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More than Numbers: Recruitment and Retention of Teachers of Color in U.S. Public Schools

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Abstract

Recent scholarship has demonstrated the improved educational outcome of students of color when their teachers are of a similar background (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). In addition to this work, there is research that shows that teachers of color leave the profession due to the lack of agency and voice in decision making and racially hostile climate for teachers of color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Kohli, 2016). This article presents a case for recruiting teachers of color and the development and support for programs that would lower teacher turnover rates. In addition, I present possible and endorse existing programs to recruit teachers of color and create more democratic schools. I end with a call for research to address the racial hostility that exists in schools to not only keep teachers in schools, but to improve the educational experiences of students of color.

Keywords: Teachers of color, diversity, racism, democratic schools, students of color, rationale, proposal

Introduction

In my 12 years of public education in working-class, predominantly Mexican immigrant schools, I had very few teachers of color¹. Several of the

¹I utilize Kohli's definition for people of color, as it adequately addresses my conception of the term. Kohli uses the term, of color to collectively reference people of African, Asian American, indigenous, Latina/o, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander descent. These broad racial parameters are drawn to synthesize the discussion of communities with racialized colonial histories and/or who experience racial marginalization in the United States today" (Kohli, 2016).

white teachers, many with good intentions, had assumptions about students based on our culture. These assumptions were often reflected in the way they engaged with us and motivated them to uphold White dominant cultural values in the classroom. White teachers would comment on our general lack of care for our education, display concern only for students that willingly complied to their teaching, and discredit students because I am the one with a doctorate”². Still, many of the teachers of colors that I did have were unable or uninterested in using culturally relevant pedagogies. I present this piece as someone who, until college, rarely had the opportunity to have teachers of color who engaged in work that was relevant to my life. The purpose of this article is to present the issue at hand and the need for teachers of color in schools with high populations of students of color. Nieto writes that teachers of color who are well trained and supported are able to engage with students and create conditions that facilitate learning in ways White teachers cannot (as cited in Villegas & Irvine, 2010). However, the impact that teachers of color may have in schools with high populations of struggling students of color are minimized by the experiences teachers have in schools. Policy must work towards supporting students and teachers of color.

This article will use teachers of color to address the needs of this group as a whole. However, this lumping” can make invisible the particular needs and experiences of certain racial and ethnic groups, since they are not individually addressed. This piece will find ways to address the problem as a whole, although specific needs, challenges, and policy changes need to be studied and addressed. To make the necessary changes to improve the educational outcomes of students of color, some existing recruitment and teacher certification and evaluation programs need to be developed and/or expanded, but others need to be placed into question when they do not prepare teachers to work in schools with high populations of students of color. Finally, schools should develop democratic leadership models to include teachers in school decision-making, and create environments that are not racially hostile and are instead open and grateful to the experiences and work of students and teachers of color.

²After that instance, I lost respect for the teacher. In shock by their response, I decided to continue learning on my own without the help of the teacher. After receiving the highest grade in my class on the state exam for the subject, the teacher congratulated me and later tokenized me.

Disparities between Teachers and Students of Color in Public Schools

At an outstanding 81.9%, White teachers make up the majority of the teacher workforce of K-12 public schools (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013). This means that teachers of color only compose 17.1% of the workforce (Goldring et al., 2013). These numbers, in contrast to the actual percentage of these racial and ethnic groups, indicate the disparity between the percentages of students of color and teachers of color. A report from the US Department of Education shows that of the overall public school student population 51% are non-Hispanic White, 24% are Hispanic, 16% are Black, 1% are Native American, 5% are Asian, and 3% are mixed race. As a whole, students of color represent 49% of the total public school student population. Utilizing the Teacher-Student Parity Index developed by Ana Maria Villegas, we find that White teachers are overrepresented in schools in proportion to the percentage of White students in schools³. However, these numbers indicate the problem of diversity at the national level, but do not consider the specific populations of public schools and school districts.

When broken down by the family income level of students, the percentages of teachers of color in schools change. In schools where 50 to 74% of students received free or reduced-price lunch, White teachers make up 82.2%, while White teachers make up 63.3% of the workforce in schools where 75 percent or more students were in need. As the number of students in economic need rise, the number of White teachers decrease. Meanwhile, the percentages of Hispanic, Black, and Asian teachers nearly doubled in schools where the majority of students received free or reduced-price lunch. For Native American and mixed race teachers however, there is little change in percentage (Goldring et al., 2013). These percentages of teacher diversity indicate, in general, that teachers of color are more likely than their White colleagues to teach in lower-income schools (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). However, these figures fail to account for the racial and ethnic diversity of those schools where more than half of its students receive free or reduced lunch. Overall, teachers of color are more willing to work in low-income schools and work with students at those schools.

While, nationally, teachers of color are underrepresented in the workforce, there is more racial diversity in schools where more than half of students re-

³Please refer to the appendix to find the teacher-student parity score tables.

ceive free or reduced-price lunch (Goldring et al., 2013). Additionally, the breadth of student-teacher diversity gaps vary by state and district (Boser, 2014a). Research on the state and district student-teacher diversity gaps indicate that although the population of students of color has grown by 3%, the population of teachers of color has only grown by 1% (Boser, 2014b). The widening gap between teachers and students of color should raise concern considering the impact teachers of color may have on the educational outcomes of students of color, which will now be discussed.

Student Culture, Teachers, and the Classroom

Creating parity between student and teacher of color populations is not enough to close the achievement gap that exists between students of color and White students. In addition, teachers must be trained to use culturally responsive pedagogy effectively in the classroom.

A teacher of color is an asset in schools and classrooms with high populations of students of color. These teachers are able to connect with students at a cultural level specially if they both share racial and/or ethnic backgrounds. Even if they do not share the same background, cross-cultural similarities may be found ⁴. Cultural connection with students gives teachers of color a significant advantage over White teachers who may understand the cultures of their students as an outsider. For example, White teachers may be unable to understand cultural references, language, and worldviews of students of color. Teachers of color may be able to recognize the racial and ethnic differences of their students and infuse cultural language and symbols into their teaching. The lack of this recognition (colorblindness) feeds into the deficit attributes given to students of color (Nieto, 1996). Teachers of color are able to build connections between their teaching and the students, and challenge deficit traits often attributed to students of color.

Furthermore, White teachers can replicate white racist structures (Hyland, 2005). The replication of racist structures and attitudes towards students of color can create bias, especially in discipline. For example, racist bias against structures feed into the school-to-prison nexus when White teachers feel threatened by the presence of boys of color (Witt, 2007). However, this is not to say that teachers of color are not capable of replicating white racist

⁴This does not, however, discredit the possibility of cultural misunderstandings and reproduction of stereotypes.

structures (Picower, 2009). Having teachers of color in the profession is not enough—they must be passionate and trained to work in low-income schools with large populations of students of color.

The Challenges of Teachers of Color in the Field

Teachers of color face a multitude of challenges as they aspire to become educators. While many participate in recruitment programs, teachers of color in the public schools leave the profession for many reasons. Among those reasons: the limited autonomy of teachers in schools and hostile racial climates. In order to complement the success many recruitment programs have in recruiting teachers of color, significant changes must be made in schools to keep teachers of color.

The limited autonomy of teachers hinders their ability to make the necessary decisions and steps to help their students succeed. Schools are often dismissive or uncooperative of the initiatives taken on by teachers of color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). This limited autonomy creates unfavorable working conditions for teachers (White, 2015). In addition, limited autonomy in school decision-making can leave teachers out of important decisions that impact them and students. Overall, non-favorable school structures lead to a high turnover rate for teachers of color (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Assessing the ways that individual schools function is important to create sites where teachers are given the freedom to utilize the methods at their disposal to help students.

On top of the limited autonomy teachers have in schools, hostile racial climate and the lack of support systems present additional challenges to teachers of color. This additional challenge leaves teachers of color to contemplate leaving the field. Teachers of color experience isolation when their work is dismissed by the school and often experience emotional fatigue when dealing with micro and macro aggressions (Kohli, 2016). In order to keep teachers of color, schools should actively work to ensure that the school provides a space that does not replicate racial hierarchies and oppression not only for teachers, but also for everyone else who is part of the school. In addition, alternate professional development should be available to teachers of color that address their particular needs and challenges in teaching in schools. For example, black male teachers have benefitted from professional development that allowed them to develop tools and strategies to navigate schools, and create conditions that facilitated learning for students (Bristol, 2015). Cre-

ating the necessary tools to support teachers of color is critical for their craft and to encourage them to continue working in schools. Schools must become sites where teachers of color are welcomed and given the necessary support to create classrooms where students engage and learn.

Diversity of the teacher workforce is not enough. Teachers of color must be adequately trained and supported to facilitate learning and close the achievement gaps⁵ between White students and students of color.

Existing Policies and Practices

As mentioned before, several teacher education programs have been successful in recruiting teachers of color into the profession. In “Grow Your Own” models from Illinois, people of color make up 84 percent of candidates in the program (“Grow Your Own Teachers: An Illinois Initiative,” n.d.). Individuals in the program come from the neighborhoods and schools where they will be placed after certification (Center for the Study of Educational Policy, 2013). “Grow Your Own” models bring in teachers who are aware of the neighborhoods they work in because of their lived experiences being students themselves in those schools or similar ones. In addition to bringing in more teachers of color, “Grow Your Own” models reduce teacher turnover and place teachers in hard-to-fill positions in schools. Finally, “Grow Your Own” models utilize federal and state funding to prepare teachers that allow the program to be cost effective. State programs, such as “Grow Your Own” can bring in teachers of colors into schools with need. Similarly, the Golden Apple Scholars of Illinois program recruits high school seniors and college students in their first and second year into teacher preparation and certification through scholarships, training, and mentoring (“Golden Apple Scholars Program,” n.d.). State-level programs in Illinois have been very effective in recruiting teachers of color and supporting them through the process and once in the profession.

Other national programs such as Teach for America have attracted high numbers of people of color in Illinois into the teaching profession (White, DeAngelis, & Lichtenberger, 2013). Teach for America has several initiatives to recruit teachers of color, which have been successful when taking into

⁵However, it is necessary to rethink and reformulate what achievement gap when it only refers to the gaps between the test scores earned by students of color and White students.

consideration that half of TFA participants are people of color (Teach for America, n.d.). However, Teach for America may not prepare participants well to teach due to limited training. However, the appeal to join Teach for America can be in the ease and speed at which participants can become teacher certified.

As mentioned earlier, it is not enough to have alternative teacher education programs that allow teachers of color be trained to work in schools. Teacher performance evaluation programs, such as edTPA, use alternative methods to certify teachers. However, programs, such as edTPA are objective in their evaluation they do not consider the context of the classroom and the school. When teacher certification programs are objective, they exclude the subjective knowledge and the history and community of learners (Madeloni, 2015). Programs like these provide certification, but do not prepare teachers well to work with a diverse student body. Neither do they utilize culturally relevant pedagogies that are critical to utilize in classrooms with students of color.

Expanding and Developing Programs and Creating More Democratic Schools

Alternative teacher education programs are effective in recruiting teachers of color and should not be entirely dismissed. However, the approaches of the program in alternative certification should be placed into question when they create more harm than good for students. In addition, aspiring teachers of color should be supported financially to make it easier for aspiring teachers to become certified through traditional programs. A combination of federal and state funds can help keep down costs for individuals and specific scholarships can make it easier for many to take the time necessary to become trained and certified.

Creating teacher inclusive decision-making in schools will help teachers of color stay in schools. Community school leadership models may be an excellent way to incorporate not only teacher voice in decision-making, but also the surrounding school community (Frankl, 2016). Although it is clear how to create more inclusive school leadership models, dealing with the racial hostility of schools is a more difficult to dismantle. The first step to dealing with the issue is a recognition that racial hostilities exist as a legacy of a colonial system and the creation and continued existence of a racialized capitalist system in the US. Racial hostility has material consequences, and

in this case on the educational outcomes of students of color. Although this paper will not discuss specific action steps, significant research must be conducted to find how to create positive racial climates for teachers in schools.

In the meantime, several practices can be utilized to create welcoming schools for teachers of color. One way to create racially welcoming schools is the recognition of teachers of color and the experiences and practices they bring into the classroom (Kohli, 2016). Moving forward from this recognition, action steps must be taken to find ways to develop welcoming classrooms. One of those action steps may be to create welcoming environments is providing workshops where teachers, White and of color alike, engage in topics of race/ethnicity, gender, (dis)ability, class, etc.

The policy proposal provided is just a scope of what specific procedures can be utilized to recruit teachers of color and support them once they are working in schools. Policy must be reevaluated continuously to ensure that the program is being effective and shift in ways to achieve its goals. For these reasons, teachers of color must be involved and given a stake in the policy evaluation process in order to ensure that the goal of the policy remains to support the unique needs of teachers of color.

Conclusion

The lack of racial and ethnic parity between public, K-12 teachers and students is alarming. Students of color are likely to benefit from being taught by a teacher who may understand their cultural context and be able to use culturally responsive curriculum to engage them in ways other teachers cannot. State and national programs have been in many ways successful in recruiting teachers of color in schools. However, many of those programs have problems in their implementation and results. To amend such issues, new initiatives must be taken to support teachers of color in the profession. By creating parity between teachers and students of color along with culturally responsive pedagogy, students will be more likely to have greater educational outcomes.

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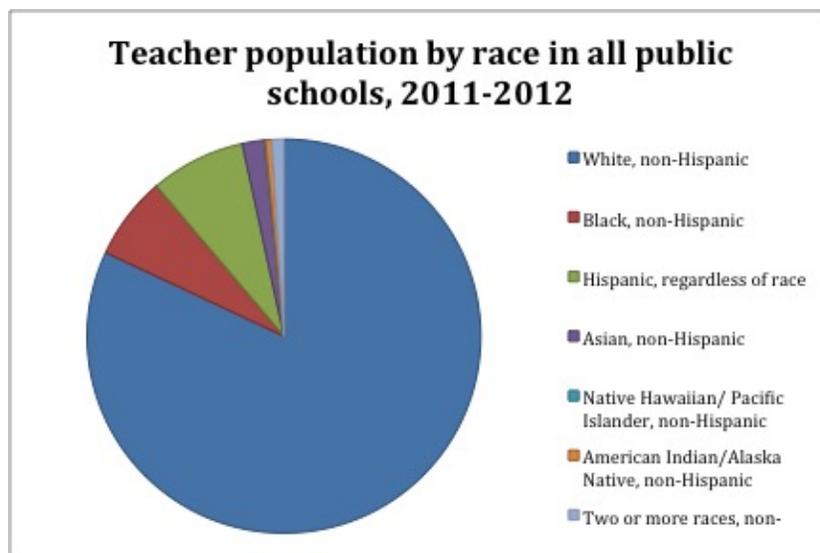
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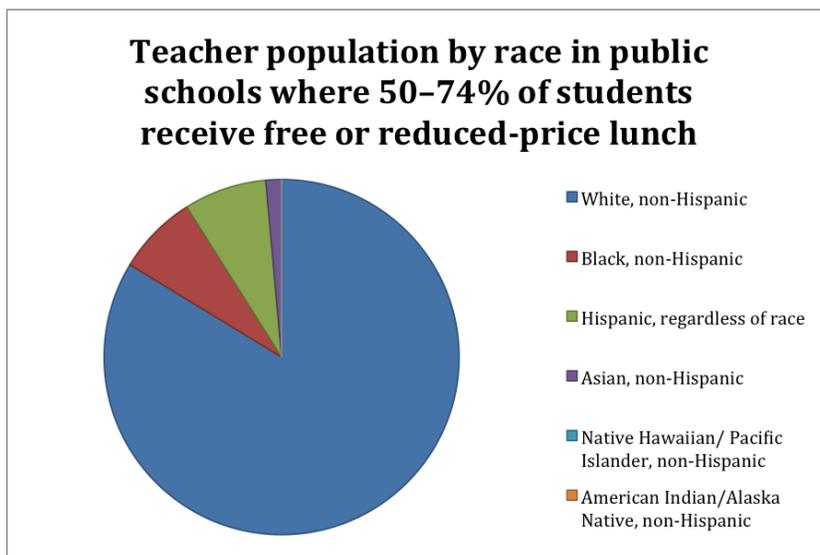
Appendix

Teacher population by race

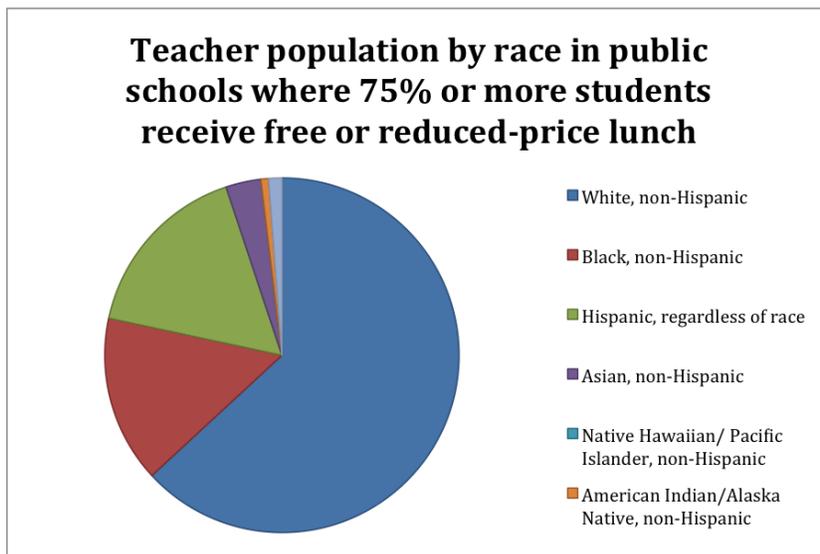
The following figures are generated from Table 1 in Goldring et al. (2013)



Graph:1



Graph:2



Graph:3

Student-student parity index school.

The following table is generated from data from the US Census on student enrollment and data from the Schools and Staffing Surveys from the National Center of Education statistics. Census information provided enrollment by year, thus the school year population is calculated by taking the average of both years. Since data on the racial makeup of the public school teacher workforce is collected every few years, the 2007-2008 and 2011-2012 school year were selected. In addition, the school years selected illustrate the increase in the population of students of color in school.

Year	White, non-Hispanic	Black, non-Hispanic	American Indian/Alaska Native, non-Hispanic	Asian, non-Hispanic*	Hispanic, regardless of race	Two or more races, non-Hispanic
2007-2008	1.50	0.41	0.42	0.29	0.33	**
2011-2012	1.59	0.43	0.42	0.38	0.33	0.37

* Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islanders were added into the Asian category.

** Omitted, since the percentages of students who are of two or more races were not collected in 2007.



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