Invited Address

Race, Talk, Opportunity Gaps, and Curriculum Shifts in (Teacher) Education

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Abstract

Although race remains a controversial, yet pervasive, issue in society and education, practicing teachers may still grapple with whether race should be a central feature of curriculum and related instructional practices, and/or how race should be interrogated in the classroom. In this article, I discuss results from teacher survey data about their views on the relevance of race talk in their classrooms; their feelings and beliefs about their preparedness to develop discursive raced opportunities; and whether they believe parents, guardians, and administrators would support such discourse inside of the classroom. Implications for literacy teacher education and teacher development are discussed.

Keywords

race, discourse, talk, teacher education, curriculum, learning, teaching, equity

I have always secretly wanted to be considered a scholar of language, literacy, and culture since I began my career in higher education. As a student, it was in my English Language Arts (ELA) classes where I fell in love with learning. In middle and high school, I was introduced to Black Writers of the United States and their transformative

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writings from varying genres, such as Phillis Wheatley’s (1773) “A Farewell to America,” X. M. and Haley’s (1992) “the Autobiography of Malcolm X,” Benjamin Banneker’s (1791) “Letter to Thomas Jefferson,” David Walker’s (1829) “Appeal,” Turner’s (1831) “The Confessions of Nat Turner,” Claude McKay’s (1922) “My Mother,” Langston Hughes’ (1945) “I, Too,” Zora Neale Hurston’s (1933) “The Gilded Six-Bits,” and Margaret Walker’s (1942) “For My People.” It was in my literacy classes where I was able to make sense of a history of the United States and 18th-century beginnings. I learned about pervasive struggle against slavery and racism, Black abolitionists, and Black Nationalists. It was in my literacy courses where I began to make sense of the Black man (and woman) in the civil war, Reconstruction Era and reaction, and renaissance and radicalism. I shall never forget reading for the first time—and then over, and over, and over again the years that followed, Paul Laurence Dunbar’s (1872–1906) “We Wear the Mask”:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes,—
This debt we pay to human guile;
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile
And mouth with myriad subtleties,
Why should the world be over-wise,
In counting all our tears and sighs?
Nay, let them only see us, while
We wear the mask.
We smile, but oh great Christ, our cries
To thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing, but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile,
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask!

Now, at that time, I was not completely sure what Dunbar meant by “the mask,” but for me as a 14- or 15-year-old Black male, the mask represented needing to check important aspects of my identity space at “the door” to confirm and assimilate into a oppressive schooling context (and yes, even in my ELA classes) each day. At the time, I was immersed in what is now affectionately called “Hip Hop culture” (see Footnote 1 of the Online Appendix). I was listening to the Fat Boys, Doug E Fresh, KRS-One, Outkast, Run DMC, L.L. Cool J, and NWA (yes, Niggers with Attitude).

I was searching department store dumpsters and supermarket delivery piles for empty, large cardboard boxes that I would eventually drag back to my parents’ patio to disassemble and flatten so that my friends and I could break-dance on them with precision. I wore thick fat shoe strings in my tennis shoes draped over the outside of my shoes and begged my parents for a “boom box” (a large portable radio) that my friends and I would eventually carry around from house to house tuned into V103, the
local radio station (of Atlanta, Georgia) or playing cassette tapes I purchased with money I earned from my afterschool job at Chick-fil-A. Most of the important dimensions of my being had to be checked at the door when I arrived at school. I was expected to become a much different Rich when I walked into the classroom. I was expected to become, what felt to me, a much whiter person. What I mean is that whiteness is about far more than skin tone and skin pigmentation. Critical race theorists remind us that whiteness is about maintaining the status quo, White supremacy, and injustice regardless of one’s race (Bell, 1980; Harris, 1993). Specifically, my teachers (Black, Brown, and White) expected and demanded I check my language, how I dressed, what I listened to, all at the entrance of the school. And so for me—I wore a mask that eventually meant I grinned and lied to satisfy teachers (and to an extent, a schooling system that was not meant for me) who tried to cultivate my identity into something very different from what I enjoyed, connected to, and yearned for. Pedagogically, my teachers did not necessarily attempt to make explicit connections to those identity spaces that mattered to me, my outside of school experiences, and interests to complement learning opportunities in the classroom. They, perhaps with good intentions, attempted to change me. I remember wondering: What about me is so bad? Why do my teachers hypercorrect my language and grammar? So, the mask I wore was in order to—in many ways—survive and make it through school. I understand clearly now that I was indeed being schooled but not educated as Shujaa (1994) and his colleagues conceptualized in an important volume, Too Much Schooling: Too Little Education. But I still had a special love place in my heart for my ELA teachers and those classes because unlike my other teachers and classes, ELA allowed me to critique, question, negotiate, and examine my world in ways that my other classes just seemed to not. Indeed, I was able to lose myself and eventually find myself in written assignments that guided me into spaces to reflect, question, voice, share, and rethink components of readings I read and experiences I had. In my ELA classes, my teachers at least allowed me to engage in introspection about my own life world—phenomenologically speaking. I was even allowed to (most of the time) write in first person unlike my science (and even at times social studies) classes that demanded we divorce ourselves from the content and write in third person. We were somehow supposed to be “neutral” and “objective” in our analyses, critiques, and interpretations. Simply sad!

Natalie Ford was my senior high school English teacher—a dynamic, culturally responsive (Gay, 2010) Black female teacher—who shared with me in my senior English class that I was indeed what she called a “powerful writer.” She told me that she always read my essays last among the stack of papers from her students because my essays/papers were so “incredibly thought-provoking” and “persuasive.” There was something particularly meaningful about that exchange between Ms. Ford and me, and her confidence in my writing shepherded me into a profession and career of writing. She allowed me to center important aspects of my identity rather than suppress them. My writing would meteorically intensify only after I transitioned into graduate school at The Ohio State University after teaching ELA to almost all Black
students in South Carolina where the vast majority of my students lived below the poverty line. Although I did not teach for an extended period of time, those days in the classroom with my students were profound and made a serious impact on my decisions thereafter.

**My Research Focus**

Although I mostly study teachers, it was these personal experiences in school with other students, and some particular teachers that propelled me to pursue a career centered on race. My body of research has focused on the intersections of teachers’ practices in urban (see Footnote 2 of the Online Appendix) middle and high schools and teacher learning and development in teacher education. I have attempted to study successful instructional practices of in-service teachers in middle and high schools—mostly language arts classrooms—to shape my own decisions in preparing teachers to teach in teacher education programs (Milner, 2006, 2010a; Milner & Smithay, 2003). My research has examined the ways in which teachers talk about their knowledge, beliefs, mind-sets, thinking, and consequently practices in schools to attempt to understand linkages to student learning opportunities (Milner, 2005a, 2005b, 2008a, 2013, 2015). I have learned several important lessons from my research regarding the support preservice and in-service teachers need to meet the complexly diverse needs of students in schools—especially those too often placed on the margins of teaching and learning such as those who are Black and Brown, those whose first language is not English, those who live below the poverty line, and those who learn differently.

**Conceptual Framing**

Teachers’ knowledge shapes decision-making and practices with students. Teachers’ knowledge is an essential aspect to their work with students (Brown, 2016; Eisner, 1994; Elbaz, 1983; Gay, 2010; Shulman, 1987). This knowledge that teachers have, develop, and need in the planning and enactment of curriculum practices has been conceptualized as their practical knowledge (Carter, 1990; Doyle, 1986; Elbaz, 1983), their personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986; Connelly & Clandinin, 1984, 1985), their pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1987; Shulman & Sykes, 1986), and their racial, cultural, sociocultural and socio-political knowledge (Banks, 2015; Brown, 2016; Cochran-Smith, 1995; Foster, 1997; Irvine, 2003; King, 1991; Milner, 2008a, 2008b). In particular, my work has focused on studying how teachers talk about their cultural and racial knowledge for teaching (Milner, 2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2010a, 2010b).

Teachers’ beliefs and knowledge seem to be strongly connected and also sometimes conflated. For instance, teachers sometimes claim “to know” when in fact they are relying on a set of unchallenged, untested belief systems. In addition to their knowledge base, it is clear that teachers’ beliefs can shape their practices (Gay,
2010; McCutcheon, 2002; Milner, 2015). Compelling research has demonstrated the role and salience of teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs or their sense of efficacy in executing teaching tasks (Bandura, 1986; Milner & Woolfolk Hoy, 2003; Woolfolk, 2016). Teachers’ beliefs—their sense of self-efficacy and confidence—influence their decision-making and practices with students (Milner & Woolfolk Hoy, 2003). According to Bandura (1986), four sources shape people’s sense of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasive discourse, and physiological or emotional states.

Haberman (2000) explained that, “language is not an innocent reflection of how we think. The terms we use control our perceptions, shape our understanding, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement” (p. 203). Teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, history, and worldview influence what they say (their talk) and their discursive interactions with other educators, parents, and students. Understanding the ways in which teachers talk about their work helps us (and them) more deeply understand what we might observe of their practice. For instance, observational studies that describe the pedagogical moves of teachers are importantly complemented when teachers help to elucidate their practice (McCutcheon, 2002). As teachers develop in preservice and in-service teacher education programs, for instance, their talk can also be gauged to determine their developmental trajectories to enhance their practices (Milner, 2010a, 2010b). Teacher talk is also essential to understand because their discourse is and can become a powerful political move (Freire, 1998). Talk is a form of action (Freire, 1998) and studying teachers’ discursive patterns allow us to more deeply understand what they know, believe, and ultimately what they do.

Teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, histories, worldviews, and talk seem to influence their actions and practices whether consciously or unconsciously. Knowledge, beliefs, and discourse inform teachers’ practices (Freire, 1998; Milner, 2010a, 2010b). Building on an important, established body of work (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009), I have attempted to identify and describe instructional practices of teachers that build on the many assets of students, their families, and communities (Milner, 2010a, 2013, 2015). Teachers’ knowledge, beliefs (and talk) about race and culture influence their ability, skill, and willingness to develop curriculum and instructional practices that are relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and responsive (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010) to students inside of the classroom. In short, knowledge, beliefs, and discourse inform teachers’ practices (Freire, 1998; Milner, 2010a).

The place—the sociopolitical context—in which teachers work appears to influence their own learning, beliefs, knowledge, discourse, and practices. Teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, talk, and practices are shaped by the ecological nature of their learning, development, and lived experiences (Milner, 2010a). In other words, the context of teachers’ work is guided and influenced by cultural, social, economic, structural, and political conditions (Anyon, 2005; Payne, 2008) of place (Morris & Monroe, 2009; Tate, 2008). Perhaps for students who are most grossly underserved in
schools, teachers’ beliefs, knowledge, talk, and action seem essential to their learning and development. Figure 1 attempts to capture aspects of my research agenda and what I have learned from and about studying and supporting teachers in sociocultural, sociohistorical, and sociopolitical contexts.

Students of color, and Black and Brown students, in particular, continue to be grossly underserved in classrooms, schools, and districts across the United States. I am particularly interested in issues of race as I work to study and support teacher development. Issues of race and racism, from my perspective, are those that are at the very center of building an educational system that truly is designed to support students’ learning and development.

**Defining Race**

Race is constructed physically, contextually, socially, legally, and historically. The meanings, messages, results, and consequences of race are developed and constructed by human beings in society, not by some predetermined set of scientific laws or genetics. Genetically and biologically, individuals are more the same than they are different. Thus, race is *physically constructed*: Based on skin pigmentation or colorism (Monroe, 2013), people in society construct ideas, judgments, characteristics, and beliefs systems about themselves and others. These physical constructions are
sometimes inaccurate, but the constructions of race remain. It is important to note that physical constructions of race vary from one society or context to the next. For instance, constructions of race on continents such as Africa or Asia are different from constructions of race based on phenotype in North America. Although these constructions of race are different, race is still operating and salient to human experience. In this way, race is also contextually constructed. In short, place and space matter in how race is thought about, constructed, and talked about. Societies prioritize values and practices based in part on race.

Race is also socially constructed. Based on a range of societal information and messages, people socially construct and categorize themselves and others. These social constructions are connected to how groups of people perform, their preferences, values, and worldviews. Societal constructions are based on a range of issues such as history and law, and these social constructions shape how we think about individuals and groups of people regionally and contextually. Moreover, race is legally constructed. Laws in U.S. society (related to education), for example, help those of us in society socially construct what race is. Landmark cases and related legal policies such as Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), Brown v. Board of Education (1954), and Milliken v. Bradley (1974) all influence our constructions and definitions of race in U.S. society. Additionally, race is historically constructed. Historical realities related to how people have been treated and how people have fared in a society also shape the construction of race. In U.S. society, we rely on our historical constructions to shape how we currently view raced beings. The very fact that Black bodies were deemed as property (Harris, 1993) during slavery, and that Black people were not even viewed as human, influence our current constructions of race—albeit implicitly. In short, a history of Jim Crow laws, slavery, and racial discrimination shepherd us to currently construct and think about race in particular ways. But why focus on race?

**Why Race**

I was conducting professional development with a group of elementary school teachers on the topics of race, poverty, and teaching, and one of the teachers voiced what I suspect others in the room felt but did not share:

> Our principal invited you here to talk to us about specific strategies to teach our poor children. I was devouring what you had to say—you were right on target—until you got to this race stuff. Race has nothing to do with how to teach my kids living in poverty. What does it matter? Really!

For the remainder of the professional development session the teacher disengaged despite my best efforts to re-engage her for the sake of her students, especially her Black and Brown students whom I suspected would reap the consequences of
her unwillingness to acknowledge the salience of race and racism in our (and her) work.

Teachers tend to struggle with race in their work (Milner, 2010b, 2015). Some may adopt colorblind orientations to their practices and they may not recognize or acknowledge that there is: (a) an overreferal of Black and Brown students in special education (Artiles, Klingner, & Tate, 2006; Blanchett, 2006; Noguera, 2003; O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006), (b) an underreferal of these students in gifted education (Ford, 2010), and (c) an overreferal of Black and Brown students to the office for “misbehavior” who are subsequently suspended and expelled (Davis & Jordan, 1994; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Yet, preservice and practicing teachers may ignore or at best minimize race, racism, and discrimination as explanatory rationales for these patterns (Milner, 2010a). Structural and systemic barriers, and educators’ inabilitys to address them, have perpetually underserved children of color (Milner, 2015).

This Study

Over the last 4 years, increasingly, news media outlets and reporters have asked for my professional judgment and view of how teachers should engage their students about race in the classroom in light of heightened attention to unarmed Black bodies being shot and killed by police officers and related deaths of Black people in police custody: Amadou Diallo, 23, shot dead while unarmed, February 4, 1999; Sean Bell, 23, shot dead while unarmed, November 25, 2006; Sandra Bland, died in police custody, July 13, 2016; Philando Castile, 32, shot dead while legally armed, July 6, 2016; Oscar Grant, 23, shot dead while unarmed, January 1, 2009; Trayvon Martin, 17, shot dead while unarmed, February 26, 2012; Jonathon Ferrell, 24, shot dead while unarmed, September 14, 2013; Eric Garner, 43, choked to death while unarmed, July 17, 2014; and Michael Brown, 19, shot dead while unarmed, August 9, 2014.

Although I was relieved that media were interrogating the links between and among these Black bodies, death, violence, education, and race, I believed that the foundational questions that should have been posed were not those about how to equip teachers with tools for talking about race in the classroom as much as whether teachers believed in their professional judgment that they should engage race at all with their students. Offering tools to teachers without gauging their beliefs about whether they should discuss race and whether they felt prepared and supported to do so seemed counterproductive. In light of this, I sought out to explore the degree to which teachers locally (and nationally) believed they should engage race. Unfortunately, established survey tools did not exist to help me study teachers’ beliefs about what were essential for my study.

Below is the Teachers Race Talk Survey (TRTS) that I developed with assistance from colleagues (Milner, Delale-O’Connor, Murray, & Alvarez, 2016). The exploratory survey constructed and analyzed in Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT)
asks preservice and in-service teachers pertinent demographic questions before inquiring about their beliefs and feelings (yes, unsure, and no) about the following:

- I believe race plays a role in the educational experiences of my (current/future) students.
- I believe the topic of race is important to discuss with the students in my (current/future) classroom.
- I believe that teachers should discuss racism and racial discrimination with their students.
- I believe teachers should discuss recent instances of violence against Black people with their students (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Philando Castile).
- I believe teachers should discuss recent violence against police officers with their students (e.g., the police shooting in Dallas, TX).
- I feel prepared to have conversations about race in my classroom.
- I believe my teacher training program prepared me to discuss race in my classroom.
- I believe my students’ parents/guardians would support conversations about race in my classroom.
- I believe the administration at my school supports conversations about race inside the classroom.
- I believe that it is my responsibility to help my students acquire the skills to critically analyze and respond to social injustices.
- I feel prepared to help my students acquire the skills to critically analyze and respond to social injustices.
- I believe the administration and teachers at my school would be supportive of student organizing and activism.

Intentionally, each participant is asked to provide a more in-depth open-ended response to each of the items as outlined above. In particular, respondents were asked to respond to 9 demographic questions (including one that addressed their race and ethnicity), 12 closed-ended exploratory questions, and 12 open-ended explanatory questions that expanded on the closed ended questions.

**Sampling and Respondents**

Because this was an exploratory study, I was interested in receiving as many teacher responses as possible. In terms of local sampling, the survey was sent out to the University of Pittsburgh School of Education current teacher education program students and alumni. I also sent requests to three additional colleagues working in three different teacher education programs/universities in Pittsburgh. The invitation was also sent to local educational networks throughout Pittsburgh.
with a request for participation. National sampling included an invitation to all 62 Association of American Universities public and private school Deans of Education and/or Directors or Coordinators of Teacher Education as determined by an Internet search. The Literacy Research Association also posted the survey to its distribution list.

As of November 28, 2016, in preparation of the plenary keynote, a total of 386 respondents completed the survey: About 49% were at the preservice level and 51% was at the in-service level. The average number of years teaching was 5.5 years, and 87% of respondents were White or European American, 6% were Black or African American, 3% were Brown or Latinx, 2% were Yellow or Asian American, and 2% self identified as multiracial. In terms of grade level, 5% of the participants were pre-K/preschool, 32% were at the Elementary level, 18% were at the Middle or Junior High level, and 45% of all respondents were at the High School level. Forty-one percent of all participants in the survey were ELA teachers, 14% were Math teachers, 14% were Social Studies or History teachers, and 8% were Foreign Language teachers.

The Milner, Delale-O’Connor, Murray, and Alvarez Teachers Race Talk Survey (TRTS)

Q1. Current teaching grade level:
   - Pre-K/preschool
   - Elementary
   - Middle/junior high
   - High school
Q2. Subject Area
   - ELA
   - Spanish
   - Mathematics
   - Social Studies/history
   - Science
   - Health/physical education
   - Art/theater
   - Music/band
   - Foreign language
   - Other
Q3. Please specify “Other”:
Q4. Current role:
   - Preservice
   - In-service
   - Other (please specify)
Q5. Number of years teaching:
Q6. Race/ethnicity:
   Black/African American
   American Indian/Alaskan Native
   Yellow/Asian
   Brown/Latinx
   Multiracial
   Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
   White/European American

Q7. Teacher training program type:
   Traditional (college/university)
   Nontraditional (i.e., teach for America, emergency training certification)

Q8. Current region:
   Northeast (CT, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, PA, RI, VT)
   South (AL, AR, DE, DC, FL, GA, KY, LA, MD, MS, NC, OK, SC, TN, TX,
   VA, WV)
   Midwest (IL, IN, IA, KS, MI, MN, MO, NE, ND, OH, SD, WI)
   West (AK, AZ, CA, CO, HI, ID, MT, NM, NV, OR, UT, WA, WY)

Q9. Student racial/ethnic demographics:
   Primarily White
   Primarily Black/African American
   Primarily Latinx
   Primarily Asian
   Racially/ethnically mixed population

Please respond to the following statements and provide brief explanation of your response.

Q10. I believe race plays a role in the educational experiences of my (current/future) students.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure

Q11. Please provide an explanation of your response:

Q12. I believe the topic of race is important to discuss with the students in my (current/future) classroom.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure

Q13. Please provide an explanation of your response:

Q14. I believe that teachers should discuss racism and racial discrimination with their students.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure

Q15. Please provide an explanation of your response:
Q16. I believe teachers should discuss recent instances of violence against Black people with their students (e.g., Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Philando Castile).
   Yes
   No
   Not sure
Q17. Please provide an explanation of your response:
Q18. I believe teachers should discuss recent violence against police officers with their students (e.g., the police shooting in Dallas, TX).
   Yes
   No
   Not sure
Q19. Please provide an explanation of your response:
Q20. I feel prepared to have conversations about race in my classroom.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure
Q21. Please provide an explanation of your response:
Q22. I believe my teacher training program prepared me to discuss race in my classroom.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure
Q23. Please provide an explanation of your response:
Q24. I believe my students’ parents/guardians would support conversations about race in my classroom.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure
Q25. Please provide an explanation of your response:
Q26. I believe the administration at my school supports conversations about race inside the classroom.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure
Q27. Please provide an explanation of your response:
Q28. I believe that it is my responsibility to help my students acquire the skills to critically analyze and respond to social injustices.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure
Q29. Please provide an explanation of your response:
Q30. I feel prepared to help my students acquire the skills to critically analyze and respond to social injustices.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure

Q31. Please provide an explanation of your response:

Q32. I believe the administration and teachers at my school would be supportive of student organizing and activism.
   Yes
   No
   Not sure

Q33. Please provide an explanation of your response:

Results from All Participants

Figure 1 in the Online Appendix presents teachers’ reported beliefs that race plays a role in students’ educational experiences. Of the Black/African American respondents, 91% answered yes, 4% answered no, and 4% answered unsure when asked about their belief that race played a role in students’ educational experiences. Asian participants responded with 88% yes, 6% no, and 6% unsure. 100% of Latinx participants responded yes while 0% responded both no and unsure. 100% of multiracial participants responded yes while 0% responded both no and unsure. White participants responded with 89% yes, 6% no, and 5% unsure.

Figure 2 in the Online Appendix presents teachers’ reported beliefs that race is an important discussion topic in the classroom. Of the Black/African American respondents, 91% answered yes, 0% answered no, and 9% answered unsure when asked about their belief that race is an important discussion topic in the classroom. Asian participants responded with 75% yes, 13% answered no, and 13% answered unsure. 100% of Latinx participants responded yes while 0% responded both no and unsure. Multiracial participants responded with 78% yes, 11% no, and 11% unsure. White participants responded with 88% yes, 5% no, and 7% unsure.

Figure 3 in the Online Appendix presents teachers’ reported beliefs on discussing racism with students. Of the Black/African American respondents, 91% answered yes, 4% answered no, and 4% answered unsure when asked about their belief that teachers should discuss racism with students. Asian participants responded with 90% yes, 0% no, and 10% unsure. Latinx participants responded with 90% yes, 0% no, and 10% unsure. Multiracial participants responded with 89% yes, 0% no, and 11% unsure. White participants responded with 88% yes, 4% no, and 8% unsure.

Figure 4 in the Online Appendix presents teachers’ reported beliefs of discussing violence against Black people with students. Of the Black/African American respondents, 33% answered yes, 32% answered no, and 44% answered unsure when asked about their belief that teachers should discuss violence against Black people with students. Asian participants responded with 13% yes, 25% no, and 63% unsure. Latinx
participants responded with 38% yes, 50% no, and 13% unsure. Multiracial participants responded with 18% yes, 36% no, and 45% unsure. White participants responded with 35% yes, 34% no, and 31% unsure.

Figure 5 in the Online Appendix presents teachers’ reported beliefs on discussing violence against police with students. Of the Black/African American respondents, 43% answered yes, 0% answered no, and 57% answered unsure when asked about their belief that teachers should discuss violence against police with students. Asian participants responded with 19% yes, 31% no, and 50% unsure. Latinx participants responded with 33% yes, 56% no, and 11% unsure. Multiracial participants responded with 25% yes, 0% no, and 75% unsure. White participants responded with 34% yes, 36% no, and 30% unsure.

Figure 6 in the Online Appendix presents teachers’ reported feelings of preparedness to have race conversations in the classroom. Of the Black/African American respondents, 53% answered yes, 18% answered no, and 29% answered unsure when asked about their belief that teachers should discuss violence against police with students. Asian participants responded with 19% yes, 50% no, and 31% unsure. Latinx participants responded with 43% yes, 14% no, and 43% unsure. Multiracial participants responded with 37% yes, 38% no, and 25% unsure. White participants responded with 32% yes, 34% no, and 34% unsure.

Figure 7 in the Online Appendix presents teachers’ reported beliefs that teacher training programs prepared them for race conversations. Of the Black/African American respondents, 31% answered yes, 50% answered no, and 19% answered unsure when asked about their belief that teacher training programs prepared them for race conversations. Asian participants responded with 33% yes, 20% no, and 47% unsure. Latinx participants responded with 50% yes, 13% no, and 38% unsure. Multiracial participants responded with 57% yes, 43% no, and 0% unsure. White participants responded with 32% yes, 33% no, and 35% unsure.

Figure 8 in the Online Appendix presents teachers’ reported beliefs that students’ parents/guardians would support race conversations with students. Of the Black/African American respondents, 44% answered yes, 19% answered no, and 38% answered unsure when asked about their belief that students’ parents/guardians would support race conversations with students. Asian participants responded with 13% yes, 0% no, and 87% unsure. Latinx participants responded with 67% yes, 0% no, and 33% unsure. Multiracial participants responded with 20% yes, 60% no, and 20% unsure. White participants responded as 33% yes, 35% no, and 32% unsure.

Figure 9 in the Online Appendix presents teachers’ reported beliefs that school administration would support race conversations with students. Of the Black/African American respondents, 23% answered yes, 55% answered no, and 23% answered unsure when asked about their belief that school administration would support race conversations with students. Asian participants responded with 30% yes, 0% no, and 70% unsure. Latinx participants responded with 50% yes, 38% no, and 13% unsure. Multiracial participants responded with 25% yes, 38% no, and 38% unsure. White participants responded with 34% yes, 33% no, and 33% unsure.
**Summative Interpretations and Emergent Themes**

The vast majority of these 386 teachers who have responded answered yes (at or above 90%) when asked about their belief that (a) race plays a role in students’ educational experiences, (b) race is an important topic of discussion in the classroom, and (c) teachers should discuss race and racism with students. While most teachers believed in the importance of race-centered conversations in the classroom, the topics of those conversations are less clear, especially regarding recent societal events such as violence against Black bodies and police officers. According to these responses, about half of the teachers in this study believed they should discuss in the classroom: (a) police committed violence against Black people and (b) violence against police.

Respondents were less confident in their feelings and beliefs when asked about (a) their preparedness to have conversations about race and racism (only 53% reported in the affirmative) and (b) their teacher training programs preparing them to have conversations about race—with the majority of responses being negative (31% answered yes, 50% answered no, and 19% answered unsure). In addition, participants mostly answered that they were unsure or did not feel parents and guardians of their students would support race conversations (19% said no and 38% responded unsure). Finally, overwhelmingly, participants reported that they did not feel confident that they would receive administrative support for discussing race in the classroom—23% responded yes, 55% responded no, and 23% responded unsure.

**ELA Teachers’ Responses**

In this section, I share results from the ELA teachers who participated in the survey. It is important to note that 41% of all participants in the survey were ELA teachers. When asked about their belief that race plays a role in students’ educational experiences, 50% answered yes, 12.5% responded no, and 37.5% answered unsure. When asked about their belief that race is an important discussion topic in the classroom, 72% answered yes, none answered no, and 28% answered unsure. In response to the statement about their belief that teachers should discuss racism with students, 96% answered yes, none answered no, and 4% answered unsure. When asked to respond to the statement about their belief that teachers should discuss violence against Black people with students, 63% answered yes, none answered no, and 37% answered unsure.

When asked to report on the statement regarding the belief that teachers should discuss violence against police with students, 58% answered yes, none answered no, and 42% answered unsure. When asked about their feeling of preparedness to have race conversations in the classroom, 38% answered yes, 23% answered no, and 39% answered unsure. When asked about their belief that their teacher training program prepared them for race conversations, 32% answered yes, 33% answered no, and 35% answered unsure.
When asked about their belief that students’ parents/guardians would support race conversations, 44% answered yes, 21% answered no, and 35% answered unsure. When asked to respond to the statement about their belief that school administration would support race conversations, 38% answered yes, 20% answered no, and 42% answered unsure. In light of the finding that teachers tended not to feel strongly prepared to discuss race in the classroom, in the next section, I outline some strategies to assist them.

Race-Central Instructional Practices

Teachers need tools to think about building classroom environments and implementing instructional practices that produce effective learning opportunities for students regarding race. Drawing from a range of literature (Freire, 1998; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Milner, 2015), several principles shaped the kinds of moves and instructional practices necessary for teachers to build and enact curriculum opportunities that centralize race. From the very beginning of the academic year, teachers should:

- **design a classroom ethos** open to questioning, openness to varying perspectives, and that expects and encourages discourse. Designing an environment of respect (even when conversations get heated) is essential to encouraging students to interrogate and grapple with tough issues in general and raced conversations in particular.
- **reflect on and balance** their own views and positions on race and societal occurrences. Their goal is not to indoctrinate students into believing or embracing a particular point of view. The goal is not for teachers to push their own agendas as much as to **nuance** points related to race with students to sharpen their analytic and critical thinking skills. Teachers should **offer** counterviews and positions to students’ positions as they participate in classroom discussion.
- **Identify and centralize** “the facts,” based on evidence from varying sources and multiple points of view. They should **encourage** and **require** students to explore different sources of information and to consider positions and standpoints inconsistent with their initial thinking on topics related to race.
- **expect** students to draw from sources (including their own experience) in expressing their views and positions on issues of race.
- **design for logical inside of school curriculum connections linked to the discipline being taught.** Teachers should prepare to help students understand convergence between race and the subject matter they teach.
- **build their own repertoire** to support race talk, cognitive, socioemotional, and affective needs of students as conversations about race emerge. They should **build networks** to support student needs that fall outside of their toolkit by working with school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and so forth.
- **recognize and nurture** the affective and socioemotional dimensions of students. Students could feel very strongly about a racial topic or issue and could become
emotional as conversations develop. Teachers should **acknowledge** and **validate** these students’ feelings and respond to them with affirmation and sensitivity.

- **talk**, **collaborate**, and **partner** with parents, community members, and school administrators about their views and expectations regarding race-centered conversations and develop strategies with these groups to bolster and complement discourse inside and outside of the classroom.
- **build** knowledge and skills related to racial literacy (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Price-Dennis, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016).
- **consider** next steps associated with race talk. Once students have engaged the issues, deepened their knowledge and understanding, teachers can help students think about their role in working against racism currently and in the future by considering broader more collective ways to build conversations. In other words, what can students do to fight against discrimination and racism in the collective based on what they learn about talk outside of the classroom space in the school and outside of it?

**Implications and Conclusions**

The responses in this research would suggest that we have made progress in teacher education in building teachers’ beliefs about the importance of race discussions in the classroom with the teachers who completed the survey. I, in fact, used to spend weeks in my teacher education courses just trying to make the case for race-centered discussions. While it appears that we (teacher educators) have made progress in cultivating these teachers’ belief systems about the importance of race-centered conversations, most of the teachers did not feel prepared to lead those conversations and did not believe their teacher education programs had necessarily prepared them for such an area of focus. Thus, teacher educators need to do a much better job of supporting preservice teachers with tools to engage such discourse in the classroom. In other words, it is important that teachers engage race with students in ways that disrupt, not reinforce, stereotypes, inequity, and racism.

It is also important to note that teachers tended to either be unsure or negative about parents and guardians’ support of such conversations in the classroom. This point suggests that teachers must inquire about their level of support and build trust with parents to have such conversations. Moreover, most of the teachers felt less efficacious about support from administration regarding these conversations. Because administrators (principals, superintendents, and so forth) play a huge role in what happens inside of classrooms, much more attention needs to be placed on administrative beliefs, practices, and decision-making in support of (or not) race conversations within the classroom. For instance, if administrators do not support teachers’ practices, how is it possible for teachers to deeply interrogate issues of race and racism with their students in the classroom?
Indeed, teachers are under immense pressure to teach a curriculum that is tied to accountability systems, such as standardized testing. Thus, it can be difficult for them to engage issues of race inside of the classroom when they worry that such learning and engagement are inconsequential to the real curriculum. But for many students, race, racism, and other forms of discrimination are the curriculum of their lives and so should be addressed inside of the classroom. Moreover, if we do not address these issues in schools, how will students become engaged citizens who understand how structures and systems of racism continue to maintain an unjust status quo? How will they develop tools to be change agents committed to helping us realize and reach our ideal democracy? For the sake of our democracy and humanity, I conclude with the following lingering question: What if we really conceptualized and practiced race as a legitimate space of content knowledge construction?

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