# Whom Do I See in the Staff Room Every Day?

## The Sources of Resilience of Teachers of Color

**Lina Darwich**

## Abstract

In the United States, K–12 students are likely to go through school without learning from a single teacher of Color (TOC), yet research shows that all students, especially students of Color, stand to benefit from having TOCs. Therefore increasing the diversity of the teaching working force has gained public concern in the past few years, especially given the higher attrition rates among TOCs. Still, there are TOCs who stay and persist in the face of racism and alienation in schools. The goal of this study was to understand the sources of strength of TOCs who have taught for 5 or more years. The themes identified from the in-depth one-on-one interviews with 10 TOCs in different parts of the United States indicate that growth-fostering relationships and a social justice–oriented teacher education are key sources of strength. Importantly, participants highlighted the importance of having someone "reflecting back to them" in their school buildings.

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## Introduction

> What if every day you came to work every day, every day, and everyone looked different? How would you feel? But I come in and it's very normal. . . . How would you deal with that? How would that impact you? Would you stay in a place like that?
>
> —Gabrielle, elementary school teacher

Gabrielle is a veteran Black educator and the only Black teacher in her school for over a decade. This is not surprising. More than half the students in American public schools are students of Color (SOCs), yet most of their teachers are White, with teachers of Color (TOCs) making up less than 20% of the teaching body (Geiger, 2018). Moreover, turnover among new TOCs is significantly higher than it is among White teachers (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Thus a focus on diversifying the teaching workforce has been a public issue for some time, especially given the benefits of having TOCs in schools (Jackson & Kohli, 2016). For example, TOCs tend to hold higher expectations for SOCs (Oates, 2003; Uhlenberg & Brown, 2002). Additionally, they tend to bridge the severe shortage of teachers in underserved urban schools because they are more than twice as likely as White teachers to work there (Ingersoll et al., 2018). Importantly, they *see* and value the community cultural wealth of SOCs (Jackson & Kohli, 2016).

In their report on trends in the teaching force, Ingersoll and colleagues (2018) stated that the lower number of TOCs is not a problem of failure to recruit them but rather a problem of failure to retain them. Fortunately, though, not all TOCs leave teaching. In fact, some stay and cope with the stressors of racism, racial microaggressions (Endo, 2015; Kohli et al., 2017), and the rejection of their community cultural wealth (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Herrera & Morales, 2018) in their teacher education programs and, later on, in their schools. So, what keeps those TOCs from leaving despite these challenges? The literature on teacher resilience has indicated that several factors sustain teachers, but teachers' relationships appear to be one of the most significant factors, if not the most critical (e.g., Gu, 2014; Le Cornu, 2013). However, existing studies have not taken into account the racialized experiences of TOCs. To that end, the present study sought to answer the research question, What contributes to the resilience of TOCs who have taught for 5 or more years?

## Theoretical Frameworks

### *Relational Cultural Theory*

Resilience, once depicted as "ordinary magic" (Masten, 2001), has its beginnings in child development and psychiatry research (Day & Gu, 2013). Initially, resilience involved understanding the individual traits of children who thrived and adapted positively in the face of adversity (Waller, 2001). Over the years, the focus of resilience research moved away from looking at personal traits and toward understanding underlying processes (Day & Gu, 2013). Teacher resilience,

a recent social construct, is a teacher's continued sense of purpose and capacity to flourish in the face of stressors and difficult school circumstances (Mansfield et al., 2016). However, several researchers (e.g., Johnson & Down, 2013) called for a more critical perspective on teacher resilience. They argued for a deeper focus on the social and ecological environment first and then the interaction between environment and individual (Ungar, 2011).

I adopted Jordan's (2006) relational resilience model to gain a deeper understanding of how teacher resilience is rooted in connectedness. Jordan based teacher resilience in relational cultural theory (RCT; Miller, 1976), which posits that all psychological growth happens in relationships and that relationships are the core of resilience. RCT has its roots in counseling psychology (Miller, 1976) and was developed in response to prominent psychological theories' lack of attention to the contextual and relational experience of people of Color and other historically marginalized groups (Comstock et al., 2008). RCT supposes that experiences of isolation and marginalization are relational violations and at the core of human pain (Birrell & Freyd, 2006; Comstock et al., 2008). Healing, in contrast, happens in the context of mutually empathic, growth-fostering relationships (Comstock et al., 2008) characterized by mutuality, empowerment, and the development of courage (Jordan, 2006).

Comstock et al. (2008) explained that one way RCT supports social justice is by affirming that although oppression and marginalization are typically institutionalized at societal levels, they are "necessarily enacted in the context of interpersonal relationships" (Birrell & Freyd, 2006, p. 52). Specifically, although racism in schools and the scarcity of TOCs are institutional problems, TOCs experience them through their daily interactions with students, their families, school staff, and administration. These relationships can be sources of pain due to marginalization, but relationships can also be sources of growth and empowerment.

### *Critical Race Theory*

To understand the central role of race in TOCs' school experiences, I coupled RCT with critical race theory (CRT). CRT grew out of the realization by lawyers, legal scholars, and activists that the civil rights movement's advancements were hampered, even reversed in some ways (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Legal scholars (e.g., Bell, 2004; Crenshaw, 1995) recognized the urgent need for theories that confront different forms of racism that were gaining momentum. Thus CRT involves examining *and* transforming the relationships between power, race, and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017); it centers the voices of people who have been marginalized and prioritizes their fight for equality (Kohli, 2014).

CRT has had a profound impact on several fields, including education (e.g., Kohli, 2009; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). For example, Solórzano and Delgado Bernal developed five principles to guide education research based in a CRT framework. I used three of these to frame the study:

1. *Centrality of race and racism*: Race and racism play a fundamental rather than peripheral role when seeking to understand individual experiences (Russell, 1992). They are at the center of teacher and student school experiences that continue re/producing society's inequities.

2. *Valuing experiential knowledge*: CRT recognizes the power of people's lived experiences, which are critical to understanding racial inequities. Because their lived experiences have been missing from the teacher resilience literature, I sought the reflections and stories of TOCs to better understand what contributes to their resilience.

3. *Commitment to social justice*: Pursuing the transformation of the educational system so that it empowers marginalized groups and eliminates racism and other forms of oppression drives CRT (Kohli, 2009). Although schools play a major role in perpetuating racism and inequity, they also hold great potential to empower people of Color by committing to social justice.

Together, RCT and CRT underscore the racialized experiences of TOCs and center the role of race in how they develop their strength through growth-fostering relationships.

## Literature Review

The most notable reason for teacher attrition is often not retirement but job dissatisfaction (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Interestingly, the percentage of White teachers' turnover is linked to the percentage of SOCs in school, even when controlling for poverty. This is not the case for TOCs. Their reasons for leaving their schools or teaching are not correlated with student demographics (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Kokka, 2016). Thus, with SOCs making up more than half of the student body in public schools, recruiting and retaining TOCs is a pressing issue (Partee, 2014). Indeed, increased teacher diversity is linked to higher levels of academic achievement and social emotional well-being for SOCs (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Moreover, the effects of having at least one TOC can be lasting for SOCs. One study (Gershenson et al., 2017) found that having at least one Black teacher between third and fifth grade reduced high school dropout by half for Black boys. Another 5-year study conducted in North Carolina (Holt & Gershenson, 2015) found that K–5 students with other race teachers had more unexcused absences and greater likelihood of chronically missing school than their peers with race-matched teachers. TOCs can have a positive impact on student discipline. For example, Lindsay and Hart (2017) found that having a Black teacher was linked to reduced exclusionary discipline for Black students. These results suggest that having a TOC provides SOCs with greater social and emotional benefits. Still, the credentials, expertise, and qualifications of TOCs are often questioned and challenged by peers and administrators (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Castaneda, Kambutu, & Rios, 2006). For instance, in Castaneda et al., all six participants revealed incidents that involved questioning their preparedness and qualifications.

TOCs serve as role models for all students, especially SOCs who get the opportunity to feel seen and reflected in their teachers' stories, experiences, and approaches to teaching (Griffin, 2018; Griffin & Tackie, 2016). This is critically significant because the transmission of society's values happens in schools and it is unreasonable for a diverse society to have an overwhelmingly White teaching force working and shaping students' values (Graham, 1987) and perceptions of themselves. As evidenced by the literature (e.g., Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Griffin, 2018; Kokka, 2016), TOCs value the important role they play for SOCs. In one study (Kokka, 2016) that examined what kept TOCs in an undersourced urban school, two female African American math and science teachers wanted to be role models for students. The math teacher wanted her African American students to feel inspired by someone who is like them, speaks like them, and lives in the same neighborhoods as them. Nonetheless, the community cultural wealth that TOCs bring is often dismissed (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Herrera & Morales, 2018).

Furthermore, the varying needs of SOCs are more likely to be met when they have teachers from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Carver-Thomas, 2018), because TOCs often serve as advocates for SOCs and their families (Griffin, 2018). Unfortunately, though, some TOCs face disapproval and antagonism when they advocate for or defend their SOCs (Amos, 2020). Simply put, despite the indispensable roles and important gaps that TOCs fill, schools continue to be unkind, even hostile, contexts for many TOCs. Moreover, as Amos argued, race appears to matter at creating alienation for TOCs in predominantly White workplaces thus contributing to stressful working conditions (Quiocho & Rios, 2000) that seem to play a key role in their low retention rates (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Nonetheless, there are TOCs who stay and have resources sustaining them. So far, it appears that the literature (e.g., Gu, 2014; Le Cornu, 2013) on teacher resilience, which suggests that teachers' relationships are one of the most critical factors in teacher resilience, has not captured the central role of race in teacher resilience for TOCs.

## Method

The present study uses qualitative thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) of semistructured, in-depth interviews to understand TOCs' sources of strength and resilience. Using interviews allowed me to obtain rich data because I had the opportunity to follow up, probe, and ask for clarification if a response required it. The data in this study are part of a wider research project, an interview study, to better understand the experiences of TOCs who have taught for 5 or more years with both racism and teacher social emotional learning.

### *Participants*

After obtaining approval from my institution's ethics board, I invited TOCs who have taught for 5 or more years through a flyer posted on the Facebook page

of Rethinking Schools, a leading publisher of social justice materials in the United States. I also contacted colleagues in teacher education programs in Oregon and California asking them to share the study's flyer with their former students. The study included 10 participants (see Table 1). All teachers, except Adriene, Alicia, and Gabrielle, taught in schools where SOCs made up a majority of the student body. Most participants taught in California. Each interview, except one (in-person), took place via Zoom and lasted 60–80 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded, and pseudonyms were used to maintain confidentiality. The first set of questions were demographic, asking participants about their race/ethnicity, where they taught, and years they taught. The second set included the questions utilized in this study. They were, What are your sources of strength? What are the major sources of strength that you access regularly as a TOC? What can teacher educators do in support of teacher candidates of Color?

### *Researcher Positionality*

I recruited the participants, completed all interviews, and transcribed and analyzed the data. As a former schoolteacher and teacher educator from a Middle Eastern background, I had some personal understanding of the participants' racialized experiences and the sources of strength that helped me. For example, during graduate school, some instructors were surprised that I could speak and write fluently in English. During my early years as a teacher educator, I experienced students questioning my ability to teach and my expertise in the area of child/adolescent development. At the beginning of each interview, I shared with the participants that I was an immigrant with a Middle Eastern/Arab background and that I was an elementary school teacher in Dubai before moving to Canada and then the United States. I believe my background and experiences helped build trust between the participants and me.

**Table 1**
***Teacher Demographics***

| *Name* | *Race/ethnicity* | *Gender* | *Location/years of experience* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Adriene | Latina | female | Oregon/6 |
| Alicia | Cuban and White | female | California/22 |
| Anthony | African American | male | California/8 |
| Camila | Chicana; Mexican American | female | Ohio/6 |
| Chloe | Black | female | Texas/21 |
| Gabrielle | Black | female | California/20 |
| Isabel | Mexican and Puerto Rican; Latina | female | California/20 |
| Jasmine | Black | female | Connecticut/17 |
| Mark | Filipino | male | California/13 |
| Selena | Latina | female | California/6 |

### *Data Analysis*

Using thematic analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This included familiarizing myself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, and reviewing and defining themes. After transcribing the interviews, I conducted multiple readings of the transcripts to familiarize myself with the data, taking notes and documenting early impressions and questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Next, I used open coding to make sense of the data, and during that process, I defined and refined my definitions of the codes I identified by rereading the transcripts and the literature. During this process, I fine-tuned my codes using CRT and RCT as analytical lenses, keeping memos throughout the process. Then, I developed a code list with definitions and used it throughout the transcript. Later, I grouped the codes into wider themes that fit the key aspects of the analytic questions. I reviewed the themes and sought the consultation of peers in the field. I shared my interpretations of the data with the participants to check for accuracy and give them an opportunity to comment on the findings (Creswell & Creswell, 2005). Seven out of the 10 participants replied, and all 7 gave their approval of data interpretation.

I identified three themes: (a) sources of support, (b) kinship in relationships at school, and (c) the importance of social justice education.

## Findings

### *Sources of Support*

Participants identified three different, types, subthemes, of support. They spoke of (a) support received from family; (b) support received from mentors of Color; and (c) mutual support with peers, mostly TOCs.

**Received support: Family.** All 10 participants expressed gratitude for the invaluable support of family. Prior research has shown that encouragement and support from family contributed to the resilience of teachers, especially early in their teaching career (Day, 2008). Anthony spoke of the encouragement from his family and the practical support they offered, "Sources of strength, I would have to say my family is definitely one. . . . The encouragement from my friends . . . I remember having a family member actually going with me to interview in Charlotte." Mark deeply appreciated his family's unconditional love, noting they supported him although he chose a path that was unfamiliar to them. He was the first in his family, immediate and extended, to go to college: "The immediacy of my family. They may not have known what they were doing or what I was doing but they supported me as I started my educational journey."

For TOCs, family can be an invaluable source of support and insight because it is likely that their parents experienced being the only persons of Color at work and, thus, understand their racialized experiences firsthand. Parents can provide

TOCs with advice about navigating unwelcoming White spaces. Adriene, the only Latina teacher at her school, was very grateful for her parents, from whom she drew strength regularly: "My parents. Whenever I'm going through something, they're the first people that I call immediately. Just, I need some wisdom here. They've never understood me wrong." Particularly, Adriene drew strength from her parents' immigration story and experience in building a life in the United States.

Others, like Gabrielle, credited their family for also raising their consciousness about racism. She spoke of her mother's role in raising her awareness:

> I definitely had a mother who wanted me to see the truth and did not rose-color anything. We talked about racism and prejudice and White privilege from the moment I could remember. . . . So, for her, it was really important for her daughter to understand how the world worked and my place in it. . . . It turns out most of what she said is right.

Jordan (2006) explained that relationships that give courage help one approach situations that could involve hesitation or fear. She stressed that courage is "created in connection" (p. 86). She also considered the role of healthy resistance, highlighting that relationships are "at the heart of growth, healthy resistance, and resilience" (p. 80). But it is the lens of critical race theory that explains the centrality of race and racism in TOCs' experiences, as indicated by Gabrielle's response. In the present study, Selena and Jasmine also spoke of their mothers' roles. They indicated that their mothers gave them the courage to persist, to speak their truths, and not to give up when their abilities were questioned and helped them build healthy resistance to racism. Consider Selena's thoughts:

> And resilience, just understanding that you have to keep going. I just feel that's something I kind of learned and watched from my mom. Seeing how she never gave up. . . . They're [people] not always going to be kind. But that doesn't change what we want, what we see for ourselves, and to continue on and I guess I got that a lot from her.

Selena, like others in the study, felt that because of her minoritized identity, her capability to pursue higher education and her potential were scrutinized by her White peers. By observing her working mother, she learned how to face exclusion due to being Latina. Despite being singled out for questions like "How did *you* make it this far? . . . How did *you* pay for college?" by her White peers, Selena persisted. She was undeterred from achieving her goals, including being an advocate for the Latinx families in her school, especially undocumented families, because her job is "to work for the people." Her mom was a role model who helped her in developing transformational resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Selena was aware of the injustices in her community and was committed and determined to fight for social justice.

**Received support: Mentors.** Like families, mentors provided support through

warm and encouraging relationships. Camila, for instance, recalled the comforting role of her mentor teacher, also a Latina, during practicum:

> So one of my teachers is from Mexico and the other teacher was Caucasian, who grew up speaking Spanish. But so, in my first student teaching experience it was a nice transition because we were culturally the same. So, I didn't need to adjust myself for a Caucasian person like I normally do in situations. . . . My student teaching experience was my first year away from my family and for the Hispanic community and the Latina community family is everything and being far away from family was super hard for me. Then to have another Mexican teacher there was very helpful.

Overall, research on teacher resilience has not examined what aspects of relationships could be unique to TOCs given their minoritized status in schools. Importantly, Camila's mentor teacher, a source of warmth, was also a cultural broker (Gay, 1993) guiding her in navigating a predominantly White profession. Gay and others (e.g., Easton-Brooks, 2019; Eddy & Easton-Brooks, 2011) have highlighted the role of cultural brokers in schools. Cultural brokers deeply understand different cultural systems and, therefore, bridge the gap across different cultures (Gay, 1993). Camila's mentor teacher gave her courage by showing her "the ways to interact with everybody [White teachers] that was appropriate but not compromising your values as a person of Color." Furthermore, Jasmine and Alicia alluded to the courage that veteran mentors of Color could provide when TOCs have to deal with tough situations. Recognizing the significance of their experience, Alicia wished she had the opportunity of learning from the wisdom of a mentor of Color:

> So I think pairing someone [a preservice TOC] up with someone teaching [a TOC] and going through the process and then they're not like "oh this weird thing—this happened." I didn't get heads up like "this might happen" or "this is how I deal with this."

In contrast, to illustrate the key role of veteran TOCs, Jasmine recounted a recent experience where she sought advice from her two mentors, Black veteran educators, after she asked to meet privately with her principal, a White male, who dismissed her during a committee meeting by shushing her:

> He set up a meeting because I said we need to have a meeting and he did set one up but I called my mentors and said I need you to help me navigate this because I want to be able to make my point of the fact that he has pretty much been ignoring me for the past few months. . . . And, they were really helpful in that . . . oftentimes teachers of Color can find another teacher of Color in the building or outside the building, preferably teachers of Color who have more [experience].

During the interview, Jasmine spoke vividly of the lack of support from administration. The student body at her school was mostly Black and Latinx, and she was on the leadership team and active in the community. Still, her principal ignored her suggestions and did not try to utilize her community cultural wealth (Burciaga & Kohli, 2018; Morales, 2018), although he spoke of supporting SOCs.

Because of their years in the district, her mentors provided her with the courage to confront him.

**Mutual support: Peers.** Mutuality is at the center of RCT: "The importance of these relationships is . . . that they also provide an opportunity to participate in a relationship that is growth-fostering for the other person as well as themselves" (Jordan, 2000, p. 88). All participants drew strength from their mutual relationships with colleagues, specifically referring to colleagues of Color. Those whose schools did not have TOCs lamented their absence. Moreover, race, experiences with racism, and a desire to transform education, all tenets of CRT, were at the heart of why peers mattered. Peers were a source of comfort as well as a source of learning, exchanging and sharing ideas, and empowerment. Adriene, who taught at a predominantly White school in Oregon, stressed the importance of letting teacher candidates of Color know that they will need to find other TOCs. Having them played a comforting role: "There are so few of us that we tend to really lean on each other and make affinity groups wherever we can. . . . You're going to need to find other ones because you're going to lean on them as often as you can."

Participants who were the only TOC on their teams often did not experience reciprocity of support from their White peers. For example, Selena, the only Latina teacher at her site, experienced mutual support with the custodial staff and the bilingual aides who were also Latinx:

> I feel for me being a minority that my network is very small; where I work [my network] are the custodial staff and/or bilingual aides. We're very close. We share everything. We kind of just let everything out and even reflect on things. But I don't have that with the teachers.

Selena's experience illustrates the importance of relationship reciprocity. She could not find such support among her White teacher colleagues (Amos, 2020). Reciprocity is key in belonging, a universal basic human need (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but TOCs experience hostility and alienation from peers and staff (Amos, 2020), preventing them from this connection.

Chloe, Jasmine, and Anthony spoke fondly of their colleagues, particularly their colleagues of Color, with whom they also spent time outside school. Gatherings and activities offered TOCs opportunities to bond and seemed to play a role in their well-being. Jasmine, for instance, took the initiative and created a social network for TOCs in her district because she knew there were very few of them:

> We tend to forge a very strong bond with each other. I know because of the district I am in, there aren't a lot of teachers of Color. We do tend to try to at least keep up with each other. . . . There are times that I'm like OK I don't know about you guys but you know what I think it's time for a check-in and most people are like YUP!

Colleagues were also a source of mutual empowerment for participants. Jordan (2006) explained that mutually empowering relationships are growth fostering

because they enable participants to feel competent and confident and to experience creativity. For several participants, there were relationships that provided a space to exchange ideas about teaching practices and to consider ways to support SOCs whose needs are often neglected. Gabrielle appreciated the opportunity to grow through observing peers:

> They hired two teachers that were absolutely awesome. And I was inspired by them because they took the curriculum and they flipped it. . . . And that I feel that was what I needed and I don't know if I hadn't the two of them I would choose something different. But I think the inspiration and the collaboration and the feedback and a safe place to be able to debrief.

To feel that one is engaged is important to one's sense of self-efficacy and engagement with the work, and the opportunity to grow happens through the exchange of ideas with others (Le Cornu, 2013). More importantly, what Gabrielle shows is a form of healthy resistance (Jordan, 2006) where, through reciprocal relationships with other teachers, she rejected teaching approaches that did not work for her. She found hers by learning and exchanging ideas, thus reclaiming her agency. Jasmine appreciated having her sister, a teacher, and another TOC at her school for support, exchanging ideas, and disrupting the ways of the system:

> My sister is also an educator. So, we have been able to support each other throughout everything we've ever done. . . . She helped give me like where will my kids go? What should I be teaching them to get them ready? But then we also talk about race and education both being Black women. . . . [Also] I have a really good friend that works in my building. She happens to be Mexican American. . . . In the most recent years, we've really been digging into being women of Color in a building where most of the teachers are not of Color.

Empowerment for TOCs, as demonstrated in Jasmine's response, is related to working with peers to find ways of supporting SOCs and their communities and being role models (Kokka, 2016). In this study, peer relationships that involved working collaboratively on making a change or improving the experiences of SOCs and their communities were important to several of the participants. For example, Mark spoke of experiences supporting his community along with other teachers:

> We helped each other with that level of awareness in looking at who was in our classroom. . . . We would talk about what's going on in the classroom. We would talk about our students not just our students but our community and then how we would participate.

In contrast, Selena, who was dedicated to serving her school's community, which mostly consisted of immigrant and undocumented families, was surrounded by teachers who were not motivated to engage with the community. So, she was deprived of the opportunity of collaborating with peers sharing her commitment. Anthony, whose teaching focused on equity and was enrolled in an EdD program

while also teaching, felt "stagnant" at times in his program because he noticed that while he and few peers wanted to "make a difference, make a change," some were in it only because they wanted to move up the pay scale. Anthony's and Selena's thoughts suggest the importance they placed on having mutual growth-fostering relationships that inspired their desires to make a difference in their communities and encouraged their commitment to social justice. Thus relationships with peers were critical not only for commiserating but also for feeling inspired and motivated to make education more equitable and to empower SOCs. Many TOCs share this motivation as a response and form of resistance to systems of oppression and discrimination (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

### *"I Don't Have to Explain Myself": Kinship With TOCs and SOCs*

One of the main themes was having other TOCs who could "reflect back to" the participant. It was important to have another TOC who did not need them to explain themselves or their thinking. This has not been revealed in previous studies on teacher resilience. Some of the participants felt this kinship—"having someone like me"—not only with TOCs but also with SOCs. Those who did not have that often felt more isolated. Gabrielle was the only Black teacher in her school since she joined more than a decade ago. She spoke of how much of a difference having another Black teacher made when she started teaching:

> My second year of teaching, they hired another Black teacher. She was Black and Japanese and we connected right away. . . . We are to this day—twenty years later [we're still] very, very close. So, there is something about being able to identify with people that are around you. And it's not as if I don't connect with people that aren't. I absolutely do. There is something comforting. Everybody needs to see themselves represented and when there is a lack of this presentation that's what's unsettling.

Moreover, TOCs find solace in sharing spaces with other TOCs who understand their struggles and the importance of working toward more equitable education systems (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Consider what Isabel said of having another TOC in school:

> It is crucial that we provide support for one another and remain in the fight together. When we can look at each other and understand what the other is thinking or feeling but can't necessarily explain it to someone outside our "world." This is the type of comradery necessary to survive in such harmful environments.

Feeling that you are the only one in the room on many occasions could be isolating (Brazas & McGeehan, 2020). TOCs are in spaces where they might have to constantly explain themselves or advocate for and defend SOCs (Morales, 2018). With other TOCs, they do not have to worry about such issues, as Chloe explained:

> As a Black teacher, I don't have to explain [to another Black teacher] that I also love this [Black] student. I see you—this very hard headed kid who gets on my

> nerves. This little Black boy—I can see him as my son. So, even though I am extremely frustrated. . . . I also feel I don't have to explain to her that that's not the end of it. . . . So, I would say, in particular, having other Black teachers around to kind of reflect back to me, or just listen to me or encourage me, they can relate [to me] and I don't have to explain [a lot of stuff] . . . there's a lot of shorthand and I don't know, they kind of get it. They get me.

Although Chloe recognized that the work is hard and fraught with struggle, she felt kinship with her students, who were mostly of Color. Conflict with a student was not "the final word" on her relationship with him. She did not write off the student. Importantly, what helped her was having another Black teacher "who gets it." Another Black teacher gets Chloe's struggle with the Black student *and* recognizes his humanity without assigning "permanent and often racist character flaws" to the student. Chloe's response denoted that being "reflected back" and seen was important not only for feeling validated but also for her students. Previous studies (e.g., Kohli, 2009; Morales, 2018) reported that SOCs are often—as stated by Chloe and most participants—"written off" by their teachers and face hurtful racism from them. Camila shared that she drew strength from her SOCs. Whenever she felt stressed, she thought of them and that they needed her, given most teachers had a negative attitude toward them: "My sources of strength are the students themselves [SOCs]. I think that that's what keeps me going as a teacher because I identify with them and they identify with me. So, that's very, very powerful to me."

Previous studies have shown that a number of TOCs chose teaching so that SOCs could see people who looked like them (e.g., Kokka, 2016). This kinship enriched TOCs' relationships with SOCs, as illustrated by Anthony:

> There is an understanding—like one of my [Black] students came in. He had like little white stuff in his hair and I was like what is all this? You got all this lint in your hair. He was like I know. That's not lint that's grease. I was like oh, you've got to rub the grease into your hair and so I'm rubbing it into his hair. I can do that because he and I have a cultural understanding.

His experience suggests that the role of TOCs for SOCs transcends better academic achievement. Feeling seen and understood because of a shared background also contributes to the social emotional well-being of SOCs (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Villegas et al., 2012).

The absence of feeling reflected by another TOC was a prominent issue for participants. Isabel and Gabrielle spoke of the repercussions on students of not feeling reflected. Isabel was aware of how the absence of TOCs affected SOCs since she went through K–12 without seeing a single TOC:

> There is no one to look up to for many of us who went to school, from preschool through college without even having a non-White teacher. We can't or simply don't ask for advice. You don't think teaching is a possibility for you.

Alicia and Jasmine alluded to a sense of isolation when you are the only one. Alicia said, "When you're the only one and [have] no one to relate to, I guess you're more closed off and not sharing as much." Jasmine poignantly described what it was like for her to walk into a staff room and not find people who looked like her:

> Every morning when I get up, every morning I'm a Black woman. So, that's number one. Every morning I walk to a staff room that is White. I always tell people you don't know what it's like to go to a staff meeting. It's horrible. And, then when I hear people say those kids, their behavior, their parents. So you're talking about kids who look like me.

Their comments suggest that SOCs are not the only ones who benefit from having teachers who look like them. Having other teachers of Color could lessen the sense of isolation for TOCs (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

### *The Importance of Social Justice–Oriented Education*

Several studies have shown that it is more effective to integrate the study of social justice throughout a teacher education program (TEP) than it is to restrict it to a course or a few faculty members (e.g., Zeichner & Flessner, 2009), usually faculty of Color. Gay and Howard (2001) and Milner (2003a, 2003b) stressed the importance of having dialogue around race in teacher education. Milner (2003b) called for including critically engaged dialogue around race among preservice teachers and underscored that they should be allowed to share their reflections on their experiences with race. Since most teacher education classes are overwhelmingly White, dialogue and other class experiences must involve recognizing the few preservice TOCs as valued assets with insider knowledge (Kohli, 2009). The value of a social justice–oriented TEP and the key role of conversations on race were recurring themes for most participants. Selena felt that she drew her strength from the theory she learned from her TEP:

> I felt very strong in my background, in theory and how I was able to apply it even with other people. . . . I do feel that I drew a lot more from my professors and what they taught us. I really, really loved Freire and I took a lot of what he said to heart and that's kind of what I hang on to when I am teaching and when I'm collaborating with other colleagues.

Several other participants echoed the need for having difficult and uncomfortable conversations about privilege and cultural competence, stressing the need for conversations about race and racism in particular. Gabrielle, a veteran teacher, appreciated her current doctoral educational studies program including courageous conversations she did not have in her TEP years ago. She believed she would have been inspired had she been given the opportunity to discuss race, acknowledge the "yucky" stuff, and be recognized for who she was:

> I know one thing that I didn't have the experience [in her TEP], until I got into

> this program [the doctoral program] was to have those courageous conversations about race and to have a dialogue about White privilege and about the language that's in our textbooks. . . . The misrepresentations that's in our textbooks. . . . And, for them [TOCs] to have permission to utilize who they are in their teaching.

Her current program validated her experience especially since she did not feel validated at work where no one recognized what it was like for her to be the only Black teacher. Most participants shared her sentiment. Remarkably, they did not want generic discussions about race in teacher education. Their thoughts were well represented in Isabel's response:

> I also think teacher preparation programs need to have some explicit classes on race, education-learning focus on race. Not where culturally relevant pedagogy is taught in a generic the way, like a chapter we skim through to get out of the way. We are afraid to offend folks, so we avoid these topics. We must be explicit in these conversations.

Relatedly, Adriene and others highlighted the importance of TEPs paying specific attention to the experiences of preservice TOCs and supporting them in navigating the system because their experiences are different from those of their White peers. Indeed, most TEPs are tailored for preparing White teachers. The needs of TOCs are often overlooked, with the curriculum rarely acknowledging their racialized experiences (Kohli, 2009). Adriene and others did not experience that in their programs either. Of her program, Adriene said,

> I think the best thing that teacher educators I think can do is to understand their role within the system. And so, to understand that for teachers of Color and making it really explicit that it is going to be a different experience for them. I didn't get that when I was in graduate school.

More than half the participants recognized the key role of a social justice– and equity-oriented education for their K–12 students. They pointed to the K–12 curriculum's cultural invisibility (Kohli, 2009). Some of them either shared how they were bringing social justice and/or a culturally responsive pedagogy to their classrooms or lamented their scarcity in their schools. Most of them taught SOCs, felt strongly connected to them, and were concerned for their education. For example, Anthony, a science and math teacher, enthusiastically depicted his students' engagement with a lesson on inequity:

> My kids are currently looking at trying to understand why cancer happens, who is affected by cancer. We looked at inequity. We actually had them do a Socratic Seminar where they looked at HeLa cells. . . . [We discussed] was it right for them to take her cells without the permission of the family. And for other people to benefit from that. . . . A lot of kids [said] you know this is an inequity because I think the reason why they did [this] is because she's Black. I don't know if they would have done the same thing if she was a White woman.

Jasmine, a math educator, voiced her frustration with how little her peers were doing to reach SOCs, a majority at her school. Unlike her colleagues, she was intentional in showing students, especially Black students, that Black people are not what is portrayed in news:

> Kids of Color, specifically Black students in this situation, aren't seeing themselves being taught, like in history or mathematicians. I like to bring in to all the students. Do you know like mathematics . . . the Moors were from Africa! Getting kids to see that you're more than just what's being shown the news. You're more than what's on social media.

Taken together, participants' thoughts speak to the importance of a social justice–focused education for K–12 students and for teacher candidates. Jasmine and Isabel wondered how SOCs were expected to enjoy school and feel validated when they could not see themselves in their learning. Connecting these thoughts to the shortage of TOCs, they pondered why a SOC, based on his or her school experiences, would consider a profession that does not want them. In contrast, the excitement in Anthony's voice while sharing his students' engagement and the questions they raised about equity show the power of education when students can see themselves and raise questions about our unjust systems.

## Discussion

Similar to previous studies (Amos, 2020; Morales, 2018; Pizzaro & Kohli, 2018), the present findings indicate that race, hostile working conditions, and ongoing negative, racist attitudes toward SOCs impact the experiences of TOCs. Yet these educators persisted. This study revealed factors that sustain TOCs and help them persist in their schools, while also pointing to gaps in the literature on teacher resilience. Particularly, participants' responses revealed that race is central to their thoughts on their sources of strength and resilience and that it contributed to their desire for transforming schooling for SOCs. For all participants, their relationships with their families and with mentors and colleagues of Color were critical to feeling supported, encouraged, and inspired, confirming RCT's claims about the restoring power of relationships. Indeed, several studies on teacher resilience (e.g., Gu, 2014; Le Cornu 2013) using RCT have suggested that relationships may be the most critical factor sustaining teachers. However, without a framework, such as CRT, that recognizes the indivisible role of race in TOCs' experiences, research on teacher resilience falls short in capturing the experiences of teachers who are non-White.

Family, as well as mentors and colleagues of Color, were sources of love and support. Importantly, they were also sources of empowerment and encouragement, inspiring persistence and resistance—at times transformational resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). They provided guidance through cultural brokering (Gay, 1993) and were a source for feeling "reflected back" and affirmed. According to Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), multiple layers of oppression

are met with multiple forms of resistance, and a commitment to social justice is a form of transformational resistance. Most participants were committed to social justice, and it appears that having TOCs with similar motivations was empowering and felt less isolating. Family and mentors of Color, in particular, also played the role of cultural brokers for TOCs. They helped them navigate working conditions dominated by Whiteness. Several studies have indicated how TOCs can be cultural brokers for SOCs (e.g., Eddy & Easton-Brooks, 2011; Gomez & Rodriguez, 2011), but these findings suggest that mentors of Color could play a similar role for TOCs.

Many TOCs spoke of the importance of having people who "reflect back" to them. TOCs experienced that kinship with TOCs as well as SOCs. Previous studies (e.g., Pizzaro & Kohli, 2018; Pour-Khorshid, 2018) by teacher education scholars demonstrated the importance of feeling affirmed for TOCs, but in these studies, the TOCs found solace in the affinity groups outside their schools. In the present study, TOCs referred to the importance of feeling "reflected back" at their own schools by TOCs *and* SOCs. Because studies on teacher resilience have overlooked TOCs, the impact of Whiteness on TOCs and the nuanced role that supportive relationships play for them are a gap in the literature on teacher resilience. Addressing this gap involves ensuring that TOCs are included in research and that a critical lens is applied given that Whiteness dominates.

Educational institutions, while having the capacity to oppress and stigmatize people of Color, also have the potential to bring transformation and empowerment through a social justice–oriented education that resists (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Most participants saw the potential for change through education. TOCs wanted to have uncomfortable conversations about race, and those who did not have them yearned for them. Particularly, they recognized the importance of having them in teacher preparation programs and of centering social justice in teaching K–12 students, especially SOCs. Previous studies (e.g., Morales, 2018; Pizzaro & Kohli, 2018) have called for that as well, highlighting that it is not enough to hire TOCs. It is necessary to provide them with the pedagogical knowledge that centers social justice so they can better support SOCs. To achieve this, there is a need for research (e.g., action research) that examines the teaching of social justice in TEPs and the extent to which the community cultural wealth of teacher candidates of Color is treated as an asset by teacher educators.

This study had its limitations. First, it had a small sample size and mostly included teachers in California. It would be helpful to examine the experiences of TOCs across different parts of the country. Also, the participants self-selected to participate; they might therefore be more aware of how race impacts their experiences. Nonetheless, the study shed light on how teacher resilience research needs to be more nuanced. We cannot talk about ways of retaining TOCs if we do not recognize that the experiences of TOCs are different and supporting them entails understanding their racialized experiences. Far too many TOCs feel isolated and alone in their schools, largely because they cannot access growth-fostering rela-

tionships where they can experience reciprocity in feeling seen, heard, and valued and where they are inspired to work collectively with other educators to undo our unjust systems.

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