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Advancing Equity: Mentoring to Develop and Retain Bilingual Teachers of Color

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In the State of Washington, and across the nation, there is a shortage of teachers who reflect the demographics of students (Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board, 2019). Even though the teaching workforce has diversified nationally in recent decades, teachers from diverse backgrounds, when attracted, depart schools at a significantly higher rate than white teachers (Ingersoll, Merrill, Stuckey & Collins, 2018). Over the past seven years, Highline Public Schools, a diverse urban multilingual district, has developed a rich Schools University partnership with Western Washington University.

Our partnership is guided by the Second Edition of the NAPDS Nine Essentials (NAPDS, 2021). Our shared work of developing and retaining bilingual teachers from the community, for the community, aligns with NAPDS Essential 1 to advance equity, antiracism and social justice within and among schools, colleges/universities, and their respective community and professional partners. The teacher pathway includes shared resources from the district and the university to recognize, enhance, celebrate and sustain the work of our partnership (NAPDS Essential 9). We believe that clinical preparation is key to teacher preparation (NAPDS Essential 2), and that the most effective way to increase the number of teachers who share language and cultural backgrounds with their students is from community members, including those who are already school employees. We believe that a cohort model, with extensive mentoring and support between participants and from both the university and the district are essential to supporting emerging teachers from diverse backgrounds.

This article describes one critical aspect of our success, our approach to mentoring from high school and into the first years of teachings. To do this, we follow the mentored journey of one bilingual teacher of color, our co-author Gami Diaz-Lizama, who currently teaches first grade in a two-way 50-50 dual language classroom with students instructed half the day in English and the other half in Spanish. Gami, now in his fourth year as a classroom teacher in Highline Public Schools, was part of our first cohort, graduating in 2018.

Through our work with Gami, we identify four phases of his professional career: Phase 1: High School Teaching Academy, Phase 2: Paraprofessional, Phase 3: Teacher Certification, and Phase 4: Early Career. We describe the

role of mentoring, within our Schools University Partnership, in each of these phases.

High School Teacher Academy Mentoring

Gami first learned about the teaching career participating in a high school teacher academy class in his school district. His high school teacher mentored Gami, as Gami prepared to observe in an elementary school. This allowed Gami to work with students in an elementary classroom while learning about the teaching career in his high school Teacher Academy course.

When I was in high school, I had a class that was a teacher academy class where I volunteered some of my time during the week to go help a classroom and when I started with that, that's when I started to begin seeing how a classroom works and learned a little bit about what a teacher goes through. I was able to learn about them but that actually was not the career I was pursuing.

Early classroom experiences and mentoring planted the seed for a career in education, even though Gami didn't go directly into teaching. Having our Partnership members and graduates meet with high school teacher academy students is part of our intentional recruitment process.

Phase 2: Paraprofessional Mentoring

Initially interested in business, Gami completed an Associate's degree after high school and worked as a tax professional, which ended up being seasonal work. A relative was working as a paraprofessional and talked with Gami about the benefits of a regular schedule working in schools. Gami pursued a position. The paraprofessional phase of Gami's professional journey consisted of one year of employment as a bilingual paraprofessional in an elementary school, followed by three years as a family liaison worker. Gami became aware of his impact on student learning, as a bilingual person of color, through the power of using his home language to connect with students and families and jumped at the opportunity offered by a clinical (NAPDS Essential 2) alternative teacher certification route launched by our partnership specifically to develop and retain bilingual paraprofessionals, from the community, as classroom teachers for this school district.

A paraprofessional supervisor, who also served as the school's instructional coach, mentored Gami during this time to offer job support and encourage his vision of becoming a teacher. Gami leaned heavily on the school's instructional coach who supervised his work, provided advice

and resources related to his job performance, and encouraged him to pursue teacher certification. In her words, mentoring paraprofessionals includes the following:

...letting people know that you see the potential and gifts that they have. I think people are harder on themselves than they should be. I think that is something really important for school leaders to recognize that passion and be an encourager and if there's an opportunity, then really provide them the opportunities.

As a bilingual person of color, Gami was aware of barriers of navigating and supporting the relationships between schools and families, especially around language and culture. In many traditional families, school and teachers are respected as experts. It would be disrespectful to question a teacher or a school leader. Schools sometimes operate on the belief that because families are not reaching out the families may not care, when the opposite is actually true—they are showing respect. Since families of bilingual children may not always realize that they can, and should, reach out to schools, Gami realized that he needed to help families advocate for their children in the U.S. school setting. By placing advocacy for each student at the forefront when supporting teacher/family relationships, he was able to bridge barriers. Gami leaned on informal mentoring from other bilingual paraeducator and teacher leaders:

...there were a lot of supports with the other bilingual paras that worked in the school as well as the other teacher leads such as the interventionist or the math coach that just supported when I had to say "this is happening, how can I receive support?" helping and facilitating the discussion or giving tips on how to pursue the situation.

Working as a family liaison, Gami realized how powerful it was for students when he observed teachers who had that family liaison relationship with families, not having to rely on an outside liaison. He realized he could be that teacher/liaison as a bilingual, bicultural teacher. This led Gami to the next phase, teacher certification.

Phase 3: Teacher Certification

The clinical practice design (NAPDS Essential 2) in our program includes multiple aspects including: a) a half-day placement in a mentor teacher classroom over two full academic years, b) full-time work as a Bilingual paraprofessional, c) on-site in-person University courses for the cohort after work and on weekends, d) access to a State Scholarship covering most of tuition

and fees, e) monthly combined professional development for candidates and mentor teachers, f) a district facilitator/mentor, and g) university field supervisors/mentors.

Gami had the opportunity to participate in our first cohort, working full time as a bilingual paraprofessional while completing the two-year teacher certification program (NAPDS Essential 1). During this phase, Gami received formal and informal mentoring from university and district mentors, a retired bilingual teacher-hired by the program, support from peers, and mentoring from his classroom mentor teacher.

University Faculty Field Mentoring

Two university-based field supervisors provided student teaching supervision and collaborated with the district program facilitator mentor on monthly training meetings for mentors and teacher candidates. The collaboration between the field supervisors and the program facilitator mentor consistently modeled the strong partnership. They also provided individual mentoring support. A third mentor was a retired bilingual teacher who served in a non-evaluative capacity. This was important because it provided a confidential and safe space for Gami and his fellow cohort members to talk about whatever they wanted, in a non-evaluative context.

University coordinators...we had certain teachers and mentors from the university that were constantly checking in with the cohort I was in for the program.

Cohort Mentoring

A cohort of fellow teacher candidates, all bilingual educators of color, provided key support. This peer-to-peer mentoring with other teacher candidates of color supported Gami's navigation of the mentor teacher classroom, bilingual paraprofessional duties, and University courses (NAPDS Essential 1). Cohort members met quarterly in an affinity group that they titled "Get Real" sessions where they could support one another in situations they encountered around equity, anti-racism, and social justice within their settings.

...the cohort was one of the biggest layers of support that I found, having a group of other adults that are future teachers of color, I feel that I was able to lean on them whenever there was a situation.

Cooperating Teacher Mentoring

During his two years in our school university partnership, Gami worked with two classroom mentor teachers, a different one each year. His mentors were mentored by the district facilitating mentor and he was mentored by all of them.

I would say both my teacher mentor and my district mentor (district program facilitator mentor) were key players in being able to lean on them and then asking for support and sometimes even them being the person to advocate for me because there were times I was

hesitant to advocate as a teacher of color, as someone who is still going through the certification process. It can feel kind of difficult advocating for yourself so it was great to have people advocating for me that would use their privilege or their resources to support me.

Teacher preparation programs differ in models of student teaching, expectations for mentoring, and the amount of time dedicated to student teaching. Even across short four-week student teaching experiences, mentor teachers positively influence growth in professional identity, confidence, teacher voice, and vision of student teachers (Izadina & Cowen, 2016). Building knowledge and skills of mentor teachers has the potential to amplify the impacts of the mentor teacher on the student teaching experience (NAPDS Essential 3).

District Program Facilitator Mentoring

A district program facilitator mentor, a university mentor and a classroom mentor teacher worked together over the two years as key partners in providing mentoring support for the candidates. A key component of this support is mentor advocacy through facilitated discussions, accessing resources, and advocating using positional power in the district and articulated agreements (NAPDS Essential 6).

District mentor: I consider myself an advocate. There are times where I advocate on behalf of fellows. Or first year teachers. So, for example, getting a principal to support the program requirements "hey you just need to do this." There's also advocating side by side with a teacher or fellow. Being an ally in conversation or problem-solving. So being that side-by-side friend. There's also a role of mentoring teacher candidates and teachers in self advocacy.

Phase 4. Early Career Mentoring

Mentoring should not stop with a teaching position. In reality, mentoring should never stop. In our model, early career teachers receive formal, state-funded mentoring through trained school district mentors. Gami accessed mentoring support from the district's first-year teacher mentors, his peers and his grade level team.

District First-Year Teacher Mentoring

During his first year of teaching, Gami felt well prepared and appreciated mentoring through monthly first-year teacher meetings and a district mentor to check in, coach, and offer professional development. The district mentor was the same mentor who had worked with his teacher mentor and him during Gami's teaching certification program. Gami already knew this mentor and was comfortable reaching out to him.

...the most important thing I think was that the district had a lot of support for first year teachers. We had monthly meetings and we had a district mentor who frequently checked in and then

we had times scheduled to check in. That was very useful support. The district mentor offered opportunities for professional development or coaching cycles, and sometimes was just another person in the room observing what I am doing or what a student is doing if I have a concern or if I have questions about the curriculum or just really anything.

Peer-to-Peer Mentoring

The cohort model created a support system for informal mentoring throughout and beyond the certification program. Gami stayed, and continues to stay, connected with his teaching preparation program cohort for peer-to-peer mentoring through problem solving and support. He continues to participate in "Get Real" affinity sessions with both his original cohort and subsequent cohort members (NAPDS Essential 1).

My first-year teaching, I feel like I also leaned on our cohort again. I was still in communication with the people I was in my program with, a lot of them teaching in the same district, one of them teaching in the same school. So, being able to communicate and ask them "hey, how's it going, what problems are you running into?"

Grade-level Team Mentoring

Gami leaned heavily on peer-to-peer mentoring support from a grade level team consisting of three other teachers of color. This placement provided robust support as a teacher of color. While experiencing barriers, he checked in, asked questions and gleaned advice from the grade level team. Moving to a new grade level during his second year of teaching, Gami continued to access support from the team from his first year. This affinity peer support structure provided Gami with immediate access to mentoring as his cohort dispersed across schools and grade levels (NAPDS Essential 1).

I was very fortunate to have on my team, other teachers of color who understood what it is like to be a teacher of color in a predominantly white system. We were the only team where all the teachers were teachers of color for my grade level that year and I leaned on them a lot, we were in constant communication and we just built strong relationships with each other and even now, even though we are not on the same team, I am constantly checking in with them...asking them questions or advice.

Conclusion

In this article, we describe how our collaborative approach created well-defined and boundary-spanning mentoring roles that supported an emerging multilingual teacher through the first four phases of his professional career (NAPDS Essential #9). Our model allows employees an opportunity for a robust clinical preparation

