

Original Paper

“It’s Like the Elephant in the Room” A Qualitative Analysis of Racism in a U.S. High School

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Abstract

Identifying and addressing systemic racial oppression in the education system is a key component in confronting pervasive health and economic disparities for Black students. In this qualitative study, we conducted secondary analysis of existing data. Transcripts of interviews and focus group discussions belonged to 21 Black students in a charter school in Michigan in the year 2013. Open access data were downloaded from University of Michigan’s Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) database in 2022. We used an inductive analytic approach to analyze the qualitative data for constructs related to experiences of structural racism. Three constructs that characterized students’ experiences of structural racism in the U.S. education system were found: (a) Lack of Color-conscious Curriculum; (b) Selective Cultural Erasure; and (c) The Demonstration of Racialized Power. For researchers, these data highlight a need for more studies on the effects of structural racism in the U.S. education system on educational, economic, and health outcomes. For administrative and policy makers, the results emphasize the need for educational initiatives that address deeply-rooted structural inequalities in the U.S. education system. This may include adoption of color-conscious

curriculum and culturally responsive pedagogy, the utilization of restorative justice practices, and reparations for Black Americans.

Keywords

Education, school, students, youth, adolescents, racism, racial disparities, structural racism

1. Introduction

Black Americans continue to experience worse economic, educational, and health outcomes in nearly all domains compared to Whites (Assari, 2018). One potential underlying mechanism that explains sustained disparities in economic, educational, and health disparities among Black Americans is the Marginalization-related Diminished Returns (MDRs). Marginalization-related Diminished Returns for Black students, a well-documented phenomenon in the literature, refers to the paradox experienced by socially marginalized groups as social attainments, otherwise proven to serve as protective factors for health, education, and economic development, produce significantly diminished effects/returns when compared to socially privileged groups (i.e., non-Latinx Whites) (Assari et al., 2020). The systemic racial oppression experienced by Black students in multiple facets of life results in diminished returns of education advancement, as reflected by widening educational, health and economic inequalities in Black communities (Assari, 2018).

Understanding and adequately addressing systemic racial oppression in the U.S. education system is a key component in confronting pervasive and sustainable racial economic, developmental, educational, and health disparities. However, research on racial inequity in the education system too often fails to directly analyze power structures and evidence of normalized facets of structural racism in the U.S. as a whole and in the education system in particular (Kohli, Pizarro, & Nevárez, 2017). By reducing the concept of racism in the education system to incidents of personally-mediated acts of discrimination or simply experiential differences between students of color and White students, this scholarship has additionally masked the underlying systemic mechanisms of racial oppression and the diminished returns of Black students despite their educational attainment and investments on educational upward mobility (Mouzon et al., 2017).

Racism is not singular and limited to one level; it exists and operates on multiple levels and across all sectors and institutions. Renowned epidemiologist and anti-racism activist, Camara Jones provides a conceptual framework for understanding these multiple levels of racism (Jones, 2000). According to Jones, racism can be understood at least on three levels: structural/institutionalized, personally-mediated, and internalized. Unlike personally-mediated racism, Jones distinguishes structural/institutionalized racism as systematized and normative, without the need of a distinguishable or known perpetrator (Jones, 2000). Differential access to education and power within the education system, such as access to one's history or voice, are forms of structural racism for Black youth in the United States. Other relevant models that describe structural racism include the work of Krieger (2012,

2021), Gee (2021), Williams (2019), Phelan and Link (2015). For example, Phelan, and Link (2015) refer to structural racism as a fundamental cause of health and economic inequalities; and Williams (2001, 2019) provides additional domains of racism, highlighting evidence of the impact of residential segregation on racial disparities in health and arguing that structural racism is the most essential way racism affects youth health and development.

To further understand the complexity of structural racism in the U.S. education system for Black students, for the current study we utilized a qualitative research approach. Despite the fact that scholars have used segregation, neighborhood, quality of services, density of resources, and the like, as a proxy of racism, there is still a lack of instruments and tools to inform quantitative studies of racism (Alvarez, 2021; Williams, 2019). Qualitative research is uniquely suited to exploring structural racism, as it begins with the assumption that reality is socially constructed and therefore cannot be measured directly, but rather through the experiences and perceptions of people (Cleland, 2017). This approach has the unique potential to ground our work in the lived experiences and perceptions of Black students, in their own words (Watkins et al., 2007). While existing literature using this approach has historically focused on interpersonal mechanisms, such as racial socialization, the aim of this study is to highlight some of the core institutionalized and structural aspects of racism and their undesired influences in the everyday experiences of Black youth (Seaton et al., 2012).

2. Methods

This is a secondary analysis of existing qualitative data. Data that were used were originally collected in 2013. The original study was designed to explore the ethnic-racial socialization practices as perceived by Black students (Byrd & Hope, 2020). Data were downloaded from the University of Michigan's Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR).

2.1 Setting

The primary study conducted interviews at a predominantly Black public charter school located in an impoverished city in Michigan in 2013. One important aspect of this location is that Michigan is ranked third worst in the nation for Black educational attainment (Stebbins, 2020). At the time of the original study, state data indicated the racial makeup of the school was 84% non-Hispanic Black or African American and 14% Hispanic. At that school, about 800 students attend grades 7 through 12, and 85% of students were eligible for the free or reduced school lunch program. Racial demographics for staff showed 59% of teachers and 27% of administrators were White, while less than 28% of teachers and 64% of administrators were Black.

2.2 Participants

The sample included 21 tenth grade through twelfth grade students, 20 of whom identified as Black or African American and one of whom identified as multiracial (Black and White). 71% of participants identified as female. Participant recruitment was done via in-person invitation to a discussion about "diversity at their school." All students were invited to participate; interested students were

subsequently contacted via phone to schedule interviews. Students first participated in a focus group interview to discuss how they experienced racial relations and race-related experiences in their school and to build rapport with the research team. Participants selected a pseudonym. Then were scheduled for an individual interview approximately two weeks later. Participants received \$10 for each interview. Ten focus groups and 17 individual interviews were conducted overall (as described in Byrd & Hope, 2020).

2.3 Procedure

Interviews were conducted by three Black women as part of their graduate schooling or postdoctoral fellowship. Focus groups were 30-50 minute semi-structured sessions concentrating on two main questions: (a) “What do you learn about race and culture at school?” and (b) “How do people of different races get along at school?” Follow up interviews lasted approximately 15-30 minutes and included questions giving students an opportunity to expand on statements made in focus group interviews as well as additional questions on students’ experiences as Black students in school. Interviews were audio-recorded then transcribed. The transcripts of these interviews were used for the secondary analysis for this study. Please visit ICPSR (openicpsr.org) for more information (Byrd & Hope, 2020).

2.4 Analysis

For data analysis, we used an inductive analytic approach by thoroughly reviewing both focus group and individual interview data and generating codes from the data rather than utilizing an existing theoretical framework. Following an idiographic approach, nine authors primarily considered each transcript individually, noting instances of significance in regards to the research question as well as in relation to what seemed important or of particular interest to the speaker. While authors made specific note of mentions of culture, race, and discrimination, themes were not predetermined or limited exclusively to race and racism. Next, notes and comments on each transcript were reviewed by all authors and emerging themes were formulated, grounded in details from the transcripts. Finally, coding and themes were discussed as a group (all authors) and distilled down to three main constructs.

2.5 Ethics

The protocol for this study was deemed exempt from Institutional Review Board review because it uses publicly available, deidentified data.

3. Result

Analysis of the data revealed the following three major themes that characterized students’ experiences of structural racism in the U.S. education system: (a) Lack of Color-conscious Curriculum; (b) Selective Cultural Erasure; and (c) The Demonstration of Racialized Power.

“We don’t really talk about race like that”-Lack of Color-conscious Curriculum

Based on participant responses, the first emerging theme demonstrated students’ perceptions of racial discourse in school in light of a colorblind curriculum. A majority of participants mentioned teachers

not talking about race or acknowledging racial differences in the classroom. When asked about what the school could do to promote discussions on race and culture, Jesse stated:

We hardly even cover it. This is really catching us off guard because we don't really...we don't—we don't discuss it. It's like the elephant in the room.

Several other students echoed the lack of discussion regarding race in the classroom adding that teachers “see everybody the same” or exhibit teaching styles that indicate colorblindness:

They don't say it [color blindness] but it is exhibited through the way they teach. (Temperance)

The majority of students also spoke about curriculum positioning race and racism as ancient history with no impact on contemporary culture. Students mostly described learning about race and racism in the context of slavery and the civil rights movement. When asked if Black people were represented in textbooks Sarah said:

Yeah I think so. But not recent African Americans. Like back-then African Americans. Like we know all about the back-then African Americans. Like, we know about Rosa Park, Martin Luther King stuff like that.

Echoing the sentiment, Olivia stated:

...everything that I've learned about blacks is just black history, what happened in the past, so I don't really know what culture—cause of what they say where we came from.

Despite the lack of contemporary color-conscious curriculum, students expressed a desire for school-based discussions on race and racism. In response to the question of what the school could do better in terms of race, diversity, and culture, the most common response among participants was, “talk about it.”

“We learning black culture on our own” – Selective Cultural Erasure

Another prevalent theme throughout the transcripts was instances of selective cultural erasure against racial minority groups within the school. The erasure of Black culture, specifically, described by the student participants in this study was rampant despite the overwhelming majority of Black students in attendance. Occurrences recounted by the students ranged from outright explicit erasure to more selective, implicit experiences. On the subject of Black History Month, students Amber, Jesse, and Jerome explained that acknowledgement of the cultural month is nonexistent, let alone celebrated.

Jesse: Yeah, I can't even remember what we did for Black History Month.

Jerome: I don't think we did nothing.

Jesse: I think that the whole, the administration as a whole is just so focused on uniting everybody that they forget to celebrate each individual culture, or at least bring, you know, shed some light on it, shed some light on the history of each culture.

In another interview with student Tee, a specific occurrence involving a teacher choosing to instruct the dance style of salsa over hip-hop, despite the majority of the students requesting the latter, was shared. Tee recounts the leveraging of grades as a means to shroud Black culture in the quote:

Black people want to do hip hop of course and the Mexican girl wanted to do salsa. [. . .] Everybody

sooner or later got used to it or did it because it was a grade. But no it wasn't a problem.

When asked if racial discrimination is prevalent at this particular school, Tee answered: *"I had noticed it's not really racist, like I don't live around racism. I don't think so."* Discussion of racism and discrimination that breeds cultural erasure were observed several times throughout these two particular interviews.

"It's like the police for us" – The Demonstration of Racialized Power

Power, punishment, and the criminalization of behavior were revealed to be significant tools enacted by authority to operationalize racial hierarchy against Black students. Transcripts revealed many students experienced disparities in how rules and punishments were enforced, and how they were treated and subsequently gained access to educational resources, based along the lines of race and power.

Students shared that teachers and administrators were looked upon as authoritative and *"like the police."* For example, students describe being targeted and with racial bias tracked over years by teachers with threats and enactment of suspension and expulsion.

Antonio: I'm not fond of talking to administrators and teachers cause it's like police to us... When I got little, it got to the point where most teachers didn't like me, so they had it out for me. They basically always try to find a way to get me in trouble or get me kicked out of school or suspended.

Students were also subjected to unjust physical violence in the process of being disciplined by police-like authority.

Antonio: One teacher, um, had a student--well, her son went there. And she got mad because me and him got into a fight. Of course, I won... She took me and him to the office and told him to sit there and hit me. And if I do anything, I would get suspended. I: The teacher said this? Antonio: Yes.

Racialized punishment played an even more direct negative impact on academics

as teachers are described using the withdrawal of formal instruction as a tool of discipline and as a way to exercise power.

One student recalls:

Olivia: I need 2 years of French, you know, to get in college. The class was being disruptive, talking and stuff. So she [teacher] completely stopped the whole lesson, yelled at everybody, showed them their test grades, and just like, "You guys don't want to learn, so I'm not going to waste my breath. What's the point?... she just completely stopped teaching.

In reference to another course, a student echoed:

Temperance: Now I go ask him [a question], he will refer us back to our notes. And I'm like "I don't understand. Could you help me?" He was like "well, if you would have paid more attention in the class, you might be able to get it."

Withdrawal of formal instruction was also yielded in conjunction with racial deprecation of Black students assumed intelligence and academic capability.

Coco: And I feel like I have a bad-- I don't want to say vibe. Some just have some type of energy when he's teaching our class...

And he looks at us, and he has said some things that I kinda took to heart like [imitating the teacher] “all you guys gonna fail, you gonna come right back to my class—to my class next year”...

He just pretty just much put us down, and his side [slight?] comments just made us not wanna learn anymore, because now we think you’re against our race now instantly.

As a part of the interview, another student echoed these comments, with particular focus on the racial mockery from the White teacher.

Temperance: Yeah, it does appear to be mockery. I could understand if he was trying to relate to us, I can’t understand that. Like he’s trying to understand what are all of this means. No. No. He’s just...mocking us.

I: Okay

Temperance: And then he adapts... Okay. [Coco laughing] We like to—we do—we don’t say we don’t say e-r like water [full word]. We say wata’ [dropped r]. He takes off the e-r of off everything, and he imitates us... He spends most of the time trying ...to imitate us than to actually teache us.

Through threats, sanctioning of physical violence, withdrawal of formal education, and racial mockery, the Black students describe a myriad of ways in which teachers and authorities racialize discipline and differentially enforce rules in a described police-like environment. These factors are particularly harmful for not only immediate academic achievement but also as will be discussed, profound socioeconomic outcomes.

4. Discussion

This study aimed to explore three core constructs of structural racism, in which systemic racial oppression and diminished returns operate to reinforce educational and subsequent public health disparities observed in the Black community. Qualitative analysis was chosen both for its utility in identifying aspects of the structural, endemic nature of racism in the U.S. education system, and its ability to capture the evolving nature of perceptions of structural racism (Parker, 1998; Griffin, 2016). The themes identified and discussed were: “Lack of Color-conscious Curriculum,” “Selective Cultural Erasure,” and “The Demonstration of Racialized Power.” All these three themes reflect multilayered and rampant structural racism that impacted the wellness, development, and academic potential of the Black youth, with long term implications and health and other Social Determinants of Health (SDoH). Black high school students in this study depicted an educational environment void of **Color-conscious Curriculum**. Critical race theorist Neil Gotanda (1991) portends color-blind ideology preserves White supremacy in sustaining social, economic, and political advantages that Whites hold over other Americans. In positioning race only as a historical artifact rather than seeing it as a significant component of curriculum, it can then be argued that teachers who do not see or teach a color conscious curriculum, can thereby not be agents of change (Ulluci, 2015). Colorblindness is ultimately a privilege exclusive to White people or the dominant racial class. More intentionally, colorblindness allows race denial, where “the more certain we are that race is never relevant to any assessment of an individual’s

abilities or achievements, the more certain we are that we have overcome racism as we conceive it” (Ulluci, 2015).

Black students identified many instances where **their cultural identity** was not recognized and intentionally **erased**. However, a multicultural education is important in the context of a society that will be majority-minority by the year 2043 (Saraj, 2015). Multicultural education is long considered to be consistent with social trends that aim to expand civil rights, individual rights, and democracy (Saraj, 2015). Curriculums that highlight diversity, of marginalized populations, both challenge and reject racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society (Saraj, 2015). In an observational study of the impact of multicultural education, fifth-grade students expressed ample curiosity towards learning about various cultures, growing empathy and self-awareness and made an overall positive impact on the educational environment (Saraj, 2015). This is important as culturally-affirming education, especially tied to the identification of the cultural strengths, is long identified as a bridge to success in school achievement (Boute, 2006). Colorblindness opposes utilization of racial socialization as an institutional attempt to improve positive Black identity and positive development of Black youth. Lastly, students described how even suspected discriminations manifest as larger representations of **Demonstrations of Racialized Power** in the education system. Racialized discipline is proposed as a moderating factor in the achievement gaps between Black and White students. Black students and their behaviors are both perceived as more problematic and are subsequently punished more compared to White students (Morris, 2016; Riddle, 2018). For example, in a cross-sectional study analyzing socioeconomic data and structural Magnetic Resonance Imaging (sMRI) data of 4,305 American children ages 9-10, teachers rated children with larger amygdala sizes as having fewer behavioral problems consistently among White students (Assari, 2021). However, Black students were reported to have high behavioral problems across all amygdala sizes, suggestive of teachers holding anti-Black bias that leads to increased perceptions of negative behaviors and subsequent punishment among Black students (Assari, 2021). In another study using hypothetical vignettes, results found comparable behavior in White students was viewed as indicative of long-term problems and deserving of suspension or expulsion in Black student counterparts (Onkonofua, 2015). Survey of the National Center for Education Statistics showed Black students experienced far more suspension rates compared to any other racial group at 13.7% compared to 3.4% suspension in White students (deBrey, 2018). In the School-to-Prison Pipeline premise, the disparities we see in Black communities in police violence and incarceration rates, can be traced down congruent paths and manifestations of racism and disparate punishment against Black students (Morgan, 2021). School suspensions are the leading predictor of whether or not a student will drop out of school (Iocono, 2022). School suspensions also lead to increased unsupervised time and loss of instructional time which can lead to increased opportunities to become involved in problematic and criminal activity and decreased academic success, respectively (Morgan, 2021).

6. Policy Implications

There is plenty of literature discussing racism as interpersonal discrimination (Byrd, 2020, Chin, 2020). However, there is a severe lack of research dedicated to highlighting the effects of structural racism in the education system and its effects on public health outcomes. The educational system has inseparable ties to codified and legalized systemic oppression through sanctioned economic and residential segregation. Ultimately this paper aligns with bodies of work that argue social determinants of health are the core moderators of educational and subsequent health disparities in the Black community, and the root cause of SDoH is structural racism. As long as structural racism remains “the elephant in the room” and excluded as the root cause in frameworks addressing SDoH, pervasive inequities will continue to persist across all social systems including but not limited to health and education (Yearby, 2020). This is a core public health problem that affects not only the Black community but the greater community overall. The American Medical Associations’ recent adoption of the policy declaring *Racism as Public Health Threat* acknowledges that structural, systemic, and interpersonal forms of racism and bias exist across all the social determinants of health, and across medical research (Keeyes, 2021). Education initiatives that do not address these deeply rooted structural and societal inequalities will not be sufficiently impactful (Assari, 2017). The following are just a few policy considerations, given the results of this study.

6.1 Contextualization of the U.S. Education System

The education system is only one sub-system within the broader U.S. social system. Policy must take on a multi-system change approach, considering multiple subsystems that reinforce one another, while also working toward a systematically shared goal of dismantling systemic racist oppression and White supremacy. Increasingly, social justice and education reform advocates are pointing towards the need of economic reparative solutions to address educational attainment gaps through exploration of reparations considerations for Black Americans. Income redistribution policies are regarded as central to potential policy strategies that address these disparities (Assari, 2017). It is proposed that reparations and restitution for Blacks would eliminate racial disparities in education, income, incarceration, political participation, and subsequent opportunities for Black Americans to engage in American political and social life (Xiyung, 2022; Green, 2021). Additionally, accurate historical contextualization of professional practice as it relates to structural racism, is necessary across all affected social systems. Educators and school administrators should know the anti-Black roots of the public-school funding model just as healthcare providers should know the medical field’s history of regarding Black bodies as disposable, while simultaneously refusing to so much as to mention the word “racism” in academic and professional publication (Nurridin et al., 2020; Krieger et al., 2021). There is an immense need to foster a culture of practicing health, education, and legal professionals, who question the status quo.

6.2 Color-Conscious Curriculum & Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Curriculums that endorse colorblind ideology through lessons reinforcing a) the belief that the U.S. is post-racial society or b) stark denial of the existence or importance of the social construction of race

and racism, enlists educators in the perpetuation of patterns of inequity in student achievement (Milner, 2003). To address this, school districts should adopt curriculum that recognizes and celebrates the experiences and contributions of learners from varied racial backgrounds, while accurately portraying the varying domains of racism, including structural racism, and discussing the impact of race and racial identity (Xiyung, 2022). Additionally, educators should be supported in adopting pedagogy that helps contextualize lessons and engage learners through culturally relevant and affirming exchanges (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Lastly, tools, such as *Reaching Black Students in a Multiethnic Context* published by Black Campus Ministries (2013), should be provided for educators to actively engage in identifying obstacles and finding solutions to connect with and create a more welcoming environment for Black students.

6.3 Restorative Justice Training Requirements for Educators

Although restorative justice training and research is still in its infancy, many administrators and educational councils have begun to incorporate these training sessions (Morgan, 2021). Restorative justice philosophy promotes conflict resolution, active listening and aims to establish non-punitive methods to both address and avoid harm (Morgan, 2021). Restorative justice training teaches educators about alternative punishment methods in educational settings different from the traditional methods such as expulsion or suspension as they have negative effects on students (Morgan, 2021). Restorative justice is seen as a precautionary measure for creating a united classroom culture and a positive school atmosphere where penalized offenses are less likely to occur (Fronius et al., 2019). Silverman (2018) demonstrates the significant impacts restorative practices had on the peer relationships of educators and the insights they discovered towards educating young adolescents. It was found that teachers and administrators who foster a secure, encouraging, and caring learning environment aid in fostering children's positive mindset and social-emotional maturation. Restorative practice and implicit bias training should be a requirement as policy for teacher certification to address racially biased disciplinary practices (Xiyung, 2022).

7. Limitations

In qualitative research, including that of this analysis, room for limitations such as biases and restrictions should be considered. Firstly, the data which was analyzed primarily consisted of student interviews. While the information obtained from these interviewees holds immense value, it is not verifiable due to it not being of a quantitative nature. This allows for biases on both the interviewee and interviewer to be present, thus limiting objectivity. Having the opportunity to include additional people in the study such as the students' teachers and parents could have greatly contributed to this analysis. Including these individuals would have allowed for the researchers to better understand the students' viewpoint on their everyday experiences in the education system and provide effective solutions, not just in the classroom setting but in an at-home setting as well.

Another limitation of this qualitative analysis was that multiple campuses were not considered in the

original study where the transcript data was collected. While thinking of the campus communities themselves, the fact that only a charter school was considered omits potential findings to be had within non-charter schools. The environment within charter schools has been shown to lead to contemporary displays of racism where older Black teachers are replaced by younger White ones (Kohli et al., 2017, pp. 188-189). Comparing the interviews from this urban school with non-charter schools can attest to potential associations between charter schools and anti-Black racism experienced by the students.

Another limitation was that more settings outside of an urban city could have been encompassed in the original study for this qualitative analysis. Diverse geographic populations, such as suburban neighborhoods and rural countryside, would have provided more data to observe potential biases against particular racial demographics. Black students that attend schools in urban and rural areas experience the consequences of implicit biases by administrators and instructors at higher rates than their suburban counterparts (Ullucci & Howard, 2015, p. 185). Introducing student interviews from a rural and even another suburban school has the potential to strengthen the evidence of structural racism in the U.S. education system at large disclosed by this urban school in Michigan.

8. Conclusion

This study examines several mechanisms of structural racism in the U.S. education system and the implications of these constructs on Black students' educational attainment. Through secondary analysis of existing qualitative interviews with Black students in a high school in Michigan, evidence of three main themes of structural racism emerged: lack of color-conscious curriculum, selective cultural erasure, and the demonstration of racialized power. These themes reflect the rampant and multilayered nature of structural racism impacting the wellness, development, and academic potential of Black youth. Findings are further evidence to support the implementation of anti-racist education reform such as color-conscious curriculum and restorative justice training for educators. Further, identifying and illustrating the mechanisms of structural racism in the U.S. education system aids in informing policies aimed at addressing disparities in economic, educational, and health outcomes for Black youth.

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