

# WE ALL WANT MORE TEACHERS OF COLOR, RIGHT?: CONCERNS ABOUT THE EMERGENT CONSENSUS



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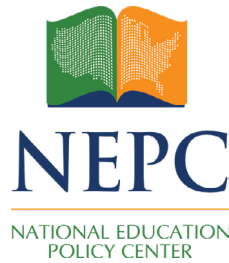


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## Executive Summary

There is a need to examine the implications of the apparent unanimity by researchers and practitioners about recruiting and retaining teachers of color. In particular, the push for diversifying the teaching force must be scrutinized within the context of larger patterns and structures of racial injustice and should be pursued as part of broader efforts toward equity-oriented school reform.

Prior research documents the strengths of teachers of color, including their essential role as cultural translators, their greater awareness of racial trauma experienced by students, their increased likelihood of working in schools that disproportionately enroll low-income students of color, and their concrete benefits for racially matched students with respect to higher test scores, more positive disciplinary outcomes, higher expectations, and authentic forms of care.

Yet a narrow goal of employing teachers of color can divert attention from the comprehensive transformation of schools and society. While teachers of color may be recruited for their commitments and presumed shared experiences and identities with students of color, these very assets are likely to become liabilities in school contexts that are not aligned in philosophy, institutional culture, and pedagogical approaches. Particularly in “no excuses” schools, teachers of color are caught in a double bind, trying to satisfy irreconcilable demands focused on extreme accountability on one hand and commitments for cultural relevance and justice on the other. Placing teachers of color in these precarious positions can result in trauma and lack of efficacy.

How might we acknowledge and work toward the important task of diversifying the educator workforce and still maintain healthy skepticism about the confluence of actors with differing

motivations who are promoting educational reform, including actors who effectively devalue and dehumanize communities of color?

Calls to diversify the teaching force must be understood within the societal context where diversity has been embraced across institutions, but often in ways that have blunted demands for structural change. We examine the diversification of teachers with particular attention to assumptions about racial/cultural match and the discourse of role models. While there are several rationales for diversifying the teaching profession, it is the fusing of racial/cultural match and the role model thesis that has had the greatest mainstream currency in justifying the need for teachers of color. This image of teachers of color, however, is fraught with deficit assumptions about communities of color.

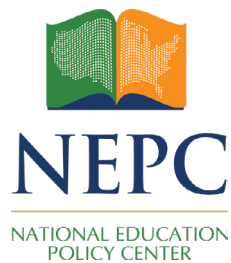
These concerns implicate some controversial elements of recent school-reform advocacy. The stated goal to achieve racial parity between teachers and students in public schools is easily incorporated into educational reforms that are intent on weakening teacher unions and promoting charter schools. These efforts resonate with campaigns that are ostensibly in the interest of low-income students and families of color but funded by individuals and entities who advocate market-based solutions with little if any grounding in the schools' communities. While these reform advocates sometimes hitch their efforts to calls for diversifying the teaching workforce, it is essential to de-link the two, given that their goals and results can be in conflict.

In fact, we critically examine the dangers of using the term, "teachers of color," as a shorthand that makes broad generalizations about racial/cultural match and its benefits. As a term so prone to slippage into essentialism, we invite attention to what might make the category strategic in addressing systemic inequities and more explicit in specifying the important pedagogical and relational work toward this end.

We propose two principles when considering the diversification of the educator workforce: (1) specifying the need for and possibilities of strategic essentialism, and (2) keeping the focus on transforming schools. Flowing from the two principles, we offer a set of questions that educational stakeholders concerned with the diversification of the teaching force should consider. These questions should be employed when stakeholders consider or implement efforts to diversify a school's educational workforce.

- *What is the purpose of diversifying the teaching faculty at a school? How is diversification related to a broader effort toward racial justice?* We maintain that by pursuing in a substantive fashion the question of why teachers of color would be a valued asset to a school, decision-makers could better tease out any assumptions and logics about the need to hire more teachers of color, beyond the simple demographic imperative.
- *What are the current experiences of teachers of color in a school and/or district?* We argue that educational stakeholders need to seriously consider the experiences of teachers of color who are currently in their schools. In exploring these questions, educational leaders can begin to think about the current context of teachers of color as a way to inform how teachers of color can contribute to and fundamentally change schools.

- *What will change by increasing the numbers of teachers of color?* We argue that in exploring this question, school districts could deeply reflect on the purpose of hiring more teachers of color. For instance, does their presence substantively shift how power operates in schools, particularly the role of families and communities of color in decision making? Might they expand notions of expertise? What role do they have in creating more humanizing spaces for students, parents, classified staff, community members, and colleagues?



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## Introduction

There is a near consensus amongst researchers and practitioners that we need more teachers of color. For a field that is notoriously divided, the relative agreement is striking. We find this relative unanimity concerning since it masks significant distinctions between race conscious and race neutral research and policies.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore important to ask, “Why this convergence of interests now?”<sup>2</sup> What are the implications of the considerable agreement in recruiting and retaining teachers of color? How do we ensure that efforts to increase racial diversity in the educational workforce complement rather than detract from endeavors toward more racially just policy and practice?

We begin with a historical note. The shortage of teachers of color is a result of racist policies that have excluded and actively removed teachers of color, particularly Black<sup>3</sup> teachers, from the educational workforce. To mince words about the causes of our current situation risks solutions that disingenuously entice potential educators into a profession that has denied teachers of color access and support—solutions that do not address fundamental racial inequities in the educational workforce. For example, Black educators were dismissed *en mass* after *Brown vs. Board of Education*, a judicial ruling that is often touted as a landmark victory in the Civil Rights movement.<sup>4</sup>

Systemic processes of exclusion continue today, including the financial burden and debt associated with teaching, the increased likelihood of school closures where Black and Latinx teachers are concentrated, the differential effects of licensure and credentialing exams on different racialized groups, and a fundamentally inequitable K-16 “leaky” pipeline that disproportionately fails potential teachers of color at each phase of schooling.<sup>5</sup> The shortage of teachers of color today is a clear and direct outcome of historical and contemporary racist policies; this must be the starting point for any analysis of diversity in today’s educational

workforce. And it must be the backdrop for cautiously proceeding with initiatives to recruit and retain teachers of color into schools and school systems still fraught with these dynamics today.

We would like to be explicit about what we will address and will not address in this brief. First, there is an existing research base that documents the strengths of teachers of color. For instance, this body of research shows that teachers of color play an essential role as cultural translators,<sup>6</sup> are more likely to be aware of racial trauma experienced by students, and work in schools that disproportionately enroll low-income students of color.<sup>7</sup> These teachers offer the following benefits for racially matched students: increased test scores,<sup>8</sup> more positive disciplinary outcomes,<sup>9</sup> higher expectations,<sup>10</sup> and, authentic forms of care.<sup>11</sup> Given relevant reviews of research,<sup>12</sup> we do not delve into this body of literature about the unique benefits of teachers of color. Second, we acknowledge that there are excellent and comprehensive reports on diversifying the teaching profession. For example, Carver-Thomas's report<sup>13</sup> is a wealth of information about the case for diversification, the associated barriers, and promising practices to recruit and retain teachers of color. It provides both a compelling argument and a set of tangible tools for diversifying the educator workforce. This brief takes a diverging but complementary stance from these two major approaches, and asks: How might we acknowledge and work toward the important task of diversifying the educator workforce while maintaining a healthy skepticism about the confluence of actors with their differing motivations who are promoting the diversification of the teaching profession?

## **Review of the Literature**

### **A Caveat about Terms**

We use the terms “people of color” and “teachers of color” throughout this brief to signify people who have been racialized as non-White in societies structured by Whiteness and White supremacy. These terms, however, can mask or obscure how anti-Blackness further marginalizes African Americans in racial coalitions. Similarly, the shared identity of people of color, within the context of settler colonialism, often works to erase and make invisible the experiences of and even the existence of Indigenous peoples.<sup>14</sup> Given the centrality of anti-Blackness in U.S. racial processes, we intentionally distinguish Black teachers from the broader category of teachers of color when possible. We are also explicit that our analysis of teachers of color and race are inadequate to address the unique histories and trajectories of Native American teachers in the U.S.

### **The Popular Uptake of Racial/Cultural Match Within the Discourse of Diversity**

The notion of racial/cultural match<sup>15</sup>—that professionals from a racial or cultural group are uniquely equipped to work with “clients” from that group—isn't new. But, the widespread acceptance of this idea surely is. Notions of racial/cultural match in education can be traced to the early 1800s. At abolitionist conventions in the North, it was argued that Black chil-

dren would be better off taught by Black teachers.<sup>16</sup> Within these discussions was the belief that African American teachers could help motivate Black children to emulate their social and intellectual behaviors. The idea that Black teachers possess a special set of pedagogies and experiences continued through most of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and even the 20<sup>th</sup>-century discussions. The sound bite of racial match had more appeal than a careful look at how Black students could benefit from pedagogies that were sustained by certain Black teachers in particular schools through these teachers' intentional professional and social networks.<sup>17</sup>

Beginning in the 1980s in particular, educational scholars argued that inequitable outcomes in U.S. public schools were due to teachers' lack of cultural connection to the communities they served.<sup>18</sup> Researchers found that White teachers often lacked authentic care and/or had limited knowledge and awareness of the histories and experiences of communities of color.<sup>19</sup> The 1980s and 1990s literature and policy reports about cultural synchronization broadened the conversation about race, culture, and ethnicity in teacher education.<sup>20</sup> However, the ideas of cultural relevance and responsiveness did not have the same level of mainstream traction as constructs like pedagogical content knowledge,<sup>21</sup> a reflection of a pattern in educational research and practice that maintains a false division between race, racism, and racial justice on one hand and abstracted notions of teaching on the other.<sup>22</sup> The dominance of pedagogical content knowledge was particularly notable since that body of "literature is all but silent about diversity, multiculturalism, and equity."<sup>23</sup>

During the first two decades of the 21st century, however, attention shifted to issues of culture and diversity. Universities, corporations, and state institutions formulated policies embracing diversity.<sup>24</sup> Professions and their organizations increasingly attended to these factors. For example, medicine and psychiatry confronted the need for culturally sensitive and competent care in light of continued disparities.<sup>25</sup> Police departments examined implicit racial bias and diversity as they experienced more public scrutiny for police shootings and violence against communities of color.<sup>26</sup> Even Hollywood had to come to terms with the overwhelming Whiteness of the Academy.<sup>27</sup> Diversity offered social and economic benefits for public and private sector institutions without fundamental change in racialized systems of power.<sup>28</sup> Education's espousal of the recruitment and retention of teachers of color, therefore, needs to be understood within a larger societal push for diversity that many argue actually blunted demands for structural change.<sup>29</sup>

## **Role Models**

Within the broader societal embrace of diversity, there exist particular discourses on teachers of color. Given public expectations that teachers are responsible for their students' character development and moral formation, the call for teachers of color often commingles with broader assumptions about deficiencies in communities of color. The propensity to see communities of color through a lens of deficit is particularly likely when positioning teachers of color as "role models." The role model thesis is premised on the idea that a set of behaviors, dispositions, and attitudes can be transferred from one person to another, which can be passed by direct interaction or through observation.<sup>30</sup>

The role model thesis assumes that the closer connection the recipient has to the person



modeling specific behaviors, the greater the effectiveness of the role modeling relationship. Taken together, the idea of racial/cultural match suggests that a teacher possesses a repertoire of cultural forms that will match the target population of students in need of educational and social change. While several arguments are raised about the need for teachers of color, it is the fusing of racial/cultural match and the role model thesis that has had the greatest mainstream currency in justifying the need for teachers of color.<sup>31</sup> It is this image of the teacher of color that resonates across political and economic lines with devastating outcomes for racial justice, as we further explain below.

These tropes draw on varied histories of racialization, while differently impacting various racialized groups. We therefore caution against broad generalizations about teachers of color that are not historicized or situated within a structural analysis. Several scholars have recently offered important critical analyses of how teachers of color are often boxed in by ready-made expectations.<sup>32</sup> For example, the call for Black male teachers has been tied to the social and educational conditions of Black boys. The role model thesis predicates the apparent social and educational failures of Black boys on the presumed absence of fathers and/or father figures in their lives. Not only does this discourse assume father absence as being a natural part of African Americans' lives, it then positions Black male teachers as "surrogate fathers," particularly in a presumed role of a disciplinarian.<sup>33</sup> In this sense, Black male teachers are expected to fill the taken-for-granted void of Black fatherhood—a masculine replacement to the biological fathers who have allegedly shirked their responsibilities to raise their boys.

The popular uptake of diversity combined with the role model thesis is especially potent in co-opting the authentic need to diversify the teacher workforce. In particular, school leaders from large, racially segregated school districts, seek a cure-all for their lagging underachievement through the possibilities of teachers of color. And as we elaborate below, the generic calls for more teachers of color, devoid of a structural and institutional analysis of racism, has reverberated with the market-oriented educational reform movement.

## **Recent Developments**

### **Pro-Market Educational Reform and Teachers of Color**

The landscape of educational reform is dominated by organizations that advocate market-based solutions, notably defined by the language of choice, particularly in the form of charter schools, and efforts to diminish or eliminate the role of teacher unions.<sup>34</sup> They have increasingly moved their efforts into teaching and teacher education.<sup>35</sup> Simultaneously, these organizations (e.g., Education Leaders of Color, National Council on Teacher Quality, Relay Graduate School of Education, The New Teacher Project, Teach For America, Teach Plus, Students First, Students Matter) and their major philanthropic funders (e.g., Gates Foundation, Broad Foundation, New Schools Venture Fund, Schusterman Foundation, Walton Foundation) have also strongly advocated for the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. These entities represent a converging trend in educational reform efforts that prioritize privatization and market-driven solutions and a stated goal to achieve racial parity

between teachers and students in public schools.<sup>36</sup>

Market-oriented educational reform has its roots in neoliberalism, a larger economic and policy shift in the U.S. that stresses privatization and personal responsibility.<sup>37</sup> First, it emphasizes transferring resources and decision making from bodies that are, at least in theory, more accountable to the public, to wealthy individuals and their philanthropies and corporations. Second, it hones in on individual attributes such as responsibility and entrepreneurship as the reasons for economic and social success and failure. The educational reform efforts highlighted above are closely aligned to these two defining characteristics of neoliberalism: (1) Private philanthropies exert influence and pressure on public educational institutions, which have been pushed into a manufactured crisis through policies that have chronically underfunded them, and (2) The language of choice and competition shifts the focus from addressing growing systemic inequalities to the individual choices of students, parents, and teachers.

These entities' efforts to recruit and retain teachers of color can dovetail with their goals to marketize public schools. Such efforts parallel the Parent Trigger Law or the *Vergara vs. California* case, which were ostensibly in the interest of low-income students and families of color but funded by individuals and entities who are explicit about undermining the role of unions in public schools.<sup>38</sup> It is essential to separate out the crucial imperative to diversify the teaching workforce from the concerted attempts to promote charter schools and undercut teacher unions.

*Teachers of color are being enlisted into a more financially precarious version of the teaching profession.*

Under the guise of equity, teachers of color are increasingly recruited into a profession that is temporary, financially untenable in many metropolitan regions, and losing ground in traditionally attractive benefits such as pension programs and healthcare. While healthcare and pension benefits transferred public funds into a generation of large-

ly White, female, middle-class households over the last few decades,<sup>39</sup> it is noteworthy that teachers of color are being enlisted into a more financially precarious version of the teaching profession. Trends in the educational workforce mirror patterns in the larger "highly hierarchical labor market in which a very small, highly paid, managerial class supervises a large pool of part-time and temporary workers, mostly immigrants, who are employed without job security or union protection."<sup>40</sup> Teachers of color, in many cases, are the parallel class of temporary workers in the market-oriented vision of education reform.

Teachers of color are also positioned at the nexus of market-oriented interests that undermine racial justice. For instance, Michael Bloomberg, former mayor of New York City, was featured prominently in President Obama's initiative, My Brother's Keeper, "an interagency effort to improve measurably the expected educational and life outcomes for and address the persistent opportunity gaps faced by boys and young men of color."<sup>41</sup> While the initiative itself was steeped in neoliberal logics,<sup>42</sup> the extreme contradictions of converging efforts are evident through the involvement of figures like Bloomberg. As mayor, he propagated *stop and frisk*, a blatantly racist policy that targeted and criminalized young African American and Latino boys.<sup>43</sup> Like countless other reforms, efforts to supposedly decrease racial disparity in education are wrapped up, by virtue of their funding sources, with deeply racist

policies that further entrench racism in society. As a trend, these efforts are also routinely tied with anti-union and pro-charter efforts: Bloomberg facilitated the growth of charter schools in New York City and he was a top donor to pro-charter school board candidates elsewhere in the country.<sup>44</sup> His philanthropy has underwritten work by Education Leaders of Color, reflecting a pattern in which many organizations and researchers advocating the diversification of the teachers benefit directly from philanthropies and policies that inflict systemic violence on communities of color. Bloomberg's converging efforts are not isolated. For instance, the NewSchools Venture Fund and the Walton Foundation have also prioritized the diversification of the teacher workforce<sup>45</sup> while they are similarly entangled with strongly anti-union and pro-charter stances.<sup>46</sup> There are deep ethical concerns that need to be addressed when these efforts converge repeatedly.

We need to explicitly consider the political and economic motivations and the accompanying intertwining of activities that bring these entities together. The convoluted terrain of educational reform requires us to identify interested parties and their varied motivations when working on the recruitment or retention of teachers of color. Too often, there is a justification that the end justifies the means: that it is important to increase the number of teachers of color in the workforce regardless of who might be directly or indirectly behind the efforts. We are cautious of this approach, noting the confluence of entities that are now underwriting the diversification of the educational workforce and their multiple motives.

Pro-marketization entities in the U.S. have a history of co-opting justice-oriented causes to blunt criticism, weaken demands for racial and economic justice, and split constituents. Taking up the cause for teachers of color or seemingly advocating for communities of color through efforts like the Parent Trigger or *Vergara* are contemporary examples of this historical pattern.

## Discussion and Analysis

Considering the language of racial/cultural match and role models within the larger context of market-oriented reform, we draw out two major principles that we see as necessary for the recruitment and retention of teachers of color, if these efforts are to work toward racial justice.

### 1. Specifying the Need for and Possibilities of Strategic Essentialism

“Strategic essentialism,”<sup>47</sup> a term offered by scholars of race, asks when and how racialized communities might unify under a shared category toward a specific purpose. It is a potent political tool, but there's always a danger of losing its strategic dimension and degenerating into plain, old essentialism—a belief that racialized groups share a set of immutable characteristics. Teachers of color and their presumed racial/cultural match are two terms that constantly risk such slippage. That is, they are prone to move *from* a tactical analysis of explicitly articulated commonalities in the histories, experiences, and/or conditions of certain groups of people for a provisional and deliberate purpose *to* a presumption of a shared essence in these groups of people.

Essentializing usages of student-teacher racial/cultural match, whether intentional or not, appeals to different constituents who are brought together through an umbrella effect<sup>48</sup> or interest convergence.<sup>49</sup> For educators who believe in ideas of individualism, racial/cultural match would serve as a means to “fix” students of color through a focus on character, hard work, and merit as the central features of academic success. Often rooted in middle-class notions of “respectability,” students are expected to mimic the behaviors of their role models. For activists concerned with community control, the hiring of teachers of color is also appealing. With greater representation, the argument goes, people of color in leadership roles ensure that their specific interests are met. Yet, this approach presents the added risk of what Lani Guinier<sup>50</sup> terms tokenism, where certain representational goals are achieved without shifting the locus of power in institutions. For pro-market reform efforts, the focus on teachers of color signals commitments to racial equity while deflecting attention from neoliberal policies that have concentrated power in corporations and an elite class and widened income and wealth inequality to levels unprecedented in decades. This wide-ranging policy appeal of recruiting teachers of color eviscerates the political power of the term and homogenizes these teachers’ roles, possibilities, and expectations.

To be clear, there is value in strategic essentialism for teachers of color and with the concept of racial/cultural match. For instance, focusing on teachers of color, Black teachers, or Latinx teachers could be important to highlight how licensure exams disproportionately exclude these groups. Or, cultural match could explicate how shared linguistic repertoires, or practices that include families and communities in schools, might support students’ learning. But there is increasingly a carelessness in usage—a shorthand that glosses over the specifics and makes broad generalizations about groups of people. These terms are useful only when they are employed to analyze the operation of power with discernible delimitations.

*Research in classrooms, based on observations and interviews, paints a complex portrait of teachers of color.*

When considering teachers of color, there are leaps in logic that point to a need for a more nuanced framework. The modest benefits in racially matched pairings are mainly in contexts where racially matched teachers are a numerical minority within schools. As a field, we know little about the possibilities and challenges for teachers of color when working with differently racialized students. There is thus a conflation of the benefits of racially matched pairings with the case for teachers of color more generally. There has been little attention to how dynamics between teachers and students of color might change within institutional contexts where teachers and leaders of color become the majority. As a field, again, there has been a paucity of work on these new racisms and new possibilities for educational and racial justice in demographically changing institutions.

Research in classrooms, based on observations and interviews, paints a complex portrait of teachers of color. Teachers of color demonstrate tremendous diversity in their paths to teaching, political purposes for teaching, self-understanding of racialization, and pedagogical approaches.<sup>51</sup> For example, Brown<sup>52</sup> in his research with 10 Black male teachers revealed substantial variation in what, how, and why they taught students. But the multiplicity of their lives and approaches are often distilled down to a “pedagogical kind”—an educator whose possibilities, expectations, roles, and responsibilities have been defined by others

even before entering the classroom.<sup>53</sup>

Categories such as teachers of color can inhibit a closer analysis of specific processes. For instance, Klopenstein's<sup>54</sup> findings show that the Black students in a geometry class only benefitted academically when taught by Black teachers of the opposite sex. The possible benefits of racial match, thus, are also moderated by the subject area, grade level, gender, and other factors. When making claims about the benefits of teachers of color, there needs to be greater attention to the specific pedagogical and relational work that teachers of color do in particular contexts rather than overarching claims rooted in assumptions of a "pedagogical kind."

Assumptions about the inherent abilities of teachers of color as a category can be severely detrimental to both students and teachers. Philip and his colleagues<sup>55</sup> detailed a phenomenon they called "friendly-fire racism," which is a consequence of assumptions of racial/cultural match. In the case they analyzed, a teacher was self-assured that her racial match enabled her to effectively engage in conversations with students about race, gender, and power. The sense of inherent ability was further bolstered by a larger community of educators, who relied on narratives of this teacher's charisma and racial/cultural match with students. However, a close analysis of her interactions in the classroom revealed how she inadvertently reproduced deficit notions of communities of color when she assumed racial/cultural match. Presumptions of match prevented her from engaging in important pedagogical and relational work to establish commonality and recognize its limitations.

As a term so prone to slippage into essentialism, we invite attention to what might make teachers of color, as a self-identified category, strategic in addressing systemic inequities. We seek to specify the important pedagogical and relational work by teachers of color toward this end.

## **2. Keeping the Focus on Transforming Schools**

The key rationale for increasing teacher diversity is premised on findings that teachers of color bring a strong sense of commitment, are able to build on the strengths of students of color, and are more likely to stay in schools that disproportionately enroll students of color. We are concerned that this argument is increasingly appropriated in ways that focus on individual teachers of color as the singular solution rather than also addressing their school contexts. More perniciously, the focus on individual teachers of color deflects the attention from school policies that marginalize students of color.

While teachers of color are recruited for their commitments and presumed shared experiences and identities with students of color, these very assets are likely to become liabilities in school contexts that are not aligned in philosophy, culture, and approach. In these schools, teachers of color are caught in a "double bind,"<sup>56</sup> trying to satisfy irreconcilable demands focused on extreme accountability on one hand and commitments for cultural relevance and justice on the other. Placing teachers of color in these precarious positions result in a trauma and a lack of efficacy.

Teachers of color are increasingly recruited into "no excuses" charter schools (e.g. includ-

ing KIPP (Knowledge Is Power Program), Achievement First, Uncommon Schools, Mastery, Democracy Prep, and the Harlem Children’s Zone Promise Academies) that exacerbate the “double bind.” Some of the defining characteristics include increased instructional time, frequent testing, and a disciplinary model that uses extensive systems of rewards and consequences and sets “clear and precise expectations for student behavior, dictating how students dress, enter a classroom, walk up the stairs, show attention in class, organize a binder, and pass in papers.”<sup>57</sup> Such approaches tend to “develop worker-learners—children who monitor themselves, hold back their opinions, and defer to authority—rather than lifelong learners.”<sup>58</sup> The rationale for increasing the percentage of teachers of color is in stark contrast to the realities into which they are recruited.

Studies of schools as organizations convincingly show that school culture is more important than individual teacher beliefs in predicting how teachers take responsibility for their students’ learning.<sup>59</sup> This finding is not surprising. Recruiting committed teachers into school contexts where they are “teaching against the grain”<sup>60</sup> results in their burnout and limited efficacy.

Rather than simply focusing on recruiting teachers of color, we need to ask, “Into what professional future and types of schools are we recruiting these teachers?” What are we doing to make schools places where teaching is a creative, intellectually engaging activity that addresses persistent racialized inequities in society?

## Recommendations

Gershenson et al’s study,<sup>61</sup> “The long-run impacts of same-race teachers,” has certainly struck a chord with the popular media. The takeaway is enticing in its simplicity as it has been represented in the media: Students who had “one black teacher by third grade were 13 percent more likely to enroll in college; those who had two black teachers were 32 percent more likely to enroll in college.”<sup>62</sup> Gershenson et al. “provide suggestive evidence that role model effects [rather than teacher effectiveness] help to explain why black teachers increase the educational attainment of black students.”

But as Brown and Thomas (in press)<sup>63</sup> explain, the study “problematically shifts responsibility for ameliorating the sociohistorical and systemic causes of substandard schooling onto the shoulders of Black male teachers alone.” The uptake of these findings, coupled with the incessant viral videos of Black teachers who get students “pumped up for learning” through unique handshakes,<sup>64</sup> conveys a palatable solution—recruit more teachers of color and especially Black male teachers—while doing nothing to address the deep-seated racial inequities and injustices in society and schooling.

In moving forward, we offer a set of questions that educational stakeholders concerned with the diversification of the teaching force might consider. These questions are meant to be safeguards that promote a focus on strategic essentialism and the transformation of schools.

- *What is the purpose of diversifying the teaching faculty at a school? How is diversification related to a broader effort to racial justice?* The answer to these questions, on the surface, may seem simple. If the current teaching force does not reflect the

diversity of a school, then it would seem obvious to increase the number of teachers of color. This argument alone should not be the only reason educational stakeholders are concerned about hiring of teachers of color. We maintain that by pursuing in a substantive fashion the question of why teachers of color would be a valued asset to a school, decision-makers could better tease out any assumptions and logics about the need to hire more teachers of color, beyond the simple demographic imperative.

- *What are the current experiences of teachers of color in a school and/or district?* Often times the topic of teachers of color is taken up at the level of recruitment. We argue, however, that educational stakeholders need to seriously consider the experiences of teachers of color that are currently in their schools. Are they happy in their current roles? Do they feel that their talents and abilities are recognized and valued? Can they exercise race conscious pedagogies that address how race operates in classrooms? Are they supported in expanding the curricular “canon” to include the histories and knowledges of people of color? In exploring these questions, educational leaders can begin to think about the current context of teachers of color as a way to inform how teachers of color can contribute to and fundamentally change schools.
- *What will change at a school, in a community, or in society by increasing the numbers of teachers of color?* We argue that in exploring this question, school districts could deeply reflect on the purpose of hiring more teachers of color. For instance, does their presence substantively shift how power operates in schools, particularly the role of families and communities of color in decision making? Might they expand notions of expertise? What role do they have in creating more humanizing spaces for students, parents, classified staff, community members, and colleagues? Teachers of color should not be considered a panacea for addressing complex educational issues. Purposefully addressing how teachers of color might change schools is a guard against enclosing them in the “superman syndrome.”<sup>65</sup>

Our pluralistic society, even with its flawed democratic processes, still requires an educational workforce that is representative of its general population. But, our push for diversification must be rooted in a historical and contemporary analysis of racism in the U.S., clarity for why strategic essentialism for teachers of color is justified, and a persistent attempt to name and understand the effective pedagogical and relational work by teachers of color to support students of color.

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