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Behind Closed Doors: The Mask of Antiracism in Presentation and Practice

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Education with an emphasis in Education Leadership and Policy Studies

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## BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

### **Abstract**

School districts have recognized the challenges that teachers face in building relationships with the students they teach. This can be especially true when the teacher is White and the students are people of color. This study is a follow-up to an intense, year-long professional development that a group of teachers experienced in 2012. Through interviews, six such participants were asked about their experiences in the classroom, the ways in which they felt they had grown because of the professional development, and ways that they had implemented what they learned in their classrooms. While the teachers had positive things to say about the training, and generally reported that they implemented specific strategies in order to better connect with their students, this study discusses whether the changes that the teachers reported in themselves were genuine, or if the conversation surrounding their experiences is a strategy to present a comfortable narrative for the public.

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### **Chapter 1**

#### **Background**

Before I became a teacher, I had a clear vision of what my classroom would be like. I knew that we would read plenty of books and have rich, meaningful discussions about them. I would tell jokes and students would laugh; occasionally I would have to make a phone call home because a student was struggling to read or write well. I felt this way because this is what most of my memorable classes were like growing up: relaxed, interesting, and intellectual. Like most teachers, I projected my past experience with education into my vision of what a classroom should be.

Well, this vision was obliterated on my first day of teaching when I stood, as a temporarily-certified teacher without a single education class, as a White male in front of 37 African-American 7<sup>th</sup> graders who basically ignored everything I said. Up to this point, my reality had been one of almost total segregation. I went to an all-White grade school, a high school that was also, for all intents and purposes, all-White, and attended college and associated exclusively with Whites. My understanding of the African-American community was limited to what I had seen or read in the media and pop culture. Needless to say, this greatly impacted my ability to connect with my students. At that point, I had to throw everything out and improvise ways to establish effective instructional and management structures in the class, and figure out how to reach the students on their level, because laid back discussions of our nightly reading was just not in the cards.

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The most consistent piece of advice I received from the more experienced teachers at the school was to be as stern and serious as possible to let the students know that I meant business. I was told that if I was too nice or showed that they got to me, they would take over the classroom. I took this advice to heart and made sure that I was tough and not a pushover, and tried to use sarcasm and humor the best way I knew how, but obviously there were classroom conflicts. My first few years I did not really think about how or why these conflicts came about, my mindset was very top-down and any negative interactions in the class were, in my mind, the result of a disobedient student and were best handled through the school discipline policy. It wasn't until later when I began to seriously consider the classroom dynamics and whether all of my classroom interactions with students were for the betterment of the children.

I have spent 12 years teaching in large urban or suburban school districts. For all of those years, I taught in schools that were made up almost exclusively of poor children of color. This is a fact that I am very much used to now. However, until I began teaching full time in my second year out of college, I had not had any kind of close relationship with an African American person. I grew up in a mostly White community, and went to a private Catholic grade school, and then to a Catholic all-boys high school, and then to a college that did not have a very diverse population. My first couple of years in the classroom were a huge adjustment, not just in learning the basics of classroom instruction and management, but in learning how to relate to students who came from a completely different background from myself. As I worked with these students, I could sense a kind of distance that I couldn't quite crack. They just seemed uncomfortable with me, would make awkward apologies, and correct each other if they were to happen to mention race

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or White people. In addition, when I would have disagreements with students, or I would be redirecting or disciplining them, sometimes they would protest that I was being racist or I did not like them. This always confused me, because I did not feel like I treated any of them differently, and I certainly wasn't doing anything that I knew at the time to be racist, like making racist remarks. Yet, I couldn't help but wonder if I was doing something that I did not think to be racist or offensive, but they saw differently.

Throughout my career and in continuing my education I have had and taken numerous opportunities to scrutinize my own instructional practices and my place within our school and look at how my actions might exacerbate, instead of alleviate, the effects of institutional racism. Our school, as a turnaround school under the School Improvement Grant program, in addition to a great deal of academic interventions, has also been subject to interventions designed to improve the school's climate, and a focus area of this work was in the relationships between the predominantly African-American student population and the majority-White teaching staff. This training specifically brought teachers together to discuss issues of personal racism and systemic racism, mostly in the context of society, and not necessarily in the school setting. This work was designed to get teachers to think about these types of issues and use that as a springboard to impact their professional practice. Having undergone this lengthy personal and professional transformation over the course of my career as a teacher, I began to wonder about this journey in other people, specifically my colleagues who were taking part in the same training as I was. I was curious as to what they really thought of the work we were doing in our meetings. Essentially, what I wanted to know was: *How reflective are teachers of*



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*children of color regarding issues of institutional racism and social justice and how does awareness of these issues impact their practice?*

### **What is Known**

Institutional racism manifests itself in a number of different ways in the school setting. This study is informed by a wide range of literature and research. Several studies (Fowler, Lightsey, Monger, Aseltine, 2010; Vang, 2006; Townsend, 2000) outlined the disparities in school discipline and showed that Black students are far more likely to be referred for behavior incidents, and those referrals are more likely to result in harsher penalties than White students. Although many studies focus on this disparity as it relates to black males and their eventual entry into the prison system, the School to Prison Pipeline, another study (Blake, Butler, Lewis, Darenbourg, 2010) highlighted this issue as it relates to Black and Hispanic girls as well. Unfortunately, the disparity in educational outcomes is not limited to issues of discipline. What is called disproportionality, or the overrepresentation of minority students receiving special education services, can stem from a lack of cultural understanding. According to Klingner, et. al. (2005), disproportionality is thought to be one of the primary factors in what is known as the School to Prison Pipeline, which is the systemic structure by which children of color, primarily African-American males, find themselves moving from being under control of the school system to being under control of the correctional system with virtually no break. A growing body of research has begun to recognize classrooms as White space (Moore, 2008; Boyd-Fenger, 2012), which means that the educational

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system's values are dominated and governed by White, middle-class belief systems and moralities. Their values then are centered as those that shaped and continue to shape the public school's rites, procedures, processes and expectations (Hyland, 2006; Gillborn, 2008), and, like all processes, are designed to create outcomes that conform to the system's values. When students are perceived as non-conforming, the system takes action to correct so-called deviant behaviors. As instruments of this vast system, teachers are the ones who most often take steps to correct behavior, using what may seem to be a variety of methods, but in reality are disciplining mechanisms closely linked in important ways.

Critical Race theorists have long discussed the existence of microaggressions and their role in the suppression of people of color (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Microaggressions are "(c)onfrontations with racism that are daily and pervasive, and that consequently assault African-Americans' core identity, self-esteem, and sense of self-worth." (Gordon, 2003, p. 416) Also described as "(b)rief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color." (Sue, et al, 2007, p. 271) Real life examples of these types of behaviors could include, a White person refusing to make way on the street for a person of color, a White person calling a person of color articulate, or a White person ignoring an African-American person, claiming not to have seen him or her. (Sue, et al, 2007) The cumulative effect of these daily reminders of inferiority can have a profound effect on the lived experiences of people of color. When taken as a whole, these daily reminders of inferiority solidify the message to a minority group's members that they are in fact the

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minority and their experiences and values are either inconsequential, subordinate to those of the majority or both.

Many school districts have recognized the need to train their teachers to be successful when interacting with students who may come from different backgrounds. One way that schools have recognized and attempted to address these issues is by offering diversity training that attempts to help teachers understand the students they are working with in class and why they display some of the patterns of behavior that they do. One such approach has been to use a self-published book, *A Framework for Understanding Poverty*, by Ruby Payne. In what amounts to a series of unsupported and questionable stereotypes, Payne lays out the different worldviews of people who are wealthy, middle class, and poor. However, even this material can end up harming students rather than helping, due to the class-based assumptions that permeate the work (Gorski, 2008). Ultimately, the body of work that I have read paints a picture of an educational system with deep disparities in opportunity and outcome for White students and students of color. In addition, many of the attempts to bridge this disparity seem to be ineffective.

Another major influence on this study is the work of Michel Foucault. In *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault (1980) theorizes subjugated and privileged knowledge within the social power dynamic. In his estimation, subjugated knowledge consists of the perspective and experience of those on the periphery of society, while privileged knowledge belongs to their counterparts, e.g. those in power whose position is sanctioned by society or the system. In other words, in the conflict between common, popular understanding and the state of affairs deemed official or scientific, common knowledge is

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seen as less valuable, less important and less worthy. Foucault considers official knowledge—knowledge sanctioned in some way by governmental or scientific authority—privileged knowledge. Oftentimes, the dynamic in the classroom between teachers and students boils down to this privileged/subjugated dichotomy.

Obviously this is a complicated issue, with many factors playing a role in classroom dynamics. What I am most interested in discovering is what other urban teachers think about these issues and how their reflection impacts their classroom practice. While I have read a lot of data on disproportionality and the outcomes of troubling systemic practices, I have not seen, other than personal accounts, a study that seeks to deeply interrogate teachers about their classroom beliefs and practices, and engages in a conversation about how to improve both.

This study will help document the understanding teachers have about their own biases and hopefully help guide them become more reflective practitioners. In enlisting teachers in this narrative on reflective practice, I am hopefully initiating a larger conversation about how White teachers unwittingly negatively impact their students of color. This is significant because one of the most persistent problems in education today is the vaunted achievement gap, the disparity between the academic performance of White students and that of their African-American counterparts. Even the framing of this issue is troubling, because it does not acknowledge the hurdles placed in front of students of color and how they help to create this supposed gap. In addition, while many districts offer training such as the professional development we underwent, as an educator, we struggle as a profession with follow-up. I am intensely interested in the long-term impacts

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of any kind of professional development that seeks to mitigate the effects of systemic racism.

### **Research Questions**

Through the course of this qualitative study, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with a number of White middle school teachers of predominantly Black students. The interview subjects will be of varying ages, educational backgrounds, and experience levels. The purpose of the interviews will be to engage them in a reflection and discussion of their own practices in the classroom, as well as to gauge their level of familiarity with the issues that I have previously discussed, and were central to the professional development that they participated in. Through these conversations, I hope to gain some insight into the following questions, the first three of which I view as questions regarding mindset, i.e. what experiences shaped your perspective before the training and practice, i.e. how did the training change you moving forward?

- 1) *How would you characterize your experience and familiarity with issues of social justice before you became a teacher?*
- 2) *Do you have any regrets in regards to the way you have treated a student in the past? Can you talk about that experience?*
- 3) *What experiences, either through working in the classroom or professional development, or other means, have impacted your perspective in the area of social justice?*
- 4) *What concepts remain with you from the race and equity professional development you experienced in the 2012-2013 school year?*
- 5) *Do you think you made any changes, in mindset or professional practice, as a result of that professional development?*
- 6) *Would you be willing to engage in a similar professional development in the future?*

### **Limitations and Delimitations**

Some potential limitations inherent in a study of this nature include the possibility that teachers will simply be unwilling to offer an honest assessment of their classroom practice as it relates to these issues, because they are afraid or are uncomfortable in doing so. I hope to alleviate this potential problem by assuring teachers of the confidentiality of this work and through my professional relationship with them. Another limitation is the heavy weight placed upon the personal experience of teachers, whom it has already been acknowledged approach their students and the educational enterprise in general with a certain degree of built-in bias. I will use a critical discourse analysis of interview data to systematically document how the questions are answered and what, if any, patterns exist in the answers of various teachers.

Some additional constraints I intend to place on this work include limiting the pool of interview subjects to those teachers with whom I have some kind of professional relationship, in order to enhance the quality and depth of response. In addition, all of the teachers involved will have undergone some form of professional development centered on the work of breaking down racism, and improving cultural competence.

**Table 1: Terms**

<b>Autoethnography</b>	A self-reflective account of one's experiences related to some sociological issue. A form of qualitative study. (Glowacki-Dudka, et. al., 2005)
<b>Critical Discourse Analysis</b>	A method of analyzing text that seeks to unlock subtextual information (Rogers, 2003)
<b>Critical Race Theory</b>	A method of analyzing social systems through the lens of race (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005; Ortiz and Jani, 2010)
<b>Institutional Racism</b>	Hierarchical sorting of different groups of people that is supported by public policy (Smedley and Smedley, 2005)
<b>Microaggressions</b>	Small, frequent, sometimes unconsciously negative interactions that occur between White people and people of color (Gordon, 2003)
<b>Race</b>	Perceptions of differences between groups of people based on certain physical characteristics (Smedley and Smedley, 2005)
<b>Racism</b>	Belief that perceived physical differences between groups require different groups to be ranked hierarchically (Smedley and Smedley, 2005)
<b>Racist</b>	A person who believes in and actively supports the hierarchical sorting of different groups of people (Smedley and Smedley, 2005)
<b>School to Prison Pipeline</b>	The phenomenon of student involvement in the school discipline system transitioning to formal interaction with the prison system (Kim, 2010)
<b>White Supremacy</b>	Political, economic, and social systems where Whites control resources and that control is reinforced in a number of different ways (Ansley, 1997)

## **Chapter 2**

### **Foucault**

The work of Michel Foucault has done a great deal to shape my thinking about the systems of control that societies exert on people. I feel that Foucaultian theory can help explain the existence of, and mechanisms that reinforce, systemic racism in our society, because it operates largely as a method of control.

In the classroom, one of the most important aspects of management is the sense that the teacher has control of the class. If the children do not feel like the teacher knows what he or she is doing, if they do not feel that there is someone in charge, many of them will begin to engage in other activities, or simply check out entirely. Conversely, one of the primary fears of teachers, especially beginning teachers, is the loss of the control he or she has over the class. Foucault writes a great deal about control, especially control of knowledge. Particularly, he notes the difference between privileged knowledge and subjugated knowledge. Privileged knowledge is that which is venerated by authority or society and seen to be superior to subjugated, or common knowledge (Foucault, 1980). One way to look at this might be to think about the way a doctor might treat an ailment and the way a grandmother might use a home remedy. When presented with a patient, the doctor will go through a series of tests and protocols to diagnose the problem and prescribe treatment. These protocols will have been established over the course of many years, by legions of similarly trained physicians who undertake very similar training. This knowledge is privileged because it comes with a societal stamp of approval. On the other



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hand, a grandmother who is taking care of a sick grandchild might assess and choose to treat an ailment differently, using what he or she had been taught by her mother, or grandmother, or what she had learned by her own experience as a parent. This treatment may well work to treat that malady just fine. However, if the two were to come into conflict, if there were to be a disagreement over which course to take, frequently the course of action favored by society or the system would be that of the doctor—the privileged knowledge. The common approach would be subjugated and hence seen as less worthy or valuable.

A key aspect of this privilege and subjugation is that it is not directed in any way from above. The movie cliché version of this is a vision of an austere, dark boardroom where powerful evil men sit around and decide who to control and how to control them. Unfortunately for the cliché, there is no centralized authority. Real power and control develops organically, through daily interactions and decisions made on what might be described as the molecular level of society. That is, individuals, working not in concert but independently, will inevitably make decisions that end up serving the interests of the powerful. Foucault therefore is interested in analyzing how that power arises and is enacted:

(B)asically I do not believe that what has taken place can be said to be ideological. It is both much more and much less than ideology. It is the production of effective instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge—methods of observation, techniques of registration, procedures for investigation and research, apparatuses of control. (p. 102)

I wanted to closely explore this power dynamic, because it is so readily observable in many of America's classrooms today. When Foucault writes about methods

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of observation, measurement, procedures for investigation and research, it is hard not to think about the way that the American school system today. Teachers today are expected to perform an all-encompassing form of surveillance. Almost everything that happens in the classroom must be documented, catalogued, collected, ranked, rated, and scored.

Students, teachers, behavior, trips to the bathroom are all tracked. Foucault traces this obsession with cataloguing back to the development of the prison system, which created a culture that seeks to discipline individuals through observation and correction, a carceral approach to human management that has spread to many other societal institutions (Foucault, 1995).

Our school systems today are no exception to these developments. Foucault's typically idiosyncratic word choice (assessment, differentiation, hierarchies, etc.) even seems to fit right in line with modern educational jargon. Indeed, much like Foucault's prison officials, school officials today are constantly striving to standardize instructional practices, and, in effect, the educational experiences of all students. The understanding is that all students will improve their performance on a year-to-year basis. There are growing calls for this expected growth be the benchmark by which teachers are ranked, paid, retained, and even removed from the classroom. According to Michael Apple, the officials that establish and perpetuate these bureaucracies is referred to as the managerial state (Apple, 2006). Largely made up of a group of middle class officials, the managerial state is primarily responsible for developing and implementing educational policy, especially at the state and local level. According to Apple (2006), "The organization of the state centered on the application of specific rules or coordination. Routinization and predictability are among the hallmarks of such a state" (p. 191). If this is true, the

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direction our educational system has taken should be unsurprising, as it is reflective of the values of those who organize and run it. Additionally, it should be no surprise that those values filter down to the classroom, which if dependent on the increasing standardization of curriculum and educational outcomes, would value predictability.

Another area of Foucault's work that is rather applicable to a study of the classroom dynamic is the ritualistic employment of public power. In *Discipline and Punish* (1995), he describes how those who had committed capital offenses were treated in a very specific way designed to identify them as outsiders and enemies to the state. Although a student in a classroom is quite different from a criminal accused of serious crimes, the methods of control and the ritualistic employment of power enacted in the classroom can be unnervingly similar. Basically, the offender in each case has chosen to deviate from the expected pattern of behavior. In order to rectify this disorder in the system, there are rituals that must take place. Classroom rituals of punishment and displays of power serve this function. In addition, there are many different rituals that are designed to ensure uniformity among the students before any deviation can occur. These rituals and sub-rituals are embedded throughout the lifelong educational experience of all students, and direct students in virtually everything they do, from properly registering for classes and navigating educational bureaucracies, to the types of supplies students are expected to bring to school, and the proper ways to address a teacher and interact in the classroom among many others.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) forms the foundation for the analysis of social systems through the lens of race, and how racial disparities are created and reinforced by White supremacy. It is based on several key premises; that race is a key factor in structural inequality in the US, that our society is founded on property rights, and that the intersection of race and property rights creates a useful tool to analyze various forms of inequality, including school inequality (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

This foundation has led to a variety of different areas of research using CRT as a lens to analyze educational outcomes and educational policy. Major themes related to a CRT analysis include the study of microaggressions in school, disparate educational outcomes and disparities in educational services and discipline, which has given way to research into the ways that students of color are funneled into the correctional system (school-to-prison pipeline), and discussions of White privilege.

CRT scholars have looked at the existence of microaggressions and their role the suppression of people of color (Dixson and Rousseau, 2005) as evidence of racism's daily effects on minority groups, particularly African-Americans. Speaking specifically of the educational system, racial disparities in educational opportunities and outcomes also have been a significant focus of CRT research. Microaggressions impact students of color in a number of ways. One very common statement made about African-American students and their parents is that they do not value education, and therefore these children tend to fall behind. This mistaken belief plays out in the ways that school teachers and

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administrators interact with Black students and their families. (Delpit, 2006; Reynolds, 2010)

There are real consequences to these beliefs. Statistics show significant differences in the numbers of White students and African American students referred for special education services. (Klingner, et. al. 2005) One could view this phenomenon as a type of microaggression in and of itself. According to one study:

The artificial boundaries that separate ‘normal’ students from their disabled peers are in effect gerrymandered boundaries that effectively favor White students and serve as yet another means through which schools promote the interests of the most privileged students while undermining the interests of culturally and linguistically diverse students. (Ahram, Fergus, and Noguera, 2011, p. 2236)

The data in this study show that African American students are more than twice as likely as Whites to be identified as intellectually disabled, and nearly three times as likely as Whites to be identified as emotionally disturbed. This study shows that these statistics are no accident, rather they are a product of a special education system that privileges the personal experiences of teachers and psychological examiners. According to the study, “ethnographic research carried out in schools has shown that the placement of students in special education is based on the assumptions and beliefs of several individuals who, in their formal and informal evaluation of students, construct notions of student ability. The ways in which these individuals conceptualize disability maintains an inherently divisive conception of normality—equating it with ability.” (p. 2238) In effect, when White middle class teachers analyze students and determine educational placements, the effect is that the experiences, behavioral and speech patterns of African American students are classified as deficient in relation to those of their White counterparts, and the result is

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often placement in special education. This is another example of the dynamic of Foucault's privileged-versus-subjugated knowledge playing out in the educational system.

The school-to-prison pipeline is another key to understanding the ways that systemic racism impacts the educational opportunities of African American students. This term refers to the method by which disproportionate numbers of African American students find themselves wrapped up not in an educational system, but what is, in effect, a carceral system. (Kim, 2010) This theory posits that the way that schools handle discipline of students of color virtually guarantees that disproportionate numbers of these students will enter a spiral of ever-increasing punishment throughout the course of their life in school which will eventually transfer them directly into the juvenile and/or adult justice system. The pipeline metaphor is used because of the near-certainty that certain types of students will find themselves moving from the school to prison system. It should be noted that these discrepancies are not necessarily limited to lower-income black students, but apply to students from middle-class backgrounds as well. (Allen, 2010)

The funneling of Black children into the prison system has also had the effect of drastically increasing the amount of the population of people in color overall in the system. Alexander (2010) *The New Jim Crow* details the dramatic increase in the number of minorities arrested and jailed in this country, and the devastating effect on the life chances of people who find themselves under the control of the justice system. Some of the ways that this impacts people of color include disproportionate numbers of individuals arrested and charged with crimes, racial discrepancies in sentencing, and the difficulty of being a productive member of society once one is released, due to

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discriminatory practices in employment, housing, and public assistance (Alexander, 2010).

In addition to the increased probability of people of color having to enter the criminal justice system at some point in their lives, what is notable about Alexander's work is her highlighting of the ways in which the criminal justice system is built to extract greater penalties from African Americans than Whites for crimes of similar magnitude. One such example would be the disparities in sentencing guidelines for powdered cocaine versus crack cocaine. Crack cocaine, a cheap form of the drug commonly found in the inner city and used more frequently by Blacks, carries punishments up to 100 times greater than powdered cocaine, a more expensive form of the drug favored by White users (Alexander, 2010).

Indeed, one doesn't need to look very hard to see similarities in the arrest and incarceration patterns of Black citizens and the discipline and suspension patterns of Black children. Researchers continue to produce study after study which shows the disproportionate rates of suspension between White and Black students (Smith & Harper, 2015; Townsend, 2000). Additionally, the increasing presence of School Resource Officers in schools, ostensibly to protect students from violent crime, actually has been linked to increases in arrests for disorderly conduct (Theriot, 2009).

While these facts are well-documented, what's been explored less is how these discrepancies in outcomes manifest themselves. Leonardo (2004) writes about dozens of examples of historical examples of economic, social, political, and legislative policies that have worked to ensure the permanence of White supremacy, including but certainly

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not limited to, restrictions on the definition of Whiteness to ensure its purity, domination of Native American peoples, Jim Crow laws, White constructions of intelligence and control of the testing of intelligence, and lower community health standards for people of color (Leonardo, 2004).

However, McWhorter (2005) writes that what needs to be studied are the ways in which Whiteness is performed and White Hegemony maintained at the micro level. That is to say, if Whiteness is the standard at which things are measured, then how does the measurement and correction work in the everyday world? This is, to circle back to Foucault, looking at how societal systems serve the needs of the majority. Murray (2013) posits some scenarios that detail how microaggressive interactions in the classroom might serve to correct and normalize students of color into a White disciplinary structure. However, what is lacking is information directly from teachers who can analyze and critique their own place within the educational power structure.

One of the problems with an approach that seeks the input of teachers on their own practices is the reluctance to speak candidly about their classroom practices, for fear of reprisal or ostracization. Leonardo (2010, 2013) has written extensively about the ways that Whites avoid having difficult racial conversations out of fear, and how antiracist positions and actions that Whites undertake can often be seen as a proactive attempt to cancel out any future accusations or suspicions of racism.

Indeed, this defensive stance on the part of Whites can be attributed to the way that society at large deals with racist speech. Every so often, a story will be reported in the news of some public figure making racially insensitive comments. Several years ago,



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radio personality Don Imus was discussing the appearance of some of the members of the Rutgers University women's basketball team. He commented negatively on their appearance, calling them "rough" and, famously, "nappy-headed hoes" (Chiachiere, 2007). The backlash was swift, and he was soon fired from his television and radio jobs. Another recent example would be television chef Paula Deen. Through revelations related to court filings in a lawsuit she was a party to, it was reported that she had engaged in a pattern of racist behavior, including casual use of the n-word, and expressing a desire to plan a plantation-style wedding for her brother that specifically included Black servers dressed in white coats. This information created a public outcry, and as a result, her cooking show was cancelled and other business relationships she had were severed. (Fallon, 2013). These are but two examples in a long line of incidents in popular culture, each of which tends to play out in a familiar pattern: the speech is exposed and broadcast to the country, people verbally condemn the individual, who apologizes or says he or she did not mean to offend anyone. Then the person usually slinks away from public view for a while, and everyone can congratulate themselves on standing up to that type of behavior. In reality, what it does is allow the White public to quarantine its racism into a very narrow cage, and not have to confront all of the ways it benefits from its privileged status and all the ways people of color are truly suppressed.

A side effect of this dynamic is that Whites are terrified to discuss racial issues, out of fear that what they say will be interpreted as racist (Leonardo, 2010). If they do say something that is racially insensitive, or perceived that way, Whites have seen what can happen to that person, so they would rather avoid saying anything at all.

### **Professional Development**

The impetus for this study was a desire to learn about the potential lasting impacts of an intense professional development that I took part in related to improving the cultural competence of teachers. The training itself was primarily aimed at helping teachers to understand the challenges faced by students of color.

While there is some writing about the importance of teaching teachers to be culturally competent and how that might come about (Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Banks, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 1995), there is relatively little research available that studies the effects of such professional development.

Much of the existing research consists of empirical studies of preservice teachers (Kea & Trent, 2013; Dee, 2012; Wong, 2008). Kea & Trent (2013) studied the frequency and depth of culturally responsive lessons planned and delivered by student teachers in a special education preparation course. All of the preservice teachers designed and implemented lessons as measured by a specific culturally responsive framework. The study found that even with fairly intensive training and direction, most preservice teachers included culturally competent strategies at a low level.

Dee (2012) analyzed the language of preservice teachers' assignments for the presence of a culturally competent sensibility. Similar to a discourse analysis, this study chose to look at the words preservice teachers used to describe the community they were serving and the activities they would be planning for students. This study found serious gaps in the ability and even desire of the subjects to address student diversity in a

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meaningful way, and called for more comprehensive measures of the cultural competency of preservice teachers.

In fact, I found only one published study of inservice teachers and their work with culturally competent strategies (West-Olatunji, et. al. 2008). This was an attempt to study the cultural competence of a small group of early childhood teachers through a study of lesson plans and delivery methods, and found that it was difficult to guide teachers toward teaching in culturally competent ways.

Gallavan and Webster-Smith (2012) wrote that one of the most important aspects of effectively teaching teachers to be culturally competent is a school-wide journey that begins with altering the mindset of teachers to more deeply understand the role of racism and White supremacy in society. Their study was an autoethnography of one teacher's journey along this path, but posited a sequence that all educators might follow. Autoethnography is an in-depth self-reflection that is undertaken with a view to illuminating or representing one's personal experiences through the lens of sociology. The intention is that by reading an autoethnographic account, the reader will then self-reflect on his or her own experiences (Glowacki-Dudka, et. al., 2005).

In the most closely related work, Ferguson (2009) studied the effects of an intense program of professional development that sought to help educators understand the effects of White privilege and teach them methods of improving their instruction through culturally and linguistically competent methods. This study involved surveys, focus group, and individual interviews, and found that a large majority of participants found the

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training to be beneficial, and could discuss ways in which it had changed the way they thought about these issues.

The training that is the focus of this study was conducted in 2012-2013 and was modeled on this approach. The first step of which was the yearlong professional development piece aimed at fostering a culturally competent mindset in the core group of teachers involved.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **Introduction**

Over the course of my career as a teacher, I have experienced a number of professional development opportunities that relate in some way to racism. The most immersive experience was during the 2012-2013 school year. My school, a suburban Midwest middle school with a nearly exclusively African-American population, participated in an antiracist professional development program. Specifically, a large number of White and African-American teachers participated. The participants were of varying ages and experience levels. Between 20 and 30 teachers took part in this training which included 2-hour meetings every month throughout the year, as well as a number of release days to participate in further professional development activities, all on-site.

The activities were numerous and varied, but all centered around the notions of institutional racism and how it impacts students of color. Teachers were encouraged to share their personal attitudes and insights about racism, as well as experiences they had both in and out of the classroom. Often, teachers shared deeply personal thoughts and feelings with each other, and spoke candidly—or so it seemed—about themselves, and the attitudes of their families. In addition, teachers were asked to think about the impact of racism in their classroom and act in ways that countered institutional racism for their students. We were encouraged to use the professional development to create a school-wide atmosphere where these conversations could occur outside of the setting of the professional development and impact the practice of teachers who were not participating in the training. However, once the professional development ended at the end of the

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school year, there was no follow-up with participants, and there has not been any to date. What I am interested in is how this professional development experience and others like it truly impact the practice and attitudes of the people who participate in it. What really happens behind closed doors when a teacher who has undergone this kind of experience gets back in front of his or her students, many of whom are of another ethnic background?

The school I intend to study is one which has undergone great changes in the last few years. Populated almost exclusively by African American students, it had struggled academically and with behavior issues. Beginning in 2006 it began to steadily improve, but not rapidly enough, and was placed on a list of the lowest performing schools in the state in 2010. Under the new Federal education guidelines, it was marked for intervention, and the district chose a turnaround model for the school, which meant that the principal was replaced, along with more than half of the staff members. In addition to these changes, staff members worked on plans to expand after school opportunities, revamp the school curriculum, extend the school day, as well as incorporate new reading and math specialists. Throughout this process, the school continued to make steady growth academically.

As a result of the staff turnover, and then years of successive turnover, the staff was considerably younger and held less experience than most schools. This is one of the reasons that professional development opportunities in a wide range of areas have been made available to this staff. One of the district's priorities in the past few years has been to offer cultural competency training and development opportunities to staff.

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For context, in the 2012-2013 school year, the school found itself with a student population that was 99 percent African American, a staff that was 75 percent White, and was still struggling with a large number of referrals for behavior incidents in and out of the classroom, and a district that was open to training staff in the areas of cultural competency.

### **Methodology**

Phenomenology is the study of the lived experience of an individual or group of individuals (Creswell, 2007). Its primary applications are in the fields of counseling, anthropology, and sociology, but it has been used in the realm of education as well. For example, phenomenology was used as a means to study the feelings of loss that teachers had after learning of the death of a student (Hart & Garza, 2012). In that circumstance, the authors were attempting to probe deeply into the emotional lives of teachers as it related to very personal and tragic circumstances.

What is the best way to gather information from people who may not be truly open or emotionally prepared to fully share? Phenomenology is appropriate to use in this case because what I'm primarily interested in through this research is how the staff members who take part in anti-racism professional developments such as this change as a result of this experience both in identity and behavior.

This was a comprehensive professional development that sought to introduce the staff to a number of different concepts, including the idea of institutionalized racism, and its causes and structures, how to understand the experiences of students of color, and how

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teacher attitudes may exacerbate the effects of institutionalized racism. The course also asked teachers to explore their own experiences with racism. The group was roughly two thirds White, and one third African American, which yielded what seemed like powerful group discussions and small group exchanges. I use the word seemed because it is notoriously difficult to ascertain the true feelings of people (Whites in particular) when it comes to dealing with issues of racism. Whites tend to feign anti-racism in an attempt to look anti-racist, rather than actually pursue antiracist change (Leonardo, 2013). Because of this, I believe that a study of this type is the only way to get access to the personal thoughts of these teachers. The change that I am seeking to study might be expressed as a change in their classroom demeanor or approaches to students of color in regards to discipline or relationship-building. It also might have resulted in a change in their personal relationships with both people of color and Whites, and how they perceive the actions of others.

Finally, the work of CRT scholars has established the power and validity of the lived experience of people as data. Commonly referred to as storytelling or counter-storytelling, it supports the idea that in the structure of a society dominated by White supremacy, it is necessary to collect narratives from marginalized groups to understand their experiences (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solorzano & Yasso, 2002). In this study, the subjects are not people of color, but since the work falls within the purview of Critical Race Theory, and the teachers who participated in the study were so moved by the stories told by their Black colleagues, it is important to note the usefulness of stories to illuminate truths.



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### **Sample**

The people I've chosen to sample will be a small group of White teachers who have participated in this antiracist professional development. The study will involve semi-structured interviews that will roughly focus on various aspects of professional development, and other areas of the individual's experience, especially their experiences in the classroom, past educational history, their changing (or not) attitudes towards the areas covered in the training. I will choose people with whom I have a professional relationship. I hope that this will alleviate any fear that the subjects may have in sharing personal thoughts and feelings, as well as allowing them to open up to me more thoroughly, revealing their true thoughts and feelings.

Another important factor that should allow me to obtain more useful information is the fact that I also participated in this professional development opportunity, meaning that I will be able to speak knowledgeably about their experiences, will be able to ask them specific questions about different experiences from the training, and will be able to anticipate where people may be reluctant to talk. Knowing these things, I feel I have an advantage in that I know the right questions to ask. I also feel that this will help the participants in the study trust me, because they will likely have had a similar experience.

As established previously, Whites are particularly protective of their thoughts and feelings surrounding racism and White supremacy. I am anticipating that through the course of the interviews, the interview subjects may avoid discussing certain topics, use euphemisms to soften their words or ideas, and use other tactics to sound like they think they are supposed to sound when discussing these topics.

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Consequently, in addition to being interested in the thoughts and actions of teachers as they work behind closed doors, I am interested in attempting to detect similarities or patterns in the ways that teachers talk about these issues. I suspect that White teachers, having been conditioned to *sound* nonracist or politically correct, will approach this task in the same ways. Something else I intend to study is the *way* that teachers talk, not just what they say. I intend to do this through Critical Discourse Analysis.

### **Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a method of analyzing language, written or spoken, that seeks to unlock subtextual meanings in the written or spoken word (Rogers, 2003). CDA has been broadly applied to analyze any number of phenomena in the realm of education, including classroom interactions (Fairclough, 2013), but more specifically it has been used to study rationales, motives, and outcomes of numerous examples of social and educational policy (Supitsyna, 2012; Stevens, 2003). CDA will allow me a way to study the results of the interviews, specifically the language and language patterns of the participants, systematically. I expect to see some patterns in the way that both White teachers discuss their experiences with the professional development as well as with students. These patterns should present themselves when the interviews are subjected to this type of analysis. I also expect the types of words used to describe certain experiences to be similar.

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Often, White teachers are unaware of the mundane ways in which they oppress students of color in the classroom (Murray, 2013). This can take the form of direct interactions and how they choose to approach discipline situations. For example, a teacher can choose to take the most aggressive, confrontational approach to a situation, one which will likely end in some sort of official discipline for a student, rather than trying to diffuse a situation through other means. This tends to mean that black students are disciplined disproportionately and more severely than White students. Because teachers may not realize that this is the case, or may not have taken the time to reflect on this fact, they may be unaware of its presence in their classroom. Therefore, if it is a factor in their interactions with students, not only will they be unwilling to divulge it, they will have no conscious knowledge of it even if they wanted to do so. This is why CDA will be so crucial to this study. It will allow me greater insight into the thought processes and professional practices of people who would otherwise be unable or unwilling (even unconsciously) to share them.

### **Limitations**

There are some drawbacks to this study. For one, this training took place at a school that is quite different from many others. It was recently a turnaround school as a part of the Obama administration's education policies, which require that, due to low test scores, the principal and a large portion of the staff were removed before the 2010 school year. As a result, the staff of this particular school is significantly younger, with less experience teaching than many other schools. The staff members with the most experience at this school may have had 10-15 years' teaching experience, while the most

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experienced staff members at other schools might have had 25-30. In addition, the teachers at this school have been subjected to a much greater amount of scrutiny than other teachers with similar experience, and have been expected to be much more open to new experiences and ideas from the outside than other teachers. There is less of a tendency to reject suggestions for improving practice, which may mean that teachers at this school are more open-minded about a training of this nature.

Another potential limitation is that the concepts that are being discussed are of a highly personal and sensitive nature. White supremacist speech can be aggressively stigmatized by our culture, which may make these teachers reluctant to discuss candidly their opinions about how racism affects the school. In addition, they may fear that if they are critical of other teachers, that criticism will be discovered and may ruin professional or personal relationships that they have established. White teachers may also be reluctant to discuss their opinions, for fear that they are revealed to be, or seem racist themselves (Leonardo, 2013). Getting the participants in the study to speak forthrightly will be the paramount challenge in this study. Consequently, the greatest care must be paid to confidentiality, to assure participants that their opinions will be protected and that they should not fear that what they say will damage themselves or others. Teachers will not be identified by name, gender, or amount of experience. All interviews will be recorded as electronic files and transferred to a flash drive, which will be the only copy. This flash drive will be kept in a locked and secure location.

Despite these limitations, I feel strongly that this is the appropriate method for analyzing the true impact of this type of professional development. When the topic is of such a sensitive nature, surveys do not really capture an accurate picture of a person's

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experience. This is especially true when it has been demonstrated that when it comes to racism, White teachers are often unwilling to admit or unable to see their own racism. If this is true, then there should be a pattern to the way that teachers respond to antiracist training and discuss their own experiences, which should reveal deeper truths than a survey or other, less personal research methods.

Ultimately, this study is not just important to me and my school, but highly relevant to the broader context of education in this country. Politicians and other leaders are constantly reminding us about the achievement gap between Black and White students. Crime rates, unemployment, economic growth, and dozens of other measures tell us unequivocally that what we are really looking at is an opportunity gap. These heartbreaking statistics are more than numbers in the newspaper or on a website, however. They are measured in real pain for millions of children of color who simply will not get the same opportunities as others will. Schools and communities are desperate to figure out why this phenomenon exists and to eradicate it. Teachers need powerful tools at their disposal to help them more effectively work with Black students to keep them in their classrooms and keep them improving on their skills. If this study can teach us something about how teachers absorb and implement techniques in their classrooms that help Black students achieve at greater rates, then it will be a success. If school districts can learn valuable lessons about how to present the kind of raw, emotional, sometimes painful information that these trainings entail to teachers and have them taken back and implemented in their classrooms, then students will benefit from stronger, more effective teachers. If consultants can learn what works, what doesn't work, what gets teachers to open up or shut down or keeps them from engaging fully in this process, then they can be

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more effective in helping teachers understand these critical problems and attack them with urgency.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Introduction**

In this study, I wanted to try to determine how White teachers of Black students were affected by a long, intensive professional development that focused on improving their cultural competence. I wanted to see if teachers, having undergone this training, would be willing to talk candidly about their experiences in the classroom. I also wanted to see if, two years later, the training that they had undergone had impacted their mindset or professional practice in some way. I decided to conduct one-on-one interviews, because I felt that this dynamic would make the teachers feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings. In this chapter, I give some background information on why I chose this project. I then complete a critical discourse analysis, emphasizing the subjects' willingness to share stories, as well as analyzing the nature of the conversations surrounding race in general. Finally, I discuss ways in which the training impacted the subjects' mindset or professional practice.

When I first began seriously reflecting on my own personal practices as a teacher, when I first began to truly see myself not in the public persona that I had constructed to represent myself to the world, but rather to look deeply into my own actions as a teacher and recognize the ways in which I had harmed students, there has always been a clear incident that stands out to me. My first year of teaching, in a large urban school district, I was teaching 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes of Language Arts. I graduated college with a bachelor's degree in English Composition, and had worked for one year as a teacher assistant in a special-needs classroom, this time in a district in the suburbs. The only

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training I had was the weeklong new teacher orientation, a large portion of which centered on how to properly fill out our insurance forms, and a week of orientation in the building to which I was assigned, which was a two-floor, eight-classroom annex that had a gym which quadrupled as the cafeteria, administrative offices, and supplemental classrooms of the school.

I explain all of this not to seek some kind of pity, but to be frank about what the conditions in a severely under-resourced school and classroom actually look like. Most of my classes had at least 30 students, the largest, a 7<sup>th</sup> grade class, had 37, with 15 students who received special education services of some kind. Every single one of those students was African-American. I had probably had a conversation longer than 15 minutes with less than 5 African-Americans in my entire life at that point. And again, having had virtually no formal training in education, and teaching on a temporary certificate that required I earn 9 hours per year in order to renew it, I was certainly the most under-developed resource in the room.

When a teacher with my level of experience gets in front of a roomful of students who he doesn't know, whose culture he doesn't understand, and frankly, confuses and scares him, the only tool he has to interact with those students is control.

*You have to be in control.*

*Don't let them know you're scared.*

*Don't smile until Christmas.*

*Don't let them question your authority.*

These are all messages that I either told myself or was told as advice to help me be an effective teacher. So one day in class, when a student told me (or what I thought he



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told me), “you’re gonna get bucked in the chest,” those messages told me that I needed to step up and get control of the situation. They told me to write a referral, send the student out of class, and show the other students that I wasn’t going to be spoken to in that manner.

Later in the day, the student, his mother, and the principal and the instructional coach came back to my room and we had a conference. At the conference, the student said that he didn’t say what I heard, instead, he had said that I was, “getting buff in the chest,” meaning that I was being arrogant, or bold. Again, here I had another chance to be reasonable, work something out, and acknowledge some kind of misunderstanding. I remember my principal telling me that they had the paperwork ready to file a report that this was an assault—a threat on a teacher with all kinds of repercussions that at the time I had no concept of. Even if he had said what I initially perceived (I strongly doubt this), this still would have been an opportunity to develop a deeper relationship with this student and come to an understanding about communication in the classroom. I wish I had taken that opportunity, rather than pursuing a formal referral.

Given this chance, I again remembered the bad, or at least very one-sided advice that I had been given about the necessity of classroom control, and insisted that I heard what I heard, and whatever consequences arose from that incident the student should accept.

Today I recognize this as part of the school-to-prison pipeline; a sequence of negative interactions with school personnel that take children and put them on the road to incarceration.

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I don't know ultimately what happened to the student, other than he returned to my class some time later and the incident was basically forgotten—by me. I can only assume that he never forgot the way that I misunderstood what had happened in my class and then insisted that he be punished for it. Given the statistics and realities I know about now, I'm certain that this wasn't the first situation he had been a part of or subsequently experienced like this, possibly at the hands of another scared, inexperienced White teacher.

I am explaining this because it was what I had in mind when I constructed the interview question about regretting something that the teacher had done in class, having gone through the Race and Equity Training Program and with the benefit of hindsight being able to engage in a critical discourse with one's own professional practices.

This is the kind of incident that teachers don't like to talk about. It doesn't feel good to admit to doing something like this. It wasn't intentional. I didn't set out to invent a situation in my class and then file some trumped-up charges against a student. However, it came from a place of fear and the desire for a kind of control that at the time I didn't yet understand was totally artificial. I was attempting to control my classes rather than form a partnership with the students that would benefit us both in learning about each other.

When I encountered the Race and Equity training, I had already analyzed, re-analyzed, played out in my head over and over this situation, because I had already learned, reflected, and recognized the ways that institutional racism affected the lives of my students, sometimes with me as the instrument.

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It is because I had gone through this process that I thought other teachers, who like me, were White, came from a middle-class upbringing, would have gone through a learning curve or a transition to being able to form relationships and work well with students of color, would be able to relate similar instances where they had not acted in the best interest of their students. Sometimes these actions come from a place of fear or a desire for control. Sometimes they come from anger or frustration at the way a student is acting. Regardless of where they came from, I felt that they would be willing to acknowledge, in clear terms, where they had mistreated a student.

I did not pursue this research out of a sense of vindictiveness, or a sense of superiority. Often in our society the word racism is used as a cudgel to beat down someone who says something that is or is perceived to be bigoted. Often, Whites are the first to denounce verbal racism as a method of quarantining their own prejudices. This project was not intended to be any of those things.

I meant for this project to be a conversation between people of similar backgrounds and experiences about the ways in which they had played a role in the harming of students of color. I thought that, as in my case, the teachers I interviewed would be willing to accept and acknowledge the ways that they had, even inadvertently, engaged in a form of institutional racism in the classroom. I thought it might be uncomfortable, but I thought that it would happen.

I also thought that if they were unable to see or unwilling to talk about what they had witnessed, then they would avoid doing so in similar ways. That is, that the way that Whites have been socialized to treat race and racism would impact their conversational habits in a recognizable pattern.

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**Critical Discourse Analysis**

The primary aim of this study was to pursue the question of whether the teachers who participated in this training had engaged in the same type of critical self-reflection that I felt I had, and if so, would they be prepared to openly discuss it? The selection of the participants, the framing of the questions, and the structure of the interviews themselves were all designed around this aim.

However, in not one interview did a teacher share a specific story about a specific student. And the pattern of verbal responses, in several cases, were almost exact.

Compare the following answers to the question about a time when the teacher regretted the way he or she had treated a student:

**Oh gosh, there's probably a million of them (laughs)**

***Can you talk about one?***

**I'm just trying to think of a particular one where I wish I would've handled it different**

***Yeah?***

**I'm...its' like singling out one...(laughs) I really...(pause)**

***Well I'll talk about one for me and maybe that'll help you***

**Ok.**

**[I then proceeded to tell my story]**

**Right...(pause) gosh, like I said there's just so many different times where...I'm having trouble getting one just specific into the front of my mind. (pause) There's just been a lot of time where I will write somebody up that...It's really probably just more kids being kids where I feel they're being personal or you feel you're being personally attacked, instead of just looking at them saying you know, "you're a kid" where it really shouldn't matter...you know I'll keep thinking about it...**

***You know, it's fine, I don't want to....***

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It's like the pressure of a story...

Another teacher:

Any student?

Yes.

You mean just based on their background or—

[I tell my story, then rephrase the same question]

Yeah, I can say that, umm, I can't give you an exact example, but, I feel—sometimes I go home after dealing with a child, and like, at the end of the day you deal with a child and you do it, you're so angry with them at that point, and you yell at them or you correct them or whatever and they get really angry back at you and you're not sure why you're having this confrontation with a child, and later in the day you find out something's going on at home, or maybe they're homeless now, or mom like, for example, last year—I got an example now. Last year he never acted up, he was one of my sixth graders, and one day he just lost his cool, like completely lost his mind, and I was like 'what is going on?' and I couldn't figure it out, and I didn't—nobody had told us anything. And I didn't know what was going on and I reprimanded him and later on that day I found out that the entire weekend his mom just didn't come home. And he is this twelve year old, taking care of his three siblings, and finally on Sunday he had to call his aunt and tell her 'we haven't eaten all weekend.' They hadn't eaten since Friday at lunchtime at school. And his aunt was like 'what do you mean?' and they were like 'mom never came home' and they went all weekend, taking care of themselves, and not eating, not knowing where mom was, and it broke my heart, and I wanted to cry when I got home. I would've handled the situation completely differently if I had known all this stuff was happening at his house, but nobody had told us. And he didn't tell us, and I asked him, 'why didn't you tell me something was up? You know I would've worked with you, I would've given you some of my lunch or something' and he was like, 'I don't know, I just didn't wanna talk about it,' which of course he's not gonna want to talk about it. And I feel like that's happened a couple of times, where I've done something, like, overreacted, and then to find out, a lot of stuff's not going on in their home life, because their home lives are totally different from whatever I grew up with, I'm not used to that type of stuff. So I try to take in the idea that that happens, because like with the \_\_\_\_\_ (a family of kids) that happens all the time they take it out on me when something happens at home and I'm like, "why are you yelling at me? Why are you coming at me?" but they think of me as their mom, when mom does something or gets herself put back in jail they rebel on me at me or they come back at me about it, and so yeah. That's when I would-I do regret sometimes because I didn't know, so...

Another teacher:

A student or just students?

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*If you could, think of an example, so...an example of a time, knowing what you know now, like 'I really regret the way I handled that situation.' You know, either the way you dealt with a student, or something along those lines.*

Um...(pause) from a classroom management standpoint, are you wanting something like that or does that matter? Is that what you're looking for?

*I'm really thinking more along the lines of—*

Like culturally?

*Culturally*

Yeah, um. I don't know if I can...

*Now, they impact each other, so it's hard to divorce one from the other--*

Right that's why if the one that I'm thinking of if it could tie in both ways or not. I don't know if I could think of specific examples, other than the one I'm thinking of right now that could apply. Because the one I thought—I have a lot of former students that I still keep in contact with through Facebook or different things, or I might periodically meet up with for lunch or whatever. That I've said a couple different occasions that I wish I could have a "do-over", not with them specifically or nothing specific that happened with that individual, but just...how much better I know I am at my job, whether it's just from a straight-up teaching aspect or just the culture aspect, a marriage of those two together. I know how much better I do in the classroom now that I wish I could go back and...I know there's a lot more I could do with students I had in the past, if I could take myself now and put myself back there. I don't know if I can think of a specific example that at least is related to the topic.

All three of these teachers had significant pauses in their responses, or breaks in their train of thought, asked me to clarify, or paused enough that I felt I needed to clarify, and none of them could come up with anything resembling a concrete example. The second teacher I cited did provide an example, but it was not an example of mistreating a student, or acting in a way she regretted, but about a problem a student had and how she had found out what the real problem was. Ultimately, the framing of the story paints the teacher in a very favorable light.

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In this second set of examples, the teachers do answer the question, and attempt to give an example, but in none of these statements is a concrete example. Instead, they are vague, focus on general areas of concern they remember in their class, regarding academics or school policies. Again, this is the same question regarding specific mistreatment of a student:

**(sigh) Yeah, some of the...I mean we had a lot of students probably not getting adequate services that had—because of being social studies in my first middle school position, not having adequate SSD services, or the emotional piece, if we had any emot—ED students, and the explosions that you know some of the males would have. We had fights, so...**

***In the classroom?***

**No, I was very blessed there I did not—I think I sort of said...it's a harsh joke but somebody said 'once you come through the door, that's it, go fight—' and fights would happen in the hallway, but not in my room. Maybe other people's rooms, but they tended—I can only think of one that might have happened in my room, but otherwise, it was go fight where the cameras are and secur—but it's...I...that respect of space, this is where we're trying to learn, we're not trying to have conflict, but um...I'm thinking of like, I don't know I'm trying to think of a kid...a gentleman walked out of class, and was angry, you know, and just thinking about how to...having more knowledge of how to diffuse, you know, and I don't know that they really can train...I don't know if—I don't know if that's trainable, because of being different humans all the time, how do you train someone to adequately go through all the ways middle schoolers tend to fly off the handle, or get very emotional very quick—I guess you can to some degree but we're all different when you're in the thick of things...**

***Right.***

**It's um...it's a...tricky.**

Another teacher:

**I left \_\_\_\_\_ in the hallway for forty-five minutes, didn't realize it, but he sat outside and read the entire time, so...**

***Ok.***

**Other than that, I don't think so...I mean...**

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*Just knowing what you know now about building relationships, and how to interact in the classroom effectively could you think of a time where you were like, 'wow, I really wish I wouldn't have done that, or I really regret how that played out?'*

Umm...there's a few kids that I let slip by, just because they were quiet, or they caused a lot of trouble, but I think if I could go back and work with them now, they would succeed more, but...

*What do you mean by 'let slip by?'*

Umm...just kids that kind of coasted along, they didn't—I remember a couple that just didn't make a lot of noise, so they weren't really on my radar like the loud and crazy ones. They did fine and they passed and I think they learned things that year, but...like I could look back last year and 'ok I know who didn't learn and why' whereas then I could be like 'I'm not really sure if that kid learned anything that year.' I'm not sure if that was just because I didn't—It is because I didn't know what I was doing, which kind of sucks for anybody that has a first year teacher...

*(laughs)*

**Everybody's gotta have a first year eventually so...**

Again, note the similarity in these two responses. This time, instead of offering vagaries or dancing around the question altogether, these teachers offer a picture of what is happening systemically. In one case, it is the fighting policy of the building or the district that she is enforcing, requiring students to remain in the hall, within range of cameras. This response to such an obviously troubling policy is curious. It seems like the teacher is taking the position that she was following orders to allow the students who were obviously in distress to go in the hallway to fight. Milgram's famous behavioral experiment which studied the psychology of people who administer shocks to unseen, and nonexistent, people has recently been revisited using a bureaucratic framework. Initially thought of as a study in the psychology of why someone would participate in such an experiment, it may be instructive to think of the experiment, and in this case



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compliance with school policies that one knows to be troubling, in terms of the need of people to conform to the demands of a bureaucracy (Russell, 2014).

In the other the teacher does talk about the role she played in the students falling behind, but ultimately it turns into a comment on the nature of first-year teachers and how their lack of experience impacts student achievement. Again, a systemic issue.

In only two circumstances did a teacher directly acknowledge regrets that he had in interacting with students. This person acknowledges that he wish that he had been more compassionate when responding to students who had conflicts or other issues meeting certain expectations:

**Oh, yeah, for sure. It's mainly...when I uh...(pause) maybe the way I handled a situation, just because I didn't understand, maybe what was going on at home, or their beliefs, or um...you know just...they were raised by grandma, and grandma didn't have transportation, and I didn't realize mainly how fam—how a lot of family systems worked. Their traditions, um...like one of the things when we went through the training and they were referring to, like, what was it...White...what did they call it? White...privilege?**

***Yeah.***

**And they, the opposite was how like, Black families were—perceive things, like police, or authoritative figures. I didn't—that really opened my eyes, I was like, 'whoa, I shouldn't have been like that as a teacher' I was a little overbearing and that wasn't the way to handle it. So it has changed, I try to step back, think...I try to get to know the families a lot more, I talk to the kids on the side, I mean I did before, but now I ask slightly different questions...**

***What do you mean?***

**Just, you know, how—I try to dive in to more how their family is doing, you know, mom—is grandma ok? Just try to find out more what's going on in their day-to-day life...um...if they're really involved in church, because I know that takes up certain nights, and uh...sports...**

***Just as a way to be more, kind of accommodating about activities?***

**More accommodating and no—if mom's working two or three jobs, that's why, you know, they can't get the paper signed, or that's why I can't get a hold of them. Do I need to be—**

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**email, or text, or what's the best way to handle this, and try to open up more the—an open line of communication. Um...and yeah, it's understanding.**

Now, to be clear, this is not exactly a specific anecdote that goes into any kind of detail about one individual event, this is really more of a reflection on personal practices. However, it does differ significantly in that it is an acknowledgement of mistakes, and it even refers to the notion of White Privilege as a reason for the prevailing attitude that the students needed to conform to the rigid class structures this teacher had established.

In another instance, the teacher from the first interview circled back around and brought up an instance where she felt regret about the way she had dealt with a student, specifically in the way that she had spoken to students:

**And I think, going back to that question you asked before that specific thing? It's not really a specific thing, but just statements we used to kind of make to people. And I know there are a lot of teachers who did it. You know talking to kids it's like you know, making comments to them, it's like "OK well, if you can't read now, you know you have a better chance of going to jail." And it's just like saying that to somebody who's in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. It's like basically you're telling a child that there's no hope for them because they can't read now. It's like that's something I won't say. I've never said since then. Because it's just telling them they don't have anything to believe in, or...**

***Right. At the time, what would you...how would you...when you're sitting there, "I'm gonna tell this kid this..." what are you thinking to yourself that you're trying accomplish?***

**Trying to motivate—**

***Right...motivating...***

**At the time it was trying to motivate them to really take it seriously, be more serious, do the work, put in the time...but now it's like saying that thing in particular to me seems very...de-humanizing. And it's like saying...ok what we learned in college classes in admin was that basically after teaching phonics in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade and you take that 3<sup>rd</sup> grade MAP test before they start teaching reading comprehension, if your ability to read at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade is where they start planning for prisons in the future, based on 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading scores. So if we're telling that to 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. So really we're saying "you can't fix this" it's just a horrible thing to say, it's embarrassing to think that I ever said it.**

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*Right, and so you're coming from a place--see I don't think I've said that specifically but I can definitely remember saying things like, "what are you gonna be," or "what kind of job do you think you're gonna get" I think it came, I would like to think anyway that it came from a place of motivation, but, I see what you're saying as far as like, that's not...that's not helping (laughs)*

**And it just makes them feel bad and it's not gonna help either. It's not gonna help relationships, it's not gonna say "what can we do to fix this?" It's not solution-driven, it's problem-based.**

This to me was another, fairly frank admission of actions that the teacher regretted upon reflection and specific training in working with students of color. I thought it was very telling that the comments the teacher made initially stemmed from a professional development where statistics about the relationship between reading levels and prison rates were presented to the staff. This teacher (and the anecdote seemed to imply that there were other teachers doing this as well) then took that information and used it to "motivate" students to work harder. In a vacuum, one can almost see the logic of using statistics in that manner to show children how important it is to study hard and be a proficient reader. But we don't live in a vacuum, we live in a country that has, as a result of mass incarceration policies, thrown a huge percentage of people of color behind bars, often for trivial offenses. These policies have ripped apart families, perhaps even the families of children in classes where they are being told that if they don't learn how to read they'll end up in prison. In the context of a school that builds effective relationships with students, talking to students in this way would probably be considered counterproductive, at best.

To recap, out of six teachers interviewed, three claimed that they could think of no relevant examples of ways that they had mistreated students at all, and then one of those teachers turned around and gave a clear example. Two others related stories that

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had more to do with systemic issues that they felt swept up in, and one directly stated that they had indeed regretted the way they treated students. Furthermore, this is from a population of teachers who have undergone an intense antiracist professional development, spent significant time reflecting on issues of systemic racism and learned about specific policies that have historically harmed people of color. Finally, all six stated that they felt they benefitted from this training, and said they would do it again. Yet, only two of six, and initially only one of six, could think of, or was willing to admit to, an instance where they had mistreated students of color.

Incidentally, what made the inability or unwillingness to recall specific instances of mistreatment of students of color even more noteworthy was that two out of the three who initially could recall no specific examples did not seem to have this problem in recalling incidents from early on in their careers when they were mistreated by students. They were able to recall very specific situations in which they were called a racially-charged name, or felt that they were treated poorly because they were of a different race than their students. Note the following exchange:

***My first question is, how would you characterize your experience and familiarity with issues of social justice before you became a teacher?***

**I don't really feel like I had any direct issues with any kind of social justice, mainly because I'm from Wyoming, and I didn't start teaching until I moved here, so it really was a non-issue. There were some Hispanic families back where I lived, and we had very few Black families, that just really, just really non-exposure to the issue of race in general.**

***When would you say you first ran into that?***

**Here, in St. Louis, my very first year of teaching.**

***Can you talk a little bit more about that, like what, how that came about, or...***

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Well, just I think a lot of it...coming in I started mid-year, and I had had a long term sub since the first day of school, and a lot of it was, uh...she had...every Friday was free day and that's a fifth of the school year which is insane. So when I came into the room, I put a stop to free day Friday which was an unpopular decision, but the very first thing I was ever called was White bitch and so that was kind of surprising to me...

*How did you react to that?*

I was just shocked. Um, just I never really I guess when I look at kids I see kids. That was my first real issue that there was something different going on I mean just because I never really thought about it I always just thought of people as people. And never really thought in terms of Black or White or what kind of differences there were. So that was just surprising to me. I can't remember specifically what I did.

*To be called that?*

Yeah.

*Ok.*

I mean well I'm pretty sure it was in response to getting rid of Free Day Friday

*Just, so you sort of became like the, you know, the heavy or whatever in that class?*

Well yeah, it's like "now we can't have any fun now that we have the White bitch here."

*Was the previous teacher African-American?*

Yes, the long-term sub was.

In this case, the incident was a powerful moment for the teacher because she had been raised in an environment that was free of any discussion of race or racial issues. This is commonplace in many places in America, where race is simply not a factor in daily life, because of the ubiquity of fellow Whites. The language is also quite typical of Whites who have stated that they don't see race at all (including teachers interviewed for this project). Later on in the interview with the same teacher, when asked about what was retained from the professional development that I reference throughout the interviews and this study, circled back to another incident where it was felt that some mistreatment was due to the fact that she was White:

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One thing and I guess I still kind of...I do understand you know that...like White people have not been persecuted throughout history necessarily but I do still...there were points which I still believe which is kind of against what the program talked about...that there is kind of a reverse degree of racism that goes on. I know that they say that racial, reverse racism doesn't exist, but I do to an extent believe that it does still.

*Ok.*

I mean just...in some experiences, dealing with some parents, you know just, not even just parents, people out in the community at times. That I believe that sometimes you know because, well, even some students, you know, just I had one parent in particular that kept referring to me as "that White teacher" and that was...

*To your face?*

Yeah, we were in meetings, um. \_\_\_\_\_....do you remember...I don't know if you remember him. And I just went through a lot with that parent and...

*Ok.*

And so I mean a lot of it was because I was the White teacher and 'if he hadn't had that White teacher this year it would've been different.' And he was a Special School District student and so he'd had the two teachers he'd had previously were also Black teachers and so she felt a lot, you know we were moving him into a separate school placement and so he needed to be...it was actually his grandmother who was raising him. But, yeah, so we went through a lot and she felt it was me persecuting him, which was the problem. And so I believe to some degree that, you know, that...I can understand that there's a lot of mistrust between Black and White people, that you know just due to everything, Civil Rights, slavery, all the different things that have happened over the years, I do believe that there's a degree of reverse racism.

*Ok.*

One of the things that is always frustrating to me about conversations like this is the tendency for some Whites to slip into false equivalency when discussing historical injustices. Note the use of words like "mistrust between Black and White" here. This is a failure to accurately confront the systemic injustices met upon Blacks. Because this situation happened to her personally—and I'm not questioning that it did—it is weighted equally with things like slavery. Additionally, the use of the term reverse racism would betray a fundamental misconception on the part of the teacher as to what racism actually

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is. My one-word answer to her statements here should serve to indicate my level of agreement with her framing of this issue.

Another teacher reported a similar incident from early in their tenure as a teacher where she had felt she was being disrespected because she was White:

*So when you first came to this school, what was your experience like? Just talk about that.*

Honestly I didn't find it to be that different, because I taught middle school before and I felt like I was just doing another middle school thing, I didn't see the color, I didn't think the kids saw the color, either. When I first came into the position, in my interview, \_\_\_\_\_ asked me if I had ever worked with students of color, and I said, no I haven't, and he asked me what I thought would be the difference, but I told him that I didn't think there would be that big of a difference. I told him they were middle schoolers, and that middle schoolers were a certain way with their attitudes and everything. So when I came into the classroom I was a little bit nervous, never really being around African Americans before—

*Just socially, or—*

Socially or in general, I never really had, so this was my first experience with it, and I find that the kids really didn't treat it any different, and I didn't treat it any different, so I didn't really see a whole lot of difference from where my other position was, until a child got angry at me and said that I was racist because I called them out, and that was my first experience really with that whole thing and having to sit them down and be like, 'I wouldn't be teaching in this school if I was' and like you can't be angry with me because...be angry with me and call me a racist. That's not the issue, it's your behavior that's the issue.' And we had to have a conversation with the principal. So that was my first experience with that really. But other than that, I didn't really see a huge difference.

*Let's go back to that...tell a story or tell me what happened...*

It was \_\_\_\_\_, but I didn't remember what she did, she was just an angry child. You remember \_\_\_\_\_, don't you?

*Mmm mmm.*

She got mad about something and she went to the principal and she wrote a note that I yelled at her or I told her not to do something, and I remember walking outside and explaining to her, and she was--\_\_\_\_\_ was there, and Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ was there, and they had to explain, 'why would she be teaching here if she was racist? She's not racist because she told you to do something and you didn't want to do it.' I think it was she didn't want to read and I had told her to read or something silly like that. But then when we broke it down to her and

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explained it to her she said that's what she heard at home, that her parents would say all the time about White people and so she thought it was ok to say it, which it's not, so we had to explain that, how you can't be characterizing people based on their culture, not every White person is racist, not every Black person is racist, not every Hispanic is racist, so we explained it to her like that, and she kind of got it in her way (laughs)

*So, what did you think when she said that, what did it make you think?*

It took me back, I was speechless, I didn't know what to respond, I didn't know how to respond, because I'd never been called that before, because I knew that I wasn't, and I knew if I...I was very confused by it because I... obviously I'm teaching in a school, and all my students are African American, and I knew she was angry, but I didn't...I didn't really know how to approach it, it was the first time I had to approach it. I've had to approach it a couple of times in my teaching. Probably a few times I've had to handle things like that but it always comes back to that's the way you respond to things like that and that's not...you have to teach them that's not the correct way to respond.

In this example, like the previous one, the teacher felt like the students were getting messages from their parents or other family that told them Whites weren't to be respected, or trusted.

What is noteworthy to me is not the fact that these incidents happened. I believe them, and I believe that there are children who have been taught to act that way, or parents who feel that way, for whatever reason. I think it is telling, however, in the context of people who could not (at least initially for one) recall a single example of them mistreating a child of color, even coming from a place of inexperience, or naivete, that they had no difficulty at all recalling at length examples of when they were mistreated.

It could also be true that the 4 out of 6 teachers who could not recall a single specific example, other than very broad suggestions about letting a child be in the hallway for too long, have never mistreated a student of color. However, given the statistics about disparities in academic success and discipline rates between White



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students and students of color, I find it more likely that they either were blind to their own actions or unwilling to admit more uncomfortable truths.

### **Systemic Patterns**

Another area of interest that came up through the course of the interviews, was that several of the White teachers of primarily students of color I interviewed reported that upon first entering the classroom, they felt ill-prepared to interact successfully with a population of such stark racial and socioeconomic circumstances from their own. Five out of the six teachers interviewed reported feeling surprised at the economic disparities with either other children or what they were expecting, or the skill level of the students in their classroom. Furthermore, the guidance that they reported receiving was minimal, and they often felt alone in “figuring it out.”

**Yes, completely different than my background. (laughs) It was intimidating.**

*How so?*

**It was intimidating because I didn't really feel like I understood them very well, I didn't understand the music, I didn't listen to it, I didn't understand a lot of the slang, so it was just...coming from a small town in Wyoming just being in the city in general was different, but that was just really...it was just different like you said from my background.**

*So did you sort of try to take steps to try to learn, you know, not necessarily you know learn to like the music, but just to get sense more of who the kids were in general?*

**I...at first it was more just different strategies on working with them. And actually it came about, one of the principals, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_, I don't know if you were there when he was there.**

*I've heard of the name*

**Ok, because I was just struggling with the behaviors and classroom management, and so he...I had a teacher assistant with me also, part of the day, and so he would...he told me he recommended that I go for walks with them. So we spent a lot of time on the track. Walking the track and trying to talk through some of the issues which I think helped me build more of a**

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relationship with them. Or, I had another strategy where I would walk out, take them out to the hall and say, 'you know if you have something to say to me and we're out and you say 'M. \_\_\_\_\_ I need to see you out in the hall,' that's you and I having a conversation, say what you need to say, I'm not gonna write you up, but if you do it in my classroom, I am going to handle it that way every time.' So we, it took a few tries of them getting them to trust me and they would tell me off, and I would be like, 'are you done?' And they would be like, 'no' and keep going and (laughs) and when they saw that I wasn't writing them up, and then it was like, 'OK it's my turn can I talk now?' And so that I think that helped me bond with them a little bit better. At the time, but yeah, so it was definitely a learning process.

*Yeah it sounds like it.*

**I cried a lot every day, drank a lot, every night (laughs)**

This teacher eventually developed her own system for handling disruptions and student frustration without immediately resorting to office referrals. The tactic she describes is based on developing a strong working relationship with the student. Another teacher did the same, realizing that success in the classroom was going to require work outside of it:

**It definitely was challenging the first few years of teaching, just being in a different environment from what I grew up in and what I did my student teaching in was very eye opening, it was definitely a culture shock, it was a very different environment than what I was used to. So it took a few years of just getting to better understand the environment, breaking down assumptions that I had, maybe going in, whether they were assumptions I knew I had or not, getting to know kids and families better, and getting to go beyond just what happens in the classroom and getting to understand about general life and things like that, I think the big turnaround for me was year five, that was the first year that I really got to know some of the kids and their families more personally, doing more of the football games and things like that, getting outside of the school environment. And getting to be more of a part of the community, and just learning by observing and just experiences through that. That's just continued to be a learning process since then. But that's when I say I really started to notice it.**

***Why do you say by year 5? Not that there was anything necessarily about that year specifically, but what—you mentioned something about starting to go to games, starting to participate more in the community, what made you do that or want to do that?***

**The main reason why I did—there were several little things—the first three years were \_\_\_\_\_ which was just a whole different environment in and of itself. The fifth year was the second \_\_\_\_\_ year, so I think year four was the first year I really knew what it meant**

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to be a teacher, because that was a very different experience than what I had been teaching at \_\_\_\_\_, just the learning environment and everything the whole building environment was just different, so that was kind of a significant year just for that—of not knowing how different things were until that year actually happened. And then year five I had the three kind of survival years of getting through \_\_\_\_\_, figuring out everything that was going on, the school environment as a whole changed, I got used to that, so I felt I was a little more comfortable year five. That year I also happened to have...I had one class that was almost entirely boys, and almost all of them were on the football team. And so that kind of turned into 'ok, I really need to make an effort to go to this and show them that I care about them outside of the classroom and make some of those connections.' And not meaning to, saw some significant changes on, just like how receptive they were to me in the classroom, in the hallway, a lot more just comfortable conversations, the respect factor grew because they knew I wasn't fake. If I was taking the time out to do that kind of stuff, and wasn't necessarily expecting that result, and saw that result happen, and things like that turned that into a priority for me and that has followed through ever since then.

*So it wasn't necessarily a strategy, per se, it was more like, 'I should do this—get closer to these kids, I want to, you know...it wasn't calculated in the sense that this is going to translate into them listening to me about math' it was just...*

It maybe turned into slightly calculated now because I know this has been the result, but the underlying intent and the original intent has not been calculated that's just been a nice perk, but it's something that I bring up any time a student teacher or newer people ask, that this was something that at least helped me big time, that they might want to consider.

*I want to take you back a little bit. You said in your first couple years about a culture shock. Can you put yourself in that space when you first started teaching? Because I was in that same space, I never had education classes or anything I just got dumped in a classroom and it was, you know, 30 African-American kids, I had very little experience relating to African American people up to that point. I know how it felt for me, it was a tough transition in terms of 'how do I talk to these kids, what works, what doesn't work.' So could you talk a little bit about that?*

Yeah, I'm not sure how much I can talk about it because it has been a little while now.

*Sure, yeah, yeah.*

I know that some of it was that, I grew up in St. Charles, my elementary, middle, high school, and college were all within blocks of each other, so...got out for other things, but life was pretty much was secluded to that area, and my student teaching was in St. Charles county, also. Very much the same environment I had grown up in. So when I got hired—ok let me think—there were several factors that went into that experience as a whole. I was hired at the last minute, in a subject that I did not actually have my degree in, so, my degree and student teaching everything was social studies. I did 8<sup>th</sup> grade history for my student teaching. So when the teachers got back that Wednesday, I got the call, 'cause they had someone get a

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counseling position. Missed all the new teacher training, missed basically all the teacher PD, had enough time to get in there, do one day of meetings, set up my classroom, and then students showed up on Monday, and I'm doing a subject I've never done anything in. So that was part of it. Then you throw in that it was um...I think we had six periods, so I taught 5 classes, out of what would've been a hundredish kids, and two of them were White. And I want to say everyone else was African American, maybe there would've been someone else, but I don't remember specifically. I remember there were two White boys and everyone else was African American. So up to that point there had just been a lot of assumptions, it's a poor African American area, so there would be assumptions like kids wouldn't be able to read...

*From other people or teachers?*

Um...society, probably more so. Not necessarily, I don't remember any...

*Just messages you got about this population?*

I mean just things you think about like the movie "Dangerous Minds" (laughs)

For this teacher, the process to learning to work more effectively with students of color again did not come from a specific training, but from realization that the more she connected with students, the smoother their working relationship would be. In this instance, it manifested itself in primarily supporting the boys' football team. This seemed to be an effective strategy, because it allowed the teacher to connect with the students, but also be connected to the wider community outside of school.

I should note here, that upon reading my response in this conversation, I feel uncomfortable with the connotation of the word I used—dumped—when describing my first few days in the classroom. I think that it is reflective of the way I felt about the level of support I had (a common theme in the interviews) as a first-year teacher. This common theme speaks of the under-resourced nature of many schools and districts that serve students of color. Having said that, I can't deny that the use of that word reflects poorly on me.

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Another teacher I interviewed also reported that she felt seriously unprepared by her collegiate-level teacher education program, which did not incorporate any instruction or training for teachers working with students of color:

**I would say that I didn't have very much background in it at all. I came from a predominantly White background and that's where my schooling was at, too. Where I came from they didn't train us in this at all, there was no training in that at all.**

*You had no experience at all—*

**No classes at all, that had to do anything with any of that at all. Not until I became a teacher.**

*This is not the first school you taught at, right?*

**Nope.**

*Where all did you teach?*

**Dupo Junior High School, which is in Dupo, Illinois, and it's a small town, and it was all, I mean we had one African-American student, and one Hispanic student and the rest were White.**

*And so this school is probably the first time that you've had to deal with any kind of issues in your classroom as far as a difference between your students and yourself.*

**Correct.**

*So when you first came to this school, what was your experience like? Just talk about that.*

**Honestly I didn't find it to be that different, because I taught middle school before and I felt like I was just doing another middle school thing, I didn't see the color, I didn't think the kids saw the color, either. When I first came into the position, in my interview, \_\_\_\_\_ asked me if I had ever worked with students of color, and I said, no I haven't, and he asked me what I thought would be the difference, but I told him that I didn't think there would be that big of a difference. I told him they were middle schoolers, and that middle schoolers were a certain way with their attitudes and everything. So when I came into the classroom I was a little bit nervous, never really being around African Americans before—**

*Just socially, or—*

**Socially or in general, I never really had, so this was my first experience with it, and I find that the kids really didn't treat it any different, and I didn't treat it any different, so I didn't really see a whole lot of difference from where my other position was, until a child got angry at me and said that I was racist because I called them out, and that was my first experience really with that whole thing and having to sit them down and be like, 'I wouldn't be teaching in this**

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school if I was' and like you can't be angry with me because...be angry with me and call me a racist. That's not the issue, it's your behavior that's the issue.' And we had to have a conversation with the principal. So that was my first experience with that really. But other than that, I didn't really see a huge difference.

And later in the conversation:

*Would you say you were much more by the book, like just, 'these are the rules—'*

When I first started out?

*Yeah.*

Oh yeah I was very much like that. Now I'm much more...

*Do you think that's pretty common?*

Oh yeah.

*Why?*

Well what do you mean by the book?

*I mean you just think 'these are the rules and you talked 2 times' and now you get—*

Well yeah, because that's what they teach you in college. You don't get any—going back, college was a waste of time and money (laughs)

*Ok...*

Because I learned everything in my teaching position. I mean looking back, I learned nothing in college. They didn't teach me about how to...SIUE is where I went, and they placed you in 3 different settings. My "urban" setting was Belleville, and it was all White. There were like 3 Black kids and it's like, that was not an urban setting. Stick me in Hazelwood, stick me in Ferguson. What's the one right next...right by the river?

*Riverview?*

(laughs)

*Right by the river...*

(laughs) It's summer. But they place you in these places where it's not, there's no cultural diversity, there's nothing.

*So they put you in Belleville, that was your urban—*

Belleville. A fifth grade classroom in Belleville, it was like 'are you kidding me?'

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*That's really interesting...*

Yeah, that was my urban setting, and my...the settings were just ridiculous. I feel like they teach you in college, I remember them telling us—you had to have classroom rules, you had to have—this is the behavior management plan, blah, blah, blah. You think that's the way it has to be. So your first classroom, that's the way it is. Even switching positions from Dupo to \_\_\_\_\_ I had to change things up. I went into \_\_\_\_\_ thinking 'well in Dupo, that did not work' it was a totally different group of kids and I decided to change things up. I'm a lot more lenient with these kids than I was—if my 22 year-old self came right out of college and watched myself I'd probably give myself a panic attack because I'm way more lenient with it, and I roll with the punches and I let the kids interact with me and talk out and stuff and my 22 year-old self would be like 'Oh my God, what are you doing, they can't talk when you're talking, they can't...they can't have that group work, what are you doing? They need to be talked to 3 times in the first 5 seconds, he needs to go.' And now you're like supposed to give them two warnings and put them out or whatever, you know whatever our rule is supposed to be but everybody gives them like 20 warnings and they're finally like, 'ok, you're just not getting it.' But totally, totally different, and I think it's because of college and the way colleges train teachers. And I mean they don't train them—I don't think they train 'em correctly. I mean this doesn't have anything to do with this but in reading, I taught reading for 7 years here, never took a reading class in college, but for the past 7 years I was told I had to teach the lowest readers, and I had to teach middle school students how to read, to get their reading levels up, never taught how to do that, until I was taking—I got my master's in reading and those were the only classes—

*Don't you have a reading certification?*

Nuh uh. Elementary with an endorsement in middle school language arts, and that's how I got into reading, and I'm special ed, too, but I never took any reading classes until I got my master's in reading, so...I just...it's ridiculous, I mean they don't teach you...

*I was the same way I didn't, I mean my first year I didn't even have a teaching degree. I just had an English degree. I had a bachelor of arts in composition and I...had...I taught for a year as a TA for special, and I was in a 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in St. Louis Public Schools.*

Yeah!

*I mean my 7<sup>th</sup> grade had 37 kids in it...*

I can't imagine...

*And I had zero training. Zero. I mean I had, at that time I was in a Master's program, I had started, but the day I had my first class was, I'm pretty sure I had not even had a single session of a class in education.*

Yeah, so that's...but I guess that's what TFA gets, they get...

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*Well they get six weeks of training*

Yeah, that's why the way they train you as a teacher is completely not what happens in reality in a classroom. I remember being in a classroom, writing on a board and my supervisor came to watch me, and she told me I shouldn't have my back to the board, I should always write to the side so I could always see them, like sideways, right? I'm like, 'I don't know how to do that' so I was always paranoid about that because she would always say something to me about it, but now, seven years later, you're writing on the board and you're like, '\_\_\_\_\_, stop!' And they're like 'how did you know it's me?' And you know their voices, you know what they're doing. It's like, ok, that's not necessarily the teaching you need, because you know what kids are gonna do what, like a week into school you know what's up.

*That's interesting, because like I said I never had a "teaching" class, so I can't, I didn't know that's what they're teaching, how to write on the blackboard (laughs) "How to write a report card..."*

Right, 'don't put your back to the class' and I remember my first year teaching, I set up my desk all cutesy and stuff, with all my little teachery stuff, and I remember the teachers I taught with—it was a very small school—there were like four of us on a team, math, science, social studies, and English and I remember that they came in my room after the first week and they were like 'we were really worried hearing that you just came out of college and then we came in and saw how you set up your classroom all cutesy and everything and you had all these breakables on your desk and it was all very clean and we were like 'look at this, this is funny hahahaha' and weeks later I had piles everywhere, and now I know you don't do that, you just need your piles. But I don't do that anymore, it's just funny. I don't know...

*So you feel like, the way you deal with kids it's just a natural progression of that?*

**Definitely.**

Clearly this teacher did not feel well-prepared by the teacher education program she completed, and relayed that she even practiced skills such as how to write at the chalkboard, but did not have a single class or even part of a class that dealt with cultural competence. Furthermore, the student teaching experience that the college provided this person with, which is supposed to have a component dedicated to in their words, an *urban* setting, could not by any reasonable standard be considered diverse.

In this excerpt, you can see another example of the teacher describing her placement in language that seems less than flattering. References to *sticking* her in



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different places, and then being unable to remember the name of Riverview Gardens, a prominent school district in the area, lead one to believe that there is a perception that various districts mentioned are not distinct from each other, but rather serve as interchangeable.

In addition to the lack of training in working with diverse students, two of these teachers stated that they were hired as mid-year replacements for other teachers, and two of them were hired to teach subjects for which they may have been qualified, but had limited training. Another way to look at it might be that two-thirds of the teachers interviewed were hired because the school needed someone who was qualified, not necessarily because they were the most qualified. This is not meant as a slight against these teachers, but rather serves as further evidence that the school system has consistently under-resourced schools that serve children of color. With higher rates of teacher turnover, which results in teaching staffs with less overall experience and training, schools that serve this population often struggle to meet the most basic staffing requirements.

### **The Training**

With so much data to analyze related to the teachers' basic experiences in the classroom, it would have been easy to lose sight of the initial purpose of this project, which was to try to assess the efficacy of the antiracist training these teachers all participated in during the 2012-2013 school year. Part of the goal was to try to determine how forthcoming teachers would be about their past experiences, but I was also interested

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to know how their experiences during the training translated to their classroom practices, and if these teachers ultimately felt that they benefitted by participating in this work.

I think one of the most surprising (pleasantly so) aspects of conducting these interviews was being able to talk to the teachers about how they felt that the Race and Equity training gave them the confidence and tools to speak to their students about controversial issues surrounding race, and specifically issues related to protests in Ferguson, Missouri and other places following the August 2014 death of Ferguson teenager Michael Brown.

On August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014, Michael Brown and a friend entered a convenience store in the inner-ring suburb of Ferguson, Missouri, just outside of St. Louis. They engaged in a brief argument with the clerk, and Brown took a carton of cigarettes. A few minutes later, the two were stopped while walking through the Canfield Apartment complex by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson, who ordered them to get out of the street. The rest of the incident is in some dispute, but eventually there was some kind of struggle between Brown and Wilson, and shots from the officer's gun were fired, and Brown was injured. He then ran away from the police car, chased by Wilson. Wilson claims that Brown then turned around and charged him, others stated that Brown surrendered. Either way, Wilson shot and killed Brown.

As police officers and investigators came on the scene, residents and community members, likely remembering their own dealings with the police, and having seen and heard about other incidents where unarmed Black men, like Brown, were shot and killed by police, gathered in mourning and protest. The body of Brown was left in the street,

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uncovered, in the heat for many hours while police conducted their investigation. The police claim that the investigation was delayed because of the increasingly hostile crowd. Eventually, officers were deployed specifically to control the crowd, with a show of force that included police dogs, which further inflamed the situation (Bosman and Fitzsimmons, 2014).

The deeper issues at play in this incident which further inflamed community reaction cannot be ignored, either. The Ferguson Police Department, similar to other police departments that serve majority-minority populations, is almost entirely White. The city government at the time was also mostly White, and this caused a great deal of tension with residents, who felt that they were frequently treated unfairly by the police. In fact, the furor created in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death drew attention to the ways in which municipal governments across the area were operating with respect to their citizens. Over time, they had become increasingly dependent on fines and court costs to fund operating expenses, to the point where some of the small communities in the predominantly Black inner-ring suburbs like Ferguson and others were relying on fines, court fees and costs to provide up to 30% or more of their operating revenue, in violation of Missouri law (Staples, 2014).

The prominence of these events in the news, combined with the relative proximity of the events to the school itself, provided an environment in the classrooms where students were confused, angry, enthusiastic, and interested to learn about what was happening. The teachers reported that they responded to student interest in these events, and directly related their experiences in the training to their comfort level and approach to dealing with these topics.

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Five out of the six, without prompting, were able to go into specific and at times exhaustive detail regarding how they used what they had learned to relate to their students, felt comfortable having frank and open discussions, and used those conversations as a platform to help the students find outlets for the anger, frustration, and confusion they felt at the time, and may continue to feel today.

The Ferguson responses typically came from the fourth and fifth questions, which related to what they recalled from the training, or what about their professional practice had changed as a result of the training. At a time when classrooms around the St. Louis area and around the country were struggling to address these issues with students, and when administrators were forbidding teachers to even discuss the situation with their students, five of the six teachers I interviewed volunteered that they had engaged in thoughtful, nuanced conversations, with these middle school students. The conversations covered what had been happening, what the protests were about, their own opinions about Michael Brown and the protests, and even went so far as to offer advice and guidance to students seeking to voice their own concerns and frustrations. What's more, is that the teachers did not hold these conversations begrudgingly, or out of a sense of obligation. In fact, they continued to hold them in defiance of official instructions to cease to do so. I think this is vitally important, perhaps the most significant finding from this project.

I would first like to note the quality of the dialogue that the teachers reported happening in their classes:

**So I was always afraid to bring up anything or discuss anything with race, and now I know it's OK and you know I'm more comfortable with it now, so it's like "ok let's have this**

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conversation.” One day we just all sat on the floor and it’s like this is just “straight talk” no judgments, just say whatever you’re thinking right now. And so that’s, you know, some of these conversations can happen now. It’ll be...I think the kids see that I am supporting them, you know, and that I think the whole situation you know was, even though...I was not a fan of Michael Brown and I actually told them that. They asked what my opinion was, and I said that I believe that you know racial profiling does need to stop, it needs to be addressed. I’m 100% in favor of that. I know it happens and it needs to be stopped. And I said that I don’t believe he is the....angel they’re making him out to be. So...

*How did they respond to that?*

They were fine with it. I had several kids agree, and there were some that didn’t and that was OK, you know. And there...we brought up other names, Trayvon Martin came up and so we’ve had some talks about it.

*Do you feel like those conversations helped you relate to them, you know, in other areas, not necessarily in academic areas but maybe helped them trust you more? Or helped them, you know maybe sometimes give you the benefit of the doubt when things are going on in the classroom?*

I do. You know the day the verdict came back in...this is one thing...

*Had you already talked about it at that point?*

Yeah, we knew it was coming, and they had been talking to us and sending us a lot of communication in the days prior to that

*The administration had?*

The administration. They had actually sent us talking points to talk with the kids as the conversations came up for like the month before. So we had had a lot of conversations as things had come up instead of just saying, “let’s not talk about that now.” If it came up and the kids were talking about it we just talked about it. Briefly. It’s like “let’s take a minute, go through this.” But the day the verdict came back they were adamant that we dismiss as quickly as possible, get everyone on the bus, get everybody home, staff leave immediately...cause nobody knew for sure what was gonna happen.

*That was a Monday, right?*

Tuesday.

*‘Cause I thought we were off on Tuesday?*

No, we were off on Tuesday...because...oh, it was Monday.

*Right.*

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Yeah so it was on a Monday and so the kids...when they dismissed they said that you know the verdict was coming out that afternoon and they didn't know exactly what time they wanted to get home safely. And I had kids that...one girl in particular was like "well, my parents don't get home till like 7 or 8" and she was scared. And so I kind of broke our protocol of not calling at home, but I called her once, to see if she had talked to her parents and I called once to see if she was home. That night I was like "I'm sorry I'm just real worried about her being there by herself. They appreciated that and I think that it helped her and I bond and she saw that I cared about her. Made sure she was alright...Just pretty close to their neighborhood

*So, being able to, I guess...having the confidence to be open with the kids and not be so worried about being called "racist?"*

Judged, yeah.

*Judged for that...that helped you connect with them a little bit better?*

Yeah, and just them being honest about being afraid and then being able to be there for them because they were...

I think it is important to note that the teacher felt comfortable enough to share her opinion about the situation, even if it conflicted with the students, but was able to still maintain a productive conversation about the events and how they were unfolding.

Another example:

That's what I thought it was going to be more of, and it was, like you said opening up the conversation about it, and I felt like—I'm jumping-moving forward—that would have been good information to have when all of this Ferguson stuff happened. That was happening literally like two blocks from us. That would have been good information to have but they weren't giving us anything to talk to the kids if they brought it up. You kind of had to wing it on your own

*Did they bring it up to you?*

Not a lot of them actually did. I heard some kids brought it up to other teachers, but not in my room. There was some...I'm trying to remember what the kid did...I can't remember what he—we were doing something, and the kid brought up Mike Brown, and it had no context with what we were doing. I remember him bringing it up though. I think he just wanted to see what my reaction would be. And I said that right now wasn't the time to talk about it because it had nothing to do with what we were doing, but we could talk about it after class. And he was just like, "ok," and I think he just wanted to see what my reaction would be but I can't remember what it was...It was something completely off-topic. It was one of our books, it

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might have been our book on slavery....I can't remember, but yeah, that was the only thing that they ever really talked about. Or when the 8<sup>th</sup> grade would go down the hallway screaming after lunch "hands up, don't shoot!" But they just wanted a reaction at the middle school level. They weren't doing walkouts and stuff like the high school, but middle school just wanted a reaction. They wanted to see what you would do.

*So did you—let's assume that...what if he had brought it up at the time when you weren't in the middle of something else, would you have felt comfortable talking about it?*

Yeah, I would have felt comfortable talking about it—I guess it would have depended on the grade too, that was an 8<sup>th</sup> grader so I felt more comfortable talking about it with them.

*Why?*

I don't think a 6<sup>th</sup> grader understands it as much, what they see is what they see, their parents and older siblings are doing. One of my 6<sup>th</sup> graders was like 'yeah my brother was one of the looters and he got new kicks and a TV yada yada yada...and it's like, "ok that's not what this is about" so you kind of told them what it's about, and they just kind of looked at you and were like "ok back to looting." But 8<sup>th</sup> grade you could have a whole conversation with them about racism and how Mike Brown—the whole situation, and they would understand it more. So I would have a conversation with my 8<sup>th</sup> grade and my 7<sup>th</sup> grade but my 6<sup>th</sup> grade were just not getting it. And my 6<sup>th</sup> grade this year was so immature, like it would've went badly. I guess you have to kind of feel for the kids and what kids you have in there and those kids like tell-talking about it. But those kids that group I totally would've had a conversation.

*But it just never came up?*

It never came up.

*Did you consider bringing it up?*

Hmm...We were talking about something, see here I go again I don't remember

*You don't remember anything...*

Its summer...

*Oh, just shuttin' it down?*

I know, right? What were we talking about? Maybe it was a vocab word or something and it had to do...one of our vocab words was something to do with the Ferguson stuff. And we talked about it then and how it came into effect, and one of our—what was it—and then one of my 8<sup>th</sup> grade books, which was one of the Bluford books, and we were talking about how the boy...which book is it? Brothers book...Blood Brothers? No?

*I think that's one of them...*

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That is one of them...but that's not the one I'm thinking of. Whatever book I read with my 8<sup>th</sup> graders. I don't know, I can't think of it. But his cousin goes and thinks his cousin's up to no good, because he's getting all the—based on what he's doing, his background, the way he's acting and all this, things he's coming home with, he's making an assumption about this person. And in retrospect he's always with gang members, he's robbing a store and all this stuff. And in reality the cousin's just going to this underground club and rapping at night and he wants to be a rapper but he's too scared to tell his dad. And we talked about how you can't judge a book by it's cover. And we talked about the Mike Brown case, he could've...it's possible he was judged because of the way he was dressed, the way—the color of his skin, the way he was walking the way he mouthed off, the way it was said he was in this gas station, like he was judged by all this stuff before the cop even talked to him. And I was just, you can't judge...and there was other things like vocab words that we connected to it but I can't really remember the exact ones. I remember talking about it with the kids, the older ones, the 8<sup>th</sup> graders and the 7<sup>th</sup> graders but I can't give you an exact example.

In this situation, the teacher reported that she would have felt comfortable talking about it, but it never came up. However, she then went on to talk about a number of instances where it did. I thought that this was reflective of how deeply she had incorporated the work into her own practice because she were almost unconsciously incorporating it into class discussions, using the situation to compare to the plot of a novel that the class was reading, and so forth. This seems like an example of a culturally-competent teacher in action. Meaningful aspects of student culture are brought in and are essential to instruction, not a side lesson, or a special project. This same teacher, while not feeling like she did a lot of work with students related to Ferguson, also clearly understood the importance of giving students a platform to voice their concerns:

**I wish someone would put on a training like how we should have dealt with the Ferguson issue. How do you deal with that? Nobody ever told us. It's like 'have fun, figure it out.'**

***I wonder why...because...we didn't either, I mean nobody said anything. I don't remember them saying not to talk about it...***

**Somebody—ok, we were, they said not to bring it up and they said, we got an email—somebody must've said something wrong. He said 'don't bring it up unless it has to be brought up.' And my brother teaches in New Athens, Ill. And it's a super small town, all White, and he**



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was told not to talk about it—he's a social studies teacher, and one of his classes was current events, and he brought it up, and he was told 'do not talk about it.' He was not allowed to talk about it, because parents said something so that just brings you back up to how things are nowadays but he was told 'do not talk about it.' And he was like, 'it's current events, this is the big thing that's happening right now.' It was 20 minutes from them and he was not allowed to talk about it. And I know Edwardsville School District were not allowed to talk about it either. It was in the news. And the superintendent there is an African American guy and he said, 'Do not talk about it.'

*So why do you think they said that?*

I don't know.

*Because I have a theory.*

You have a theory?

*Yeah.*

I feel like the kids need to talk about it they don't understand what's going on around them—

Another teacher:

I think only one—without having to see a list to be reminded of that has stuck is just the definition of racism being institutional, especially the last year after all the Ferguson stuff, and how it's such a big-time topic of how you can actually be considered racist and different things. Because there have been a lot of conversations about racism as an institution, versus just saying someone is a racist and stuff like that. And that whole definition of institutional racism I had either never heard before or—

*You'd never heard it?*

I'd never heard it or it had always been in passing. Like 'here's this article and it mentions it' in a way that made it stick anything more than just, the idea of racism being someone of a different race. And a very rudimentary definition versus an ingrained part of society, that influences all sorts of different areas, not just one person's personal feelings toward another. Because I think probably until then I viewed it more as an individual thing, not a structural or an institutionalized—

*Would you say that having gone through that experience changed, it's hard to say changed, but do you feel like you view, I would say Ferguson, but I guess a lot of the movement, social justice, dealing with mass incarceration, things that people are kind of talking about right now. Do you feel that you view those issues differently than—again it's really hard because you're not there—*

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Yeah 100% I feel differently—

*I guess differently than you would have thought then.*

Yeah, it's hard to say for sure, had we not done that, again, there were little things that were happening year to year, as my own personal experiences I was coming to understand more, but doing the Race and Equity thing just vaulted all of that forward so much that I'd be curious to see where I would have been on like, my "take" I guess for lack of a better word—

*Yeah what would have been your views like going back to 2010—*

Or even the 2015 \_\_\_(name)\_\_\_ who had just continued that natural progression without that big...yearlong process happening. How far along would I have come, or would it have still been the same as the 2012 \_\_\_(name)\_\_\_\_\_ or whatever. With little difference, because that's some of the things like, one of the students who I've been keeping in contact with that recently graduated is very involved in student activism. We've actually gone out to dinner a couple of times and had some pretty long conversations about all of this type of stuff. And--

*Do you feel like you're more equipped to have that conversation now? (laughs)*

And it was more than-this was an assumption on my part, because we had not specifically had this-but the first time that we went out to dinner, I think it was kind of a testing the water thing maybe on this person's part, because it was 'I don't know—'

*'I know how I feel about this—'*

'I don't know what her views are on this, and what I can say' but once we started talking about stuff, I mean we sat there and talked for a good two to three hours.

*That's really cool.*

And it might be me reading into it, but I felt like it was, you could kind of see this kind of tension, that was not necessarily heavy, but you could kind of tell that there had been a hesitation, like 'ok the walls are down, we're ok' and there hasn't been any kind of hesitation since then when we had the conversations. But part of it is this personal bringing up things that relate to that talk we had in the Race and Equity training that, again, I don't know that I would've either been aware of at all, or would have thought I would be aware of-not to say I truly understand it now because not anyone truly does, but by learning the process with it and my understanding is a lot deeper now because of doing that, we probably would not be able to have the same kinds of conversations. And I would probably be a lot more skeptical about stuff, and a lot more of it is, listening. And not talking unless there's like a question asked or a clarification and different things. Kind of going back to just hearing the stories and just trying to better my understanding of, yeah I may or may not agree with everything this person is saying, but I can one hundred percent see why this person feels this way, where they're

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coming from, and I don't know that I—don't know everything so there's probably some middle ground between us that I wouldn't have known or wouldn't have felt that way.

*Did it—did you talk with your students about any of that stuff? Did it ever come up in the classroom?*

We did, there was a little hesitating because there was a lot of iffy ground on what you could and couldn't say—

*From administration, or just your comfort level?*

A little bit of both at the beginning of the year, some of it was probably personal level because it's a new group of kids. And it went down the first day of school, like the night before the first like...

*One hundred percent—*

You don't know the kids—

*Yeah me teaching journalism—*

(laughs)

*Really interesting. Really cool, but really interesting.*

I can imagine. Yeah so there were some conversations but it was mostly about like—a kid would randomly say their family was at a protest. Or different things. But there wasn't a whole lot, probably just comfort level on both parts, like I don't know how much I can say to a certain kid, without them taking something the wrong way or like, knowing if their parents would be ok with that conversation being had.

*Well and it's one thing, as a high school journalism teacher, I mean that is what that class is about.*

(laughs) Right, it didn't really pertain to 8<sup>th</sup> grade math (subject)

*It would be weird if I didn't talk about it, versus \_\_\_\_\_, you're either having to create something that doesn't really fall under the auspices of what you're supposed to be doing, or you're bringing it up, which is fine, but you can't—*

Right—

*It's weird to start that conversation.*

Right it would be different if it was social studies or something.

*Sure, sure*

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Yeah, so there were some little things here and there, by the time November, and the Grand Jury announcement happened or whatever, I mean that was a different ballgame because we've now known each other since August. With that one, I can't exactly remember the time, but when the high schools started doing the walkouts and stuff, that's when we—I had three math classes, and we ended up having conversations in two of the three. One, they were, kind of like, not immature like (makes a goofy sound). Still very young-immature. So it was one of those, there was no, they were just kind of oblivious, so unless someone would've happened to say something there was no really no reason to bring it up with them. But my other two classes, one had a couple of kids that—any time they'd be working on a group assignment or something, they'd be having conversations about it. I'm walking around the room, and they're doing their math work and talking very...actively about things that are going on, and you can tell like, they want to be able to do something. And some of them were having very mature conversations, like talking about—I don't know if I remember specifically but I think it was about some of them having, like a lot of the more violent things that were happening were people out of town coming in and how it's making the city look when their own neighborhoods burning down. Not just like 'ha ha ha this is burning down' like it's—they're actually putting real thought into it. So those conversations were kind of happening on the side between the kids. And then the high schools in the area all did the walkouts, and there was a lot of talk about the junior highs on them trying to plan something but they're fourteen and they can't really do that very well (laughs).

*(laughs)*

Can you even imagine how it would get going?

*Yeah, coordinating is not a great...skill at that age*

So they were gonna do a sit-in at lunch, and they were all just kind of like, 'do we or don't we, do we or don't we' and some of them just started to stand and they wimped out. But there were conversations, definitely on the forefront of their minds. So when the high school thing happened, the day before they did their big crackdown and 'do not talk about this' there had been an article in the paper that was about all of the walkouts that had happened in the area, but almost every picture was on...the one school that like, got more chaotic. So there were several that were—at least from what you could see that were pretty organized, that were actually marching going on, regular chanting and stuff like that. And you had one that was yelling and screaming at the police, throwing rocks at the police, flicking off the police, cussing out the police and all of that. And so if you went and clicked on all the pictures, there were maybe 8-10 pictures, one or two were of the organized protests, and the rest were literally 'here's the kid flicking off the cop, here's the kid screaming in a cop's face' and stuff like that. And so I think we actually might've spent the entire, my \_\_\_\_\_ class we might have spent the entire class period—I brought it up with them in that case, and it was another thing they were having a lot of side conversations going on—

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*You could sort of read the room—that they were talking about it?*

Right and at that point, I don't remember if it had been the day before that had been their sort-of attempt to stage a protest, or if it was still in the works of trying to figure out how they're gonna do it. They weren't talking about it as freely in class as the pre-algebra classes were, but there were still a lot of conversations. So I pulled up the article and we had a whole conversation just about like, media, and if you're an outside person reading this, and you're looking at what kind of message this is sending, why are they showing this many of these pictures versus this, and had a conversation that there was actually—a kid in the class actually made the comment, I don't think he said quite "thank you" for talking about this, but no one else would talk to us about this kind of stuff. And so it was just you could kind of tell the feeling of a lot of them wanting to have these conversations...at least have an open conversation with someone that won't just like shut it down. So we actually had a really good talk in that class just about all of that in general. And then the next class that came in was the one where a lot of the kids were having the side conversation. Theirs was a little less mature so I kind of debated with them, and I think I had told—I think it was the co-taught class—I had given the other teacher the heads up of "hey, depending on how they come in, this is what happened in my other class, so we may or may not talk about this in there." And they came in and they were still talking about it. So we didn't talk the whole time in that class, we had a split lunch and just up until lunch.

*Kind of like a pressure-release valve? (laughs)*

Kind of, just like, 'hey I know this is going on, blah blah blah.' But this was also the class that had the kid that was really wanting to do something but didn't know how to go about it, so we talked more about civilly protesting and different things like that, and what message are you trying to send, are you trying to send the message of 'look at us we're yelling and cussing people out' or are you trying to send a message of we're actually trying to make a point? And so we ended up having some good conversations with that one, too. I think it was the next day that it came out, 'do not talk about anything with them whatsoever.' (laughs) so then we—

*Which is frustrating...I see the administration's point...I obviously was not a member of conversations like that, but...and they never said why they gave that directive, but honestly, there's very few teachers that I would trust to have a good conversation. I could probably put them on two hands (laughs)*

(laughs) Which is unfortunate.

So in this case, the teacher was able to go beyond just having rich, meaningful conversations with the students in class regarding the situation in Ferguson. The conversations ranged from talking about what was happening, to extremely nuanced

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discussions about the consequences of protesting and the image of the people protesting or taking advantage of the chaos in the area to engage in criminal behavior. Again, these are middle school students engaging in this high level dialogue. Furthermore, this teacher took their discussions to the next step and tried to help the students into a productive form of protest, and discussed what the ramifications were for the image of the community and the schools when demonstrations at other schools had gotten out of control. It would seem to me that this is exactly the kind of teacher response that an administrator, and a parent of a student in this community would want.

Another example of this type of discourse happening in the classroom in conjunction with the events in Ferguson:

*You mentioned the—talking about Mike Brown and Ferguson and stuff. How did that—did that come out because it was just happening in the news and kids wanted to talk about it? Or was that something that like...we need to talk about this?*

**I think both. I think I kind of waited to see when they would bring it up, and most of them did. But it was also something that I knew we needed to talk about when it happened. It was I think, the weekend before school started. So it wasn't something that we tackled on the first day of school, because that's a little...much. But it—I know we talked about it the first week. In learning lab quite a lot—we read articles a lot, we watched videos that I had pre-watched at home because you never know...but I knew it was something that we needed to talk about, because it was something that was happening to them. It was happening to me, it's in my neighborhood too. That was something that we talk about a lot.**

*It sounds that you had lessons, it's like you put together lessons to talk about it.*

**Especially in learning lab, because we have time to play with that.**

*Is that something that you feel like you needed to prepare for?*

**Yeah, because I didn't want to go in and say—that was still when we didn't know what happened...I mean I don't think we do now, but I wanted to be able to say, 'well this is what some people are saying, this is what some people are saying. I didn't want to say that this is what I believe, because I didn't want that to be something different than their parents had told them. (pause) I remember we got a lot of stuff around—maybe not that very same week,**

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but maybe like a month later. Stuff from Teaching Tolerance, stuff like 'how do you talk about Ferguson in your classroom,' and...Flocabulary did—it was mentioned in their weekend wrap.

*Flocabulary?*

Yeah it's like a...they—it's like some subscription program you can do and they have ideas on all kinds of things. It's awesome.

*Ok.*

But it was coming up in other things we were seeing. It wasn't something I just wanted to walk in to and be like, 'so, guys, Ferguson this weekend...' and not know anything about it myself.

*Why not?*

Umm...just because I like to know about things before I talk about them?

*No that makes—did you feel—I guess what I'm getting at is did you feel like because they're...I mean \_\_\_\_\_ graders are pretty young—*

I teach \_\_\_\_\_ graders.

*Well you—I mean that's not a huge difference...*

Yeah, no.

*Because they were pre-teens that you needed to kind of control that discussion a little bit, or that you needed to be prepared to...*

I wanted to be able to answer questions, instead of just—I mean if—in class I don't know the answer to stuff, I can look it up, or we'll talk about it tomorrow. I didn't want to have to say 'well we're not gonna talk about that because I don't know.'

*Right.*

I wanted to at least say 'well, this is what 17 news reports said happened, so...' I don't know. I just like being prepared.

*Did you think you found yourself doing that a lot, answering questions? Or did you feel like they were expressing like how they felt?*

Somewhat answering questions, because some kids knew a lot about what had happened, some knew a little bit. I don't think there was anyone that was like 'what happened? I don't know what happened in Ferguson...'

*Yeah, yeah.*

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There wasn't any of that, but...we talked a lot about protests, especially as the school year went on. And that was fun, and how we should protest...appropriately. And I did research on that, too. And—because I wanted to give them ideas on protesting, not necessarily like, 'you should walk out of class.' Because you're like 12 and that's not a good idea. Not that I don't think you should do something, but...

*Were you afraid that they would do something...without—*

When all the stuff happened at \_\_\_\_\_?

*Being inappropriate, or without being inappropriate?*

When all the stuff happened at \_\_\_\_\_, and it was a lot of kids that they knew. I was like, 'I don't want them to just walk out...'. Not that I thought they would do it, but a few, I was like, 'I'm a little bit worried that you're just gonna get up and leave.' Nobody did, but...

Again, the teacher in this case centered the discussions on appropriate student responses to the frustration they were experiencing from seeing events take place on the news, and for some in their own community. Like others in the study, this teacher could cite specific preparations she had made to be able to respond to students, including doing independent research and incorporating the lesson content within existing resources that are already in use in the classroom.

Yeah we didn't do it...deeply...but it ended up—I did more mentoring off the book with the group we had last year, because we had a lot of these kinds of conversations. It gave some of the time back, where if we veered off, it still could connect to whatever we were discussing. It wasn't, yeah, canned. I think we had a lot more, especially with things happening, all of that happening in Ferguson, that's why I feel like, what a shame we didn't continue a lot of that, and bring in more community members.

*Did you feel that that prepared you to talk about those things?*

I don't know...at least I felt...I felt strongly that we should allow the kids—if there was something on their mind before class started...you can't just tell kids to not think about it—'don't think about that.' Especially when the neighborhoods, because I knew Riverview kind of boundary lines, so many of them were so close...were close, or had cousins or family that were too close. And that at least let them—let—listen for a little bit. And let them talk about what was going on. Because there was so many messages about—I remember getting a couple emails, I didn't agree with them. I remember read—well someone's gonna walk through and I shared a little bit with \_\_\_\_\_ because he's my boss. That they needed to have a



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place to talk, and not, you know...talking de-escalates. Not letting them talk, or letting them—I guess they were afraid of what we would share with them and I thought ‘why can’t—’ there’s not that trust there with some of your own teachers. But maybe some...maybe that’s ok. But I feel like at least in our building anyway, I feel like a majority of the teachers—and I don’t know if I can say that’s because of that training—I’m sure it helped for a lot of people, because I doubt anybody really had any experience like that before. I know I didn’t have that experience, a circle of people kind of talking about where the students are really coming from, and realizing your own bias and background that you can’t—the idea that nobody’s really at fault anymore, kind of released us from the guilt trip you feel. Like some people—I can’t handle the people who baby the kids. I just can’t. There’s a way to build a relationship, be a person of authority, but not be their friend, you know, and some people, that’s the—‘I feel sorry for them, so I’m gonna let ‘em skate on this and let ‘em skate on that.’ Even with those four year old kids, it’s just, it was so funny that like, ‘oh Joey or whatever can’t put his coat on.’ I’m like, ‘Why? Joe, go put your coat on.’ (laughs) You know, and it’s like, the independent thing. Letting them, you know, do it. And I felt like, I felt like we probably should have done a little more, but...I’m sure from what I kind of heard from teachers there were conversations going on in classrooms. It just...I mean I—we’d never experienced anything like that. And again, for us, I mean like, how do we not talk about it? They’re gonna hear conversations, and I think they need to hear our conversations from school, which are probably gonna be very different from home conversations, anyway. For some of the kids. Where you could calmly talk about—calmly within a range, because most of them, I don’t know if I saw a lot of initial anger, I think it’s more hurt, just hurting. I think I saw more of that than “AHHHH,” like an intense anger...

*Yeah.*

It was more just like, disbelief. Lots of disbelief. And I think when you have that I feel like you need to talk, because they’re just...and it’s important for them to know nobody can quite—we couldn’t quite put our head around it, really. I mean I don’t think so. Even with a year...yeah it’s coming up. Like, yeah, I don’t know, that’s crazy thinking—cause that’s near my birthday too, so it’s like, what a year that was to start, for all of us. In St. Louis. And to still hear about it, people who know Ferguson, you know. I don’t know that our kids got...yeah I wish we could’ve just done more on the social side—activism and...but I don’t know, I don’t think they were prepared to step into that role, and we had—we would have to do so much to get them ready for...and the whole deal with what happened at the high schools. And I thought some of it was handled well. And again, between all three of them ‘which one handled it like...the bes—quote/unquote the best’ and which ones was it really—and is it different based on Eastside versus the Westside of course and...how that got perceived in the media, too. Yeah. We veered off of it.

Regardless of anyone’s personal opinions of the shooting of Michael Brown and the resulting protests and general unrest surrounding the events in Ferguson, I would have

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to believe that people would appreciate teachers being able to conduct this type of dialogue with students. The conversations as reported in the interviews were nuanced, balanced, well-researched and prepared-for, solution-driven, and culturally responsive to the perspectives of the students in the classroom. Furthermore, throughout the interviews the teachers stressed the importance they gave the issue and noted over and over their desire for the students to understand the events as they happened and give them nonviolent, practical tools for expressing themselves.

In fact, one might go so far as to say that if the result of the Race and Equity professional development was nothing more than 20+ teachers having the skills, knowledge, and temperament to interact with students of color on this level, then the training should be considered a success.

### **Teacher Mindset**

One of the stated goals of the Race and Equity professional development is to influence the mindset, or stance, of the teachers who take it so that they can be more culturally responsive to the students of color they serve. In that respect, I think that the training was successful as well. All of the teachers that I interviewed stated that they found the training meaningful, and most of them found it profoundly so. Furthermore, it did not seem that this was mere lip service to an answer that the teachers felt they were supposed to give. Rather, in their explanations, all of them could cite specific reasons for why they felt the training to be meaningful to them. All of them could relate anecdotes about specific activities during the training that either changed the way they had viewed

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an issue before, or influenced them to be more empathetic to the conditions that many of the students in the school—95% of whom are receive Federal Free or Reduced Lunch benefits—live with.

One of the most common responses when I asked teachers what they remembered from the training was listening to the stories of African American teachers. One activity that was cited numerous times in the interviews was an activity where the W teachers sat in a big circle around a circle of African American teachers. The African-American teachers then told stories about their past experiences with racism. The stories ranged from events that had taken place at school, out in public, when they were young, and so on. The teachers in the interviews reported that that these stories helped them understand what racism or racist systems have impacted the lives of their colleagues.

One teacher's account:

**And just realizing that just yeah the feelings run very deep and just realizing that even though we've been through Civil Rights and all of that movement, even though I feel like we've taken a giant step backward in this last few years, um, I feel that you know that you know there are a lot of struggles that people do go through, and continue to go through.**

***Is that something that you didn't really think about before?***

**Yeah, I guess I just always in my mind because I really haven't had that much exposure and I was just like, 'OK, it's all over and done with' but it isn't, and I know that a lot of people are still judged by their race, so...even more so...there's a lot of people who are very very much bigots, and prejudiced and not just against Black people, Hispanic people and other races**

***And is that something that you just didn't think about before or—***

**Yeah, it just never really crossed my mind. I figured you know things, have turned a corner, you know, small-town thinking just...lack of exposure. And now it's clear that, watching those people and watching them cry, and these are all well-educated...at that training when we were there. And watching people with their doctorates and masters', well-educated Black people and watching them cry over...having those same conversations we had casually in our**

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group, watching them answer the same questions was illuminating. So I guess I'm more aware that the struggle continues.

*Would you say that was the most...because you know you've mentioned that a couple times that you...talking about that and again the story you told, do you think that was the most impactful part of that training for you?*

Yeah.

*Why?*

Because it just...it was such a small group of people, and for all of them just to have the exact same experience and just to watch all of them break down and cry it just...it made me cry. It's like OK it wasn't like this was early in my childhood, it's like these are still things that happened to them.

*Yeah, so it wasn't...my question's kind of misguided. It wasn't really like the "concepts" that you connected with it was really more the personal connection and watching people talk about their experiences, that's what stuck with you-*

**And realizing this is still ongoing.**

Like several of the other teachers interviewed, this teacher was greatly impacted by the stories told by colleagues during some of the exercises in the training. It seemed that listening to people she was friends with and respected talk about how they had been treated in the past was crucial to her understanding and acceptance of the presence of racism. Again, like many Whites who grow up surrounded almost entirely by other Whites, this teacher just didn't think much about civil rights, as she phrased it. However, when confronted with first-person accounts of it happening, it essentially forces the White teacher to engage with the problem, even if it's just to respond to it.

Something else of note in this passage was the framing of the stories that this teacher was moved by in her account of the teacher meetings. She refers to watching well-educated Black people, with master's degrees and doctorates talk about their experiences. This is described in a way that makes the reader think that the level of

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education of the participants gives more weight and power to their stories. It seems as though the stories of oppression told by less-educated people would be less credible. I would like to think that she meant that the stories were more moving because she knew the people personally, but it is hard to ignore the implication of her statement.

Another example:

**No. I don't remember any of that stuff. The only thing that sticks in my mind is the stories our colleagues shared about their backgrounds, and what type of struggles they went through growing up and getting to where they are now and being judged on the color of their skin. That's the only thing that really sticks out. I don't remember anything else (laughs). Kumbaya, I guess.**

*You keep saying Kumbaya, why do you keep saying Kumbaya?*

Because you know it was like a circle and we were like...

*I've never sung Kumbaya, so...*

We got in a circle...eye contact...you had to bring your energy in, it was very hippyish.

*Did you appreciate that or did you—*

No, I thought it was weird. (laughs)

*Just cause you're not from that vibe?*

I have good vibes, I—

*Well you're not very, you're not a very kumbaya person, so you know...*

I have my hippyness but that was a little too much for me, so I didn't like—I don't know it was very...I don't know...

*Um, ok. So you say you didn't really remember much but the Kumbaya circle?*

(laughs)

*But would you say you made any changes in mindset or practice as a result of that professional development?*

I guess hearing from our colleagues the struggles they went through and stuff I've thought of that when it comes to the kids and all that, but—

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*What do you mean you thought of that when it comes the kids?*

That—I've heard my kids say they've been followed in stores before like \_\_\_\_\_ had mentioned and hearing \_\_\_\_\_ talk about getting her scholarship and stuff. I've tried to set up one of my dancers—he's going to high school but I know that there's scholarships out there and stuff like that and he wants to go into dance and I'm like 'come back in three years and I'll get you hooked up with SIUE because I know they're looking for male dancers.' Trying to get like that. I feel like I'm more—every year I learn a little from all my kids and I am understanding more of their backgrounds. I mean some of them have really terrible backgrounds, especially where we teach it's just every group of kids is gonna be different based on which ones you have. I think it's just experience, being in the classroom experiencing different kids and different situations that they approach you with every single day and learning how to deal with it that way, I think that's more helpful than that training was, it's just the experience you get on a daily basis.

So this teacher reported being impacted by colleague stories as well. She was then able to make a connection from the training to her students' lives. This teacher even struggled with the presentation of the information, repeatedly referring to the activities as *kumbaya*. Even though the training wasn't aligned to her personality, necessarily, she still saw the value in it and used it to grow into a more complete teacher who could recognize the same struggles in the lives of her students.

Another teacher also reported that the training opened their eyes to facets of their students' lives and colleagues' lives that she had no idea about. This was a teacher who had very early on decided to make it a point to get to know her students, get to know the community, but wasn't aware of how deeply race and issues of racism impacted the community.

**Largely the whole Race and Equity thing that we did. Because there were a lot—when we first got assigned to that, it wasn't really a choice thing, I was very...skeptical might be kind of a strong word, but I can't think of a better one.**

*Why were you skeptical?*

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More along the lines of just feeling...I would've been there eight years by that point or something like that, and I'd already had my "breakthrough" at five years or whatever and I continued to just learn from that, and I thought it should've been more new teachers, new to the building, new to that environment or things, that it wasn't necessarily something that someone who's been at the building eight years would benefit from it, per se. I felt like I had already learned, kind of through my experiences, and that it was going to be a waste of time. And I probably still felt that way for the first couple of meetings, and (pause) I don't know what it was just the way that it was designed and the way that they slowly break down barriers and kind of open eyes and a lot of the stuff was hearing stories from coworkers and being able to kind of think back to different student situations that I've had with students, especially by that point I already had some students that graduated by that point, so I had some adult-level conversations with some former students, and being able to kind of apply things that I thought that I had understood at that point and realizing that 'no, I really have no idea.' And having that—was it a whole year?

*I think it was the school year.*

Yeah, I knew it was at least a school year, but I couldn't remember if we did any follow-up

*No, I don't think so*

But how long of a process that was, I noticed very subtle changes in things, I would go back, hear, things I sort of picked up that were just part of everyday life. Whether it was just random comments people would make, or just things that would've normally I would not have even noticed whatsoever, it was just like 'oh that is really happening,' or 'oh, that means this.' That was really the big tipping thing...

*So you mentioned the stories, people just talking about their experiences. Can you go more into that, I'm not asking you to name names, or talk about a person's specific experience, but go back to what you were thinking while that was happening, like what—*

Yeah

*Like what you were processing—and I'm assuming that you're talking about African American teachers taking about their experiences.*

So like when we did the fishbowl thing, sitting around the side or the edge, listening, I think a couple ones that stood out were...someone had mentioned something about how...at some point, usually around adolescence or whatever, they had to have the talk about what it is to grow up Black in America. Things like that, and since that point, I've actually had conversations with former students about that, where they've had to give a younger sibling the talk or they just in passing mentioned 'yeah when I had the talk' so, just the fact that even existed.

*Sure, the talk you mean?*

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Yeah, because I think part of when that day happened, I think it might have even been asked to all the White teachers that were listening, 'did any of you happen to have something like this?' It's like, 'no, what are you even talking about?' And just across the board every African American teacher saying 'yeah this is something that we had to do.' And just the fact that that existed, and there were a couple...there was one story about someone who I think it might've been a recent thing, had been out and it was like, I think it was four of 'em, and two were White and two were Black, and cops stopped them and told the White guys they could leave they just had to question these two. And they were like 'we were all together this entire time what do you mean we can leave?' and just the fact that this is one of my friends that is telling the story that this had happened to. Another teacher was telling the story of like, couldn't even get stories out because they were breaking down into tears the entire time, just about different things, whether it was self-image or different things, that just really made a lot of things hit home, which then made me pick up more on, like in conversations with students or just hearing students talk about things and picking more up on cues and clues and just like 'ok this is the kind of thing they were talking about. This is a very big part of reality. This changes how I would interact with them. I would never have known to do. Or to be cognizant of, had it not been for those kinds of conversations that we had as part of the Race and Equity training. And the fact that there were so many of them spread over the whole year kind of helped saturate things, and gave you a better view of this as reality, this is every day, not just a 'oh here is this random story of what I had to do one time.' This is part of daily life, so...

*I think that's a good word-saturation. I think that, because I mean—so much professional development is 2 hours of you know, even if you're really into it and its intense, it's gone in the next time.*

That's what I was trying to think if there had been anything before we did that—

*I'm sure there was something, but you don't even—*

Other than that and like maybe a couple articles and the reason I remember that is because there's some other memory associated with it. I think that falls into the whole idea going into it being skeptical thinking 'I've done this, I already know about this, I've lived this for 8 years, I've read these articles and different things, there's not gonna be something else you're going to be able to teach me that I don't already—at least have a basic understanding of.' And by the end of the year it was a whole different tune.

*So, a big part of that experience was you know, having conversations with colleagues, and listening to stories, either in a group setting or one-on-one, but another big part of it was concepts, you know there were actual social justice concepts, structural racism, concepts that they taught. Do you—did any of those stick for you, do you think about any of them?*

I think only one—without having to see a list to be reminded of that has stuck is just the definition of racism being institutional, especially the last year after all the Ferguson stuff, and how it's such a big-time topic of how you can actually be considered racist and different



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things. Because there have been a lot of conversations about racism as an institution, versus just saying someone is a racist and stuff like that. And that whole definition of institutional racism I had either never heard before or—

*You'd never heard it?*

I'd never heard it or it had always been in passing. Like 'here's this article and it mentions it' in a way that made it stick anything more than just, the idea of racism being someone of a different race. And a very rudimentary definition versus an ingrained part of society, that influences all sorts of different areas, not just one person's personal feelings toward another. Because I think probably until then I viewed it more as an individual thing, not a structural or an institutionalized—

*Would you say that having gone through that experience changed, it's hard to say changed, but do you feel like you view, I would say Ferguson, but I guess a lot of the movement, social justice, dealing with mass incarceration, things that people are kind of talking about right now. Do you feel that you view those issues differently than—again it's really hard because you're not there—*

Yeah 100% I feel differently—

For this teacher, the process of the training itself was very important. She reported that she had some other, surface-level professional development (like reading an article here or there), and didn't get that much out of it, but due to the fact that she had enough experience that she felt that she didn't really need something like this. But once she had heard respected colleagues frankly discussing their experiences, this teacher really re-examined things that she had assumed. Once again, a key factor was the stories told by African American teachers.

This teacher reported having a very similar experience and took away some of the same lessons as others, and once again, the key factor was hearing stories of discrimination from fellow teachers:

**Hearing other people's perspectives on stuff. Like we read a bunch of cards, and it would say like, White woman and things she'd experienced. And Black woman and things she'd experienced...do you remember that?**

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*I'm trying to think, was that—*

**We sat in a circle in the library—**

*Did we have to write things down? Or was it like general stuff—*

**They had general ones, and people said like, “I’ve had that happen to me.”**

*Ok it was like, scenarios that people talked about their like...how they had experienced that themselves. Right. Yeah. And what were you saying, something about a circle?*

**We sat in a big circle I remember, and we all read different cards, and people would say, ‘this happened to me.’ Stuff like ‘I was ignored in the store’ or ‘People follow me around every time I go shopping.’ And I just...you kind of hear about that kind of stuff, but you’re ‘oh that doesn’t really happen,’ or you know, ‘that happens to “thugs” or people look like they’re trouble.’ I don’t know...that’s not a thing, people don’t look like they’re troublemakers, but you don’t think about that kind of stuff happening until you’re friend goes, “oh yeah that happened to me last week.” And you’re like, “oh...” It’s two thousand...whatever, it shouldn’t be like that anymore, it’s not the sixties...especially when we talked about—when we talked about Civil Rights with the kids, you’re like, “oh yeah that happened in the sixties” and they’re like, “yeah that still happens now.” And you’re kinda, “oh...I don’t see that, just hanging out by myself in \_\_\_\_\_, I don’t see that happening to me, but you do the exact same things I do and see something different.” That’s what stuck with me the most.**

*Do you—so, in class do you...do you have conversations with them about like...*

**We have conversations about discrimination—**

Similar to the teachers engaging in conversations with students about issues surrounding Ferguson, here is a teacher who made direct connections from experiences in the professional development and took them to the classroom to engage with the students in nuanced conversations surrounding issues of race and privilege. I have to believe that school leaders and members of the community would be pleased if they knew this was the level of discourse occurring between teachers and students at the middle school level.

### **Summary**

Initially, my vision for this project was simply a collection of stories told by educators of their interactions with students. These classroom experiences, largely unseen by the outside public, make up a huge portion of the business of education—what happens in the classroom between teacher and student—but they are almost never studied. We collect test scores multiple times per year on a variety of different students in a variety of different subjects. Teachers are observed and evaluated based on their performance. To a lesser extent, teachers take surveys about what they do in the class, how they interact with students, and so forth. Even students are occasionally asked to respond to questions about their interactions in the classroom.

What I have not seen, though, are teachers telling their stories about what goes on inside the classroom. For years, I knew what happened in my classroom, and I would hear my colleagues' anecdotes about what happened in their classroom, maybe with a particular student or in regards to a particular lesson. But I knew that these conversations are often guarded and performative, constructed in a way that doesn't necessarily get to the whole truth about what happened.

I thought that having participated in the same training as the teachers, and having built working relationships with them, that they would be more open to sharing specific stories, even if those stories were about situations that were uncomfortable or embarrassing. Anticipating the possibility that they might be reluctant to talk candidly, I

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planned to look at their answers for patterns or similarities in the way that they avoided talking directly about negative interactions with students.

I also wanted to know if the teachers felt that the training that they experienced was worthwhile. This had been a lengthy, intense, and often emotional experience. The teachers invested a great deal of time in this training, in terms of hours spent after school and sometimes during school, participating in activities and workshops. The school also invested a great deal of resources, including the cost of the training, the allocation of all of the after school professional development hours of the teachers involved, in addition to substitute teachers for all the teachers involved on a number of in-service trainings that occurred during school hours. After all of these resources, did the training work? Did the teachers realize a change in their mindset? Did they change the way they approach their students? Did they use what they had learned in the training with their students?

Again, I felt that a one-on-one interview would be the best way to determine the answers to these questions. In that situation, I felt that I could explore with the teacher how the training had impacted them, if at all, personally and professionally. If they said that it did, then what examples might they use to show how they incorporated different ideas into their teaching or how had concepts from the activities and discussions altered the way they approached their students or their subject material?

## **Chapter 5**

### **Findings: Mindset**

When I first conceived of this project, I had hoped to accomplish two things. First, I wanted to know if White teachers of (primarily) students of color would discuss events in their classroom in a frank and unflinching manner, and how this training changed these teachers. I know that as a White teacher, I entered the classroom and approached my students affected by the various ways I had been taught to exist in a system of White supremacy. The process of recognizing those traits and patterns of behavior and changing them has been a process that continues to this day, after a number of different, lengthy experiences (the Race and Equity professional development, training in Culturally Responsive Teaching, my graduate program in Education Leadership and Policy Studies, to name a few). Along the way, there have been moments that, upon reflection, make me regretful of the way I treated my students. One of the examples of this is the story I told or alluded to in several of the interviews, where I took a situation that was really just me misunderstanding what a student said, and turned it into the equivalent of a legal matter.

Having conducted and analyzed the interviews, I feel that rather than openly and frankly tell stories about negative interactions with students in their classes, a majority of the teachers avoided going into specifics and talked around uncomfortable interactions with students in their classes. The teachers I interviewed, as I will demonstrate, did not directly address actions that they had taken in specific ways in the classroom, even when

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given a chance to address a follow-up, and in some cases, given a clear example of what I was thinking about, in the form of a shorter version of my own story of my first year and the choice I made to be “tough” rather than build a relationship.

I strongly suspect that most White teachers of students of color, especially those who have been working for several years, have had similar misunderstandings, or otherwise acted in ways that they regret. Furthermore, I suspected that teachers who had undergone an intensive, yearlong antiracist professional development would have spent time reflecting upon their practices and interactions with their students and would recognize instances where they regretted things that they had said or done.

While this may be the case, the fact is that for the purposes of this project, I found the teachers I interviewed to be less than forthcoming in this particular area. Several of them, when asked directly about times when they had regretted their treatment of students in their class, dissembled, claiming that they probably had, but that they weren't really able to name any specific examples. Ultimately, two of the six I interviewed could come up with examples. Two others mentioned things they had done, but couched them in terms of systemic issues related to school or district policies that weren't really in their control. None of the six related a story about a specific student.

Although disappointing, this was not completely surprising. Antiracism in Whites tends to be performative, consumed as much by the desire to appear antiracist as to actually be so (Leonardo, 2010). Based on the nature of the responses to this question, I believe that under the right circumstances, the interview subjects might be more forthcoming with specific stories or examples, but that didn't happen in this case.

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Where this reluctance to talk frankly comes from, I cannot be certain. I know that in general, Whites have been socialized to avoid racial conversations. This avoidance can come both in what Whites won't say and what they will say when discussing race. Sometimes Whites will employ code words to avoid direct discussion of racial issues (Fasching-Varner, 2013). This became painfully obvious to me when I went back through and did some critical analysis on the conversations that I had with the teachers I interviewed. All of us (myself included) seemed to do everything we could to avoid using racial language at all. What follows are some general statistics on the conversations that I had with the teachers I interviewed:

Interviews: 6  
Total time: approximately 254 minutes  
Total words spoken: 42,123  
Number of occurrences for selected words:  
"Racism/Racist"-29  
"Culture/Cultural"-35  
"Prejudice"-2  
"Difference/Different"-160  
"White"-79  
"Black"-49

Obviously this evidence is circumstantial, but it seems to me to be an indicator of White language usage that favors neutral or neutral-sounding words like differences as opposed to the more direct use of words like racism or prejudice. In retrospect, this is reflected clearly in the questions that I wrote to structure the interviews. For each interview, I had a set of six questions that I was to ask every interviewee. Since the nature of the interviews was more conversational, these were not the only questions that I asked, as I also asked numerous follow-up questions throughout each interview, as the transcripts make clear. Nevertheless, the unifying thread that ran through each interview

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was the list of six questions that I did ask, regardless of whether or not I thought they had already answered the question. These were the six questions I asked:

- 1) *How would you characterize your experience and familiarity with issues of social justice before you became a teacher?*
- 2) *Do you have any regrets in regards to the way you have treated a student in the past? Can you talk about that experience?*
- 3) *What experiences, either through working in the classroom or professional development, or other means, have impacted your perspective in the area of social justice?*
- 4) *What concepts remain with you from the race and equity professional development you experienced in the 2012-2013 school year?*
- 5) *Do you think you made any changes, in mindset or professional practice, as a result of that professional development?*
- 6) *Would you be willing to engage in a similar professional development in the future?*

Based on these questions, I am not surprised that the answers they solicited were wrapped in neutral language. The most critically self-reflective question, number two, which asks teachers to discuss specific details about a time when they mistreated a student, should probably have been worded differently. When I wrote it, I had in my head the experience that I related earlier in this analysis, when I had a cultural misunderstanding, driven by the racial differences between myself and my student, which led me to needlessly pursue a referral and assault accusation against a student. The question I asked, however, could be broadly interpreted to mean any number of things. In fact, I think that it is worded in a way that leads one to answer *yes* (what teacher hasn't regretted a way that they dealt with a student?) but then avoid taking ownership with a specific story—oh, there's so many or I can't really think of a specific example. Instead, I could have pursued a different tactic:



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*Can you think of a time when cultural differences caused you to mistreat a student of color in your classroom?*

Or:

*Knowing what you know now, would you label any of your past interactions with students of color as racist?*

There would be any number of ways to formulate this question in a more direct manner that would require the respondent to acknowledge some things that they might be afraid to admit. The fact is that the word racism is scary. Racism for Whites is always something that someone else is. We can always come up with some reason or excuse for any action that explains away or justifies or mitigates or negates the harmful system that we have benefitted from or power that we have used intentionally. Racism is always someone else. Racism is the n-word.

I don't remember actively thinking this when I wrote these questions, but I am positive that some part of me knew that asking about racism would be off-putting for the teachers I was interviewing. Upon hearing that word, I am sure that the interviews would have taken a very different, much more guarded and ultimately less effective and revealing turn. That was the balance beam I attempted to walk—how to get teachers to openly self-reflect and discuss that reflection without scaring them into silence?

I thought that by picking people that I knew fairly well that I would be more likely to get straightforward answers. However, what may have happened is that by picking people I knew fairly well, I shaped the questions in a way that facilitated a comfortable conversation, but to an extent, avoided critical questioning on my part, and critical self-reflection on theirs. In any event, the result was a series of conversations that

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discussed the effects of systemic racism and the classroom dynamic in a general way, but not through genuine storytelling.

### **Findings: Practice**

The other goal of the research was a little more vague: I wanted to try to determine what benefits, if any the teachers received from participating in the training itself. I wanted to see what effects or impacts the training had on their mindset or performance, some three years later. I wasn't sure what that would look like. Especially since this data is all self-reported by means of a face-to-face interview, what would constitute evidence of a lasting effect or impact? Similar to asking about teachers' personal interactions with students, the teachers could shape their answers in a way that exposed themselves to as little scrutiny as possible.

However, in this regard, I was surprised, not only by the universality of the support the teachers had for the training, but the meaningful and very specific ways they felt that they and their students had benefitted. I was not prepared for how eagerly and skillfully the teachers reported jumping into conversations with their students regarding the events in Ferguson, Missouri last year. The teachers all could recall, in significant detail and with little prompting, specific conversations they had had with their students about those events. Many of those conversations were geared toward positive outlets for student angst. The issues of police brutality, mass incarceration, and predatory police policies, among others, have not really gone away in the last few months, but have seemed to intensify as new incidents are brought to the attention of activists and the

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media. As a result, the knowledge of concepts, paired with the comfort level necessary to discuss difficult issues with students seems to have served the teachers and the school as a whole very well. At least this school seems to have a large number of teachers, both White and Black, who can address these issues with students in a culturally responsive and positive way. I don't think that is the case without this professional development.

Finally, I think it is clear that the reports from teachers in the study of feeling moved to change, or at least reflect upon, their past beliefs and understandings regarding race relations by the stories told by their African American peers had the most lasting impact. Five out of the six teachers cited specifically activities from the professional development where teachers of color recounted past experiences with racism as a pivotal moment in the training, as well as their comprehension of the ways that systemic racism impacts the lives of their colleagues, and by extension, students. It seems that because they were able to hear this testimony from their colleagues, they gained a much deeper understanding of the community they serve, and how their students are also affected by various aspects of systemic racism.

To be honest, I did not anticipate that the conversations would focus so heavily on the events in Ferguson and the teachers' and students' interactions around those events. It feels silly to even say it now, since this topic ended up consuming large portions of almost all of the interviews conducted, but in the process of preparing the interview questions, I didn't even think about asking about Ferguson. However, I am glad that I didn't. The questions themselves were left intentionally vague, so as to allow the teachers themselves to volunteer their own experiences, and not something shaped by a question I had asked. I think that in this regard, the structure of the questions was a positive. On

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their own, teachers were able to volunteer their own specific stories or examples about what aspects of the training moved them, what they remembered, how they incorporated lessons or concepts into their classrooms, and what stayed with them going on three years later.

So how does one rectify one result with the other? What is there to explain the dissembling and clear reluctance to commit to honest storytelling about negative elements of one's own past, but the flow of details to support the positive changes that have been made in personal mindset and practice? Leonardo (2013) has argued that antiracism on the part of Whites is a type of insurance used by some against future charges of racism. I think that this is instructive, but what if instead of a guard against future accusations, we look at antiracism as a kind of mask used to prevent Whites from the gaze of others—or themselves.

Fritz Fanon wrote about masking in 1952. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, he posits that Black people who are socialized to grow up in a White world essentially put on a mask to become more acceptable to society. He argues that this act is damaging to the psyche of the Black individual who is forced into this socialization (Fanon, 1952). This is instructive as far as the idea of a racial mask, but this concept of Black people unconsciously adopting and being wounded by White culture obviously doesn't translate directly to this work.

There are other examples of work that uses the language of masks or masking. In a study of the language used by genome researchers, the author documents the use of colorblind language and labels it a rhetorical mask (Williams, 2015). In a similar vein,

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Sham (2015) argues that the persistence of colorblind language among Whites has served to shape systemic racism in a way that strengthens and perpetuates it by masking its true nature, thus making it even more insidious. By neutralizing race talk, Whites allow for existing forms of oppression to continue because frank discussions of race or racial issues are considered to be out of bounds. This seems to line up well with other research about the use of code words by Whites to bond over an avoidance of direct discussion of race (Fasching-Varner, 2013).

Finally, in a discussion of racial tension at a particular Southern high school, Hardie and Tyson (2013) explain how the limited definitions of what is and is not racist speech serves to shield the community from having to analyze structural racism. When racism is narrowly labeled as an overt act of hate speech, other forms of racism and oppressive structures are allowed to be masked.

None of these examples, while all are instructive, directly address the type of masking I see at play here. What I see is the participation in antiracist training and working with students of color as a mask that prevents the White teachers studied from honest self-reflection about their own beliefs and practices. The teachers all participated in the same training. They all witnessed the stories of colleagues who tearfully recounted ways in which they had been mistreated because of their race. They completed reflection and discussion activities which asked them to study antiracist concepts like White supremacy and the school-to-prison pipeline. However, when asked to discuss specific incidents in their own classrooms when they had enacted the injustices they had read and learned about on their students, none could find a specific example.

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The inconsistency I see is this: if the teachers have done the deep, often painful, truly probing self-reflection that a transformative experience like this requires, and like they claim to have had, then they should be able to discuss openly and specifically the nature of their experiences in the classroom.

If they are unable to do so, it would tell me that they are engaging in masking by either consciously pretending to have been transformed, or subconsciously taken on the persona of one who has been transformed by this experience. Either way, the behavior is a mask—a comfortable shield that gives them the ability to talk about the positive results from this work they have employed in their classroom, without acknowledging any of the painful experiences of their students or the painful reflection of having operated within a system of White supremacy.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This project began as a desire to explore whether White teachers would be willing to talk about frankly about their experiences in the classroom. I know that in my own development, beginning as a novice educator with no classroom experience, let alone experience in recognizing and confronting White supremacy, I spent a great deal of time reflecting on the way I had treated my students of color. Sometimes this came in the form of interrogating my own practices, and recognizing ways that I may have caused harm to my students through basic classroom interactions, as well as specific incidents that happened with individual students. I offered an example of one such event earlier in this writing. I think more studies on the journey of other White educators of students of color

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would be very instructive. This could take the form of autoethnographies or phenomenologies.

Since this research was centered on teachers who underwent the Race and Equity training, I also think that it would be beneficial to conduct additional follow-ups like this in a similar way to this project. The traditional method of getting feedback for presenters is a one page self-reflection, hastily filled out at the end of a professional development session, often at the end of a long workday, where the teachers are racing out the door. I would say that these are minimally effective. Rather, conducting some kind of longitudinal work, one, two, or even more years down the road to track changes would be more effective.

Obtaining what I felt to be honest, forthright answers was a challenge for this project, despite providing what I felt to be a relatively safe space to talk openly. While most of the interview subjects were readily willing to admit regret in their treatment of students, none were able (or willing) to share a specific story about a specific student. This willingness varied by interview subject, from being unable to recall anything specific to referring to acknowledging a role in systemic issues to deflection.

While I still believe in the value of this process to collect stories, it's clear that the questions I created to prompt these stories were worded vaguely; worded in a way that either was not direct enough in letting the teachers know specifically what I was looking for, or allowed the interview subjects to dodge the question, perhaps even subconsciously. Perhaps a more direct approach, where the researcher began openly and directly using the word racism would allow the interviewees to overcome any hesitations

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or awkwardness and dispense with euphemistic language when talking about their experiences. It is also possible that this would cause the interviewees to raise their defenses.

As far as the other aim of the project, to try to determine whether the training in question had any long-term impact, I think that the study was effective in that regard. Through the course of the conversation that I had with each participant, I was able to verify that when they said that the training changed the way they thought, they were able to point to specific experiences in the classroom that supported their assertions. The teachers were able to speak at length about specific conversations and classroom activities that were impacted by the training.

This impact was felt most when teachers were put in a position to help students process the events surrounding the death of Michael Brown last August. Facing classrooms of students who had serious questions about the meaning of the unrest and protests, teachers came to that situation armed with cultural sensitivity and tools to calmly and effectively work with students, even if they may have held personal viewpoints that differed from the students'. I think that a study that focused solely on the experiences of teachers and their responses to Ferguson protests and related issues of social justice would be compelling. I am interested to see how other teachers in other districts, and dealing with different student populations treated the Ferguson protests and how they address the ongoing social movements that sprang from Ferguson protests, like Black Lives Matter.



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Finally, what has troubled me the most about this research, and what I am eager to follow-up with, is the idea of White masking. What are the ways that Whites mask the true nature of their feelings toward people of color? Is all White antiracism a mask? When does White antiracism move from deeply held conviction to interest convergence to mask? Is there such a thing as true White antiracism?

### **Conclusions**

This study was an exploration of the long-term effects of an antiracist professional development for teachers. I wanted to hear the stories of White educators who had undergone this training and hear the stories of their journey to a state of higher cultural competence. I know that I am in the process of that journey right now, and reflecting on my past experiences has been powerful for me.

Even though I was not able to collect specific stories from teachers, I was able to hear other types of stories. I heard stories about teachers who found their preservice training woefully inadequate and had to learn on the fly how to relate to their students. I heard stories about teachers who were deeply affected by listening to their Black colleagues discuss the ways that racism had affected them personally. I heard stories about teachers who felt the frustration and confusion of their students trying to process the events in Ferguson and employed effective strategies to help them work through their thoughts and feelings. All these stories paint a picture of a group of teachers that are working to be more effective teachers of students of color.

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I think that the mixed results of this work reflect what we already know about the complicated nature of race in American society. It shows that even with teachers who have extensive training in understanding concepts of White supremacy and institutional racism, who have committed to and demonstrated evidence of using culturally competent teaching techniques in their classroom, there is still a great reluctance to openly discuss race and racism.

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