



CMSI RESEARCH BRIEF

Mentoring New Teachers of Color: Building New Relationships among Aspiring Teachers and Historically Black Colleges and Universities

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Executive Summary

Teachers of color comprise just 17% of the teaching profession in the United States, and of even more concern half of all U.S. schools do not employ a single teacher of color. With students of color comprising over 50% of the K-12 student population, schools have been increasingly concerned with developing and enacting strategies to not only recruit more minority teacher candidates, but to support these candidates through the teacher certification and hiring processes (Gasman, Castro Samayoa & Ginsberg, 2016). But what happens when they get hired?

This research brief considers some of the reasons that teachers of color are frustrated or dissatisfied with the field, why many decide to leave the profession entirely, and what specific strategies and practices might support their retention. After a brief overview of research on the pipeline for teachers of color, we focus on the practice of mentoring aspiring and new teachers. More than half of teacher education programs require some mentoring to assist new teachers in integrating into their roles. The quality and impact of these programs, however, varies significantly (Kent, Green & Feldman, 2012).

Many mentors, for example, hold a supervisory or evaluator role, inhibiting new teachers from asking questions and engaging in honest conversations about how to improve their practice. Another significant issue discussed herein is that teacher mentors that come from White, middle-class backgrounds can have difficulty supporting teachers of color for a variety of reasons including discomfort discussing issues of race

and racism and lack of appreciation for culturally relevant pedagogy. Based on focus groups, surveys, and discussions with teacher education students, faculty and alumni of two Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) teacher education programs in Texas – Paul Quinn College and Huston-Tillotson University – we offer recommendations for future mentoring programs specifically designed to engage alumni and support aspiring teachers at HBCUs.

Introduction

The Penn Center for Minority Serving Institutions (CMSI) has been actively working with Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs) across the country to research and support successful models and practices that will lead to a more diversified teaching profession, the research is sponsored by a generous grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.

MSIs are the nation's primary source of educating and certifying teachers of color. For example, even though Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) represent only 4.4% of all the institutions conferring bachelor degrees in education, they account for 26% of all Black students receiving a degree in this field. Other types of MSIs – Hispanic Serving Institutions, Tribal Colleges and

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-Jackson and Kohli, 2016, p. 6

Universities, and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander Institutions – mirror this disproportionate contribution of educating teachers of color. It is also important to note that MSIs have been on the cutting-edge of new research and practice around culturally relevant pedagogy and asset-based approaches to student learning, providing guidance for teacher education at MSIs, Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs), and alternative certification programs alike. Our findings are summarized in *A Rich Source for Teachers of Color and Learning: Minority Serving Institutions* (Gasman, Castro-Samayoa & Ginsberg, 2016).

In 2016, the CMSI received a grant from the Milken Family Foundation to take this work to the next level. We were concerned that while the pool of qualified and committed teachers of color is slowly increasing, these same teachers are leaving the profession at alarmingly high rates for a variety of reasons including feelings of cultural isolation and inferiority. It is the purpose of this research to explore the value of same-race mentoring to slow or halt the attrition of teachers of color, as well as to better prepare new teachers and support their promotion to school leadership positions.

“When considering reasons that new teachers leave the profession, not being able to contribute to the school’s culture, feeling unable to affect student achievement in a positive way, and classroom management issues are all on the table....”

-Callahan, 2016, p. 8

Concerns about Teachers of Color Leaving the Field

One of the challenges to retaining teachers of color is the fact that they are clustered in the most hard-to-staff, economically disadvantaged and lowest performing schools. The working conditions can be so exhausting and overwhelming that even the most dedicated and highly trained teachers burn out quickly. Many teachers of color also indicate they feel as though they are viewed primarily as disciplinarians by their White peers, rather than as intellectual leaders. Likewise, attempts to integrate culturally relevant pedagogy are often viewed as counterproductive to state standards and testing mandates. Often, teachers of color feel frustrated by their inability to change school discipline and tracking policies that can be very unfair to students of color. Teachers’ fear of negative evaluations from supervisors or as being viewed as “trouble makers” can lead them to silence their own voices and prevent them from bonding with other teachers of color.

As Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) suggest, making teachers adhere to restrictive curricula and pedagogical practices can inhibit “their ability to enact the cultural/professional roles that may have drawn them into the profession” (p. 7).

Jackson and Kohli (2016) similarly note:

“We see the strengths and resiliency of teachers of color as they work tirelessly to improve the educational opportunities of students of color, but these studies also force us to contend with the fact that we are recruiting teachers of color into spaces where they are limited, dehumanized, and alienated from their professional identity and goals” (p. 6).

All teachers must negotiate the competing demands of survival and success, yet feelings of isolation and fear of negative evaluations leave many new teachers of color questioning whether the teaching profession is personally and professionally sustainable.

Problems Retaining Teachers of Color

“How do we defend a profession that purportedly seeks to recruit educators of color, but, once there, decides they are not worth the money, time, or energy to support?” – José Luis Vilson, 2016

- Teachers of color are clustered in the most hard-to-staff, economically disadvantaged and lowest performing schools.
- Teachers of color are often viewed as school disciplinarians instead of intellectual leaders by their White peers.
- Teachers of color feel frustrated by their inability to change school discipline and tracking policies that can be unfair to students of color.
- Teachers of color may be inhibited from using culturally relevant pedagogy because of pressure to comply with national and state standards and testing mandates.
- Teachers of color fears of negative evaluations from their supervisors or as being viewed as “trouble makers” can lead them to silence their own voices and prevent them from bonding with other teachers of color.
- White mentors assigned to assist teachers of color are often uncomfortable discussing issues of race and inequality for fear of appearing racist, or due to their own lack of knowledge about cultural diversity and closing the opportunity gap.
- Feelings of isolation leave many teachers of color questioning whether the teaching profession is personally and professionally sustainable.

What We Know About Mentoring and Teachers of Color

Mentoring has been used in a variety of ways to meet the needs of pre-service and first year teachers. Mentor teachers have the responsibility of observing and providing critical feedback during student teaching and the first-year experience (Henning, 2015). Some describe the mentor as a master teacher with more experience that guides first year teachers through the most challenging year of the teaching career (Callahan, 2016, Hobson 2012). Mentoring programs help to reduce isolation felt by some new teachers, and provide them with on-going opportunities for inquiry, self-reflection, and professional development.

Even though most new teachers are assigned a formal “mentor” or “supervising” teacher to work with by their school or school district, these relationships are very limited in scope and time. In addition, mentor teachers are often responsible for evaluating new teachers’ performance, which can lead to superficial relationships and strained levels of trust.

While there are different kinds of mentoring programs for new teachers, very few of them are centered specifically on issues of equity and social justice. According to Yendol-Hoppey et. al. (2009), “Given that the selection criteria for many mentoring programs does not include attention to these dispositions, many mentors will need to engage in professional development and self-reflection about social justices before even thinking about how to support novice teachers...” (p.40).

In other words, a mentor teacher might have a strong grasp of subject matter and/or be a skilled classroom manager, yet still lack sensitivity to the issues that are driving teachers of color out of teaching.

“Mentoring is not a choice, but the responsibility of every professional within a school who is interested in seeing new teachers become comfortable in their new position”.

-Kent, Green & Feldman,

How Can HBCU Teacher Education Programs Improve the Mentoring Process?

Who better to mentor aspiring teachers of color at HBCUs than alumni of these very same programs? HBCUs often have unusually close relationships with their alumni given that many students choose HBCUs with a predisposition to being part of and to helping communities of color. Alumni of HBCU teacher education programs are also more likely to work in local schools, sometimes even the very schools that they themselves attended in elementary, middle or high school. Alumni of HBCU teacher education programs have also shared a common curricula and experience with current students in the program, greatly increasing the chances that mentoring relationships will be based on a common commitment to social justice and equity.

Research Questions

- How can HBCUs successfully mentor beginning teachers of color making the transition from student teaching to leading their own classrooms?
- How can HBCUs adequately prepare new teachers of color to navigate complex urban school systems often dominated by White teachers and administrators?
- What strategies can HBCUs adopt to prevent teacher attrition given the stresses and challenges of teaching in high-needs, under-resourced school districts?
- How can we help new teachers of color graduating from HBCUs find supportive communities that will nurture and sustain them beyond their first few years of teaching?

With the goal of developing a mentoring program between alumni and current teacher education students at these two HBCUs, we asked current teacher education students, faculty and program alumni to share their experiences, concerns, and expectations:



STUDENTS

- What specific concerns do you have about becoming a teacher and leading your own classroom?
- To what extent are these concerns shaped by issues of race and equity?
- Do you feel you have a sufficient support network for addressing these concerns? If so, please explain. If not, what kinds of resources do you think would help you?
- If you were offered the possibility of having a mentor, what kinds of activities and advice would you like to see this relationship encompass?



ALUMNI

- What obstacles and challenges did you face as you made the transition from course work and student teaching to being a full-time teacher or educational administrator?
- To what extent were these obstacles and challenges shaped by issues of race and equity?
- How did you address those obstacles and challenges?
- What kinds of additional support and resources would have helped you?
- Did you have a mentor? If so, what about that experience was most useful? If not, how might a mentor have helped you?
- Would you be interested in serving as a mentor for a teacher education student or newly certified teacher?



FACULTY

- As you have watched your teacher education students graduate, what do you feel have been the largest obstacles and challenges they have faced?
- To what extent were these obstacles and challenges shaped by issues of race and equity?
- How have you attempted to prepare students for these challenges formally and informally?
- Have you kept in contact with graduates of your teacher education program? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
- What do you think would be the primary value of developing an alumni mentoring program at your institution?
- How could this program be designed in such a way as to maximize participation and benefits?

"I believe it would have been better to have a team of diverse educators mentoring me. Each cultural experience is different and there is so much to be learned. The teacher that mentored me cut a lot of corners; corners I could not afford to take as I would risk losing/damaging my credibility. Further, some white teachers in this region don't seem to have a broad view of students and student needs".

- Huston-Tilton University Teacher Education Alumni

What do HBCU Alumni Think?

In the Spring 2017 Eric Budd, a member of the Teacher Education at Huston-Tillotson, surveyed alumni from his program:

Do you think it would make a difference if your first-year mentor was the same ethnicity, culture or race as you?

67.5% of the respondents replied that having a first-year mentor from a similar cultural background would make a difference. Pre-service teachers believed they would feel more comfortable and would be better able to relate to their mentor.

Do you think a mentor who is culturally similar to you would enhance your confidence and provide greater emotional support and encouragement?

89% of the respondents believed that having a mentor from a similar background would enhance and boost their confidence.

Should a mentor teacher of color talk to first year teachers about race, culture and possible racism on your campus?

75% of the respondents replied that a mentor teacher should bring up issues of race and racism, with comments such as: "It could help me learn about the challenges I may face as a teacher of color," and "We need to be aware and learn how to move beyond preconceived ideas."

Research Findings

What we found was that it was difficult to isolate issues of race and equity from the more immediate day-to-day concerns of teaching – such as classroom management, dealing with administrators and parents, relationships with students, professional development opportunities, teaching evaluations, time management, and work/life balance. Participants also discussed their concerns about choosing which schools they wanted to teach at, how to communicate and conduct oneself in a professional manner, and how to gain the respect of co-workers.

These findings underscore the ways in which issues of cultural identity, power, voice and respect permeate all aspects of teaching. Aspiring teachers worried about gaining student's trust while also fearing that large class sizes would prevent them from having the time to get to know students on an individual level. Experienced teachers shared stories of trying to address systemic issues of racism and finding themselves at odds with their supervisors and coworkers who found them too confrontational or aggressive. Faculty expressed their concern that their program's emphasis on culturally relevant pedagogy might be lost once teachers are confronted with pressure to superficially raise test scores and proficiency levels.

Conclusion

Our research confirmed our initial supposition that aspiring and new teachers can benefit from mentoring relationships with peers that are from similar backgrounds and are trained at institutions with common commitments to educational equity. As we work closely with these universities to continue to develop teacher education alumni mentoring programs, we are seeking ways to offer participants both individual and group mentoring experiences, and to build supportive communities for teachers of color – both in and across schools – that will be long-lasting.

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