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Moral Injury in K-12 Education: A Phenomenological Inquiry at the Intersection of Race and Class

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ABSTRACT

This study is a phenomenological exploration of moral injury among K-12 professionals who work in schools in which the large majority of students are students of color and are eligible for free or reduced lunch. All participants worked in one urban school district in the Midwest of the United States. Professionals identified harsh discipline practices, insincere restorative justice programs, deceptive use of outcome data, and a pitying approach to the education of low-income students of color as morally injurious practices. The paper ends with recommendations for how the construct of moral injury can be useful in identifying and confronting sources of educational injustice.

Keywords: moral injury, phenomenology, Critical Race Theory, K-12 education, teacher demoralization

Over the last 15 years, the construct of *moral injury* has gained increasing interest across the fields of psychology, social work, health care, religious studies, and philosophy. Moral injury refers to the lasting emotional, psychological, and existential harm that occurs when an individual "perpetrates, fails to prevent, bears witness to, or learns about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations" (Litz et al., 2009, p. 700). Individuals who experience moral injury may report feelings of guilt, shame, anxiety, and depression (Dombo et al., 2013; Litz et al., 2009). Moral injury can result in an existential crisis when one's sense of self as a moral actor and the world as a moral place is shattered (McDonald, 2017). Although the term "moral injury" was originally coined by mental health professionals working with American military veterans (Litz et al., 2009; Shay, 2014), researchers have

found evidence of moral injury in a variety of other morally significant sociocultural contexts, including among Middle Eastern refugees living in Europe (Nickerson et al., 2015), teachers in violent areas of El Salvador (Currier et al., 2015), women with substance abuse histories (Hartman, 2015), forensic psychiatry patients (Roth et al., 2022a), police officers (Simmons-Beauchamp & Sharpe, 2022), and parents and professionals involved in the Child Protection System (Haight et al.; Haight et al., 2017b). The arrival of COVID-19 in Spring 2020 has led to a boom in studies exploring moral injury among healthcare professionals (e.g., Mantri et al., 2020; Nieuwsma et al., 2022; Rosen et al., 2022; Rushton et al., 2022; Song et al., 2021) and first responders (e.g., Ritter et al., 2023; Roth et al., 2022b; Roth et al., 2023;).

The U.S. public education system is another important setting in which to consider moral injury, both because of the moral nature of teaching practice and the moral complexity of the education context itself (Levinson, 2015). Two core aspects of teaching render it a moral practice. First, teaching involves "human action undertaken in regard to other human beings" (Fenstermacher, 1990, p. 133), inherent in which are issues of rightness, fairness, and justice. Second, teaching consists of influencing or changing the behavior of students to meet prescribed, normative goals, based on ideas of good and bad, right and wrong (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002). In addition to the practice of teaching, other practices that occur in the education context, including evaluation, assessment, and the control and monitoring of student bodies (e.g., where and how they sit, when they use the bathroom, how they walk down the halls, etc.), are loaded with moral meaning and result in moral dilemmas (Buzzelli & Johnston, 2002).

Buzzelli and Johnston (2002) have stressed the importance of educators cultivating an awareness of the moral nature of their work in order to identify and engage in moral action. In contrast, Levinson (2015) has argued that awareness alone is not sufficient because the nature of the political, economic, and social constraints in which the public education system exists frequently renders moral action impossible. For example, individual educators cannot refuse to administer state-mandated standardized tests, even if they feel these tests are culturally biased and hinder their ability to teach their students a rich and transformative curriculum. An educator cannot stop a school resource officer from arresting a student for bringing marijuana to school, even if they strongly believe that marijuana laws are immoral and that involvement in the criminal justice system will cause deep harm to their student. Keefe-Perry (2018) makes a similar argument, with a focus on how the altruistic and vocational aspects of the teaching profession make teachers particularly susceptible to the "psycho-spiritual" (p. 489) aspects of moral injury. Ultimately, despite moral awareness and even best intentions, educators perpetrate moral wrongs, and it is these immoral actions, in the context of an immoral system, that could result in K-12 educators' moral injury (Levinson, 2015).

Both Levinson (2015) and Keefe-Perry (2018) assert that identifying and understanding moral injury among educators is critical for creating more just and moral schools. Awareness of moral injury brings attention to the moral harms that are perpetrated in education systems, particularly on children, and thus can be an initial step in addressing and eliminating moral harm.

Although Levinson (2015) and Keefe-Perry (2018) make the argument for why moral injury should be considered within the context of education, their work is conceptual and philosophical. Currier and colleagues (2015) were the first to empirically investigate moral injury among teachers in El Salvador, within a region plagued by high levels of gang violence. The authors found significant evidence of moral injury, but many of the morally injurious events related more to the context outside the school than that within the school and the education system (Currier et al., 2015). Albright (2023) published a case study of a biracial female-identified teacher's experience of moral injury in a public high school in Massachusetts. The individual teacher identified both contextual sources (e.g., racism, poverty) and school-based sources (e.g., lack of student supports, inadequate special education services) of moral injury. Although the findings from Albright (2023) provide an example of one teacher's experience of moral injury, the moral complexity of teaching and the theoretical arguments presented by Levinson (2015) and Keefe-Perry (2018) suggest the need for a broader exploration of moral injury within the U.S. public education context.

This paper presents the qualitative portion of a larger explanatory sequential mixed methods study of moral injury among K-12 professionals[1]. This study is the first to empirically investigate moral injury within the context of the U.S. public education system. In the quantitative portion of the study (Sugrue, 2020), I used a modified version of the Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES; Nash et al., 2013) to measure the extent of, and factors related to, experiences of moral injury among 218 education professionals in an urban public school district in the Midwest. The MIES contains nine questions, each on a 6-point Likert-type scale, and defines morally injurious events in terms of three factors: transgressions committed by other, transgressions committed by self, and betrayal, with strong internal consistency estimates for each factor (α = .79, α = .94 - .96, and α = .83-.89; Bryan et al., 2016). The higher the score on each factor, the more the respondent endorsed experiencing morally injurious events. Although no clinical cut-off score exists for the MIES, scores above 3 suggest endorsement of morally injurious experiences. Over 80% of participants scored above 3 on at least one of the three factors measured by the MIES. Additionally, results of regression analyses showed a significant relationship between the racial and economic make-up of a school's student body and moral injury due to each of the three factors (p = .000, p = .000, and p = .006, respectively), among its staff. The more students of color or the more students receiving free or reduced lunch in a school, the more likely the professionals in that school were to experience moral injury (Sugrue, 2020)[2]. Based on these results, using a post-intentional

[1]In this study, *professionals* refers to all professionally licensed non-administrative staff who have direct contact with students, including teachers, school social workers, school psychologists, school counselors, speech pathologists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and school nurses.

[2] A full discussion of the methods and results of the quantitative study can be found in Sugrue, 2020.

phenomenological approach (Vagle, 2018), I sought to explore the following questions:

> How does moral injury take shape within the context of segregated public schools with high percentages of low-income students of color?
>
> More specifically, how does the context of a racially and economically segregated and marginalized public school produce moral injury among K-12 professionals?

Guiding Theoretical Principles

Moral Injury

Litz and colleagues' (2009) conceptual model of moral injury states that when an individual perpetrates or witnesses a morally transgressive act, they experience cognitive dissonance due to the discrepancy between their moral beliefs and the transgression. For those prone to moral injury, this cognitive dissonance leads to cognitive attributions that are "global, internal, and stable" (Litz et al., 2009, p. 700). These attributions will cause the individual to experience guilt, anxiety, and shame, and engage in withdrawal behaviors, which prevent reparative experiences that might allow for self-forgiveness and healing (Litz et al., 2009).

Whereas Litz and colleagues' (2009) model proposes that moral injury is a socio-cognitive phenomenon that results from the interpretation and attribution of a specific morally troubling event, McDonald (2017) conceptualizes moral injury in existential terms, in which it is the shattering of "one's sense of rightness and wrongness altogether" (p. 6) that is at the heart of the phenomenon. Thus, McDonald (2017) argues, a theoretical discussion of moral injury should focus less on understanding how individuals cognitively respond to individual moral transgressions and more on how one copes with a world in which the moral structures on which they had based their beliefs and expectations no longer hold.

Teacher Demoralization

The moral injury work of Litz and colleagues (2009), as well as McDonald (2017), is situated in the U.S. military context, yet their conceptualizations demonstrate similarities with Santoro's (2011) work in the U.S. public education system on a phenomenon that she refers to as *teacher demoralization*. Teachers experience demoralization when their pedagogical practice is constrained by policies that are not consistent with their beliefs and values about their profession, resulting in feelings of depression, impotence, hopelessness, shame, and an inability to access "the moral rewards of teaching" (Santoro, 2011, p. 2). Sources of teacher demoralization include standardized testing that constrain teachers' pedagogy (Santoro, 2011) and teacher evaluation processes rooted in "a logic of management," (Bradford & Braaten, 2018, p. 5) that lead to inauthentic instructional performances. Teacher demoralization also occurs when teachers attempt to speak out against accountability policies and their protests are characterized as selfish and uninformed (Santoro, 2017). Santoro (2017) coined the term "moral madness" that refers to

teachers' experiences of having their moral claims and their moral agency go unrecognized and delegitimized.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a useful tool for examining the moral aspects of racism as a social phenomenon that is deeply embedded in systems, such as that of public education. CRT challenges White normative social processes and standards and provides insight into how the relationship among race, racism, and power produces, maintains, and supports racial inequality (Kolivoski et al., 2014). In this sense, CRT approaches inquiry from a moral stance – arguing not only the immorality of the current social order, but the moral need to create a truly just society (Gentilli, 1992).

METHODS

In order to understand how moral injury is produced and experienced within the context of racially and economically marginalized schools, this study employed a post-intentional phenomenological design (Vagle, 2018). In post-intentional phenomenology, researchers are urged to adopt a post-structural epistemological perspective, in which knowledge is viewed as "partial, situated, endlessly deferred, and circulating, through relations" (Vagle, 2018, p. 126). In contrast to more traditional conceptualizations of phenomenological research (e.g., Husserlian phenomenology), a post-intentional phenomenological approach acknowledges that there is no one, static essence of a phenomenon to be discovered but rather phenomena are constantly being produced and provoked (Vagle, 2018). Post-intentional phenomenology focuses more on "how things connect rather than on what things are" (Vagle, 2018, p. 129, emphasis original), allowing the "outcomes" of phenomenological research to "become multiple and shifting in and over time, rather than essentialized and transcendental" (Vagle, 2018, p. 131). Vagle argues that a post-intentional approach to phenomenological research ultimately results in a deeper and more complex understanding of the phenomenon.

Post-intentional phenomenology is particularly well-suited for a study of moral injury. Moral injury remains a construct whose characteristics and conceptual boundaries continue to be explored and debated among researchers and practitioners in the field. By drawing on a post-structural view of knowledge as fluid, shifting, and incomplete (Vagle & Hofsess, 2016), post-intentional phenomenology not only allows for but encourages an exploration of the multiple ways that moral injury may take shape within and through the education context while the core conceptualization of moral injury continues to evolve.

Participants

This study used purposive sampling. In a previously published quantitative study of moral injury (Sugrue, 2020), 218 K-12 professionals employed in one urban public school district in the Upper Midwest of the U.S. completed an online survey which

included the Moral Injury Events Scale (MIES; Nash et al., 2013). From the completed surveys, I identified 36 professionals who scored highest on the MIES (i.e., those who scored a mean of 5 or above, on a 6-point scale, on at least two of the three factors, indicating high endorsement of moral injury) and who had indicated in the online survey that they would be willing to be contacted by the researcher to discuss their experiences. I contacted all 36 professionals and was able to schedule and complete interviews with 21 participants (n=21). Approval for the study was received from my university's Institutional Review Board, under exempt status.

Demographic information for the sample is presented in Table 1. The sample was predominantly female (90%) and White (71%), with a wide range of years of experience in teaching. Half of the sample worked in an elementary school. Of particular note is the racial and economic makeup of the schools in which the participants were employed. All participants worked in schools in which at least three-fourths of the student body were students of color and at least two-thirds qualified for free or reduced lunch. Eleven participants worked in schools with greater than 90% students of color and in which more than 90% qualified for free or reduced lunch.

Table 1: Participant Demographics and Pseudonyms (n = 21)

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Role	% F/R Lunch[3]	% SoC[4]
Tasha	Female	White	Program Coordinator	77%	88%
Joshua	Male	White	Special Ed Teacher	94%	91%
Patsy	Female	White	Special Ed Teacher	83%	79%
Annette	Female	Multiracial	ELL Teacher	68%	78%
Kerry	Female	White	Gen Ed Teacher	82%	93%
Irma	Female	White	Gen Ed Teacher	92%	97%
Jean	Female	White	Gen Ed Teacher	96%	95%
Kelly	Female	White	School Social Worker	85%	96%
Aubrey	Female	White	School Psychologist	94%	91%
Jody	Female	White	School Social Worker	91%	93%
Linda	Female	Multiracial	Special Ed Teacher	92%	97%
Pa	Female	Asian	Gen Ed Teacher	82%	93%
Matt	Male	White	School Psychologist	88%	96%
Margie	Female	White	School Psychologist	91%	93%
Elsa	Female	White	Gen Ed Teacher	82%	93%
Erika	Female	Asian	Gen Ed Teacher	94%	91%
Leah	Female	Native American	Gen Ed Teacher	82%	93%

Rose	Female	White	Gen Ed Teacher	86%	87%
Helen	Female	Black	Gen Ed Teacher	91%	93%
Nicole	Female	White	Gen Ed Teacher	92%	92%
Samantha	Female	White	Special Ed Teacher	96%	95%

Note. [3] Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch; [4] Percentage of Students of Color.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted between July and October of 2017. I asked participants to review a blank copy of the modified MIES (Nash et al., 2013) and to share any events or experiences that came to mind as they reflected on the questions. I asked participants to articulate which specific aspects of situations they found to be the most morally troubling, how they coped with their experiences, and what could prevent similar events from happening in the future.

As a phenomenological researcher, my role was as a supportive, affirming listener of the participants' stories (Vagle, 2018). During interviews, I asked clarifying questions if I did not understand what was being said but I did not attempt to challenge or question any of the statements the participants' made regarding their perspectives and experiences. Consistent with Vagle's (2018) approach to phenomenological interviewing, I attempted to interrogate my assumptions of understanding and definiteness by asking participants questions such as "Can you tell me more about that?" and "I want to make sure I understand you, can you say a little more about what you mean?"

Post-Reflexivity

Vagle (2018) identified post-reflexivity, or reflexivity from a post-structural perspective, as a critical component of the post-intentional phenomenological approach. Throughout all stages of research, post-intentional phenomenological researchers must constantly examine their own assumptions, experiences, values, and beliefs and consider how these may shape the interpretations of the phenomenon being studied (Vagle, 2018). Prior to beginning the interviews, I wrote an initial post-reflexion statement (Vagle, 2018) in which I identified the significance of my positionality. I am White, U.S.-born, heterosexual, cis-gender, woman. Prior to my career in academia, I spent over a decade as a school social worker. My years working in the education system meant that I was familiar with its terminology, structures, and common practices. This knowledge allowed me to "speak the language" of the participants and to be able to have a clear picture the settings, interactions, and experiences that they discussed in our interviews. At the same time, my experiences may have led me to overidentify with the participants, particularly the White female participants, and I may have neglected to further probe or question their narratives in a way that would have provided more critical and complex data. Thus, I approached this study from an emic perspective, with regard to my relationship with the participants, but held an etic view in terms of the students whose lived experiences in the education system were at the core of educators' morally injurious experiences.

Throughout the data collection process, I kept a post-reflexion journal (Vagle, 2018). After each interview I wrote down key ideas that stood out to me from the interview – both ideas that supported the assumptions I had going into the interview and those that surprised me or contradicted my expectations. I continually reviewed my post-reflexion statement and tried to be aware of how my own assumptions, beliefs, and identities were shaping all aspects of this research, including the questions I asked, the connections I made between ideas, and the conclusions I drew.

Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed and then uploaded into the online qualitative research program, Dedoose. My analytic process was guided by Vagle's (2018) post-intentional phenomenological approach, in which analysis involves three key components: phenomenological material, theories, and post-reflexions. All three components are equally important in understanding how a phenomenon might take shape, although this does not mean that they need to be equally employed during each analytic moment. I began the analysis process using Vagle's (2018) "whole-part-whole" analytic approach. First, I read each transcript in full and reviewed my post-reflexion journal entries as a way to immerse myself in the data, much of which I had collected months prior to beginning my analysis. Then, I conducted careful line-by-line readings of each transcript in Dedoose, using the coding function to deconstruct each transcript into parts, paying particular attention to elements of the transcripts that might "mark" the phenomenon of moral injury (Vagle, 2018). I did not constrain myself to an a priori list of codes or themes, but rather allowed myself to follow the data, marking any passages that appeared to contain potential meanings and engaging in memoing throughout the process.

After deconstructing each transcript, I began to examine how the different parts were forming into new thematic wholes, or what Vagle (2018) refers to as "productions and provocations" of the phenomenon. During this stage of the analysis, I used Vagle's (2018) application of Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of lines of flight. I looked for where the data seemed to "take off" (Vagle 2018, p. 157) by examining my themes and post-reflexions and asking "What doesn't fit?" and "What else can I learn about moral injury in education if I focus on the data or ideas that don't fit with my current themes and understandings?" Finally, I began the process of interpreting these productions and provocations through and against my own assumptions and experiences, as well as in the context of CRT and conceptualizations of moral injury. Throughout my analytic process, I wrote post-reflexive memos to both guide and document my thinking. I tried to maintain an open stance to the research, guided by Dahlberg's (2006) call to phenomenological researchers to resist the urge to understand too quickly and carelessly, such that "we do not make definite what is indefinite" (p. 16).

RESULTS

As previously discussed, McDonald (2017) argues that moral injury may stem less from individual moral violations and more from a context in which moral beliefs,

expectations, and practices can no longer be upheld. Using this approach to understanding moral injury, I examined how K-12 professionals viewed elements of the racialized and classed context in which they worked as creating an environment rife with moral transgressions.

Morally Injurious Practices at the Intersection of Race and Class

Discipline and Deficits

In popular discourse, schools with high concentrations of low-income students of color are frequently characterized as having low levels of academic achievement, problems with truancy, a lack of parental involvement, and high levels of violence and disruptive behavior (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Picower, 2009). In this hegemonic story of urban schools (Picower, 2009), the source of their assumed deficits is often explained by cultural deprivation theory (Ladson-Billings, 1999), in which racial and economic disproportionality in academic achievement is attributed to pathologies in students' inferior sociocultural backgrounds (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1999). Schools that operate from a cultural deprivation framework tend to respond to academic achievement disparities among low-income students of color with policies and practices aimed at changing students' individual behaviors (Dudley-Marling, 2007). Proponents of this approach have argued that low-income students of color have poor educational outcomes because they have not been held to high academic and behavior expectations (Whitman, 2008). In order to get students to meet these expectations, this approach to education advocates strict behavior codes, token economies, and rigid systems of rewards and punishment (Whitman, 2008). Samantha, a White elementary special education teacher in this study, offered an explanation of what she found morally troubling about the concept of "high expectations" for students in her school:

> It's interesting because I feel like the word "high expectations" is a lot like the word "inclusion"—where it can be used as a blanket way to actually not be treating kids the way they need to be treated or giving them the support or the resources they need.

Participants in this study described similar individual-behavior-focused interventions in their schools and reported that these interventions, in particular the use of out-of-school suspensions, were sources of moral injury. Kelly, a White high school social worker was particularly troubled by dishonest practices regarding suspension reduction in the district. She explained:

> We're having all these conversations about [high rates of] suspensions of Black boys, but what happened last year is that the district was like, "Every building has to reduce their suspensions overall," but then what that turned into is, "ok, we won't suspend them we'll just 'remove' them and code it differently. Or not code it all and just send them home, you know." That's WRONG.

"Restorative Justice" as a Buzzword, Not a Practice

The district in this study had directed schools to significantly decrease their use of out-of-school suspension after a 2014 investigation by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights found that African American students were significantly overrepresented in disciplinary actions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). According to professionals in this study, schools were directed to replace suspensions with a restorative justice approach, in which students would be given opportunities to make amends for their mistakes while remaining in school. Although professionals in this study agreed on the problematic nature of suspension, they expressed dismay that the schools were not actually implementing restorative justice practices with fidelity. Training in restorative practices was not provided to staff, and additional personnel were not allocated in order to help the school make a major paradigm shift in their approach to student discipline. In essence, restorative justice became a buzzword, signaling the absence of suspensions rather than an actual shift in how schools respond to the needs of students. Tasha, a White middle school program coordinator, explained:

> It's this idea that we would do restitution, [and] everyone is like, "Sure! Yeah!" But no training. No extra people. We said we're not going to suspend anybody anymore but then we don't have anything in place to say, "So, we're also going to do this."

Leah, a Native American high school social studies teacher, said, "I think that there has to be more real …restorative justice within the buildings. We talk about it in words but it doesn't happen. It does not happen."

With a significant decrease in the use of suspension without a formal, consistent implementation of a restorative justice model, professionals described school environments that were marred by confusion and chaos. Professionals described how, when confronted with student behaviors, many administrators replaced a suspension response with no response at all. Tasha, the middle school program coordinator, explained:

> We have about 600 students in our school and we have at any given time during the course of the day, 30 kids, wandering the halls, who we do not seem to be reaching – and they just tell me to "fuck off" if I say anything to them and then nothing happens with administration.

Helen, an African American 5th grade teacher, described a similar approach in her elementary school:

> I've watched the administration see something going on … and turn and go the opposite way. We were told that if you see anything going on, don't do anything, just leave it alone, stay out of it. I have trouble with that.

Erika, an Asian American 4th grade teacher, told a particularly harrowing story of an incident in her classroom involving a student who had significant mental health needs but was not receiving the appropriate supports to address them. She began the story by referring to a different student in her class whom she had been struggling with:

> This kid that I was telling you about that was calling me a bitch every day and was super dysregulated … he kicked a pane of -- we had glass on the doors -- so he kicked the pane through.

A couple of days later, the glass pane next to her door hadn't been replaced when:

> This other kid comes in my room, a 2nd grader, looking for his sister. I was teaching 5th grade at the time and all the kids were freaking out because this student was going around hitting kids because that's just what he does. I get him out, but I can't lock -- well I can lock my door – but I have a pane missing. So he reached in [through the pane] to try to open the door and all the kids are like, 'Don't let him in!' So I'm holding the door, literally holding it up, and he's reaching through the pane trying to punch me. And there was nothing I could do because I couldn't call anyone because I was holding the door. I sat there for like a good, I don't know, 15 minutes until someone came.

When asked specifically about what aspects of these incidents they found to be most morally troubling, professionals were quick to point out that the individual students' behaviors were not the source of their moral injury. They viewed the students' behaviors as reflections of their own struggles and unmet needs. Instead, they felt morally injured by systemic failures that created the chaotic and unsafe environments. For instance, Erika, the 4th grade teacher who told the story of the student punching her through the broken pane on her classroom door explained:

> I feel most betrayed by the lack of support from not just the administration but from the district at large; for creating a very unsafe environment for teachers and students, because in this case there were so many students that were really afraid to come to school . . . and I couldn't always protect them.

After completing my interview with Erika, I spent a significant amount of time reflecting on my own experiences working in schools with children with complex mental health needs. I spent over a decade as a school social worker in an upper middle-class, predominantly White suburban school district. I could not imagine this situation occurring in this district – not because there are not students in that district who have histories of trauma exposure, who struggle with significant mental health issues, and who exhibit behaviors that can be potentially dangerous to themselves and others. Rather, the expectation in schools with majority White students is that White children's educational, physical and mental health, and safety needs will be met at school. The implicit belief in White U.S. society is that White children have the right to attend schools that are academically rigorous, emotionally nurturing, and physically safe, but that students of color, particularly low-income African American students, have no such rights is a reflection of what Harris (1993) refers to as *whiteness as property.* Under early American law, property rights were only afforded to White men, formally solidifying the ideology of the supremacy of Whites to other races (Vaught, 2012). This ideology was used to produce additional rights, such as voting and representation that were also only available to White men (Vaught, 2012). The institution of slavery further cemented Whites' power of ownership and exclusive

claims to humanity (Vaught, 2012). In contemporary contexts, "whiteness as property" is exercised through the claim of Whites "to craft and instantiate meaning, to accrue benefit, and to expect exclusivity and legal protection" (Vaught, 2012, p. 53).

According to Erika, the incident she described did not result in a dramatic response from school or district leadership. There was no urgency expressed around the fact that both the student who was reaching through the broken pane and the other students in the class were not having their educational, emotional, and physical needs met at school. White hegemony allows for the expectation and acceptance of trauma, suffering, and oppression for low-income African American students, while insisting on opportunities, benefits, and legal protections for White children.

Don't Look Under the Hood

Along with racial disparities in suspension rates, graduation rates throughout this district also vary significantly by racial group, with White students having an 84.7% graduation rate in 2016, and African American, Latino, and Native American students having graduation rates of 59.4%, 50.1%, and 37.4%, respectively (Gotlieb, 2017). In response to this data, the district has stressed the need for schools to raise graduation rates, particularly for African American, Latino, and Native American students. However, the K-12 professionals in this sample reported that the push to increase graduation rates has focused on producing good graduation numbers rather than better addressing the learning needs of marginalized students. Secondary teachers described extreme pressure from administrators to give students higher grades and pass students regardless of their performance. Leah, a Native American high school social studies teacher, shared an example of an email she received during the last week of the 4th quarter of the school year regarding a student:

> The AP sent an email to all of this student's teachers saying this student needed to pass all of her classes with GOOD GRADES. I hadn't seen her until the last week and a half of the year. She had been accepted into a college and she needed to get good grades. No work from her. No summative assessments. But she needed to pass so do what you have to do. . . We're hurting them by pretending that they're achieving. It's just SO WRONG.

Kelly, a White high school social worker, explained how she feels they are facing a conundrum at her school. She acknowledged that not graduating from high school leads to very poor economic and social outcomes for students, but if they are graduating kids from high school without the skills to be successful in college or the job market, does the diploma really mean anything? She explained:

> We do whatever is necessary to get these kids to graduate. When I first started I was like, "Yeah, let's give them all kind of accommodations." But now we're seeing the kids who we pretty much pushed to graduation and told that they were college ready and we've had maybe a handful of kids who've actually made it through their first year of college. We are still setting them up to fail.

Jeannette, a White high school English teacher used a metaphor of a broken-down car to capture her concerns about the way the district has been educating students and the moral injury it caused for her:

> It bothers me. A LOT. The idea that someday, when all is said and done, we're going to look under the hood and realize that the only thing keeping the whole thing together has been wishful thinking and duct tape. And that -- I'm conflicted about that. Both because it's the meaning of my work, and it's the meaning of their [students'] work.

Low academic expectations as sources of moral injury were not limited to professionals in secondary schools, but were also expressed by elementary educators. Helen, an African American 5th grade teacher, began to cry when talking about the academic progress of students in her school. When asked to explain what the tears were about, she replied:

> It's pain. It is pain of watching children who you know have great potential just be pushed to the side like okay, it doesn't matter, you don't matter. Because we're just going to let you keep doing what you're doing. They're not going to leave academically ready for the work of next year. It is painful.

Some participants frequently referred to the moral injury they experienced due to the dishonesty that they and their school practiced towards students and families. By feeling pressured to give students higher grades, Grace, an Asian American social studies teacher, explained that she was lying to students—telling them that a C paper is actually an A paper. She explained, "It's like you're telling them [students] 'You're awesome,' and they get to the real world and it's like, 'How come the world doesn't think that?' They're confused. As a teacher, I think that's wrong." She explained that these low academic standards and dishonest practices are "not fair to the kids, but they don't know it yet." In contrast, she knows that students are being harmed but is unable to change the systemic practices in which she participates. Jeanette, a White English teacher, stated bluntly, "we may just be a professional class of liars. We may be claiming to do more than we actually can for the communities we serve".

These examples of sources of moral injury illustrate the CRT tenet of *interest convergence* (Bell, 1980). It is in the interest of both students of color and the school district to raise graduation rates and decrease suspension rates for non-White students. However, the district's approach to addressing racial disproportionality in academic achievement focused on improving the data (i.e., graduating more and suspending fewer students of color) rather than on transforming the pedagogy, practices, and structures that have led to the racial disproportionality in the first place. This approach reflects a core characteristic of interest convergence where, according to Milner (2008):

> people in power are sometimes, in theory, supportive of policies and practices that do not oppress and discriminate against others as long as they—those in power—do not have to alter their own ways and systems, statuses, and privileges of experiencing life.

The result of this approach is that the interests of the district (i.e., higher graduation rates and lower suspension rates for students of color) are met while the interests of students of color for equitable, rigorous, transformative educational experiences continue to be denied.

The Fine Line Between Empathy and Pity

Sociologist Pedro Noguera (2008) has written of the *pobrecito syndrome* in which educators feel sympathy for low-income students of color and, out of that sense of sympathy, lower the academic expectations and experiences for those students. Pobrecito syndrome is evident in the way Kelly, a White high school social worker, describes her school's approach to working with students:

> It's PITY is what it is. There's a line between being supportive and wanting to advocate for these kids and pitying them. And then it kind of turns into a "White savior" attitude in a way, and it's icky. It feels really icky".

Leah, a Native American high school social studies teacher, noted similar racial condescension when she worked with White colleagues in a program for Native students, aimed at increasing their attendance and academic performance. She explained that she wanted to set up a system in which the students could earn special field trips and other experiences for improving their attendance and/or class performance. However, she found that her White colleagues wanted to take them on field trips regardless of their school performance, arguing, "Well they [Native American students] never get to do this. If we don't do it, they never in their lives will". She explained that her White colleagues perceived Native students as "very helpless victims of poverty without any control in their lives". She ended up leaving the program due to her objections to how it was run and noted that the program has had very little academic success with its students. Similarly, Tasha, the White middle school program coordinator lamented:

> I just feel like we're holding those kids to lower standards so it feels like we're telling those kids that they're not worth it. "Oh, ok, you have a lot going on? Why don't you just do whatever". I mean, oh my God?! We're reinforcing this message that they're getting that they are not worth anything. That we don't think they can do it. It feels awful.

Some K-12 professionals in this sample brought up the district's push to adopt a trauma-informed approach to educating low-income students of color. Trauma-informed approaches in education are based on the idea that many students have experienced trauma in their lives that can have significant impact on their cognitive, emotional, and social development (Treatment & Services Adaption Center, n.d.). In a trauma-informed school, all adults know how to recognize and respond to the needs of students who have experienced trauma, students are taught communication and coping strategies, and a focus is placed on fostering a culture of respect and support that avoids retraumatization (Treatment & Services Adaptation Center, n.d.). However, professionals felt that insufficient training and leadership around trauma-informed approaches meant that the framework was being misinterpreted and

misapplied. Just as some administrators seemed to be using restorative justice as a directive to not respond to students' mental health needs and violent behaviors, professionals in this sample gave examples of a trauma-informed approach reflecting Noguera's (2008) pobrecito syndrome. Kelly, the White high school social worker, who supported trauma-informed approaches, shared her feelings on the misapplication of this approach as well as the tendency for White middle-class educators to stereotype all low-income students of color as traumatized:

> We are assuming that every kid in this building has some kind of trauma, just because of who they are and where they live, which isn't fair. Then we're overall lowering our expectations and rigor because we're making these assumptions about these kids.

Professionals talked about the value of a trauma-informed lens in understanding where kids' difficult behaviors and lagging skills may be stemming from, but insisted that this must be coupled with coaching and guiding kids through their trauma to experience academic success. Neglecting the "where do we go from here" part of the trauma-informed approach cultivates a pitying, deterministic approach to students. One example of this misapplication of the trauma-informed approach was given by Rose, a White elementary art teacher. She described how a student in her school had torn down and destroyed all the student artwork that had been hanging in the hall. When Rose asked her principal if they could have the student rehang any artwork that was not destroyed and apologize to the students whose artwork was damaged, the principal responded "That's too shaming. That will be traumatic for him". Rose questioned what type of community the staff were attempting to create in their school if students are not able to make amends to each other.

The district's move to restorative justice practices, changing academic expectations, and trauma-informed approaches were done, in part, in response to critiques about the district's enormous racial disparities in academic achievement and disciplinary practices. However, as Noguera (2008) and others (e.g., Kiuchi, 2016) have pointed out, pobrecito syndrome represents the other side of the racist educational practices coin. Harsh punishments and exclusionary practices are replaced with low expectations and pity. Both approaches result in the reproduction of racial and class-based education, economic, and social inequities, and maintain the racist and classist status quo. The pitying pobrecito attitude towards low-income students of color reflected in the district's practices illustrates the active domination of White supremacy (Leonardo, 2004). Responding to racial inequity in educational practices and outcomes with pity and lowered expectations (rather than structural transformation), reinforces the idea of White superiority (i.e., low-income students of color are too traumatized to learn and succeed), while ensuring the continuation of White supremacy (i.e., students of color graduate from high school without the skills needed to be successful in college or the labor market).

DISCUSSION

These findings have important implications for the study of moral injury and the understanding of the American public education system as a morally complex and

high-stakes context. Participants' descriptions of morally injurious experiences support McDonald's (2017) argument that moral injury stems less from individual moral violations and more from exposure to a context in which moral beliefs, expectations, and practices can no longer be upheld. Similarly, their descriptions echoed Santoro's (2011) description of teacher demoralization as an experience that results when the educational context dramatically changes such "that moral rewards, previously available in ever-challenging work, are now inaccessible" (p. 1). Although at times participants described specific acts which were morally troubling, the educators in this study spoke at length about broader sources of moral injury, including the traumatizing effects of racism and poverty on their students, the pity directed at low-income students of color that masqueraded as empathy, and the acceptance of, and reproduction of, race and class oppression. This broader understanding of moral injury as a normative consequence of exposure to, and awareness of, social injustice is a critical first step in challenging and addressing its sources.

The results of this study also illustrate that moral injury can occur not only in response to experiences of unusual or extreme moral violation (e.g., war, child abuse) but in response to normalized social injustice. Many of the sources of moral injury identified by the professionals in this study are notable for their ordinariness. The participants described conditions, practices, and structures that, as a society, we have allowed to be the normative reality for students and educators in highly segregated and marginalized schools. I assumed that the culture of high-stakes standardized testing would be a common topic for participants when discussing the sources of their moral injury but it almost never came up. Standardized testing may not have been a major source of moral injury among my sample because the professionals were preoccupied with much larger sources of injustice—namely racism and its intersection with classism. By identifying examples of racist and classist practices as morally injurious, the participants in this study force us to consider the reality of race and class oppression in public education in explicitly moral terms. This moral framing helps move the discourse around issues, such as the racial achievement gap and racial segregation, beyond one that is solely pedagogical, sociological, or political. As racism and classism violate established moral codes, eliminating these forms of oppression becomes essential to our collective humanity.

The results and analyses from this study must be considered within the context of several limitations. First, the findings should be interpreted through a Durkheimian understanding of morality as socially constructed (Durkheim, 2009). When K-12 educators discuss experiences that have conflicted with their moral values and expectations, resulting in moral injury, they are referencing a moral system that is rooted in the dominant norms, beliefs, and values of the society in which they live. In the U.S context, these dominant norms and values are rooted in White supremacy and are constructed by and reflected in the public education system (Love, 2019). Thus, participants' narratives, though reflective of their own individual moral suffering, must be acknowledged for the race and class biases that they reflect. For example, participants discussed being deeply troubled by the low standards they were asked to place on their students of color from low-income families, but few questioned the validity and objectivity of the standards to begin with. Professionals felt they were

lying to students and parents by giving out higher grades than warranted by the quality of the students work, but they did not question whether the grading system itself was a meaningful form of evaluation and feedback.

Similarly, participants' understanding of trauma was rooted in a medicalized paradigm. Participants expressed distress regarding how their schools were implementing "trauma-informed approaches", because they stemmed from racist and classist views of their students as being incapable and in need of pity and ultimately harmed students. However, a larger critique of trauma-informed approaches in education should also consider the conceptualization of trauma from which they are developed. From a medical perspective, trauma is something that happens to individuals, results in individual symptoms, and should be addressed with individualized psychological treatments. However, trauma is not an individual phenomenon but a social phenomenon (Ginwright, 2018). It stems from oppressive social systems, such as racism, capitalism, and misogyny. Medicalized trauma-informed approaches, with their focus on helping individual children cope with their emotional and behavioral issues, are problematic not only because they reinforce deficit discourses and engender pitying responses, but also because they serve to obscure trauma's underlying social causes, and by doing so reinforce and reproduce oppression (Ginwright, 2018; Lovrod & Ross, 2012).

Participants' medicalized understanding of trauma, and the moral injury they experienced from the way trauma-informed approaches were being applied in their schools, supports Ginwright's (2015; 2018) argument for the need to replace trauma-informed approaches with what he refers to as *healing-centered engagement*. Healing-centered engagement (HCE) requires that educators and others working with young people who have experienced trauma move beyond an individualized approach to treating symptoms of trauma to a focus on holistic, collective, culturally-grounded, politicized healing (Ginwright, 2015; 2018). HCE rejects a pitying and pathologizing approach to individuals who've experienced trauma and instead "views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events" (Ginwright, 2018; no page). Additionally, a principle of HCE is the need to support the healing and well-being of the adults who work with young people who have experienced trauma (Ginwright, 2015; 2018) in order to sustain the important and challenging work of fostering well-being and holistic justice. This element of "healing the healers", is often missing from approaches to trauma-informed care in education. The moral injury identified by participants in this study is one example of the harms that can result when trauma-informed approaches ignore the well-being of the significant adults tasked with supporting and caring for students.

A final limitation of this study that must be discussed is the way in which I employed Critical Race Theory as a guiding theoretical framework. A key tenet of CRT is the significance of voices of color and the role of the counter-narrative (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Out of the 21 professionals I interviewed, 15 were White. The voices of White educators proliferate in educational and social science research, and thus their narratives cannot be considered true counter-stories. That being said, I am not sure it is possible or ethical to study moral injury within the context of U.S. public education without using a critical lens for studying race and racism. White supremacy has been an organizing principle of this system since its

founding and public education continues to be one of the most effective contexts for reflecting and reproducing White supremacy (Keisch & Scott, 2015; Love, 2019). CRT, even when applied to White voices, is essential for revealing the moral issues in U.S. public education that are too often ignored. However, to deepen the understanding of moral injury in education and how it occurs in the context of racial oppression, future research must specifically explore the experiences and narratives of educators and students of color.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how moral injury is an important conceptual tool for identifying and understanding injustice in the education system. Future research should examine how the identified practices and structures that produce moral injury can be mitigated or eliminated. During my interviews with participants, I often heard the phrases "I don't have the answers" or "No one knows what to do" when discussing their sense of hopelessness and impotence to change the morally troubling situations they encountered in their work. As researchers, we have a responsibility to discover what can be done to create a moral and just education system. Most importantly, we need to move the discussion of moral violations in education beyond the school walls. Levinson (2015) has argued that:

> As a polity, we delegate to educators the responsibility to enact justice toward students and to enable students' experience of justice in school. At the same time, however, we retain the responsibility of ensuring the justice of the educational system as a whole; this is the obligation of the polity, not of the individual educator.

As communities, we are accountable for the moral suffering of educators and the injustices enacted on children. Addressing moral injury in education will require a collective effort to abolish systems and practices that have allowed moral wrongs to be perpetrated and tolerated and to re-imagine an education system rooted in the hope of liberation and justice.

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