

## Sources, Conceptualizations, and Mechanisms of Racism/Oppression for Academic and Mental Health Outcomes

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*Interpersonal and systemic racism and discrimination persist in our educational system—from primary and secondary institutions through college, despite the forward strides of desegregation, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Black Lives Matter movement. This special topic collection identifies and applies empirically and theoretically grounded conceptualizations of racism to improve our understanding of the experience of racism, interventions to mitigate it, and protective factors. The papers in this collection reflect two themes: 1) racial and religious identities in classrooms, schools, and universities, focusing on how educators mitigate and perpetuate systemic racism, including how White teachers understand the impact of race, how inclusive and antiracism curricula are received and rejected by future educators and clinicians, and the impact of exclusionary social networks in the hiring of teachers of color and 2) school belonging and climate, including documenting that students of color feel less safe, are disproportionately exposed to harsh discipline, question their belonging, and question commitments to diversity. The negative sequelae are concurrent and last into adulthood. In addition, there are several advances in theory and measurement, including assessing gendered and racial biases in teachers' attributions about students' abilities, frameworks for mitigating colonial and racialized trauma, and domains of antiracist activism to bring racial justice and equity to schools.*

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At the time of this writing, the United States was squarely at the center of a racial reckoning, even in the midst and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following the highly public and devastating murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, by police officers in Minneapolis, MN, thousands of protestors took to the streets to demand equal treatment. Citizens marched, pleaded, and cried, not just for equity in policing but for equity in our institutions and the policies and practices therein. Racism and oppression are deeply ingrained in every facet of American life, cemented within the very foundation of the United States (Cose, 2022). Persistent inequities across our social, economic, political, and educational systems demonstrate how interpersonal, systemic, and cultural racism and discrimination continue to have deleterious effects on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) throughout their lifespan. Despite some

racial progress, there continue to be reasons to conceptualize and identify mechanisms of impact and challenge racism and discrimination in order to protect and promote the well-being, mental health, and educational opportunities of BIPOC individuals and communities.

The detrimental effects of racial discrimination on youths' academic engagement (Leath et al., 2019), academic achievement (Merolla & Jackson, 2019), college graduation rates (Del Toro & Hughes, 2020), school discipline (Butler-Barnes & Inniss-Thompson, 2020; Carter et al., 2017), mental health (Cave et al., 2020), and overall well-being (Saleem et al., 2020) demand decisive action from researchers, educators, activists, and policymakers. To continue to dismantle racism and reduce its negative impact, the field requires a deeper understanding of the sources, conceptualizations, and mechanisms of racism to identify practical areas of



prevention and intervention. This special topics collection presents a robust set of scholarship that advances the field's understanding of how diverse manifestations of racism undermine BIPOC student and educator potential. Through this set of articles, our understanding of the processes and mechanisms through which racism and oppression operate across and within educational contexts is expanded by addressing the impact on the sense of belonging, school discipline, educator-student relationships, identity, and activism in education. The authors of the included articles employed diverse methods grounded in multiple theoretical orientations centering on BIPOC educator and student experiences to help understand how racism may be reproduced or reduced in educational settings.

Moreover, this collection of articles highlights the significance of culturally relevant theory and measurement to address, decrease, and dismantle racism and oppression. Building upon culturally sensitive theories such as the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVest; Spencer, 2006), critical race theories (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), and social stratification theory (Tumin, 1967), these articles break new ground in understanding the nuanced ways that racism and oppression play out within school contexts at the individual levels of the student, teacher, and families and at the systemic levels of schools, districts, and policies. This special topic collection challenges the field to engage more nuanced questions and methods to understand racism and discrimination in education and expands our understanding of how racial inequity permeates educational practices, policies, and systems at all levels.

The articles in this special topics collection reflect two broad themes, in addition to advances in theory and measurement. First, there are five articles that focus on the intersections of racial and religious identities in classrooms, schools, and universities as they impact the ability to teach and learn. At the university level, Kohli and Pizarro (2022) focus on the lack of support BIPOC university lecturers experience when teaching required courses on racism and inclusion. Conversely, Novak et al. (2022) focused on medical students' responses to required courses on the legacy of racism and outlined five levels of engagement. Also, at the university level, Nojan (2023) described the impact of hegemonic Whiteness and Christian normalcy on Muslim students' sense of belonging. In focusing on elementary and secondary teachers' identities, Deutschman (2022) focused on how White teachers come to understand their racial identity and racial awareness through interactions with students of color. Jabbar et al. (2022) described how power differentials and racial disparities in social networks impact the hiring of teachers of color.

Second, there are four articles focused on school climate and belonging and the role they have on youths' achievement and outcomes into adulthood. Viano and Truong (2022) documented that students of color feel less safe in school

than White students and demonstrated the negative impact on outcomes into adulthood. However, Graham (2022) demonstrated that a higher proportion of teachers of color in school mitigated some racial differences in perceptions of school climate. In an attempt to improve racial climate and school belonging, Pagán (2022) identified barriers across multiple levels to implementing culturally relevant and culturally inclusive pedagogies. Further, in examining belonging at the district level, Castro et al. (2022) described the marginalization and diminished sense of belonging that occurs among families when changes in school assignments and zoning policies are found to be exclusionary and politicized.

Finally, in addition to the two substantive themes, this set of articles includes five articles that bring advancement in theory and measurement. Cruz et al. (2021) and Jacobson et al. (2022) focused on renewed conceptualizations and measures of teacher perceptions and bias. Based on QuantCrit and RaceCrit theories, Cruz et al. (2021) extend the conceptualization of disproportion discipline to consider the impact of the intersection of race and special education status, finding that those who are of color and have an IEP are three times as likely to receive harsh and exclusionary discipline. In conceptualizing and measuring racial and gender differences in teachers' attributions and expectations of math excellence, Jacobson et al. (2022) validate a measure of the attributions of mathematical excellence scale, including four factors: genetic, social, personal, and educational attributions.

Conceptualizing the implementation of interventions to improve racial climate and promote healing was taken up by Alvarez and Farinde-Wu (2022), Villavicencio et al. (2022), and Diem et al. (2022). In conceptualizing trauma and healing, Alvarez and Farinde-Wu (2022) introduce the holistic trauma framework to identify and understand the cumulative racialized trauma experienced by youth and the mechanisms necessary to mitigate it, including collective critical resistance, integrating multiple forms and sources of knowledge at multiple time points and the significance of authentic relationships. Two papers investigate the impact and translation of research to practice, including identifying the critical leadership necessary to implement antiracist intervention in schools (Villavicencio et al., 2022) and a framework for understanding interactions among the domains of activism (Diem et al., 2022). Together, these papers move beyond the ubiquitous analysis of gaps in achievement to a deeper understanding of students' and families' experiences in school as they navigate the social and political contexts.

In the sections that follow, we take each of these themes, integrate their methods and findings across papers, and discuss implications for future research and program and policy interventions. In turn, these unifying themes concretize our understanding of how racism and discrimination contribute to racial inequities in education and provide timely, critical, and relevant pathways to reduce the effects. Further, we

emphasize how educators, researchers, and policymakers might integrate, replicate, and amplify the findings herein to ensure more equitable and just policies, practices, and educational contexts.

### **Racial and Religious Identities in Classrooms, Schools, and Universities**

This first set of articles explored the role of educator and practitioner identity in shaping their experiences of and responses to inequitable and oppressive institutions and systems within varying educational contexts. Together, these articles represent diverse educational perspectives and differing vantage points. Though racial and ethnic identity is central to each paper, the authors elevated our understanding of the role of educator and practitioner identity not as solely an intrapsychic experience but as a multidimensional co-construction of their individual, cultural, social, professional, and religious socialization experiences. Through these studies, the authors demonstrated how ethnic and racial identity (including how individuals claim their identities, how those identities are challenged or ascribed by others, and how identities are reflected and integrated) influence educational and clinical policies and practices, training and preparation, and teachers' social networks. In these ways, identity has an outsized observable impact on the recruitment and retention of educators of color, classroom equity, health justice, and institutional commitments to diversity and inclusion.

For educators of color, networks are critical in identifying and securing job opportunities. Jabbar et al. (2022) described the importance of social networks for charter school educators from historically marginalized groups. Yet many charter schools are led by a majority of White men, who have limited connections to the cities they serve and tend to network among and hire within their pre-established and racially homogenous circles. This process displaces educators of color and leaves local educators who have more direct ties to the community in an information and opportunity vacuum. These racially segregated social networks reproduce and exacerbate racial stratification and entrench "ethnoracial power dynamics" and pose a direct challenge to institutional diversity commitments and equitable recruitment and retention. Jabbar et al. (2022) urged policymakers and school leaders to revisit their diversity commitments to ensure their attempts at actualization align with organizational policies and practices—making their diversity goals more achievable and teachers' experiences more equitable. Kohli and Pizarro (2022) asserted that discrimination and marginalization of BIPOC educators and their experiences begin much earlier than the recruitment and retention process. Here, Kohli and Pizarro (2022) considered the role of teacher education in reproducing inequity and shaping educator identities. The authors utilized critical race theory to explore the racialized

experiences of BIPOC teacher educators and demonstrate the harm they experience when implementing curricula that fail to decenter Whiteness. Consistently, BIPOC teacher educators are expected to carry race and equity work and cope with racial stress when exposed to race-evasive colleagues or institutional marginalization. Like Jabbar et al. (2022), Kohli and Pizarro's research underscored the need for reform that intentionally disrupts "harmful cycles of White dominance" (p. 8) by directly challenging race evasiveness. Doing so requires base levels of racial literacy and confronting racism and White supremacy ideologies that pervade teacher preparation programs.

Interactions among students, faculty, and contexts in elementary and secondary schools and on college campuses highlight the weight that students and faculty of color carry beyond racial discrimination. Deutschman (2022) deepened the call for racial literacy by insisting that White educators develop a strong racial awareness and recognize how their racialized identity shapes their teaching. In this article, Deutschman (2022) employed a critical Whiteness framework and life history methodology to expand our understanding of White identity development among educators. Teaching Black and Brown students often serves as an inflection point for White teachers, leading to understanding themselves as racialized beings. White educators' racial awareness being dependent upon their proximity, exposure, and interactions with Black and Brown children has serious implications for teacher preparation. That this awareness develops in tandem with Black and Brown children's learning and socialization also poses questions about the limits and realities of educational equity in contexts where children shoulder the emotional weight of their White teacher's racial identity development.

Similarly, Novak et al. (2022) highlighted concerns about medical education programs and historical injustices within the healthcare system. To promote health justice and equity, the authors interviewed first-year medical students and explored their understanding of the legacies of medical racism. In this article, medical students' professional identity processes were informed by broad ranges of critical consciousness, including levels of awareness, engagement, and action around race, power, and oppression to dismantle injustice. The authors implored medical education programs to offer multiple entry points aligned with variations in students' critical consciousness stances and active engagement in health justice and adopt communities of practice that encourage knowledge reciprocity between faculty and students.

Nojan (2023) deepened this discussion by demonstrating that the onus of promoting racial equity often falls on the most marginalized. Nojan (2023) asserted that entrenched racial hierarchies that elevate White Christian normativity on college campuses obscure the experiences of students marginalized across multiple identity domains. In this article, the author specifically examined the racial-religious decoupling

experienced by Muslim college students. The decoupling process separated race and religion as distinct social experiences denying Muslim students' intersectional resources for confronting and coping with experiences of anti-Muslim racism. In this way, racial and religious decoupling homogenizes the experiences of historically racially and religiously minoritized students as non-White and non-Christian, flattening their diverse and often intersectional experiences of oppression. In turn, Muslim students rated their campuses as having low commitments to diversity and must advocate for resources and support their institutions deemed unnecessary. How power operates in educational contexts, specifically how presumptions of White cultural dominance intertwine with expectations of BIPOC emotional labor to teach antiracism and undo oppression, serve as a common thread among these articles. The racialization of BIPOC individuals by their teachers, students, and medical providers, and the degree to which that racialization is informed by antiracist or critical perspectives, influence opportunities for educational equity. Plainly, how one is perceived informs the kind of educational access, opportunities, and resources they will receive. Educators' individual journeys with their own racialized understanding and identities set the tone and foundation for school racialized climate.

### **School Belonging and Climate**

There has been increased attention on school climate and belonging because, as Graham (2022) notes, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA; 2015) mandates that all schools assess and monitor school climate and safety, along with the academic performance of students. The National School Climate Council (2007) defines school as "the quality and character of school life. [It] is based on patterns of students', parents', and school personnel's experience of school life; it also reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures." Graham's (2022) study is based on a broad and multidimensional conceptualization of school climate and belonging that reflects students' beliefs, interactions, and organizational structures that impact students' holistic experiences at school (Aldridge et al., 2018; Ryberg et al., 2020). Indeed, whereas Graham's study takes a broad multidimensional scope, Viano and Truong (2022) focus on the most essential aspect of school belonging and climate—students' sense of safety. Safety is a foundational component of school climate (Boxe et al., 2003; Dotterer et al., 2009).

These studies also expand our understanding of belonging because while these studies found that BIPOC students continue to feel unsafe and have negative views of school climate, important factors were examined that mitigate the effects of a harsh school climate. These include the proportion of Black/African American teachers in a school, creating supportive and affirming environments. Additionally,

the studies point to the ways that teachers can more fully create affirming and inclusive environments by ensuring that the voices of students and families of color are magnified particularly as school policy decisions become racialized and these voices are typically silenced or marginalized. These papers integrate multiple theories of race and school climate/belonging to break new ground in our understanding of students' everyday lived experiences at school and their impact on youth outcomes.

Moving beyond individual students' experiences to school and district climates and policies, Pagán (2022) focused on the ways in which teachers structure the curriculum and classroom experiences to help students, especially BIPOC students, see themselves in the curriculum and thereby promote a more inclusive school climate and students' sense of belonging. Examining the inclusion of community voices and stakeholders in school district zoning and school assignment policies, Castro et al. (2022) examined how such policies impact families' sense of belonging, sense of fairness and equity, and feelings of inclusion and being heard. School climate and belonging span the individual day-to-day experiences of students, teachers, and families, as well as the ways in which policies and leadership at the district level engage with the broader community.

To capture the unique experiences of students of color, each of the four papers integrated theories on school climate and belonging with theories related to race, ethnicity, culture, and social stratification. Viano and Truong (2022) integrated critical race theory and QuantCrit theories (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Garcia et al., 2018) with theories of school safety and positive youth development to examine the impact of students' experiences of discrimination, sense of safety in high school, and adult economic outcomes. Graham integrated the phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST; Spencer, 2006) with multidimensional school climate theories to examine racial and ethnic differences in students' perceptions of school climate using statewide administrative data from the state of Georgia. Pagán (2022) leaned into theories on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and focused on positive racially conscious attitudes and practices, along with theories of racialized learning (McKinney de Royston & Nasir, 2017) and the integrative model (Garcia Coll et al., 1996) as she developed her "Race Conscious Multilevel Framework for Teachers' Implementation of Culturally Relevant Pedagogies." Finally, Castro et al. applied a lens of critical Whiteness (Cabrera et al., 2017) to their analysis of school rezoning policies and the inclusion of stakeholder perspectives and belonging.

Together, these studies used multiple methods, including administrative data (Castro et al., 2022; Graham, 2022), nationally representative samples (Viano & Truong, 2022), and qualitative interviews and observations (Castro et al., 2022) to examine the role of race and racism in understanding students' perceptions and experiences of school climate

and belonging. Across students, Black/African American, Latinx, and American Indian students reported feeling less safe (Viano & Truong, 2022) and reported worse perceptions of school climate on all indicators of climate and belonging assessed by Graham (2022). In the Graham (2022) study, such negative perceptions remained, longitudinally, across middle and high school. However, despite more negative experiences, Black/African American students reported a stronger sense of connection to school (Graham, 2022). In the Graham study, having a Black/African American teacher moderated students' perception of climate and outcomes as a protective factor. As the proportion of Black/African American teachers increased within schools, the gap in perception of school climate between Black/African American students and White students declined. In the Viano and Truong study, experiencing school as unsafe was associated, longitudinally, with economic outcomes into adulthood. This association was mediated by ecological assets, such as support, empowerment, time management, and expectations. In both studies, the importance of creating an affirming environment with adults who know and care about students is essential for short-term experiences of school climate and belonging and long-term outcomes of well-being and economic success into adulthood.

Moving beyond students' experiences and toward building upon the importance of creating an affirming school climate, Pagán (2022) developed a framework for assisting teachers in understanding and overcoming the barriers to creating a culturally inclusive and affirming classroom. Her theory focuses on how teachers' racialized beliefs develop, how colorblindness embodies a form of racialized harm, and how racial beliefs manifest in the classroom. Similarly, working beyond the students' experiences at the level of district policies, Castro et al. (2022) focused on the racialized and politicized aspects of setting school policy, specifically school assignment and zoning. Because policies regarding school assignment and zoning dictate where students attend school and the extent to which schools are integrated racially, economically, and culturally, they are the top-line mechanism for creating a school climate in racialized terms. By examining concurrent and historical tactics used by school districts and parent stakeholders in determining zoning and school assignment, Castro and colleagues identify how White voices are magnified and voices of families of color are minimized and/or silenced.

Taken together, these four studies on school climate highlight the need to examine how students of color experience the schools they attend. Theories and research focused on school climate need to be broadened to include the racism, discrimination, and marginalization experienced by students of color and deepen our understanding of the processes that mitigate these negative experiences. These papers provide insight into the role of teachers and other adults as sources of support and the ways in which developing ecological assets

mitigates the negative sequelae of negative racialized experiences in schools. As the four articles on school belonging and school climate also attest, the importance of school climate and students' sense of belonging for their academic achievement, mental health, and future success cannot be overstated.

### **Advances in Theory and Measurement to Dismantle Racism in Education**

This special topics collection also provides several theoretical and methodological advancements that help to better uncover the sources, conceptions, and mechanisms of racial oppression. From more critical methods, such as DisCrit and QuantCrit, to new measurement tools that help to surface, more explicitly, deficit perspectives of teachers or their beliefs/biases; to building in critical reflection, anti-deficit conceptualizations of trauma; and anti-racist activism domains into our theoretical and methodological approaches, this special collection provides examples of specific approaches that can be utilized to deepen our understanding of identity, belonging, and other key areas.

Conceptualizing students' experiences must consider how teachers and other school personnel perceive them. Cruz et al. (2021) focused on how teachers and school personnel perceive students of color who also receive special education services. Utilizing a dis/ability critical race theory (DisCrit) and a critical quantitative (QuantCrit) lens, they documented how teachers perceive and engage students of color and students with learning disabilities and the compounded risk of exclusionary discipline for youth of color who have IEPs. Further, they challenged the use of comparison frameworks that center White, neurotypical learning and behavior as normative. White dominant cultural norms and assumptions about normative behavior and learning are harmful to BIPOC youth. Through their examination of discipline rates, Cruz et al. (2021) painted a complex picture of discipline and dis/ability among multiply marginalized youth.

Also, conceptualizing and measuring teachers' perceptions, Jacobson et al. (2022) examined teachers' attributions for mathematics ability across gender and race and their impact on educational equity. The authors argued that educators' math attributions are influenced by their racial and gendered beliefs and biases, which have implications for how and to whom teachers respond during mathematics instruction and whether these educators can effectively maintain commitments to math equity. They focused on the extent to which teachers ascribe students' progress in mathematics to genetic ability, parents' socialization, personal effort, and/or having good instruction. They validated the 24-item Attributions of Mathematical Excellence Scale, and, importantly, the scale scores were unrelated to social desirability. Both articles demonstrate the insidiousness of educational

racism and how educators' perceptions are critically important to not only how and what students learn but how they are taught and supported.

Finally, conceptualizations and methods for implementing interventions to improve the school climate were taken up in this special topic collection. Villavicencio et al. (2022), Alvarez and Farinde-Wu (2022), and Diem et al. (2022) each took up conceptualizations and frameworks that increase the likelihood that interventions succeed. Villavicencio et al. (2022) studied the process of implementing a year-long intervention to improve racial justice at the school level, with an emphasis on the efficacy of interventions intended to reduce racial bias and racism in school settings. The significance of both individual educators in acknowledging their biases and also the critical role of school leaders and administrators in bringing about systems-level change were outlined (Villavicencio et al., 2022). Few studies assess both the efficacy and effectiveness of antiracism training and programming. As such, the authors explored whether antiracist practices and policies can shift and the extent to which these efforts persist over time. Importantly, they stressed the time-consuming work, leadership, and persistence that is required for ongoing critical reflection, improvement, and sustained change.

Also focused on the conceptualization of intervention strategies, Alvarez and Farinde-Wu (2022) underscored that challenging White cultural dominance in our schools and communities goes beyond shifting policy and practice and proposed a holistic trauma framework. The authors contended that we cannot simply program, train, and test our way to antiracism. Instead, they asserted that we must heal from racism and that healing requires a collective response that eschews White dominant cultural framings and discussions of trauma. The authors argued for a framework that relies on multiple forms of knowledge and experiences of suffering, uses organic approaches that neither pathologize communities nor normalize oppressive acts, and attends to intergenerational trauma and pathways of re-traumatization. To disrupt inequities in our systems and institutions, and remedy the deep harms experienced by BIPOC individuals, we must first abandon deficit-oriented conceptualizations of trauma and remain critical of approaches to healing where individuals are the sole arbiters of change (Alvarez & Farinde-Wu, 2022).

Similarly, Diem et al. (2022) advanced a theoretical framework for understanding antiracist activism focused on improving racial justice. They propose four antiracist activism domains (e.g., school leadership, teaching/learning, policy, and community). The framework also highlights where each domain converges, cross-domain activism coalesces, and coalitions form to co-construct antiracist education solutions. They emphasize the interdependence of each domain, differing from previous approaches operating within one or two domains and seeing little progress

(Diem et al., 2022). Through this multidimensional framework, the authors offer a more substantive approach to antiracism education activism to target and address the complexities of educational equity.

### **Future Directions**

Together, these fourteen papers add to the research that highlights and examines the most pressing sources of racism and oppression for academic and mental health outcomes. These papers highlight the central role of adults in education in creating and maintaining racialized contexts and mitigating racism and its sequelae. However, we still need a better understanding of the processes by which teachers can meaningfully and safely embark on journeys of identity as it relates to their teaching and how to create time and incentives in the academic year for this work. Further, teacher training programs that build upon an understanding of colonial and historical trauma and deficits that arise from unchecked White hegemony will guide teachers in valuing their own and the identities of students of color through both pre-service and in-service training. This is increasingly important, as more than half of US schoolchildren are of color, while 79% of the teaching workforce is White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). There is room for more research and evidence-based practices to prepare teachers to engage an increasingly diverse student body.

Whereas some of the protective factors are described in this set of papers, including the protective role of teachers of color and ecological assets for reducing the negative effects of racism on students and the protective role of networks for teachers of color, additional research is needed to understand the mechanisms of these protective assets. For example, beyond the mere presence of teachers of color, what are the mechanisms of benefit? There are other protective features that are not accounted for in this set of papers, including students' own racial/ethnic identity, racial/ethnic socialization at home, and the supportive role of families (Umaña-Taylor & Hill, 2021). More work is needed to integrate our knowledge across fields on the mechanism through which racism and oppression marginalize students across grade levels and through college and the mechanisms and factors that protect them in the context of racism.

Many of these papers drew upon critical theories, including QuantCrit, DisCrit, and critical race theory, and culturally relevant theories such as theory of racialized learning and culturally relevant pedagogy. These provide essential lenses for understanding implicit racial beliefs and manifestations. However, most often, these theories are not well integrated into the foregoing research. To better understand the experiences of an increasingly diverse student body, future theory and measurement need to strengthen the conceptual and methodological linkages between critical theories and the phenomenon understudy.

The United States is continuing on the path of racial reckoning and needs to examine its past and come to terms with and reconcile its painful history. Only then can we step boldly into a future that embraces an increasingly diverse society. Identifying the sources and mechanisms of racism and oppression and identifying protective factors and mechanisms are only part of the solution. We must understand how to cultivate the will and drive to embrace the strengths that are inherent in a truly multicultural society.

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