

ABSTRACT

DE LA TORRE, CORINA. Race, Education, And Systemic Barriers: Examining the Psychological and Structural Dimensions of Educational Inequity. (Under the direction of Dr. Christy Byrd, Dr. DeLeon Gray, Dr. Samantha Marshall, and Dr. Jennifer Ayscue).

This dissertation examines the racial and ethnic experiences of students of color within the U.S. public education system, with particular emphasis on Latine students, through three interconnected papers that use critical race theory as a unifying framework. The research bridges educational psychology and policy to address systemic racial inequities in public school education.

The first paper analyzes survey data from 274 Latine adolescents to investigate how school socialization practices and color-blind attitudes influence students' interest in and perceived importance of school. Findings reveal that cultural promotion positively predicts both outcomes, while color-blind approaches negatively impact students' valuing of education, validating CRT's critique that colorblindness maintains inequitable structures.

The second paper reimagines educational psychology theories through a cultural lens, critiquing how traditional frameworks fail to account for diverse cultural perspectives. It provides concrete strategies for creating "race-reimagined" educational psychology courses to prepare pre-service teachers for increasingly diverse classrooms.

The third paper examines intensifying racial resegregation in North Carolina public schools through a policy brief analyzing three decades of enrollment data. It reveals divergent segregation patterns between rural and urban districts and offers policy recommendations to support desegregation efforts.

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Race, Education, And Systemic Barriers: Examining the Psychological and Structural
Dimensions of Educational Inequity

by
Corina De La Torre

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APPROVED BY:

Dr. Christy Byrd
Committee Chair

Dr. DeLeon Gray

Dr. Samantha Marshall

Dr. Jennifer Ayscue

BIOGRAPHY

Corina De La Torre, M.Ed., is a first-generation Chicana scholar from East Salinas, California. Raised in a community that demonstrated resilience and hard work, she earned her dual bachelor's in arts, Psychology and Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 2017. Corina moved across the country in fall 2020 in pursuit of her doctorate in Teacher Education and Learning Sciences at North Carolina State University. Along the way she has earned her master's in education, curriculum and instruction and her research focuses on the educational experiences of students of color and the psychological and structural dimensions of educational inequity. Currently serving as Policy, Research, and Community Engagement Manager at the Center for Racial Equity in Education, De La Torre's work through scholarship, advocacy, and organizing strives to transform long-term policy changes resulting in safe, thriving neighborhoods and schools. She brings critical perspectives to academic spaces while maintaining authentic connections to the communities that continue to shape her journey.

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Dissertation Committee

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION OF THE THREE PAPER DISSERTATION

This dissertation examines the racial and ethnic experiences of students of color within the U.S. public education system, with particular emphasis on Latine students across three interconnected papers. This introduction will provide the purpose of intersecting two fields, educational psychology and educational policy, and a short description of each paper. This dissertation aims to provide a broader understanding of the experiences of Latine and students of color in the U.S. public school system with a critical race lens. In this chapter, I will discuss the target problem, the rationale of this dissertation, and the connection of the three papers. My positionality statement and the significance of this dissertation will also be addressed here.

The Statement of Problem

Today, nearly 14 million Latine students sit in U.S. classrooms, representing the fastest growing demographic in public schools across the country, and are expected to make up 30% of the total public school population by 2030 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). As national demographics shift, Latine representation in schools will also require a comprehensive understanding of what motivates these diverse learners and how we must meet their needs. Hispanic, Black, and Pacific Islander students attend predominantly non-white, high-poverty schools with limited diversity (Ayscue et al, 2024; NCES, 2023). This segregation creates systemic inequities that reduce educational opportunities and achievement for students of color (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012), while also negatively impacting their college completion rates and lifetime earnings potential (Frankenberg et al., 2019). In 2024, graduation rates showed significant racial disparities: Asian students (95%) and White students (90%) had the highest

rates, followed by Black (84%), Hispanic and Multiracial (83%), and American Indian students (82%). Low-income students graduated at just 82%, with this gap widening (MyFutureNC

Dashboard, 2024). These educational disparities are worsened by funding inequities, with a \$23 billion national funding gaps between predominantly white and non-white districts (EdBuild, 2019). This systemic underfunding means schools serving primarily students of color receive fewer resources, less experienced teachers, and limited access to advanced programs (Ford & Triplett, 2019).

Schools across the country remain structured by policies, practices, and expectations that have historically been structured around White, middle-class cultural norms and standards (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). This disconnect affects how students experience education and develop academically. Schools have the power to shape adolescent development through both academic and social experiences. For students, academic motivation consists of three key elements that are influenced by school cultural messages: interest (enjoyment of learning), utility (perceived value of education), and importance (personal investment in success; Eccles & Wigfield, 1995). Research shows that students with stronger self-concepts who attach higher intrinsic value to coursework achieve better educational outcomes (Guo et al, 2015). Similarly, students' interest in specific subjects is heavily influenced by their self-concept; those who believe they can succeed in science are more likely to be interested in science classes (Cheung, 2018). These motivational factors are particularly important for students of color, whose cultural identities and experiences may not be reflected in traditional educational environments. Students of color may often rely more heavily on internal motivation because they navigate educational spaces not designed for them. When curriculum and school culture primarily reflect white, middle-class norms, students of color face additional challenges, including stereotype threat and

cultural discontinuity between home and school. Strong intrinsic motivation and positive academic self-concept become crucial protective factors that help them persist despite these structural barriers. When students of color find personal meaning in coursework and develop confidence in their abilities, these internal resources sustain their engagement even when external environments lack cultural relevance or contain subtle biases. Education scholars continue advocating for equitable changes in what and how students learn, recognizing that culturally responsive approaches can bridge these gaps (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Paris & Alim, 2017). Thus, there is a pressing need to understand how we can better support the needs of Latine and students of color within the K-12 education system to ensure that all students succeed and thrive in the public education system and beyond.

The Rationale for the Study

Research shows that culturally responsive teaching increases engagement, interest in school, and educational achievement among students of color (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). Additionally, racial and socioeconomic diversity among students can provide cognitive and social benefits, such as higher achievement, test scores, college enrollment rates, and future earnings (Century Foundation, 2019). Specifically, when teachers effectively incorporate students' diverse cultures, lived experiences, and interests into the curriculum, teaching methods, and social environment within the classroom, known as culturally relevant and responsive education, students demonstrate higher test scores, subject mastery, confidence, interest and engagement (Aronson & Laughter, 2016). This underscores a need for teaching so students can see themselves reflected in the curriculum, ensuring all schools are racially and ethnically diverse and integrated for all students to succeed.

In addition, racially integrated schools encourage friendships and understanding between students of different races, reducing prejudice and stereotypes (Tropp & Saxena, 2018). Furthermore, students in diverse schools tend to have higher self-esteem, robust social skills, and increased motivation to create positive social change (Tropp & Saxena, 2018). School integration efforts also help create a more equitable society and skilled workforce by closing racial disparities in access to resources, achievement, and life outcomes (Reardon et al., 2018), as schools that are diverse foster critical thinking, creativity, leadership skills, and preparation for participation in a global society and economy (Page, 2008; Chang et al., 2006). Overall, research demonstrates the broad benefits of racially integrated school environments for students of all backgrounds. However, substantial work remains to increase integration and equity in the public school system to support student success. The persistence of racism within even integrated environments highlights why this work is urgently needed.

Students of color can experience racism, microaggressions, and other forms of discrimination in the school setting by peers from different backgrounds (Reynolds et al., 2010). These negative experiences may include stereotyping and bias from school staff and peers, disproportionate disciplinary actions, tracking into lower-level courses, and social isolation or exclusion (Ford & Triplett, 2019). However, the combined efforts of racially and culturally competent educators and a diverse student population can mitigate some of these negative experiences. Segregated schools often have fewer resources and lower academic outcomes, further perpetuating systemic inequalities (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012). The benefits of diversity (improved critical thinking, reduced prejudice, better preparation for a diverse world) are crucial for all students and their learning (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Reardon, 2016).

When done thoughtfully and with proper support systems, integration can lead to positive outcomes for students of color (Johnson et al., 2019). The long-term societal benefits of integration (reduced racial bias, more equitable social networks, better preparation for diverse workplaces) outweigh the short-term challenges (Ayscue et al., 2017; Coleman et al., 1966; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Reardon, 2016). Ultimately, all students benefit from attending racially and socioeconomically diverse schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

The Study

Through an interdisciplinary lens, this dissertation bridges educational psychology and K-12 policy research to examine and address systemic racial inequities in public school education. My dissertation provides contributions to better support Latine students and students of color in K-12 public schools in the following ways: (1) in Paper 1, by exploring student perceptions of school diversity and students' motivation through an empirical study, then (2) by reimagining and culturizing teaching and learning in Educational Psychology for pre-service students through a conceptual guide, and finally (3) in paper 3, by providing a historical analysis of the impacts of school segregation and policy on students of color in North Carolina through a policy brief.

The framework grounding these three papers is the Critical Race Theory (CRT), which emphasizes race and positions racism as embedded in institutional structures rather than individual actions. This framework shows how racial inequity shapes people's daily experiences in education and law through policies, practices, and systemic barriers (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Using CRT as a lens in this dissertation, I can focus on how racism persists in the education system through policy, teaching, and learning. Next, I will discuss the framework in depth, followed by an overview and the importance of each paper. Later, I will share my positionality statement and the overall significance of this dissertation.

Connecting framework

First emerging as counter-legal scholarship to the positivist and liberal legal discourse of civil rights, Critical Race Theory (CRT), focuses on issues of race and racism in pursuit of justice (Ladson-Billings, 1998). CRT informs us on how race and racism are central factors in explaining an individual's experiences in legal and educational systems (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). This theoretical framework challenges objectivity and race neutrality statements by examining race and its implicit and explicit impacts on social structures, practices, and discourses. (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). CRT theorists acknowledge that education can oppress and marginalize while having the potential to emancipate and empower. CRT specifically in education examines how educational theory, policy, and practice are used to subordinate certain racial and ethnic groups (Solórzano, 1998). Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be used as a connecting framework to understand educational inequity by examining how racial power structures shape institutional policies and practices, while also providing concrete examples and policy recommendations to dismantle systemic inequalities in schools, teaching, and learning. The following five CRT tenets provide a guiding lens to identify, examine, and transform structural and cultural aspects of education (Solórzano, 1998):

1. *The intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination.* Acknowledges the intercentricity of racial oppression with different social identities based on gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality.
2. *The challenge to the dominant ideology.* Recognizing that power and politics are at the center of all teaching and learning and rejecting the notion of racial neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy,

color blindness, and equal opportunity claims act as a camouflage for self-interest, power, and privilege of dominant groups in U.S. society.

3. *The commitment to social justice.* Envisions and seeks liberation and radical transformation from racial, gender, and class oppression (Matsuda, 1991). Requires a social justice research agenda that leads toward the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and the empowerment of people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).
4. *The centrality of experiential knowledge.* Legitimizes the knowledge of people of color and dismantles the deficit view of students of color as incompetent and valueless. Centering the voices and experiences of people of color is critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination and drawing on explicitly and embracing voices that are otherwise absent, including using methods such as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, testimonios, chronicles, and narratives (Bell, 1987; Matsuda, 1991; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).
5. *The transdisciplinary perspective.* Allows educational researchers to draw on various disciplines' strengths and research methods to understand and improve the educational experiences of students of color. Disciplines such as, but not limited to, ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, history, law, and other fields guide research that better understands the impacts of racism, sexism, and classism on people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

As discussed, CRT helps address the social construct of race by examining the ideology of racism and calls attention to racism that is disguised in the rhetoric of “normative” values and “neutrality” that shape our education systems and society (Matsuda et al., 1993). The goal of CRT is to interrogate oppressive institutional structures and social inequalities, to eradicate these oppressive aspects, and create transformative spaces of equity and justice. For example, CRT

explains the educational experiences of students of color by seeing the curriculum as whiteness as property. History textbooks that minimize racial injustice and center white perspectives demonstrate how educational content serves as a form of property that privileges white students' cultural knowledge while marginalizing others. Another example using CRT lens in education is recognizing that colorblind policies perpetuate inequality. "Race neutral" standardized testing that determines educational opportunities often reflects white, middle-class knowledge and language norms, systematically disadvantageous students of color despite claims of objectivity.

Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a connecting framework, this dissertation provides a foundation for understanding educational inequity by examining how racial power structures shape institutional policies and practices. It will help reveal how neutral educational practices perpetuate racial hierarchies through mechanisms like resource distribution in schools, desegregation policies, and curriculum design. CRT's emphasis on intersectionality helps analyze how race intersects with class, geography, and language to create compounded educational disadvantages, which aligns directly with this three-paper dissertation's goal. Most importantly, like the CRT, this dissertation aims to move beyond just documenting educational disparities and provide concrete examples and policy recommendations to dismantle the historically rooted systemic inequalities in schools, teaching, and learning.

Paper 1

Racial socialization is how we learn about race and ethnicity throughout our lives, with K-12 schools playing a crucial role in this development (Perry et al, 2024). Schools do more than teach academics—they shape how students understand themselves and their societal place (Byrd & Legette, 2022; Wentzel & Looney, 2007). When teachers limit or avoid discussions of race, treating it as something from the past, they send powerful implicit messages that invalidate

students lived experiences (Byrd & Hope, 2020). This color-blind approach denies the importance of race and reinforces whiteness by minimizing the effects of oppression experienced by people of color (Husband, 2016; Neville et al., 2013). Negative messaging about race can shape how youth view themselves, their capabilities, and their place in education (Bañales et al, 2019). School practices significantly influence students' self-perception through colorblind approaches in teacher attitudes, curriculum choices, and disciplinary practices (Husband, 2016).

This first study examines how school socialization practices and color-blind attitudes influence Latine students' interest in and importance of school. Using the School Climate for Diversity Scale developed by Byrd (2017), I analyzed survey data from 274 Latine adolescents aged 13-17 to investigate how cultural promotion, cultural socialization, and color-blindness predict interest in and perceived importance of school. Multiple regression analyses revealed distinct patterns of influence across these dimensions. For interest in school, the model was statistically significant ($F(5, 213) = 12.040, p < .001$) and explained 22.0% of variance ($R^2 = .220$). Cultural factors had the strongest relationship with interest ($\beta = 0.281, p = .005$), followed by promotion ($\beta = 0.243, p = .019$). For perceived importance of school, the model was also significant ($F(5, 213) = 5.763, p < .001$) and explained 11.9% of variance ($R^2 = .119$). Here, promotion had the strongest positive relationship ($\beta = 0.296, p = .007$), while gender ($\beta = -0.183, p = .006$) and colorblindness ($\beta = -0.173, p = .020$) had significant negative relationships. Cultural promotion was the only factor significantly predicting both outcomes, suggesting its crucial role in supporting Latine students' motivation development. Female Latine students reported higher perceived importance of schooling than male students, indicating a gender difference in how school is valued.

These findings align with critical race theory, demonstrating that color-blind approaches negatively impact students' valuing of school, while culturally relevant practices enhance both interest and importance. The study validates CRT's critique that colorblindness maintains inequitable structures by invalidating racial experiences, particularly for Latine students who receive mixed societal messages about their cultural identity (Bañales et al, 2019). Results highlight the need for educational environments that actively acknowledge and affirm students' cultural identities rather than minimizing racial differences. This research contributes to understanding how school socialization shapes different dimensions of motivation development among Latine youth, with implications for improving educational practices and student outcomes.

Paper 2

Education systems have historically operated from a deficit perspective that actively strips away the cultural and linguistic practices students of color bring from their communities (Paris, 2012). This approach stems from viewing communities of color as inherently lacking and needing to assimilate to white middle-class cultural norms (Sleeter, 2001; Gay, 2001). Today, this harmful legacy manifests in teacher bias, colorblind teaching approaches, and disproportionate disciplinary actions that undermine students' racial identity development (Bracy, 2010; DeCuirGunby, 2009). The persistence of these deficit perspectives in teacher preparation programs continues to reinforce rather than challenge these systemic inequities. This second paper argues the importance of incorporating race, ethnicity, and cultural perspectives into educational psychology courses, particularly for preparing pre-service teachers.

This paper advocates race-reimagining and culturalizing educational psychology theories and teaching to better prepare preservice teachers for diverse educational settings (DeCuir-

Gunby & Schutz, 2014) by critically reviewing major learning theories (Erikson, Piaget, Bronfenbrenner, self-determination theory, and social cognitive theory) and demonstrating how they fail to account for diverse cultural perspectives and experiences. For example, the paper shows how Erikson's theory of psychosocial development reflects distinctly Western, individualistic assumptions that misalign with varied identity development processes across different cultural contexts. Similarly, Piaget's theory of cognitive development fails to account for how systemic racism forces many youth of color to develop sophisticated cognitive skills.

To address these limitations, the paper offers concrete strategies for creating race reimagined courses, including five culturalized learning outcomes: demonstrating critical understanding of race and psychological development, developing transformative inclusive methodologies, engaging in critical self-reflection, committing to decolonizing education, and cultivating community engagement. It provides practical classroom activities that help preservice teachers examine their positionality and develop culturally responsive teaching approaches, noting that most U.S. teachers are white women. At the same time, student populations are increasingly diverse, and there is a need to prepare pre-service teachers, especially white teachers, to be culturally knowledgeable and aware of their students' holistic needs (Kumar & Hany, 2023; Sleeter, 2001; Gay, 2001). This is a collaborative paper with four other scholars, and we share our diverse positionalities, demonstrating how varied backgrounds strengthen educational psychology teaching.

Collaborative scholarship strengthens academic work by bringing together diverse perspectives, experiences, and expertise; It has long been associated with increased scientific productivity and an essential factor of self-reported research success (Leahey & Cain, 2013; Parish et al, 2018). The overarching framework, Critical Race Theory (CRT), aligns with this

paper by positioning race as fundamental to understanding educational experiences, not as a secondary factor. This is evident in the critique of traditional educational psychology theories that treat race as peripheral. By challenging dominant narratives, the paper critiques traditional educational psychology's reliance on White, middle-class samples, like CRT's questioning of dominant narratives. It advocates "race-reimagining" of established theories. It also validates the experiences of students and teachers of color, incorporating our narratives in the "Who We Are & Why We Teach" section. This reflects CRT's emphasis on counter storytelling. Ultimately, this paper moves beyond theory to practice, providing concrete strategies for changing educational practices, aligning with CRT's commitment to transformative action.

Paper 3

Over six decades have passed since the landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which found racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. However, *Brown's* promise of educational equity continues to go unfulfilled across the United States, including North Carolina. Despite the growing diversity among K-12 students, public schools in North Carolina is increasingly segregated (Ayscue et al., 2024). Today, more than half of Hispanic, Black, and Pacific Islander students attend public schools in which the combined enrollment of students of color was at least 75 percent of total enrollment, and these same groups, along with American Indian/Alaska Native students, disproportionately attend high poverty and mid-high-poverty schools. (Ayscue et al, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

This third paper consists of a policy brief examining the intensifying racial resegregation of North Carolina's public schools over the past two decades. The brief begins with an overview of the historical roots of segregation to provide an understanding of how past policies and court

decisions have shaped current conditions in North Carolina that facilitate and constrain desegregation efforts today. It highlights research demonstrating the systematic disadvantages created by racially segregated schooling, including reduced academic achievement, lowered college attainment, and decreased employment and earnings potential for non-white students (Frankenberg et al, 2019). It then provides an empirical analysis of school segregation trends in rural and urban North Carolina school districts using the dissimilarity index and racial concentration measures. The districts analyzed include Wake County Public School System, Durham County Public Schools, Guilford County Schools, Halifax County Schools, Vance County Schools, and Robeson County Schools. The first three districts represent major urban areas, while the latter are rural. Enrollment data were gathered from these six districts for the academic years 2002, 2012, and 2022. This allows for analysis of student demographic changes, specifically the growth of students of color, over two decades. Looking at urban and rural districts provides a greater understanding of the state's geographical trends regarding school resegregation. It is necessary because school diversity is associated with student outcomes such as graduation rates and academic achievement (Ayscue et al., 2024). The goal of this targeted data sample is to illuminate geographical patterns of racial segregation and isolation of students of color in North Carolina public schools that can further support student achievement research. The brief concludes with policy recommendations that support school desegregation efforts.

The overarching framework, Critical Race Theory (CRT), aligns with this policy brief through its structural and systemic focus on examining policies like school choice and district boundaries that maintain segregation and show how seemingly race-neutral policies perpetuate racial inequities. It also traces segregation from *Brown v. Board* through the present, highlighting historical context and centering experiences of students of color using data to challenge

dominant narratives about failed integration progress. Using the CRT framework in this policy brief helps expose how systemic racism continues to shape educational opportunities and outcomes in North Carolina schools.

Key findings reveal divergent patterns between rural and urban districts. In rural districts like Halifax County, Vance, and Robeson, dissimilarity indices decreased substantially between 2002 and 2022, likely reflecting population changes rather than successful integration efforts. These rural districts experienced declining overall enrollment, leading to school consolidations, while also seeing growth in Hispanic student populations. In contrast, despite past integration efforts, the three urban districts (Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Durham, and Guilford County) show increasing racial isolation. Dissimilarity indices increased or remained stable, while the share of intensely segregated schools rose substantially in Charlotte-Mecklenburg (16% to 46%), Durham (24% to 48%), and Guilford (14% to 33%). These districts experienced significant Hispanic student growth, particularly in Durham (8.9% to 34.17%), and expanded their number of schools, with Charlotte-Mecklenburg growing from 134 to 180 schools. Based on these findings, the brief concludes with policy recommendations to fund the Leandro Comprehensive Remedial Plan fully; designing intentional integration plans that avoid burdening communities of color; consolidating segregated rural multi-district systems like Halifax through state intervention; implementing stronger controls on urban school expansion to prevent segregation; providing targeted support for growing student populations like Hispanic students; and maintaining proactive integration policies through multi-sector collaboration.

Positionality Statement

Throughout my educational journey, I questioned, resisted, and challenged the idea of race and power that was reinforced in school and my day-to-day life. Growing up, I did not have

the language or knowledge of systems as I do today. So, my rebellion as a K-12 student, despite what educators deemed me as, was my form of coping with institutional forces greater than me—a reality of many students of color. It was not until my undergraduate years that I understood my and my family's circumstances as immigrants, why my neighborhoods and the schools I attended did not have the same resources and appearances as wealthier and whiter ones, and why the more I pursued academia, the less of myself in those around me. After finishing my undergraduate degree, I was still left with many questions about race and power, specifically within K-12 education, which led me to pursue my doctorate. During these last five years in my doctoral program, I have gained much knowledge and experience that has drastically impacted me and those around me, like my family, friends, and home community. This knowledge has further led me to action, formally critiquing how we view students of color and proposing changes to better support them in K-12 education, which inspired this dissertation. Additionally, I came to this work by listening, building community inside and outside the ivory tower, and organizing for justice in public schools and local neighborhoods.

I am a Chicana, first-generation Mexican American *mujra*, born, raised, and rooted in East Salinas, California. In addition, I am a first-generation college graduate, educator, community organizer, and *mamá*, which has made me into the ever-growing woman I am today. My diverse experiences, both positive and negative, have stemmed from my identities and have given me the strength, resilience, and dedication I hold to navigate the world around me. I ground myself in criticality in how I engage in scholarship, activism, research, and teaching, allowing me to challenge, expose, and dismantle but also reimagine and recreate spaces I am a part of. I have recognized I must do more than just learn as a Ph.D. candidate; I must think in challenging ways and fearlessly name the inequities and unjust histories underpinning our U.S.

institutions and systems. Today, I find myself positioned in the intersection of educational psychology and education policy, allowing me to merge the two and provide a unique perspective of theoretical and practical recommendations to influence policy for the betterment of students of color.

The Significance of the Dissertation

The significance of this dissertation lies in three key contributions: methodological innovation, comprehensive analysis, and practical impact. By bridging together educational psychology and policy research, I can answer the critique of educational psychology's disengagement in addressing systemic racism and the lack of equitable approaches in practice and policy (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014; Salter & Adams, 2013; Schutz, 2020; López, 2022; Strunk & Andrzejewski, 2023). I use CRT to analyze racism at individual and systemic levels by combining empirical, conceptual, and historical approaches. This dissertation provides a comprehensive analysis of student perceptions and motivation (micro level), teacher preparation (institutional level), and segregation trends and impacts (systemic level). This dissertation has a practical impact because it provides empirical data on Latine students and students of color's experiences in schools, provides a guide in teaching educational psychology through a race reimagine and cultural lens, and lastly, through policy recommendations based on a two-decade North Carolina school district analysis. By connecting these levels of analysis through Critical Race Theory, this dissertation reveals how racism operates across multiple avenues in public education while offering concrete policy solutions for change.

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CHAPTER 2: RACIAL SOCIALIZATION, COLOR-BLIND ATTITUDES, AND THEIR IMPACT ON LATINE STUDENT MOTIVATION AND EDUCATIONAL VALUE

Abstract

This study examined how school socialization practices and color-blind attitudes influence Latine students' interest and importance of school. Using the School Climate for Diversity Scale, I analyzed survey data from 274 Latine adolescents to investigate how cultural promotion, cultural socialization, and color-blindness predict interest in and perceived importance in school. Multiple regression analyses revealed distinct patterns of influence: cultural factors and promotion significantly predicted interest in school ($R^2 = .220$). In contrast, promotion positively predicted perceived importance, and color-blindness and gender negatively predicted importance ($R^2 = .119$). Notably, promotion was the only factor significantly predicting both outcomes, suggesting its crucial role in supporting Latine students' interest and the importance of school. These findings align with critical race theory, demonstrating that color-blind approaches negatively impact students' valuing their schooling, while culturally relevant practices enhance both interest and importance. Results highlight the need for educational environments that actively acknowledge and affirm students' cultural identities rather than minimizing racial differences. This research contributes to understanding how school socialization shapes different dimensions of schooling among Latine youth.

Racial Socialization in Educational Settings

Racial socialization consists of the process through which we develop understanding of race and ethnicity, beginning at birth and continuing through key institutions like K-12 schools (Perry et al, 2024). K-12 schools serve as crucial environments where adolescents form their understanding of both themselves and society (Wentzel & Looney, 2007). Beyond academic

instruction, schools function as powerful social institutions that shape how students view themselves, relate to others, and interpret the world around them (Byrd & Legette, 2022). During the critical transition from childhood to adolescence, students spend a substantial portion of their daily lives in school settings, making these institutions particularly influential in their development of autonomy and evolving identities (Eccles, 1999; Erikson, 1968). Schools create the primary social context where youth learn to navigate relationships, understand social hierarchies, and develop their sense of belonging within larger groups (Hughes et al, 2017). These social experiences profoundly impact how students understand themselves and their capabilities. The combination of increased autonomy, evolving identity development, and heightened social awareness makes the school environment especially powerful in shaping adolescents' worldviews, values, and self-concepts (Saleem & Byrd, 2021; Kubi et al, 2022). For example, when students participate in classroom debates about current social issues, they develop critical thinking skills and gain confidence in articulating their values and beliefs. This process of self-expression and receiving feedback from peers and teachers helps adolescents refine their values and solidify essential aspects of their identity development.

Color-Blindness And Culturally Relevant Teaching

Colorblindness is an ideology claiming race does not matter, that all people are equal, and that racism is solely historical (Bonilla-Silva, 2006); while this may seem progressive, this ideology upholds racial hierarchy by downplaying the significance of race rather than essentializing it (McLean & Syed, 2015; Rogers et al, 2021). Color-Blindness may appear in school settings through curriculum, teaching practices, student-teacher interactions, academic tracking systems, and student discipline. While color-blind approaches harm student development, culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 1995) offers an evidence-based

alternative that actively acknowledges and incorporates students' racial and cultural experiences (Saleem & Byrd, 2021). This process involves different layers of communication and experience that shape how youth understand racial identity, racial dynamics, and their place within the broader social context (Aronson & Laughter, 2016).

Within schools, teachers and staff communicate beliefs about race both explicitly through curriculum choices and implicitly through their handling of race-related discussions. When educators frame racism as purely historical or avoid the topic altogether, they not only miss opportunities to develop students' critical thinking skills but also invalidate the lived experiences of students of color (Byrd & Hope, 2020). For example, a teacher who responds to a Latine student's experience of discrimination with "I do not see color, we are all just people" effectively dismisses that student's reality while appearing inclusive. Similarly, when English teachers present readings by white male authors while claiming they are selecting texts based on "universal themes," they are implicitly reinforcing hegemonic whiteness as the default cultural perspective. These color-evasive approaches ultimately deny students the tools to understand and navigate racial dynamics in their daily lives, reinforcing systems of oppression by making whiteness the dominant norm with which all other experiences are measured (Husband, 2016; Neville et al., 2013).

Due to its hegemonic nature, many people, including white and communities of color, embrace color-blind ideology in some form (DeCuir-Gunby et al, 2020). Many implications for educational environments and student development embrace color-blind ideology. When both educators and students internalize color-blind perspectives, racial inequities become further normalized and invisible rather than addressed (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Wise, 2010). For Latine

students and other students of color specifically, this could lead to identity suppression, as they learn to downplay their cultural backgrounds to conform to dominant norms.

The disconnect between their lived experiences with racism and the institutional denial of racial significance may create cognitive dissonance that can undermine academic engagement and sense of belonging.

Traditionally, educational materials and teaching approaches often center white perspectives and standards (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012). Colorblind curricula and teaching practices are harmful to students of color, impacting student-teacher relationships and trust (Khalifa et al, 2016). Culturally relevant and responsive teaching are educational approaches that harness students' diverse cultural experiences and knowledge as valuable resources to enhance learning in the classroom (Gay, 2010; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2002). Both teaching methods have been proposed to promote better outcomes for students, particularly students of color, by recognizing and building upon students' cultural strengths rather than viewing them as barriers (Gay, 2010; Paris, 2012). When done with intentions (i.e., through cultural competency and critical awareness), discussions around race are positively associated with psychological well-being and academic outcomes (Huguley et al, 2019). Culturally relevant teaching is a powerful method for increasing student achievement and engagement and reducing achievement gaps (Byrd, 2016). For example, Byrd (2016) examined culturally relevant teaching and school racial socialization. Both were positively associated with K-12 students' interest in school, leading students to have greater feelings of belonging and comfort with students of different backgrounds. When students encounter various forms of messaging that can negatively impact their self-perception, it can influence how youth view themselves, their capabilities, and their place within the educational system (Bañales et al, 2019). School practices and messages

significantly influence students' self-perception and educational experiences, particularly through colorblind approaches that emerge in teacher attitudes, curriculum choices, and disciplinary practices (Husband, 2016).

Motivation and Educational Value

Motivation in education emerges from students' personal interests, values, and identities and the messages they receive from their school environments, shaping how students engage with learning and ultimately impacting their academic achievement and educational journeys (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2016; Kumar et al, 2018; Schmidt et al, 2019). Intrinsic interest reflects students' enjoyment of learning, utility captures perceived value of education, and importance indicates personal investment in academic success (Eccles & Wigfield, 2020). School importance is also known as attainment value, and when students find importance in a task, they can find a connection to their self-schema and identity and are more likely to do well. For example, doing well in an English paper may be important for a student because a central aspect of their self-identity is their concept of themselves as a good writer. In an article, the interplay among motivational beliefs, achievement, aspirations, attainment, self-concept, and intrinsic value predicted educational attainment. The study indicated that adolescents who believe they are skilled and have a higher intrinsic value attached to coursework are likelier to have high educational attainment (Guo et al, 2015). Understanding motivation requires recognizing it as a multifaceted construct where students' identities, self-beliefs, and personal values interact with institutional messages to shape educational engagement and outcomes.

When students find and experience enjoyment in doing a class task, they will be more engaged and intrinsically motivated to complete the assignment, showing high-interest value, which is also connected to intrinsic and personal interest (Niehaus et al, 2012). While

investigating students' interest in science and whether it affected their interest in school science lessons, Derek Cheung found that students' interest in school science lessons is most heavily affected by their science self-concept (2018). Students are more likely to be interested in studying science at school if they believe they have higher levels of competence to learn science successfully (Cheung, 2018). These findings highlight that motivation is deeply intertwined with students' self-perception and identity development. They suggest that educational approaches must address enjoyment factors and students' beliefs about their capabilities to foster academic engagement effectively.

Intrinsic Motivation & Latine Students

Latine students represent the fastest-growing demographic in public education, projected to comprise 30% of all public school students by 2030 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). This demographic growth highlights the need for a deeper understanding of how these students learn, what motivates them, and how cultural factors influence their academic achievement. Intrinsic motivation refers to students' internal drive to engage in academic activities for inherent satisfaction rather than external rewards (Eccles & Wigfield, 1995; Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014). Trevino & DeFreitas (2014) emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation among Latine students. When intrinsically motivated, these students demonstrated deeper processing of learning material and greater conceptual understanding, resulting in higher grades, better standardized test scores, higher classroom engagement, and overall greater persistence. One form of intrinsic motivation found in the study is cultural connection to content that honors their heritage (Trevino & DeFreitas, 2014) also supported by other education scholars studying Latine students and motivation (Alfaro et al, 2009; Bañales et al, 2019; DeCuir-Gunby,

& Schutz, 2016; Kumar et al, 2018; Niehaus et al; 2011; Schmidt et al, 2019).

This type of motivation can be potent when schools acknowledge these students' cultural backgrounds and connection to family values, provide collaborative learning opportunities, recognize bilingual/bicultural strengths, and create culturally safe learning environments.

Despite the clear benefits of supporting intrinsic motivation and students' cultural capitals (Yosso, 2005), public education systems often fall short in not only meeting the diverse needs of Latine students but also valuing them holistically by frequently upholding institutional racism that causes racism-related stress (Reynolds et al., 2010). This racism-related stress, defined as the psychological and emotional distress experienced due to perceived discrimination, creates significant barriers to academic success. These barriers include decreased overall motivation and can manifest through "silent insults and injuries" (i.e., colorblind racism), disproportionately impacting Latino boys compared to Latina girls (Reynolds et al., 2010). These stressors represent significant obstacles to academic persistence and graduation for Latine students and other students of color (Reynolds et al., 2010). Addressing these systemic challenges through culturally relevant teaching is essential to fostering environments where Latine students can develop intrinsic motivation, ultimately supporting their academic success and well-being.

Critical Race Theory Framework

Critical Race Theory (CRT; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001) provides a framework for understanding how institutional practices and school culture shape educational experiences. CRT emphasizes that racism is endemic and embedded in educational systems, manifesting through color-blind practices that maintain inequitable structures (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Through this lens, Latine students' academic engagement reflects their navigation of racialized school environments.

CRT is grounded in key tenets that inform our understanding of color-blind versus culturally relevant educational practices. For example, *the intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination* tenets recognizes racism as a normalized feature of American society, evident when schools adopt "neutral" policies that ignore how standardized testing disadvantages Latine students whose cultural knowledge differs from dominant norms. Meanwhile, *the challenge to the dominant ideology* confronts claims of objectivity and colorblindness by recognizing how power and politics are central to teaching and learning. CRT in education challenges the seemingly neutral but harmful practice of colorblindness by exposing how it maintains racial inequalities while appearing fair.

Using CRT, this study examines how school culture, mainly through color-blind practices, mediates relationships between Latine students' academic interest and sense of importance in school. This framework suggests institutional messages about race influence how students connect school engagement to their identity development. Consistent with CRT, this study predicts that color-blind approaches in schools will negatively impact Latine students' sense of importance in schools. At the same time, cultural promotion practices will positively influence both interest in and importance of school.

This Study

This research study focuses on how racial socialization practices (particularly around cultural promotion) and color-blind attitudes influence student outcomes related to motivation and valuing of education in the context of Latine students' experiences. This study addresses two key research questions: (1) *How do different aspects of racial socialization predict interest in school among Latine youth?* and (2) *How do different aspects of racial socialization predict the importance of school among Latine youth?* The variables in this study align with dimensions of

racial socialization based on Byrd's (2017) School Climate for Diversity Scale, looking specifically at cultural promotion, cultural socialization, and colorblindness. Student interest and importance in this study define interest in the enjoyment of school, while the importance of academics is also considered. Using survey data from a Likert scale survey, 274 Latine students' self-reported classroom experiences are included in this analysis. This study contributes to understanding how the interest and importance of school connect to academic motivation, highlighting how school racial socialization practices can either support or undermine students' educational engagement.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

The larger survey aimed to understand how adolescents learn about culture, race, and racism from parents, school, and online and how this learning affects their academic outcomes, identity development, and psychological well-being. The survey included detailed questions about race, ethnic background, student grades, and parenting behavior/attitudes. It took about 20-40 minutes to complete.

The data were collected through an online survey platform called Qualtrics and were administered throughout the United States between June and July 2017. Parents had to agree to have their children participate in the study. There was minimal risk associated with the survey. It could cause some uncomfortable feelings while answering questions, although no question was required, and it was recommended that these feelings be skipped if they arose. Participants received no direct benefits from completing the survey and had the right to withdraw from participation at any time. The child portion of the survey was asked to be completed virtually and required that students share their experiences with culture at home, school, and online.

Demographics

A total of 819 surveys were collected. Participants self-reported their age, gender, grade, and race. In the more extensive survey, the race/ethnicity of the participants was balanced, and participants' races were Black, Latine, Asian, and White, with each race having exactly 25% representation in the data. Still, as mentioned, this study will only look at the self-identified Latine students for this specific research. Specific to this study, 274 students identified themselves as being Hispanic, Latino, or Latine. The age range for this group of students ranged

from 13 to 17 years old, with their mean age being 15 ($SD = 1.38$), and their grade level ranged from 5th to 12th grade, with most students (77.7%) in grades 8th to 11th. As for gender distribution, it was fairly even among the subset of students in this study, with 52.4% identifying as girls and 47.6% identifying as boys.

Measures

Motivation was measured using three scales from Eccles and Wigfield (1995; Wigfield et al, 1997), all on a Likert-scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*completely true*). First, interest included three items about enjoying school with rating statements of “I find school interesting”, “I like school”, and “I enjoy my classes”. Second, importance consisted of three items: how important being a good student and getting good grades were to them. The statements that were rated were “Being a good student is important to me.”, “Compared to my other activities, being a good student is important to me.”, and “I need to get good grades in school.”.

Racial Socialization was measured using three dimensions: color-blindness, promotion of cultural competence, and cultural learning from School Climate for Diversity-Secondary Dataset (Byrd, 2017), all on a Likert scale from 1 (*not at all true*) to 5 (*completely true*). Colorblind socialization included five items about teaching that race does not matter: (1) “People here think it is better not to pay attention to race/ethnicity.”, (2) “At your school, people think race/ethnicity is not an important factor in how people are treated.”, (3) “Your school has a colorblind perspective, (4) Your school encourages you to ignore racial/ethnic difference.”, (5) “Your teachers say that focusing on race/ethnicity makes things worse, not better.” Promotion of cultural competence referred to the opportunities to learn about other cultures with six items: (1) “You have learned about new cultures and traditions at school.”, (2) “You have the chance to learn about the culture of others”, (3) “In school, you get to do things that help you learn about

people of different races and cultures.”, (4) “Your classes teach you about diverse cultures and traditions.”, (5) “Your textbooks show people of many different races/ethnicities.”, (6) “At your school, they encourage you to learn about different cultures.” Cultural Socialization refers to opportunities to learn about one’s own culture with five items: (1) “At your school, you have chances to learn about the history and traditions of your culture.”, (2) “At your school, you have participated in activities that teach you more about your cultural background.”, (3) “Your teachers encourage awareness of social issues affecting your culture.”, (4) “In your classes you’ve learn about people who share your race/ethnicity.” and (5) “Your teachers have taught you about important people from history who are from your culture.”

Analysis Plan

To investigate influences on Latine students' academic motivation, I conducted multiple linear regression analysis to examine how school ethnic-racial socialization practices and colorblind attitudes simultaneously predict motivation outcomes while controlling for demographic factors. A multiple linear regression analysis is a statistical method used to predict the value of a dependent variable based on two or more independent variables (Aiken & West, 1991). This study's analysis uses several independent variables (age, gender, colorblind, promotion, and cultural) simultaneously to predict each dependent variable. The dependent variable in this study is interest, which is used as the dependent variable in the first regression analysis. Measuring the importance of Latine students was used as the dependent variable in the second regression analysis. This analysis was done using SPSS Statistics.

Results

This study examined how school socialization practices and color-blind attitudes influence Latine students' interest in and perceived importance of school. Two multiple linear

regression analyses assessed the relationships between the predictors (age, gender, colorblindness, promotion, and cultural factors) and the two outcome variables (interest and importance). The data consisted of 274 Latine students, with 219 completed cases, removing any incomplete cases. This represents approximately 80% of the original sample.

Regression Model 1: Predicting Interest in School

The first regression model examined factors predicting Latine students' interest in school. The overall model was statistically significant ($F(5, 213) = 12.040, p < .001$) and explained 22.0% of the variance in interest ($R^2 = .220$, Adjusted $R^2 = .202$). Table 1 presents the unstandardized and standardized coefficients for all predictors in the model.

Table 1.0: *Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Interest in School*

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	1.600	0.780		2.051	.041
Age	0.023	0.047	0.031	0.490	.625

Gender	-0.069	0.129	-0.033	-0.536	.592
Colorblindness	-0.063	0.080	-0.055	-0.790	.430
Promotion	0.267	0.113	0.243	2.360	.019
Cultural	0.286	0.101	0.281	2.844	.005

Among the five predictors, only two were statistically significant. Cultural factors had the most substantial relationship with interest ($\beta = 0.281, p = .005$), followed by promotion ($\beta = 0.243, p = .019$). These findings indicate that students who reported higher levels of cultural socialization and promotion in their school environments demonstrated greater interest in and importance of school. Age, gender, and color blindness were not significant predictors of interest.

Regression Model 2: Predicting Perceived Importance of School

The second regression model examined factors predicting Latine students' perceived importance of school. This model was also statistically significant ($F(5, 213) = 5.763, p < .001$) and explained 11.9% of the variance in perceived importance ($R^2 = .119$, Adjusted $R^2 = .098$).

Table 2 presents the coefficients for all predictors in this model.

In this model, three predictors were statistically significant. Promotion had the most substantial positive relationship with perceived importance ($\beta = 0.296, p = .007$), while gender ($\beta = -0.183, p = .006$) and colorblindness ($\beta = -0.173, p = .020$) had significant negative relationships.

Table 2: *Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Perceived Importance of School*

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
(Constant)	3.317	0.703		4.716	< .001
Age	0.029	0.043	0.045	0.680	.497

Gender	-0.322	0.116	-0.183	-2.768	.006
Colorblindness	-0.170	0.072	-0.173	-2.353	.020
Promotion	0.276	0.102	0.296	2.704	.007
Cultural	0.027	0.091	0.032	0.300	.764

These results suggest that students who experienced more promotion of their cultural identity in school reported higher perceived importance of school. Female Latine students reported higher perceived importance of their schooling than male students (as indicated by the negative coefficient for gender). Lastly, students who reported higher levels of colorblind attitudes in their school environment perceived their schooling as less critical. Unlike the first model, cultural factors did not significantly predict perceived importance ($\beta = 0.032, p = .764$).

Age also remained non-significant in this model.

Discussion

The regression analyses revealed different patterns of relationships between school socialization factors and the two dimensions of interest in and importance of school. Interest in school was primarily predicted by cultural factors and promotion practices, with both having significant positive effects. Perceived importance of school was significantly predicted by promotion (positive effect), gender (negative effect, indicating higher scores for females), and colorblindness (negative impact). Promotion was the only factor that significantly predicted both outcome variables, suggesting its central role in supporting both interest in and perceived importance of school among Latine students.

These findings highlight the differential impact of school socialization practices on distinct dimensions of ethnic-racial socialization. Colorblindness negatively affects perceived importance of school ($\beta = -0.173$, $p = .020$), as minimizing racial differences implicitly signals that ethnicity should not be central to students' self-concept. This supports CRT's critique that colorblind approaches maintain inequitable structures by invalidating racial experiences (Bell, 1987; Matsuda, 1991; Solórzano, 1998; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). For Latine students who receive mixed societal messages about their cultural identity (Bañales et al, 2019), this undermines the value they place on their schooling. As Neville et al. (2013) argue, addressing colorblind attitudes is fundamental to creating environments where students can fully develop their identities.

Cultural factors significantly predicted interest ($\beta = 0.281$, $p = .005$) but not importance ($\beta = 0.032$, $p = .764$), reflecting distinct psychological processes. Cultural content naturally sparks curiosity and engagement (interest) but does not automatically communicate as central to

one's self-concept (importance). This highlights that merely including cultural content is insufficient; schools must pair cultural content with explicitly promoting its value. Female Latine students reported higher perceived importance of school ($\beta = -0.183, p = .006$). Educational approaches should support male students in developing a sense of importance regarding their schooling while building upon the strengths female students demonstrate.

The findings validate CRT's critique of colorblindness, demonstrating that color-blind approaches maintain inequitable structures by invalidating the significance of racial experiences. The differential impact of socialization practices reveals how institutional messages shape identity development promotion practices communicate value while colorblindness signals irrelevance. These relationships provide concrete evidence for CRT's proposition that schools serve as racial socialization agents that either support or undermine student identity development through their explicit and implicit messages about race. Taught K-12 Curricula should explicitly incorporate diverse cultural perspectives and histories rather than presenting "neutral" content that often defaults to dominant cultural narratives. Furthermore, curriculum relevant to students lived experiences supports more profound learning, retention, and belongingness when institutional practices affirm rather than erase racial identities (Byrd, 2016; Hughes et al, 2017).

These results directly extend Byrd's (2016) findings that culturally relevant teaching positively affects student interest, confirming this relationship specifically for school interest among Latine youth. The negative relationship between color blindness and perceived importance aligns with literature documenting how colorblind approaches harm student development (Byrd, 2015; Husband, 2016; Neville et al, 2013). This study contributes insights by examining differential effects on interest versus importance, revealing that while cultural factors generate interest, they do not automatically translate to perceived importance without

explicit promotion. This is important because it highlights a critical gap in how ethnic-racial socialization can be cultivated in educational settings.

While the findings of this study suggest that promotion practices positively influence interest and importance, longitudinal research is needed to confirm directionality and examine how these relationships develop throughout adolescence. Our reliance on self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias, particularly for sensitive topics like racial attitudes. Future studies should incorporate multiple informants, including teacher reports and observational measures of school practices.

Future research should examine additional outcomes beyond interest and importance, including behavioral engagement, academic achievement, and psychological well-being, to understand the broader implications of school socialization. The differential effects observed suggest examining other dimensions of ethnic-racial socialization, such as exploration, resolution, and public regard. Comparative studies across different racial/ethnic groups would clarify whether these relationships are unique to Latine students or represent broader patterns. Examining how these processes operate for students with intersecting marginalized identities would enhance our understanding of socialization processes in increasingly diverse educational settings.

Conclusion

The findings in this study demonstrate the negative relationship between color blind attitudes and students' perceived importance of their school. This confirms theoretical propositions from CRT that color-blindness maintains inequitable structures (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Color-blind approaches fail to acknowledge the centrality of race in students lived experiences (Edwards, 2021; Rogers et al, 2021). The differential effect of

colorblindness (affecting importance but not interest) reveals nuanced ways these attitudes impact motivation. Addressing color-blind attitudes is not just about cultural sensitivity but about creating educational environments where students can fully develop their identities (Neville et al, 2013), demonstrating that when color-blind approaches minimize racial differences, they undermine Latine students' sense of importance regarding their school. This aligns directly with Ladson-Billings' (1995) conceptualization of culturally relevant pedagogy, which “not only addresses student achievement but also helps students to accept and affirm their cultural identity while developing critical perspectives that challenge inequities that schools (and other institutions) perpetuate.” The analysis shows the positive effects of cultural factors and promotion on interest and importance, supporting culturally relevant pedagogy. The impact of cultural promotion on both dimensions of ethnic-racial socialization demonstrates how affirming cultural identity can serve multiple functions in student development. Color-blind approaches represent missed opportunities for cultural enrichment and actively hinder students' identity development processes essential for academic engagement and success.

Building on the findings that promotion predicted both interest and importance outcomes, our study demonstrates that positive socialization practices serve as protective factors for Latine students. Specifically, promotion practices help students connect their cultural identities with academic success, creating meaningful bridges between personal identity and educational engagement. Schools that intentionally promote cultural identity create environments where students can thrive academically and personally. The strong effect of cultural factors on interest demonstrates how socialization directly shapes intrinsic motivation, potentially increasing student engagement with learning. Furthermore, these positive socialization practices may help

counter negative societal messages about minoritized groups, providing students with affirming narratives that support healthy identity development and academic resilience.

Implications and Recommendations

Based on the findings showing the differential impact of school socialization practices on Latine students' ethnic-racial socialization, several important implications emerge for education policy, teacher preparation, classroom practice, and future research. Integrating critical race perspectives into teacher training is essential. Teacher preparation programs must develop specific skills for implementing cultural promotion practices, which our research shows positively impact both interest and importance dimensions of school. Programs should help teachers recognize and avoid color-blind attitudes in curriculum and discourse, as these approaches demonstrably undermine students' valuing of their school. School policy is critical for creating formal structures that acknowledge and celebrate cultural diversity. Schools should evaluate their climate through the lens of racial socialization, explicitly assessing how institutional messages about race and culture influence student motivation. Policies should prioritize promotion practices that uniquely support multiple dimensions of ethnic-racial socialization.

Research has consistently shown that incorporating culturally relevant curriculum materials benefits all students. Teachers should create deliberate opportunities for students to explore their ethnic-racial identities through classroom activities and assignments. It is important to facilitate discussions about race that validate students' experiences rather than minimizing racial differences through color-blind approaches. Research must expand to examine the longterm effects of school socialization on student outcomes. Longitudinal studies should investigate how these processes operate across different racial/ethnic groups to determine

whether the patterns observed with Latine students reflect broader developmental processes or culturally specific pathways. Additionally, intervention studies targeting promotion practices could help establish causal relationships and develop evidence-based approaches for supporting ethnic racial socialization in educational settings.

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CHAPTER 3: MAKING RACE AND ETHNICITY MATTER FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING IN EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGY

Corina De La Torre, North Carolina State University, Jaylene Patterson, University of Kentucky, Jetta Lewis, North Carolina State University, Anastacia Cole, University of Kentucky, Mizuho Tatebayashi, North Carolina State University, and Dr. Christy Byrd, North Carolina State University

Abstract

This practical guide demonstrates the importance of attention to students' beliefs and attitudes about race and ethnicity when teaching educational psychology and human development courses. The guide will begin with a brief overview of research on the development of ethnic and racial identity and attitudes and then turn to a review of major learning theories, with examples of how those theories need to be applied differently when addressing content related to race, ethnicity, and diversity in general. In other words, educational psychology theories and educational psychology teaching must be race-reimagined (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014) to best prepare students for working in and researching educational settings. For instance, we will show how self-regulated learning theories can be applied to understanding student defensiveness when learning about racism (e.g., Byrd, 2023). We conclude with practical examples drawn from our teaching.

Introduction

Educational psychology teaching focuses on major theories within learning, motivation, and human development. This guide argues that educational psychology courses must be race reimagined (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014) to best prepare students for working in and researching diverse educational settings. By failing to acknowledge the critical roles of race,

ethnicity, and culture, the field of educational psychology has undermined its capacity to be a transformative force in educational policy and practice. Recent empirical studies underscore the critical importance of culturally relevant pedagogical approaches. For instance, Byrd (2016) demonstrated that constructivist teaching practices significantly enhance students' academic engagement and interracial understanding, revealing how culturally responsive methodologies can simultaneously address academic achievement and promote cross-cultural comprehension. Similarly, Laughter & Adams (2012) illustrated the power of culturally relevant pedagogy in a middle school science classroom, showing how innovative instructional strategies that center students' critical thinking and cultural experiences can deconstruct scientific bias and develop students' critical consciousness. In this paper, we begin by briefly reviewing the history of antiracism within educational psychology and research on ethnic-racial identity development. We will then discuss culturalized perspectives of major educational psychology theories and practical tips for using culturalized perspectives in higher education classrooms. We end with a reflection on our positionalities and how identity is crucial to the work of educational psychology.

Anti-Racism in Educational Psychology

Scholars are increasingly recognizing educational psychology's historical roots in eugenics and the marginalization of people of color. Early research emphasized the intelligence and supremacy of European-descended people and contributed to the development of racist instruments and policies (Matthews & Lopez, 2020). Even as the field began to embrace broader perspectives in research, studies continued to make universal claims based on predominantly White, middle-class samples. Research on marginalized groups was often sidelined, appearing only in special issues if not excluded from the field's major journals (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz,

2014; Matthews & Lopez, 2020; Strunk & Andrzejewski, 2023; Zusho & Kumar, 2018).

However, there is a recent and growing trend towards acknowledging and addressing cultural and racialized experiences. Although authors have discussed the importance of a culturally attentive approach to educational psychology theories in the past (e.g., Maehr, 1974; Graham, 1994; Parajes, 2007; Zusho & Clayton, 2011), a pivotal moment was the 2014 paper by De Cuir-Gunby and Schutz that introduced the idea of race-focused and race-reimagined work.

Since then, the field has experienced recurring and more frequent calls to use culturally grounded methods to dismantle white supremacy and color evasiveness (2018 special issue, 2020 special issue). In the summer of 2020, educational psychologists joined the national calls to support Black Lives Matter and dismantle systemic racism. The educational psychology special interest group of the American Psychological Association, Division 15, released a statement committing to increased efforts to “dismantle racism; become a more inclusive and diverse Division; and elevate our members and the communities and cultures in which they live” (American Psychological Association, Division 15, 2020). Many of those efforts have been led by the division’s Race and Diversity Committee, founded by Jessica DeCuir-Gunby in 2019. Since 2020, the Race and Diversity Committee and its partners have hosted conference sessions, webinars, workshops, and discussions addressing race and diversity in educational psychology. Regarding scholarship, recent reviews of racism within the field (Kumar & DeCuir-Gunby, 2022; Strunk & Andrzejewski, 2023) have furthered attempts to make educational psychology more relevant and culturally responsive. Despite these efforts, the teaching of educational psychology retains the same focus on the core, universal theories. This chapter aims to continue calls for culturalizing educational psychology (Kumar et al., in press) and provide a guide based on our practices.

Ethnic-Racial Identity Development

Race emerges as a profoundly salient social construct that fundamentally shapes childhood experiences in the United States, operating as a complex system of meaning-making that extends far beyond mere demographic categorization. Long before entering formal educational settings, children and adolescents are immersed in a societal landscape structured by prejudice and discrimination, characterized by deeply entrenched disparities in wealth, educational access, health care outcomes, and systemic institutional opportunities (Trent et al, 2019). These structural inequities are not confined to the United States but represent global patterns of marginalization, where cultural minority groups consistently experience systemic barriers that reproduce social and economic hierarchies across diverse national contexts (Gee & Ford, 2011).

Within this nuanced societal context, children's racial socialization experiences diverge dramatically. Some grow up in families and communities that engage in explicit, critical dialogues about race, racism, and social justice, providing young individuals a foundation and understanding of how to navigate complex social landscapes. Conversely, other children encounter more implicit or passive racial messaging that profoundly influences their sense of social dynamics. Hughes and colleagues (2023) illuminate how children universally develop sophisticated understandings of racial categorization and social interaction, actively constructing personal and collective identities through continuous negotiation with social environments. Through these intricate processes of observation, interpretation, and internalization, children map their potential social positions, developing nuanced understanding of group membership, power dynamics, and their potential agency within broader social structures. Schools must therefore create intentional spaces that honor, extend, and critically engage with students' diverse racial

socialization experiences, serving as responsive environments where children can thoughtfully examine, articulate, and further develop their racial identities and understandings.

Teaching Educational Psychology

Educational psychology is a requirement for most teacher education programs across the United States. It is used to make meaning of learning, development, motivation, and individual differences (Nezhad & Majid, 2011). The goal of introductory educational psychology courses is to broaden and deepen students' knowledge and understanding of applying psychological principles to education. Typical topics covered in the most popular educational psychology textbooks include cognitive and personality development, individual differences, learning and behavior theory, cognitive strategies for learning and remembering, critical thinking and problem-solving strategies, motivation, classroom management techniques, components of teacher effectiveness, measurement and student evaluation, and multicultural education. Instructors may also bring in additional resources such as news articles, videos, podcasts, and scholarly journals to provide students with real-life examples, viewpoints, and practices outside of the perspectives covered in textbooks. As we will make clear in the chapter, instructors must move towards challenging students and make efforts to cultivate a course that is critical and attentive to race and ethnicity. In the next section, we will review some of the foundational learning theories in the field and show how they fail to account for diverse perspectives.

A Review of Major Learning Theories

Some major learning theories in the field of educational psychology include Erikson's (1950) psychosocial development theory, Piaget's (1936) stages of cognitive development, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems theory, Deci and Ryan's (2000) self determination theory, and Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. These foundational theories have provided

important understandings of learning and development and have shaped decades of high-quality research. While these foundational theories have generated decades of valuable research and insights, their limitations in addressing cultural diversity have become increasingly apparent as student populations grow more diverse. Specifically, these traditional theories often fail to account for how cultural background shapes learning experiences, social development, and academic challenges (Kumar et al., in press). This gap between theoretical frameworks and classroom realities has significant implications for teacher preparation. Although these theories remain essential for developing preservice teachers' metacognitive abilities and pedagogical knowledge, they must be taught critically and supplemented with culturally informed perspectives. When teachers deeply understand both traditional developmental theories and their cultural limitations, they can better anticipate and respond to students' social, emotional, cognitive, and physical needs while appropriately scaffolding learning for diverse learners. Educational psychology courses thus can serve as a crucial bridge between theory and practice, but this bridge must be reconstructed to help teachers navigate the complexities of today's multiracial and multicultural classrooms. To achieve this goal, the field must evolve beyond its traditional theoretical foundations to prepare teachers who can recognize, understand, and effectively respond to an increasingly diverse student population.

While groundbreaking in its conceptualization of identity formation, Erikson's (1950) theory of psychosocial development reveals significant limitations when applied across diverse cultural contexts. The theory posits universal developmental stages centered on resolving existential crises - trust, autonomy, intimacy, individuality, integrity, and identity. However, this universalist framework fundamentally misaligns with the varied way's identity develops across different cultural contexts. This limitation becomes particularly evident in Erikson's fifth stage of

identity versus role confusion during adolescence. While Erikson correctly identified adolescence as a critical period when individuals begin constructing meaning about their place in society, his conceptualization reflects distinctly Western, individualistic assumptions. The notion of a "moratorium" (Erikson, 1968), where adolescents freely explore identities before committing to adult roles, presupposes cultural privileges and opportunities not universally available. For example, when adolescents may need to work to contribute to their family household, their freedom to explore identities is limited to show up for their families. They adopt adulthood responsibilities sooner rather than later.

Research has consistently demonstrated that this model fails to capture the identity development experiences of many cultural groups. For instance, empirical studies have predominantly focused on white samples (Sneed et al., 2006), leaving significant gaps in our understanding of identity formation in communities of color. Cross-cultural research in European and East Asian contexts has revealed fundamentally different patterns, particularly regarding the timing of adult role assumption and the relationship between individual and collective identity (Schwartz et al., 2012). Although Erikson acknowledged the role of cultural context and structural factors in development (Syed & Fish, 2018), the theory's implementation in educational settings often strips away these crucial considerations. When taught as a universal model of human development, the theory inadvertently marginalizes alternative developmental pathways and cultural frameworks for understanding identity. This oversimplification not only misrepresents the complexity of human development but also risks perpetuating cultural biases in educational practice.

Piaget's (1936) theory of cognitive development provides valuable insights into how adolescents develop abstract thinking capabilities; however, its universal stage model fails to

account for how lived experiences of racism and discrimination accelerate critical consciousness in youth of color. Piaget posits that the formal operational stage, beginning around ages 11-12, marks the emergence of abstract reasoning and critical thinking about societal issues. However, this framework problematically assumes all children follow the same developmental trajectory toward critical consciousness, overlooking how systemic racism forces many youth of color to develop sophisticated understandings of social inequality well before adolescence. This oversight reveals a fundamental limitation in Piaget's theory: it presents cognitive development as primarily age-dependent rather than experience-dependent. Research demonstrates that youth of color often develop early understanding of race, power, and inequality through direct encounters with systemic racism (Rivas-Drake et al, 2009; Seider et al; 2019). For instance, Black youth may develop strategies for navigating racial profiling by law enforcement or retail workers; Latinx students may learn to analyze and respond to linguistic discrimination and xenophobia; and Asian American students must process and resist academic stereotyping and cultural microaggressions. These experiences demand that youth of color develop advanced critical thinking skills about social systems and power dynamics as a matter of survival, not simply cognitive maturation.

The gap between Piaget's theory and the lived realities of youth of color has significant implications for educational practice. By presenting critical thinking about societal issues as a universal developmental milestone that emerges in adolescence, educators may overlook or dismiss the sophisticated social analyses already developed by their younger students of color. This misalignment not only fails to recognize students' existing capabilities but may also lead educators to underestimate the impact of early racial trauma and the need for culturally responsive support systems. To be truly useful in diverse educational contexts, Piaget's theory

must be fundamentally reconceptualized to account for how systemic racism and other forms of oppression shape cognitive development from the earliest ages.

While Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems theory offers a framework for understanding environmental influences on child development, its failure to explicitly theorize racial-ethnic dimensions represents a critical oversight that limits its applicability in diverse contexts. The theory conceptualizes child development through nested environmental layers - microsystems (immediate surroundings), mesosystems (interactions between microsystems), ecosystems (indirect influences), macrosystems (cultural context), and chronosystems (temporal changes). However, this seemingly comprehensive model inadequately addresses how systemic racism and cultural strength fundamentally reshape these environmental interactions for youth of color. This limitation becomes particularly problematic when examining how racial-ethnic factors transform each system level. At the microsystem level, for instance, Latinx children's development may be powerfully shaped by cultural assets like *familismo* and multi-generational households (Gonzales, 2019)—factors that provide unique forms of social capital and resilience but are often misinterpreted through dominant individualistic frameworks.

Furthermore, the mesosystem level fails to account for how racial discrimination can create hostile interactions between microsystems, such as when cultural disconnects between home and school environments force children to navigate conflicting cultural expectations (Paris, 2012). At the exosystem level, the theory inadequately addresses how systemic racism in institutions like law enforcement, healthcare, and employment creates distinct developmental contexts for families of color. Most critically, Bronfenbrenner's conception of the macrosystem treats culture as a broad environmental influence rather than recognizing how racial-ethnic identity and racial hierarchies fundamentally structure all system interactions. This oversight

obscures how communities of color develop distinct cultural strengths—including collective resistance strategies, cultural pride, and intergenerational wisdom (Yosso, 2005). These are not simply variables within the system but transformative forces that reorganize how environmental layers interact. To be truly useful for understanding development in communities of color, Bronfenbrenner's theory requires radical reconceptualization that centers racial-ethnic experiences and cultural assets. This means moving beyond simply acknowledging cultural differences to theorizing how racial oppression and cultural strength fundamentally alter the architecture of developmental systems. Without this evolution, the theory risks perpetuating colorblind approaches that mask the unique developmental pathways and strengths of youth of color.

While influential in understanding human motivation, self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) fundamentally fails to theorize how systemic racism and racial hierarchies transform the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. This oversight renders the theory incomplete at best and potentially harmful at worst when applied uncritically in educational settings. The theory's conception of autonomy reveals particularly problematic assumptions. By presenting autonomy as an individual psychological need divorced from social context, SDT obscures how structural racism systematically constrains the choices available to students of color. This individualistic framework misattributes the behaviors of students of color to personal choice rather than recognizing them as strategic responses to racially hostile environments. More harmfully, this theory quietly releases schools from responsibility for creating and maintaining systems of inequality by falsely suggesting that all students have the same opportunities to act independently and succeed. An example is a school that prides itself on having an Advanced Placement (AP) program, stating that any student who

works “hard enough” can enroll, suggesting this is an opportunity for all students. However, the reality is AP classes are racially disproportionate, and rather than addressing the racial disparities, the administration frames the issue as a matter of individual student choice or motivation instead of examining how policies and practices systematically exclude certain student populations. Furthermore, the theory's treatment of competence similarly reflects colorblind assumptions that ignore how racial stereotypes and discrimination fundamentally alter the development of self-efficacy for students of color. When students face constant exposure to negative racial stereotypes about their intellectual abilities, deficit-based expectations from educators, and systemic barriers to educational resources, their sense of competence is not simply individually determined but profoundly shaped by racist social structures. The theory's failure to address these realities means it cannot adequately explain or support competence development in students of color.

According to social cognitive theory, an individual's functioning is a dynamic interplay between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). Each factor influences and is influenced by the others. For instance, a student's sense of belonging (a personal factor) can influence and be influenced by their engagement (a behavioral factor) and the classroom or school climate (an environmental factor). Individuals' circumstances matter in their motivation and behavior (Usher, 2021). Therefore, teachers and schools must cultivate learning environments that enable students to draw on their identities and experiences to thrive. As such, this framework may clarify how students navigate the complexities of their social and cultural contexts by drawing on their backgrounds and experiences, which can affect their future educational experiences, motivation, and self-perceptions.

Furthermore, while this theory acknowledges the importance of environmental factors, such as classroom and school climate, it does not adequately capture students' challenges and disparities from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds. Students of color often experience a different sense of belonging and school climate compared to their white peers. In predominantly white schools, students of color may feel marginalized, underrepresented, and disconnected from the school community. This can significantly impact their factors, such as motivation, self perception, and academic outcomes. Moreover, the lack of diversity among educators can further exacerbate these issues. Students of color may struggle to find role models and mentors who share their cultural background and can relate to their experiences. This lack of representation can hinder the development of positive student-teacher relationships and limit students' access to culturally responsive teaching practices. Expanding social cognitive theory by incorporating a more explicit focus on the experiences of students from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds is essential to address these limitations. This may involve examining how systemic inequities, cultural biases, and power dynamics within the education system shape the interplay between personal, behavioral, and environmental factors for students of color. SDT must be radically reconceptualized to address how racism shapes psychological needs, how communities of color develop unique motivational frameworks, and how cultural values influence motivation. Without centering these perspectives, the theory risks perpetuating deficit views that blame students of color while ignoring their strengths and resources.

While providing essential frameworks for understanding human development, these foundational theories in educational psychology critically fail to address how racism and cultural diversity fundamentally shape learning and development. These omissions profoundly impact how preservice teachers conceptualize and approach their practice, potentially perpetuating

harmful educational practices and inequities. DeCuir-Gunby and Schutz (2014) argue that educational psychology theories must be race-reimagined to effectively prepare educators for today's diverse classrooms. The dangers of applying these universal theories without cultural consideration are significant and far-reaching. When teachers apply theories like Erikson's identity development model without understanding cultural variations, they risk creating harmful conflicts between school expectations and family values. For example, a teacher might encourage students to "find their voice" and make independent career choices, while their family expects decisions to reflect collective family goals. Erikson's theory emphasizes individualism and autonomy, primarily reflecting Western cultural values that prioritize individual development and independence, whereas in some cultures, identity is deeply rooted in family relationships, community roles, and cultural traditions, creating tensions and confusion for the student. By recognizing these cultural variations, teachers can support identity development in ways that bridge school and home expectations rather than forcing students to feel conflicted and choose between their own cultural vs. Western ideology.

More fundamentally, these traditional theories fail to recognize how systemic racism pervasively influences every aspect of educational experience. This oversight reinforces a broader pattern of treating race as merely an individual characteristic rather than acknowledging it as a powerful social construct that shapes all educational institutions and experiences. Race reimagined theories offer a path forward by not only explicitly addressing how racism operates within educational systems but also recognizing cultural strengths rather than deficits. Furthermore, it challenges assumptions embedded in traditional theory while promoting equity through theoretical reconstruction. Only through this fundamental reconceptualization can educational psychology theory adequately support the development of practices, policies, and

interventions that serve all students. Without such transformation, the field risks continuing to perpetuate the very inequities it should help eliminate.

Creating a Race-Reimagine Course

While foundational theories provide understanding of human development, preparing effective educators for diverse classrooms demands a fundamental transformation of teacher education. This transformation must move beyond mere exposure to theories and critically engage with how race, power, and culture shape educational experiences. Teaching traditional theories without interrogating their cultural limitations perpetuates systemic inequities and leaves teachers ill-equipped for contemporary classrooms. Building cultural competence through practice represents the second crucial element of this transformation. This goes beyond superficial "multicultural" approaches to integrate diverse cultural perspectives throughout the curriculum. Teachers must develop concrete skills for culturally responsive teaching and create opportunities for authentic engagement with diverse communities. This practical dimension ensures that theoretical understanding translates into effective classroom practice.

The ultimate goal is transforming educational spaces themselves. Teachers must be equipped to create truly inclusive learning environments to address power dynamics proactively, support student identity development, and recognize and challenge systemic barriers. This requires a fundamental shift in how we conceptualize the role of teachers in creating equitable educational opportunities. To achieve these goals, teacher education programs must be comprehensively redesigned. This means centering race and culture in all coursework, not just isolated "diversity" classes. Programs must integrate critical analysis of power throughout the curriculum, provide sustained opportunities for guided practice and reflection, and build concrete skills for creating equitable learning environments. Only through such comprehensive

reconstruction of teacher preparation can we develop educators capable of creating truly equitable and inclusive classrooms. The goal is not simply to add cultural awareness to existing practice, but to fundamentally reimagine how we prepare teachers for the complex work of education in a diverse society.

Culturalizing Learning Outcomes

In educational psychology, traditional learning outcomes often overlook the critical dimensions of cultural context and systemic inequities. Culturalizing learning outcomes for preservice teachers is fundamental to preparing educators who can effectively navigate contemporary classrooms' complex, diverse landscapes. This approach transforms pedagogical preparation from a standardized, one-size-fits-all model to a nuanced, critically engaged framework that recognizes the profound impact of culture, identity, and social structures on learning and development. The following are five learning outcomes that incorporate a culturalized approach and why they are essential.

- (1) **Demonstrate a Critical Understanding of Race, Culture, and Psychological Development.** Beyond surface-level awareness, this learning outcome demands a deep, intersectional examination of how race, culture, and psychological development intertwine (Kumar & DeCuir-Gunby, 2023). Preservice teachers must develop sophisticated analytical frameworks that deconstruct how systemic inequities, historical trauma, and cultural experiences fundamentally shape students' cognitive, social, and emotional development. This outcome challenges educators to move beyond deficit based perspectives and instead recognize the rich cultural capital that diverse students bring to learning environments.
- (2) **Develop Transformative Inclusive Educational Methodologies.** Inclusive education transcends mere accommodation; it requires radically reimagining pedagogical practices

(DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014). This learning outcome encourages preservice teachers to develop adaptive, culturally responsive teaching strategies that actively dismantle barriers to learning. Educators can create dynamic, responsive learning environments that affirm and leverage students' diverse strengths and experiences by understanding the complex intersections of identity, learning styles, and systemic oppression.

(3) Engage in Critical Self-Reflection and Identity Analysis. Self-reflection is a rigorous, ongoing process of critical consciousness, meaning preservice teachers must develop the capacity to deeply interrogate their own identities, privileges, and positionalities, understanding how this shape their pedagogical approaches and interactions with students (Machost & Stains, 2023). This learning outcome requires students to do more than personal introspection—it requires a commitment to continuous learning, vulnerability, and active dismantling of internalized biases and oppressive mindsets.

(4) Commit to Dismantling and Decolonizing Education. This learning outcome positions preservice teachers as change agents who actively challenge and reimagine educational systems. Beyond mere critique, educators must develop concrete strategies for decolonizing curriculum, challenging oppressive institutional practices, and creating learning environments that empower students as critical thinkers and social justice advocates (Eaton, 2022). This commitment requires a holistic approach that connects classroom practices to broader social transformation.

(5) Cultivate Comprehensive Community Engagement. Community engagement emerges as a critical pedagogical strategy, not an optional add-on. Preservice teachers can develop sophisticated approaches to building authentic, reciprocal partnerships that extend beyond traditional school boundaries through, for example, service learning (Verducci & Pope, 2001). This learning outcome emphasizes understanding community assets, developing wrap-around

support systems, and recognizing the profound educational resources within diverse communities.

In conclusion, culturalizing learning outcomes represents a fundamental reimagining of educational psychology's role in preparing educators. This approach demands that preservice teachers become more than instructional technicians—they must become critical scholars, cultural translators, and transformative leaders committed to creating educational spaces that affirm, empower, and celebrate the full complexity of human learning and experience.

Re-Creating a Syllabus

Incorporating cultural perspectives into educational psychology courses helps future teachers understand that classrooms and the educational system are not neutral spaces. Instead, they are influenced by various cultural values, beliefs, and biases that shape students' learning experiences from diverse backgrounds. By making pre-service teachers aware of this reality, they can better understand and address their students' unique needs and challenges, ultimately creating more inclusive and equitable learning environments. Educators must challenge preservice teachers by bringing in resources that represent the current education climate and demonstrate how to teach with a critical lens so that all students feel valued and seen. Some examples of activities include the following. Assigning research articles, YouTube videos, podcasts, and newspaper articles can provide pre-service teachers with real-life and scholarly examples of emerging thoughts and issues within K12 education. Unlike academia-focused traditional scholars, various sources allow students to write different essays and views of the education system. It is also critical to intentionally include the scholarship of multicultural writers for culturally diverse contexts and perspectives. For example, providing educational news articles from rural communities sheds light on issues that may impact specific groups of students

geographically and provides first-hand context of what teaching is like in current times. In contrast, a theoretical paper from an education journal may not grasp the entirety of an educational issue.

These goals and learning outcomes can be achieved through the assigned readings, assignments, and lectures listed in the syllabus and through examples. To create a communal space where everyone feels like they belong and are supported, it is important to set expectations, values, and norms on the first day of class as a group. Co-creating a list of expectations that everyone in the class agrees to require everyone, including the instructor, to respect and be held accountable. Ultimately, creating an atmosphere based on the shared knowledge of differences and similarities.

Classroom Activities in Educational Psychology

Educators have developed and used the following activities in their educational psychology courses. We share these examples to provide inspiration and practical teaching resources. Feel free to adapt these activities to fit your classroom needs, student population, and educational objectives. Each activity can be modified to suit different learning environments and teaching styles. These activities are meant to be flexible tools that can help engage students, promote critical thinking, and bring psychological theories to life in meaningful ways.

Critical Self-Reflection Essay

“Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly.” (Freire, 1968). This reflective critical self-reflection essay is a foundational tool for educators and preservice teachers to examine their positionality, particularly regarding race, and understand how their backgrounds influence their teaching practices (see Appendix 1). Having preservice students explore their personal histories, family attitudes, and formative interactions

with diverse groups, these future educators develop self-awareness about biases that may unconsciously affect their work with students. This critical self-examination is not meant to induce guilt, but rather to initiate the vital process of identifying and dismantling assumptions that could impact educational equity.

The questions guide (see appendix 1) preservice students through exploring their racial identity development, from the demographic compositions of their early environments to the influences that shaped their worldviews. For example, one of the questions asked is: What were the compositions of my schools, neighborhoods, and family (ie, race and ethnic compositions, class, gender, cultures) growing up? This question helps develop a race reimagined lens by prompting students to analyze the demographic environments that shaped their early socialization. By examining the racial, ethnic, class, gender, and cultural compositions of their schools, neighborhoods, and families, educators understand how these formative spaces influenced their understanding of "normal" or "typical" American experiences.

This structured reflection assignment helps students recognize how their socialization affects their perceptions of students from different backgrounds. Educators can better understand how their lived experiences contribute to their current perspectives and teaching approaches by examining specific incidents and historical events that shaped their awareness of prejudice. Ultimately, this reflective process prepares educators to develop intentional dispositions for teaching diverse student populations. By understanding their starting points and acknowledging areas for growth, teachers can work toward creating more inclusive, culturally responsive classroom environments. This ongoing self-examination helps educators move beyond merely acknowledging diversity to actively dismantling inequitable practices in their classrooms and schools, positioning them to serve all students better regardless of background. The final

reflection on desired dispositions empowers educators to create actionable plans for continued professional growth and anti-racist practice.

Four Corners: Educational Beliefs

The "Four Corners: Educational Beliefs" activity, whether conducted virtually or in a physical classroom setting, prompts students to contemplate and discuss their educational perspectives. This deliberative process is imperative and aimed at critical self reflection. This activity is most effective after instructors have established a rapport and have insight into their students. Instructors must diligently plan and organize these activities to ensure they are logistically sound. Preparation involves creating a list of predetermined educational beliefs that will be presented to the students. The instructor's understanding of the students becomes pivotal in selecting contextually relevant beliefs conducive to meaningful discussion. While instructors should encourage students to step outside their comfort zones, it is crucial not to single out individuals.

Each corner of the room is arranged to symbolize a scale ranging from "Strongly Disagree" to "Strongly Agree." Throughout the activity, students navigate to the corner that aligns with their stance on each presented educational belief. For instance, a belief such as "Multitasking is an effective and efficient way to learn" might be juxtaposed with another belief that challenges conventional perspectives, such as "Zero tolerance policies are making schools safer." The latter, deliberately designed to provoke thoughtful discussions, introduces the potential complexities of institutional issues linked to zero-tolerance policies and their differential impact on various individuals.

This activity is adaptable for online or hybrid courses using tools like Google Jamboard, allowing students to move between corners virtually. Discussions about beliefs can happen

through Zoom or chat boxes. Various factors like identity, upbringing, and school experiences shape educational beliefs. The goal is to make students reflect on their beliefs about education and understand why they hold them. The activity also encourages students to discuss their beliefs with peers, acknowledging differences. It helps build skills like empathy and communication by fostering open conversations. For future teachers, it's a valuable exercise in clarifying their educational philosophy and understanding why they choose to enter the field of education.

Informative Podcast Project

This informative podcast project assignment (see appendix 2) asks students to create an audio podcast exploring current educational research topics. Students research articles on their chosen topic, submit an outline showing interconnections between sources, and produce an audio podcast that connects research insights to course content. It is important to provide campus resources for technical support and optional equipment. An example topic a student can choose is cultural inclusivity in 7th grade mathematics. By choosing a topic that examines how traditional educational practices may disadvantage certain cultural groups in math classes and exploring alternative practices, the students demonstrate critical engagement with culturally responsive pedagogy. This assignment encourages students to not only research important educational issues like inclusive mathematics but also to communicate them in an accessible way that models the kind of inclusive communication they might use in their future classrooms.

The podcast assignment exemplifies culturally inclusive teaching by offering alternative modes of expression beyond traditional writing, allowing students to demonstrate knowledge through verbal communication. This multimodal approach honors diverse learning styles and communication preferences. Students can select research topics with personal or cultural relevance, examining educational issues through their unique perspectives and cultural lenses.

The podcast format encourages authentic voice and storytelling—communication approaches valued in many cultural traditions—while building digital literacy skills. Some examples of audiences can include peer educators, students, educational policy makers, school district leadership, parents and the larger community. The conversational nature of podcasting reflects inclusive pedagogical practices that emphasize collaborative knowledge construction. When implemented thoughtfully, this assignment creates space for students to address educational equity and cultural responsiveness through research-informed discussions, preparing them to become educators who approach their profession with both cultural humility and scholarly rigor.

Public K-12 Education & Teacher Preparation

The overwhelming whiteness of the U.S. teaching force represents not merely a demographic mismatch but a fundamental crisis in educational equity and cultural representation. While 79% of public school teachers are white, they disproportionately dominate classrooms serving students of color, constituting most teachers in schools with predominantly Hispanic (54%), Black (54%), Asian (60%), and American Indian/Alaska Native (61%) populations (Spiegelman, 2018). This pattern reflects and reinforces deeply entrenched systems of power that privilege white middle-class cultural norms while systematically devaluing the cultural wealth of communities of color (Sleeter, 2001; Gay, 2001; Yosso, 2005).

White teachers, often inadequately prepared for diverse classrooms, tend to view communities of color through a deficit lens that demands assimilation rather than cultural affirmation (Sleeter, 2001; Gay, 2001). This mindset manifests in concrete ways: through teacher biases, colorblind approaches that deny racial realities, and disproportionately harsh disciplinary actions that undermine students' racial identity development (Bracy, 2010; DeCuir-Gunby, 2009).

More troublingly, teacher education programs continue to reproduce these patterns.

Despite growing student diversity, these programs remain predominantly white and middle-class (Kumar & Hany, 2023). Research reveals that white preservice teachers often actively resist engaging with structural inequalities and racial equity work, choosing instead to cope through denial and ignorance (Sleeter, 2001). This resistance stands in stark contrast to preservice teachers of color, who typically demonstrate stronger commitment to multicultural teaching, social justice, and academic rigor for students of color.

Teacher education programs must fundamentally transform to prepare educators for diverse classrooms. Rather than treating cultural competence as a separate topic, programs must integrate critical analysis of race, power, and culture throughout their curriculum. This means equipping white educators with concrete tools to recognize and disrupt classroom inequities while creating environments that support racial identity development (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009).

Critically, teacher preparation must shift from viewing students of color as problems to be solved to recognizing them as bearers of valuable cultural wealth (Sleeter, 2001). Students of color already demonstrate resilience in navigating educational systems, bringing rich cultural resources that enhance learning for all. Drawing on Yosso's (2005) framework, teachers must learn to identify, validate, and build upon students' cultural capital - from linguistic diversity to navigational knowledge. This means moving beyond superficial celebrations of diversity to deeply integrating students' cultural resources into curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment to create truly culturally responsive learning environments.

Who we are & why we teach: Positionality Statements

Our diverse identities and experiences fundamentally shape how we understand and approach education and teach. Sharing our positionalities demonstrates how our different

perspectives enrich the field and illustrates the crucial role of identity in shaping educational practices (Holmes, 2020). Our varied backgrounds collectively strengthen our ability to reimagine educational psychology. We teach because we believe in education's transformative potential and its ability to actively confront inequity while affirming students' cultural wealth and power. Below are who we are and why we teach.

Corina De La Torre. My diverse identities as a first-generation Mexican American community organizer, mother, and woman have molded me into the research scholar and educator I am today. I strive to teach educational psychology from a decolonial perspective; despite the challenges, learning alongside my students and witnessing their growth has been rewarding and fulfilling. I believe that education is a powerful tool for liberation and achieving justice. As educators, we are responsible for actively dismantling harmful practices within our classrooms, regardless of the level of education we teach. We can reimagine and create a more equitable and inclusive educational environment by unlearning and deconstructing deficit and racialized colonial practices that are deeply rooted in our education systems. As an educator, I teach because I am committed to empowering my students with the skills and tools necessary to translate theory into practice by equipping them with resources, as described in this chapter. I teach to inspire and enable my students to make meaningful impact in the communities they will serve throughout their careers. As an educator and lifelong learner, I hope to continue contributing to creating a more equitable and inclusive future for all learners by embracing my own identities, co-learning with my students, and intentionally working towards dismantling oppressive structures within education.

Jaylene Patterson. My identity as a Black female has significantly influenced my educational journey as a student and educator. This unique perspective is particularly relevant to

this handbook, given the role of an instructor responsible for teaching Educational Psychology courses focusing on race and ethnicity issues. Through direct observation, these courses have the potential to benefit students and spark crucial discussions about social matters intertwined with race. The bias in positionality revolves around a deep-seated passion for the future integration of the fields of race and ethnicity with Educational Psychology. The central theme is the belief that Educational Psychology can effectively prepare pre-service teachers and students to engage critically in conversations about race and the experiences of diverse populations. The positionality as an instructor with a particular focus on issues of race has afforded a firsthand view of the transformations occurring in student beliefs and their increasing comfort when engaging with race-related topics. This perspective is indispensable when advocating for the enduring inclusion of these themes within the Educational Psychology curriculum.

Jetta Lewis. I am a black woman who embarked on my post-secondary educational journey as a first-generation student and Pell Grant recipient. My identity has empowered me to engage in improving teaching and learning in education. Given my current and previous roles as an educator, researcher, student services specialist, advisor, and mentor for faculty and students, I have witnessed what success looks like, considering racial and cultural factors that may impact one's ability to succeed. Educators can provide a more inclusive environment and comprehensive education by incorporating and engaging in race-related curriculum in Educational Psychology courses. My professional goal is to continue promoting student success while incorporating the best pedagogical and community approach through a culturally responsive and appropriate lens.

Anastacia Cole. As a white/Japanese woman, I have navigated the intersectionality of my cultural background across different contexts and roles, giving me insights into the importance of

embracing and fore fronting diverse perspectives in education. My experiences as a former high school teacher and pre-service teacher educator also fuel my commitment to understanding and emphasizing the importance of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities in research and practice around teaching and learning. I have experienced and witnessed educational practices and structures that erase or treat students' racial and cultural backgrounds as deficits. So, one important goal in my work is to use and advocate for practices and policies that value stakeholders' backgrounds. Currently and in my future profession, I am committed to doing impactful evaluation work that empowers decision-makers with information to improve diverse populations' educational experiences and well-being.

Mizuho Tatebayashi. I am a Japanese national, a woman, and a proud descendant of farmers born and raised in Japan. Diverse educational roles have shaped my professional journey. Commencing my career as an instructor at Japanese high schools, I gained valuable insights into the importance of educational psychology. Subsequently, I expanded my expertise as an administrator and a student scholar in international education, fostering a keen interest in global educational dynamics. Having relocated to the U.S. just over a year ago, I am currently exploring the meaning of being an Asian/East Asian in the American context and a first-generation immigrant. I commit to this ongoing exploration, coupled with my professional background, to contribute to discussions on racial, ethnic, and cultural identity in teaching Educational Psychology.

Dr. Christy Byrd. I am a Black woman from a low-income background who was drawn to educational psychology because of its potential to transform education from something for the privileged few to something everyone can access. As an undergraduate, I was inspired to see that the work of Kenneth and Mamie Clark was cited in the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme

Court decision. Their work spoke to the specific experiences of Black people without trying to generalize to all of society. Yet, their findings speak to the universal need for belonging and self regard. My work as an educational psychologist and instructor is rooted in the belief that to reach those universal needs, we must see individuals for their full, whole selves and appreciate the communities they come from. As a mid-career scholar, I am invested in promoting the perspectives of those in our field who have been marginalized by organizing workshops and presentations through the Race and Diversity Committee and in bringing together early-career scholars like the authors of this chapter.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has been driven by a fundamental commitment to advancing the ongoing calls for the centralization of educational psychology (Kumar et al., in press). Emphasizing the critical need to integrate race-, ethnic-, and culture-conscious perspectives in teaching educational psychology courses, our primary objective is to provide a practical guide informed by our teaching experiences. In other words, this chapter sought to provide more actionable strategies in educational psychology to effectively prepare students for diverse educational settings, both teaching practices and research.

The chapter provided a brief explanation of anti-racism in educational psychology and an overview of the development of ethnic and racial identity, followed by a comprehensive review of relevant learning theories and their practical applications to create a race-reimagined classroom (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014). The main takeaways for education practitioners are: (1) While foundational learning theories offer a good foundation for pre-service teachers to comprehend the cognitive and developmental aspects of Educational Psychology, we need to encourage our students to take challenges and actively work to develop a course that is both

critical and mindful of issues related to race and ethnicity. Actual educational materials may include news articles, videos, podcasts, and academic journals, which offer students real-life examples that present diverse perspectives and practices. (2) Fostering a race-reimagined classroom (DeCuir-Gunby & Schutz, 2014) involves encouraging pre-service teachers to understand the dynamics of race, ethnicity, gender, and language power in their future classrooms. Educators can set the tone for such classrooms by utilizing culturally relevant learning outcomes (see the example list in the chapter) and re-creating a syllabus to have all students feel valued and seen. Including diverse educational materials with multiple perspectives will cultivate critical thinking in pre-service teachers. (3) Deficit approaches in education negatively impact minority students. The majority of the teachers in the American education system identify as white, which contributes to these issues. It is crucial for teacher preparation programs to acknowledge the challenges related to teacher identity and readiness, aiming to enhance the training of educators and improve the support for students of color. Furthermore, recognizing students of color as peer educators with cultural wealth is important for fostering culturally responsive teaching and learning.

The chapter is significant because it explores crucial issues in teaching educational psychology, focusing on its practicality to prepare future educators to create culturally responsive classrooms. The chapter advocates for a transformative shift in teacher preparation programs to instill critical thinking and pedagogies that disrupt classroom inequities and biases. This will meet the needs of diverse student populations and contribute to the educators' lifelong process of learning and maturity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Critical Self-Reflection Essay

“Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly.” -Paulo Freire

As peer educators, many of you have been asked to consider your positionality: the important aspects of your identity (race, class, gender, age, etc.) However, how do you consider your positions when you engage with students? Whether you are working in an after-school program, a low-income school, or a museum, you are encountering different ways of being, knowing, and identifying with certain groups. How can we critically reflect upon ourselves and our world as educators?

Write a 3-4 page essay (double-spaced) based on the questions below. The purpose of the essay is to allow us to “re-examine ourselves” before we begin committing ourselves as educators. We may feel uncomfortable or guilty when examining these assumptions, but remember, we all have biases and assumptions, and reflecting is the first step to dismantling them.

1. What were the compositions of my schools, neighborhoods, and family (ie. race and ethnic compositions, class, gender, cultures) growing up?
2. How frequently and what types of interactions did I have with individuals different from my own growing up?
3. What were my family’s attitudes about my own race/ethnicity and the race/ethnicity of others?
4. Who were the primary persons that helped to shape my perspectives of individuals from different groups? How were those opinions formed?

5. How did family, friends, media, or books influence my worldview (ie. race, class, gender, religion, etc.)? How were those opinions formed?
6. What incidents happened to me personally? What historical events or experiences made me aware of my own prejudice or of prejudice of the country?
7. (*On race*) What activities may I have been involved in throughout my life that may have supported or worked against racism?
8. Upon answering these *guiding* questions, what dispositions do I want to develop when I am an educator? In this answer, you may also revisit Question #1 and reflect on “What are the compositions of my schools, neighborhoods, and family now? How are my dispositions, attitudes, and actions changing (if so) and how can I continue to reflect and change?”

Appendix 2. Informative Podcast Project

In the field of education, we are examining countless new trends and ideas proposed to enhance student learning and achievement. In this class, we will engage in discussions about these conceptions and new developments. With this project, you will produce a podcast capturing essentially a conversation about a relevant and current research topic in education. You will research articles related to the topic. Discussion themes or points must connect back to the lecture and overall course. More details concerning the requirements will be provided in class and on Moodle. If you require assistance in creating your podcast, please make an appointment with METRC in Poe Hall (<https://ced.ncsu.edu/metric>). You may also borrow a podcasting kit from the NCSU Libraries (<https://www.lib.ncsu.edu/devices/podcasting-kit>).

- *Podcast Outline – Due week 10*

This outline should include brief descriptions of the articles that you will be using and how they are interconnected (i.e., methodology, theoretical frameworks, and major findings).

- *Audio Podcast – Due*

Your podcast should be audio only in MP3 or AAC audio format.

CHAPTER 4 DIVIDED BY DESIGN: SCHOOL SEGREGATION TRENDS IN NORTH CAROLINA'S URBAN AND RURAL DISTRICTS

Executive Summary

North Carolina is experiencing substantial demographic shifts, with an increasingly diverse and multiracial student population. However, despite this growing diversity, the education system grapples with persistent segregation and inequity patterns. Economic and racial-ethnic segregation present one of the most alarming barriers to achieving educational equity (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2019). When students are segregated by race and class, a growing reality for Black and Hispanic students and also known as double segregation, they often attend schools with fewer resources, less challenging curricula, and lower quality facilities, all of which can hinder their academic progress and limit their prospects (Frankenberg et al, 2019).

In this report, I analyzed school enrollment and segregation trends at the district level in eight school districts in selected rural and urban settings between 2002 and 2022. I measured desegregation using concentration and dissimilarity index measures. Key findings from the analysis include:

Selected Rural Districts:

- From 2002 to 2022, dissimilarity indices decreased substantially in Halifax County (0.814 to 0.391), Vance (0.332 to 0.206), and Robeson (0.506 to 0.409)
- The continuity of Halifax County's three-districts structure highlights the racial differences between the three school districts.
- From 2002 to 2022, the Hispanic student populations grew in the six rural school districts (Vance County Public Schools, Public Schools of Robeson County and Halifax County Public Schools

with three sub-districts: Halifax County Schools, Weldon City Schools, and Roanoke Rapids City Schools), with Robeson showing the highest increase to 20.4%

- Rural districts experienced declining enrollment from 2002 to 2022, leading to school consolidations

Selected Urban Districts:

- Dissimilarity indices increased or remained stable in the three selected urban districts (Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Durham, and Guilford County) from 2002 to 2022
- From 2002 to 2022, the share of intensely segregated schools rose substantially in Charlotte-Mecklenburg (16% to 46%), Durham (24% to 48%), and Guilford (14% to 33%)
- The three selected urban districts (Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Durham, and Guilford County) experienced substantial Hispanic student growth from 2002 to 2022, particularly in Durham (8.9% to 34.17%)
- The three selected urban districts (Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Durham, and Guilford County) expanded from 2002 to 2022, with Charlotte-Mecklenburg growing from 134 to 180 schools

The divergent patterns between the selected rural and urban districts demonstrate how demographic shifts affect segregation differently based on local context. While dissimilarity indices show a substantial decrease between 2002 and 2022 in rural districts, this likely reflects population changes rather than successful integration. The selected urban districts face increasing racial isolation despite past integration efforts, suggesting the need for targeted policy approaches based on district type and demographic trends. The policy recommendations based on this report's findings include:

- Fully funding the Leandro Comprehensive Remedial Plan.
- Designing intentional integration plans that avoid burdening communities of color
- Consolidating segregated rural multi-district systems, like Halifax, through state intervention
- Implementing stronger controls on the selected urban school expansion to prevent segregation
- Providing targeted support for growing student populations, like Hispanic students
- Maintaining proactive integration policies and multi-sector collaboration

Introduction

The 1954 Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education* was historically seen as a triumph in declaring racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional. At the time, it was believed that ending legal segregation would end racism. However, despite this landmark ruling, U.S. public schools continue to struggle with desegregation efforts and providing equal access to education. Today, more than half of Hispanic, Black, and Pacific Islander students attended public schools in which the combined enrollment of students of color was at least 75 percent of total enrollment, and these same groups, along with American Indian/Alaska Native students, disproportionately attended high-poverty and mid-high poverty schools (Ayscue et al, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). This means that these students are highly concentrated in schools that are predominantly non-white and have limited exposure to diverse peer groups. Research shows that racial segregation in schools systematically leads to inequities, including fewer educational opportunities and lower achievement for students of color (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012). Recent studies have shown that racial segregation in K-12 education is now linked to longer-term outcomes, including reduced college attainment and decreased long-term employment and career earnings potential (Frankenberg et al., 2019). This policy brief highlights critical data on the intense resegregation in North Carolina school districts

over the past two decades. The data shows that growing racial isolation and segregation in NC public schools have undermined and will continue to undermine the promise of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling.

Furthermore, the current political climate in the U.S. has made public school environments more challenging for teachers and students, complicating equity efforts to serve and recognize the growing diversity among student populations (American Library Association, 2021). Ongoing debates over issues like critical race theory, immigration policy, and book bans have increased polarization and aggression in public discourse about race (Pen America, 2022). This has negatively impacted public schools, where student populations have become more diverse even as the broader climate has grown hostile. In North Carolina and across the country, public school enrollment has increased substantially for students of color compared to previous eras. However, recent racially divisive political rhetoric and policies have complicated educators' efforts to make all students feel welcome and included in public schools. Acknowledging these broader societal trends that shape public school climates and adding new tension for segregated schools is essential.

The brief begins with an overview of the historical roots of segregation to provide an understanding of how past policies and court decisions have shaped current conditions in North Carolina that facilitate and constrain desegregation efforts today. It then provides an empirical analysis of school segregation trends in eight North Carolina school districts using the dissimilarity index and racial concentration measures. The brief concludes with policy recommendations that support school desegregation efforts.

Roots of Segregation in Public Education

North Carolina's commitment to public education dates back to 1776 when its first ratified constitution included a provision for public education in Article XLI, mandating that the legislature establish schools for the "convenient instruction of youth." This groundbreaking constitutional provision set an early precedent for state-supported public education. The state reaffirmed this commitment in 1868 during the Reconstruction era, with Article IX stating, "The General Assembly shall provide by taxation and otherwise for a general and uniform system of public schools, wherein tuition shall be free of charge to all the children of the State between the ages of six and twenty-one years." Despite these constitutional provisions, the implementation of equal access for all has yet to be fully realized in North Carolina.

Access to equal public education in North Carolina has always been racialized. Race is persistent in determining educational opportunities for students of color (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Following the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, which legalized the "separate but equal" doctrine, racial segregation was enforced in public schools until 1954. That year, *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal," overturning segregation. However, desegregation efforts in North Carolina did not begin until the late 1960s and early 1970s due to state and national resistance to racial integration. After consistent court rulings and threats to withhold federal funding, many states, including North Carolina, agreed to integrate Black and white schools (Scott & Porter, 2018).

For example, North Carolina's Pupil Assignment Act of 1955 was part of Southern states' efforts to resist school integration. The law shifted state power to local school boards, which allowed school boards to decide which students went to which schools (Campbell, 2006). While not mentioning race directly, it let school boards create rules that made it hard for Black students

to be reassigned to white schools. This kept schools separate in practice, even though segregation was no longer legal (Scott & Porter, 2018). The 1956 Pearsall Plan of North Carolina also legally complied with federal demand, although it did the opposite for school integration after the *Brown v. Board* decision. Very similar to what we see today with school choice, white families were given public funding for private schools to avoid integration (Casey, 2022). It even allowed towns to close integrated schools by public vote if integration caused issues and continued local control over where students went to school. North Carolina's Pupil Assignment Act and Pearsall Plan were eventually rendered ineffective through federal court decisions, civil rights legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and overall changes in social attitudes. Despite these laws ending, educational inequity and evolving forms of school segregation continue in North Carolina and the United States (Nordstrom, 2022).

During this period, a national landmark study in education research and policy was released called the Equality of Educational Opportunity Report in 1966, also known as the Coleman Report. This comprehensive study, involving over 600,000 students and teachers across the U.S., found a substantial achievement gap between Black and white students and continues to be foundational, unequal evidence in many Supreme Court desegregation cases and education research over the past six decades.

In 1971, the NAACP sued the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school district on behalf of Vera and Darius Swann, parents of a six-year-old North Carolina public school student, for its lack of desegregated schools. At the time, less than 5 percent of African American students attended integrated schools (Duignan, 2025).

The Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Swann family in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*, placing the responsibility of school integration at the district level and requiring transportation as a permissible tool for desegregating schools. This decision gained national attention and was adopted by public schools nationwide. However, after 30 years, in 2002, the U.S. Supreme Court nullified the decision, claiming the remedial practice was no longer needed because schools had become desegregated.

In some of North Carolina's school districts, efforts to maintain integrated schools extended into the early 2000s. For example, Wake County Public School System, one of the state's 116 districts, led this effort by implementing a strategic student assignment policy from 2000 to 2010 that directly considered socioeconomic status and academic achievement levels, rather than race. This policy required district schools to have no more than 40% of the student population eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) and 25% of students performing below grade level. This meant that WCPSS reassigned students to create more socioeconomically and achievement-balanced schools across the district. Despite the mandatory assignment policy plan substantially improving academic performance across all student groups, it ended due to political pushback and growing preference for neighborhood schools (Frankenberg & Taylor, 2017).

The history of desegregating schools has shown both progress and setbacks over time. Today, Black and Hispanic students across the state and country attend schools that are more segregated than in 1970 (Ayscue et al., 2024; Fiel, 2013). Research shows that school segregation systematically leads to inequities, including fewer educational opportunities and lower achievement for students of color (Mickelson & Nkomo, 2012). These national disparities extend to academic success, reduced college attainment, and decreased long-term employment and earnings potential post-graduation (Frankenberg et al., 2019). This history demonstrates that

while North Carolina has made constitutional commitments to public education and efforts toward integration, the struggle for equal educational opportunities continues. The persistent influence of race on educational access and outcomes highlights the ongoing need for policies and practices that address both racial and socioeconomic segregation in schools.

The Battle for a “Sound Basic Education”

To date, North Carolina has failed to provide all students and their public schools with equitable funding. *Leandro v. North Carolina* (1994) was filed by families and school boards from five low-wealth counties (Hoke, Halifax, Robeson, Cumberland, and Vance) challenging the state's unequal school funding system. These counties, which served predominantly students of color and low-income students, argued that their schools were severely underfunded compared to wealthier districts. This case is particularly substantial because it indirectly challenges the lingering effects of segregation through the lens of school funding, highlighting how historical patterns of segregation continue to impact educational opportunities today through economic disparities.

Leandro v. The State of North Carolina initially settled over 30 years ago, resulting in a State Supreme Court ruling that North Carolina must uphold its constitutional obligation to provide every student access to a "sound basic education," requiring all public schools to be equitably funded. Unlike the federal constitution, North Carolina's constitution provides this educational right. In 2021, Superior Court Judge David Lee ordered a comprehensive plan to define "sound basic education" by 2028. As a result, it was found that implementing this plan would cost \$1.7 billion. Superior Court Judge David Lee ordered the state to transfer the total cost from its reserves to fund the comprehensive remedial plan to address educational inequities across North Carolina. The decades-long delay stems from state legislatures' constant resistance

to reallocating the required funding, claiming budgetary constraints, and questioning the court's authority to mandate specific funding levels. The state's failure to fully fund Leandro's mandates continues to disproportionately impact low-income and minority communities and schools, maintaining the same resource disparities and segregation that the case sought to remedy 30 years ago.

While Leandro's funding mandates remain unfulfilled, the state's growing investment in school vouchers and choice programs diverts public education funds away from historically underfunded districts, intensifying segregation patterns. The same state legislature that resists funding Leandro is actively diverting public school money to expand private school vouchers and corporate tax cuts (Davis, 2023). This pattern mirrors North Carolina's historical response to desegregation: after *Brown v. Board of Education*, the state provided vouchers to white families to attend "segregation academies"- private schools specifically created to maintain racial segregation by allowing white students to avoid integrated public schools. Today's expanded voucher programs, while not explicitly segregationist, continue this legacy by enabling the transfer of public funds away from public schools.

School Choice Drives Segregation

School choice in North Carolina operates primarily through two mechanisms - charter schools and vouchers - both of which have evolved substantially since their inception and impact patterns of school segregation. While these programs were initially designed to expand educational opportunities, research shows they have often contributed to increased racial and socioeconomic isolation in schools (Ayscue et al, 2018; Carlson et al, 2020). Furthermore, school choice policies have consistently provided an advantage to the dominant cultural group (Cobb &

Irizarry, 2020). The following sections examine how charter schools and vouchers have developed in North Carolina and their impact on school segregation.

School Charters

North Carolina's charter school landscape has evolved substantially since the 1996 Charter School Act. The legislation in North Carolina authorized the creation and operation of charter schools in the state, setting a limit of 100 charter schools statewide and requiring charter schools' racial and ethnic demographics to "reasonably reflect" the demographics of their local school district. This law remained largely unchanged until Senate Bill 8 in 2011 removed the 100-school cap, leading to substantial charter school expansion across the state. Research shows North Carolina's charter schools are often racially segregated, with most serving either majority white or majority Black student populations and few achieving significant diversity. (Ayscue et al., 2016; Bifulco & Ladd, 2017).

School Vouchers

North Carolina's Opportunity Scholarship Program, established in 2014, has evolved from its initial purpose of helping low-income families access school choice to becoming a broader mechanism affecting school segregation. Recent legislative changes have expanded eligibility regardless of income level. However, research shows that the reallocation of public school funding and unrestricted school choice through vouchers have primarily benefited the students and families with advantages (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2013). Private schools receiving these vouchers operate under different rules than public schools - they can select students based on various criteria and are not required to provide services like transportation or meal programs upon which many low-income students depend (Eckes et al., 2016). This structure, combined

with limited oversight and accountability, has implications for school segregation patterns and educational equity across the state (Ayscue et al., 2024).

Segregated Schools and Unequal Outcomes

North Carolina's public schools face mounting challenges as student demographics rapidly shift, deepening academic disparities for students of color. This demographic transformation, coupled with persistent systemic inequities in school funding, resources, and opportunities, continues to widen achievement gaps and limit educational outcomes for students of color. One of the state's rapidly growing populations is the Hispanic-Latino population, surging from 77,000 in 1990 to over 1 million by 2020, representing nearly 10% of the total population (Cline, 2023). This shift is particularly pronounced in public schools, where Hispanic students constitute over 20% of statewide enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). As the Hispanic student population grows, the severity of school segregation in North Carolina continues, too, where one in four Black students and nearly one in five Hispanic students attend intensely segregated schools (Ayscue et al., 2024).

Data reveals persistent achievement gaps for students of color. 2024 high school graduation rates varied substantially by race and economic status. Asian students had the highest graduation rate at 95%, white students had the second highest rate at 90%, and Black students had the lowest rate at 84% (MyFutureNC Dashboard, 2024). Hispanic and Multiracial students had a rate of 83%, while American Indian students had the lowest graduation rate at 82%. Economic factors further compound these disparities, as low-income students graduate at just 82% - a gap that continues to widen (MyFutureNC Dashboard, 2024). These disparities in educational outcomes are exacerbated by the substantial gaps in school funding between districts serving predominantly white students and those serving mostly

students of color (Reardon, 2016). EdBuild's (2019) national district analysis exposed a stark \$23 billion funding gap between predominantly white and non-white school districts, despite serving similar student populations. Systemic policies, including unequal school funding, budgeting, and resource allocation practices, directly impact student opportunities, creating a cycle where schools serving predominantly students of color receive less funding, fewer experienced teachers, and limited access to advanced programs compared to majority-white schools (Ford & Triplett, 2019).

Benefits of School Integration

School integration benefits students from all racial backgrounds who attend racially integrated and adequately funded schools (Johnson et al., 2019). Studies show that diverse school populations contribute to reduced achievement gaps, improved access to quality education, and broader societal benefits (Ayscue et al., 2017; Coleman et al., 1966; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Reardon, 2016). The benefits extend beyond academics. Integration promotes better intergroup understanding, increases empathy, and reduces prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Long-term outcomes include higher educational attainment, better earnings, improved health outcomes, and increased civic engagement (Ayscue et al., 2017).

Research reveals that racial segregation's impact on achievement gaps is primarily linked to differences in exposure to school poverty between white and minority students (Reardon, 2016). Importantly, racial composition affects achievement even when accounting for socioeconomic status, suggesting the need for comprehensive integration strategies that address both racial and socioeconomic diversity (Ayscue et al., 2017). The body of research provides compelling evidence for maintaining and pursuing integrated school environments as a key strategy for promoting educational equity and improving student outcomes. Ultimately, all

students benefit from attending racially and socioeconomically diverse schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Data and Methods

This policy brief explores segregation trends for selected North Carolina public school districts over the last two decades. These districts include three urban (Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Schools, Durham Public Schools, Guilford County Schools) and three rural (Halifax County Public Schools, Vance County Public Schools, and Public Schools of Robeson County). After collecting data, Halifax County Public Schools showed a three-subdistrict structure, making this analysis a total of eight school districts within six county districts. Halifax County Public Schools' three sub-districts are: Halifax County Schools, Weldon City Schools, and Roanoke Rapids City Schools. The six county school districts were selected to examine how segregation patterns differ between selected urban and rural schools in North Carolina. The counties selected represent growing, diverse geographic regions and demographic compositions.

The data was retrieved from the North Carolina Public Schools Statistical Profile and the Urban Institute Education Data Explorer. More specifically, student demographics (i.e., gender, race, and ethnicity) and school type (i.e., elementary, middle, or high school) were collected for the academic years of 2001-2002, 2011-2012, and 2021-2022. Looking at these years allows for analysis of student demographic changes, specifically the growth of students of color over 20 years. Geographically, looking at the selected urban and rural districts provides a greater understanding of the state's trends in school resegregation. This is necessary because school diversity is associated with student outcomes such as graduation rates and academic achievement (Ayscue et al., 2024).

Findings

Analyzing school segregation patterns requires a combination of absolute and relative measures to provide a comprehensive understanding of school segregation patterns (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). This study used the dissimilarity index (relative) and concentration (absolute). Concentration analysis offers direct insights into racial isolation by revealing the percentage of students of color in each school, making it possible to track demographic changes, identify schools with extreme racial isolation (over 90% of students of color), and understand how students experience segregation at the school level (Massey & Denton, 1988). The dissimilarity index, meanwhile, provides a standardized measure (0 to 1) that enables comparison of segregation across different districts and periods, measuring the evenness of distribution between racial groups and indicating what percentage of students would need to change schools to achieve perfect desegregation (Massey & Denton, 1988). When used together, these metrics provide a more nuanced and complete picture of segregation patterns, helping to distinguish between demographic shifts and actual desegregation efforts.

This study specifically tracked overall enrollment of students of color and Hispanic student data to understand segregation patterns in North Carolina schools from 2002 to 2022. While students of color data show broader patterns of racial isolation, Hispanic enrollment data reveal substantial demographic changes, with notable increases in the selected urban areas (Durham: 8.9% to 34.17%) and rural districts (Robeson: 4.27% to 20.42%). Examining both metrics shows how North Carolina's growing Hispanic enrollment is related to but not reduced by existing segregation patterns. Below are the research questions that guided the data analysis.

Research Question 1: What are the enrollment and segregation trends in the selected eight school districts between 2002 and 2022?

Research Question 2: What are the enrollment and segregation differences across selected urban districts (Wake, Durham, Guilford) and selected rural districts (Halifax*, Vance, Robeson) between 2002 and 2022?

Research Question 3: What impact has the growth of the Hispanic student population had on school segregation patterns in North Carolina in the last two decades?

The analysis of North Carolina's school segregation patterns from 2002 to 2022 reveals complex demographic shifts and persistent educational inequities across the selected urban and rural districts. The study examined six school districts- three urban (Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Durham, and Guilford County), three rural (Halifax, Vance, and Robeson), and three subdistricts within Halifax schools (Halifax County, Weldon City, and Roanoke Rapids City Schools)- tracking changes in racial composition, enrollment patterns, and segregation indices. The data shows contrasting demographic trajectories between urban and rural areas, with urban districts experiencing substantial growth while most rural districts faced declining enrollment. Halifax County's unique three-district structure (Halifax County Schools, Weldon City Schools, and Roanoke Rapids City Schools) is a striking example of how administrative boundaries can maintain racial isolation. All districts saw substantial increases in Hispanic student populations, though urban areas experienced more dramatic growth. Dissimilarity indices and school-level racial concentration data indicate that, despite increasing diversity in student populations, patterns of segregation have either persisted or intensified, with both urban and rural districts showing high concentrations of students of color by 2022. Urban districts demonstrated more dynamic demographic shifts, while rural districts maintained more established patterns of racial isolation, suggesting that historical segregation patterns continue to shape educational opportunities in North Carolina's public schools.

Number of School Districts in Rural vs. Urban

Table 1 shows stark urban-rural differences in the selected North Carolina school district development from 2002 to 2022. While urban districts like Charlotte-Mecklenburg, Guilford County, and Durham County showed substantial growth in their number of schools (with increases of 46, 28, and 13, respectively), rural districts stagnated or declined. This pattern reflects broader demographic and economic shifts, with urban areas expanding while rural communities face challenges maintaining their educational infrastructure (Lichter & Johnson, 2021).

Table 1. Total Number of Schools Per District in 2002, 2012, and 2022

School District	Total Number of Schools								
	2002			2012			2022		
Rural Schools									
Halifax Schools*	15	3	4	11	4	4	11	4	5
Public Schools of Robeson County	40			41			35		
Vance County Public Schools	15			16			16		
Urban Schools									
Charlotte Mecklenburg Public Schools	134			163			180		
Durham Public Schools	41			54			54		
Guilford County Public Schools	98			121			126		

Note: Halifax has three different school districts: Halifax County Schools | Weldon City Schools | Roanoke Rapids City Schools

Particularly notable in Table 1 is the complex situation in rural counties like Halifax, which operates under three separate school districts (Halifax County, Weldon City, and Roanoke Rapids City Schools) and saw an overall school decline. Similarly, Robeson County decreased from 40 to 35 schools, while Vance County remained almost unchanged. These trends raise substantial concerns about educational equity, resource distribution, and the long-term sustainability of rural education systems, highlighting the growing disparities between selected urban and rural educational opportunities in North Carolina. The following section covers enrollment by race within these districts and subdistricts during 2002-2022.

Enrollment by Race

The demographic data from Table 2 highlights the three rural North Carolina school districts' dramatic shifts between 2002 and 2023. Halifax and Vance County schools experienced severe enrollment declines (46.9% and 41%, respectively), while Robeson County showed growth with an 18.68% increase. These contrasting patterns (Table 2) suggest different challenges and opportunities in each rural community, with some facing substantial population loss while others maintain or grow their student base.

Table 2. Three Rural Public School Districts Enrollment By Race

Total Enrollment		By Race							
		American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Pacific Island	Two or More Races	Total students of color	White
Halifax County Schools									
2002-2003	5864	5.2%	5.1%	88.5%	0.7%	n/a	n/a	94.4%	5.6%

2012-2013	3,665	5.9%	0.9%	85.8%	2.6%	0.1%	0.7%	95.2%	4.8%
2022-2023	2,062	6.8%	0.2%	82.1%	4.0%	0.5%	3.0%	96.7%	3.3%
<i>64.8% decrease in total enrollment</i>									
Weldon City Schools									
2002-2003	1,123	0.2%	0.2%	96.8%	0.3%	n/a	n/a	97.4%	2.6%
2012-2013	989	0.4%	0.5%	94.2%	0.4%	0	1.2%	96.8%	3.2%
2022-2023	679	0.1%	0.1%	93.4%	1.3%	0.3%	2.1%	97.3%	2.7%
<i>39.5% decrease in total enrollment</i>									
Roanoke Rapids City Schools									
2002-2003	3,065	0.4%	1.5%	22.7%	1.2%	n/a	n/a	25.8%	74.2%
2012-2013	2,988	0.6%	1.5%	22.8%	4.0%	0.2%	1.8%	31.0%	69.0%
2022-2023	5,335	0.3%	2.2%	27.8%	8.5%	0.1%	4.1%	42.9%	57.1%
<i>74.1% increase in total enrollment</i>									

The racial composition across all three districts (Table 2) substantially transformed during this period. In 2002-2022, Hispanic student populations grew substantially in all districts, most notably in Robeson County, which increased from 4.3% to 20.4%. Meanwhile, between

2002 and 2023, the white student population decreased considerably across all districts, with Vance County showing the most dramatic decline from 28.4% to 12.1%. Black student enrollment between 2002 and 2023 also showed varying trends, with Halifax seeing a notable decrease from 69.3% to 57.1%. Robeson County, from 2002 to 2023, maintained its unique demographic profile with a large American Indian population (around 40%), though this, too, showed a slight decline over the 20 years.

These changes reflect broader societal shifts in rural communities, particularly the increasing diversity of student populations and the challenges of maintaining enrollment in rural areas (Center for Rural Policy and Development, 2009). Introducing new demographic categories like "Pacific Islander" and "Two or More Races" after 2002 also indicates more nuanced tracking of student demographics over time. Together, these trends paint a picture of rural schools in transition, facing both demographic diversification and, in some cases, substantial enrollment challenges.

Table 2a. Halifax County Schools Sub-Districts Enrollment by Race

Total Enrollment		By Race							
		American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Pacific Island	Two or More Races	Total students of color	White
Halifax County Schools									
2002-2003	5864	5.2%	5.1%	88.5%	0.7%	n/a	n/a	94.4%	5.6%
2012-2013	3,665	5.9%	0.9%	85.8%	2.6%	0.1%	0.7%	95.2%	4.8%
2022-2023	2,062	6.8%	0.2%	82.1%	4.0%	0.5%	3.0%	96.7%	3.3%

<i>64.8% decrease in total enrollment</i>									
Weldon City Schools									
2002-2003	1,123	0.2%	0.2%	96.8%	0.3%	n/a	n/a	97.4%	2.6%
2012-2013	989	0.4%	0.5%	94.2%	0.4%	0	1.2%	96.8%	3.2%
2022-2023	679	0.1%	0.1%	93.4%	1.3%	0.3%	2.1%	97.3%	2.7%
<i>39.5% decrease in total enrollment</i>									
Roanoke Rapids City Schools									
2002-2003	3,065	0.4%	1.5%	22.7%	1.2%	n/a	n/a	25.8%	74.2%
2012-2013	2,988	0.6%	1.5%	22.8%	4.0%	0.2%	1.8%	31.0%	69.0%
2022-2023	5,335	0.3%	2.2%	27.8%	8.5%	0.1%	4.1%	42.9%	57.1%
<i>74.1% increase in total enrollment</i>									

Table 2a shows the three sub-districts within the Halifax School District and their enrollment by race from 2002 to 2023. Throughout the past two decades, Halifax County Schools and Weldon City Schools maintained incredibly high concentrations of students of color (96.7% and 97.3%, respectively), while Roanoke Rapids City Schools remained majority white (57.1%). These demographics suggest persistent segregation within the county's educational system. The enrollment trends (Table 2a) further highlight disparities within Halifax: Roanoke Rapids (the majority-white district) grew by 74%. In comparison, in 2002-2023, Halifax County

and Weldon City Schools experienced severe 65% and 40% declines, respectively. The maintenance of three separate districts within one county likely creates inefficiencies in resource allocation and perpetuates educational inequities. Despite some demographic shifts, in 2022-2023, particularly in Hispanic student populations across all districts, the overall patterns of racial isolation persist, raising serious questions about educational equity and access in Halifax County.

Table 3. Urban Public School Enrollment By Race

Total Enrollment		American Indian or Alaska Native	Asian	Black	Hispanic	Pacific Island	Two or More Races	Total Students of Color	White
Guilford County Schools									
2002-2003	65,396	0.7%	4.3%	43.5%	4.8%	n/a	n/a	53.2%	46.8%
2012-2013	71,995	0.6%	5.6%	40.6%	11.0%	0.2%	3.9%	61.7%	38.3%
2022-2023	67,817	0.3%	6.8%	42.0%	17.8%	0.1%	4.8%	71.8%	28.2%
<i>3.7% increase in total enrollment</i>									
Durham Public Schools System									
2002-2003	30,511	.3%	2.3%	59.1%	9.0%	n/a	n/a	70.7%	29.3%
2012-2013	32,654	0.3%	2.4%	51.3%	22.3%	0.1%	2.9%	79.4%	20.6%
2022-2023	31,360	0.1%	1.9%	39.8%	34.2%	0.1%	4.7%	80.9%	19.1%
<i>2.8% increase in total enrollment</i>									

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools									
2002-2003	109,767	0	5.8%	53.9%	29.2%	n/a	n/a	89.0%	11.0%
2012-2013	137,942	0.5%	5.1%	42.1%	17.4%	0	2.5%	67.5%	32.5%
2022-2023	140,404	0.2%	7.1%	36.3%	28.5%	0.1%	3.1%	75.2%	24.8%
<i>27.9% increase in total enrollment</i>									

Table 3. highlights that Charlotte-Mecklenburg, the largest selected urban district, grew substantially from 109,767 to 140,404 students from 2002 to 2023. In comparison of 2002 and 2022, the student racial composition shifted notably, with the Black student population decreasing from 53.9% to 36.3%, while Asian enrollment increased to 7%. From 2002 to 2023, the Hispanic population remained relatively stable at around 28-29%. The district maintained a high percentage of Students of Color over the two decades, though the distribution among racial groups changed substantially.

Durham Public Schools and Guilford County Schools experienced different trends. Between 2002 and 2023, Durham's enrollment remained relatively stable at around 31,000 students but saw a dramatic increase in Hispanic students (8.9% to 34.2%), while Black student enrollment decreased (59.1% to 39.8%). In 2002-2023, Guilford County initially grew from 65,396 to 71,995 students by 2012-2013 but then declined to 67,817 by 2022-2023. Like the other districts, Guilford in 2002-2023 saw increasing diversity, with Hispanic enrollment growing from 4.8% to 17.8% and Asian enrollment rising from 4.3% to 6.8%.

Index of Dissimilarity (D) Findings

The dissimilarity indices used in this analysis measure how evenly student groups are distributed across schools in a district, ranging from 0 (perfect integration, where the proportion of each group is identical in every school) to 1 (complete segregation, where groups are entirely separated). To understand these numbers practically, an index of 0.500 means approximately 50% of students from one group would need to change schools to achieve an even distribution across the district (Massey & Denton, 1988).

Table 4. Dissimilarity Index for Rural Schools Among White and Hispanic Students

District	Year	Dissimilarity Index (w/tw-h/th)
Halifax Schools*	2002	0.4835240968
	2012	0.3763160542
	2022	0.2389487507
Vance County Public Schools	2002	0.3321389872
	2012	0.2761466097
	2022	0.206171404
Public Schools of Robeson County	2002	0.5069887658
	2012	0.4785796203
	2022	0.4092042741

Table 4 shows that rural school districts consistently decreased dissimilarity indices over the 20 years. Between 2002 and 2023, Halifax County schools (all three sub-districts) experienced the most dramatic decrease, dropping from 0.483 to 0.238. Similarly, between 2002 and 2023, Vance and Robeson counties also showed notable declines (0.332 to 0.206 and 0.506 to 0.409, respectively). However, these decreasing indices should be interpreted cautiously, as they may reflect broader demographic shifts and population losses rather than successful integration efforts. When overall student populations decline in rural areas, schools may naturally appear more integrated simply because there are fewer students to distribute, not necessarily because of intentional or effective integration policies.

Table 4a. Dissimilarity Index for Halifax Schools Three Subdistrict

District	Year	Dissimilarity Index (White/Total White - Hispanic /Total Hispanic)		
Halifax	2002	0.8145716073	0.5287356322	0.03368275928
	2012	0.5623803828	0.25	0.2454978985
	2022	0.3913199426	0.2777777778	0.1740981543

Note: Halifax has three different school districts: [Halifax County Schools](#) | [Weldon City Schools](#) | [Roanoke Rapids City Schools](#)

A closer examination of Halifax County's three separate school districts (Table 4a) reveals complex patterns within this broader trend. Halifax County Schools experienced the most dramatic transformation, starting with a high dissimilarity index of 0.814 in 2002 before declining substantially to 0.391 by 2022. Weldon City Schools followed a similar downward trend by 2022, dropping from moderate dissimilarity (0.528) to relatively low levels (0.277). Interestingly, Roanoke Rapids City Schools displayed an opposite pattern, beginning with very low dissimilarity (0.033) in 2002 before increasing notably to 0.245 in 2012, then slightly decreasing to 0.174 by 2022. Though through different paths, these varying trajectories have led to a convergence of dissimilarity levels across all three districts by 2022. This complexity highlights why examining Halifax as a single entity does not provide a complete picture of

educational segregation in the area, pointing to the persistent challenges of maintaining educational equity within a three-district structure.

Table 5. Dissimilarity Index for Urban Schools Among White and Hispanic Students

District	Year	Dissimilarity Index (w/tw-h/th)
Guilford County Schools	2002	0.4479737395
	2012	0.4720996392
	2022	0.4860772208
Durham County Public Schools	2002	0.4420700188
	2012	0.5964962669
	2022	0.4075476398
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Schools	2002	0.4956350655
	2012	0.5665115083
	2022	0.5785715172

In contrast, three of North Carolina's urban school districts (Table 5) show different patterns among white and Hispanic students from 2002 to 2022. Charlotte-Mecklenburg shows a steady increase in dissimilarity, with its index rising from 0.495 to 0.578. Guilford County maintained relatively stable levels of dissimilarity (0.447 to 0.486). At the same time, Durham Public Schools presents an interesting case with a substantial spike in dissimilarity in 2012 (0.596) before declining to its lowest level (0.407) by 2022.

The comparison between rural and urban districts reveals striking differences in dissimilarity trends between white and Hispanic students. While urban districts either maintained or increased their levels of dissimilarity, rural districts consistently showed decreasing dissimilarity indices. This divergence might be attributed to different underlying factors: selected urban areas face challenges related to growing diversity and housing patterns, such as neighborhood segregation and the impact of school choice policies. In contrast, the selected rural areas' improving indices might reflect broader trends like overall population decline or shifts in community composition. These contrasting patterns suggest that addressing educational segregation requires different approaches in urban versus rural contexts. The selected urban districts need to focus on housing policy and school assignment strategies, while selected rural districts need to prioritize maintaining educational quality and access while managing declining enrollments.

Concentration Analysis

While dissimilarity indices tell us how evenly students are distributed across an entire district (showing what percentage would need to change schools to achieve perfect integration), concentration analysis reveals the actual day-to-day experience of segregation within individual schools. Together, these measures provide a more complete picture of school segregation. For example, a district might have a moderate dissimilarity index of 0.5, suggesting some progress toward integration at the district level. However, concentration analysis might reveal that several schools still have over 90% Students of Color, indicating persistent racial isolation that the dissimilarity index alone does not capture. This combination of measures helps researchers and policymakers understand the broad patterns and specific instances of segregation, leading to more informed decisions about addressing educational inequities.

Table 6. Concentration of Hispanic Students and Students of Color in Rural Schools

School District	Year	Total Schools Over 90% concentration of students of color	Concentration Percentage of students of color	Concentration Percentage of Hispanic students
Halifax Schools*	2002	15/22 (68%)	84.0%	0.8%
	2012	12/19 (63%)	70.3%	2.8%
	2022	15/20 (75%)	70.6%	5.8%
Vance County Public Schools	2002	3/15 (20%)	71.6%	5.8%
	2012	3/16 (18%)	77.6%	12.5%
	2022	9 of 16 (56%)	87.9%	16.1%
Public Schools of Robeson County	2002	22/40 (55%)	78.9%	4.3%
	2012	24/41 (58%)	84.1%	11.1%
	2022	21/35 (60%)	89.2%	20.4%

The data in Table 6 reveals essential trends in school segregation by looking at two key measures: the percentage of intensely segregated schools (where more than 90% of students are Students of Color) and the overall rate of students of color in each district. These numbers help us understand whether students attend diverse schools or primarily learn alongside students of similar racial backgrounds. The third column shows the percentage of Hispanic students within each school district, highlighting the rapid demographic change.

Halifax County's patterns are complex (see Table 6). The number of highly segregated schools increased slightly, with 75% of schools in 2022 now having over 90% students of color (up from 68% in 2002). However, the district's overall percentage of students of color decreased from 84.0% to 70.6%. This means that while more individual schools became heavily segregated, the district became slightly more diverse.

Vance County shows a different pattern (Table 6). The number of highly segregated schools increased dramatically, from just 20% of schools in 2002 to 56% in 2022. At the same time, the overall percentage of students of color grew from 71.6% to 87.9% (see Table 6). This means both individual schools and the district became more segregated over time.

Robeson County followed a similar trend to Vance, with individual schools and districts becoming more segregated. The substantial growth in Hispanic student enrollment was an essential change across all three districts. Robeson saw the largest increase, with Hispanic students growing from 4.3% to 20.4% of the student population. Vance and Halifax also saw increases in their Hispanic student populations.

All three rural districts also saw a decrease in their total number of schools over this period, likely due to school closures or mergers (Table 6). These changes and shifting demographics suggest that rural schools face ongoing challenges in providing educational environments where students can learn alongside peers from diverse backgrounds.

Table 6a. Concentration of Hispanic Students and Students of Color within Halifax Schools

School District	Year	Total Schools Over 90% concentration of students of color	Concentration Percentage of students of color	Concentration Percentage of Hispanic students
Halifax County Schools	2002	12/15 (80%)	94.0%	3%
	2012	9/11 (81%)	95.0%	.66%
	2022	11/11 (100%)	96.0%	3.9%
Weldon City Schools	2002	3/3 (100%)	97.0%	1%
	2012	3/4 (75%)	96.0%	.26%
	2022	4/4 (100%)	97.0%	1.3%
Roanoke Rapids City Schools	2002	0/4 (0%)	25.0%	8%
	2012	0/4 (0%)	30.0%	1.2%
	2022	0/5 (0%)	42.0%	8.5%

Table 6a examines student concentration distributed across the three sub-districts within Halifax Schools. It shows markedly different demographic compositions and trends, highlighting how separate district structures can maintain different levels of racial isolation even within the same geographic area. Schools are "intensely segregated" (where 90-100% of students are Students of Color) and "hyper-segregated" (where 99-100% of students are Students of Color) (Ayscue et al., 2024).

Halifax County Schools, the largest of the three districts (see Table 6a) shows increasing racial concentration over time. In 2002, most of its schools (12 out of 15) were already intensely segregated, meaning they had more than 90% Students of Color. By 2022, this separation had increased - all eleven remaining schools were intensely segregated, with students of color making up 96% of the total student population. During this period, the district closed several schools, dropping from 15 to 11. The Hispanic student population in these schools has fluctuated, starting at 3% in 2002 and rising to nearly 4% by 2022.

Weldon City Schools (Table 6a) shows similarly high levels of racial separation. In 2002, all three of its schools were intensely segregated. While there was a brief change in 2012 when one school had slightly more diversity, by 2022, all four districts were back to being intensely segregated. Throughout this period, students of color consistently made up 97% of all students, approaching hypersegregation levels. The Hispanic student population remained small, never exceeding 1.3% of students.

Roanoke Rapids City Schools (Table 6a) looks very different from the other two subdistricts. None of its schools ever reached the level of intense segregation. While the percentage of students of color has increased from 25% in 2002 to 42% in 2022, these schools remain much more racially mixed than those in the other two districts. The Hispanic student population has varied, starting at 8%, dropping to about 1%, then rising back to 8.5%. Unlike the other districts, Roanoke Rapids added a school during this period, growing from 4 to 5 schools.

Having three independent school districts operating within Halifax Schools maintains substantial disparities in racial isolation between schools that serve the same geographic area. While two districts (Halifax County and Weldon City, as seen in Table 6a) maintain almost completely segregated schools, the third (Roanoke Rapids) serves a much more racially mixed

student population. This suggests that how district boundaries are drawn and maintained might contribute to keeping schools segregated.

Table 7. Concentration of Student of Color and Hispanic Students in Urban Schools

District	Year	Total Schools Over 90%	Concentration of students of color	Concentration of Hispanic students
Guilford County Schools	2002	14/98 (14%)	53.2%	4.8%
	2012	32/121 (26%)	61.7%	10.9%
	2022	42/126 (33%)	71.8%	17.8%
Durham Public Schools	2002	10/41 (24%)	70.7%	8.9%
	2012	27/54 (50%)	79.4%	22.3%
	2022	26/54 (48%)	76.1%	34.2%
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools	2002	22/134 (16%)	56.7%	7.7%
	2012	57/163 (34%)	67.5%	17.4%
	2022	84/180 (46%)	75.2%	28.5%

Table 7 examines racial concentration patterns in three major urban school districts in North Carolina from 2002 to 2022. The data tracks the growth of intensely segregated schools (90-100% Students of Color) and overall demographic changes in these urban districts. Guilford County Schools (as seen in Table 7) steadily increased intense segregation. The number of

intensely segregated schools nearly tripled, rising from 14% (14 schools) in 2002 to 33% (42 schools) by 2022. The overall concentration of students of color increased from 53.2% to 71.8%. Notably, the Hispanic student population grew substantially from 4.8% to 17.8%, reflecting broader demographic shifts in the region.

Durham Public Schools (as seen in Table 7) experienced the most dramatic increase in intense segregation during the first decade. The proportion of intensely segregated schools doubled from 24% (10 schools) in 2002 to 50% (27 schools) by 2012, before slightly decreasing to 48% (26 schools) in 2022. The district (as seen in Table 7) maintained the highest concentration of students of color among the three districts, peaking at 79.4% in 2012 before declining slightly to 76.1%. Durham also saw the largest growth in Hispanic student enrollment, increasing from 8.9% to 34.2%.

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools (Table 7) showed the most pronounced shift toward intense segregation. The percentage of intensely segregated schools increased from 16% (22 schools) in 2002 to 46% (84 schools) by 2022, nearly tripling. The overall concentration of students of color (as seen in Table 7) rose substantially from 56.7% to 75.2%. The Hispanic student population grew substantially, from 7.7% to 28.5%. Notably, the district expanded considerably during this period, rising from 134 to 180 schools.

The data in Table 7 reveal a consistent trend across all three urban districts: increasing racial isolation in schools, substantial growth in Hispanic student populations, and a substantial rise in the number of intensely segregated schools. None of the districts reached hypersegregation levels (99-100% Students of Color) at the school level, but the trend toward increasing segregation is apparent across all three urban systems.

Summary

Using dissimilarity indices and racial concentration measures provides a comprehensive picture of how segregation manifested differently across the districts in this report from 2002 to 2022. In rural districts, dissimilarity indices showed substantial decreases, with Halifax County dropping from 0.814 to 0.391, Vance from 0.332 to 0.206, and Robeson from 0.506 to 0.409. Halifax County's unique three-district structure mainly illuminates how administrative boundaries impact segregation: Halifax County Schools and Weldon City Schools remained intensely segregated, with over 90% of Students of Color, while Roanoke Rapids City Schools maintained a more diverse student body with 42% of Students of Color. While Hispanic student populations grew in rural districts, with Robeson showing the highest increase to 20.4%, these districts generally experienced declining enrollment, leading to school consolidations.

The selected Urban districts displayed markedly different trends, with dissimilarity indices increasing or remaining stable. All three major urban districts saw substantial growth in intensely segregated schools: Charlotte-Mecklenburg rose from 16% to 46% (22 to 84 schools), Durham from 24% to 48% (10 to 26 schools), and Guilford from 14% to 33% (14 to 42 schools). These districts also experienced substantial Hispanic student growth, with Durham showing the most dramatic increase from 8.9% to 34.2%. Unlike the selected rural counterparts, the urban districts generally expanded, particularly Charlotte-Mecklenburg, which grew from 134 to 180 schools.

These divergent patterns demonstrate how demographic shifts affect segregation differently based on local context. While rural districts show improving statistical measures, this likely reflects population changes rather than successful integration. The selected urban districts

face increasing racial isolation despite various integration efforts, suggesting the need for targeted policy approaches based on district type and demographic trends.

Policy Recommendations

School segregation does not happen by accident - it results from deliberate policies and systemic racism that have created racial divisions in our educational system (Nordstrom, 2022). Creating more integrated schools in North Carolina requires coordinated action with school districts, cities, and state leaders. A first step forward begins with fully funding the Leandro Comprehensive Remedial Plan to improve educational quality and experiences for all students across both rural and urban selected public school districts. By fully funding and implementing the Leandro Plan, North Carolina can take significant strides towards closing achievement gaps and providing all students with the educational opportunities they deserve. The remedial plan aims to increase funding for low-wealth districts, improve teacher quality and retention, expand early childhood education access, support at-risk students, and strengthen school accountability all foundational to helping North Carolina educational quality and experience. However, achieving true educational equity will require ongoing commitment and additional reforms beyond this initial investment.

Integration plans such as controlled school choice, magnet schools, and redistricting must be carefully designed to avoid placing undue burdens on communities of color or privileging the preferences of wealthier white and Asian families (Ayscue et al., 2018). Rather than simply assigning students based on geographic zones, these policies consider factors like a student's race, ethnicity, and family income level to create more integrated school enrollments. Controlled school choice refers to families ranking their preferred schools, and the district assigns students based on those preferences while considering diversity goals. Magnet schools provide unique

programs or curricula to attract a diverse range of students from across the district and are enrolled through a lottery system with diversity targets. Lastly, districts can redraw school boundaries to include neighborhoods with different demographic makeups to bring together students from diverse areas. District plans should also be transparent about student assignment procedures and broader equity issues, including discipline practices, within-school segregation, tracking, language support, curriculum development, teacher diversity, and professional development (Diem et al., 2015). Successful integrated schools require clear accountability metrics, regular progress monitoring, and sufficient resources to support implementation.

Some recommendations for integration plans based on this report's findings: integration approaches must be carefully planned to depend on the selected rural and urban contexts, recognizing their distinct challenges. For rural schools, particularly for Halifax County Public Schools, Vance County Public Schools, and Public Schools of Robeson County, residential segregation such as housing, school zoning and taxes can be contributing to school segregation and therefore, school district, city and county leaders must work together to focus on integration and equal opportunity. Doing so can help build more inclusive, cohesive county-wide schools and communities. It requires intentional effort by the district, the city, and the state to break down long-standing divides. Furthermore, state intervention is necessary to unify segregated rural multi-school districts like Halifax County Public Schools, where separate and unequal systems persist. In a recent study, Nordstrom (YEAR) stated that 11 counties in North Carolina have extreme racial divisions, like Halifax, such as Davidson and Randolph County Schools. This report also found that rural districts are experiencing declines in student enrollment. If school consolidation becomes necessary due to declining enrollment in districts, developing

policies that carefully manage the consolidation process is crucial while maintaining student integration and diversity.

As for urban districts found in this report, districts must have more controls and limitations on constructing new schools and expanding existing schools to prevent increased racial segregation and isolation. For example, if a district allows a new school to be built in an affluent, predominantly white neighborhood, it can lead to more white families concentrating in that area to attend the new school. This furthers racial isolation and makes integration harder to achieve. In addition, school expansion can also drain resources away from existing schools in more diverse areas that may need additional support and investment to succeed. Another recommendation for selected urban schools with growing student populations is to effectively integrate the growing population (i.e, Hispanic students). School districts should develop targeted strategies that address these students' unique needs and challenges. For example, the growth of the Hispanic student population in Durham would benefit from language support, culturally responsive teaching, and family inclusion. By incorporating integration supports, districts can create more equitable and inclusive schools.

As rural and urban school districts across North Carolina continue to change and grow, strong, proactive integration policies are crucial to prevent schools from becoming segregated. This requires ongoing monitoring, creative problem-solving, collaborative district-county-state efforts, and a firm commitment to educational equity. By using a combination of intentional strategies, school districts in North Carolina can foster more diverse and inclusive schools that benefit all students.

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