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Fighting to Educate Our Own: Teachers of Color, Relational Accountability, and the Struggle for Racial Justice

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ABSTRACT

Research demonstrates that many teachers of Color enter schools committed to challenging injustice, yet often face barriers to accomplishing this goal. This article presents emergent themes from a qualitative study with 218 self-identified, racial justice-oriented teachers of Color. Using Wilson's (2008) indigenous cultural framework of relationality and relational accountability to analyze our data, we introduce the concept of community-oriented teachers of Color to describe the accountability these teachers have towards students of Color and their communities. We found that despite their connections, insights, and successes with students, hierarchies of ontology (ways of being) and epistemology (ways of knowing) within schools that promote individualism served to isolate and marginalize community-oriented teachers of Color and, thus, limited their ability to advance racial justice.

As a second-generation South Asian immigrant, I (Kohli) was the only Asian American teacher on staff at my middle school in Oakland, California. The school served a predominantly Black community, with a small Middle Eastern and Asian American population that included South Asian students. Although racism against South Asian Americans was not new, the attack of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001 sparked a dramatic spike in violence directed at my community. A few days after the collapse of the towers, I showed up to my classroom and saw that a teacher across the hall had posted a photo of Osama Bin Laden in a 7–11 uniform on his door. When I asked him to take it down in light of all the recent shootings of Sikh convenience store owners, he said, “Lighten up, it’s just a joke.” Although I made a formal complaint to the principal, the picture remained on my colleague’s door for several weeks with no apologies or discourse about how this racist act impacted my students, my community, and my sense of belonging in the school. This, along with similar incidents, made it clear that my identity, my culture and my community were invisible to, or even devalued by, the broader staff. On campus, I felt isolated in my identity as an Asian American teacher, as an advocate for my community, and as an educator committed to issues of racial justice and equity.

I (Pizarro) had my first full-time teaching position on an emergency credential as a sixth-grade educator in Inglewood, California during the early 1990s. The approaches of the predominantly White teaching staff were often condescending and reflected a lack of commitment to the academic success of Black and Latina/o students and to our community. Teachers to whom I was supposed to turn for support repeatedly said out loud that our students would become teenage mothers and “gangbangers.” As a teacher of Color¹ committed to racial justice, I did not share their beliefs. Instead, I felt compelled to develop curriculum and teaching methods that would challenge my students to collectively create a better world despite the messages they were receiving on so many fronts. As the only Chicano teacher, I was racially

isolated. More significantly, though, I felt isolated in my racial justice ideology and my commitment to students and our community. As a survival strategy, I withdrew from my peers by eating lunch in my room. Keeping to myself, I did my best to construct a space for students that allowed them to dream and live those dreams.

As the examples above demonstrate, both of us former teachers in urban public schools experienced a profound sense of marginalization in our workplaces. Although we were one of few teachers of Color on our respective staffs, the alienation we felt was not just based on our identity as teachers of Color. It was also significantly tied to our racial justice ideologies and our deep commitment to our communities. While students of Color are steadily increasing in public schools, teachers of Color continue to be drastically under-represented (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Villegas & Jordan-Irvine, 2010). Nationally, students of Color make up almost 50% of the public school student population, yet only 18% of all public school teachers in the United States are racial minorities (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). When teachers of Color enter the field, they typically work in schools with few peers who reflect them racially or culturally. While this demographic context is troubling, in this article we argue that the marginalization teachers of Color experience often goes beyond just their race, ethnicity, or phenotype.

Although there are racial minority teachers who never name injustice or approach injustice through an individualized lens, research demonstrates that many teachers of Color frame racist and classist experiences within a broader sociopolitical context and are committed to challenging such inequities (Kambutu, Rios, & Castañeda, 2009).² Because schools operate through Eurocentric cultural frameworks that devalue their communities and their community-based forms of knowledge (Yosso, 2005), teachers of Color are often not able to engage holistically, to grow in ways that accomplish their goals, or to advocate for their communities. Specifically, as our narratives above illuminate, many teachers of Color are challenged when they bring the insights and strengths they have as members of communities of Color into their professional lives. Using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), we analyzed qualitative data from 218 teachers of Color from across the nation who had a self-identified commitment to racial justice and an advanced racial literacy (Sealey-Ruiz, 2011), defined as a structural analysis of racism, an asset-based framing of communities of Color, and a critical theoretical approach to challenging inequality (Yosso, 2005). Through their narratives, we learned that in addition to wanting to transform educational opportunities for youth of Color, these teachers also expressed a deep relational commitment to teach along with, and as part of, communities of Color. In this article, we begin by theorizing this way of being as a community-orientation. Sharing representative examples from our data, we then examine contradictions between the approach and goals of community-oriented teachers of Color and the traditionally individualistic climate of schools. Adapting Wilson's (2008) indigenous cultural paradigm of "research as ceremony" to the context of teaching, we illuminate how these contradictions are ontological (ways of being), epistemological (ways of knowing), and axiological (ways of establishing ethics), and frequently result in isolation, marginalization, and barriers to the advancement of justice.

Beyond teacher demographics

Although teachers of Color bring a great deal of insight into the field, very little of their experiences and prior knowledge are currently built upon within teacher training (Gorski, 2009; Montecinos, 2004). Numerous studies demonstrate that the focus and design of teacher training is for White teacher candidates, and the voices of teachers of Color are either ignored or silenced within classes (Amos, 2010; Parker & Hood, 1995; Sheets & Chew, 2002). This marginalization limits the growth of teacher candidates of Color and is a key factor in their high attrition rates from credential granting programs (Bennett, Cole, & Thompson, 2000).

When compared to their White counterparts, practicing teachers of Color are 24% more likely to leave the field per year (Ingersoll & May, 2011). This attrition has primarily been attributed to the low pay of the profession in the face of higher debt, and the over-representation of teachers of Color in schools with high turnover rates (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010). Recent research also has shed light on racism as a factor that can impact teacher of Color retention (Dingus, 2008).

In light of research correlating the presence of teachers of Color with the academic success of underperforming students of Color, recruiting and retaining teachers of Color has become a growing concern for teacher education programs, districts, and schools (Sleeter, 2001; Sleeter & Kumashiro, 2014). Although having teachers who racially and ethnically reflect students is important, it is not demographic matching alone that leads to better learning. A teacher's identity is more complex than his or her race or ethnicity. Socioeconomic status, geographic upbringing, immigration status, and culture are some of the many factors that impact the cultural connections and engagement between teachers and students (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011); equally important and interconnected with those factors are the orientations that many teachers of Color carry into their classrooms.

Often because of personal experiences with culturally disconnected curriculum, or the under-resourced conditions of their schooling, teachers of Color have a heightened awareness of educational injustice and racism (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). Compared to White teachers, practicing teachers of Color have more positive views of students of Color, including more favorable perceptions of their academic potential and higher expectations of their learning potential (Boyle-Baise & Sleeter, 2000; Dee, 2005). Many teachers of Color also enter the field with an orientation towards justice and equity. They often choose teaching as a profession because they want to improve the academic experiences of students of Color (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012), to support the educational transformation of their own communities (Dingus, 2008), and to act as racial justice advocates (Hilliard, Perry, & Steele, 2003). The research cited above demonstrates the challenges faced by teachers of Color, but the research has yet to examine epistemological conflict as a cause of the isolation teachers of Color face, more specifically—how the community-orientations of teachers of Color are devalued in schools.

Cultural hierarchies in K-12 schools

Critical education scholars have revealed K-12 schooling as a highly individualized experience, driven by capitalism and competition (Au & Ferrare, 2015; Giroux, 2012). Within this context, the knowledge and contributions of indigenous communities and communities of Color have been ignored, overwritten, and devalued within US school contexts. From Americanizing schools that worked to intentionally strip indigenous youth of their cultural identity (Zitkala-Sa, 2009), and White paradigms infiltrating African American segregated school contexts (Dubois, 1935; Woodson, 1933), to Eurocentric curriculum in textbooks today (Loewen, 2008), schooling in the United States has worked to diminish the self-worth of students of Color. In a contemporary context, Valenzuela (1999) argues that mainstream schooling subtracts the unique culturally-based orientations to learning and knowledge of Mexican-descent students. Yosso (2005) frames the community cultural wealth of Latina/o communities, and argues that these powerful forms of “capital” are typically ignored in schools, preventing these communities from building on their strengths to achieve school success. The neglect of the history, knowledge, and contributions of racial and ethnic minority communities in U.S. schools has been, and continues to be, a cross-racial experience.

Several scholars have illuminated the conflict between indigenous knowledge and Western colonial ways of thinking and understanding in schools (Kawagley, 1999), in teacher education (Watson-Gegeo & Gegeo, 2004), and in research (Smith, 2012). Wilson (2008) builds on this work to define the relational ontologies (ways of being), epistemologies (ways of knowing), and axiologies (ethics) of indigenous communities that have been historically overlooked and dismissed by researchers. While his framework was specifically developed to consider indigenous North American communities, he argues that his lens is generalizable to broader colonized and postcolonial communities including U.S.-based people of Color (Wilson, 2008). Because teachers of Color are racially marginalized within broader society as people of Color, as well as in their profession (Dingus, 2008), we find Wilson's model useful to interpret racial and cultural hierarchies that impact teachers' experiences in U.S. schools. In adapting his framework to teachers of Color as an under-studied population, we argue that there is a hierarchical conflict between the individualized, Western, capitalist structure of schools, and the relational lens through which community-oriented teachers of Color approach teaching. We further contend that this conflict limits their ability to transform schooling for students of Color.

An indigenous paradigm of relationality

Wilson (2008) explains that indigenous communities have distinct ontologies—ways of being. Through his examples of community practices and the ways native languages evolved, he demonstrates that these ontologies are most often relational; meaning, that it is relationships, above all else, that shape how indigenous communities learn to be in the world. As Wilson explains, “an object or thing is not as important as one’s relationships to it ... reality is not an object but a process of relationships, and an Indigenous ontology is actually the equivalent of an Indigenous epistemology” (2008, p. 73). Linking ontology to epistemology, he explains that ways of knowing are synonymous to ways of being, as they also are relational and shaped by a community-minded way of being. Wilson explains that, “Indigenous epistemology is our cultures, our worldviews, our times, our languages, our histories, our spiritualities and our places in the cosmos. Indigenous epistemology is our systems of knowledge in their context, or in relationship” (2008, p. 74). He suggests that it is essential in these communities that children are raised to honor their families rather than to pursue individual success or interpret the world in isolation. In fact, his argument suggests that “success” is not possible in these communities if one is not growing in relation to one’s community.

Wilson goes on to connect indigenous ontology and epistemology to axiology—the ethics, or rules for living in these communities. Not only are indigenous communities relational, they are defined by a relational accountability, a deep commitment to their relationships. As he explains, “What is more important and meaningful is fulfilling a role and obligations ... that is being accountable to your relations” (Wilson, 2008, p. 77). The lives of indigenous people, he argues, are guided by principles of justice that are not individualized, but are defined by what is good for the family and community, with a commitment to participate in the upliftment of those communities. Wilson shares this framework to explain that researchers who are working in indigenous communities must have clarity on the relationships among a community’s ontology, epistemology, and axiology before designing a methodology for doing research. Although Wilson’s (2008) work is specific to research with indigenous communities, his framework has implications for communities of Color broadly, as African American, Latina/o, and Asian American communities demonstrate similar relationships among ontology, epistemology, and axiology, and also have experienced the devaluing and attempted eradication of their unique epistemological insights. As Wilson suggests, unique intellectual insights and orientations persist within these communities, which is of particular importance when considering the professional lives of community-oriented teachers of Color in the Eurocentric context of U.S. public schools.

Community-oriented teachers of Color

Many teachers of Color enter the profession with deep ties and connections to their communities. They often articulate that they become teachers with the objective of returning to their own or similar communities to provide opportunities for intellectual engagement that they felt were lacking in their own schooling (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012). These teachers want their students to perform well academically in terms of GPA and test scores, but that is not how they primarily define racial justice. Instead, these teachers often come to teaching from an activist standpoint, seeking the creation of strong, critical, intellectual communities (Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003) that honor and grow the ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies of their communities. Building on Wilson’s (2008) framework, we operationalize community-oriented teachers of Color as those who feel a relationality and relational accountability to their communities. To contrast our community-oriented definition from conventional ideas of educational justice that promote individualized achievement, taking kids “up and out” of their communities, we introduce this term to mean teachers of Color who are fighting inequality and seeking justice, but who do this relationally, along with and as part of communities of Color.

Adapting Wilson’s (2008) framework, we argue that community-oriented teachers of Color bring community-based ontologies (ways of being), epistemologies (ways of knowing), and axiologies (ethics) into teaching. They seek and need relational ways of being in their work that honor their own families and communities through the success of their students. They want to build intellectual community in

the classroom, teach in the community, and grow a collective epistemology. Because of the relational accountability they feel to their families, communities, and histories, this community-minded ontological and epistemological approach to teaching informs and is informed by their ethics. Thus, community-oriented teachers of Color often feel a responsibility to challenge inequity and promote justice for communities of Color.

Unfortunately, this relational way of being is often neglected and suppressed within the increasingly neoliberal and capitalist nature of K-12 schooling and is not typically shared by most teachers and school leaders. Thus, community-oriented teachers of Color often feel isolated in their beliefs and their advocacy, which serves as a barrier in moving towards racial justice.

Methods

Data were collected with teachers of Color who worked in urban public schools where students of Color comprised the majority. Participants were recruited through a national professional development (PD) for teachers of Color with a self-identified commitment to racial justice. Of the 462 teachers who applied to the PD, 268 were selected by a review panel to attend based on their advanced racial literacy, which was defined as a structural analysis of racism, an asset framing of communities of Color, and a critical theoretical approach to challenging inequality. Of the PD attendees, 218 (81%) self-selected to participate in our study; 48% of participants were Latina/o, 20% were Black, 20% were Asian American or Pacific Islander, and 12% of participants identified as mixed race. Over two-thirds (68%) of participants were novice teachers, having taught less than five years, and 14% were veteran teachers having taught more than ten years. Participants ranged in age from their early twenties to late fifties and represented the teaching spectrum of elementary through high school. The majority (78%) of participants were women, and 22% were men.

Because of the unique positionality of the teachers who attended the PD (described above), we must note that teachers of Color in this study are not generalizable to all teachers of Color who identify with racial justice, which as a concept is largely variable in its operationalization. Participants in this study have a highly developed critical analysis of racial inequity in schooling. While it is important to recognize their distinct ontology as a possible limitation, they are a subpopulation with the language and skills to both identify and describe inequality, which makes them well suited to act as a voice in education equity discourse. In addition, because teachers in this study often reflect the interests and orientations of the communities they serve, we find their experiences particularly relevant for understanding and informing schools serving students of Color.

Data were collected for a broader study on the racialized experiences of racial justice minded teachers of Color. As the community-orientation framework emerged from our data analysis process, select ideas and themes representative of participants' experiences within the identified findings were used for this article. There are many additional findings that inform, but are not directly related to, the focus of this article and, thus, are not included. We collected data in two main ways: through a qualitative, short answer questionnaire with all 218 participants, and in-depth interviews that lasted one–two hours with a smaller pool of 16 participants. The questionnaire asked: What are your commitments to working for racial and social justice? How is race and racial inequality framed at your school site? And, What do you struggle with as a teacher of Color in urban public schools? These data were collected as part of their application to the PD. Using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), the questionnaire data were coded and the themes discussed in the subsequent findings section clearly emerged (almost universally) among the participants. Interviews were conducted to explore these themes in depth, and once transcribed and coded, served to affirm the centrality of these themes from the questionnaire while providing a nuanced articulation of them. The method and analysis were aligned with CRT education research, such as the work of Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007), who used a similar approach of open ended questions in both surveys and interviews to center individuals' framing of racialization in school contexts. CRT education research has not often integrated questionnaire data and interviews, but the strength of this approach with a broad sample of diverse participants (Smith et al., 2007) compelled us to adapt the method for this project.

We then re-analyzed the questionnaire and interview data collectively. The theme of a community-orientation was powerfully consistent across the different geographic and racial communities of participants, which led us to adapt Wilson's (2008) paradigm of relationality and relational accountability. Answering our research question with such a geographically, ethnically, and contextually diverse group of participants required that we emphasize themes over specific contexts. The qualitative data, therefore, are not structured to describe or deconstruct specific individuals' school settings, but rather work to emphasize the common themes identified by teachers of Color across urban schools with high percentages of students of Color. In sifting through the data for excerpts to include below, we sought to identify those that reflected the nuances and distinctions within these themes. Once we formulated this analysis, we shared our findings with participants to check for accuracy.

Finally, it is important to note our positionality in the research process. As former teachers, teacher educators, and scholars dedicated to the success and development of teachers of Color, we carry our unique biases to this study as all researchers do. These biases shape the questions we ask and the analyses we make, but also are instrumental in our ability to identify and describe the nuanced phenomenon of the community-orientation of teachers of Color. As facilitators of the PD, and researchers of the teachers within the PD, we are committed to both supporting and understanding the experiences of participants as complexly and honestly as possible. Because of our role, our commitment to racial justice, and our reciprocity with our participants, they trust us with deep, sensitive, and complex stories from their lives. In the research process, we examine their strengths as well as their contradictions and challenges, and we do this with ethics and a commitment to their well-being (Zuberi & Bonilla Silva, 2008). The primary limitation of our positionality and approach to the research is that it is not representative of an ideological range of teachers of Color. In particular, because we are focused on teachers of Color with a racial justice lens and community-orientation and our sample comes from those who reflect a particular framework aligned to the racial justice professional development, our work informs and describes a specific and smaller group of educators. Even so, we feel there is much to be learned from this population of teachers of Color.

Findings

Our application of Wilson's framework to this data illuminated that the social justice orientations of teachers of Color in the study were operationalized through their relationships and accountability to communities of Color. However, this community-orientation was often in conflict with the culture of schooling. Because this conflict existed within a racialized, cultural hierarchy where a Eurocentric, individualized nature of schools was prioritized, community-oriented teachers of Color felt both isolated and devalued, which created a barrier in their racial justice goals. In this section, we demonstrate this by showing data across the following emergent themes: (1) racial justice teachers of Color have a community-orientation, (2) school culture conflicts with the community-orientation of teachers of Color, and (3) cultural hierarchies of schools impede the racial justice goals of community-oriented teachers of Color.

Racial justice teachers of Color have a community-orientation

The vast majority of teachers of Color in our data set demonstrated a deep grounding and connection to communities of Color and, although not all participants taught in their geographic or racial communities, or shared the socioeconomic status of students, they still often identified themselves as part of the communities in which they teach. For example, one participant explicitly defined teaching in relation to her community, "I treat teaching as a community responsibility and mission. I am here for my community and I serve my community by serving these students." Wilson's model helps us understand the ways in which the identities of community-oriented teachers of Color are integral to their understandings of what it means to be a teacher, as they see themselves and their families reflected in their students and feel a responsibility to support and serve them.

Participants of all races repeatedly articulated that they wanted students to have an education that they did not have: one that was critical, rigorous, and affirming to their identities as students of Color. Maya³ shared:

The reason I decided to become a math teacher is because I want to develop strength and confidence in my female or Latino students necessary for success in any field, but particularly in STEM. I want them to come to the realization that they are just as intelligent and capable as other students with different backgrounds, but at a much earlier stage in their career than when I realized it for myself. I want them to be critical of their education and the world around them.

One of few Latina math teachers in the field, Maya's goals as a teacher were informed by her own educational struggles and are operationalized by the success of her students of Color. Embodying community-orientation in her teaching, Maya saw herself in her students and thus, was dedicated to their growth. She continued:

I feel like I'm not doing everything I can. I can serve as a role model to students, I can [create] motivating lessons and projects with real world applications, and I can connect with students on a personal level, but in many ways it's not enough. I wish that I had a greater repertoire of strategies.

In addition to seeing her herself reflected in her students, Maya embodied a practice of authentic caring, which Valenzuela (1999) describes as a teacher's investment in the holistic well-being of students. Maya felt an incredible responsibility to the multilayered success of her students, and despite her support of them through a critical curriculum and personal relationships, she still did not feel as though she was doing enough because they were not succeeding to the level she dreamed for them. Maya's sense of responsibility to holistically care for students of Color was grounded in her identity and positionality, and this relationality and relational accountability directly shaped her ways of being, ways of knowing, and her ethics.

The relational accountability that community-oriented teachers of Color have is about the affirmation and growth of individual students, but it also is about community and is grounded in communities of Color. Community-oriented teachers understand the historical and current-day strengths and struggles of their students and their communities. Cindy, a Southeast Asian teacher, argued:

There are many issues that affect the Southeast Asian community, primarily stemming from the Vietnam War and the Cambodian genocide. Our community is affected with trauma, depression, anxiety, and poverty. My students live in Section 8 housing, are heavy drug users, and some participate in gang activity, but because of the Model Minority perception, my youth are often overlooked. I am often met with resistance, comments such as, "Asians already do well in school" or "Asians aren't involved in bad behaviors." The idea of the model minority myth silences the issues that directly affect my students and my community everyday ... I always have to fight and prove that my students need the services that are otherwise not provided to them.

For her students' holistic success, Cindy knew she must engage not just with the strengths of her students, but with the community struggles as well. The only Southeast Asian teacher at her school site, she had insight about the issues her students were facing, as well as the racialization they experienced in school because of the model minority myth.⁴ With a relational accountability to her students, she created bridges in her advocacy between their racialized struggles in the community and at school. And although taxing, she battled against this racism, because her primary goal was the holistic success of her students.

In addition to advocacy at school, a relational accountability frames teachers of Color as activists for communities of Color. Octavia, one of the only Black teachers at her school, was committed to her students in a multilayered way similar to Maya, and she understood her students' struggles as Cindy did. She also, however, saw herself as a change agent on a structural level. She articulated:

My students are brilliant beyond measure, but it is not coincidental that many of them are homeless from week to week or are unable to be a part of programs because of lack of transportation. I want to work to fight and tear down the structures that keep my students' noses pressed to the glass and their heads down when spoken to. I want to discuss the lack of access to healthy food options, adequate health care providers, educational programming that creates opportunities, and lack of affordable safe housing. ... My students need to know they are sitting in a class

where their teacher advocates for their well-being. I want my students to hold their heads high and realize that no matter where they start, there is always something better.

Because of their relationality and relational accountability to students, families, and communities of Color, community-oriented teachers often see themselves as educational activists (Picower, 2012). This activism is typically grounded in both school related injustice and larger community based issues that are barriers to the well-being of communities of Color. Octavia embodies this community-orientation, as she wants to transform the structural barriers students of Color are facing.

As this section demonstrates, community-oriented teachers of Color are inspired to work tirelessly through their intrinsic understanding of relationality and relational accountability. Their community-orientation provides them with insights to the experiences of students of Color. This allows them to support students' holistic growth in a community responsive and transformative way, as well as to engage as activists for communities of Color.

School culture conflicts with the community-orientation of teachers of Color

As the previous section demonstrated, community-oriented teachers of Color offer tremendous strengths to the schools in which they work because their approach for engaging students of Color is based on understanding the students and their communities, and connecting this knowledge to the academic work of school. However, the school culture often conflicts with the community-orientation that teachers of Color bring to their work with students of Color. Eddie was one of few Pacific Islander teachers in a district that lacked an adequate representation of teachers of Color. He felt incredibly marginalized with regard to his purpose as an educator amongst his peers. Eddie explains:

As a teacher of Color I struggle with the fact that there are few colleagues who embrace the concept that education should be about liberation, not indoctrination. It is a constant battle dealing with isolation as an educator who believes an education should encourage students to think critically about solving problems in their communities and around the world, not simply learning how to “play the game of school.”

Referencing Freire (1970) in his interview, Eddie discusses the dichotomy of liberating versus indoctrinating pedagogy as a process to challenge oppression or affirm the status quo. Eddie found himself in conflict with his peers about the purpose and process of education. His colleagues did not share his community-oriented ethics and ideology and, in actuality, were limiting the potential of his students. This left Eddie battling rather than building with other teachers, a struggle that is both exhausting and alienating.

A community-orientation is a powerful way of being that holds teachers accountable to students and fosters a deep mutual respect. When a community-oriented teacher of Color sees herself reflected in her students and her peers do not, it can be a painful manifestation of how the school culture conflicts with their relational accountability. Helen shares:

My White colleagues have made extremely insensitive comments towards our students. When disciplining students, they say things like, “If you don’t get your act right, you are going to end up raising your children in the ghetto just like your parents.” When I call them out on these comments, they get extremely defensive and refuse to acknowledge my concerns. The worst part is that my fellow teachers of Color do not stand up with me. They [too] allow teachers to make these comments without any corrections. It seems like, at this point, I am the only teacher advocating for my students.

The teachers at Helen’s school were engaging in deficit thinking, a prevalent belief system that frames individual students and families as the root cause for their academic struggles. This type of thinking has been used to maintain hierarchical power structures, and has long roots in U.S. schooling (Valencia, 1997). When teachers use deficit frameworks to discuss students who community-oriented teachers of Color, like Helen, feel a relational accountability to, it can be hurtful and marginalizing.

Teachers of Color in this study shared complex experiences with racism in schools serving students of Color. At times, that racism was directed at students, but often it was the teachers of Color who experienced racism. Pinay educator, Tala, shared that as a novice teacher, a woman, and an Asian American

teacher, her colleagues expected her to be quiet, “meek,” and to manifest her culture through dance and cuisine with the kids. She went on to analyze her experiences:

My own personal identity, ideologies, and beliefs are put to the test specifically by teachers and administrators who are in positions of power. I’ve chosen a career committed to liberatory education and humanization of the students I serve, but it has become all too apparent that institutional oppressions marginalize and isolate me more and more because of who I am and what I believe.

Tala explains the way in which the components that Wilson (2008) argues makes up a community-orientation—her “identity, ideologies, and beliefs,”—are challenged by authority figures in her schools. Although Tala relied on her strong, critical identity to provide a powerful education to her students, she felt questioned and silenced by those in power. It is this power structure that intensifies the racism and, thus, the isolation that community-oriented teachers face.

Dominant methods of schooling often do not value a transformative approach to schooling, and instead dismiss and challenge the foundational ways of being, ways of knowing, and ethics of community-oriented teachers of Color. The resulting isolation can be a struggle. Manny explains how hard it is to be the only one with this community-orientation:

It’s challenging to navigate not taking it personal when the racial injustices are affecting the very students you see as an extension of yourself, your family, your loved ones, your community. It’s an even greater barrier being a teacher of Color who is committed to racial justice when there are few teachers of Color on campus to begin with and even fewer that are willing to be vocal and advocate, when needed, for racial justice. This sad reality leaves one feeling like one is isolated working in a silo and with the very real instances where one is standing alone at times.

Manny, a teacher who is clearly relational in his ontology (way of being), saw his students as an extension of himself. As a racial justice advocate, he had a strong community-orientation. However, because the norms of school culture were not consistent with his goals to transform the barriers that students of Color face, he felt isolated in his ideology and advocacy.

The teachers represented in the data are from a diverse array of ethnicities, races, and geographic communities of Color, but they share a sense of relationality and relational accountability. With this cultural orientation, they continually find themselves facing a school culture that challenges multiple facets of their identity. Although their ways of being and knowing provide them with insights into engaging students of Color, the culture of their schools does not recognize critical or community-based approaches to working with students of Color. This hierarchical conflict has left community-oriented teachers of Color feeling isolated and often marginalized.

Cultural hierarchies of schools impede racial justice

Because of the contradiction between traditional school culture and a community-orientation, community-oriented teachers of Color are often unable to teach students of Color in a way that reflects their shared ontologies (ways of being), epistemologies (ways of knowing), and axiologies (ethics). Instead, they feel that they are expected to teach a way of being that is in direct contradiction to their community-orientation, which often serves as a barrier to the success of students of Color and in moving towards racial justice.

Despite that teachers in this study were inspired by their sense of relationality and relational accountability, their community-orientation was challenged by colleagues and school leaders to the point that they often questioned if they chose the right profession to pursue their goals of racial justice and community development. Repeated in the data was the questioning that Natalie articulated, “Is this career really for me?” The data additionally revealed that community-oriented teachers of Color were commonly overlooked for professional development opportunities, not supported by administrators, and attacked by colleagues. Although they would like to be able to focus on growing as teachers, the hostile racial climates in which they strive for their goals make it exceptionally difficult to teach through their community-orientation. Luna articulated her isolation as one of few community-oriented teachers at her school:

I have few opportunities and spaces where I can share and brainstorm with people/educators who look like me and have the same passion for racial justice. When you are not surrounded by like-minded people it is hard to advocate for things you are passionate about, so I find myself taking the backseat in a lot of discussions or receiving pushback on my thoughts.

Luna does not have support to realize her racial justice goals. Not only does she not have a safe space in which she can develop her ideas and grow in ways that allow her to better achieve her goals, she is challenged when she articulates her justice-based passions. Thus, her survival skill is to withdraw, a tactic that not only impedes her growth but also the growth of her students of Color and their communities.

Deepa was a South Asian teacher in a school with a significant South Asian student population. She was always doing things to serve her students that fell outside the scope of her professional duties. Despite her investment in students of Color and communities of Color, however, she was overlooked for many professional opportunities, and felt silenced in her advocacy. Deepa explained that, “The real challenge is the lack of support and opportunities in the staff community. Many teachers of Color are quick to be labeled if we challenge the status quo. I feel that I can’t speak up for fear of not being [seen as] a team player, for bringing down the group, for being the angry person of Color.” The irony of Deepa’s circumstance is that, as a community-oriented teacher committed to the growth of communities of Color, she is labeled as not being a “team player” because of her advocacy for her students of Color. The choices presented then were to stop her activism, a key part of her community-orientation, or be mislabeled and overlooked for support and leadership opportunities.

Noelle was a novice mixed race, Black and Asian American, teacher who felt colleagues and administrators were actively working against her. She described her experiences:

I make sure that I am an active voice and participant on campus; I am beyond committed to the school, my students, and my practice. However, I am not provided or even considered for the development, respect and, essentially, appreciation when compared to my White colleagues. As one deeply committed to racial justice, these acts of racism and the microaggressions inflicted daily are quite frustrating ... I strive to be the best I can be but am told daily that I am not a good teacher. And should this be the case, I would be open to coaching and development to take me to the next step. However, my administration has literally no time for my growth.

Noelle had a clear commitment to her students and school community, but was underappreciated by school leadership. The largest travesty that Noelle articulated was that, as a new teacher, no one was invested in her growth. Her community-orientation positioned Noelle to believe that the school community should help teachers who need to grow, but the culture of her school instead deemed her an inadequate teacher. If Noelle and new teachers like her are not supported—if no one is invested in their growth—how can they realize their justice oriented visions for students of Color? The narrow definitions of successful teaching in many schools prevent dynamic and effective community-oriented teachers from being centered as models and leaders in their schools.

As the data illuminate, while other colleagues are mentored or provided opportunities for professional growth within the realm of conventional approaches to teaching, community-oriented teachers of Color are often isolated in their ideologies, ethics, and advocacy. This challenge brings us back to Wilson (2008) and the difficulty community-oriented teachers of Color experience when their sense of relational accountability is challenged by “a world that thrives off injustice and indifference,” as one participant described. While community-oriented teachers are actively working against this injustice and indifference, it often has a deep impact on them personally and professionally and, thus, they face a cyclical barrier that hinders them from advancing justice, the very work they set out to do.

Discussion and implications

In adapting Wilson’s (2008) indigenous cultural paradigm of relationality to analyze the experiences of teachers of Color, we saw that participants’ pedagogy was centered on their relationships with students and communities, and was informed by relational ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies. These teachers often enter schools with feelings of great responsibility to create positive, critical, educational opportunities that reflect the histories, values, and cultures of students of Color. We call this way of being

a community-orientation, and it drives the goals, dreams, and daily actions of these teachers of Color. Community-oriented teachers of Color want to work collectively to support the holistic growth of students. They are aware of community issues and bring these issues into their classrooms (Tintiango-Cubales et al., 2015), as they want their students to experience the same relationality and relational accountability to the communities of Color affirmed in the classroom. Community-oriented teachers of Color also have an activist stance and are motivated towards social transformation and racial justice. This analysis has, therefore, allowed us to complicate our own working definition of advanced racial literacy and racial justice orientation for teachers of Color.

In line with Wilson's (2008) analysis, we also found in our data that the individualistic nature of schooling conflicted with the community-orientation of teachers of Color, and called into question every facet of who these teachers are. The participants in this study who embodied these relational ontologies (ways of being), epistemologies (ways of knowing), and axiologies (ethics) often felt that their peers or administration did not share these orientations. Instead, community-oriented teachers of Color felt isolated in their sense of relationality and relational accountability, as well as unacknowledged, disregarded, called into question, and even deemed inferior. This isolation and alienation was a barrier in the racial justice goals of community-oriented teachers that often had the effect of maintaining a schools' reproduction of inequity.

Today, teachers of Color are being recruited into urban schools more than ever, because research has shown their increased presence is correlated with the increased academic success of students of Color. Community-oriented teachers of Color are often sought after because of their strong relationships with students and insider knowledge of the community. Ironically, an individualistic cultural paradigm of schools alienates these same teachers of Color from building on their insights and strengths. They are often pressured to dismiss the ways of being that they share with students and have developed as members of communities of Color. Schools that recruit community-oriented teachers of Color must recognize this ontological conflict.

The community-orientation that teachers of Color bring into schools is a strength, and influences their pedagogy, curriculum, and community engagement. School leaders and other staff must be able to see the value that this cultural paradigm has for the empowerment of communities of Color, as relationality and relational accountability can transform the intellectual engagement and growth of students of Color. Thus, we must allow community-oriented teachers to have a voice in leadership as it relates to the education of communities of Color. Schools can manifest this by (1) ensuring that teachers of Color have a place on school leadership teams, (2) seeking advice on school policy from teachers of Color who have strong relationships with students and their families, and, (3) investing in the growth of teachers of Color around their own professional goals. In the face of schools with status quo leadership, community-oriented teachers of Color also must recognize the strength and wealth of their own ontology, epistemology, and axiology, even when they are not understood or acknowledged by colleagues and administrators. To resolve the isolation that is so damaging to teachers of Color with a relational ontology and epistemology, community-oriented teachers should find a network of like-minded educators with whom to build, plan, and organize. Whether through a teacher activist group, a critical inquiry circle, or just a meeting of several like-minded teachers, having this community will support the retention of community-oriented teachers of Color, as well as their potential to create transformative educational spaces. A community-orientation is a powerful and strength-based way of being, defined globally and for centuries by communities of Color. Instead of stripping this cultural wealth from communities of Color to enforce individualized notions of growth and success, we must see relationality and relational accountability as essential forces in our fight for equity and justice.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper we use the term "of Color" to collectively reference peoples of African, Asian American, indigenous, Latina/o, Middle Eastern, and Pacific Islander descent. We draw these broad racial parameters to synthesize our discussion of communities with racialized colonial histories and/or who experience racial marginalization in the United States today. Capitalizing "Color" is used to legitimize the collective identities of those within this grouping.

2. Although research shows that teachers of Color tend to have a more advanced racial literacy and commitment to justice; we are aware that there are many teachers of Color who, for a host of reasons, do not carry this commitment. We are in no way attempting to essentialize all teachers of Color, and acknowledge that “teachers of Color” is a broad category with a range of varied races, ethnicities, ideological commitments, and orientations.
3. All names included in this article are pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of participants.
4. The model minority myth is the stereotypical belief that Asian Americans are passive, docile, hard-working, and successful. It was developed as a divisive tactic during the civil rights movement, but continues to be pervasive in U.S. race politics (Lee, Wong, & Alvarez, 2009).

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