

# *A Healing Centered Racial Affinity Group: Toward Holistic Approaches of Support for Future K-12 Teachers and Teacher Educators*

**Farima Pour-Khorshid, Sarah Capitelli, Eghosa Obaizamomwan-Hamilton,  
Gertrude Jenkins, Gloria Muñoz, Kanako Wong, Cady Sitkin, and Rebecca  
Anderson**

E-mail: [fpourkhorshid@usfca.edu](mailto:fpourkhorshid@usfca.edu), [sacapitelli@usfca.edu](mailto:sacapitelli@usfca.edu), [eghosa@stanford.edu](mailto:eghosa@stanford.edu), [tjenkins1@pacific.edu](mailto:tjenkins1@pacific.edu),  
[gamuñoz2@dons.usfca.edu](mailto:gamuñoz2@dons.usfca.edu), [kwong@reach.edu](mailto:kwong@reach.edu), [cesitkin@usfca.edu](mailto:cesitkin@usfca.edu), [rranderson@dons.usfca.edu](mailto:rranderson@dons.usfca.edu)

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## **Abstract**

Given the racialized harm within pre-K-16+ schools, educators are often urged to engage culturally sustaining, trauma-informed, and humanizing approaches to teaching/learning. However, the field often fails to provide holistic approaches to critical professional development, particularly for educators committed to racial justice. In response to neoliberal, color-evasive, and apolitical approaches to teacher support, we describe our efforts to pilot a holistic and healing centered racial affinity group initiative within a teacher education program. Implications from this two-year ethnographic snapshot demonstrate how racial justice efforts depend on the intentionality and investment in holistic development for both student teachers and the teacher educators that support them.

**Keywords:** *racial affinity groups; healing centered engagement; racial healing; critical professional development; holistic education; humanizing pedagogy*

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## **Introduction**

Educators are navigating precarious times in and out of schools. We are currently navigating a global pandemic amidst racial and social uprisings against state-sanctioned violence, a U.S.-funded genocide in Palestine, the destabilization of other countries around the world, the banning of books and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) efforts, censorship of history, and countless other forms of violence. The aforementioned examples of

collective trauma are compounded by systemic professional harm even before teachers enter the field as they are met with expensive standardized state requirements in addition to completing over 450 hours of unpaid teaching labor to earn a preliminary credential (Valdez et al., 2020); massive student loan debt and inequitable and unethical compensation (Stanfield, 2022); all while navigating a race-evasive predominantly white workforce (Bendixen et al., 2023). As a team of current and former K-12 educators, we are attuned

to how teacher education often fails to address racialized harm and trauma, and we offer a snapshot of our journey attempting to address these gaps. While our Teacher Education Program (TEP) is situated within a university committed to social justice, Love (2023) reminds us that, “despite good intentions, the work of racial justice is at best elusive without substantive commitments from institutions” (p. 214). Therefore, in the 2022-2023 academic school year we began a pilot Healing Centered Racial Affinity Group initiative, centering holistic and counter-hegemonic practices, critical reflection, humanizing frameworks, and transformative action.

### **Addressing the Racial Demographic Gaps in the U.S. Teacher Workforce**

Updated research shared by the 2022 Education Trust report showed that nationally, while the majority of students in the U.S. are students of color, only about 20% of teachers are non-white and more specifically in California, only 39% are teachers of color serving over 77% students of color. White and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC), whether students or teachers, each have different needs related to unlearning and healing from the internalization and socialization of white supremacy culture (Jones & Okun, 2001). Racial consciousness development is often divergent between racial groups and can be triggering to engage alongside others of a different racialized experience. A healing-centered racial affinity group (RAG) approach (Pour-Khorshid, 2018a) can serve as an opportunity to create brave spaces and collective emotional containers for deeper engagement, authenticity, vulnerability, and radical honesty among peers with shared identity features and experiences. In a multiracial course, for example, a student teacher might worry about saying the “wrong” thing, thus offending the “other” by their lack of critical awareness and

racial consciousness. Within a healing centered RAG, however, the intention is to acknowledge the need to address harmful racial ideologies toward collective healing. Many years of experience in our TEP have shown us that what gets shared in smaller groups is not always shared in a whole group within courses due to racialized dynamics, leaving harmful ideologies unaddressed. BIPOC students often experience tokenization or hostility when talking about race while white students frequently choose to be silent bystanders or aggressors when topics related to whiteness are addressed. How might teacher education address these racialized dynamics head-on as a central aspect of holistic teacher development?

#### *The Need for Critical Racial Affinity Groups*

A critical racial affinity group (Pour-Khorshid, 2018a) consists of individuals with a shared racial identity and commitment to social/racial justice (e.g., Black women’s feminist group, white allies against racism group). Racial affinity groups within organizations and institutions have been taken up to support people with shared identities by creating a space to collectively process, strategize, and address institutionalized racism, oppression, and privilege within their respective contexts (Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Michael & Conger, 2009; Nieto & Boyer, 2006). Racial affinity groups have also served as institutional interventions to address areas of diverse recruitment and retention, morale and a sense of community, the advancement of women and minorities, and to act as a mechanism for community involvement (Greene, 2020). Racial caucusing and race-based caucusing are other terms used to describe racial affinity group approaches within organizations that value and practice antiracism, ongoing personal and professional development tailored for marginalized groups, and active accountability in addressing institutional racism (Blitz & Kohl, 2012). Mosely (2018) describes racial affinity professional development as, “spaces of support,

learning and healthy career development that are culturally responsive to a specific racialized group who experiences the consequences of institutional racism in particular ways” (p. 270). Social activists and educators create racial affinity spaces for individuals affiliated around a common cause within their collectives in ways that also center members’ racial and social identities (Beck, 1999; Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Pour-Khorshid, 2016; Strong et al., 2017).

Racial affinity groups organize their respective spaces differently based on racial justice intentions and goals. For example, White’s (2022) participatory social justice study of a teacher of color racial affinity group explored how teachers of color perceived the impact of the support they received and reported that participants perceived the group as a safe space shaped by cultural understanding, validation, collective mentorship, internal empowerment, and the realization of support structures leading to action and advocacy work. In Mosely’s (2018) research on the Black Teacher Project, her study demonstrates how racial affinity professional development not only sustains Black teachers through an intentional focus on holistic well-being but also through a focus on transforming educational spaces through a social justice approach. Pour-Khorshid’s (2018b) research on H.E.L.L.A.: a racial affinity group centering healing, empowerment, love, liberation, and action for teachers of color, reported on the intentions of cultivating a critical, humanizing, and healing centered space for BIPOC teachers navigating socially toxic education institutions which had implications on their personal, political, relational, and pedagogical growth. Strong et al.’s (2017) study on racial affinity groups reported on how the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) created two grassroots racial affinity groups, the Educators of Color Group (EoC) and the Antiracist White Educators Group (AWE-G), to separately address their needs as teachers committed to racial justice in and out of schools.

Michael & Conger (2009) describe how their racial affinity group, White Students Confronting Racism (WSCR), was organized for white people to “examine what it means to be white, to critically reflect on themselves and their actions, and to work to identify and confront racism in schools, in society, and at the university” (p.56). Kulkarni et al.’s (2022) report on a critical racial affinity group for special education teachers of color (SETOC) designed to combat disability battle fatigue through collective support, action, and healing toward the “(re)positioning of SETOC as knowledgeable, smart, good, and actively working to undo ableism and racism in school settings” (pg. 44). These examples of racial affinity group approaches were all shaped by a desire to address the harm caused by structural racism through different focus areas, all of which center (un)learning of the dominant discourses that normalize racialized harm by creating space for holistic practices toward racial healing.

#### *The Need for Holistic and Racial Healing Centered Frameworks in Teacher Education*

Ginwright’s (2015) Healing Centered Engagement (HCE) framework offers a holistic psychospiritual approach to address harm caused by structural oppression by creating pathways for healing at individual, interpersonal and institutional levels. HCE is a political, holistic, and intersectional approach to healing “involving culture, spirituality, civic action, and collective healing [which] views trauma not simply as an individual isolated experience, but rather highlights the ways in which trauma and healing are experienced collectively” (Ginwright, 2018, p. 3). Ultimately, while much change can occur at a policy level, the social change that we seek is not guaranteed to manifest through policy and institutional change alone. Therefore, when educators heal, the ripple effects impact curriculum, instruction, advocacy, and relationships across education stakeholders. Some examples of holistic and healing centered

approaches to teacher learning might include collective cultural practices and spiritual rituals such as mindfulness, somatic therapeutic practices, decolonial and ancestral medicinal practices, rest as resistance, inner child healing, reconnecting to nature and land, transformative and restorative justice to address harm, *testimonio*, and counter-storytelling (Bai et al., 2018; Edwards & Reynolds, 2024; Garcia, 2019; Kokka, 2023; Nyachae, & Pham, 2024; Wilson & Jackson, 2023).

There is a great need for critical racial affinity group approaches to support teachers in the field. While racialized dysfunction continues to pervade society, K-12 schools and universities often mimic this dysfunction as microcosms of our racist societal reality. We believe that cultivating space for teachers to name and reflect on the racialized realities they live and teach in might serve as a first step to disrupting the status quo and normalization of racism in schools.

### Context

The TEP healing centered racial affinity team consisted of two faculty, a white TEP department chair (Sarah) and a mixed-race Afro-Nicaraguan/Iranian junior faculty member (Farima), that teamed up with five doctoral students working in K-12 public schools which included a Black/Nigerian high teacher and doctoral student (Eghosa); a Black American teacher and doctoral student (Gertrude); a Chicana *Indigena* (Yaqui) teacher and doctoral student (Gloria); a mixed-race: Japanese and German educator and doctoral student (Kana); and a white European American educator and doctoral student (Rebecca) who were all highly recommended by trusted colleagues, as well as a white Greek/Irish/Jewish woman adjunct instructor (Cady), who also had several years of experience organizing within a local social justice grassroots teacher organization alongside Farima. It is

important to note that Farima had extensive experience with racial affinity group work and healing centered engagement to build the vision of this initiative out. However, due to limited resources, how the racial affinity groups were constructed were also impacted by limitations in resources and capacity. Thus, semester one's pilot racial affinity group initiative included 5 racial affinity groups: a Black/Indigenous Racial Affinity Group; a Latinx/Indigenous Racial Affinity Group; an Asian and Pacific Islander Racial Affinity Group; a White Racial Affinity Group, and a Mixed-Race Racial Affinity Group. With an intention of addressing the professor-student power dynamic that often impacts students' comfort, vulnerability, and participation, only one of the racial affinity groups was facilitated by a full-time faculty member (Farima), which was requested by two mixed-race student teachers in TEP after announcing the racial affinity group pilot initiative. This was an important factor that revealed how racial anxiety surfaced in the beginning phase of students identifying with a respective racial affinity group. We decided to provide more details to the TEP community to demystify the intentions shaping the healing centered racial affinity groups, which was communicated as a holistic approach designed to cultivate space for student teachers to: 1) Separately address particular race-related healing, (un)learning, and needs in relation to our collective commitments to racial justice (individually, interpersonally, and institutionally) to create change in and out of schools; 2) Build community through critical reflection, vulnerability, and collective care while interrogating embodied intersectional positionalities in relation to privilege and marginalization; and 3) Reflect on how racialization within the dominant culture shapes the field that teachers are navigating, as well as their experiences in K-12 settings and within our TED programs—to create change.

Ultimately, our goal was to take the learning from this pilot endeavor to improve the experiences of our students and our program more broadly. Doctoral students were also intentionally supported through mentorship and planning. The team regularly reviewed student feedback and data reporting on the needs and reflections from all racial affinity groups to plan and co-construct holistic learning experiences for sessions. The faculty team leads also shared student data via anonymous student feedback at departmental meetings to inform colleagues of issues reported by students which led to collaboration on how to improve our TEP.

### Methodology

This study explores the various experiences of the team members facilitating our TEP's healing centered racial affinity group initiative. This design experiment (Van den Akker et al., 2006) is commonly used methodologically to examine interventionist and process-oriented work. Barab and Squire (2004) define education design research as "a series of approaches with the intent of producing new theories, artifacts, and practice that account for and potentially impact teaching and learning in naturalistic settings" (p.2). We intentionally chose design research as it allowed us to center our problem of practice (i.e., the challenging racial dynamics in our teacher education programs TEPs) and create an intentional intervention (TEP's healing centered racial affinity group initiative). Design research allowed us to study how our TEP students respond to various elements of the intervention. Additionally, design research allowed us to make changes to our intervention in real time and from session to session, as we used our debriefs and planning sessions to pivot and improve the intervention to be responsive to the student issues and challenges that arose. Our project sought to generate knowledge from the following questions:

- 1) How does a TEP's healing centered racial affinity group initiative support the racial healing and consciousness raising of teacher education candidates?
- 2) How do TEP's racial affinity team members experience and learn from the planning, debriefing and facilitation of healing centered racial affinity groups?

For the purposes and scope of this article, we will focus primarily on the latter question. Over three academic semesters, our team met to plan and share ideas and resources collectively and separately to plan in partnership for each respective racial affinity group meeting. Each of the nine meeting agendas were co-constructed by facilitators after meeting with the team to debrief each meeting before the subsequent meetings took place, identify areas of need and strengths, and build upon the experience based on the overarching healing centered framework's focus: racial healing at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional level(s). Our team also recorded each of the nine Zoom meetings (pre- and post-facilitation), reviewed each of the 9 co-constructed agendas, and each of the 9 audio recordings of personal post-facilitation reflections from every facilitator addressing the same recurring questions immediately after facilitating monthly sessions for students:

- 1) *How am I feeling [mind/body/heart/spirit] after tonight's facilitation? Why?*
- 2) *What are some aspects of tonight's meeting experience that went well?*
- 3) *What are some challenges, concerns, or areas for growth that I noticed?*
- 4) *What were some important moments/reflections that stood out to me?*
- 5) *What do I want to continue to build on/from in my next experience with student teachers?*

### Snapshots of Each Racial Affinity Group's Co-Facilitation Experience

In this section, we highlight reflections from each racial affinity group co-facilitator partnership. Each pair of facilitators came together to review their respective co-facilitation process over three academic semesters and wrote individual analytic memos of the overarching themes that they identified from witnessing their own experience concerning the research question: *How do team members experience and learn from the planning and facilitation of healing centered racial affinity groups?* First, we include a short excerpt to highlight a significant reflection from one of the 9 audio recordings of post-facilitation reflections in each section. We then share a collaborative reflection that each co-facilitator partnership wrote together to report on their overall reflections and overarching themes based on their shared experiences with co-facilitation within their respective racial affinity groups.

#### Black/Indigenous Racial Affinity Group: Eghosa and Gertrude's Shared Reflections

*“This isolating experience is one that many Black teachers experience but Black students at [the teacher education program] did something about it [...] In this portal of Black affinity, we all got to share, we all got to connect, and we all got to bear our stories in a way that was impactful [...] Though I was the co-facilitator, I remember feeling so seen. It is not often I have the opportunity to speak with teachers who even understand the connotation of being called an Oreo, let alone have experienced it.” –Eghosa*

*“As veteran teachers with thirty-five years of teaching experience between us, my co-facilitator and I shared our experiences and swapped stories with a new wave of Black teachers. In this space, we made intergenerational connections centered*

*on resistance and refusal [...] we got to be more than facilitators; we too were active participants, sharing our own traumas and allowing ourselves to be held together by community. Together, we provided resonance and encouragement to continue to buck school systems and policies; for Black teachers, these spaces are rare to come by.”*  
–Gertrude

Black people and rhythm go together, real bad. There is a smoothness and an openness to the cadence of our existence. Our co-facilitated Black teacher affinity group carried that same rhythm. The beats of our sessions were complex, reflective, and beautiful. We cultivated a space wherein we were able to make intergenerational connections of resistance and refusal with a new wave of Black educators. And it was harmonious. We worked collectively to create a sound that was beyond the bounds often reflected in higher education. We had just met and yet, the way we shared, the knowings that were understood, and the way we recognized ourselves in each other's experiences made clear that, although we are not always granted time or space to work together, we always instinctively remember what it is like to be Black together.

In researching Black women's pedagogy, Eghosa names memory-responsive teaching (Obaizamomwan-Hamilton et al., 2024) as a process in which Black educators use their prior experiences as students to inform their current teaching methods. The essence of memory-responsive teaching lies in rescripting and embodying roles that were structurally denied to us during our own educational journeys. It names the ways we draw on our prior experiences as Black students to inform our pedagogy and praxis. By centering Black voices within the very white context of both teacher education and K-12 schooling we are making a subversive and disruptive Black racial affinity space. It was clear,

for us, that we were operating in this disruptive realm and the TED students we were working with were doing the same at their school sites.

Our own lived experiences as students in K-12 schooling and later as graduate students in teacher preparation programs served as the pathway toward planning an all-Black teacher space. By returning to the wound of schooling where we experienced racialized microaggressions, invisibilization, and the questioning of our intellectual capabilities, memory-responsive teaching became a transformative tool that informed our session planning. Using memory as teaching, praxis was pivotal as a natural recall of memory was a driving force in how we laid out the curriculum. This project was a direct response to Black graduate students who advocated for a critically reflective and justice-oriented schooling experience. As Black women versed in the anti-Black nature of schooling, we knew what it meant to push back against oppressive educational systems that have worked to push Black students out.

Under this same accord, much of our planning was responsive to the narratives graduate students shared that, in turn, triggered our own recollections as Black teachers. As our sessions rolled out, we resonated deeply with graduate student's narratives of ostracization and problematization, because those were our narratives too. We reveled in their stories of refusal and resistance because we too know the desire - and sometimes the will - to push back against systems of oppression. Our storylines are in concert, no matter where we have been, inspiring us to create a Black space, where we do not suffer in silence, but rather we laugh, cry, reflect, engage, and build over the bass of our own curated soundtrack.

Over the course of a semester, our sessions involved art, journal reflections, community building, reflective activities rooted in our

positionalities as Black educators, and appreciations for each other, the process, and the space. Although we were co-facilitating, we found this space to be just as nourishing for us as it was for the students we were working with (Obaizamomwan-Hamilton & Jenkins, 2024). As seasoned Black women teachers with over thirty years of teaching experience between us, we cultivated a space wherein we were able to make intergenerational connections of resistance and refusal. As active participants in this space, we got caught up in the rhythm of sharing our own traumas and allowing ourselves to be held together by community. As facilitators who work closely and often, there were elements of each other's teaching experiences that we had learned for the first time. Together, we provided resonance and encouragement to continue to resist anti-Black school systems and policies; for Black teachers, this is an experience that is rare to come by.

Ultimately, we are making it a site of healing for us as Black present and future educators. By making a space comprised of Black folks we are finally provided room to put our defenses down. Even if just for a moment, in this Black space, we did not need to be on guard and could share, laugh, reflect without tension. The sonic synergy created by the boundaryless space of Black educators allowed us as a collective to freedom dream our way through the complicated experiences of teaching while Black. For us, our rhythmic energies merge as our truths come out of their hiding places. And even though we know we are returning to and will continue to exist within institutions of harm that are upheld by structural racism (Rose, 2015), we somehow leave this space feeling lighter.

#### **Non-Black People of Color Racial Affinity Group: Gloria and Kana's Shared Reflections**

*"This last session left me the most emotional because in many ways it was a conversation*

*with a version of my younger self [...] I supported this student at a moment of brave risk-taking, but I also healed that younger educator in myself. [This student] being so critical of their own inability was a familiar trait, and having that moment to let them know that this was part of their healing, to move through that discomfort and that I would hold them, was an exchange that I felt deeply. This moment opened up our discussion to allow them to finally release a number of racial microaggressions that they had been holding onto that semester, to feel validated in their anger, and to be told that what they experienced was wrong. I was able to validate their feelings in a way that I was unable to do during my credential program more than 20 years ago.” –Gloria*

*“Going through this reflection process allowed me to see the power in reflection and how it is the purpose of an affinity space [...] I have done a lot of hard things in my life, and dealt with difficult situations, however, facilitating these racial affinity spaces was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do [...] I grew up during a time when the only option was to choose one box so I always chose the box labeled “other”. “Other” is how I would describe my own struggle with race and identity. Yet here, I was seen as Asian.” –Kana*

During the first year of this work, there were two affinity spaces—Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) and Latinx/Indigenous. We facilitated these spaces individually but partnered during the planning sessions to meet the needs of our respective groups. In the second year of this initiative, the group moved to combine the two affinity spaces into one: Non-Black People of Color. This move to one affinity space was to provide TED students the benefit of two facilitators, as well as address a smaller enrollment of TED students from the previous year.

In the second year, it was beneficial that all TED students and facilitators met at a cross-racial joint event to ground ourselves in the understanding of what racial affinity spaces are and why as an institution, prioritizing this work in its teacher preparation program was so important. Each facilitator was able to introduce themselves to the community and share why this work was important to us as a group of multiracial educators. As we moved into our own respective racial affinity group sessions, we reaffirmed that our space holds healing at the center, it was made clear by the students that they truly craved the dedicated time to reflect deeply on the individual level, apart from content covered in other classes. The level of vulnerability that students shared in their personal reflections was both surprising and beautiful. Students were quick to share the importance of not only teaching students to think reflectively about their own racialized experiences, but also the importance of creating time for themselves to do this work, too. This introspective work impacts how we show up in the classroom as educators of color, for ourselves, and for our students. Students were also able to hold healing conversations about how U.S. schooling experiences have contributed to the loss of their home language and thus contributed to the inability to connect with some of their own community and elders. As facilitators, it gave us hope for the future educators that we were graced to work with-- future teachers of color who were proud of who they were becoming—it creates the throughline for sustainability in this challenging work. As educators of color facilitating this racial affinity space, it helps us to reframe how we view professional development in the work that we do in and with schools, respectively in our workplaces and broadly in the field.

As women of color leading this work, we were intentional in centering students’ identities, creating space to reflect on our racialized lived experiences individually and collectively as a

necessary part of the liberatory work in the role of educators committed to racial justice. In a bilingual educator's space that Gloria facilitated outside of her racial affinity group, a colleague provided feedback that she initially resisted engaging in reflective work and questioned if it was the best use of that group's time. However, the same participant later shared and identified that this level of critical reflection was new for her and therefore unfamiliar; this insight was shared by a bilingual educator who has been in the field for nearly 20 years. Critical race reflection matters but it is often missing in teacher development so having the opportunity to unapologetically create this kind of space through racial affinity groups felt more in alignment than what she was doing in schools.

Through our joint facilitation of the non-Black Teacher of Color racial affinity group, we got to support a new generation of pre-service educators of color who are entering the field already creating a practice to critically reflect on their racial identity and lived experiences. This inspires us because it undoubtedly impacts how they can connect with their own students and build networks of support with future colleagues. At the same time, TEP students expressed a sense of feeling lost and questioning their sense of belonging within their program and we created space to unpack the various reasons underlying those feelings. As facilitators of color, we were able to relate to and address larger concepts like impostor syndrome as well as honor their lived experiences as an asset and as navigational capital, (Yosso, 2005). We were able to share that even as doctoral students of color, we also still experience racialized challenges like theirs, both in academia and in the workplace, and that healing is not linear and always ongoing, especially in a racist society. These moments of mutual vulnerability led to deeper discussions about how schooling was designed to cause harm, ranging from micro to macro aggressions, and collectively shared mutual experiences from as early as elementary school—this act allowed for

students and us as facilitators to validate structural wounds and acknowledge the need to heal collectively. The more we exchanged our stories, the better equipped we believed we could become to face these wounds and reaffirm that there is nothing wrong with any of us but that there is something very wrong with systems we teach and learn in. *This* is why community building through healing centered racial affinity groups is so critical to us; to remind ourselves and each other, regardless of what level we are in our education journey, of all that we embody and offer despite these institutions, and that our contributions are uniquely ours and hold so much value. In this dialogue with TEP students, we shared that each phase of this journey brings its own set of (un)learning, which is steeped in the duality of excitement and apprehension, (Negrón-Gonzales & Barrera, 2023).

While we shared our stories and experiences to acknowledge the emotions that were surfacing for students in our racial affinity group, it was through our audio-recorded reflections after facilitating each of our meetings that affirmed how these sessions were equally impactful for us as facilitators, as we also navigate our own racialized education journeys. In these racial affinity spaces, we become mirrors for one another—future and former selves—in (re)discovering what really matters to us in our purpose as educators of color. Thus, as facilitators of this non-Black Teacher of Color racial affinity space, we got to experience ongoing dynamics of mutuality and sacred care. Through self-reflection of one's identity and collective vulnerability and storytelling, we engage in critical and necessary work, we begin to heal together by holding space for ourselves and one another.

## White Racial Affinity Group: Cady and Rebecca's Shared Reflections

*"In our reflections afterward, I was unsettled by the white silence from other participants in response to the white (and patriarchal) rage from the two men who had interrupted our facilitation. I was also struck by the tremendous need for differentiation within our white racial affinity group sessions. It became clear that participants' exposure, knowledge and understanding of concepts like white supremacy, racial identity and cycles of oppression were as varied as their intentions were within the space." –Cady*

*"I have been on a journey for the past two decades learning and unlearning a lot about my Whiteness and how White supremacy culture is prevalent in the United States, even in the progressive Bay Area. White affinity groups were one tool on my journey. I am proud to acknowledge how far I have come and I think it is essential to give these students the same grace, patience, and space that was given to me as I unpacked my own Whiteness." –Rebecca*

We—one doctoral candidate and school district leader and one adjunct instructor and educator-organizer, both white women—have deepened our appreciation of the complexity of healing and the profound need for white teachers, including ourselves, to engage in this critical racial justice work. Co-facilitating the white racial affinity group has been healing in surprising, messy, painful, nourishing, illuminating, and vital ways.

Reflecting on our very first session, we began by introducing ourselves, sharing why this work is important to us and explaining that as white educators, we need to understand how white supremacy impacts us, our students, and our schools to disrupt racialized harm. However, we

were quickly interrupted by two male-identified white students who loudly rejected the idea that white supremacy might play a role in their educational or personal experiences. They yelled, they questioned us, and one stormed out of the room while the rest of the white students in the room watched silently.

The level of white rage (Anderson, 2017) that was displayed through words, volume, and body language was unsettling for us. A few weeks later, one of us saw one of these students on campus and was taken aback by how much fear it activated. If it was this terrifying for a middle-aged, white instructor to simply see this student, how must it feel for young people of color to share space in university classes with him? And the horror of imagining him as a teacher of children, and especially children of color? It made us feel sick as well as ashamed of our naivete of the violence and aggression that Black teacher candidates had tried to alert us to when they advocated for these groups in TEP to begin with.

Additionally, the silence (complicity) (hooks, 1995) from the other white students in the room, along with the fact that many did not return to future sessions after this incident, forced us to recognize that the anti-racist ideals that white students were espousing in their graded coursework did not correspond with the ways that these students were (not) engaging in this work outside of class. How could we expect white educators to interrupt racial harm occurring at school sites, potentially jeopardizing their healthcare and salaries, when they were unwilling to practice in a space that was created for them to do exactly that? Many white students expressed discomfort and confusion about what they had to gain from this racial affinity group. Some seemed to think that they had already learned all they needed to know, and many questioned how this was relevant to their development as teachers. This made us wonder whether the equity work we do

with pre-service and in-service white teachers was creating real change or just performative allyship. We were surprised by how much work there was to be done as we had ourselves, through our white conditioning, underestimated the monumental need.

Thanks to collaboration and facilitator team mentorship, we made shifts in our planning and facilitation that were helpful. First, we made our community guidelines and expectations clearer and firmer. We also shared sentence frames to help participants disagree respectfully and a “parking lot” for questions and concerns. We planned tight and concise sessions, provided multiple learning modalities for each session (art, articles, audio and video clips, reflective writing, scenarios, etc.), and included structured community building. We moved intentionally between individual, triad, and whole-group activities to encourage vulnerability, engagement, and accountability. We addressed the harm (and rumors about the harm) from the first session and cited clear evidence of the need for white racial affinity work in our teacher education department. We made fewer assumptions about what students already knew and offered more introductory conceptual definitions and frameworks with differentiated entry points. This has been beneficial even for more knowledgeable students as unlearning and healing from internalized white supremacy is neither linear nor finite. Participants have been receptive, and we are hopeful as we broaden the space for curiosity, courage, conflict, and connection.

Holistic and healing centered racial affinity group approaches have also benefited us as white facilitators, serving as a kind of therapy or antitoxin to internalized racist superiority (Crossroads, n.d.). We have more reverence for the vulnerability, humility, and (un)learning required as well as the indispensability of this transformational work. We have started questioning ourselves about the space we have

taken up in facilitator planning sessions as we grappled with the “crisis” of the white affinity group within the facilitation team, and we hope to be more mindful about the amount of space we allow ourselves and enable other white people to occupy. Our participation in this project has also inspired more courage in confronting and directly responding to racial harm. It has nurtured more consciousness about the space between our values and our actions as we continue to work to bridge the distance between the two.

### **Cross-Racial Faculty Collaboration and Leadership: Farima and Sarah’s Reflection**

Working together on this pilot initiative has been a complicated but necessary journey. While our department made attempts to address pervasive issues (e.g. intentionally diversifying our faculty and adjunct pool, diversifying our cooperating teacher and supervisor pool, and improving our teacher education curriculum to better reflect the diverse experiences of our students), we still struggled to confront racial dynamics amongst our teacher candidates, particularly the insidious whiteness permeating much of our coursework experiences. The need for healing centered racial affinity groups became a clear responsive and holistic approach to begin addressing the layers of racialized harm experienced within and outside of our TEP.

After sharing this pilot initiative with our TEP, we included a pre-survey asking students to identify which respective racial affinity group they would participate in, and multiple challenges immediately surfaced. Some students felt perplexed about how to racially identify themselves, which came to a surprise for us and resulted in the need to help students make sense of their racialized identities. Some mixed-race students found it nerve wracking to choose one identity over the other, which resulted in the request for an additional racial affinity group for mixed-race students, which was

an important oversight on our end and a critical contribution to this initiative. However, not surprisingly, the more overwhelming challenges came from white-identified students revealing their deep ambivalence and fear of the idea of racial affinity groups in general. A significant number of white students pushed back on the purpose and need for the groups at all and the use of class time for issues that they felt had little to do with learning how to be a teacher. The initial response of white students within the pre-survey required extensive time on the part of the faculty team leaders - meeting with irate white students and additional work with the white facilitators to prepare for what they might encounter. There emerged a fine line and contradiction as we tried to address the insidious nature of whiteness: if we leave the problematic behavior of the white students unaddressed, allow it to grow, take up space *and* cater to it then we would continue to center whiteness which felt counter-productive to the purposes of the racial affinity groups and what we were hoping to accomplish. And, if we address the white rage, white fragility, and white interpassivity (Hoard & Bland, 2023), we would need to prepare for the backlash and labor required to make the case that these students are not ready to teach diverse student populations. This added another dimension to our work highlighting how racial healing looks and feels different for every student teacher and required differentiation and varied levels of responsiveness.

Healing is racialized and the racial wounds of BIPOC are vastly different from the kinds of wounds our white teacher candidates embody but even amongst those groups there are differences in experiences related to class, gender, ability, and sexuality, for example. However, we both experienced how often the work to address racial harm in TEP was reductive in nature and often centered shame, which over time had little impact on addressing the roots of racialized harm and changing the minds, hearts, and actions of

problematic white teacher candidates. We began to reflect and strategize on humanizing ways to address whiteness without resorting back to punitive approaches preventing transformative (un)learning or placing the labor on BIPOC to engage. We were committed to approaching this work from a holistic lens, but it was a challenging and complex undertaking.

While our department had talked about the importance of addressing the issue of racial macro- and microaggressions, how this might be taken up in the racial affinity groups was not as clear to other colleagues. We prioritized sharing more about this initiative in department meetings ranging from the frameworks shaping our initiative, snapshots of what the different racial affinity groups were doing in their sessions, and quotes shared in student feedback forms post-sessions. There is a very real tension in teacher education between the traditional pedagogical training that preservice teachers need and the more personal and practical applications of racial healing work that are also needed to teach in diverse communities. Sharing data from the initiative during departmental meetings allowed us to uncover the gendered emotional labor required for racial healing work that often goes unacknowledged.

### **Emergent Lessons**

This study sought to understand the nature of learning and leadership experience within a multiracial team collaborating on a TEP's healing centered racial affinity group initiative. Our central research question for this pilot study was: *How do TEP's racial affinity team members experience and learn from the planning, debrief and facilitation of healing centered racial affinity groups?* A key feature of our planning, facilitation, and research process was driven by our work together being intentionally holistic, relational, and grounded in collective leadership. The three major lessons

we've learned from this initial pilot phase are: 1) Collective non-hierarchical (femme)torship<sup>1</sup> is impactful, regardless of years of experience in the field; 2) Differentiated approaches to racial healing through racial affinity groups are necessary and complex for both participants and facilitators; and 3) Racial affinity group approaches must be accompanied by a commitment to allocating resources, time, continued development, and intentionality from institutions.

### **The Impact of Collective and Non-hierarchical (Femme)torship**

Whether it was the overarching (femme)torship of the faculty leaders, the co-(femme)torship of the educator-facilitators, or the collective (femme)torship of the team as a whole—holistic shared leadership was at the center of this racial affinity group leadership team. Academia is often shaped by a culture of rugged individualism and competition that disproportionately impacts women in the field (Guarino & Borden, 2017). However, feminist teacher educators of color have taught us why, “social justice-oriented teacher educators [must] rely on collective work as a central tenet of working towards and realizing transformative and liberatory change in teaching, learning, schooling, education, and society” (Maloney et al., 2019, p. 253). As such, we aimed to engage a multi-layered approach to (femme)torship between the chair and faculty lead, between the faculty leads and facilitator team, between co-facilitators of each racial affinity group, and across all team members during the planning and debriefing meetings and writing together.

During leadership team meetings, working with and supporting doctoral students felt healing and restorative for the faculty leads. Planning and

debrief team meetings were intentionally designed with holistic and humanizing mind/body/heart check-ins, mindful breathing and grounding practices, affirmations and healing centered prompts, as well as reflections about personal and collective strengths/needs. The whole group portion of the meetings before transitioning to breakout groups for respective partner planning sessions relied heavily on sharing ideas and emphasizing collaboration. All racial affinity group folders were accessible to every team member so facilitators could learn from how other facilitators planned for racial healing approaches in their sessions. We also strived to create a non-hierarchical planning process by positioning ourselves as co-collaborators and thought partners in the initiative. We checked in with each other frequently about facilitation needs and held space to reflect on tensions and complexities.

### **Intentionality in Differentiated Racial Healing and (Un)learning**

Another significant lesson learned was the need for differentiation related to racial healing and (un)learning. Healing is racialized and therefore requires different lenses, frameworks, and approaches for each group. Additionally, choosing doctoral students and one adjunct instructor as facilitators rather than departmental faculty was intentional to mitigate power dynamics between faculty and students. We asked trusted colleagues within the school of education to recommend doctoral students who were not only already working with and/or in K-12 schools, but who also demonstrated critical dispositions and experience with social justice and humanizing approaches to teaching/learning.

Another intentional priority was Farima's desire to facilitate healing centered engagement workshops at every TEP new student orientation as an introduction to the purpose and function of the racial affinity group initiative so that students

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<sup>1</sup> We utilize the term (femme)torship to describe mentorship specifically led by women and for women.

could be prepared for what was to come for them in their program experience. In this workshop, Farima would present the Healing Centered Engagement framework (Ginwright, 2015) and explain how racial healing is an integral component of social justice teaching. Beyond this initial introduction, students were also assigned pre-readings about the concepts and purpose of racial caucusing and racial affinity group approaches to deepen their understanding and to demonstrate how other schools and organizations were engaging in this work across the country. After scaffolding these concepts, we created a pre-survey for students to begin the process of racial affinity grouping and we provided a brief description of the initiative along with a disclaimer that racial self-identification can be a complex experience. In the pre-survey we wrote the following:

**The act of identifying which racial affinity group is right for you can be a journey in and of itself.** *While we know that race is a colonial social construct and that racial identities have evolved over time, we are aware that there are many complexities and nuances related to self-identifying which racial affinity group to participate in. We are working on expanding this initiative so in the meantime, please forgive our limitations in this area. Please see the categories below to decide which racial affinity group feels best for you to participate in throughout this semester.*

**Black/Indigenous Affinity Group:** *This term includes people who identify as Black-- including but not limited to those who identify as Indigenous, Africans, Caribbeans, Afro-Latinx, African-Americans, and/or mixed-race Black;* **Non-Black People of Color Affinity Group:** *This term includes people who identify as Indigenous, AAPI [Asian,*

*Southeast Asian, South Asian, East Asian, West Asian, Central Asian, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and/or mixed race]; Latinx/Latiné [ descendants of Latin American ancestry and lineages from Central and South America, the Caribbean, and/or mixed race];* **Mixed Race Affinity Group:** *This term includes people who identify as biracial and multiracial and will be the only healing centered racial affinity group facilitated by a professor due to our limited capacity to hire another doctoral student;* **White Affinity Group:** *The category of a white racial identity has changed significantly over the course of history but often includes people who identify as white--including but not limited to those who identify as being part of any European ancestry and lineages.*

In the pre-survey we also included questions such as: *How do you identify? (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, etc.); Have you ever participated in a racial affinity group before? If so, where and what was your experience like?; How comfortable are you with the idea of joining a racial affinity group? Please provide 1-2 sentences to expand on your answer; Do you have any questions, concerns, and/or offerings for your facilitators to keep in mind before starting racial affinity groups in TEP?; Is there anything else you would like to add?* We then met with our team to review the responses within the pre-surveys to have context of how to differentiate planning for each respective racial affinity group session to meet students where they were. Additionally, after every racial affinity group meeting in semester one, students completed an anonymous feedback form as an exit ticket and shared constructive feedback, questions, and reflections related to their experience. Lastly, student feedback was shared as report-backs to the TEP department as a way to engage in meaningful dialogue about challenges in our program related to race/racism and collaborative reflection

regarding possible departmental solutions and shifts to meet evolving student issues and needs.

Based on student feedback and facilitator debriefs, we found that differentiation in terms of facilitation was indeed critical. For example, the Black and non-Black people of color often centered art, music, healing, joy, and spirituality in their sessions to unpack issues related to internalized oppression, imposter syndrome, and the impacts of micro- and macro- aggressions. On the other hand, the white and mixed-race white groups often centered short readings for critical framing, working through dilemmas/scenarios, and journaling to process how racial harm is perpetuated by white people as harm-doers or bystanders, knowingly and unknowingly, in order to take more active steps to disrupt harm when it occurs in and out of classrooms. The level of structure, reading, prompts, and tight facilitation that was needed within the white racial affinity group was not what was needed within non-white racial affinity groups.

Addressing whiteness in our facilitator team meetings was an ongoing tension that we faced, we (Farima and Sarah) knew we needed to actively address it knowing it had been an ongoing issue in our department meetings for years but constantly centering it in the context of our team planning/debrief meetings became problematic. We noticed how much space the problems within the white affinity group were taking on which then led us to differentiate planning sessions for facilitator meetings as well. We decided that our white faculty lead, Sarah, would take on the labor of working directly with the white racial affinity group facilitators around issues related to whiteness so that Farima could work directly with the facilitators of color around issues related to internalized oppression, for example. While issues of race and racism might have been taken up in coursework and embedded across TEP in broader ways, creating a space that directly centered

critical self and collective reflection about students' experiences of racialization was indeed necessary to approach differently within each group.

### **Institutional Commitment to Resourcing for Racial Affinity Groups**

Planning for and facilitating healing centered racial affinity groups necessitates resources, capacity, time, and professional development. We faced several issues compensating team members through Graduate Assistantships, the rate at which graduate assistants are paid did not match the expertise and labor that our facilitators should have been compensated for. Funding matters—particularly funding for multiply marginalized graduate students who deserve to be compensated for emotional and racial justice labor.

Another issue we continued to face was space allocation—both physically and programmatically for this initiative. Physically, to divide students up by race/ethnicity meant that the class sizes varied and some groups were much larger than others. Given that most of our classrooms at our university are designed for small class-sizes, bringing students together for racial affinity groups presented an ongoing challenge related to space. The size of a space to engage in this kind of work matters, when smaller groups like the Black affinity group are placed in a smaller room with no technology for example, what message does that send in terms of racialized resource allocation? Beyond this issue, when larger rooms are allocated for groups like the white affinity group at a time when many students are still masking due to COVID-19, how are students able to meaningfully listen and engage in that space while being safe?

Programmatically, time was an important factor to consider seriously for this initiative. Given how overworked and overextended TEP students are with student teaching and coursework, it was essential that racial affinity groups were built into

the time that they would already be on campus for class. During the first semester we did not take student attendance, however, after several white students resisted participating and their attendance in racial affinity group meetings dwindled, attendance became mandatory since every session counted toward required instructional hours. This also meant that the instructors teaching students on that night would have to sacrifice 1 ½ hours of their class each month so students could attend.

### Implications

As the field of teacher education continues to evolve with the ever-changing political landscape and racial demographics of teachers and students, it is important to address how racially stratified the profession is by equipping future classroom teachers with differentiated holistic approaches to support racial healing and justice in education. Most teacher education programs have a clear social justice mission but how do these values permeate student and faculty experience? What does it actually look like to bridge values to practice and budgets? How do universities tangibly resource these efforts? How can leadership and faculty honor the needs of racial justice wellness work for students and faculty alike as central to holistic and humanizing teacher and faculty development? Furthermore, it is critical that teacher education programs also understand that it takes rigorous and relentless personal and professional development and resources to effectively facilitate healing centered racial affinity groups, simply sharing a particular racial identity of an affinity group is not enough to be equipped to facilitate that space responsibly. One of the team leads, Farima, for example, had several years of experience and training in racial affinity group work as well as healing centered engagement within the context of education. How this initiative evolved relied on the critical dispositions, various years of experience with social justice pedagogies, and expertise that the other team members also

already came into this experience with. Racial affinity group facilitators, regardless of their position in the field (faculty, adjunct professor, graduate student, K-12 teacher, etc.), still must engage in ongoing critical reflection and racial healing work on a personal and collective level to be equipped to engage this work with integrity in a teacher education program. This has implications for the challenges that teacher education departments might face when attempting to engage in critical, holistic, and healing centered work for teachers and teacher educators. However, as bell hooks reminds us, we cannot heal in isolation and yet, in order “to build community [it] requires vigilant awareness of the work we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination” (hooks, 2003, p. 36).

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### Author Bios

**Farima Pour-Khorshid** is a first-generation Ph.D. and Associate Professor at the University of San Francisco. Her work has been locally, nationally, and internationally situated in her roles as a K-12 teacher, professor, teacher supervisor, educational consultant, public intellectual, scholar, and educator-organizer. She has learned from and served within multiple local and national education organizations and is one of the editors, authors, and organizers of, "Lessons in Liberation: An Abolitionist Toolkit for Educators", a collaboration between various grassroots abolitionist and justice-centered collectives. She's published several peer-reviewed academic articles and book chapters, delivered over 150 invited keynote addresses, professional presentations, and guest lectures, and contributed to a range of public platforms such as TEDx Talk and National Public Radio (NPR). As such, she received the 40 Under 40 Leadership Award from California State University, East Bay, for her humanizing, healing centered, and abolitionist approaches within and outside the field of education.

### Eghosa Obaizamomwan-Hamilton

(<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6189-6418>) is a Clinical Associate in Stanford University's Teacher Education Program (STEP). She is also the

co-founding editor of [The Black Educology Mixtape](#) (Journal), a collective dedicated to advancing transformative education and promoting liberation and visibility for Black communities. Her research investigates the complex intersections of race, identity, and education, and has been published in peer-reviewed academic journals such as Harvard Educational Review, Equity & Excellence in Education, and Race Ethnicity and Education. With over 16 years of experience in education—her writing, teaching, and research meet at the intersections.

**T. Gertrude Jenkins** is an Assistant Professor and Program Director for the Transformative Action in Education (TAE) program at the University of the Pacific in Stockton, CA. Gertrude's research is deeply rooted in the liberatory practices of Black educators, particularly Black women educators, and the pedagogies they employ to subvert systems of oppression in K-12 schools, both within and without the institution. Motivated by her prior experiences as a secondary school teacher of over 15 years, Gertrude's work illustrates her desire to freedom dream alternative educational spaces that are resistant to the manifestations of systemic antiblackness.

**Kanako Wong** is the Dean of Graduate Studies at Reach Teacher's College within Reach University. Her work centers the experiences of students from underserved communities and focuses on supporting mentors of color through collaborative, asset-based practices in California's teacher credentialing programs. Drawing on decades of experience as an elementary educator in both public and charter schools, Kana is committed to creating spaces and opportunities that expand access and pathways for future teachers and teacher educators of color. Her scholarship explores holistic and healing-centered approaches to mentorship and teacher preparation.