

## High School Students of Color in the U.S. Speak about Their Educational Experiences: Schooling, Culture and Pedagogy

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### Abstract

This phenomenological study examined the experiences of high school students of color ( $n = 33$ ) living in a rural, predominately White state in the United States of America (U.S.) Drawing data from in-depth interviews and questionnaires, qualitative analysis revealed that participants experienced heightened levels of academic, cultural, and social isolation. Data also revealed that learners' histories, cultural traditions, validation of race/ethnicity and personal stories were missing in classroom instruction particularly in social studies curricula. Other findings indicated that caring and empathetic teachers helped to mitigate some of the negative experiences that students experienced, thus creating space for academic success. Therefore, this study concludes that teachers' dispositions such as care and empathy are critical aspects of culturally responsive pedagogy that can meet the needs of diverse learners. Finally, this study offers implications for classroom teachers and teacher educators.

**Keywords:** *Students of color, race, missing histories, cultural education, culturally relevant teaching*

### Introduction

Students of color in the United States generally experience diverse educational challenges (Banks & Banks, 2007; Gay, 2018; Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012), but those attending schools in rural settings that are isolated from more culturally diverse communities experience even more extensive challenges (Marx & Larson, 2012; Woldoff, Wiggins, & Washington, 2011). To better understand the nature of these students' experiences, we (researchers) designed this study to examine the challenges that high school students of color experienced while living in a predominately-White rural state. The current paper starts with a review of the literature on the experiences of students of color. Then we discuss the importance of using culturally responsive

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teaching, followed by methodology, findings, and conclusions.

### **Context**

This study was conducted in a rural state in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. In addition to being 90 percent White, the state is isolated from more racially<sup>5</sup>, culturally, and ethnically diverse metropolises (most communities are 200 miles away from nearest major cities). This primarily White state is one of ten “whitest” states in the United States which include the New England states, West Virginia, Idaho, Montana, Kentucky, North Dakota, and Wyoming (Lee, Iceland, & Sharp, 2012). Perhaps because of this isolation, rural communities in this state tend to be among the most conservative and believe strongly in meritocracy and individuality (Kambutu & Nganga, 2012; Han, Reed, Nganga & Kambutu, 2020). As a result, people of color living in the state experience heightened levels of cultural and social isolation (Nganga & Kambutu, 2009), a level of marginalization that might not be common in Urban and metropolitan states with greater populations of people of color (Han, et. al., 2020). Evident in this reality is the fact that “place” and placesness plays a critical role in shaping lived experiences and identities (Nganga & Kambutu, 2009; Gruenewald, 2003; Johnson, 2012). Johnson (2012) defined “place” within a geographical context, as a space that is based on people’s feelings. Therefore, in this study “place” means a geographical location that affects people’s everyday lives. Gruenewald (2008) argued that people are a product of place. And to Johnson (2012), place shapes people’s stories and histories because it influences the “who, what, why, when” in people’s lives (p.833). Therefore, when people are in a place, they engage in “acts of remembrance” and of “writing and telling” life stories. So, because the students of color investigated in this study lived in isolated and predominantly White rural places in the United States, the researchers wondered about the nature of the stories and experiences they developed. Additionally, we (researchers) were curious about the meaning the participants drew from their school experiences in rural settings. Although most studies on students of color focus on urban areas (Tieken, 2017), this study gives a voice to students of color living in a rural White state by examining their lived experiences from a culturally

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<sup>5</sup> The study participants used the terms “race” and “ethnicity” interchangeably. However, the researchers were aware that while race is a social construct that divides people artificially into groups based on characteristics such as physical appearance (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 2007), ethnicity denotes a group of people with a common ancestral origin who are likely to have common cultural practices (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009).

responsive pedagogy (CRP) framework.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In this study, we employ a culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) framework. A CRP approach uses cultural referents that help to bridge and explain mainstream culture, while valuing and recognizing cultures of students who have historically been marginalized (Gay, 2018, 2013).

According to Howard (2010),

culturally responsive pedagogy is a professional, political, cultural, ethical and ideological disposition that supersedes mundane teaching acts: it is centered in fundamental beliefs about teaching, learning, students, their families, and their communities, and an unyielding commitment to see student success become less rhetoric and more of a reality (p. 67).

A CRP approach emphasizes the importance for teachers to develop skills and dispositions that appropriately and accurately respond to the needs of diverse learners (Gay, 2018). Consequently, in culturally responsive classrooms, the needs and interests of all students are addressed while also ensuring a climate of respect to all cultures. Equally evident in CRP is the practice of empathy (McAllister and Irvine, 2000).

Empathy is a desirable teacher disposition when working with culturally diverse learners (Darling-Hammond, 2000; 2011; Germain, 1998). To that end, McAllister and Irvine (2000) stipulated that “empathetic people take on the perspective of another culture and respond to another individual from that person’s perspective” (p. 433). Care and empathy often appear in teachers’ caring relationships. Thus, in classrooms where a CRP approach is used, caring relationships are evident. Recognizing the importance of care and empathy, Pang (2001, p. 55) concluded that these are “the foundation for building an effective academic and social climate for schooling”

CRP acknowledges every student’s linguistic heritage, and affirms cultural differences in the classroom (Nganga, 2019; Gay, 2018; Kambutu & Nganga, 2012). Indeed, Smith (1998) argued that failure to infuse cultural heritage in the learning process results in cultural incongruity between learners and classroom practices, causing the affected learners to resent learning. Nieto and Bode (2012) recommended classroom content that examined issues of race and racism in order to promote a social justice-centered education. In the absence of such an education, students of color are typically silenced and disempowered (Soumah & Hoover, 2013).

### **Literature Review**

#### **Omissions and misinformation: the left-out voices in history and marginalization of students of color**

According to the National Council of Social Studies (NCSS, 2001) social studies should prepare learners who have “the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to assume the 'office of citizen' in our democratic republic” (NCSS, 2001, p. 5). These learners should also be able to make reasoned decisions for the good of the public in a culturally diverse nation and interdependent world (NCSS, 1993; 2001). However, the type of instruction and materials used may hinder acquisitions of essential citizen skills. For example, Loewen (2018) characterized the teaching of history as whitewashed and at times irrelevant to learners of color (Au, Brown & Calderon, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2003). Specifically, Ladson-Billings identified the absence of critical analysis of race and racism in social studies curricula as a potential pedagogical malpractice. By failing to include race and racism as topics of interrogation, then schools deny their students the opportunity to examine the historical and contemporary nature of marginalization based on race, and as result, racism is nurtured rather than eradicated. Equally problematic the is dominance of white narratives in social studies textbooks (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001; Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

Although narratives matter (Delgado & Stefanic, 2001), social studies textbooks are replete with stories about white people’s experiences that largely silence the experiences of marginalized cultures in the U.S. For examples, while textbooks tend to depict the experiences of Black people in a sketchy format mainly from a slavery lens, Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans appear mainly as figures on the landscape with virtually no history or contemporary ethnic experience, and no sense of the ethnic diversity. Meanwhile, Native Americans are usually portrayed as historical figures (Sleeter & Grant, 1991). Therefore, given that textbooks are socially constructed cultural, political, and economic artifacts, Delgado and Stefancic (2012, p. 24) recommended critical examination and replacement of “majoritarian interpretations of events with ones that provide a balanced look at history and more accurately aligned “with minorities’ experiences” Sleeter and Grant (2009). Dhand (1988) issues similar conclusions because dominant ideologies in social studies textbooks promote Euro-western ideologies that often disregard views of people of color, thus promoting racial and cultural bias. To that end, Agarwal-Rangnath (2013) invited social studies educators to offer historical narratives that are inclusive of the voices and views of

historically marginalized groups because “by teaching multiple perspectives, we can help our students realize that there is more than one story that can be told about every event that happens (p. 40). Meanwhile social studies textbooks have a reputation of trumpeting the achievements of dominant cultures and blaming marginalized groups for their plight (Aronson, Meyers & Winn (2020). This conundrum is especially evident in the example below:

Native Americans were dispossessed of their land ‘because they did not understand the concept of private land ownership’; Asian workers received low wages because they were willing to ‘work for very little’; Blacks could not get good urban jobs because they ‘were unskilled and uneducated;’ Chicano’s face problems because ‘they are not fluent in English (Council on Interracial Books for Children 1980, p. .83).

Because teachers depend on textbooks to determine what to teach, Rogers (1994) called for ongoing critical analysis of textbooks in order to identify and exclude teaching resources that promoted inaccurate and exclusive narratives. Additionally, Sleeter and Grant (2009, p. 81) cautioned against the use of textbooks and other teaching resources that whitewashed the “the history of white racism and oppression.” Similarly, Ladson-Billings (2003) and Gay, (2018) recommended using teaching resources that were bias free because any omission and misinformation of people of color in textbooks could easily have negative impact on learners who do not see themselves represented in curriculum (Apple, 1996; Au, Brown& Calderón, 2016; Wallace & Allen, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative that social studies educators to continually review teaching and learning resources for both intentional and unintentional bias. The following review suggestions from the Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (2021, p. 7-11) ask educators to always ensure that:

- Biographical, contemporary, or historical materials infuse perspectives and contributions from members of diverse groups substantially, accurately, and respectfully.
- Instructional materials include literature, examples, or situations that accurately reflect the culture, languages, traditions, beliefs, values, and customs of people from diverse backgrounds.
- Curriculum recognizes the validity and integrity of knowledge systems based in communities of color, American Indian/Alaska Native and indigenous cultures, and faith systems inclusive of but not limited to Christian.
- Instructional materials respectfully portray different ethnic and cultural traditions,

languages, religions, names and clothing.

- Diverse ethnicities and nationalities are portrayed accurately.
- Characters of diverse cultural backgrounds are not represented stereotypically or presented as foreign or exotic.
- Oversimplified generalizations of social classes and groups are avoided in text and illustrations.

### **Students of Color in the U.S. Have Historically Experienced Many Challenges**

Historically, students of color in the U.S. have experienced many educational challenges. For example, while race-based school segregation continues to be a problem (Jeremy, 2013; Mickelson, 2014) equally problematic is the fact that the American education system is founded on Eurocentric values, and therefore, it is not able to address adequately the needs of learners of color (Apple, 2004). Further, because the American education system has historically made limited efforts to challenge the existing social and structural inequalities, learners of color have been systematically disadvantaged (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009; Jeremy, 2013). To mitigate this educational injustice, (Apple, 1996, 2004, 2006; Apple & Aasen, 2003) supported an inclusive education that meets the needs of all learners. While such an education is beneficial because it is culturally responsive, it is needed because it addresses entrenched societal problems such as race and racism, unfair school funding models, and exclusionary curricula that undermine educational performance (Apple, 2004; Kozol, 1991). But even though these educational challenges affect all children of color, learners of color living in isolated rural settings face additional challenges related to being a numerical minority in their schools.

Students of color living in isolated rural settings in the U.S. are likely to experience challenges that are not common in more culturally diverse rural communities. For example, although all learners of color in the U.S. are likely to face academic segregation (Marx & Larson, 2012), this problem is exacerbated in isolated and predominantly White rural settings because educators are typically White. Certainly, White teachers are capable of meeting the educational needs of all students, including children of color. Nevertheless, Gay (2018) contended that because of cultural incongruity, some White educators are unable to utilize heritage cultures while teaching children of color. Consequently, they might not be able to adequately meet the needs of learners of color. Equally challenging is the mindset of “colorblindness” that many White teachers hold. Although

race matters (Delgado-Bernal, 2002), educators who embrace a colorblind orientation believe, erroneously, that because they do not see color, race is not an issue in academic settings (Markowitz & Puchner, 2014).

Race affects academic performance in many profound ways. For example, because of race, Howard (2010), Nieto and Bode (2012) argued that children of color are subjected to unfavorable educational conditions, structures and contexts. Equally problematic is the ideology of colorblindness because educators who hold this view embrace a deficit model, that is, failure to succeed academically is caused by lack of essential academic skills rather than the result of many societal and systemic factors (Scheurich & Young, 1997), including racism (Sleeter & Grant, 2009). Therefore, a colorblind mindset is unresponsive to learners' needs (Gay, 2018). Because teachers play a critical role in the process of teaching and learning, it is perhaps not surprising that students of color have many negative school experiences, resulting in lower performance than their White peers (Mickelson, 2014). Students of color may also experience stereotypes, stereotype threat, and microaggressions (Bratter, Rowley, & Chukhray, 2016).

### **Stereotypes and Racial Microaggressions**

While all learners of color experience stereotypes, racial microaggressions, and marginalization, learners of color in rural settings isolated from cultural diversity are likely to experience more of these acts of injustice. Several studies have explored stereotypes and stereotype threat as a psychological threat to the performance of students of color. Stereotype threat is “the anxiety of confirming group-specific stereotypes of poor intellectual ability” and has well established links to poor performance of racial minority students in college, high school and even earlier grades (Bratter, Rowley, & Chukhray, 2016, p. 340). Several studies have shown that Latinx American students, reacting to the prospect of being judged according to a stereotype of intellectual inferiority, significantly depress their academic test performance

(Benner & Graham, 2001; Edwards & Romero, 2008). Reflecting on the dangers of stereotypes, Johnson-Ahorlu (2013) repudiated gross generalization (stereotype) of a people based on shared characteristics. Such generalization might be used to justify racism and/or denying people power and privilege based on race (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007).

Students of color also experience microaggressions, subtle brief statements such as every person can succeed if he/she worked hard enough (Wing, 2010), which are especially debilitating. Microaggressions discredit the social injustices that historically marginalized peoples experience

on a daily basis (DeCuir-Gunby, Johnson, Edwards et.al. 2020; Kohli & Solorzano, 2012). But acts of empathy and care towards students of color in academic settings can help them overcome some of the negative aspects of stereotype threat, microaggressions and marginalization (Noddings, 1984). Additionally, teachers can develop and demonstrate understanding of their students' histories and lived experiences and seek to understand how conditions of social inequity and power relations situate these realities. Pang (2001) and Muff (2020) described such an approach as caring-centered, based upon the importance of building trusting relations and understanding the sociocultural context of learning. These characteristics are usually available in classrooms where a CRP approach is used (Gay, 2018).

### **Method**

We conducted this phenomenological qualitative study to explore and understand the experiences of students of color in a state located in the rural mountain West of the U. S. Specifically, this study focused on the lived experiences of research participants and sought to examine the complexity and sophistication of those experiences through qualitative methodological approaches (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Through the examination of multiple experiences, a synthesis of those lived experiences emerged. By synthesizing lived experiences, our intention was to facilitate the analysis of current educational practices, and inform future studies (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009). A phenomenological research framework was particularly helpful in examining the nuanced conditions facing students of color and other minoritized populations (Kazanjan, 2019). With the phenomenological and qualitative approach as a foundation, we used in-depth structured interviews.

The following three research questions guided the study:

- What contradictions or tensions seem to exist between students' home experiences (practices and traditions) and their experiences in the classrooms/school?
- What are the perspectives of students of color regarding the nature of learning resources, in terms of inclusion of histories, cultural traditions, race, and ethnicity?
- How has race/ethnicity affected learning experiences for students of color?

### **Participants**

To collect data, we (the researchers) interviewed 33 students of color from seven high schools in a rural western state in the U.S. To determine which schools to invite, we considered geographic

location (to represent all regions in the state), and the population of students of color in each school. In the end, students in grades 10 through 12 participated. While 12 of the participants identified themselves as African Americans, 10 were Latinx, six were Asians, three were American Indians, and two identified themselves as “Other.” In terms of gender, 19 males and 14 females between the ages of 15 and 19 years participated. In addition to using pseudonyms to protect the participants’ identities, consents and assents were obtained from participants and their parents respectively. Institutional permission for the research was granted and ethical guidelines for human subjects were followed.

### **Criteria for selection of a predominantly white state**

While studies of students of color in predominately white high schools were lacking, there were several studies that examined the experiences of students of color in predominately white campuses in large urban centers. Those studies reported that the experiences of students of color were generally unpleasant (Feagin et al, 1996; Gregory, 2000; Morrisson, 2010; Redden, 2002). As result, we wondered how high school students of color in a rural White state might interpret their experiences. While rural White states have historically had majority white students and teachers, the population of students of color in rural settings was increasing (Anthony-Stevens & Langford, 2019). Although the population of people of color in rural western states (Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and Utah, Wyoming etc.) was expanding, rurality in the U.S. is associated with “White and homogeneous, nonurban, and frequently maintains an association with discourse models such as “the real Americans”—for example, people of European descent and Christian practice (Anthony-Stevens & Langford, 2019, p. 334). This interpretation of rurality excludes people of color and extends a dominant discourse that exist in many regions of the United States. Consequently, we selected a rural White state in order to provide a platform for diverse learners to share their lived experiences in rural settings.

### **Data Sources and Analysis**

Consistent with the phenomenological orientation of the study, the researchers collected data using structured in-depth interviews (for sample questions, see Appendix A). Boyce and Neale (2006) favored in-depth interviews because they provide “much more detailed information than what is available through other data collection methods, such as surveys. They also may provide a more relaxed atmosphere in which to collect information” (p. 3). The use of in-depth interviews enabled the participants to share their experiences about schooling in culturally isolated rural

settings. Additionally, the researchers used follow-up questions to gather more information and/or explanation from responses given to the scripted questions. These structured interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the researchers scheduled interviews at school, during school days, at times and places of each learner's choosing. The researchers audio-recorded all interviews and employed a transcriptionist. Data were analyzed qualitatively, first by coding using words and/or concepts that the participants used commonly in their responses to interview questions, and then, then by studying the coded data, looking for major themes (Glesne, 2011). We discuss the results based on our research questions.

We used a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) theoretical framework to help make meaning of the identified themes. In doing so, we were especially cognizant of Cole's (2009) postulate that racism shapes people's experiences dramatically. Therefore, while objectivity was crucial in the analysis of the responses received, we remained vigilant about the possible intersection of race and the participants' lived experiences in isolated rural settings. Indeed, Gilbert, (2002) cautioned that the meaning drawn from people's feedback should not only be based on what was said, but also from the way events in the responses were placed. Therefore, during interviews, we remained sensitive to the fact that the American education system viewed children of color from a deficit model. Therefore, we approached this study from a cultural strength model (Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

### **Positionality**

Two of the researchers in this current study, one female and the other male, self-identified as Black. The third author was a White male who had worked with people of color in school and university settings. The fourth author was a female Asian American. Additionally, three of the researchers had taught multicultural courses at their institution and had also experienced teaching in American public schools in primarily White states. The researchers' interpretation of data, therefore, could have been affected by their interaction with multicultural content, their identities, and the population with which they worked. Thus, the researchers acknowledge the possibility of their lived experiences inferring with the objectivity of data analysis (Crewell, 2013). To enhance the trustworthiness and authenticity of interview results, the researchers studied data independently and then together in order to develop consensus about what was in the data (Morrow, 2005; Patton, 2002).

## Findings

### **What contradictions or tensions seem to exist between students' home experiences (practices and traditions) and their experiences in the classrooms/school?**

Participants reported not feeling welcome in some classes. When asked to discuss their classroom experiences, they described a strong feeling of cultural exclusion, and therefore loneliness, because of not being included in the learning process. While some of the participants resented being ridiculed by White students, many (63%) mentioned that their teachers did not intervene or stop race-based jokes. Failure to support students of color in the classroom is contrary to the principles of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) that promote good student/teacher relationships (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Gay (2010) added that a pedagogy that supports good student/teacher relationships emphasizes “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 31). Further, an education that is informed by CRP calls for engaging learners whose experiences and cultures are traditionally excluded from mainstream settings. To Rodriguez (2005), students are likely to develop a sense of belonging in a welcoming classroom.

In a welcoming classroom, there is a strong sense of safety, both physically and emotionally. Yet, the participants in this study did not feel safe in their classroom because most teachers did not make the effort to know them and their respective ethnic backgrounds. When asked to identify the instructional strategies that could help alleviate their social and cultural isolation, the participants spoke strongly in favor of respectful classrooms where all students' cultures and backgrounds were acknowledged. A respectful classroom not only ensures that learning materials are culturally inclusive, but it also creates space for all students to tell their stories (Nganga, 2019, Kambutu, Rios & Castaneda, 2009).

Personal narratives are essential in the process of creating meaning and ownership. These stories allow people to access deep meanings hidden within one's identity (Kambutu, et. al., 2009; Nganga, 2019). Commenting on the importance of respect in the classroom, Morrow (2015) indicated that, “every child has the right to be respected” in order to unlock his/her academic potential (p. 68). All learners also need to feel validated. A Latina participant noted that “there are different pictures hanging on the classroom wall, but I don't ever see any that covers people of color—most of the pictures have White images.” This statement reflects what many students of

color felt about their learning environments. According to Zamudio, Russell, Rios, and Bridgeman (2011), the lack of images that are representative of students of color advances the normalcy of whiteness and dominant ideologies represented by images from the dominant culture. The CRP framework is critical to an education thus designed and practiced. Instead, it favors educational practices that validate all learners.

While all students of color reported that their parents were supportive and had high expectations for them, data revealed that teachers generally held lower academic expectations for these students; thus, showing contradictions between students' home and school experiences. According one participant who identified as African American and female, one teacher told the class that she "believed they can all do well." Yet when this student did well in assignments, her teacher always seemed surprised:

Just because I answered a question eloquently does not mean that White teachers should be shocked. It seems like every time I answer a question, and they weren't expecting that form of answer, their faces show shock.

Teacher expectations also shape the decision a teacher makes when interacting with students. Supportive teacher behaviors and expectations increase the success of all students (Irvine, 1990; Jamil, Larsen, & Hamre, 2018). It is therefore problematic that teachers persist in behaviors that promote inequality and low expectations based on race. Our data revealed that some learners of color chose to take a stand against educators' assumptions about their academic abilities based on race. A Latinx student took a strong version of such a position in the following response: "Sometimes when teachers see that you are a certain ethnicity, they kind of wonder if you know the answer to their question. This is wrong and racist."

**What are students of color perspectives regarding the nature of learning resources in terms of inclusion of histories, cultural traditions, race and ethnicity?**

Overwhelmingly, the participants in this study expressed a preference for curricula that were engaging, inclusive and culturally responsive (73%). To these learners, an inclusive curriculum happens in a caring learning environment that embraces and validates students' home and cultural backgrounds. A learning environment thus designed is consistent with the ideals of a Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP). Addressing the issue, Marx and Larson (2012) affirmed the importance of appreciating learners' home cultures in order to make learning meaningful. But although cultural appreciation plays a critical role in supporting learning, the participants in this

study reported that having expert and caring teachers was equally essential because caring educators are likely to provide an inclusive and empowering curriculum. Commenting on the benefits of expert and caring teachers, for example, an African American male reported that “these teachers use materials that include all people.” To that end, this student reported that he “would also like to see representations of successful African Americans in class history textbooks and on the posters that are found on hallways; not just athletes.” What is most evident here is the fact that this student did not only prefer caring educators, but he also asked for the use of diverse instructional materials.

While an exclusively monocultural curriculum is alienating, an inclusive curriculum creates a sense of ownership and belonging as is evident in the following feedback from an American Indian female: “I am interested in American Indian History. So, when we’re talking about it in class, I am more interested in education and stuff.” Evident in this response is a reminder that when the curriculum is tied to students’ interests, they are likely to engage academically. Conversely, students lose interest when they do not see meaning in a curriculum. The following feedback from two students who identified as Latinx provides additional pertinent insights:

We all have stories, but in school, we only hear one side, White people’s perspectives. They tell their stories to push other peoples’ stories aside and that is when I feel the need to prove that my people’s stories have value too. (student a)

Instead of demonizing Mexicans who come to the United States to look for better economic opportunities, for example, a background of why they immigrate to the U.S, might be helpful. In my history class they seem to focus only on the right of the whites to acquire land from others in Manifest-Destiny. If we are taught about how the people of Mexico felt about their land being taken after the Mexican-American war and how this has impacted Mexicans up to today, maybe they can better understand my culture. (student b)

### **How has race/ethnicity affected students of color learning experiences?**

When asked how they felt about race and how it affected their schooling experiences, the participants reported that their racial identities were not respected, instructional materials did not reflect them, and they experienced cultural isolation. Chambers and McCready (2011) described such experiences as marginalization. Reflecting on the issue of whether her ethnicity was respected

in the classroom, a Latinx reported that “I do not feel that my race is respected. Some of the teachers ignore me. These teachers seem to judge people based on color/race.” Other participants reported similar aspects of marginalization, including being ignored by White teachers and students, and most impactful was the fact that most teachers rarely intervened against racial jokes. Racial jokes are forms of microaggression that some of the participants resented vehemently, although they did not use the term “microaggressions” specifically, and these acts manifested themselves in many ways. Many participants expressed microaggressions in terms of being disrespected and ignored because of race (Brondolo, Brady ver Halen, et al., 2011). Exposure to ongoing microaggression has consequences, and data from this study showed that the participants felt a strong sense of marginalization as a result. An American Indian male reported that he felt “lonely in the classroom” adding that “I rarely speak in class because White students make me feel like I'm not important.” Meanwhile, an African American male described the effects of microaggression:

The vibe I get from White teachers is that race determines a person rather than the environment and experiences of that person. Thus, they determine who I am, and my performance based on my race. I would say that it is just stereotyping. I have to be cognizant of the fact that other White people are seeing me in this light.... well, the first time they meet me; a tall African American, they say, you must play basketball; you must be good at sports. They don't ask me about academics, like what classes are you taking or where are you planning to go to college, and when they do, they ask me whether I am going to college for basketball or sports? I may not be able to change people's preconceived notions about who I am, but I always try to prove who I really am. ....you cannot categorize me based on just how I look. So, I am sometimes very frustrated when I think that sports is all that people believe I can do. I lead my class academically, and it would be nice if people would ask me about how I am doing in my classes.

This student's response suggests the cumulative psychological impact of repeated microaggressions. Worth noting, for example, is the fact that this student is already showing signs of disillusionment with society. Consider his statement that “I am sometimes very frustrated when I think that sports are all that people believe I can do.” The lesson gained here is that instead of frequent reliance upon stereotyping, developing a habit of gathering informed information about

other people is beneficial. One participant reported that gathering information is as simple as asking, and that because teachers do not ask, they simply “do not know my family’s background and my home culture.” Without a doubt, then, having access to informed and objective information is invaluable because in addition to promoting human understanding, it could support human interactions that are informed and objective, thus reducing incidences of microaggression and marginalization. In this study, the participants expressed a preference for an inclusive education because it acknowledges the existence of multiple perspectives and not just views from the dominant culture.

Data from this study show that these young students were aware of their racial position (positionality) in the U.S. and its associated injustices. Therefore, some volunteered to serve as facilitators of change, notwithstanding the risks involved. Given that these students were not necessarily cultural experts, it was an educational injustice to expect them to serve as cultural educators. Other participants were reluctant to serve as cultural experts as is evident in the following response from an American Indian:

My teachers always call on me to share my culture and experiences, but I don’t want to because I do not think sharing my experience can tell all about our culture. Teachers should instead just include American Indian history in what we study.

In the above response, the participant does not consider herself a cultural educator. Instead, she supported changing the existing curriculum in order to create room for topics in American Indian history and culture. Meanwhile, Aronson & Steele (2005) noted the disadvantages of making students cultural educators, because this practice may create role ambiguities regarding power positioning and authority (see also Zamudio, et al., 2011). Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) held a similar sentiment and added that asking students to speak for their respective cultures was unjust. Regardless of the challenges involved, however, several participants in this study were willing to serve as cultural educators so they could educate the dominant cultural group. In doing so, they hoped to help create positive images of their respective cultural groups. To that end, an American Indian male commented that serving as a cultural expert motivated him to “do the best I can so people don’t say Native Americans are any less than other races. I have to prove myself and my people’s culture.”

The “racial expert” paradox is a complex yet subtle cultural dynamic between members of the dominant culture and the marginalized groups. Being in positions of power and privilege, members

of the dominant group are less motivated to learn about other cultures. Instead, they expect members of the marginalized groups to educate them, or to speak on behalf of their respective cultures. This practice is paradoxical because although the marginalized groups could potentially benefit from educating members of the dominant group, they resent doing so because they feel that those with most power and privilege are not interested in real change (Author, 2009).

### **Discussion**

Although an inclusive education could suffice for students of color in general, learners of color studying in isolated White rural contexts will benefit from extra remedies. Among such remedies is the use of a pedagogy of care and empathy. Such an educational approach is different from regular pedagogy because its focus is on establishing a gracious learning space in the context of equity. A gracious space is a “setting” that invites the stranger (Hughes, 2004, p.15). When implemented in the spirit of equanimity, a gracious space focuses on issues of fairness, justice, and kindness while disrupting injustice, oppression and domination (Nieto & Bode, 2012). Thus, a pedagogy of care and empathy has value because it considers lived experiences and “place” in order to meet learners’ needs adequately. To that end, one male participant in this study articulated this reality lucidly when he stated that when empathy is at play, teachers do not necessarily need to “know what it feels like to be picked on, left out or made fun of because of race.” Instead, “empathy would encourage them to learn and feel about my experiences and background.”

A pedagogy of care and empathy is situational and must be adapted to meet learners’ needs. For example, because the learners of color in this study were likely to be taught exclusively by White teachers, a pedagogy of empathy would advocate strongly for the recruitment and hiring of administrators, educators, and paraeducators of color so learners of color could have role models. In terms of addressing the meaning of the academic, cultural, and social isolation that children of color in isolated rural settings experienced, a pedagogy of care and empathy would ensure an inclusive education is adopted. Additionally, it would support the hiring of well-trained multicultural experts, particularly licensed counselors, to help these learners disentangle their thoughts, feelings, and how they made sense of their school experiences.

In classrooms based on respect, all cultures are understood and appreciated, creating an inclusionary and culturally responsive education. In such classrooms, learners teachers use a culturally responsive perspective that involves integrating diverse cultural perspectives and students’ prior knowledge and experiences (Gay, 2018). Learners’ histories, cultural traditions,

race and ethnicity are validated and represented in the curriculum. However, because the American education system is shaped largely by Eurocentric values, the experiences of students of color are generally ignored. Embraced instead is an assumption that what is good for the dominant group is equally good for all cultural groups. Because students bring a variety of heritage cultures into the classroom, any failure to acknowledge this reality violates the pedagogical principles espoused in CRP. This student-centered approach to teaching identifies and nurtures students' unique cultural strengths, to promote student achievement and a sense of well-being about the student's cultural place in the world.

Data suggested that students were aware of the exclusionary nature of school curricula. This exclusion adds to a sense of isolation. To help mitigate this isolation, data showed that the participants preferred inclusion of heritage cultures in the learning process. Indeed, the framework of Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) supports the use of heritage cultures in order to enhance learning and argues that an education that does not utilize human differences falls short of providing empowering curricula (Delgado-Bernal, 2002; Gay, 2018). Because the participants in this study experienced social and cultural isolation, then, they not only reported experiencing a disempowering education, but also offered suggestions to make education inclusive and culturally responsive.

While many factors aid in the process of making education inclusive, the participants in this study recommended the use of caring learning environments. In a caring learning environment, learners are allowed to express themselves freely because voice matters (Zamudio et al., 2011). It also encourages the use of multiple perspectives (Nganga, 2015). Shoemaker and Eklund (1989), for example, argued that caring classrooms offer integrated and interactive learning that is informed by real life events. When instruction is integrated, students are able to experience learning in a manner that mirrors events in real life. This educational approach also discourages emphasis on memorization of facts and skills, without showing relationships (Bruner, 1986). Planned carefully, then, instructional integration allows learners to participate fully in the learning process, thus allowing them to develop affirming images of themselves and the educational process.

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

Data from this study offer invaluable insights. Although data showed that White teachers struggle with implementing CRP, they have the capability of educating students of color if they utilize a

culturally relevant pedagogy that features care and empathy.

Measures consistent with a pedagogy of care and empathy include, but are not limited to:

- Getting to know students of color and their families, a good starting place in the process of establishing positive relationships.
- Focusing on personal reflections, awareness of unconscious bias.
- Curricula representative of diverse cultures (histories, culture etc.) as well those from the mainstream.
- Hiring policies that support the recruitment and hiring of a diverse workforce.
- Providing professional development opportunities in culturally responsive teaching
- Pedagogy of care and empathy, including active engagement of students, exploring their own cultures and cultures of dominant groups.

In a pedagogy of care and empathy, learners are given multiple opportunities to discuss freely the place-based societal matters that influence how they make meaning of lived experiences. In a pedagogy of empathy, learners are never asked to be cultural experts. Instead, a curriculum that is culturally responsive is implemented.

### **Selecting socials studies curriculum materials**

Generally, social studies teaching and learning resources in the U.S. focus on the experiences of White and middle-class cultures (Wallace & Allen, 2008). As a result, the histories and experiences of various marginalized groups are largely ignored and/or minimized. Therefore, this study calls on educators to always adopt culturally inclusive teaching and learning resources as follows:

- Supplement existing resources with textbooks authored by writers from historically marginalized identities.
- Use inclusive teaching and learning resources. Generally, textbooks exclude contributions of historically marginalized groups and instead promote the experiences of the dominant group.
- Select supportive literature that “validates the lived experiences of learners from culturally diverse backgrounds, recognizes social differences, and contributes to the development of empathy in children and respect and understanding between and among cultures (Botelho & Rudman, 2009, p.265)
- Monitor classroom practices and instruction. It is critical for educators to establish

welcoming classrooms that are free of stereotype, racism, marginalization and microaggression. In welcoming classrooms, learners' experiences and interests serve as bridge to instruction. Additionally, learners' histories, cultures and racial/ethnic backgrounds are included in the curriculum and teachers have high expectations for all learners.

- Provide a challenging curriculum for all students. To Sleeter and Grant (2009) educators were likely to hold have low expectations for students of color.
- Provide instructional opportunities for all students to interact in ways that help them to “understand how culture and social structure orient and constrain the actions of diverse groups in history” (Wills, 2001, p. 55).
- Ask questions such as: 1). What examples or experiences do my students have that connect to the concepts I am teaching? 2). What biases do I have and how can I overcome them as an educator? 3). What assumptions do I have about culturally and linguistically diverse learners and how might they hinder how I teach? 4). Am I providing accurate information about various racial, ethnic, ability, gender, social class groups etc., and “making sure that classroom materials do not contain overt stereotypes and “(Sleeter & Grant, 2009, p. 103)?
- Use multiple modalities during instruction to reach all learners. See appendix B.
- Selecting current materials that present the realities of modern cultures as compared to those of the past.

In all, to best facilitate the establishment of positive relationships between educators and students of color, it is essential for educators to implement culturally responsive instruction. To be successfully however, it is important for educator to engage in purposeful self-reflection. In particular, they should consider how, if at all, their own unconscious bias could hinder learning (Lubbe & Botha, 2020). Once unshackled from both intentional and unintentional biases, it is probable for them to teach all students well. This is especially true for a majority of teachers in the U.S. who hail from middle class European-American backgrounds. Typically, the biggest obstacle that these educators face is disposing of their own cultural biases in order to create space to learn about the cultural backgrounds of students of color. Yet, an education that is culturally responsive requires teachers to be sensitive to their students' cultural needs.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Sample interview questions and follow up questions**

1. A. Please discuss yourself in the context of race/ethnicity, culture, and other social characteristics that are important to you.  
B. Why are these identities/features important to you?
2. As a student of color, how does your race influence your school experiences? What challenges do you face? What are your successes?
3. What helps you stay focused in school?
4. A. Describe your relationship with students and teachers from the majority culture.  
B. Describe your relationship with other students of color.  
C. How have these relationships affected your schooling? Explain.
5. A. How would you describe the type of materials (textbooks, posters, videos, other learning tools, etc.) used in your classrooms?  
B. Do these materials represent your race/ethnicity? Why or why not?
6. A. Do you have times in the classroom when you felt that teachers respected your race/ethnicity? Explain.  
B. Do you have examples of times in the classroom when you felt that your race was not respected? Explain
7. Are there changes you would like to see in the type of education you experience? Explain.

**Appendix B**  
**Multiple Ways to Engage Students in Diverse Classrooms**

<b>Auditory</b>	<b>Visual</b>	<b>Tactile- Kinesthetic</b>	<b>Affective</b>	<b>Technology Options</b>
Listening to text read aloud	Using a dictionary	Using a Braille dictionary	Working in areas of student interest	Using a talking dictionary
Listening to and retelling directions	Highlighting key points	Touching words on a word wall	Working with a partner who can help with definitions	Downloading and listening to a podcast on an iPod
Asking and answering questions	Outlining steps to solving a problem	Using manipulatives	Working alone or in cooperative groups	Using a word processing program
Engaging in a debate	Completing a graphic organizer	Building a model	Participating in a discussion group or book club	Using a talking calculator
Engaging in a discussion	Designing a poster	Using response cards	Participating in a seminar	Creating spreadsheets
Giving verbal prompts	Illustrating or taking pictures	Using a game format	Giving feedback	Creating a video
Talking through steps	Drawing	Finger spelling	Giving praise	Using blogging or text messaging

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