

Study highlights need to address race and racism in teacher education programs

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Rita Kohli. Credit: University of California - Riverside

Teacher education programs that evade discussions of race and racism often leave teacher educators of color to bear the brunt of educating students about these matters, reports a new paper published in *AERA Open*. Most individuals in a study of teacher educators of color were hired specifically to teach race and racism within programs that, nonetheless, prioritized whiteness and the needs of white student teachers in their curricula. Teacher educators of color experienced harm when the institution did not support them against the resistance to their instruction by white teacher candidates.

"Teacher education often washes its hand of its accountability to racism," said lead author Rita Kohli, an associate professor of education at UC Riverside. "Programs don't always own that they have constructed policies, practices, and content that neglect the realities of race and racism, and that they often hire teacher educators of color to do this labor, which leads to resistance, racial stress, and racial harm."

For the past 12 years, Kohli and co-author Marcos Pizarro at San Jose State University have designed and facilitated a nationally attended professional development workshop for educators of color called the Institute for Teachers of Color Committed to Racial Justice, or ITOC. While collaborating with teachers of color over many years, they noticed that teacher educators—those who teach teachers—shared many similar experiences of racism in their workplaces. They set out to explore if there were any patterns to the experiences of teacher educators of color from various institutions, and learned that teacher education programs are organized in ways that tacitly support the resistance of [white students](#) against teacher educators of color.

Over the course of five years, Kohli and Pizarro sent questionnaires to workshop participants, who returned detailed responses. Many of the 141 respondents who met their study criteria discussed incidents where white teacher candidates escalated discomfort with assignments about

racism to administrators who reassured them instead of backing up the teacher educators. Others described instances where teacher candidates left scathing teaching evaluations that jeopardized the teacher educator's career, and other behaviors by white teacher candidates and unsupportive administrators that left teacher educators of color feeling stressed, unsupported, and afraid for their jobs. Many reported that race-evasive colleagues devalued their work and encouraged them to engage less with race, while still expecting them to do all the program's work of racial education.

For example, one Black mathematics teacher educator wrote that many of her colleagues believed rigorous content and high expectations were sufficient to resolve racial inequalities. They suggested that attending to race perpetuates racism and one policy leader said, "Who cares if a teacher is green or purple, as long as they do their job?"

Another Black teacher educator said that her colleagues had trouble seeing race and racism at all and in the rare instances when they did recognize racism, they did not know how to engage.

Kohli and Pizarro found that this race-evasiveness saturated most teacher education programs, leading the programs to prioritize teaching topics that made white students feel comfortable, expecting teacher educators of color to facilitate content that challenged students' understanding yet protected their comfort—a paradoxical task.

Nationally, over 80% teacher educators and 70% of teacher candidates are white, so it is not surprising that the teacher education curriculum is structured to privilege white comfort and produce a predominantly white workforce. The new work reveals the harm teacher educators of color encounter in this environment.

"For decades teacher education programs have operated in ways that are

race-evasive," said Kohli. "But now that there is a push to be more responsive to diversity, race, and racial inequity, programs hire teacher educators of color to address race, pigeonhole them in that race work, and, when students resist, they are treated like it is their individual problem."

The paper concludes with four steps teacher education programs can take to address race and racism at the heart of their curriculum.

- Challenge [race](#) evasiveness by expecting all [teacher education](#) faculty to share the responsibility of reflecting on and challenging racism, and for supporting students of color.
- Require a base level of racial literacy for admission of teacher candidates, who should be expected to have a basic understanding and willingness to identify and disrupt racism.
- Educate white teacher candidates on how whiteness operates.
- Expect and prepare to address [racism](#) in [teacher education programs](#).

More information: Rita Kohli and Marcos Pizarro, The Layered Toll of Racism in Teacher Education on Teacher Educators of Color. *AERA Open* (2022). doi.org/10.1177/23328584221078538

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