

Race, Trauma, and the Education System

*Carlomagno C. Panlilio, PhD; Charles Alvarado, MA;
Samantha Ellner, BA*

Abstract

Education personnel make up the largest source of Child Protective Services (CPS) referrals. Yet with the ongoing disparities evident in the child welfare and education systems, we can no longer look the other way and ignore systemic issues inherent in these systems. Schools are an important partner in promoting the safety **and** well-being of children. Therefore, acknowledging the role of colorblind racial ideology in propagating disparities against Black and Brown students is necessary. This is important in understanding and reflecting on how teachers interpret, and respond to, students' emotions in the classroom, especially if students have a history of adversity. We end the article by offering guiding questions for our members to reflect on their own practice and encourage the reappraisal of thoughts, feelings, and action around the intersection of race, trauma, and education.

As I (CP) sat and pondered the beginning of this commentary, I recalled the days gone by working as a clinical family therapist with one particular 9-year-old boy who was referred to me for “behavior problems” displayed in school and in his foster home. Given that the transition to foster placement is often a difficult time for children, it was an area that we spent a lot of time exploring; and I wanted to acknowledge him and ensure that he felt heard and understood. We examined how emotion-eliciting experiences, particularly negative-valenced emotions, organized his behavioral responses in a functional manner reminiscent of his earlier abuse history. Yet despite the functional nature of his self-regulation strategies, the incongruity between his goal of emotional security (Davies & Martin, 2013) and the goals of his foster caregiver and teachers of “behaving” (however these were defined by them at that time) resulted in conflict.

Guided by principles of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), our work therefore focused on understanding what these antecedent events were (e.g., boundary-setting such as bedtime routines, homework) that elicited negative-valenced emotional responses (e.g., frustration, anger, sadness), the strategies selected to manage such emotions (e.g., outbursts such as yelling, physical aggression, running away), evaluation of the strategy's effectiveness (e.g., feelings of relief from the emotion but increased conflict or relief and positive interactions), and selection of alternative regulatory strategies as needed—and begin the cycle of strategy evaluation once again. By including his foster caregiver in sessions as an active partner in shifting not just the child's behaviors but also the home environment, we achieved positive results in the home and maintained placement stability. School was a different story...

Given the intensity of my client's learning and behavioral needs (as defined by school assessments prior to my involvement), he was referred for special education services and placed in a self-contained classroom with a lower student-teacher ratio to ensure access to tier 1 (i.e., individual targeted learning interventions) support. Having agreed to work with his special education teacher after securing appropriate consent and release forms, I set out to work with him in a similar way to the CBT approach that helped at home. This was a time before the push for more trauma-informed approaches in schools, and so our initial psychoeducation component focused on helping the teacher understand the consequences of maltreatment with the goal of helping her contextualize my client's functional behaviors. She agreed to engage in a

similar process outlined above, but after a couple of weeks, she began expressing frustration with the lack of positive results. I would often model some of the strategies that worked in the home and point out my client's positive responses, yet the teacher would often state that she implemented the same strategies in the classroom without the positive results. After some time, the teacher became more and more exacerbated, and I became more and more perplexed as to why things were not going as planned. And then it hit me...

Despite years of practice, despite attending many trainings in cultural competencies, and despite being a Filipino American therapist who "should have known better," my naivete and failure to recognize my color-blindness in the situation prevented me from seeing how race was such an important factor



that should have been considered from the start. Had I reflected on this sooner, I would have realized that perhaps the positive result at home was due to the fact that my 9-year-old African American client was placed in a home with an African American foster caregiver who was heavily invested in his success and who understood the nuances of my client's behaviors and experiences as a Black person. On the other hand, my client's White teacher, who was also well-intentioned and invested in my client's success, may not have been privy to the experiences of many students of color, particularly those who have been involved with the child welfare system.

Colorblind Racial Ideology and Schools

A difficult concept to grapple with is the idea that we can be good people and still have harmful biases about race. Although our intentions may be benign, we must begin to acknowledge that our actions are a reflection of our social and cultural histories and that these influences have the potential to racially charge how we interact with those around us. In an educational setting, especially one that services a diverse student population, these interactions can have dire day-to-day and long-term consequences. Because classrooms house, if only temporarily, an amalgamation of students and teachers, they also serve as a point of intersectionality for their perceptions and experiences with race that actively shapes the learning environment. Due to this reality, simply approaching education and educational practices with a colorblind ideology is not enough.

According to Bonilla-Silva (2017), *colorblind racial ideology* obscures racialized structures that maintain inequalities and decentralizes race, racism, and racial discrimination from the educational, social, political, economic, and historical contexts to diminish the experiences of marginalized people and focuses on victim blaming. In the field of psychology, colorblind racial ideology consists of two related dimensions: (1) *color evasion*, a strategy focused on the idea that everyone is the same and adopting a race-neutral perspective and (2) *power evasion*, a strategy to minimize the role of power dynamics in perpetuating

inequities and racial disparities and includes minimization/denial of experiences related to overt interpersonal racism, institutional racism, and racial privilege (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2020).

Indeed, such a harmful ideology continues to be perpetuated in the education system. For example, the adoption of zero tolerance policies in K–12 schools aimed at decreasing “behavior problems” have increased the use of exclusionary practices (e.g., expulsion and suspension; Borman & Pyne, 2016) for minor offenses that subsequently pave a faster way toward the school-to-prison pipeline, especially for Black and Latinx students (Weathers et al., 2021). Although attention to the use of these exclusionary practices across grades K–12 is now being recognized as a salient factor in the widening achievement gap between White students and students of color, this problem begins much earlier. Preschool expulsion, typically understood as an adult decision in response to children’s “behavior problems” (Owens & McLanahan, 2020), disproportionately affects young Black children, especially boys (Gilliam & Reyes, 2018; Gilliam et al., 2016). Given that most of these disciplinary practices are initiated by teachers, it is therefore important to understand the role of implicit bias related to teachers’ perceptions and attitudes toward behavioral and emotional expressions of students of color. More important, educators need to acknowledge the role that White privilege may play in some of these decisions to use exclusionary practices (i.e., power-evasion strategy) as a means of removing “others” that do not conform or belong.

Further, as idealistic as it is to believe schools are safe spaces for every student, many schools instead function as a possible source of trauma for a number of students, particularly if we do not recognize the systemic bias inherent in this system. In schools, some students can be exposed to a combination of microaggressions (i.e., derogatory or negative racial slights and insults) from other students and teachers alike (Torino et al., 2018). In such instances, students could be the target of malicious comments and inappropriate jokes that are inherently harmful. Students can also be victims of covert and overt racism at schools, such as when racial terminology

(e.g., *n-word*, *terrorist*) is used against students of color. Notably, as the number of experiences with microaggression increases, some researchers have found trauma symptoms also increase (Nadal et al., 2019). When these situations occur, teachers have a responsibility to check on students who have been victimized by racially charged events at school and guide difficult conversations around race with their other students. Handling race as an inconsequential construct in schools (i.e., color-evasion strategy) runs the threat of perpetuating the educational disparities (e.g., academic deficits, higher rates of discipline) among Black and Latinx students when compared with White students. To mitigate the impact of these potentially traumatic experiences around race, teachers should aim to foster strong student–teacher relationships and build a sense of community in the classroom in light of evidence showing that belongingness is an important protective factor for children.

At the Intersection of Race, Emotions, Schools, and Child Welfare

Within schools, public displays of emotions can be considered disruptions that carry a stigma due to the perception that the student may suffer from severe emotional disturbance or serious mental illness (DeCuir-Gunby & Williams, 2007). Students of color are oftentimes expected to silently restrain their emotions, especially in relation to racism, with their emotions being targets of social control when others around them are not comfortable with such expressions (DeCuir-Gunby & Williams, 2007). Unfortunately, instead of seeing the role that racialized structures and racist ideologies play in these emotionally-laden experiences, students of color get blamed and suffer the consequences. The responsibility of addressing inequities need to move from students to teachers, acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in the education system that often punish students of color. This means that teachers will need to be comfortable acknowledging their own emotions around race-related issues and reflect

on their role (purposeful or not) in perpetuating inequities. Indeed, DeCuir-Gunby and colleagues (2020) found that preservice teachers who espoused colorblind racial ideology struggled with regulating their own emotions, which led to psychological inflexibility that made it difficult to change their attitudes and beliefs about race. Furthermore, the authors found that teachers who suppressed their emotions about race allowed them to maintain their colorblind ideologies.

Unfortunately, early experiences of maltreatment, which have been associated with dysregulated emotional responses in children (Kim & Cicchetti, 2010; Panlilio et al., 2020), add a layer of complexity to how emotions and race are interpreted and responded to by teachers. This is particularly problematic given the disproportionate number of Black children referred to Child Protective Services (CPS) and substantiated as victims (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [USDHHS], 2020). Even more concerning is that educators make up the largest referral source to CPS (USDHHS, 2020), begging the question of whether such referrals were made because of unforeseen or unrecognized bias in the interpretation of Black children’s behaviors and emotions.

Back to my 9-year-old client... What I noticed with the teacher’s ever-increasing levels of frustration was that she could not get my client to comply. In my attempts to understand the problem, I realized that although I interpreted my client’s expression of emotions as appropriate given the challenge brought about by the class assignment, the teacher saw his emotions as “too much.” She did not recognize the inherent bias in her emotional response to my client’s emotional expression. When pressed to respond about her strategy use and expectations, she espoused colorblind ideologies such that she treated all her students the same way and did not engage in differential treatment. This was, instead, the fault of my client for “not listening” or “not behaving” or “not paying attention.” When his behaviors got “out of hand,” she outlined her classroom strategies that increased in intensity from warnings to what

Racial Justice Commentary

she termed a “time out.” I came to find out that this supposed time-out method was further exclusion from the classroom for “safety” and that my client was placed in a windowless room, which of course triggered his previous traumatic experiences in his biological home.

Such an appalling strategy employed is an example of how schools can become another source of trauma for children. Furthermore, the documentation provided of ever-increasing intensity of intervention and lack of response would have led to the expulsion of my client, exemplifying victim blaming. Instead, the teacher should have reflected upon her own ideology and the expectations imposed upon my client, especially in light of his previous abuse experiences and because of his race. I have often reflected on this experience and how my own failure to recognize the ubiquity of colorblind racial ideology in the many interactions between my client and the school may have limited my ability to advocate more for my client. However, this and many similar experiences over the years working with my clients in foster care have allowed me to engage in an ongoing work to ensure that I recognize and advocate against color-blind ideologies within systems I work with.

What Can We Do Moving Forward?

From our experiences as teachers (CA and SE) and working with teachers (CP), we have undergone such reflections and recognize and empathize about the difficulties of such endeavors. Some of the suggestions we offer in this section were borne out of our own personal experiences in the field and hope that these could help initiate these difficult conversations. We recognize that these suggestions are not exhaustive, nor would they always be applicable. We welcome APSAC members to also engage in this dialogue and offer other suggestions found to be helpful.

Understanding the damage of colorblind racism is only the first step, however. Teachers must become comfortable with using that knowledge to become

better teachers. This can be done in two ways. First, teachers need to engage critically with their own experiences of race and the inherent power dynamics. Assessing one’s own beliefs about race is a difficult yet necessary step to improving racial relations in schools. Teachers’ perceptions of race are altered by media portrayal and societal lessons regarding individuals of color. Given that the majority of teachers currently working in the field are White, a large proportion of teachers may be working off of a White supremacy-constructed narrative about people of color. None of the suggestions in this remaining section will be fruitful without deep self-reflection regarding one’s learned beliefs about race.

Teachers need to question and critically think about their own thought processes regarding race and how these thoughts may affect their interaction with children of color while teaching. Colorblind racial ideology promoted in our society has taught us to diminish the inequities faced by individuals of color to maintain White supremacy and privilege. White teachers need to take it upon themselves to identify and question racist ideals they have unknowingly internalized. Interfering with these thought patterns may allow for teachers to then begin altering their behaviors that are unknowingly racist. This is not easy; it requires serious critical thinking, empathy, and humility. White teachers need to reconcile with the fact that they have had racist thoughts, they have made racist choices, and they probably will again in the future. Accepting this and vowing to try to interfere with thoughts and behaviors is the only way to begin moving forward.

Once teachers have a better understanding of their own ideas and misconceptions about race, they need to then use this newfound approach to race and practice speaking about these issues. Thinking critically about race and speaking openly about it may help teachers better assess their own actions and how they may be racially influenced, creating a feedback loop (i.e., reflection encourages behavior, which then adds to opportunities for reflection, etc.). All children have questions about race, and all too often White teachers are out of their comfort zone when discussing race with White children—who

are accustomed to speaking about race in abstract terms—and children of color—who are accustomed to having a more realistic perspective about race and race relations.

These critical thinking practices are not limited to race. Teachers can also use this approach to better understand how maltreatment and experiences of trauma may alter a child's experiences in school. Implementing and improving trauma-informed practices relies on a teacher's ability to identify a child who has experienced trauma and how that trauma may interfere with their schooling (Loomis & Felt, 2020).

In the interest of addressing the needs of traumatized and marginalized children in schools, there are strategies teachers can apply to improve their responses to externalized behaviors to prevent harmful labeling of students as “dangerous” and promote their own emotional regulation during difficult exchanges with students. Not all strategies are created equal, however. Webb et al. (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of emotional regulation strategies (i.e., attentional deployment, cognitive change, response modulation domains) whose effectiveness was graded using experiential, behavioral, and physiological measures. As a broad domain, on the one hand, attentional deployment strategies such as encouraging concentration on or distraction away from an emotion were found to be overall ineffective at changing participants' experience, behavior, or physiological responses. On the other hand, strategies that encourage cognitive reappraisal had more consistent results at improving participants' emotional condition. Considering the result of this study in conjunction with the results presented by DeCuir-Gunby et al. (2020), we encourage teachers to engage in cognitive restructuring and reappraisal of their thought patterns when they interact with students of color who may have been traumatized in or outside of school. Approaching this exercise from a race-conscious perspective can have large implications to reframing how students and their behaviors are understood and responded to.

Often, the path of least resistance when topics of race and trauma arise can be found outside of ourselves. Not centralizing the influence of race and trauma in a classroom can no longer be a viable option for educators at all levels. Teachers must begin to challenge themselves and think critically about race and trauma and how their worldview and abilities to self-regulate impact their response to students who are different. Teachers are important change agents in the lives of children and can be an even more important ally in addressing systemic racism, especially in education. Having a sense of urgency to address issues of racism in schools can circumvent the cycle of racial injustice, create opportunities to prevent additional trauma, and provide a safe and supportive environment for learning. If our goal is to keep children safe in school, it begins with the leaders of the classroom, the teachers. Moving forward we would like teachers and other caregivers to reflect on the following questions posed by Adam Alvarez (Alvarez et al., 2016) to encourage reappraisal of thoughts, feelings, and action around the intersection of race, trauma, and education:

1. How does my race influence my work as a teacher with students, especially my students of color?
2. As a teacher, what is the effect of my race on my thinking, beliefs, actions, and decision making?
3. How do I, as a teacher, negotiate the power structure in my class to allow students to feel a sense of worth regardless of their background?
4. How do I situate and negotiate students' knowledge, experiences, expertise, and race with my own? (p. 36)

As members of the APSAC community, therefore, we should strive to use our expertise in trauma and commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion to work collaboratively with teachers and support the needs of children and families of color. In doing so, we can help ensure that schools remain a safe and supportive environment for students' growth, development, and learning.

About the Authors

Carlomagno C. Panlilio, PhD, is Assistant Professor in the Educational Psychology program and a faculty member with the Child Maltreatment Solutions Network at the Pennsylvania State University. His work looks at how early maltreatment experiences and other contextual factors impact children's learning-related processes responsible for later academic challenges. In addition, Dr. Panlilio's research involves the development and evaluation of trauma-informed practices in the classroom.

Charles Alvarado, MA, is a doctoral student in the Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education department at the Pennsylvania State University. He takes from his experiences in neuroscience and education, as a former middle-school science teacher, to research how childhood maltreatment affects students' attentional processing and language development.

Samantha Ellner, BA, is a doctoral student in the Educational Psychology, Counseling, and Special Education department at the Pennsylvania State University. She brings in her many years of experience having taught language arts at a language-based learning disability high school in Massachusetts. Her research focuses on how experiences of maltreatment affect language and reading abilities.



References

Race, Trauma, and the Education System

- Alvarez, A., Milner, H. R., & Delale-O'Connor, L. (2016). Race, trauma, and education: What educators need to know. In T. Husband (Ed.), *But I don't see color* (pp. 27–40). Sense Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6300-585-2_3
- Bonilla-Silva, E. (2017). *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America, fifth edition*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Borman, G. D., & Pyne, J. (2016). What if Coleman had known about stereotype threat? How social-psychological theory can help mitigate educational inequality. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 2(5), 164–185. <https://doi.org/10.7758/rsf.2016.2.5.08>
- Davies, P. T., & Martin, M. J. (2013). The reformulation of emotional security theory: The role of children's social defense in developmental psychopathology. *Development and Psychopathology*, 25(4 Pt 2), 1435–1454. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579413000709>
- DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., Allen, E. M., & Boone, J. K. (2020). Examining pre-service teachers' color-blind racial ideology, emotion regulation, and inflexibility with stigmatizing thoughts about race. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2020.101836>
- DeCuir-Gunby, J. T., & Williams, M. R. (2007). The impact of race and racism on students' emotions. In P. A. Schutz & R. Pekrun (Eds.), *Emotion in Education* (pp. 205–219). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-012372545-5/50013-7>
- Gilliam, W. S., Maupin, A. N., Reyes, C. R., Accavitti, M., & Shic, F. (2016, September 28). *Do early educators' implicit biases regarding sex and race relate to behavior expectations and recommendations of preschool expulsions and suspensions?* [Research brief]. Yale University Child Study Center.
- Gilliam, W. S., & Reyes, C. R. (2018). Teacher decision factors that lead to preschool expulsion: Scale development and preliminary validation of the preschool expulsion risk measure. *Infants and Young Children*, 31(2), 93–108. <https://doi.org/10.1097/IYC.0000000000000113>
- Kim, J., & Cicchetti, D. (2010). Longitudinal pathways linking child maltreatment, emotion regulation, peer relations, and psychopathology. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 51(6), 706–716. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2009.02202.x>
- Loomis, A.M., & Felt, F. (2020). Knowledge, skills, and self-reflection: Linking trauma training content to trauma-informed attitudes and stress in preschool teachers and staff. *School Mental Health*, 13, 101–113. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12310-020-09394-7>
- Nadal, K. L., Erazo, T., & King, R. (2019). Challenging definitions of psychological trauma: Connecting racial microaggressions and traumatic stress. *Journal for Social Action in Counseling & Psychology*, 11(2), 2–16. <https://doi.org/10.33043/JSACP.11.2.2-16>

References, cont.

- Owens, J., & McLanahan, S. S. (2020). Unpacking the drivers of racial disparities in school suspension and expulsion. *Social Forces*, 98(4), 1548–1577. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/soz095>
- Panlilio, C. C., Harring, J. R., Harden, B. J., Morrison, C. I., & Duncan, A. D. (2020). Heterogeneity in the dynamic arousal and modulation of fear in young foster children. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 116. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105199>
- Torino, G. C., Rivera, D. P., Capodilupo, C. M., Nadal, K. L., & Sue, D. W. (2018). Everything you wanted to know about microaggressions but didn't get a chance to ask. In G. C. Torino, D. P. Rivera, C. M. Capodilupo, K. L. Nadal, & Sue, D. W. (Eds.), *Microaggression theory: Influence and implications* (pp. 1–15). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119466642.ch1>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (USDHHS), Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2020). *Child maltreatment 2019*. Available from <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/research-data-technology/statistics-research/child-maltreatment>
- Weathers, E. S., Hollett, K. B., Mandel, Z. R., & Rickert, C. (2021). Absence unexcused: A systematic review on truancy. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 96(5), 540–564. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2021.1991696>
- Webb, T. L., Miles, E., & Sheeran, P. (2012). Dealing with feeling: A meta-analysis of the effectiveness of strategies derived from the process model of emotion regulation. *Psychological Bulletin*, 138(4), 775–808. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027600>