Teacher Education in the Contact Zone: The Integrity of Recruiting Educators of Color Within the Context of the Bad Character of Schools

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"They nod and smile, but I can tell that they are dismissing everything that I say."

"I've literally watched white women colleagues shield students from me with their bodies. I'm an educator too!"

"Following an evaluation from a white administrator, I was penalized for my deliberate and anti-racist choices about transitions and how I handled discipline with Black boys."

"My expertise was constantly questioned. I felt like my accent, rather than being viewed as an asset and evidence of my multilingualism, was seen as evidence of my lack of intelligence. I stopped speaking in meetings."

"I'm constantly being told I'm too close with my students."

The statements above represent composite refrains regularly shared by the experienced educators of color my research team and I have been interviewing over the course of the last three years.[1] In reviewing these interviews, I have been struck by the overwhelming lack of regard that these educators of

color are shown as professionals and as moral subjects. While it is reasonable to chalk their experiences up to anti-Black racism and White supremacy, that level of generality does not provide sufficient analytic resources to recognize and, ideally, intervene upon the moral nonrecognition experienced by some educators of color. By moral nonrecognition, I mean being disregarded as a moral subject, analogous to the ways that epistemic injustice disregards persons as knowers.

In this paper, I am going to make an intentionally provocative argument. It is one that captures a concern close to my heart and that has become even more profound as I proceed in this research. Here's the argument: the ongoing recruitment of teachers of color on the grounds of correcting a demographic imbalance may contribute to the bad character of US schools and the integrity of these efforts is suspect. I am arguing that these recruitment efforts should be read not only as a so-called demographic imperative, but that this demographic imperative is pursued with moral ends. The recruitment of educators of color is seen as a correction to institutions built upon and sustained by White supremacy. We recruiters hope that educators of color will better serve students of color, give White students more opportunities to learn from authorities in Black and Brown bodies, make curriculum and instructional practices more culturally-relevant or -sustaining, and reduce the kinds and amounts of disciplinary injustices visited upon the bodies and minds of students of color. Educators of color also seek moral ends; they often enter teaching with mission-driven purposes and view working in schools as an avenue for professional flourishing. I believe that given the overwhelming empirical evidence about the conditions of teaching for educators of color, the integrity of our recruiting efforts needs to be examined in light of the moral impact on those we recruit. How can we induct more educators of color in a profession that we know may impede their ability to flourish?[2] Are we contributing to the illusion of schools as democratic places when we recruit with the assumption that the new voices and perspectives of educators of color will change these places for the better?

This is an argument that I'm circumspect in making. I am a White teacher educator, and my small program boasts that over 50 percent of our certification candidates identify as people of color. We have been deliberate in creating the

conditions that attract and retain candidates of color. Yet my recent research gives me pause about my role in promoting a career that is likely to be fraught with situations that challenge not only these gifted individuals' intellect and energy, but their recognition as moral subjects. My argument is about looking at my culpability in the context of what seems like success.

I am interested in how the bad character of schools impacts the integrity of efforts to recruit educators of color. I am going to dwell in the uncomfortable space of this contact zone to consider what is at stake, especially for White teacher educators like me. I begin with empirical work that demonstrates how schools can be sites of what educational researcher Bettina Love calls "dark suffering."[3] Then, I turn to philosopher Chris Lebron's analysis of how institutions can have bad character. I apply his framing to show how schools' bad character perpetuates the moral nonrecognition of educators of color as institutional, not only interpersonal forms of racism. I draw on educational researcher Lisa Delpit's accounts of being silenced as a Black woman in her attempt to have a pedagogical dialogue with her White colleagues and the profound disregard that Shilpi Sinha and Shaireen Rasheed experienced when attempting to teach pre-service educators to think critically about approaches to teaching about race and difference. I argue that we should understand these experiences as a form of moral nonrecognition resulting from the bad character of schools, not *only* incidents of interpersonal racism or bias.

A few caveats before going on: I recognize the agency and intelligence of educators of color who enter the profession of teaching and the contexts of US public schools with deep awareness of the challenges that they will face on every level. I also recognize that there is great variation in the racial climates of individual schools, but my preliminary research suggests that in predominantly (and culturally) White institutions, these are differences in degree, not in kind. I'm not trying to engage in any kind of paternalism, but instead to interrogate the integrity of recruiting efforts, like mine, within the context of the bad character of public schools. I certainly want to build a teacher education program that attracts and supports educators of color. I also want to be wide awake to what educators of color may experience when they are employed.

SCHOOLS AS SITES OF "DARK SUFFERING"

When it comes to US public schools, a preponderance of evidence suggests that educators of color are not recognized as moral subjects. Philosopher Vanessa Carbonell has called this phenomenon "claimant injustice," akin to epistemic injustice.[4] I will be using the term "moral nonrecognition." In the United States, the effort to recruit educators of color has been numerically successful, even though the percentage of teachers of color has not reached parity with the student population.[5] The percentage of educators of color hired across the US has increased by 100 percent in the last 30 years.[6] However, educators of color leave teaching at significantly higher rates than their White counterparts.[7]

The statistic that educators of color leave at higher rates is worth investigating. Educators of color regularly report *higher* levels of commitment to the profession than their White colleagues and they cite substantial justice-oriented purposes for entering the profession. Many studies, that will be addressed in the next section, have shown that educators of color leave due to racially inhospitable, and sometimes toxic, environments. My research on teacher demoralization shows that we need to take teachers' moral and ethical concerns into account when examining their troubles with their work.[8] I am extending my research to argue that one of the moral and ethical challenges that some educators of color encounter is *simply being recognized as a moral subject.*

Research points to various explanations for the higher rates of attrition for educators of color, all of which are compelling. Educators of color may have accrued more debt in their schooling and have more financial responsibilities to their families. As a result, the low pay of teaching, relative to the starting salaries of jobs with similar educational requirements and responsibilities, could be a barrier to persistence. Studies have also shown that educators of color tend to work in (and persist longer in) higher-need schools where leadership is often volatile and schools chaotic. This accounting would also be incomplete without referencing the history of thousands of Black teachers losing their jobs following *Brown v Board of Education* and the more recent replacement of experienced Black teachers with younger, whiter teachers in places such as New Orleans due to so-called reform efforts.[9]

Educational researcher Bettina Love provides a wide-ranging set of examples of how White supremacy impedes the life and learning of people of color in schools (students and staff), from "no-excuses" reforms that target dark bodies to stereotypes that pit people of color against each other.[10] She explains, "What I am describing is a life of exhaustion, a life of doubt, a life of state-sanctioned violence, and a life consumed with the objective of *surviving*."[11] She explains that schools, as places where White supremacy is the norm, are sites of "dark suffering."[12] Further evidence of this suffering can be found from numerous sources including the Education Trust's report on Black and Latinx teachers, Marcos Pizarro and Rita Kohli's work on racial battle fatigue in schools, and Erikca Brown's study of African American teachers' experiences with microaggressions, just to name a few.[13]

To Love's powerful list of the causes of what she calls "dark suffering" in schools, I want to add the experience of demoralization. I have defined demoralization as "consistent and persistent frustrations in accessing the moral rewards of teaching."[14] These moral rewards capture the moral (other- and craft -regarding) and ethical (personal flourishing) dimensions of the goods the practice of teaching can offer. Interviewing educators of color has led me to believe that this definition needs to be expanded to include moral nonrecognition. The moral nonrecognition of educators of color in schools should be understood as institutional not simply interpersonal.

THE BAD CHARACTER OF SCHOOLS

Philosopher Chris Lebron makes the case that, like people, institutions can have "bad character."[15] He says, "In view of the basic values of democracy [fairness and equality, for instance], institutions display bad character when: (1) the distinctly and systematically marginalize some citizens; (2) and do so under the auspices of and sometimes in the name of democratic values."[16] While we might normally think only individuals are capable of possessing character, Lebron argues that institutions act upon us and that these actions are guided by institutional dispositions. These dispositions have been shaped over time by those who have had power (i.e., White men) and thus become part of the institution's operating logic. For instance, schools are often disposed to place

Black students in a lower academic track, regardless of their demonstrated abilities. Schools are disposed to disproportionately suspend and expel Black and Brown students. And, as we have seen, schools are disposed to be inhospitable places for educators of color to work. Yes, individuals are behind decisions and climates, but they thrive in and cohere into a logic (think: "this is how it's always been done") in the institutional context of schools.

Lebron compares institutions with bad character to individuals with bad character. For instance, we would regard a person who claims to be trustworthy, but consistently violates confidences, as having bad character. Likewise, Lebron claims that institutions that claim to be democratic [promoting fairness and equality], but consistently produce undemocratic results, can be said to possess bad character. This designation of bad character enables us to better understand the magnitude and location of harm when institutions "carry offensive social practices on account of their historical construction that tends to reflect and embody asymmetrical group relations" when they putatively promote democratic aims.[17] We cannot simply chalk up these effects (lower track placements, overrepresentation in discipline, disproportional exit from the profession) to the aggregation of the racist acts of individuals. In these cases, systemic racism is a reasonable indictment, but one that Lebron believes requires sharpening. His account of the bad character of institutions provides an analysis not just of the foreground effects of racism embedded in institutions, but the reproduction of beliefs about the social value of groups that operates in the background.

Many of us in education might understand these background operations as what we would call the hidden curriculum. All institutions educate, not just schools. Most institutions, explains Lebron, depend on hierarchy and these hierarchies will tend to reflect what is valued by the institution, for instance, profit or a particular kind of skill. The racialized context of the US has warped institutions; the hierarchy represents not only *what* is valued, but *who* is valued. He says, "We in very large part learn our socio-normative lessons from the institutional regimes in which we find ourselves."[18] The lessons we learn about our and others' value much depend upon our location in the social hierarchy.

Years of exposure to the bad character of schools has enabled those

of us who are White to learn that Black and Brown bodies are of little moral consequence. They can be relegated to the lower academic tracks, removed from school, and pushed out of the teaching profession. Because we already occupy these positions of power in the institution, we engage not only in gatekeeping, but also demand assimilation from those we let through. These are the effects of systemic racism, but they are also evidence of bad character. Educators of color are being wooed by teacher education programs like mine, universities, and school districts, with the promise that their presence will be an enactment of democratic transformation. Yet, they may learn the socio-normative lesson that they are disregarded as moral subjects in the places that sought out to be "better" by hiring them. The bad character of schools can be profoundly damaging, morally and otherwise.

Despite making good on purported values of making schools better places by hiring educators of color, they remain places where educators of color struggle to flourish. Lebron's formulation of institutional bad character provides some explanation for how racism endures without self-avowed racists and in the absence of overtly racist acts. Institutions are learning environments that make actions legible based on the moral value assigned to the person. After years of learning in institutions of bad character, a distorted sense of self may emerge. One lesson we learn may enable White educators to fail to recognize our colleagues of color as moral subjects while retaining a sense of our intrinsic goodness. Another lesson would allow my successful recruitment of educators of color to be altogether praiseworthy. This personal accounting needs to be complicated. For educators of color, this distortion might come from the damage caused by moral nonrecognition.

THE DAMAGE OF MORAL NONRECOGNITION

A familiar, and still relevant (despite being thirty-five years old), example of moral nonrecognition is Lisa Delpit's analysis of her experiences as a Black woman teacher trying to convey the value of direct literacy instruction to her White colleagues committed to a whole language approach.[19] The pedagogical concerns she raises with her colleagues are not solely about the effectiveness or efficiency of pedagogical methods. Delpit raises clear moral concerns about

what Black children deserve from schools and indicts White teachers' limited knowledge of their students' cultures.

Yet, Delpit's moral indictment cuts even deeper and is amplified by the resounding forms of recognition she received from her moral community of Black educators, documented in "The Silenced Dialogue": White teachers are not giving Black teachers the moral recognition they deserve.[20] Delpit's article demonstrates the burden carried by a Black teacher in trying to advocate for the wellbeing of students. We might describe this kind of advocacy as a virtue, perhaps as conscientiousness. Yet, the conditions of the work render engaging in this kind of advocacy potentially detrimental to Delpit. Nonetheless, we might laud Delpit for her steadfastness in speaking up for Black children, even as it comes with substantial costs – she is silenced by White colleagues, has her experience and expertise questioned and must navigate "bitterness and resent-ment" in her chosen field.[21] Rather than being recognized as conscientious, her ability to flourish has been impeded.

Delpit faces several challenges in her attempt to engage in good work that could result in demoralization. In her professional role, she attempts to do what is best for students and to provide them with the quality of education she believes they deserve. This is her moral commitment to the work. She also strives to be the best version of herself in her role that satisfies her intellectual and creative potential, among others. This is her ethical motivation for the work. In each of these normative aims, she is frustrated. Delpit does not report that she and her colleagues engaged in a rousing debate about literacy methods. Instead, she calls to be recognized as a "rational being."

Delpit pleads for her White colleagues sustain pedagogical dialogues with their Black colleagues to better recognize their sound and moral reasoning. Delpit says,

> We must believe that people are *rational beings*, and
> therefore always act rationally. We may not understand their
> rationales, but that in no way militates against the existence
> of these rationales or reduces our responsibility to attempt to

apprehend them…[W]e must learn to be vulnerable enough to allow our world to turn upside down in order to allow the realities of others to edge themselves into our consciousness.[22]

Delpit, like many of the educators of color my research team and I have interviewed, faces moral nonrecognition while attempting to engage in good work. Likely, the White teachers represented in this scenario would be quick, and earnest, in their rejection of Delpit's moral claims. Following Lebron, we might understand her inability to be heard as the background effect of the social valuation promoted by the institution.

Delpit faces a nearly insurmountable obstacle when attempting to offer an institutional critique if she is not regarded as a person worthy of moral recognition. A deracialized interpretation of Delpit's experience might portray her inability to transform reading instruction as one that is somewhat universal; teachers' voices and expertise are devalued and that their concerns are regularly misrecognized by leaders and policymakers as crudely self-interested. Yet, Delpit's account insists that we address her racialized experience. I also suggest that the moral lessons learned in schools create the conditions for White teachers to disregard Delpit. Her challenge is not only interpersonal; it is institutional.

A more recent example of this moral nonrecognition appears in philosophers of education Shilpi Sinha and Shaireen Rasheed's article "Journeying Toward Transformative Teaching in the Age of Alternative Facts and Re-Ascendant Ethnic and Racial Prejudice."[23] This reflective analysis examines their attempts to develop critical consciousness about racism, positionality, and privilege in the context of postmodernism with a class of mostly White, upper middle class pre-service teachers.[24]

Shilpi had designed her class with the aim of helping these future educators engage ethically when presented with the "felt weight" of the other.[25] Yet, in the midst of Shaireen's guest presentation on how to integrate diverse perspectives into the curriculum, a White student walks out in the middle of the class. Many others are visibly and audibly resistant, in fact, disrespectful. Even with deliberate scaffolding by Shilpi, many members of class seem to

demonstrate little concern for the course material, but even less regard for the moral subjectivity of the instructors.

The bad character of schools is on full display in their account. Even with widespread institutional expectations to teach "diversity" to aspiring educators (they were not going rogue), the careful and deliberate planning described by the instructors may reveal the risks they anticipated and the challenges they may have already experienced as educators of color. The institution of the school asks the impossible from them; to be responsible for the institution's moral mission (critical thinking, respectful interchange) in an institutional context where they may not be accorded moral recognition. The students' unthinkable actions were legible within an institution that accords lower value to Black and Brown bodies. These are not only instances of interpersonal disregard; they are institutionalized.

CONCLUSION

My initial analysis of the moral and ethical concerns of educators of color enabled me to recognize that my definition of demoralization ("consistent and persistent frustrations in accessing the moral rewards of teaching") was incomplete. I needed to include moral nonrecognition. Previously, I have argued that demoralization can be caused when teachers' moral claims are not recognized as moral.[26] Yet, I am making a stronger case that moral nonrecognition cuts more deeply. For some educators of color, I have found that it is not only that their claims are not recognized as moral; *they* are disregarded as a moral subject.

In a recent National Education Policy Center report, Thomas Philip and Anthony Brown warn that without concomitant transformation of schools, recruitment of educators of color alone will replicate an anti-democratic cycle of pseudo-reform.[27] My inquiry has been to lay the groundwork to examine the ways in which I might contribute to the bad character of schools. Am I implicitly touting schools' democratic potential while recruiting educators of color into institutions resistant to transformation? I need to be wary of my seeming successes and think about how to proceed with integrity. In the name of making schools more demographically representative, what is the integrity

of recruiting more educators of color when we know that a lesson they may learn is that they are morally inconsequential? The bad character of schools is manifest in the concomitant efforts to recruit educators of color into spaces that, for many, are inhospitable at best. Teaching may paradoxically impede the ability to flourish for educators of color, in a profession that offers the possibility of flourishing.

Thirty-five years ago, Delpit was hopeful that dialogue with White colleagues could transform these institutions to uphold the promise of the democratic ideal. Her hope seems to have vanished. Published in 2019, before the US capitol attack on January 6, 2020, Delpit writes in *Teaching When the World Is On Fire* that the world "feels more frightening now" compared to the 1960s when she was a child. "[T]he federal government at least gave lip service--and occasionally support--to the battles waged by its darker citizens...Today, our children can have no reassurance that the nation has a moral high ground... What does it mean when their fellow countrymen join in the victimization with no censure from the highest office of the land?"[28]

In the context of the White supremacy that permeates US public schools, the recruitment of educators of color without an alteration in the moral recognition of educators of color will perpetuate the bad character of these institutions. Given the forms of "dark suffering" to which educators of color are subjected, what are our responsibilities as teacher educators, hiring administrators, and colleagues? How do we transform the bad character of schools? The bad character of institutions presents "trouble for democratic integrity" but also the integrity of our endeavors within that larger project, such as teacher education.[29] For those of us who identify as White and derive privilege from our whiteness, we have much work to do in the friction of contact zones.

Communication alone is insufficient to rectify the bad character of schools. Those of us who recruit educators of color to enter these troubled spaces need to examine our roles and responsibilities much more critically. One place to start is to address the pedagogical limitations on reflective communication as a tool for transforming racialized patterns of power that Sinha and Rasheed demonstrate so brilliantly and brutally.[30] Another is to consider our responsibil-

ities to the educators of color we recruit with the hope of transforming places of bad character. This is the friction of the contact zone.

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1 The research team includes Keith Eric Benson, Julia Hazel, Alberto Morales, Dave Stieber, and Darryl Yong. This paper represents my thinking and I take sole responsibility for the argument. However, I could not do this work without the support and insights of the team.

2 It's right to ask this question about inducting any teacher into the profession right now, but this paper focuses on the distinctive features of recruiting educators of color.

3 Bettina L. Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019), 15.

4 Vanessa Carbonell, "Social Constraints on Moral Address," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research XCVIII*, no. 1 (2019): 167-189.

5 Students of color comprise over 50% of the student population in the United States, but only 20% of teachers are educators of color. Desiree Carver-Thomas, *Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2018).

6 Richard Ingersoll, Henry May, and Greg Collins, *Minority Teacher Recruitment, Employment, and Retention: 1987 to 2013.* (Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute, 2017), 23.

7 Ingersoll, May, and Collins, 7.

8 Doris A. Santoro, *Demoralized: Why Teachers Leave the Profession They Love and How They Can Stay* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2018).

9 See Robert Floden, Amy Stephens, and Layne Scherer, eds., *Changing Expectations for the K-12 Teacher Workforce: Policies, Preservice Education, Professional Development, and the Workplace* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2020). In response to criticisms, Teach for America shifted its recruiting practices and now heavily draws on HCBUs. Candidates of color now make up 50% of its teaching corps. The impact of TFA is profound in some localities and infinitesimal when thinking nationally.

10 Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive.*

11 Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive.*

12 Love, *We Want to Do More Than Survive.*

13 Davis Dixon, Ashley Griffin, and Mark Teoh. "If You Listen, We Will Stay: Why Teachers of Color Leave and How to Disrupt Teacher Turnover," *The Education Trust & Teach Plus*, Washington, DC, (2019); Marcos Pizarro and Rita Kohli, "'I Stopped Sleeping': Teachers of Color and the Impact of Racial Battle Fatigue," *Urban Education*

55, no. 7 (2018): 967-991; Ericka Brown, "African American Techers' Experiences with Racial Micro-Aggressions," *Educational Studies 55*, no. 2 (2019): 180-196.

14 Doris A. Santoro, "Good Teaching in Difficult Times: Demoralization in the Pursuit of Good Work," *American Journal of Education* 188, no. 1 (2011): 1-23, 3.

15 Christopher J. Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

16 Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame,* 61.

17 Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame,* 72.

18 Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame,* 96.

19 Lisa A. Delpit, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator," *Harvard Educational Review* 56, no. 4 (1986): 379-385. Briefly, Delpit is concerned that the "whole language" approach promoted by her colleagues as liberatory does not produce liberatory results in their predominantly Black student population. She suggests that the students require more direct literacy instruction to produce the desired results given their academic needs based on their social location and to offer them culturally-relevant pedagogy.

20 Lisa A. Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (1988): 280-298.

21 Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue," 282.

22 Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue," 297 (emphasis added).

23 Shilpi Sinha and Shaireen Rasheed, "Journeying Toward Transformative Teaching in the Age of Alternative Facts and Re-Ascendant Ethnic and Racial Prejudice," *Teachers College Record* 122, no. 4 (2020): 1-26.

24 In this reflection, Sinha and Rasheed refer to themselves by their first names in the recounting of the class activities. They do not discuss their racial identities in this article but do elsewhere.

25 Sinha & Rasheed, "Journeying Toward Transformative Teaching," 6.

26 Doris A. Santoro, "Cassandra in the Classroom: Teaching and Moral Madness," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 36, no. 1 (2017): 49-60.

27 Thomas M. Philip and Anthony L. Brown, *We All Want More Teachers of Color, Right?: Concerns about the Emergent Consensus.* (Boulder, CO: National Education Policy Center, 2020). http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/diversity.

28 Lisa Delpit, "Introduction," in *Teaching When the World Is on Fire,* ed. Lisa Delpit (New York: The New Press, 2019): xi-xxii, xii.

29 Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame,* 104.

30 Sinha and Rasheed, "Journeying Toward Transformative Teaching," 15-19.