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Educating in a 'Regressive Era': Exploring the Race-Full Ideological Standpoint of Black Women Teachers

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Abstract The purpose of this 2-year phenomenological study was to build on the legacy of Black women educators before and after Brown v. Board of Education and examine the ideological standpoint of early career Black women educators from the millennial generation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three Black women educators teaching in New York City public schools serving predominantly Black and Latinx students in order to explore how they conceptualize their sociopolitical context and implications for their teaching. Critical Race Theory and ideological clarity are used as conceptual tools to reveal contradictions informing the educational context for Black and Brown teachers and youth. Two of these contradictions are that: (1) Many liberals and conservatives tout that we have moved towards a progressive post-racial era, when in fact, this time period is characterized by heightened surveillance and criminalization of Black and Brown youth, and (2) Generally, educational programs promoting equity and democracy actually reinforce White supremacy and maintain social stratification. These findings have implications for teachers and teacher educators as they develop the clarity needed to build movements to shift common sense paradigms in education that have maintained the subordination of Black and Brown children for decades.

Keywords Black women educators · Ideological standpoint · Critical Race Theory

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Introduction

Prominent social issues facing Black people during the Civil Rights era persist today; police brutality, housing discrimination, and income inequality (Smith-Wilson et al. 2016; United States 1968). These issues are material manifestations of systems of racism and capitalism that maintain White supremacy in the United States. Black women educators in this study witness the persistence of these forms of oppression and political and economic manipulation on the education of Black and Latinx students and describe it as a "regressive era" or "back to slavery." This notion of a regressive era questions the liberal contention that such Civil Rights legislation led to the sociopolitical and economic progress of Black and Latinx people in the present moment. Acknowledging a regressive era means confronting the reality that de facto sociopolitical justice and equity have yet to be achieved. This era ironically coincides with Obama's presidency and the myth of a post-racial society. Post-racial discourse claiming that Civil Rights and social welfare reforms during the 1950s and 1960s equalized access to social and economic opportunity suppresses current day efforts towards fundamental changes leading towards equity (Taylor 2016). Instead, neoliberal reforms and ideologies that promote privatization while curtailing social programs in the belief that laissez-faire economic policies will solve social problems remain dominant (Cohen 2010; Lipman 2011). This means that for Black and Latinx children and their teachers, education reforms are limited to efforts towards privatization, standardization, and testing that are steeped in meritocracy.

Explanations for educational inequity rely on blaming Black and Brown youth and their families for a lack of success. These explanations ignore the racialized standards students are being forced to meet and structural causes of such "underachievement." As Fine et al. (2004) state "by crediting individual elite students with success, and blaming individual poor students for failure, the structural sources of privilege, 'merit' and academic problems are 'whited out'" (p. 2210). Such arguments based on meritocracy ignore how institutional oppression and culturally unresponsive schooling settings contribute to the inequity faced by Black and Brown children. Color-blindness manifests itself when schools serving White wealthier counterparts who are successful according to the standards of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) are viewed as achieving based on their own individual efforts rather than due to structural factors that place them at an advantage (Leonardo 2009). These structural factors include standardization efforts based on White supremacist patriarchal upper class norms, a lack of quality resources, fewer qualified teachers, and other environmental and social factors such as crime, lack of access to healthcare, and labor market inequities (Brown et al. 2003). Neoliberal reform "ignores the important inputs of resources that enable school quality, [which] mistakes measuring schools for fixing them" (Darling-Hammond 2010, p. 138). These inequities persist because many educators and policymakers, for various reasons, do not interrogate their own personal biases regarding young people as well as the underlying institutional causes of the oppression they face in

school. Subsequently, they often act based on *common sense* (Kumashiro 2004) explanations of "underachievement," which continue to reinforce injustice.

Black Women Educators

In order to develop engaged curricular and pedagogical practices and a well-articulated movement for liberatory education, research grounded in social justice needs to more closely examine teachers' understandings of how sociopolitical processes operate within particular contexts. This focus on counter-hegemonic ideology and historicizing and contextualizing racial oppression remains a major goal of Critical Race Theory research in education (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Exploring the ideological and political clarity of Black women educators becomes useful given their legacy of attending to sociopolitical and cultural factors in their teaching. This is not to say that all Black women teachers maintain an anti-oppressive liberatory educational framework. Many have internalized oppression that they must actively process and use to shift their practices. Yet, their womanist standpoint (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2002; Haraway 1991; Harding 2004; Hill Collins 2003) and experiential knowledge (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) offer a unique position from which to unpack how oppression impacts the lives of their students and their understandings of how this influences education. Black women educators contribute to an "intellectual identity" and "political practice" (Crenshaw et al. 1995) that centers race and challenges neutral ideologies and practices in education.

Much work has documented the role Black women educators played during the times before and after desegregation to challenge the hegemonic ideologies and systems that positioned Black children as inferior (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 1999; Loder-Jackson 2012; Siddle-Walker 2013) and teach in ways that consider the sociopolitical context. These educators have a history of being activists grounded in the communities in which they work and as promoting "racial uplift," or a commitment upon the end of slavery to challenge White supremacy (Perkins 1981). Black women educators have historically recognized their teaching as a political act whether through advocating for their students, challenging colleagues, developing meaningful curricula, or participating in protests (Dixson 2003). They have upheld the importance of relationships and showing care towards students (Beauboeuf-Lafontant 2002; Case 1997; Delpit 2006; Foster 1993; Ware 2007). They recognize that children are directly affected by state violence and inequity in education. As Dixson (2014) contends, there still exists a need for more research documenting the positive contributions of Black women teachers with consideration of their racial, class, and gender dimensions. Because of the nature of the findings, this paper focuses on participants' racial analyses of their work as educators. While some research has been done on contemporary Black women teachers (Dingus 2006; Dixson 2003) there is a need for more recent work on the role Black women educators play in the lives of Black and Brown children given the current complex sociopolitical context.

The present sociopolitical context has parallels to the Civil Rights era, but also has its own unique advances, challenges, and forms of resistance. Some advances currently informing the work of Black women educators are, though still under-

realized, Civil Rights legislation, and the burgeoning age of social media activism. Particular challenges faced by Black and Brown communities in this new millennium are the lack of resources in their communities that result from residential segregation, intentional redlining policies that create unfair mortgage rates for Black families and contribute to urban decline (Pounder et al. 2003), police brutality, and the school-to-prison-pipeline. At the same time, efforts are being made to resist these forms of oppression through the #sayhername and #blacklivesmatter movements and organizations like the Black Youth Project and Dream Defenders. Given this context, the purpose of this study was to learn from Black women educators from the millennial generation about how they experience and examine the sociopolitical and economic context in which they teach and their children learn. I asked the questions: How do Black women educators from the millennial generation describe the sociopolitical context in which they teach? How do they see this sociopolitical context informing their teaching?

In this study I explore Black women educators' structural understandings of the sociopolitical context in which they educate. And though they have their own biases, it offers a lens through which one can explore some of the factors that influence teaching in working class schools with young Black and Brown students, why it matters, and how it impacts teaching. This study contributes to existing literature by focusing on the particular standpoint of Black women educators to help illuminate a more localized understanding of sociopolitical and economic contexts and their impact on teaching. While the findings cannot be generalized, it offers a nuanced view of what ideological clarity deeply rooted in a marginalized experience and long term, yet incomplete, struggle for awareness might entail. Sharing such findings helps to support pre-service, in-service, and community-based work with educators developing clarity for their ideological standpoints rooted in a marginalized positionality and corresponding actions to take. This work centers the ideologies and experiences of Black women educators in New York City to heed Amiri Baraka's (1974) call that "we make a cultural analysis of ourselves which will answer the questions: Who are we? How have we lived, How are we living, How must we live in order to liberate ourselves? (p. 7). In this case, the latter question entails: How will we liberate ourselves as educators in order to transform oppressive educational experiences of Black and Latinx children?

Critical Race Theory and Pedagogy

Although CRT has its roots in law, scholars and practitioners recognize its interdisciplinary nature and importance of a historical analysis (Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Wing 2000). While race is centered (Solórzano and Yosso 2002), such analyses also involve the postmodern project of deconstructing multiple forms of oppression (Lynn 2002) as well as working towards their end (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Part of the work of CRT is to critique *whiteness as property* and the power to exclude, define, and normalize (Harris 1993; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995). Critical race theorists also contend for a critique of colorblindness, neutrality, meritocracy and liberalism (Bonilla-Silva 2010; DeCuir and Dixson 2004; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solórzano and Yosso 2002) that can slow efforts toward real

transformation. An invaluable component of Critical Race Theory is to equip people with a framework to help them create change. This framework was selected for this study because participants rooted their analyses in race while exploring issues of oppression that contribute to racism in education.

Race-based analyses should be coupled with action. In the field of education, Critical Race Pedagogy has the potential to offer a framework coupled with practical ideas for creating more liberatory forms of teaching and learning. Lynn (1999) defines Critical Race Pedagogy as "an analysis of racial, ethnic, and gender subordination in education that relies mostly on the perceptions, experiences, and counter-hegemonic practices of educators of color" (p. 615). In addition to an analysis of such forms of oppression, this work needs to be coupled with curricular decision-making and teaching practices. While the focus of this study was on the ideologies and analyses of Black Women Educators, participants do not separate this from their teaching and also discuss how their understandings impact their teaching, an issue to be further explored in subsequent work.

Ideological and Political Clarity

Teaching is not a politically neutral act (Bartolomé 2004; Clark and Flores 2014) and the schools and communities in which teachers work carry their own sociopolitical baggage. The nature of what people teach is informed by their beliefs and experiences. Much research documents how ideology or implicit bias correlates with teacher practices and actions (Cochran-Smith 1997; Cooper 2003; Gilliam et al. 2016; Vasileiadis et al. 2013; Webb 2010). It becomes imperative that teachers consistently examine their ideologies regarding student learning, behavior, their families, and the sociopolitical context in which they teach throughout their teacher education programs and ongoing professional development. Assaf and Dooley (2010) define ideologies as

> Idea systems and values used to understand our experiences and the world around us. They are socially determined. Ideologies reveal themselves through the language or discourse practices of social groups. Ideologies are constantly shifting. (p. 156)

They shift based on an individual's life experiences as well as societal conditions (Darder et al. 2003). In education, ideologies also consciously and subconsciously inform the curricular and pedagogical choices of teachers as well as how they interact with young people and their families.

Bartolomé (2004) defines ideological clarity as "the process by which individuals struggle to identify and compare their own explanations for the existing socioeconomic and political hierarchy with the dominant society's (p. 98)." In education, this entails exploring dominant views of why educational inequity or as the general public would refer to it, the "achievement gap," exists. Political clarity pushes this a bit further to involve an

> ongoing process by which individuals achieve ever-deepening consciousness of the sociopolitical and economic realities that shape their lives and their

> capacity to transform such material and symbolic conditions. It also refers to the process by which individuals come to understand the possible linkages between macro-level political, economic, and social variables and subordinated groups' academic performance in the micro-level classroom. (p. 98)

The key elements here that impact the work of teachers are: (1) through such awareness of their sociopolitical and economic contexts teachers should develop a sense of how to change such realities, and (2) Educators understand how the institutional level informs their local work as teachers in classrooms, schools, and communities.

Because this study also utilizes a Critical Race Theory framework it becomes important to remain aware of "dysconscious racism," and how uncritical or distorted beliefs teachers have about equity and diversity limit their capacity to work towards social justice education (King 1991). Relevant to this study is what King (1991) describes as a Category III explanation of racial inequity in which educators begin to recognize that racism is a norm within this society. Therefore, critical race ideological clarity involves examining how institutionalized racism and other sociopolitical factors shape oppressive and promising experiences of Black and Latinx students. This should be coupled with active individual and collective organizing to take transformative action at the classroom, school, district, and community level. This study begins to grapple with the former.

Much of the research on ideological clarity focuses on pre-service or novice teachers and how to foster such consciousness through teacher education (Agee 2014; Assaf and Dooley 2010; Bartolomé 2004; Bartolomé and Balderrama 2001; Expósito and Favela 2003; Freire 2016). Several researchers argue that sociopolitical consciousness (Freire 2016) and political clarity (Bartolomé 2004) have not been a critical part of teacher education, but must be developed in addition to strong teaching practice in order for students to be successful (Bartolomé and Trueba 2000). Much of the work on teacher education treats pre-service teachers as a homogeneous group, and therefore, their work towards ideological clarity are also treated as uniform. This study acknowledges that those from a marginalized standpoint have their own understandings of the sociopolitical context in which they teach and must be challenged based on their particular starting point.

Assaf and Dooley's (2010) study found that multicultural coursework can help teachers disrupt their dominant beliefs about education and develop more awareness of ideologies that might contradict what they previously took for granted. While the focus on culture and stereotypes might help teachers change their pedagogy it must go further to unpack systemic forms of oppression and the deeply rooted nature of their work. The job of a teacher is individual and interpersonal, but also requires structural shifts to the curriculum, school and district policies, school and community resources, and a move not only toward multicultural education, but also anti-racist pedagogy.

Bartolomé (2004) combines elements of examining structural inequities as well as the cultural work of teachers. In her study on the critical pedagogy and political clarity of three White and one Chicano high school teachers she found five main characteristics of their ideologies and practices: (1) They question meritocratic

explanations of our current social structure, (2) Disown deficit views of students of color, (3) Challenge views that privilege and romanticize dominant culture, (4) They have either directly or indirectly witnessed marginalization and crossed cultural borders, and (5) They see themselves as cultural brokers who help students access the school culture. Findings from this study begin to provide insight into the type of ideological growth and political awareness needed in order to truly educate for social justice. As Bartolomé (2004) notes, some of the analyses of her participants reinforce liberal notions, such as students needing exposure to how the middle and upper class lives. These findings point to a need for ongoing work among educators and researchers to deepen their analyses and ideological clarity. It also illustrates a need to forefront the ideas of educators from marginalized positionalities who are actively examining their own internalized oppression. As the aims of critical pedagogy and social justice education become co-opted and watered down, more research is needed that helps illuminate the deep critical, mental, social and pedagogical work that is necessary in order to truly teach for liberation.

Towards a Race-Full Ideological Standpoint

I define a race-full ideological standpoint as a struggle towards understanding the root causes of a racially marginalized group's experiences with particular attention to institutionalized oppression from the perspectives of that group while creating positive definitions of who they are rooted in their own humanity. The term race-full draws from Sanjek's (2000) notion of valuing the "color-full" contributions, practices, and work of racially marginalized groups. A race-full standpoint challenges colorblindness and centers systemic racism in an analysis of sociopolitical issues. I use this concept in this study to explore how participants in this group of Black women educators begin gaining clarity about the root causes of educational oppression faced by Black and Latinx students while beginning to develop a clear collective understanding of the issues. Ideological standpoint involves an ongoing struggle to challenge dominant explanations of inequity (Au 2012). It is dynamic and incomplete, which is apparent in how participants in this study were actively questioning and re-questioning some of their beliefs about their capacities as educators and how to move their students towards success. An important component of standpoint theory is that as groups develop a standpoint, they are defining themselves in new ways, which then assists their capacity to engage in transformative work (Au 2012). Such ideological standpoint equips participants with the capacity to guide a movement for change.

Methods

This study remains grounded within a critical paradigm and advocacy approach to research, which privileges examining issues of inequality and finding ways to create social change (Creswell 2009). A qualitative mode of inquiry was appropriate given the importance of historical and local context, the level at which my experiences as the researcher informed the research questions, the centralization of participants'

ideas and experiences, and the change agenda (Creswell 2009). This study serves as a phenomenological exploration (Moustakas 1994) of how three Black women educators in New York City describe and experience the sociopolitical and economic contexts in which they teach.

I used *criterion-based* (LeCompte et al. 1993) selection in order to identify participants for this study. The main criteria for this study were that participants identify as Black women educators from the millennial generation who aimed for equity and social and political change through their teaching. Such characteristics were observed through their participation in their pre-service teaching course discussions and the content of their assignments. The three Black women educators in this study identify as special education teachers in New York City public schools serving predominantly Black and Latinx students. They were born in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Two of them identify as coming from immigrant backgrounds in Latin America and the Caribbean. Their class backgrounds were varied and dynamic. These selection criteria allowed me to gain a complex sense of participants' intersectionalities, examinations of the sociopolitical context and how such context and their social locations informed their ideologies.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant during spring 2015. This interview allowed me to inquire about their teaching purposes, sociopolitical contexts and their teaching practices given these settings. I coded the data by identifying statements that illustrated their ideologies pertaining to the sociopolitical context in which they taught and then developed "clusters of meaning" to form themes based on these statements (Moustakas 1994). I conducted a second round of interviews during fall 2016 to check how their teaching continued to be influenced by the sociopolitical climate over the span of 1 year, to ask follow up questions related to the emerging themes, and to member check to see if participants had clarifications for my interpretations of their interviews.

Fitting with the methods of Critical Race Theory, I composed counter-narratives based on the themes developed in this study. The goal of counter-narratives in CRT scholarship is to challenge mainstream deficit-oriented narratives regarding the lives of people of color (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) and make visible the experiences of people of color rooted in their communal and historical social locations. Counter-narratives can become a form of resistance to dominant discourses, but should not only serve to challenge these, or it risks giving metanarratives more strength (Solórzano and Yosso 2002). In this study I incorporate counter-narratives of Black women educators in order to illustrate their examination of this pivotal time in history, understandings of the young Black and Brown students with whom they work, and implications for their teaching.

As Ladson-Billings (2000) notes, I often research who I am. With that comes the challenge of maintaining an awareness of one's positionality and how that shapes a study and its findings. As a Black woman educator I risk projecting my own interpretations of the data to tell my own story rather than that of the participants. To account for this, I engaged in peer debriefing and member checking (Marshall and Rossman 2011) in order to ensure that the themes I saw were truly prominent. Still, I do not posit a neutral stance, but rather strive through my own reflections to

see points of connection with participants and divergence as we strive for similar ends.

Unpacking the Intentionality of Institutional Racism and Getting to its Root

At the forefront of participants' ideological clarity is an understanding of institutionalized racism. They discuss various issues connected to educating their students that contribute to and maintain such racism. Zakeya talks specifically about how she sees internalized and institutionalized racism manifesting itself. She describes systematic racism as:

> when certain things are intentionally put into place. Umm certain barriers. Umm, they are specifically put in place and designed to keep whomever identified and whoever said group is back or to put them in an unfair advantage and it's based on race. So if it's a situation where it's like okay African-Americans and Latinos…no, we can't have them succeeding. Then alright what can we do systematically so it's legal? What can we do to make sure that they're not successful or that they're so behind that they have to play catch up so it's impossible and or extremely hard to succeed? (Interview 6/3/2015)

The key to her understanding of racial oppression is that it's both intentional and is enacted through legal means, or put another way, institutionalized. This understanding is aligned with how racism works in the United States. It was institutionalized in order to uphold the power and social position of White people. Thus, White supremacy becomes "secured by a process of domination, or those acts, decisions, and policies that white subjects perpetrate on people of color" (Leonardo 2004, p. 137). Those in power within school districts, charter school networks, and at the national level maintain Whiteness as property (Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995) by continuing to define the educational experiences of children of color so that they remain unsuccessful or marginally successful. Such clarity is important to have as an educator because it goes beyond helping White teachers unpack how their privileges impact their teaching and moves towards encouraging teachers from various racial backgrounds to maintain a critical gaze on intentional policies and practices that oppress Black and Brown children in our schools.

Not only do participants discuss the intentional and systematic manner of how racism impacts their students, they also strive to unpack the underlying issues contributing to such racism. In doing this, they resist meritocratic and liberal explanations for the inequity faced by their students. Zakeya shares:

> I just feel like it's systematic as far as the education system [goes], even beyond that. In the neighborhoods. Geographic. The way the lines are drawn. You know, there's no healthy eating options in our communities, but you know you got plenty of liquor stores and everything else…and to a lot of people our kids umm, they're just really lazy. They just don't want to learn. They just jump to all of these effects. They're not looking at what is the cause.

> How did things get this way? We need to unpack the myriad causes behind what we see in the educational system. (Interview, 6/3/2015)

Individuals and educators in society witness the effects of oppression and then blame young people of color and their families for their lack of success in schools, an ideology that is deeply rooted in individualism (Farley 2000). Theories such as the "Culture of Poverty" (Lewis 1966) that blame students and their families are used to explain educational inequities rather than systemic causes. Zakeya challenges placing blame on individuals and acknowledges the need to examine various causes behind the inequity we see in the educational system, such as a lack of access to healthy foods, redlining, and residential segregation in places like New York City. Redlining and other racist housing policies often go unacknowledged in meritocratic and Culture of Poverty discourses explaining educational achievement. The federal government and lenders spearheaded de jure and de facto policies that created higher lending rates for Black families, deterred White families from moving into communities of color, and contributed to urban decline in these communities. Such policies resulted in poorer living conditions, violence, lack of access to quality foods and health services. Housing policies in the U.S. provide a clear example of how behaviors and conditions blamed on individuals and their culture are actually systemically created.

When examining racism and its impacts on Black and Latinx children one also needs to consider how socioeconomics plays a role. Because our capitalist society depends on racism to thrive, students and families of color face class oppression at higher rates than their white counterparts. Aya explains how one cannot understand inequity in education without examining socioeconomics. She specifically discusses the challenges her students face with academic literacy and how this connects to their lack of access to resources to support their learning. Aya expresses that

> Education unfortunately is completely tied to socioeconomic status. I don't think by any means umm, wealthier students are more intelligent than poorer students. It's just that those wealthier students have greater resources and they have access to more resources…For a student who is coming from a poor household, those parents do not have the resources to go out and pay top notch for a top notch tutor…Many of them are immigrants, many of them do not have resources and have to depend on the schools. And when you have teachers who are not necessarily the best trained right, do not have that much experience and are relying on their public school education, you are going to get students who are struggling. (Interview, 9/1/2016)

Aya's analysis of the relationship between socioeconomics and education highlights another example of how institutional oppression rather than individual students and their families contribute to inequitable learning outcomes for Black and Latinx children from working class communities and for some, immigrant backgrounds. She explains how these families do not have the monetary wealth to create the advantages for their children that their wealthier counterparts possess. Furthermore, as Darling-Hammond (2010) has discussed extensively, they also attend schools employing fewer highly qualified teachers. While these students and their families

possess various forms of *Community Cultural Wealth* (Yosso 2005), such as an aspiration to do well, they do not have the material means to support such goals. Such sociopolitical and historical understandings of racism and class issues then help educators interact with students and design curriculum in ways that move beyond individual blame, build critical consciousness, and challenge systems in their schools that may perpetuate meritocratic beliefs.

Questioning Notions of a Post-racial Era and the Contradiction of Continued Oppression

Another idea explored by educators in this study is the false notion of a post-racial society. The impacts of post-racial discourse and its ramifications is particular to the sociopolitical context of teachers from the millennial generation and their students. Educators from the millennial generation are striving for change in a society that believes Civil Rights legislation from the 1960s automatically created equality when in reality institutional practices still limit their students' access to resources and opportunities. Aya contextualizes present day racism in terms of a "regressive era" that correlates with the Obama Administration. She states:

> So everyone thought that because we have a Black president, that we're moving forward. Umm, we've reached a pinnacle of race relations and what it should be. But because we have a Black president, people have gone out of their way to show people of color what their place is. So when like you watch the news, you watch Congress or whoever else giving him such a hard job about passing things that may be beneficial for people in this nation. (Interview, 6/1/2015)

Here, one sees the CRT critique of colorblindness and liberalism intersect to reveal a problematic contradiction. Claims to post-raciality and colorblindness on the surface correlate with intensified efforts to dominate people of color and resist potentially productive policies. So while making claims to neutral race relations, groups and individuals striving to maintain White supremacist capitalist patriarchal power intentionally resist any efforts that could begin contributing to more equitable race relations. As Bonilla-Silva (2010) puts it: "By framing race-related issues in the language of liberalism, whites can appear 'reasonable' and even 'moral,' while opposing almost all practical approaches to deal with de facto racial inequality" (p. 28). Such resistance, in effect, maintains slow symbolic efforts towards equality and social justice that allows oppression to persist.

Such efforts "to show people of color their place" manifests itself in various ways that impact the lives and education of Black and Latinx students. Aiesha builds on this analysis of systemic oppression by examining how those in power strive to condition Black people to accept injustice as the norm. She describes it as being back to slavery. She states:

> With the recent events with all the police brutality or even the AME [American Methodist Episcopal] shooting. Like the way they portray Black people and on the flip side for example, the guy that just did the [AME]

> shooting. The judge is like we want to help him…Like are you kidding me. I just wanted to bust my head open and it's just like we have a killing on camera…The narrative is completely different. There is a Black man who killed a police dog and he was instantly charged with like 23 years. It's blatant. And I'm like, am I the only person who feels like there needs to be a revolt or something? Like they're conditioning us to you know, like that's just the way it is. It's like back to slavery. That's crazy. (Interview, 6/22/2015)

Aiesha talks here about the double standard with how Black people are treated as inhumane by the criminal justice system while the humanity of White people is reinforced. For her, this "regressive era" is like being "back to slavery." Efforts are made to show Black people that they are inferior and their human and civil rights are nonexistent. Many Black and Latinx students are reminded of this on a daily basis inside and outside of school. For some, it makes them see their opportunities for success as constantly narrowing. Noticing and witnessing these contradictions of post-racial oppression are important for educators as they begin to unpack and work against liberal policies and curriculum that proclaim to promote equity and democracy, but actually continue to maintain injustice.

Participants in this study discuss several concrete ways in which their Black and Latinx students face institutional and internalized oppression. It is important to recognize that while many students resist, one of the projects of institutionalized oppression is to coerce internalized oppression. Aya discusses the systemic ramifications of the criminal justice system that her students experience as one example. She explains:

> I think that in this time period you get into the whole Black Lives Matter movement and like you know so many young men, being um, you know, committing a misdemeanor and that being a death sentence, you now. So you steal a candy bar or you, I don't know, argue with a police officer. Instead of you getting arrested or maybe fined or something, that automatically is your death sentence. (Interview, 6/1/2015)

Literally, one way of keeping a group of people in its place is by killing them or creating the threat of death. Aya also expresses that her students are under constant surveillance. Zakeya discusses how various systems of oppression can contribute to internalized oppression. She explains:

> I just, you know, feel like the whole world for African-Americans, for Latinos, we're not supposed to succeed or be successful. Umm, because we'll take away from other people. I just feel like it's beyond the schools. It goes to the media, the programming, umm…I feel like a lot of the things, a lot of the ways our kids, Blacks, Latinos…the ways they view themselves is based on what they've seen. So it's what you see on TV. It's what you see if all you're seeing is violence, you know, sex, and all of this is what you're going to do. And umm, it's just so irritating. So that becomes your truth, your reality. (Interview, 6/3/2015)

She talks about various systems that cause youth of color to internalize the negativity of violence and sex and that this is done intentionally so that they do not take away from "other people." Unfortunately, this becomes their reality. What's important to note here is that she doesn't claim that Black or Latinx youth create such violence, but rather they internalize it through what they are exposed to via systems like education and the media. While such a process isn't so clear-cut, and many youth of color resist such forms of oppression, this perspective does highlight the intentionality of systemic oppression. While White youth might also be exposed to such negative images of sex and violence the implications are not the same for them. They are not blamed for their violent acts, nor is their entire racial group stereotyped as purveyors of such negativity. These racist ideologies are evidenced by the media's recent treatment of U.S. swimmer, Ryan Lochte's, destruction at a gas station in Brazil as benign and boy-like, while Black boys and young men killed by the police were denied any chance of being seen as human. These contradictions are illustrative of Critical Race Theory's notion that race is permanent. Educators cannot fully recognize a student's humanity without also acknowledging how racism affects their material realities. Attempts at radical or even incremental change are thwarted by institutionalized racism. These understandings and experiences can lead students and their teachers to be disenchanted, but fortunately, as this study highlights there exists a contingency of teachers and young Black and Latinx people who resist or as Aiesha noted earlier, at least recognize the need for a revolt.

Challenging the Educational System's Complicity in Mediocrity and Failure

Participants in this study question the potential of the educational system, in its current state, to meet the needs of Black and Latinx children and from working class backgrounds. They reveal that the educational system tries to condition teachers and their students to accept policies and practices that reinforce their oppression. To them such inequity is blatant and intentional. They choose not to accept this mediocrity and thus, pose their own alternatives rooted in being relevant to students' real lives while being mindful of preparing students to meet standards.

> I just feel like on so many levels the system is just set up for our students, for minority students, to fail…I don't know what to do with that. I can say it's systemic and look at all of the different ways it can be, and blame it on the family, and home life, but…I'm just at the point [where] all of it doesn't matter. I'm just trying to figure it out. Now what do I do with the student sitting here? (Interview, 6/3/2015).

Zakeya questions blaming the students and their families, and recognizes systemic causes. She doesn't have the answers, but knows that she wants to figure it out. She maintains a commitment to addressing the immediate needs of the students sitting in her classroom on a daily basis. While not having the answers can bring discomfort to many educators, the important lesson here is that they not accept mediocrity, constantly question why such injustice exists, and think concretely about how to support the students in the classroom while challenging systemic racism faced by

students. Zakeya provides an example of how the educational system is intentionally oppressive when she states:

> Like for example how suspensions are handled. It's not set up in a way for the benefit of the child. So if we have a child with discipline issues who's not in class a lot suspending them so they miss more probably isn't the best thing. It's just blatant. Like it doesn't make sense. But for some reason it's not seen that way. And I think it's intentional. (Interview, 6/3/2015)

Zakeya is describing the effects of zero tolerance policies that control and punish students and the school-to-prison pipeline in which schools begin the process of criminalizing Black and Latinx students (Heitzeg 2016). Logic, a critical gaze, and/or a marginalized positionality should allow one to see the harm done by such zero tolerance policies like suspensions. Yet, *abstract liberalism* (Bonilla-Silva 2010) allowed and still allow zero tolerance and "broken windows" policies to maintain a front of maintaining safety for schools and communities with predominantly working class families and children while actually upholding White supremacy and keeping Black and Latinx people in their place.

Aiesha also challenges this pretense of a system and policies that are designed to educate *all* children when in actuality children of color about being discriminated against. She notes:

> You're telling me that standardized tests that have been around for centuries, which, in fact, were never designed to include minorities…Just like schools weren't made to include minorities. A system that was never made to include you now has to be tampered with to have like a UDL [Universal Design for Learning] type of thing…That's not going to work. It's not stable. It's just for show. I feel like…I owe my community. I owe myself. I owe my culture. I owe my people something more than what we've been fed our whole lives. (Interview, 6/22/2015)

Here Aiesha presents a critique of incremental changes arguing that standardized tests and the general education system were never created for "minorities" to achieve… In fact, such standardized tests, maintain Whiteness as property and the right to define and exclude. She believes that advances like UDL; which are meant to make learning accessible for a range of learners through multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement (Hall et al. 2012); are surface level improvements that do not offer fundamental changes that would truly transform the experiences of young people of color in schools. Instead, she calls for learning experiences that are applicable to students' lives and have an impact on their communities. She believes she owes this to her community. She goes on to explain:

> It's just a cycle. We are in a system. A system that tells us that we need to learn x, y, and z… I don't believe that. And I think that kids and students should be taught things that are applicable to them and their situations, and their life…Why not teach in a way that impacts our people? I think that's what should be done. A lot of our curriculum is not multicultural or diverse. It's a hidden curriculum. There's a hidden agenda. (Interview, 6/22/2015)

Aiesha describes the educational system as a cycle that dictates what young people should learn, but in a way that isn't applicable to students' lives. She describes the standards and tests as biased. She discusses this hidden agenda that maintains social stratification in our society. She has a desire to break away from what teachers and students are told to do. For her, teaching should involve learning that helps students make an impact on their people and communities. Aiesha also reflects on how she learned that she doesn't have to teach to the test, but rather she could teach in a relevant manner with the test in mind. As a result of her reflecting on her practice she says she gained a better sense of "who I could be as a teacher as opposed to what they were molding us to be" (Interview, 6/22/2015). She has chosen to work beyond the expectations set through teacher education and demands at the school and district level to teach in a way that she believes will allow students to meet expectations of the standards, but more importantly in ways that impact students' lives and their communities.

Committing to Leveraging One's Power to Resist a Culture of "Just Doing Enough"

Educators in this study couple their critiques of racial oppression and an unjust educational system with a deeply internalized desire and will to resist mainstream norms. As Aya expressed: "I just want them to be so amazing and great that I get very heart broken and everything for me is just a failure for me rather than me just looking at things as progress" (Interview, 6/1/2015). Teaching is deeply emotional, personal and political for the Black women educators in this study. Aiesha shares her desire to be surrounded by like-minded caring educators when she states:

> I left Florida because I wanted something new in the sense of meeting people hopefully that had empathy or sympathy or not to say some type of soul, but like caringness about them. And everywhere I went it was just the same thing over and over and I don't know it was just. It led me to believe that maybe it's something that I have to or give others to get it. (Interview, 6/22/2015)

Aiesha discusses this desire to build with people who are also willing to fight for the well-being of children of color. She characterizes such fighters for the liberation of children as possessing human care and having a soul. Yet, she discusses how when she was a social worker she constantly worked with people who made excuses for their lack of success in providing resources for Black and Latinx families and children. She, on the other hand, worked to build relationships with them and send kids in foster care back home to their families. Zakeya describes this notion of making excuses or accepting the status quo as "just doing enough." She explains that

> When your school is full of Blacks and Latinos you just have an entire school of kids who have not received quality education. And now there's this culture of well at least I did this. Well at least I did something. That drives me crazy, but as a self-contained teacher I did say that a lot. So… yeah there's this

> culture of do just enough to get by even if you don't get by…well at least I'm here. (Interview, 6/3/2015).

Zakeya owns the fact that she has succumbed to the sentiment of being ok with doing just enough. With the immense pressure put on teachers by administrators, policymakers, and a desire to support students and their families, one often becomes hopeless, drained, and accepts the status quo. This adds to the pool of under-qualified teachers that have a higher prevalence in "urban" schools (Darling-Hammond 2010). It is important that in these moments teachers pause and reevaluate why they are teaching and their effectiveness as teachers. Black and Latinx students and families deserve high quality teachers who have the energy and drive to fight against mediocrity and oppression in education. Given this, work needs to be done to make schools a more hospitable place for teachers, especially teachers of color who have been traditionally underrepresented.

The women in this study couple their ideologies about and explanations of the sociopolitical context in which they teach with a commitment to continuing to question and reshape their curriculum and teaching in ways that resist societal and educational oppression. Aya specifically wants to return to school to learn more about literacy practices so that she can utilize her privileges to contribute to "urban education." She explains:

> I am a person of color who has been extremely privileged…I'm a public school teacher because I believe that regardless of your status, background, and regardless of your race, you should have access to quality teachers and to quality education because I did…I want to provide students with that access and I want to be able to use my privileges to do so. So I'm trying to navigate the privileges that I have, to offer them to students who may not have access to those same privileges and resources. (Interview, 9/1/2016)

Aya voices a commitment to public education and maintains a belief that everyone can and should have access to quality education. Her discussion of privilege helps to illustrate how when educators have a keen sense of their own privileges they can then leverage them to target their work to particular causes. When one denies these privileges they are not allowing themselves to leverage their full potential to challenge and improve education for Black and Latinx children. Zakeya shares a commitment to such liberatory forms of education and acknowledges that it has to be about more than the individual. She states:

> I think to actually be an effective teacher and be genuine and actually reach the students umm you to have a purpose of how can I help your [the student's] life? How can I do something to kind of…we all know how the school system is. How can I try to get in the mix of things and maybe just a little bit have something to give? So I feel like you just have to be in that mindset. The perks have to be beyond what you just want for you. (Interview, 6/3/2015)

She frames the mindset of a teacher looking to disrupt systemic racism with individuals and institutions in mind. Educators must think about how they can best support and teach young people on an individual level while considering and doing

work on the systemic level. The last line in her comment is very important and draws the line between a saviorist teacher and an educator for liberation. A saviorist teacher "helps" student so that they can feel good about themselves or rid themselves of feelings of guilt. A teacher for liberation looks beyond the self (although appreciating one's accomplishments can be healthy) and truly educates for student access and systemic change.

Discussion

Upon examination of the findings, it becomes apparent that participants in this study begin to develop a race-full ideological standpoint. One begins to see elements of three Black women educators' ideological standpoint that challenges: (1) The intentionality of institutionalized racism that subordinates Black and Latinx students, (2) The falsity of a post-racial era and the contradiction of intense policing and surveillance of their students, and (3) An acceptance of mediocrity in education and abstract liberal practices that fail to create fundamental changes. These critiques are coupled with their commitment to leveraging their power to create educational change.

Participants in this study present various institutional analyses that help move educators away from blaming students and their families towards unpacking the root of educational injustices in our society. Such ideological standpoint ultimately has the power to disrupt taken for granted curricular and pedagogical choices, forms of assessment, and interactions with students and families that reinforce oppression and inequality. As analyses of how White supremacy and multiple forms of dominance manifests itself in the educational experiences of Black and Brown children deepen, educators become more equipped to challenge shallow "democratic" and liberal agendas that do not fundamentally transform educational oppression.

At the center of the ideologies communicated by the three participants in this study is a critique of how racism stifles the educational success of Black and Latinx children. They argue that racist practices and policies are institutionalized with the intention of maintaining the subordinate status of people of color. Understanding the multiple ways in which institutional oppression contributes to educational oppression allows educators to resist blaming students and families for educational inequality. Instead, it forces educators to begin making connections between systemic educational problems and ways they can organize to make changes on micro and macro levels. For example, if students are not performing well in their science classes, rather than blaming the families for not helping with homework or valuing education; one begins to examine the nature of the science class, forms of assessment, and the lack of opportunities provided for students to be exposed to real life science or science careers. Educators and administrators can concretely begin to make changes on the school level to address the issues that they find.

In order to truly be successful educators must begin examining macro level factors and collaborating with other educators and people outside of education to address those issues. Macro level issues could range from the limited number of

Black and Brown people who get access to science careers because of discrimination or scientific knowledge to assessment being defined based on narrow Eurocentric views. Engaging a process of unpacking such root causes of educational oppression requires a continued commitment to developing critical race-full ideological standpoints.

Not seeing race, color, or culture is not an option if one's goal is to educate for social justice. The Black women educators in this study understand this and challenge the notion of a post-racial society. They recognize the hypocrisy of such a claim given the surveillance and criminalization of Black and Brown bodies in the United States. As critical educators it is important to continuously consider the myriad ways attempts are made to put students in their place and reinforce a sense of inferiority. Even liberal strategies and policies need to be placed under a microscope for their false promotion of equity while still maintaining the same power structures that subordinate Black and Brown children in the U.S. Understanding students' material realities helps educators better connect to them and their families. Maintaining color-full (Sanjek 2000) and race-full ideologies helps teachers better engage in humanizing pedagogy and efforts towards educational change. Race-full ideologies allow educators to recognize the individual and cultural assets that Black and Latinx students bring to their learning juxtaposed with the injustices they face based on their race.

Participants' analyses of institutionalized racism and race-full rather than colorblind approaches to understanding their students helps them begin to see contradictions in the democratic aims of education and how they are enacted in practice. One begins to see how the educational system as defined by white capitalist patriarchal norms are complicit in mediocrity and failure. One begins to note how common sense practices in education reinforce dominance (Kumashiro 2004). With such realization comes the responsibility to challenge such inequity at micro and macro levels. Micro levels would include structural changes to the curriculum so that it is anti-racist and critically multicultural throughout. It also involves shifting assessment practices to provide a more well-rounded snapshot of what students know and can do. Relationships between educators, students, and families shift to ones that respect the varying knowledge that each party brings to teaching and learning. Critical culturally relevant care (Watson et al. 2016) are upheld by educators. On the macro level educators need to build coalitions and advocate for school, district, state, and country-wide systems that maintain the humanity of their students. This might entail advocating for positive behavior supports and restorative justice approaches that examine school practices and structures and strive to develop the skills and habits that help students remain included and valued in the school community rather than maintaining zero tolerance policies that are punitive and push students out. It might include strategizing to shift police presence and surveillance in schools and the surrounding communities. Some educators might use traditional political routes and/or attend school board meetings so that their voices are heard and elect like-minded people to serve on these boards. Such action requires educators to recognize the power they possess, particularly when in coalition with others, and be willing to leverage such power.

Coupling such analyses with genuine anti-racist action is risky and requires coalitions and building spaces within schools to allow such work to happen. There are many educators who maintain such ideological clarity who need space to engage in ongoing processes of refining their thinking. These processes need to be sustained in order to build a movement of teachers who are truly willing to resist educational oppression on multiple levels and contend with possible consequences. Such work can have negative consequences such as, losing one's job, being out-casted by a school or district, or what usually happens when marginalized groups mobilize; physical and political force being used to stifle any efforts. At the same time, such work can have positive consequences on micro and macro levels that begin to provide Black and Latinx students with quality teachers and resources they need to be successful, learning experiences that help them to self-actualize, and fair assessments. Such a movement can also help to develop students' capacities to better interact with people and fight for causes that improve their lives and the lives of other marginalized groups locally and globally. The ideological standpoint of the Black women educators in this study offers some considerations for analyses needed in order to fulfill the aims of Critical Race Theory to create sociopolitical and economic change.

Limitations and Future Directions

One potential limitation of this study is the nature of the sample group and their reporting. I am relying on the narratives of three Black women educators in order to understand a more nuanced understanding of the sociopolitical context in which Black and Latinx students learn. Participants are early career teachers in one geographic region and in a similar age group. As a result, these views and narratives cannot be generalized, nor was this a goal. Rather, I strove to maintain trustworthiness in which this study was "faithful enough to some human construction that we may feel safe in acting on them, more important, that members of the community in which the research is conducted may act on them?" (Lincoln et al. 2011). In the end, though not generalizable, participants describe key sociopolitical and economic factors that can inform their own ideological standpoint and Critical Race Pedagogy, as well as that of other educators.

This study only documents participants' ideological standpoint at one point early in their careers. More work must be done to understand the dynamic nature of ideological construction from pre-service educators and the patterns that develop as they continue teaching. Furthermore, one cannot glean from these narratives how participants formed their ideologies. While this study focuses on the ideological standpoint of Black women educators, exploring the understandings of educators from other marginalized groups can help educators find points of commonality and determine how to organize and collectively prioritize actions at a particular point in time given the various intersectionalities that are under consideration. Such analyses need to be grounded in a historical consideration of the ideologies and forms of resistance of liberatory educators who set a precedent for contemporary work. Furthermore, more work needs to be done that examines the relationship between a

group's ideological standpoint and the work they do as educators to enact the micro and macro level changes previously discussed in this article. Student perspectives and understandings should be placed in conversation with educators in order to make sure that teaching and change efforts are inclusive of their ideologies and desires. In addition to this, it would be useful to examine a group's struggle for ideological standpoint and how teachers from a single school or social justice education organization develop their ideological standpoint and take appropriate actions. The sharing of such processes and insights can help individuals and organizations know that they have allies and can build on each other's work. The accumulation of more work and research exploring ideological standpoint using a Critical Race Framework can contribute to a clearly conceptualized movement for liberatory forms of education.

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