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### Authors

Davis, Alexandra N  
Carlo, Gustavo  
Bennett, Denise  
et al.

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*Truth is on the Side of the Oppressed: Systems of Oppression Affecting BIPOC Youth*

*Special Series: Dismantling Systems of Racism and Oppression during Adolescence*

## Understanding Racial Attitudes Among Students and Teachers in a Ethnically/Racially Diverse High School

Alexandra N. Davis   
University of New Mexico

Gustavo Carlo   
University of California-Irvine

Denise Bennett  
Social Worker

Wendy Gallarza, and Dominic Saiz  
University of New Mexico

This study examined the role of racial attitudes in a diverse high school setting. Teachers and students were recruited from a public charter high school in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The final sample consisted of 19 students and 10 teachers who participated in face-to-face interviews regarding racial attitudes and racial bias in the academic setting. Three themes emerged among the teacher interviews: rejecting racial inequalities, contradicting thoughts and color-blind explanations, and racially conscious explanations. For the student interviews, two themes emerged: color-blind racial attitudes and witnessing/experiencing bias. These findings yield evidence that color-blind racial attitudes are prevalent in diverse schools among students and teachers, presenting a challenge to intervention efforts in schools aimed at promoting racial justice.

Key words: racial attitudes – education

The United States has a long history of prejudice and discrimination toward ethnic and racial minority populations that still permeates society today (see Fredrickson, 2015). Racial bias is especially salient for youth with the current political rhetoric focused on immigration policy, community protests over police brutality, and systemic oppression. Considering the role of racial bias and systemic discrimination in the lives of ethnic and racial minority adolescents is a primary area of concern among scholars, as bias and discrimination have been linked to indicators of negative adjustment, including substance use and externalizing behaviors (Clark, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Whitfield, 2015; Park, Wang, Williams, & Alegría, 2018). Therefore, research examining how racism manifests in specific contexts and systems is of particular importance. One critical context where racial bias can have long-term developmental implications is education systems.

Education in the United States is still fraught with disparities between White students and ethnic/racial minority students (see Oyserman & Lewis, 2017). Ethnic and racial minority students often have limited access to culturally relevant materials in the classroom and are typically educated from a Eurocentric perspective (Nieto & Bode, 2008). Ethnic/racial minority students, including Latino/a students, also experience higher dropout rates than their White peers and represent the largest group of youth living in poverty (Fry, 2010). However, little is known regarding the day-to-day experiences of these challenges from the perspective of teachers and students of color.

In the United States, the majority of elementary and secondary teachers are White (Department of Education, 2016). In low-poverty schools, over 90% of teachers are White, and in high-poverty schools, approximately 60% of teachers are White (Department of Education, 2016). This trend is important to consider as schools that are populated by majority non-White families tend to still be dominated by White teachers. Therefore, understanding how race plays a role in the dynamics between teachers

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Alexandra N. Davis, University of New Mexico, 115 Simpson Hall, Albuquerque, NM 87131. E-mail: alexdavis@unm.edu

and students is an important area of inquiry. Researchers have long emphasized the role of racial attitudes in creating experiences for youth; however, research considering the dynamic interplay between student and teacher racial attitudes is limited. There is evidence that teachers' who endorse biased attitudes might perpetuate inequalities among students (see Battey & Leyva, 2018). For example, racial disparities are evident in discipline referrals for students, including suspensions and expulsions for nonviolent offenses that sometimes result in youth entering the juvenile justice system (Nance, 2016). Therefore, the goal of the current study was to gain a contextualized understanding of the meaning of race and racial attitudes among students and teachers at an ethnica and racially diverse public charter school in a Southwestern city.

### The Role of Teachers' Racial Attitudes

Theories of modern racism, including symbolic racism theory, suggest that White individuals tend to endorse the belief that racism is a past phenomenon that no longer occurs in the United States, and that reparations aimed at reducing negative experiences of racial minorities are not necessary and even problematic (McConahay, 1986; Sears & Henry, 2005). Because of these beliefs, White individuals may minimize or ignore the negative social experiences of ethnic/racial minority individuals, while also perpetrating discrimination and microaggressions unintentionally (see Dovidio, Gaertner, & Pearson, 2017).

Scholars have also examined the role of color-blind racial attitudes and how such attitudes predict behavioral interactions. Color-blind racial attitudes refer to the belief that race does not matter in contemporary society and that all people are equal, ignoring the diverse social experiences of racial groups (Neville, Lilly, Duran, Lee, & Browne, 2000). Color-blind racial attitudes tend to be problematic because of the inherent rejection of the reality of racism and bias present in the lives of many ethnic/racial minority individuals, including children (Helms, 1992; Jones, 1997). Because attitudes can play a role in predicting social behaviors (Kraus, 1995), particularly when attitudes interact with emotional responses, teachers' racial attitudes might also predict their perceptions of and interactions with students (Glock & Karbach, 2015). For example, there is evidence that preservice teachers often endorse biased belief systems that perpetuate disparities in educational experiences among

non-White and White students (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Additionally, one study demonstrated that White teachers perceive African American students as less well behaved and lower in cognitive ability than White or Asian students (Tettegah, 1996), and implicit bias has also been linked to racial achievement gaps across classrooms (Van den Bergh, Denessen, Hornstra, Voeten, & Holland, 2010). Implicit bias refers to automatic assumptions that often occur without conscious awareness (see Dovidio, Kawakami, & Gaertner, 2002). Therefore, color-blind racial attitudes might be intricately tied to implicit racial biases even when the individual lacks awareness of such biases.

There is existing research examining the role of racial attitudes among teachers (Quinn, 2017; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). For example, there is evidence that White teachers recognize White privilege, but from a narrow perspective (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Specifically, teachers were likely to acknowledge discrimination experiences among ethnic/racial minority individuals, but they lacked an awareness of the role of structural power and how such privilege benefits White people in society (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Discussions highlighted perceptions from some teachers that White people also face prejudice because they are assumed to be racist both in their teaching position and in broader society (Vaught & Castagno, 2008). Furthermore, there is evidence that White teachers might actually be less tolerant than the general population in regard to topics of equal treatment, and part of this might be due to the failure of many teacher preparation programs to effectively address racial bias and systemic discrimination in the education curriculum (Hinojosa & Moras, 2009). Other research shows that teachers, when compared to noneducators, are less opposed to governmental efforts to support non-White populations and are more likely to understand racial inequalities (Quinn, 2017). However, many teachers still endorsed negative attitudes regarding race (Quinn, 2017). Such findings suggest that more research is needed to understand the complexity of teachers' attitudes regarding race and education. A narrative approach could be a useful research strategy to address this need.

### The Role of Students' Racial Attitudes

Understanding students' racial attitudes, particularly in response to the attitudes of their teachers, is also important. Because racial attitudes are socialized at multiple levels, including at schools

and within the family, there is likely large variation in the racial attitudes of adolescents. Adolescents' own race might be one factor that predicts how adolescents view race. Racial minority adolescents who have been exposed to racial socialization (transmission of messages about the meaning of race in society and systemic barriers based on race; see Hughes et al., 2006) might have a deeper understanding about the role of race in society and are likely to have their own personal experiences of discrimination or bias from others (Benner & Graham, 2011; Stevenson, 1995). There is also evidence that racial socialization practices that occur in schools can also impact students' racial identity and attitudes, which highlights the importance of education as a mechanism for teaching youth about race (Aldana & Byrd, 2015). Some White adolescents, on the other hand, have little exposure to racial socialization (Hagerman, 2014) and may be more likely to endorse color-blind racial attitudes and minimize racial inequalities. School environments might shape students' racial attitudes as well. Intergroup Contact Theory suggests that exposure to diverse others promotes intergroup harmony and can lead to reductions in prejudice and bias over time (Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011).

There is evidence among urban high school students that Black and Latino/a students' report experiencing discrimination from teachers (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Additionally, in diverse schools, reports of discrimination increase when there is a less diverse teaching staff (Benner & Graham, 2011). Students also described the passive acceptance of such behaviors by other adults, which was demonstrated by a lack of intervention when students were faced with bias and discrimination (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Adolescents' connection with their own racial and ethnic backgrounds is typically protective for youth, particularly African American youth, as ethnic and racial identity tends to be associated with adaptive behaviors (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014), so understanding students' racial attitudes is an important area of inquiry. Importantly, consistent with Intergroup Contact Theory, there is evidence that exposure to diversity can reduce prejudice and bias, although effect sizes are often not large (see Pettigrew et al., 2011). There is also evidence, however, that African American youth are faced with color-blind racial messages and ideologies in the broader community, and these messages can contribute to cognitive dissonance surrounding racial identity (Winkler, 2010). There is also evidence that some youth of color

internalize bias and might endorse color-blind racial attitudes if they are consistently faced with these messages (Boutte, Lopez-Robertson, & Powers-Costello, 2011; Kohli, 2014). Therefore, it is important to consider students' racial attitudes in diverse schools with primarily White teachers in order to better understand the development of racial attitudes because of the complexity surrounding the development of such attitudes and the possibility of internalized racial bias. The current study addresses gaps in the literature by using a narrative approach to gain contextualized information regarding racial attitudes of both students and teachers simultaneously in order to gain a better understanding of the interplay between attitudes of teachers and high school students.

## CURRENT STUDY

The goal of the current study was to examine racial attitudes among teachers and students using qualitative interviews in order to better understand the meaning of race in educational settings. The primary research questions were: (1) How do White teachers who predominantly teach students of color feel about race? (2) How do students of color feel about race when primarily White teachers teach them?

## METHODS

### Participants and Procedures

Teachers and students were recruited from a public charter high school in a southwestern city. This charter school focuses on hands-on learning experiences, with a focus on the construction profession. Many of the students attending this school have experienced substantial adversity and have sought out an alternative high school environment. These interviews were conducted during a historical period characterized by social unrest and protests against police brutality and racist systems of oppression in the United States, during the Trump administration. Importantly, discussions of racism and privilege were especially salient during this time. The student body at this particular high school is approximately 95% Latino/a/Hispanic and 100% eligible for free lunch, reflecting the low-resource community that this school serves. The school is in Albuquerque, NM (49.2% Latino/a/Hispanic, 38.9% White/European American, 4.7% American Indian/Alaskan Native; Census.gov, 2021). The city is also characterized by relatively

high poverty rates, with a medium household income of \$52,911 (Census.gov, 2021). The final sample consisted of 19 students (ages 14–18; mean age = 16.69;  $SD = 0.75$ ; 8 girls, 10 boys, and 1 non-binary/third gender individual) and 10 teachers (ages 24–62 years; mean age = 38.22;  $SD = 14.16$ ; 6 men and 4 women). All of the teachers who participated identified as White, while the students primarily identified as ethnic/racial minorities (12 students identified as non-White Latino/a, 4 students identified as White, 2 students identified as Native American, and 1 student identified as Black/African American and Latino/a). All students with the exception of two were born in the United States.

Teachers and students participated in face-to-face interviews where they were asked a variety of open-ended questions, regarding race, racial attitudes, and racial bias in the academic setting. The primary investigator conducted the interviews with teachers, and the school social workers conducted the interviews with students (in order to make students feel more comfortable). All student and teacher participants volunteered to contribute to the study, and there was no compensation.

### Positionality Statement

The primary investigator is a White woman, and the social workers were two women. One identified as Spanish American, and the other identified as Hispanic/Latina. Because the primary investigator is a White woman, she interviewed the teachers in order to make sure teachers felt that they could be as transparent as possible, as the teachers were all also White. The students were primarily ethnic/racial minority youth, so the school social workers interviewed them because they had established relationships, and students already discuss sensitive topics with these individuals regularly. We surmised that students might feel significantly less comfortable discussing race and racism with a White stranger. Social workers had extensive contact prior to this study with both students and their families, as they provided an array of services, including regular check-ins with families and youth in order to meet their needs and connect them to services. Interviews were conducted in a private office at the school. Importantly, the primary investigator's identity as a White woman could influence the interpretation of the results, as she brings her own biases and perspectives to the work and the limitations associated with her worldview and positionality.

### Measures

**Demographic questionnaire.** Participants completed a measure of demographic characteristics. Participants reported on their gender, age, ethnicity, year in school, and mothers' education.

**Racial attitudes interview.** The Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale was used as the base of the interview and was modified and presented in an open-ended format (Neville et al., 2000). Participants were presented with 8 questions taken directly from the original measure and asked whether they agree or disagree and why or why not. Example questions include, "Tell me how you feel about the following statement. White people in the US have certain advantages because of their skin color," and "Tell me how you feel about the following statement. White people in the US are discriminated against because of the color of their skin." Students were also asked, "Tell me about your experiences before coming to this school. Did you experience any bias or discrimination from teachers or administration?" Students were also asked, "How do you think race plays a role in your life?" All interviews were semistructured, and follow-up questions were asked when the interviewer felt it was necessary for clarity. We chose to use this particular measure as the basis for our interviews because we were able to use validated items that tap into color-blind racial ideologies while allowing for rich, contextualized descriptions from both teachers and students. While this specific measure has traditionally been used in quantitative research, standardized and semistructured interview methods are common in qualitative research (see Kelly, 2010), and our approach was consistent with these methods.

### Data Analysis

The primary investigator and two undergraduate research assistants coded each of the interviews initially, looking for broad themes using thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The primary investigator is a White woman, and the two undergraduate coders are both U.S. Latino/a (one man and one woman). Prior to beginning data analysis, the undergraduate students received instruction on qualitative research and how to look for themes across interviews. Each coder initially explored the data individually, looking for patterns in responses across participants. The three coders met after the initial process to discuss similarities and



differences in identified themes. There was overlap in the identified themes for both teachers and students, and through discussion, the final themes were selected (Glesne, 2011). In order to be considered a theme, patterns had to emerge across more than one participant. The coders discussed the core meaning of each theme in order to settle on the name that would be used to represent the themes. Once the final themes were selected, the three coders engaged in another round of coding, each coding select interviews. The coders also all coded a subset of interviews to check for reliability. In cases where differences occurred, the coders discussed the discrepancy and settled on a code. This process of discussion and coding allowed the researchers to arrive at consistent themes across both the teacher and student interviews, which resulted in approximately 90% reliability across coders, using numeric reliability.

**RESULTS**

Three prominent themes emerged among the White teacher interviews: rejecting racial inequalities, contradicting thoughts and color-blind explanations, and racially conscious explanations. For the student interviews, two themes emerged: color-blind racial attitudes and witnessing/experiencing bias (see Table 1 for frequencies and Table 2 for example quotes).

**Teacher Themes**

*Rejecting racial inequalities.* The first major theme was rejecting discussions of race. While this theme was the least frequent, there were three White teachers (out of 10) who expressed sentiments that rejected the reality of racial inequalities.

TABLE 1  
Frequency of Themes Among Teachers and Students

Theme	<i>Approximate % of all coded responses represented by this theme</i>	<i># of participants who had statements coded into this theme</i>
<i>Teacher Responses</i>		
Rejecting Racial Inequalities	18%	3
Contradicting/Color-Blind	42%	8
Racial Consciousness	40%	8
<i>Student Responses</i>		
Color-blind Attitudes	67%	15
Witnessing/Experiences Bias	33%	13

These White teachers expressed distrust in the interview questions and expressed frustration by the discussions of race, even suggesting that the interview was a form of propaganda. These White teachers described discussions of racial disparities as a political tool and avoided acknowledging racial inequalities. When asked to respond to the prompt, “White people have certain advantages because of their skin,” one teacher responded:

Okay. I—you have to always define your terms. Because of your skin—seems like your own, like you’re already putting a spin on things. I would say people have, people don’t, it’s not an even playing field because we’re born with different genetics. We’re born into different families. Um, some families are more functional than others. White families can be very dysfunctional. I’m sure other colored families can be very dysfunctional as well. So, I don’t think there’s a causal relationship between White skin and advantage (Teacher 1003).

This White teacher referenced genetics multiple times and ignored structural factors that might contribute to unequal access to resources and opportunities. When asked about whether race plays a role in who gets sent to prison, this participant responded, “so much is in our genetic makeup and we don’t even really know how much but so much is in our family makeup...” Additionally, this participant rationalized the overrepresentation of racial minority populations in prison. She said:

...And so, statistical situations don’t imply cause and effect. So, there are more Black, a higher percentage of Black people in prison. But there, I think there’s many causes for that and I think just having a knee-jerk reaction to the one cause often creates more problems than you know, the probably good intention behind trying to you know, trying to put it on to this particular cause (Teacher 1003).

The same White teacher also referenced family norms as a predictor of outcomes by saying, “But there’s so many things that go into why someone is sent to prison. If all of your uncles are in prison, you’re in a culture where that’s the norm. If you’re from a family where you don’t know any family member who’s in prison, then that’s a different norm,” (Teacher 1003). Explaining away racial

TABLE 2  
Example Responses for Each Theme

Participant ID	Theme	Quote
<i>Teachers</i>		
1001	Color-Blind Racial Attitudes: expressing conflicting opinions or discomfort with the conversations surrounding race Contradicting/ Color-Blind	Prompt: "White people in the US are discriminated against because of the color of their skin." "That is a tricky one. . . I think they definitely do but I think they do in a different context to other people, if that makes any sense. Um, like I think White people are judged, like I even had, I don't, am I allowed to say an experience I had with a student."
1001	Contradicting/ Color-Blind	"Like there's still hardships that White people face just like other people, like all people face hard times and I think sometimes we don't stop to think about like, White people don't stop to think about what other ethnicities are going through, or other ethnicities don't think about what White people go through. In reality, they go through the same things, they're just different colors."
1002	Contradicting/ Color-Blind	Prompt: "White people in the US are discriminated against because of the color of their skin." "Yeah, um, I think, I think sometimes that is true. . . I mean it's almost like you're always gonna have one group of people discriminating against the other um depending on the situation. So, it's hard to just find that equilibrium where everyone's on the same level. So."
Rejecting Racial Attitudes: expressing sentiments that rejected the reality of racial inequalities		
1003	Rejecting	Prompt: "White people in the US have certain advantages because of their skin color." "Okay. I – you have to always define your terms. Because of your skin – seems like your own, like you're already putting a spin on things. I would say people have, people don't, it's not an even playing field because we're born with different genetics. We're born into different families. Um, some families are more functional than others. White families can be very dysfunctional. I'm sure other colored families can be very dysfunctional as well. So, I don't think there's a causal relationship between white skin and advantage."
1003	Rejecting	"Well I think, I think we, so much is in our genetic makeup and we don't even really know how much but so much is in our family makeup. . . You just, whatever formed you at a very young age, and whoever formed you, the people that you were most open to in the while wide world. We're such social creatures that those social dynamics um, even if they bring our demise are important. You know. So, anyway I think our family more than anything else um influences us and more than we, you know more than people who grew up in my generation like to acknowledge because baby boomers like to think that they are completely different from their previous generations."
1010	Rejecting	Prompt: "White people in the US have certain advantages because of their skin color." "I believe leading as if that, that was what they would say leading the witness. And it shows you more, it tells me more where the person that states that is coming from, than about what is really is happening. Well there is racism and stuff and it's amazing that we can't celebrate our successes and uh, and there's racism, well you know what, here's the deal, what about all the racism in, outside of the white culture? Or white area? That is not called racism cuz by definition of being oppressed, you can't be racist. Well, people get killed by racism all the time. White guy and his wife, Black wife in Florida gets burned with the tire around his neck in front of, with uh, this happened 20 years ago, and it was I just caught it, it was on the obituary pages, uh in the back it's just like a footnote, it's not like the guy that was drug by the pickup, it's not front page news cuz there's a narrative to be spoken that only white racism is dangerous and unjust."
1010	Rejecting	Prompt: "Race plays a role in who gets sent to prison." "We find out who's more likely to resist arrest. There is a difference among the races. Not that, you know, so I mean just compare it with the Black officers, for example. What is the ratio with the Black officers and stuff? Oh that part of the white power structure. Oh, you've got an excuse for that, yeah I understand that everything can be manipulated and maintain the thrust of your things, but if you look at there uh, there are there's some really great research to show the, now I'm talking about the heat of the moment when the guy's chasing the guy and shoots him in the back cuz he's just so pissed, you know what I'm talking about the stupidity some guy that shouldn't be a police officer. That happens amongst all the, all races. But I think it's quite overblown."
1004	Racially Conscious Attitudes: awareness of racial bias and a commitment to actively reducing bias through education	

TABLE 2 (Contd.)  
Example Responses for Each Theme

Participant ID	Theme	Quote
	Racial Consciousness	"Because I know, due, based on what I know, due to certain advantages given by race, you can be the hardest working Black man in the world and still get arrested for walking down the wrong side of the street. So I mean I think that that no matter how hard you work, I don't have, I don't have the same problems that a person of color does. When I walk into a grocery store nobody follows me around to make sure that I'm not gonna steal something. It just doesn't happen. Where from what I know from kids it happens a lot to them. Not just because they're teenagers, but they're brown teenagers."
1004	Racial Consciousness	"A lot of these students, these high school students, and it's part of, what's cool is, you know listening to rap and hip hop and a lot of that music that I've heard is uses the "N" word, you know. So the kids use that word, kids of all. . . we have a lot of kids with Hispanic backgrounds, more so than African Americans in this school we have more. But still, they use that word, they like that music, and I even like it, I like to listen, I listen to it because they tell me "Miss, listen to this" and I like it but these words come up and I's had the conversation of this is not a correct word because it makes a lot of people uncomfortable, I and I tell them but maybe I'm wrong, but it's disrespectful because its recalling some really horrible part of African American history, and it shouldn't be used lightly."
1009	Racial Consciousness	Prompt: "White people have certain advantages because of their skin color." "Um, I do agree, coming from a mixed background um I, I look white but if you like met my mother she's very dark, and so I dealt with a lot of, of, of both sides so I did see when I was growing up perceived as being white I was treated very differently in interviews and especially if like my mother or family members that are darker were present I would be perceived very differently too."
<i>Students</i>		
Color-Blind Racial Attitudes: Minimizing the importance of race and highlighting equality across all people without discussing cultural differences and nuances associated with racism		
001	Color-Blind Attitudes	Prompt: "White people in the US have certain advantages because of their skin color." "I don't think that's fair. . . Because everyone is the same no matter what."
002	Color-Blind Attitudes	"I don't think looks of race really doesn't matter it's kind of just looks of what you wear and like stuff like that. Like if you're just like if, okay, so if a Black guy walks in and then he's fully cleaned up and then when a Black guy that's homeless comes in and he's really dirty, it doesn't matter the color its just matters like what he wears like what like the way you are presenting yourself with, so it's presentation I guess."
004	Color-Blind Attitudes	Prompt: "White people in the US have certain advantages because of their skin color." "That's not true because Black people have the same rights as white people, and a Black person could go get the same job as a white person can, it's like no difference."
Witnessing/Experiencing Bias: expressing negative experiences with teachers seemingly rooted in racial and cultural bias		
002	Witnessing/Experiencing Bias	"I feel like it's Trump and the Mexicans I feel like they don't like them and that's pretty much it, so like I don't know like some leaders I feel like they just they really think about like color or like religion or like where you came from and then they like that's who they see you as, I guess. That's how I feel."
005	Witnessing/Experiencing Bias	"I'm friends with a lot of African American people and I've always, and like I'd go to the mall with them or something like that and they have like a jacket on and I remember as soon as we would go into a shoe store or something like that at the mall, they would always like start talking in their microphones in their ears or mics or whatever and they would be like watching us so I'm like that's kind of, you know, and then when I would go in there by myself they wouldn't do anything, just because I'm Hispanic that doesn't mean anything."

disparities by focusing on other factors, such as genetics as described above, was common for these three teachers.

Another White teacher explained away White privilege by saying, "I think it's a lot more to do with um, culture and socioeconomic status than race. Although, I do understand uh, I do

understand uh racism and struggling against that. But I think the advantages, I think uh this is all an exercise in political power rather than actually trying to help people," (Teacher 010). This participant actually responded with distrust to the interviewer and said, "I believe leading as if that, that was what they would say leading the witness. And it



shows you more, it tells me more where the person that states that is coming from, than about what is really happening" (Teacher 010). He went on to say, "here's the deal, what about all the racism in, outside of the White culture? Or White area? That is not called racism cuz by definition of being oppressed, you can't be racist. Well, people get killed by racism all the time" (Teacher 010).

These rationalizations and distrusting attitudes continued in response to the majority of questions in the interview. When asked whether race plays a role in who gets sent to prison, the White teacher responded by saying:

We find out who's more likely to resist arrest. There is a difference among the races. Not that, you know, so I mean just compare it with the Black officers, for example. What is the ratio with the Black officers and stuff? Oh that part of the White power structure. Oh, you've got an excuse for that, yeah I understand that everything can be manipulated and maintain the thrust of your things, but if you look at there uh, there are there's some really great research to show the, now I'm talking about the heat of the moment when the guy's chasing the guy and shoots him in the back cuz he's just so pissed, you know what I'm talking about the stupidity some guy that shouldn't be a police officer. That happens amongst all the, all races. But I think it's quite overblown uh you know what I found? I did check something out. Men are six times more likely than women to go to prison (Teacher 010).

This White teacher also stated, "different races had different risk-taking, you know in the criminality deal, different things about taking risks." This statement also highlights the readiness to make internal attributions while rejecting systemic and environmental explanations for disparities in the criminal justice system.

*Color-blind racial explanations.* Another common theme was confusion/contradiction, often citing color-blind racial ideologies. There were some White teachers ( $n = 8$ ) who expressed conflicting opinions or seemed uncomfortable with the conversations surrounding race. When asked about racial disparities in the prison system, one teacher said, "I think what a person gets and achieves should be solely based on that individual person, not what color their skin is," (Teacher 1001). When asked

about whether race plays a role in who becomes rich, this participant said:

I think that should be the case. Like, I totally think that should be the case cuz like I said I don't think race should have anything to do with anything, like I think that a White person or a Black person should be able to achieve the same exact thing at the same exact pay scale, but do I think that's necessarily the case in our world now—no (Teacher 1001).

When asked if, "White people in the United States are discriminated against because of the color of their skin," one White teacher responded, "That is a tricky one... I think they definitely do but I think they do in a different context to other people, if that makes any sense. Um, like I think White people are judged," (Teacher 1001). Another White teacher was hesitant to acknowledge racial disparities and instead focused on the complexity as a way to avoid the conversation. This White teacher said, "So, there are more Black, a higher percentage of Black people in prison. But there, I think there's many causes for that and I think just having a knee-jerk reaction to the one cause often creates more problems" (Teacher 1003).

There were White teachers who seemed to acknowledge White privilege, but in a tentative way that was often inconclusive. For example, when asked, "Do you agree with the statement that everyone who works hard no matter what race has an equal chance to be successful," one White teacher responded, "Um, I don't think I necessarily disagree with that but I'm not 100% in agreeance because I think that that hard work can help people get out of some of the situations that society puts people in um but I don't necessarily think that that it's just hard work alone, right" (Teacher 1006). Another question that elicited tentative, often confused responses was "do you think White people are discriminated against because of their race?" Teacher 1006 responded,

I think, I think in small pockets you, like I was certainly discriminated against because of my race in that one little guy yellin' at me but I think that wasn't about my race. I think that was about like him saying a bigger thing about the world, right. Um, but as far as like discrimination as in systemic discrimination or whatever um no, not at all.

Overall, there seems to be acknowledgment that racism and discrimination is systemic, but there is also the need to recognize interpersonal experiences and the possibility that White individuals might face bias.

Some White teachers also expressed some discomfort they experienced while teaching at a school where the majority of students were youth of color. For example, one White teacher said, "it's hard to like um teaching, and I believe that probably I'm a minority at this school, um and yeah when it gets like well, or he brings up the White thing or why White people whatever, it's like yeah I mean you're right but like that's not something you can't overcome like, I don't think it's always gonna be that way," (Teacher 1002). There was also discussion of students segregating in peer groups less frequently than in the past. Another White teacher said, "It's just people tend to want to hang out with people with whom they're comfortable and so whether that's because of socioeconomics like the prep-schools or the (inaudible), and the Black kids and the White kids, so but it's, it's a much more blended culture now than it was then" (Teacher 1003).

*Racially conscious explanations.* The third theme was racially conscious discussions. There were comments made by 8 White teachers that reflected awareness of racial bias and a commitment to actively reducing bias through education. One White teacher said:

Because I know, due, based on what I know, due to certain advantages given by race, you can be the hardest working Black man in the world and still get arrested for walking down the wrong side of the street. So I mean I think that that no matter how hard you work, I don't have, I don't have the same problems that a person of color does. When I walk into a grocery store nobody follows me around to make sure that I'm not gonna steal something. It just doesn't happen. Where from what I know from kids it happens a lot to them. Not just because they're teenagers, but they're Brown teenagers. (teacher 1004).

White teachers also discussed race in connection with their own experiences, and how their experiences shapes their understanding of race. One White teacher said, "...Coming from a mixed background um I, I look White but if you like met my mother she's very dark, and so I dealt with a lot

of, of, of both sides so I did see when I was growing up perceived as being White I was treated very differently in interviews and especially if like my mother or family members that are darker were present I would be perceived very differently too" (Teacher 1009).

There were some White teachers ( $n = 6$ ) who discussed systemic racism, reflecting a deeper understanding of the pervasive nature of discrimination. For example, one White teacher stated, "The elementary school that you go to is based on the neighborhood that you live in and the neighborhood that you live in is based on a lot of like redlining issues or even just school districts now and what you can afford" (Teacher 1008). This White teacher also discussed a recent lesson they developed and were implementing with students focused on the Black Lives Matter movement. The White teacher discussed how they addressed statements such as "all lives matter" in relation to the movement and how such responses were problematic. Specifically, this White teacher said, "and they'll say all lives matter so were looking at like the (inaudible) behind like why is it Black lives matter... and that kind of goes with, it's because there's a systematic issue here that that Black lives aren't being valued." This White teacher also explained another unit they developed where students explored architecture in the Old Town district of the city, and students analyzed the architecture style that was native to this area and styles that resulted from conquistadors and historical periods of colonization. The goal of this lesson was to gain a more nuanced understanding of the role of Spanish oppressors and how the influence of this period remains today and is visible through architecture.

### Student Themes

*Color-blind racial attitudes.* We identified two main themes when analyzing the student interviews: color-blind racial attitudes and experiencing/witnessing bias. These two themes are interesting because students either ignored race as an important social construct or recognized personal experiences of discrimination and bias, creating a distinction among groups of students, but also highlighting contradictions within students. There were a number of students ( $n = 15$ ) who rejected the idea that White people have privilege in society because of their race. For example, when presented with this prompt, students said, "I don't think that's fair...because everyone is the same no

matter what" (Student 001; White). There were also students who rejected race as a meaningful construct, while recognizing appearance in general as a factor that shapes the behaviors of others.

I don't think looks of race really doesn't matter it's kind of just looks of what you wear and like stuff like that. Like if you're just like if, okay, so if a Black guy walks in and then he's fully cleaned up and then when a Black guy that's homeless comes in and he's really dirty, it doesn't matter the color its just matters like what he wears like what like the way you are presenting yourself with, so it's presentation I guess (Student 002; White).

Acknowledging clothing but ignoring race became a subtheme that multiple students mentioned. Another participant said:

Sometimes clothing can tell a person um just looks alone maybe they don't take care of themselves, they don't look successful, um there's a term dress for success. Like clothing could also be a really impactful way of thinking of someone. Personally, I don't like people who dress in um hood clothing, that kinda bothers me and I don't feel any um I don't feel they'll be successful as others compared to those who dress nice (Student 006; non-White, U.S. Mexican).

Students who endorsed color-blind racial attitudes also equated success with a good work ethic. For example, when asked whether all people who work hard have equal chances to become rich, students said, "Yes... if people have nothing in their life made it into something" (Student 001; White). Another student said, "...Black people have the same rights as White people, and a Black person could go get the same job as a White person can, it's like no difference" (Student 004; White, U.S. Mexican). One student expressed color-blind racial ideologies, while acknowledging that race might play a role. This student said, "I think that's somewhat true. I think it definitely involves the environment that the person is in. And if you do work hard, you do have that goal but sometimes it's going to be harder if you're darker skinned" (Student 014; non-White, U.S. Mexican). Another student stated that race did not play a role in wealth acquisition, but luck does. This student said, "It's true, cause there's a certain level of luck that comes with like entrepreneurship, luck doesn't care about

your skin color" (Student 011; Black, African American and Latin o/a).

In some responses, it was clear that students did not comprehend the term "White privilege." One student stated, "what do you call it? White privilege? I don't agree about how White people could... That they have more power. I don't agree that they feel that they have more power, or that they are much better than me because of their skin color" (Student 010; White, U.S. Mexican). From this quote, the student seems to think that White privilege is a personal belief that being White is better than being a person of color, with a lack of understanding that the term refers to systematic privileges afforded to White populations.

*Witnessing/experiencing bias.* Despite the fact that many students seemed to endorse color-blind racial ideologies and lacked an understanding of the pervasive nature of racism, some students also expressed negative experiences with teachers seemingly rooted in racial and cultural bias ( $n = 13$ ). For example, one student who expressed color-blind racial attitudes throughout the interview also stated that s/he had negative experiences with a math teacher who told the class, "this is what a donkey looks like" in reference to her math performance (Student 010; White, U.S. Mexican). Another student who consistently expressed color-blind racial attitudes also stated that, "I have to be cautious a lot, even more so with my age and my Mexican color yeah" (Student 011; Black, African American and Latinx). He went on to say, "I'm Black it's... first impressions are a little bit intimidating and it's noticeable in conversation, I do look a bit scary at first but once people hear me converse, they get more uh, adjusted to it, it's a lot easier that way." This student recognized the role of his race in societal interactions and was aware that people might rely on racial stereotypes when interacting with him. Another student described experiences of racial bias when dealing with teachers by saying:

I went to [blinded High school] where all my other four siblings went and I had a health teacher who had my sister and he said you're Sarah's sister you're not your guys aren't the same color do you guys have different dads. And I was like we have the same dad that's kind of rude don't say that and then one of the other teachers said that she's, I'm Sarah's sister and she said oh the Chicana chick with the eyeliner so I never got no bias but my

sisters definitely did (Student 012; non-White, U.S. Mexican).

There were students who seemed to recognize bias and discrimination, usually when they witnessed it or experienced it themselves. Interestingly, some students connected the current political climate to racism. One student said, "I feel like it's Trump and the Mexicans I feel like they don't like them and that's pretty much it, so like I don't know like some leaders I feel like they just they really think about like color or like religion or like where you came from and then they like that's how they see you as, I guess. That's how I feel" (Student 002; White). Another student stated that, "Trump is a bad president" (Student 009; White). Finally, a third student said, "Trump is a billionaire, and I don't think it's fair what he is doing with the people that are trying to get homes here, and he's splitting up the families, I don't think that's fair" (Student 001; White).

There were some students who seemed to recognize racial discrimination. "Some people get treated different because of their skin color and they... some people just get treated differently and like, everybody thinks that white people you know that they populated the earth, they like quote unquote own it, so I mean I don't know, they get, in some situations they get treated better than other races" (Student 005; non-White, U.S. Mexican). This participant also shared personal experiences where he witnessed racial profiling and discrimination when hanging out with his friends.

I'm friends with a lot of African American people and I've always, and like I'd go to the mall with them or something like that and they have like a jacket on and I remember as soon as we would go into a shoe store or something like that at the mall, they would always like start talking in their microphones in their ears or mics or whatever and they would be like watching us so I'm like that's kind of, you know, and then when I would go in there by myself they wouldn't do anything, just because I'm Hispanic that doesn't mean anything (Student 005; non-White, U.S. Mexican).

## DISCUSSION

The narratives presented in the present study provided rich contextualized information regarding

racial attitudes among high school teachers and students. The results demonstrated multiple groups of teachers with varying perspectives on race/ethnicity, including teachers who rejected racism, teachers who endorsed color-blind racial ideologies, and teachers who were racially conscious. Students also had varying perspectives, but students seemed to primarily endorse color-blind racial attitudes while also sharing stories of witnessing discrimination or experiencing it themselves. These results contribute to existing literature by demonstrating the divergent perspectives of teachers and students from a racially diverse high school. The findings yielded evidence of problematic attitudes of subgroups of teachers and students and a general lack of understanding regarding the meaning of racism despite witnessing and experiencing bias and discrimination.

Consistent with previous research (Vaught & Castagno, 2008), many teachers (42%) acknowledged White privilege, but seemed uncomfortable and unaware of strategies to use with students to combat privilege and empower students. Inter-group Contact Theory suggests that exposure to diverse racial groups, including the students, might reduce prejudices among teachers (see Pettigrew et al., 2011), but the present findings suggest that exposure might not be enough to contribute to teachers' cultural competence and ability to become advocates for racial justice, as this may require deeper training, knowledge, and motivation. Teachers who are not competent teaching antiracist pedagogies might not be providing students of color with culturally relevant education that helps them navigate systems of oppression (Taylor, 2010). Therefore, teachers may actually be contributing (intentionally or unintentionally) to oppressive educational practices. Perhaps greater attention to the quality of interactions between different ethnic/racial teachers and students is needed along with training and education programs aimed at correcting prevailing myths and misconceptions about racism.

While the majority of prior research highlights color-blind racial attitudes as common among White teachers and demonstrates the harmful consequences for minority students (Hinojosa & Moras, 2009), there is limited evidence that White teachers teaching in diverse schools actively reject the idea of race as a meaningful social construct in society. The results of the current study highlight three teachers (18% of the sample) who willingly and actively rejected the notion of racial inequities and racism, and expressed anger at the idea that

White individuals might have advantages because of race. These responses map onto broader social rhetoric opposing discussions of critical race theory and accurate historical accounts of colonization and slavery in schools, highlighting how pervasive these attitudes can be in the education system. This is an important finding because students of color might be educated by White teachers who reject the students' own experiences of discrimination and who socialize other students to not acknowledge discrimination. Given the relative lack of minority teachers that serve most minority students in the U.S. (Department of Education, 2016), these findings are concerning and suggest that racism can be easily transmitted (implicitly and explicitly) from one generation of students to the next via educational curriculums that are likely racially biased and prejudiced.

Importantly, however, the present findings also revealed evidence that there were other teachers (40% of teachers) who were aware of their own White privilege and actively integrated units on race into their curriculum. These White teachers discussed the importance of teaching students about privilege and power and educating them to be racially aware in a racial-ethnic diverse school. These responses provide promising avenues of hope for addressing ethnic/racial biases, prejudice, and discrimination. However, the juxtaposition of these White teachers as fellow colleagues of the White teachers who expressed strong racist attitudes raises important questions about the school climate and culture that is espoused. Future research is needed to examine the extent to which these groups interact and work closely, the influence of one group of teachers over the other, and whether racist attitudes and behaviors are tolerated by fellow teachers who do not condone such attitudes and behaviors.

The student interviews also revealed interesting perspectives, such that most students (67%) endorsed color-blind racial views and seemed to rely on the "everyone is equal" narrative consistently. This is particularly concerning because such idealized egalitarian perspectives mask and promote the ethnic and racial inequities in our systems. The belief system that everyone should be treated equally pushes against policies and behavioral efforts designed to address social and systemic racism. Perhaps the color-blind racial perspective is appealing to many adolescents as personal fables and idealized notions that permeate adolescents' thinking and influence their beliefs about ethnic- and race-based attitudes and

behaviors (Selman, 1980). Both White students and students of color endorsed color-blind racial attitudes, suggesting that some students might internalize the bias that is inherent in such attitudes. Students of color might be impacted by the socialization they receive in the education system and might therefore have a limited understanding of the complex meaning of race in their own lives. The present findings suggest the need for programmatic efforts to correct these prevailing misconceptions about race- and ethnic-based equal access and opportunities in order to redress ethnic and racial inequities.

Interestingly, many of the same students who expressed color-blind racial ideologies also described personal experiences of racial discrimination or witnessing such experiences. Because adolescence is a time of cognitive, social, and emotional developmental gains as well as identity development, this is a critical period to focus on racial attitudes (see Murray & Mandara, 2002). It may be that adolescents are still developing an understanding of race and privilege, and color-blind racial attitudes reflect a simplified understanding of a complicated social construct. Additionally, this study included diverse groups of students, including Latino/a students who belong to different racial groups, so attitudes regarding race as a social construct might be complicated. Previous research demonstrates that Black and Latino/a high school students report discrimination at relatively high levels (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004), so understanding how adolescents perceive race in the context of potential discrimination is important. Adolescents who endorse color-blind racial attitudes might have a harder time coping with discrimination experiences because of the lack of adequate coping strategies, as research has highlighted racial identity as a protective factor against discrimination experiences (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, & Lewis, 2006; Thomas, Caldwell, Faison, & Jackson, 2009). While parents and family members act as primary socializers of racial attitudes and identity (Hughes et al., 2006), teachers' racial attitudes and behaviors in the education system also likely impact youth development.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

There are several study limitations that should be considered. First, this is a small sample from an ethnically and racially diverse charter high school in the U.S. Southwest. Importantly, students at this charter school selected an alternative educational

institution because many had issues and demonstrated behavioral problems in public high schools in the area. The results should be generalized with caution, as this high school is not likely representative of other U.S. high schools. Racial attitudes should be examined among teachers and students in different types of educational settings, including schools that differ in size, racial demographics, and type of institution (public and private). Second, while we were cautious about who conducted interviews with teachers (White investigator) and students (social workers at the school) in order to make participants as comfortable as possible with the goal of avoiding response bias, it is still possible that responses were skewed because participants might have been uncomfortable talking about race with interviewers. And third, in order to better understand how racial attitudes of teachers and students relate and impact education, studies of larger and more representative samples using multiple methods are needed. Such studies can be designed to replicate and facilitate generalizations of the present findings.

### CONCLUSIONS

Despite the limitations of the current study, the findings provide a rich understanding of the role of race and ethnicity in the educational experiences of diverse high school youth. The narratives of both teachers and students contextualize the work on racial attitudes and behaviors and reveal complex attitudes regarding racism and social inequities. While some teachers are actively incorporating lessons on histories of oppression and the role of race in society into lessons, other teachers rejected racism and inequities, and expressed distrust in the conversation. The findings demonstrate that high school students are being exposed to teachers with vastly different understandings of racism and social inequities. Depending on which classes students are enrolled in, students are likely receiving vastly different racial messages and socialization experiences that impact youth development. Interestingly, most students primarily endorsed color-blind racial attitudes despite poignant personal experiences of bias and discrimination.

These findings are in accord with developmental notions of adolescents' thinking and were particularly concerning given the potential for color-blind racial attitudes and beliefs to mitigate anti-racism and social equity efforts. The present findings have important implications for educators and policymakers to increase awareness of such racism within

our school systems and to develop developmental-appropriate intervention and training programs to meet the needs of diverse youth and to redress the ethnic- and race-based social and educational inequities. In order to work toward dismantling systems of oppression, efforts should be made to prepare teachers to be culturally sensitive toward the needs of marginalized students in order to promote a more just educational system that is not euro-centric, but instead works for all students.

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