear counterstories, as listeners are able to realize that many of their negative experiences are due to racism and not their own individual failings. It was clear that participants were comforted in having a place to tell their counterstories, and they welcomed the opportunity to hear the stories of other Black teachers. CRT served as the
theoretical framework for this study, and it also influenced methodology and data collection methods.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

As a Black woman researcher who moves about the world with a critical orientation, I engaged in critical reflections (Milner, 2007a) of my experiences as a student, teacher, and teacher educator, as well as those of other teachers of color, both historically and contemporarily. It is the racialized experiences of my family members, community members, and myself that led me to design and conduct this study in a manner that valued the knowledge, experiences, and epistemologies of the participants. Additionally, I am a former middle school teacher, and I had previously taught in the school district where I collected data. In a city where tensions between the university and the surrounding community can sometimes run high, my positionality as a former teacher in that school district allowed me to quickly shed the role of outsider with the participants of this study. As some of the participants taught my former students, they came to understand that I view the role of research to be one of responsibility (Dillard, 2006), meaning I would not use the data I collected to harm them, as I ultimately hope to use this data to help them, their students, and other Black students and teachers. Because of this, they subsequently opened up to me in ways that they may not have with another researcher.

METHODS

The data presented in this article stem from a narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry involves “living and telling, reliving and retelling the stories of the experiences that make up people’s lives” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). Because of its focus on story and lived experience, narrative inquiry fits well with the CRT tenet of counterstory. Phillion (2008) explains that the use of narrative in qualitative research has become more frequent as researchers “draw on critical race theory to bring forward silenced narratives of underrepresented groups” (p. 283). Concerning the use of narrative inquiry in studying the experiences of Black teachers, Milner (2007b) adds that “these teachers’ texts are rich and empowering” (p. 591).

To recruit participants, I contacted school administrators and university teacher educators. I told them that I was looking to recruit Black teachers who held high expectations of their students, worked to make students knowledgeable of the positive contributions of their race, and worked to help their students develop a social and political consciousness. After asking them to recommend teachers who worked in the local school district, I reached out to all five teachers who were recommended to me. Four of those teachers agreed to participate in this study. The data collection methods that I used to coconstruct participants’ narratives included individual interviews, group interviews, and classroom artifacts. In the individual and group interviews, I asked teachers how their colleagues responded to the ways they worked to help Black students navigate systems of White supremacy and how they navigated a teaching
context that focused so heavily on high-stakes testing, amongst other things. I conducted four semistructured interviews with each participant individually. Each of these interviews was audio-recorded. I also conducted two group interviews with all four participants present. I video-taped these interviews. Finally, each participant provided artifacts of their work helping Black students navigate systems of White supremacy. These artifacts included lesson plans, class assignments, and handouts. I collected this data of the course of one academic year.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis for this study began as soon as I finished the first set of individual interviews, as I used the data from those interviews to generate the questions for subsequent interviews. Immediately following each interview, I sent each participant a copy of the transcript so they could provide member checks. Following member checking, I read and reread the interview transcripts, and I also looked closely at the artifacts that participants provided. It was only after doing this that I was able to fully engage in the process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as “a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). After familiarizing myself with the data, I used the aforementioned CRT tenets as a lens through which to generate codes. As I sought to study the ways in which Black teachers used emancipatory pedagogies to achieve their social justice goals, in the first set of individual interviews I asked each participant how their colleagues responded to this practice. This question was the impetus for much of the data presented in this article, as I asked follow-up questions specific to how each participant answered this question in subsequent interviews. As participants told me “there are things that other teachers just let go, but I can’t let go because you’re going to be a functioning member of society” and that their colleagues would label students as future dropouts, I was able to generate the code “combating other teachers’ low standards.” Other codes included “students asking for protection from White teachers,” and “tension with White colleagues.” Next, I organized these codes into themes. After reviewing the first set of themes, I discovered that some of the themes were not in alignment with the data, so I reorganized the codes into five themes. The theme discussed in this article deals with Black teachers working to interrupt the racism that their White colleagues exhibited.

SETTING

All of the data for this study was collected in a medium-sized southeastern town that is known for its hipster art and music scene (Reid, 2017) and home to a large research university. All of the participants lived and worked in this area. The geographic location of the deep South provides a context that is ripe with a historical legacy of overt racism, and the struggle for equity in this city continues. Interestingly, just before I began this research study, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People called on the local school district (where each of the participants taught) to hire more Black teachers (Shearer, 2014). Additionally, this
city has been listed as having one of the largest wealth disparities in the United States (Bloomberg.com, 2014), and all of the public schools in the local school district have been designated as Title I schools, meaning that they serve high numbers of students who live in poverty. At each of these schools, the majority of students were Black, but the majority of teachers were White. Each school also had a significant population of Hispanic students. In the next section, I will provide a brief overview of each participant.

**PARTICIPANTS**

There were four teachers who participated in this study. Each participant taught middle or high school in the same school district, and both high school teachers taught at the same school. All names have been replaced with pseudonyms. Table 1 lists the pseudonyms, age, teaching experience, grade level, and subjects taught by each participant at the time of this study.

**Emily**

Having grown up in a rural, southern town, Emily was no stranger to overt acts of racism. Although she explained that she did not always realize it was racism at the time, she remembered being the victim of racism as early as elementary school. She decided to become a math teacher, because although she had a few Black teachers in elementary school and a Black English teacher in high school, she never had a Black math teacher. She wanted her students to understand that math can be accessible to everyone and is not reserved for whomever society has deemed elite. Emily focused her efforts on building relationships with her students, because she felt that allowing her students know that she cared created a gateway for them to connect to the mathematics content she taught them. Ultimately, Emily saw her role as one of supporting and advocating on behalf of students, as she explained, “That’s my job and that’s what I’m going to do.”

**Destiny**

A self-described “outgoing, creative, engaging educator,” Destiny’s teaching philosophy revolved around building strong, positive relationships with her students, which was evident in the ways in which she employed emancipatory pedagogies in her classroom. She credited her elementary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Years of Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Subject Area</th>
</tr>
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<td>11</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>Social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharhonda</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Social studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Xavier</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Mathematics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
teachers for serving as a model for her teaching style, as she described her elementary teachers as holding her and her classmates to standards that far exceeded the expectations that society held for someone of her positionality. In her own middle school classroom, Destiny frequently engaged her students in hip-hop pedagogy, because she knew that most of her students were highly influenced by hip-hop music and culture. She also felt that hip-hop pedagogy was an optimal tool for helping her to engage her students in issues of social justice.

Sharhonda

Upon entering Sharhonda’s classroom, it was easy to understand that she had embraced her heritage and wanted her students to do the same. Newspapers from the Civil Rights Era that featured activists who had been arrested for acts of civil disobedience hung on her classroom walls, and her bookshelves were decorated with African symbols, including Nefertiti. Sharhonda saw her position as an American government teacher as an opportunity to arm her students with the knowledge and tools needed to protect themselves from the structural racism that surrounded them. Because she worked in the judicial system before becoming a teacher, Sharhonda believed it was her responsibility to help her students navigate life in a society where the laws were not created to protect them. Sharhonda grew up in the town where she taught and even graduated from the high school where she taught.

Xavier

Xavier was one of few Black male teachers in his school, and he was the only Black 7th-grade teacher. The walls of his classroom were covered with brightly colored motivational posters that served as reminders to students that they were capable of achieving great things in his mathematics course. In the front of the classroom, pictures of students that Xavier had taught in previous years hung above the interactive White board, and examples of student work were plastered to the walls. Like Sharhonda, Xavier grew up in the town where he taught and was once a student at the middle school where he taught. Because he was so invested in his students and the community in which his students lived, Xavier could be found supporting students in their recreational activities or delivering presentations on changing mathematics curriculum in the evenings or on weekends.

FINDINGS

Although this study initially sought to understand the ways in which Black teachers helped Black students navigate the systems of White supremacy, the Black teachers who participated in this study each reported having to interrupt the racism of their White colleagues. Participants went about interrupting their White colleagues’ racism by engaging emancipatory pedagogies with their students and serving as interceders on behalf of their students. Additionally, participants found themselves on the receiving end of their colleagues’ racism.
Emancipatory Practices

In my first interview with Emily, she openly acknowledged the tension between herself and many of her colleagues, declaring, “I get really offended. More students like me than teachers.” A self-described student-advocate who spent a minimum of 10 hr each day on her school’s campus, Emily also lamented that many of her White colleagues had expressed their belief that Black students performed and behaved well in her class simply because she is Black. Emily found this interpretation to be ironic, because teaching at this particular school was the first time she spent any time in a schooling environment that was predominantly Black. Emily’s K-12 schooling experiences, as well as her college experience, took place in predominantly White settings.

Much of Emily’s emancipatory teaching practice was actually a reaction to her colleagues and the low expectations they held of their Black and Brown students. Later in that interview, she explained,

I get very frustrated when I hear certain teachers say, “This kid can’t do that,” or “They’re gonna drop out before they’re 16.” And that is one of the things that pushes me more and motivates me more. And that’s why I can get kids who probably don’t even know two minus five when they first come to me to work. Because once I get that drive, that push, that y’all all think this kid can’t do it, but he’s working in my class. I make that kid show them that he can do anything he puts his mind to.

Here, Emily saw her colleagues’ low expectations of their students as a manifestation of their anti-Black racism. Because she recognized their low expectations as racism, she held her students to high standards to counter that racism and help her students achieve their goals.

Xavier’s engagement of emancipatory pedagogies to interrupt his colleagues’ racism required him to openly contradict the directions of another teacher. One of Xavier’s students, the only Black student in his advanced math class, wanted to study the Black Lives Matter movement for her social studies fair project. Her social studies teacher, however, suggested that she change her topic, because she thought some people would be offended by her studying and presenting a project on the Black Lives Matter movement. In our first individual interview, Xavier detailed,

Her social studies teacher told her that it wasn’t a good idea because she might offend some people. I told her that it was interesting. I said you have to do what you think is right. And I was really impressed that she went through and presented the information at the social studies fair. She did a really good job. She had a lot of facts. I got to look over it. I liked it, and I told her she inspired me!

Although this student’s social studies teacher may have one perspective of events, Xavier’s counterstory explains that he wanted this student to have the opportunity to think about police brutality in a critical way. In supervising her project, Xavier worked to help this student better understand the oppression under which Black people live in the United States and the ways Black people have resisted that oppression.
Teacher as Interceders

In addition to engaging emancipatory pedagogies in her classroom, these teachers also served as interceders on behalf of their students. Interceders are people who intervene in a situation on behalf of someone else. After learning that teachers in response-to-intervention (RTI) meetings spent copious amounts of time discussing what they believed to be their students’ shortcomings, Emily, who was already serving as tennis coach, Freshman Academy team leader, and afterschool tutor, joined the RTI team in an effort to change her colleagues’ expectations of their students and help them focus on what students are capable of achieving. Although she had not been assigned to the RTI team, she took on the additional labor because she did not want her colleagues to continue using that space to continually express their anti-Black racism by projecting deficits onto the students they taught. Instead, Emily wanted the space to be one where teachers came together to find ways to best serve their Black students.

Xavier also actively worked to interrupt the racism that his White colleagues directed toward the Black students they taught. Xavier and many of his Black colleagues frequently held workshops for parents in the communities where their students lived. He regularly invited his White colleagues to these workshops so they could build stronger relationships with the Black students they taught. His colleagues always declined the invitations, telling him that they would prefer not to enter “those neighborhoods.” These responses led Xavier to become critical of his colleagues, explaining, “You’re willing to be paid to teach that community, but you don’t wanna go out and show your face out there. There’s no connection.” This led Xavier to become highly critical of the approaches many of his colleagues took with Black students, as well as their motivation for teaching in the school where he worked, as he noted, “They don’t invest in our children the same way that we would invest in other people’s children.”

Xavier had learned a lot about how faulty desegregation policies negatively affected Black students from his parents and older siblings. Understanding that Black students fared better when schools were legally segregated, Xavier blamed forced desegregation for the lack of connection between Black students and many of their White teachers. He also questioned the authenticity and beliefs of some of his White colleagues, posing the question, “Are you like this with me now, but then you go home and you’re totally different?” He continued,

It’s not about just staying and grading this and grading that. I’m talking about do you really have my child’s best interest at heart? I mean, will you come out to the community if we have an event? And you have some that I feel like are scared to come out. Like, “I don’t wanna go there,” but yet you’re willing to be paid to teach that community. There’s no connection. Like I said, there’s a disconnect between the teachers and the community.

Although his colleagues may have viewed their refusal to visit their students’ neighborhoods or interact with their students outside of school as a race neutral policy, Xavier recognized that by not participating in these activities his colleagues were allowing the disparities that presented themselves at school to linger. Because he understood that the structures and policies in place disadvantaged Black students, Xavier knew that teachers of Black students needed to go above and beyond if their students were to succeed.
Experiencing Racism

Many of Destiny’s Black colleagues held thoughts and ideas that were similar to hers regarding teaching and interacting with Black students. In our first group interview, she explained that her White colleagues were critical of this approach. “They see it as if we are being too friendly towards the students, because we actually have conversations with the students when they’re not in trouble, or that we actually have conversations with the students that we don’t teach.” Additionally, her position as grade-level team leader required that other teachers come to her if there were discipline issues that they wanted to address. Her school’s chain of command required that teachers bring their discipline issues to the grade-level team leader before a teacher could send a student to the principal or assistant principal. Because many of her White colleagues did not agree with the emancipatory practices that Destiny used both in her classroom and when dealing with grade-level discipline, some teachers regularly broke the chain of command and took students straight to the office. In our first individual interview, Destiny lamented that these teachers

Will not even bring students to me that they’re having an issue with, but will try to come up with a plan of action on their own and will not even allow me an opportunity to have some kind of intervention with the student.

She went on to speak about a specific incident where, instead of coming to her, a White teacher decided to come up with her own discipline plan, which involved removing a Black student from a classroom for an entire day.

One case happened, there was someone who wanted to punish a student for the entire day. But in leadership meeting, one of the things we talked about was making sure that students are in class and not punishing students for long periods of time. And we said that even once a student gets three demerits, it will be one period punishment, the first time. The second time they get three demerits [in one week], it will be one half-day in-school suspension. And the third time they get three demerits in 1 week, it will be a full day of in-school suspension. The only person that can override that is actually an administrator. So a teacher was assigning an African American male a full day of in-school suspension.

This particular teacher’s classroom was next door to Destiny’s classroom. This means that she had to walk past Destiny’s classroom to take this student to in-school suspension, when she could have simply stopped next door and let Destiny fulfill her duties as team leader. Destiny alerted the teacher that she could not assign in-school suspension, and the teacher grew upset. To add even more tension to this situation, Destiny learned of this discipline issue from another teacher. Destiny understood that there was little she could do to change her colleague’s opinion of her as a Black woman and team leader. Instead of wasting her time and energy attempting to do so, Destiny put her energy into making sure that she was equitable in assigning consequences to students who had been referred to her for discipline. Incidents like this were not infrequent, as Destiny believed that the biggest issue in the tension between herself and her White colleagues is that they did not understand the connections that
Black teachers and Black students were frequently able to make at her school. She attempted to explain this to one of her White colleagues, as he could not understand why she was so deeply affected by the murder of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri.

I said it's always personal with African American families and African American citizens. I said you may not understand, but it's personal, and I'm still dealing with it. You know, when it involves the life of a young Black person, it's personal for African Americans. Even as someone that does not have any children, it's still very personal for me, very fresh in my mind and my heart.

Although Destiny left this conversation believing that her colleague still did not understand the relationship that she, as a Black teacher, had with Black children, she did make an attempt to connect with this teacher and explain it to him.

Sharhonda was one of two women in the social studies department at her school, and she was the only Black woman social studies teacher in a school with more than 80 teachers. The nature of her school’s social studies department allowed teachers to work somewhat autonomously, which allowed her not to have nearly as many unwarranted interactions with her peers as Destiny. For this reason, she got along well with many of her peers and found them to be relatively supportive. The colleagues who tended to challenge Sharhonda’s knowledge and professionalism, however, were the teachers she worked most closely with—young, White teachers who were within their first few years of entering the profession. When discussing how these colleagues reacted to her social justice-oriented practices, Sharhonda noted,

The way that I teach government—I mean, I’m hated on. I’m just gon’ say it. They hate on me! They wanna know why kids do for me when they won’t do for nobody else. Well they can’t do for you, ‘cause you don’t do it like I do it.

Sharhonda’s young, White colleagues did not understand why her students engaged in her class and achieved academic success, but they were not able to help students achieve similar success in their classrooms. Regardless of the fact that students scored higher on the district-mandated standardized test in her class than they did in any of the other government teachers’ classrooms in the entire school district, the White male teacher that she worked most closely with refused to acknowledge her as an expert of her craft and value her knowledge about teaching Black students, frequently implying or explicitly stating that students only performed well in her class because she is Black. She added,

It’s almost like he views me as not doing enough or being inadequate or whatever. But, again, this is the beginning of his second year of teaching; this is the beginning of my twelfth. And that alone is enough to roll my eyes.

Although her White male colleague doubted her knowledge and abilities because of her race, Sharhonda did not allow his condescension to color her perception of herself as a teacher. She understood that there was little she could personally do to combat the racism
he directed toward her, so she focused her energy on providing her students with a culturally relevant American Government course. In the next section, I further discuss these findings.

DISCUSSION

As one can see, schools were hostile racial climates (Kohli, 2018) for both the Black teachers in this study and the Black students they taught. Black teachers found themselves having to interrupt their White colleagues’ racism while working to help Black students navigate systems of White supremacy. Although these teachers’ White colleagues likely did not realize it, they sought to uphold dominant racial ideologies (Picower, 2009), leading Black teachers to engage emancipatory pedagogies and take on the role of interceder on behalf of their students while also finding themselves on the receiving end of their White colleagues’ racism. These teachers’ engagement of emancipatory pedagogies with their students is a clear example of their understanding of racial realism (Bell, 1992). Instead of trying to convince their colleagues of their students’ capabilities, these teachers taught their students in ways that were valuable to them. Emily worked to engage emancipatory pedagogies and convinced her students that they were capable of achieving their goals by holding them to high expectations. Whereas he could have attempted to convince his colleague that the Black Lives Matter movement was worth studying, Xavier took on the responsibility of supervising his student’s project and helped her apply a critical lens to the issues of police brutality and resistance. Recognizing the ways that normalized racism affected their students, these teachers also served as interceders on behalf of their students. Emily served as an interceder on behalf of her students, adding another duty to her already packed schedule to interrupt her colleagues’ low expectations of their students. Because she understood that many invisible layers of racism ultimately put her students at a disadvantage, she was not willing to let RTI meetings become yet another place where racism influenced student achievement. She also understood that large numbers of Black students not performing well academically was not due to their ability, but it was the result of a number of structures and systems in place that disproportionately disadvantaged Black students. Xavier also recognized the ways in which the structures and systems, many of which were put in place when schools desegregated, disproportionately disadvantaged Black students. It was because of this structural racism that Xavier visited the communities in which his students lived. He understood that structural racism placed his students on an uneven playing field, and he and a few of his colleagues were doing what was within their power to counteract that racism. In inviting his White colleagues to join them, Xavier invited them to help work toward addressing the structural barriers that inhibited their students. In constantly declining his invitations, Xavier’s White colleagues passed up opportunities to express any desire to work toward dismantling the many forms of racism that harm their students. Finally, these teachers’ counterstories tell a lot about the interactions they have with their colleagues while working to help their students navigate systems of White supremacy. For example, one might assume that Sharhonda’s junior
colleague would seek her advice, when in reality, he failed to value her knowledge of her students, content, curriculum, and pedagogy. Her response to his speech and action was rooted in racial realism, as she did not waste her time convincing him to respect her. Instead, she devoted that time and energy to her students. Also, in refusing to acknowledge her role as grade-level team leader and taking discipline into her own hands, Destiny’s White colleague effectively silenced her, just as the preservice teachers that Amos (2016) studied felt silenced by their classmates. Not allowing Destiny the opportunity to execute her duties regarding student discipline stripped her of the opportunity to provide a student with a fair or useful discipline practice, as this teacher sought to immediately place this student in in-school suspension.

In battle, a shield is on the receiving end of violence so that the person behind the shield can be protected and feel less of the violent impact. This was also the case with the Black teachers who participated in this study. Just as a shield bears the brunt of violence directed toward the person behind the shield, these teachers were subjected to and worked to interrupt their White colleagues’ racism because of the racial justice-oriented work they did on behalf of their students. Researchers have long understood that Black teachers commonly take on additional roles in an effort to help Black students navigate a schooling system that is steeped in White supremacy (Mitchell, 1998), but the teachers in this study became shields in the midst of battle to protect their students from the racism of the very people who are charged with educating them. This means that the teachers had to take on additional duties and responsibilities while also being subjected to their White colleagues’ racism. Being subjected to racism each day and having to take on duties beyond those required by the school have a taxing effect on Black teachers and could ultimately contribute to high attrition rates, as Black teachers become exhausted with the demands of teaching, navigating white supremacy, and helping their students do the same.

CONCLUSION

As with any research study, there are limitations to this study. As noted, the recruitment of participants for this study involved nominations from university professors and school administrators. Although I provided explicit qualifications for the teachers I sought to participate, it is likely that neither university professors nor school administrators would have nominated teachers they did not look favorably upon. It is possible that this recruitment method limited the pool of participants to those who engaged in the necessary teaching practices in ways that were pleasing to the nominators, meaning that they were likely not disruptive or understood how to navigate the politics of their schools.

The findings in this article have implications for school and school district administrators, teacher educators, and researchers:

- **School and school district administrators:** The findings presented here are an indication that school and school district administrators would be wise to take the time to
gain a deeper understanding of their teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and understandings. Teachers who are so bold as to proudly predict that students will drop out of school have no place teaching anyone’s children. Additionally, school districts must engage in robust efforts to recruit teachers of color. The work that these participants sought to do would be less draining if they had more Black teachers to do this work alongside them, as the experiences of Black teachers who work with other Black teachers can differ vastly from those who are the only Black members of their faculty (Bristol, 2018).

- **Teacher educators:** It is highly unlikely that participants’ colleagues developed these racist attitudes and beliefs years after entering the classroom. There is a strong possibility that these teachers harbored these attitudes while matriculating through their teacher education programs. Teacher educators would be well-served to restructure teacher education programs, moving away from a structure where one course serves as the expected point for discussions of race and diversity. Teacher education programs could instead center race and racism, helping preservice teachers understand that racial disparities do not exist in a vacuum and allowing them to see the ways in which they likely contribute to these disparities without even knowing. Normalizing the discussion of race throughout teacher education programs would not only provide preservice teachers with greater opportunities to learn about the pervasive ways racism exists in schools, it could also keep them from silencing their colleagues of color in discussions of race (Amos, 2016) in the teacher education classroom and later in the field.

- **Researchers:** Finally, researchers need to further study the experiences, perspectives, and understandings of students and teachers of color. Gaining a greater understanding of what students and teachers of color face each day could help us to restructure teacher education programs beyond what I have suggested herein.

So in addition to having higher expectations of Black students (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016), recommending more Black students for gifted and talented programs (Grissom & Redding, 2016), and keeping Black students out of the school-to-prison pipeline (Lindsay & Hart, 2017), Black teachers also serve as shields for their students, protecting them from the racism of other teachers while also becoming the target for that racism. It seems then, that Black teachers are instrumental the schooling experiences of Black students. School administrators, teacher educators, and educational researchers, then, must begin to treat them as such.

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