

# “Why Doesn't Anybody Want To Teach Us?” Concerns Of Teaching Urban Students

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## Abstract

Teaching Students of Color is a concern of current and future K-12 educators mainly due to lack of exposure to students of this demographic. Using a critical race lens, this paper aims to unpack the word “urban,” delving into various connotative interpretations of the term. Finally, anti-racist solutions will be proposed to defy negative stereotypes about urban students and schools.

**Keywords:** Urban Education, Abolitionist teaching, Education, anti-racist

## 1. Introduction

The teacher shortage is a national issue that receives constant attention. However, the more glaring problem is that the nation does not license enough Teachers of Color. Findings from a previous study demonstrated that many teacher education candidates have completed their K-12 educational career having 0-2 Teachers of Color, signifying that, for most students, majority of their teachers have been white throughout their educations<sup>1</sup>. This finding led to questioning regarding how this lack of representation impacts the curriculum and how content is taught. I went on to explore what prompted this shortage of Teachers of Color and found the 1954 decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* as a major influencer. While there are concerted efforts in place to reduce the teacher shortage in general, such as removing entrance exams, what is effectively being done to reduce the teacher shortage in districts composed of urban Students of Color (the areas possessing the greatest need).

## 2. Literature Review

After the *Brown* decision, 38,000 Black teachers were displaced as a result of integration. This realization led to the investigation of how that displacement impacted future potential Teachers of Color. Milner discusses the importance of teachers being intentional in relationship building with students, but we often see a disconnect between teachers and students of different backgrounds. With over 80% of the teaching force being white, middle class women<sup>1</sup> within an ever-evolving diverse population of students—how intentional are teachers being in their relationship development with students, particularly in urban settings? Previous research suggests that misconceptions and stereotypes often get in the way of relationship building, leading to low expectations for our Students of Color<sup>2</sup>.

Misconceptions and stereotypes stem from racist frameworks that trickle into the curriculum and the classroom. Because of the lack of teacher diversity, content taught to students is most often centered in whiteness<sup>3</sup>. Critiquing whiteness creates a more equitable classroom. All teachers, but specifically teachers in urban settings, must intentionally attempt to dismantle structures of whiteness through anti-racist teaching so that all students thrive<sup>4</sup>.

Definitions of urban education vary. Some suggest urban refers to being within the confines of a city, while others define it to mean that schools (and their students) have urban-like characteristics. This setting is almost always described using negative and subordinate language and creating a hierarchy through “othering.” What is definitive regarding urban schools is that they have higher teacher attrition, are often subjected to using outdated materials, and employ the most unqualified teachers; all of these factors may hinder student academic growth when compared to their non-urban peers<sup>5</sup>. However, it is important to note that urban students have unique gifts to offer the classroom and varying needs<sup>6</sup> that are unique, not monolithic.

An early example of “othering” was expressed by black children during the classic Doll Test Experiment. The Doll Test was created by Kenneth and Mamie Clark and was instrumental in the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. The Clarks presented black children with dolls that only differed in skin color. One doll was black; the other doll was white. Children were asked questions about the doll’s character and looks (which doll is nice, pretty, etc.). The self-depiction of inferiority was a groundbreaking example of the effects of racism for all children demonstrated a preference for the white doll, illustrating internalized racism on the part of the Black children<sup>1</sup>.

As discovered in the Doll Test of the 1940s, and as we currently witness protests in response to racism in 2020, it is time to acknowledge the racism that still exists in education. As stated by DiAngelo<sup>7</sup>, racism is a “Racial group’s prejudice backed by legal authority and institutional control”. Racism is a system of ideas backed with law to keep marginalized groups oppressed. Racism within a school’s context, according to Carter Andrews<sup>8</sup> is referred to as institutional racism, “Institutional racism represents discriminatory treatment, unfair policies, and inequitable opportunities based on race and produced and perpetuated by institutions (like schools)”.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

The approach to the upcoming analysis of urban-area, teacher avoidance is rooted in Critical Race Theory (CRT), Abolitionist Teaching, and Milner’s<sup>2, 6, 9, 10</sup> analyses of urban education. This research is focused particularly on how race relates to teacher candidates and their racialized experiences and how that impacts how they interact with Students of Color. Milner<sup>9</sup> describes the differences in school discipline as categorized by race; urban students are more often disciplined subjectively (i.e., sent to the office for being “too loud” and “disrespectful”), whereas white students are disciplined objectively through means that are more measurable and clear (being 10 minutes late to class). The theory of abolitionist teaching<sup>4</sup> also informs this study. Love<sup>4</sup> argues that abolitionist teaching requires all teachers to be advocates and to take a stand for justice, which encourages teachers to make tangible changes in their communities and deconstruct systems that leave themselves and their students oppressed.

## **4. Methods**

### **4.1 Survey**

Data was collected from an original survey that was distributed electronically to teacher education candidates at a university in Illinois. The survey was collaboratively designed by my research mentor, Dr. Jennifer Martin, and me. The questions are centered on the establishment of biases, the influence of media, and the types of students candidates were comfortable teaching in their future classrooms, including their perceptions of the word “urban.” The final question of the survey asked if participants would be willing to participate in a focus group to engage in a more in-depth conversation regarding the survey topics. (See Appendix for survey questions.)

### **4.2 Participants**

Forty people completed the survey. The survey respondents were aged twenty-one through fifty-six. All but seventeen of the respondents identified as white. The seventeen who did not identify as white did not select a demographic category for race. Seventeen of the respondents were secondary teacher education candidates. Fourteen were elementary candidates. The remaining participant elected not to identify their program.

### 4.3 Focus Group

Volunteers signed up for two focus groups, held approximately a week apart. The first focus group lasted one hour. There were five participants in the first focus group session. All participants selected a pseudonym. Lisa is a white female teacher with nine years of teaching experience at a local high school. Megan is a white female recent teacher education graduate who is teaching at an alternative school high school. John and Randal are both white males and seniors in the teacher education program. Merc is an African American female and newly-admitted teacher education student.

During the sessions, participants were immersed in discussions of race. The second session addressed biases through the Harvard Implicit Bias Test. Participants also watched a short video<sup>11</sup> where young black girls discuss feelings of imposed inadequacy. The focus group participants then discussed their feelings and experiences regarding race, stereotypes, and fears through critical discussion.

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Survey Results

In congruence with national trends, the survey results showed that the majority of our teacher education candidates are white. It was interesting to note that: when respondents were asked if they would consider their educational career are racially diverse, 78% responded that they would not.

Survey respondents varied in their motivation for teaching. Fifty-two percent of respondents indicated that they are passionate about teaching and 26% expressed that they want to give back to the less fortunate. While it is a benefit having the privilege of being able to give to those in need, this response led me to wonder how teacher candidates envisioned those “less fortunate.” Do the less fortunate students look like them or are the less fortunate Students of Color? Wanting to give back to less fortunate students led me to think about the savior complex, which is a theme that will be discussed in the following sections.

Results also indicated that participants had very little exposure to Teachers and Peers of Color. Most respondents had little classroom interaction with Peers of Color; over half reporting to have had five or fewer Peers of Color in high school, and over 75% reporting having two or fewer K-12 Teachers of Color. Regarding the qualitative sections of the survey, I found the following themes: representation, defining urban, and fear of urban. My analyses of these themes are presented below.

### 5.2 Representation

When asked the question: “How many teachers of color did you had as a K-12 student?” Forty-one percent of respondents reported that they had zero Teachers of Color, 1-2 = 36% reported that they had 1-2 Teachers of Color, and 14% of respondents had 3-4 Teachers of Color. When asked the question, “Would you be comfortable teaching in an urban school?” None percent reported that they would not, and 91% reported that they would (all of these respondents were white). Surprisingly, the majority of the survey respondents indicated that they would be willing to teach in an urban school, but this finding was not evident in the qualitative survey comments or the focus groups. Regardless of the apparent deficit mindsets and cultural stereotypes, teacher candidates claim to have a desire to teach in urban settings. The idea that student teachers want to teach in this setting is surprisingly promising. As one participant stated, “*We have one black teacher and you know what his job is? He's in charge of In-House. He's a Football coach, he's young, he's great... but he's in in-house. So, what do kids naturally associate? This is where all the bad kids go.*”

### 5.3 Theme: Defining Urban

Results suggest that survey respondents have passively racist thoughts, suggesting unconscious biases and deficit mindsets about Students of Color (see Figure 1). It appears that the respondents want to save urban students, which supports the White Savior Complex, or the idea that white people are needed to rescue People of Color. This is problematic because it shows that these respondents do not see the benefits of growing up in an urban setting; instead,

they view it as a disadvantage from which students need to be saved. Some respondents also suggest that Black students are dangerous and low achieving.

<b>Response</b>	<b>Demographic Information</b>
<i>Poor, diverse, loud, busy, gangs, fighting, low achieving, low SES, overcrowding, and mostly non-white communities, Lack of discipline, rowdy, really loud classrooms, students threatening teachers, lack of support for teachers, security guards walking teachers to their cars ,etc., violence is a daily occurrence, metal detectors are needed to keep out weapons , more students means more anonymity</i>	White
<i>Smart in different ways than other kids, skeptical of authority, needing guidance and encouragement, lots of potential - same as other students in non-urban schools.</i>	White
<i>Historically, more socially bold and less disciplined but rural students are rapidly shifting toward this behavior</i>	White

Figure 1: Survey Theme: Defining Urban

As depicted in Figure 1, survey respondents described their definition of urban students.

#### 5.4 Theme: Fears

Results indicate that most respondents are afraid of teaching urban students. Unfortunately, this is not an uncommon fear. Being fearful of Children of Color has much to do with the biases held against them. People may feel that Black children are aggressive, disrespectful, and appear older than their actual age<sup>12</sup>. Because of this, there is often less patience and understanding when it comes to “disciplining” Children of Color in the classroom. Teacher candidates must submerge themselves in the culture of their students to avoid falling into biased behavior.

<b>Response</b>	<b>Demographic Information</b>
<i>Possible increased violence of some types.</i>	White
<i>Risks of violence, idea that students will come from harder backgrounds to teach.</i>	White
<i>Because my personal experience in education was limited to a Caucasian bubble, I would approach an urban educational experience with much unknown</i>	White
<i>The feeling of being out of place</i>	White
<i>Having to teach kids that come from radically different backgrounds than my own. Being in an environment that I have not had much experience with.</i>	White

Figure 2: Survey Theme: Fears

As depicted in Figure 2, teacher candidates expressed internal fears teaching children of color.

#### 5.4 Focus Group Results

The focus group data was divided into several themes, including inequitable realities, cultural stereotypes, and internalized racism. Some of these themes were also evident in the survey results.

Theme: inequitable realities. One of our focus group participants shared a story of how she was willing to fight to get out of an urban pre-clinical placement because of where she was assigned to go. A focus group participant explained how, at a previous institution, a student was so fearful of teaching Black children that her father called the placement coordinator to demand that she be excused from going, which the university ultimately honored.

During the focus groups, we discussed being the sole person of a particular race in the room. The Black participants had numerous examples to share, whereas the participants who identified as white did not. Working through this idea was eye-opening for one participant in particular. She described how she now knows how that feels after taking her first job as a teacher. Considering Students of Color in predominately white classrooms, those students will be expected to code-switch. They must understand the culture of power and adapt in order to be successful in their setting. People expect these students to conform to the culture of their location regardless of their comfort in doing so. Students

may feel that they are out of place and do not relate to their peers and/or teachers. Teacher candidates and teachers must work through their discomfort and apprehension to teach all students.

<b>Response</b>	<b>Demographic Information</b>
<i>Black parents who need to prepare their children for racism in a racist world and white parents don't have to have these conversations about how to protect themselves in the same way. -Mart</i>	Professor, Teacher Education, white, female
<i>Nobody warned me that I was going to be in the minority. -Lisa</i>	High school special ed. Teacher, white female
<i>There were like 2500 students and maybe 10 were black...I did have at least some anxiousness about being in a completely alien setting. -John</i>	College senior, Teacher Education Department, white, male
<i>Why doesn't anybody want to teach us? The teachers don't want to be here so why should I? Yeah, like what's wrong with me? -Merc</i>	College student, newly- admitted, Teacher Education Department, black, female

Figure 3: Focus Group Theme: Inequitable Realities

As depicted in Figure 3, respondents explained the different realities of students of colored compared to their white peers.

### 5.5 Theme: Cultural Stereotypes

Responses explained the stereotypes participants held regarding Students of Color. The most common response was that students viewed Black students as being louder than others. Through discussions in the focus groups, participants explained how the media's depiction of Black people is what primarily shapes their beliefs.

Cultural stereotypes are dangerous but particularly dangerous for educators. Stereotypes are generalizations about a group. Often the generalizations are incorrect, but they work in allowing one to make a swift decision about unfamiliar people. One of the most common stereotypes regarding Black people is comparing them to primates. According to Goff et al<sup>12</sup>, “. . . there is a long tradition of peoples of African descent being likened to nonhuman primates. . .”. The issue is that comparing blacks to animals (apes) dehumanizes. Once others no longer view Blacks as people, the harm is often enacted.

<b>Response</b>	<b>Demographic Information</b>
<i>You know they're just loud and it sounds like they're yelling.</i>	High school special ed. Teacher, white female- Lisa
<i>The cultural stereotype is that black people are louder but if we sort of unpack that it, tends to be a more participatory culture like with the history of call-and-response.</i>	Professor, Teacher Education, white, female -Mart
<i>I think that the African American population is more outgoing and they are more loud. And I think that intimidated me a little bit. When I walked into the classroom I was like are they yelling at me or they talking to me? Like I felt like I was being yelled at a lot. That was one of things I had to get used to.</i>	Alternative high school teacher, white female- Megan

Figure 4. Focus Group Theme: Cultural Stereotypes

As depicted in Figure 4, survey respondents discussed stereotypes as they pertain to students of color.

The focus groups described how the media shapes most students' understanding of urban students since most of them have no experience with people outside of their circle; they base their knowledge of others on what they see in the media.

## 5.6 Theme: Internalized Racism

My recreation of the 1947 Doll Test, by Dr. Kenneth and Mamie Clark, revealed similar results to those of over seventy years ago. I asked Black children to hold up the doll that fit the described trait. I asked a four-year-old which doll was pretty, good, etc. All of the “good” traits she associated with the white doll, but she realized that she looked like more like the Black doll. As one participant stated, “*She’s the pretty one [white doll] and the smart one [white doll] and the nice one [white doll], the four year old responded. But you look like this one [black doll],*” I reminded the child.

The idea of internalized racism within Students of Color is important for teachers to recognize. Teachers must be attentive to this idea and work to encourage student self-love and appreciation. Because of racism in society, it not uncommon for some students to internalize racist beliefs, and to believe that they are “. . . intellectually inadequate. . . self-depreciate and look down on themselves, their culture and their community<sup>13</sup>”. It is also not uncommon for Black students to not learn about their communities in the classroom, which can contribute to these feelings of inadequacy. Often, if it is discussed, Black culture is taught only from places of trauma and despair. Teachers need to consider these notions when creating curriculum. Teachers must actively counter negative perspectives through content that is taught in class.

## 6. Overall Conclusions

*I think about all the times I've been at tables or sat at a room with white people and somebody said something, and you let it slide even though you don't agree with it. So that's what I've been working at personally to change—Megan*

The survey and the focus groups demonstrated the fears that teachers and candidates have about teaching Students of Color. Both showed that the fears are a result of not having People of Color in their lives. The responses indicate that the adults in students’ circles have a tremendous impact on their development. According to the Department of Education<sup>14</sup>, “While students of color are expected to make up 56 percent of the student population by 2024, the elementary and secondary educator workforce is still overwhelmingly white”. The increased number of Students of Color requires an increase in Teachers of Color. Representation in schools is vital. Students may not be as receptive when teachers come from different backgrounds. While diversity is important and a major component of one’s educational experience, students may feel guidance holds more weight coming from someone with a similar background.

The data gathered from the survey indicate that teacher candidates need exposure to students in environments other than their own. Teacher education programs should implement focus groups where teacher candidates are open and candid about their experiences with race/racism or lack thereof. Teacher candidates need to relinquish as many preconceived notions and stereotypes in order to hold high expectations for all students and to refrain from deficit-based thinking. This model is workable and provides a benefit to educators and the students they will encounter. The focus group participants explained how the focus groups helped them come to terms with misconceptions they held and helped them become aware of the fears they held. Teacher candidates left the sessions hopeful, more informed, and ready to help students as opposed to feeling that they needed “saving.” They were prepared to continue to unpack unconscious biases and were less fearful of Students of Color.

It is important for universities to push for the recruitment of more Teachers of Color. Students need to see others who look like them in positions of power within schools. It helps students to feel a sense of belonging. The lack of Teachers of Color leaves room for the perpetuation of colorblind and racist ideologies and practices in classrooms and schools. Teacher candidates need to be immersed in content that covers the histories and daily experiences of people who do not fit into their circles of reference.

Teachers and teacher candidates must reflectively consider where they are regarding racism and whiteness, then must actively engage themselves and their students in conversations about race and diversity. Students learn through modeling. Teachers must demonstrate what stereotypes, bias, and racism look like as they work through shifting mindsets.

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