

The Experiences of Teachers of Color

By understanding how black and Latino teachers can feel devalued, school leaders can more effectively work to retain them

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POSTED:


June 12, 2018



One of the most powerful supports (<https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2017/09/14/437667/america-needs-teachers-color-selective-teaching-profession/>) a school can give a student of color is a teacher of color. With just one teacher of the same race, a non-white student is more likely to perform better on standardized tests (<https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-importance-of-a-diverse-teaching-force/>), attend school more regularly, and be suspended less frequently (<http://educationnext.org/teacher-race-and-school-discipline-suspensions-research/>).

But that relationship is hard to come by. Even though people of color make up more than 50 percent of public school students in the United States, they make up fewer than 20 percent of the teachers, and they leave the teaching profession at higher rates than white colleagues.

Policymakers have noted multiple reasons for this, including the relative low pay of teaching, the lack of a robust pathway into teaching for young people of color, and a dearth of supportive school leaders. One unexplored avenue, though, has been the experiences of teachers of color in their schools — how they perceive their impact, and how they believe colleagues perceive them.



In focus groups, black and Latino teachers said they believed they could better connect with same-race students, and they embraced the need for those connections. But the work can be severely taxing, and teachers often believed it wasn't valued — and even that it held them back professionally.

These experiences are crucial, according to recent research. Retaining these educators from one year to the next requires superintendents and principals to be intentionally inclusive, to hold high expectations for all staff, to provide excellent training and support, and to actively appreciate the extra mentoring and support work that teachers of color often do.

A Sense of Devalued Strengths

Two qualitative studies recently released by The Education Trust (<https://edtrust.org/>) found that black and Latino teachers feel disrespected and de-professionalized in their jobs, despite often exerting more emotional and actual labor than their colleagues. The research was presented at a conference hosted by Reimagining Integration (<https://rides.gse.harvard.edu/>), a project at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/>) that seeks to move beyond desegregation in U.S. schools and establish true integration and equity.

The studies analyzed the results of focus groups with 150 black teachers (<https://edtrust.org/resource/eyes-perspectives-reflections-black-teachers/>) and 90 Latino teachers (<https://edtrust.org/resource/stories-struggles-strengths/>) from public schools across the country. Nearly one-third were veteran teachers with more than 15 years of experience, 90 percent taught in cities, and more than 80 percent were women.

From these discussions, a pattern emerged: The teachers believed their race and cultural

background influenced their work in a way that was beneficial for students and the larger school community. But they also believed that those same attributes impeded their professional growth and created extra stress and obstacles.

Latino teachers often wanted to explicitly value Latino culture, encouraging students to speak Spanish and working to provide culturally relevant pedagogy. Colleagues often criticized them for deviating from curricula.

The Findings


- Black and Latino teachers believed they could **better connect with same-race students**. They could empathize with their experiences, build relationships because of perceived cultural similarities, and motivate those students differently than white colleagues.
- Black and Latino teachers embraced these connections, feeling that they needed to **support and advocate for the whole student** — to not only teach curriculum, but to help students manage discrimination and poverty. But this added work could be severely taxing on teachers, particularly emotionally.
- Black teachers often had a **distinct ability to manage “difficult” students**, and colleagues often asked them to supervise and help these students during planning periods or after school. But because of this work, black teachers felt they were often seen as enforcers rather than educators — that they were overlooked in opportunities to advance professionally.
- Latino teachers often wanted to **explicitly value Latino culture**, encouraging students to speak Spanish and working to provide culturally relevant pedagogy. Colleagues, though, often criticized them for deviating from curricula.
- Latino teachers also often took on the **extra work of being a translator**, translating orally between families and school officials or providing written translations of school policies. While these teachers considered it important to make all students and families feel informed, they also felt overworked by, and undervalued as an educator for, translating.
- Both black and Latino teachers continually **felt they had to prove their worth as educators**. They felt they were overlooked for advancement, undervalued as experts in their subject area, and had to prove their qualifications to parents.

How to Retain Teachers of Color

We asked Deborah Jewell-Sherman (/node/126302), the former superintendent of the Richmond (Virginia) Public Schools and a professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, to share

practical guidance on how school leaders can use these insights to retain teachers of color:

First, **placement is key**. Don't place a teacher of color in a school where she's the only non-white educator; such a position can be isolating and debilitating. Remember, too, that a beginner teacher of color is just as novice as a beginner white teacher. If you give her a class that's known to be difficult in her first year — regardless of the racial makeup of that class — it will overwhelm her in the same way it would any other teacher.



As a leader, foster a community in which every teacher is responsible for every student's success and wellbeing. Enact values about the capacity of students to learn and grow to their utmost potential. When these values are explicit, teachers of color are less likely to shoulder the extra work of student support on their own.

Give a teacher of color a mentor teacher who will connect with her, assist her, and inspire her. When it comes to choosing a mentor, seniority may matter less than someone's excitement over teaching and strong teaching ability.

Don't assume that a teacher of color understands a community or a student's experiences just because she's of the same race or culture as that student. Provide trainings for teachers of color in the same way you do for all other teachers.

Work to **foster a community in which every teacher is responsible for every student's success** and wellbeing. As a leader, espouse and enact values about the capacity of students to learn and grow to their utmost potential, says Jewell-Sherman. When these values are an authentic part of the school culture, teachers of color are less likely to shoulder the extra work of student behavior and physical and emotional safety by themselves.

Explicitly value and praise the extra work that teachers of color often perform related to relationship-building, family engagement, translating, and behavior management. This doesn't mean a district has to redo its evaluation process; rather, administrators can train school leaders to ask about and record this added labor within their current format. Make sure that this additional work is seen as an integral part of being a strong teacher.

Be willing and ready to talk about race with your staff. A multiracial group of teachers need to be able to discuss discrimination, equity, and differences in experience. In staff meetings and

professional development, practice having these conversations. Establish norms and develop strategies and protocols. This work can have far-reaching effects — educators who can have these difficult conversations with adults will be better equipped to show their students how to have them, too.