

(Un)Heard Voices: Exploring the Support and Retention for Teachers of Color

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Abstract: This study examines the underrepresentation of teachers of color in U.S. schools, exploring historical and systemic barriers to recruitment and retention. Utilizing qualitative methods, the study analyzes perceptions of P-12 teachers of color (n=16) regarding preparation, support, school climate, and working conditions. Findings reveal that retention is influenced by teachers' perceived value, autonomy, and empowerment, alongside challenges such as microaggressions and inequitable workloads. The study highlights strategies for Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to amplify teacher voices, foster culturally responsive environments, and promote equity-focused practices to mitigate attrition and enhance diverse representation and inclusion in education.

Introduction

The underrepresentation of teachers of color in U.S. schools is a persistent issue rooted in historical inequities and reinforced by systemic barriers. Following the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision mandating racial desegregation in schools, discriminatory practices led to the displacement of tens of thousands of Black educators (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Today, while students of color represent 56% of the P-12 population, teachers of color make up only 20% of the teaching workforce (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2023, 2024). More specifically, Hispanic teachers comprise 9% of the teaching force (compared to 29% of students), while Black (non-Hispanic) 6% (compared to 15% of students), Asian 2% (compared to 5% of students), two or more races 2% (compared to 5% of students), and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and American Indian/Alaska Native (<1%) (compared to 1% of students) are represented in even smaller proportions (NCES, 2024).

Teachers of color play a vital role in improving outcomes for students of color, including academic achievement, engagement, and perceptions of equity (Gershenson et al., 2021). Despite these benefits, systemic barriers such as racialized microaggressions, unfavorable working conditions, and inequitable treatment contribute to higher attrition rates among teachers of color compared to their white counterparts (Grooms et al., 2021; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Mason-Williams et al., 2022). More specifically, the turnover rate for teachers of color is approximately 19%, compared to 15% for white teachers and Black

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teachers exhibit the highest overall turnover rates (Merod, 2021). As such, it is critical to explore implications and consequences of attrition, specifically as they relate to racial diversity and underrepresentation of racially minoritized teachers.

Consequently, this study advances the conversation on recruitment and retention by exploring the perceptions of P-12 teachers of color on preparation, support, school climate, and working conditions. Two key research questions guided this work:

1. What are the perceptions of P-12 teachers of color regarding preparation and support?
2. How do school climate and working conditions impact the retention and professional experiences of teachers of color?

By amplifying teacher voices, this study aimed to provide actionable insights for Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) and Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to foster inclusivity and support for teachers of color.

Literature Review

Historical and Systemic Barriers

The underrepresentation of teachers of color stems from historical inequities, beginning with the displacement of Black educators during desegregation. Prior to the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. the Board of Education* (1954), teachers of color comprised most of the teaching force in racially segregated schools (Bettini et al., 2021; Carter Andrews et al., 2019). The mandated racial desegregation of schools in the south “provided no protections for the 82,000 Black teachers leaving these segregated schools” (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p.7). A total of 38,000 teachers of color were classified as unqualified to teach white students over ten years following the Brown decision. Within a ten-year period, 38,000 teachers of color were deemed unfit to teach white students. This inequity was even more striking for administrators of color, as nearly half of principals of color in the state of Georgia lost their jobs and 90-95 percent of Black administrators in Kentucky and North Carolina were pushed out of their positions (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Disproportionate demotions, stringent hiring practices, workplace hostility, involuntary transfers, increased certification requirements, among other influences, historically created the national shortage of teachers of color that persists today (Carter Andrews et al., 2019).

Attrition and Recruitment Challenges

Even though representation of students of color continues to increase in schools across the United States (Ingersoll et al., 2019; NCES, 2024), teachers of color continue to be underrepresented (NCES, 2024; TNTP, 2020) and leave the education profession in higher numbers per capita, particularly within the first five years in the field (Grooms et al., 2021; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Mun et al., 2020;). In addition, a racial diversity gap persists in most states, as EPPs are significantly less racially diverse than the public-school population (TNTP, 2020). For example, 43 states have a teacher preparation racial diversity gap of 10 or more percentage points, and 21 states have a racial diversity gap of 20 or more percentage points. Keep in mind that, according to data from the U.S. Department of Education, students of color comprised 56% of K-12 enrollment during the 2022-2023 academic year (NCES,

2024). This is particularly problematic when considering that research suggests improved educational experiences and performance outcomes for students of color who are taught by and have access to teachers of color during their schooling experiences (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Gershenson et al., 2021). Additionally, evidence supports the need for a diverse teaching force since teachers of color often serve as role models and cultural mediators for students of color, fostering students' academic and social development (Gershenson et al., 2021).

Teachers of color face higher attrition rates due to unfavorable school climates, isolation, and inadequate administrative support (Darling-Hammond, 2020). These challenges are especially acute in under-resourced schools serving high-poverty, minoritized populations, where teachers of color are disproportionately employed (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Mun et al., 2020). Examining trends over the last thirty years, Ingersoll et al., (2018) found a substantial increase in the number of beginning teachers in the education field. In the late 1980s, approximately one-third of public-school K-12 teachers had ten or fewer years of experience, as compared to nearly 43% in 2015. They also found that as the teaching force continues to expand, so does the population of teachers of color; highlighting that in 2015, twenty percent of K-12 teachers were teachers of color, compared to 13 percent in the late 1980s. This increase is largely represented at schools with higher percentages of students experiencing poverty; where teachers of color are two to three times more likely to work than white teachers (Bettini et al., 2021; Ingersoll et al., 2018).

While the increased representation of teachers of color seems promising, data suggests teachers of color are leaving the profession at much higher rates than white teachers (Bettini et al., 2021; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017), as attrition for teachers of color has increased by 45% from the late 1980s to 2013 (Ingersoll et al., 2018). What is especially troublesome is nearly half of the turnover occurs at just 25% of schools, those with high populations of students experiencing poverty and populated predominantly by students of color in primarily rural and urban communities (Bettini et al., 2021; Ingersoll et al., 2018); thereby continuing to perpetuate pervasive inequities for students who have historically been placed on the margins (Bettini et al., 2021; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019).

When exploring factors that contribute to higher attrition rates for teachers of color than their white colleagues, previous research indicated that dissatisfaction often extends from issues related to unfavorable school climates and lack of administrative or collegial support (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Dixon et al., 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2019; Merod, 2021). For example, teachers of color reported disappointment and frustration with persistent racialized microaggressions (Endo, 2015; Grooms et al., 2021; Mun et al., 2020) that manifest themselves in various forms such as being overlooked for promotions, being reduced to disciplinary managers, and not being perceived as academic experts in their content areas (Borowski & Will, 2021).

Given the historical and systemic barriers that have resulted in recruitment and attrition challenges for teachers of color, this research was designed to amplify the voices of teachers of color, voices that are often minimized or unheard, to uncover an increased understanding of how preparation and professional experiences are shaped and impact support and retention.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore the perceptions of P-12 teachers of color regarding preparation, support, working conditions, and their related impact on retention. Qualitative research was chosen for its ability to provide more in-depth insights into the lived experiences of participants, allowing researchers to capture nuanced perspectives often overlooked in quantitative studies (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study used open-ended survey questions to facilitate rich, detailed narratives illustrating participants' experiences and perceptions. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained to ensure ethical research practices, including participant consent and confidentiality.

Participants

Sixteen P-12 in-service teachers of color participated in the study. Purposeful sampling was employed to select participants who could provide relevant and meaningful insights into the research questions (Patton, 2015). Eligibility criteria included:

- Self-identification as a person of color.
- Currently employed as a teacher in a P-12 educational setting.
- Willingness to participate in the study and complete an open-ended online survey.

Participants were predominantly female (81%) and represented a range of racial and ethnic identities: Black/African American (88%), Biracial (13%), and Hispanic (6%). They also varied in educational attainment, including bachelor's (44%), master's (25%), specialist's (19%), and doctoral (6%) degrees. Most participants (75%) taught in the Southeastern United States, with smaller proportions in the Midwest (19%) and the West (6%). Grade levels taught ranged from pre-K to 12th grade, with representation in pre-K-Kindergarten (25%), grades 1-5 (19%), and grades 6-12 (31%).

Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey disseminated via email. The survey consisted of 14 open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about participants' experiences, perceptions, and recommendations. Questions were organized around four central themes: racial identity, recruitment, retention, and strategies for support. Examples of survey questions include:

1. In what ways, if any, has your racial identity influenced your work as an educator?
2. How can schools and districts work to build and sustain culturally responsive environments?
3. What role can educator preparation programs play in improving the recruitment and retention of teachers of color?
4. What supports or changes would make you feel more empowered and valued in your role as an educator?

The survey format provided opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences at their own pace, fostering thoughtful and candid responses.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative data. This approach involved several iterative steps:

1. Familiarization: Researchers reviewed all survey responses to gain an initial understanding of participants' narratives and related perceptions.
2. Coding: Key phrases and ideas were systematically coded and categorized based on their relevance to the research questions.
3. Theme Development: Codes were grouped into broader themes that captured recurring patterns across responses. Four primary themes emerged: racial identity, recruitment, retention, and strategies for support.
4. Validation: Themes were reviewed and refined through collaborative discussions among the research team to ensure accuracy and consistency.

Thematic analysis was chosen for its ability to uncover rich, context-specific insights, aligning with the study's aim to amplify the voices of teachers of color (Janesick, 2015).

Findings

Racial Identity

Participants described both positive and negative impacts of their racial identity on their professional roles in education. As posited in previous work of Gershenson and colleagues (2021) participants in this study indicated that they used their experiences to connect with students and foster critical thinking. Participants expressed:

- *"I teach at a Title I school where most of the students are students of color. I can connect with them on a personal level because of my race"* (personal communication).
- *"My racial identity influences my work as an educator in ways that includes providing my students with the tools to think critically about their identity, their classroom content, societal oppression and discrimination, as well as opportunities and potential for success in their future"* (personal communication).

However, similar to the findings of Bettini and colleagues (2021), Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond (2019), Ingersoll and colleagues (2019), and Mun and colleagues (2020) participants in this study reported undervalued or experiencing racialized microaggressions:

- *"I've been hesitant to address topics like slavery for fear of backlash from colleagues or administration"* (personal communication).
- *"Discrimination has not had a major role in my teaching experience. I have perceived prejudice and racism from a minute number of coworkers, students, parents, and community stakeholders, but it has not had any type of effect on my job"* (personal communication).

Recruitment

Participants highlighted many of the persistent systemic barriers found in previous literature (i.e., Carter Andrews et al., 2019) in recruitment processes, including limited outreach to diverse communities. Suggestions for improvement included targeted job fairs and partnerships with minority-serving institutions:

- *“Teacher preparation programs can give teachers of color more opportunities to serve in different school systems. Support is needed throughout the first three years of teaching because I did not have a mentor, and I wanted to run out of that school when I taught 8th grade Mathematics because I wasn’t exposed to different school systems. I came in with all these ideas and had to deal with constant fighting and kids not wanting to learn”* (personal communication).
- *“TEP [Teacher Education Programs] should reevaluate their programs and pedagogy. There is also a need to support teacher education programs at predominantly Black colleges /universities with placing their graduates in more schools where teachers of Color are underrepresented. There is a stigma associated with many of the predominantly Black colleges/universities where the graduates’ skills are less than those of their counterparts who graduated from predominantly White teacher education programs”* (personal communication).

Retention

Retention challenges continue to be centered on the lack of support, mentorship, and inclusive leadership. Similar to the results of Bettini and colleagues (2021) participants in this study emphasized the importance of equitable workloads and career advancement opportunities:

- *“Having a mentor who shares my background would make a significant difference”* (personal communication).
- *“Equitable treatment of all teachers would truly help with this. Sharing the ‘love’ when creating class rosters, allowing input during faculty meetings, and being open to hearing concerns from teachers are all ways to retain us”* (personal communication).

Participants stressed the need for culturally responsive professional development, affinity groups, and greater involvement in decision-making processes to enhance support, inclusion, and positively influence working conditions and the overall school climate.

Discussion

Representation and Recruitment

The findings support existing literature that emphasizes the importance of increasing representation in the teaching workforce to address systemic inequities (Gershenson et al., 2021; TNTP, 2020). Targeted recruitment efforts, such as partnerships with minority-

serving institutions and equitable hiring practices, are essential in fostering a recruitment climate where teacher candidates feel both welcomed and represented and see prospective employment opportunities.

Retention and Support

Retention requires dismantling barriers that contribute to attrition, including microaggressions and inequitable treatment. Consistent with prior research from Bettini et al. (2021), findings confirm that experiences of teachers of color are often shaped by unfavorable, sometimes hostile, racial climates within schools, which can be traced back to systemic inequities established during segregation. Thus, the results of this study confirm that retention efforts such as mentorship programs and culturally affirming school climates facilitated through collaborative and democratic leadership can provide the support teachers of color need to feel both supported and connected, as well as build their capacity to thrive.

Policy and Advocacy

The contradiction between equity-focused goals and restrictive education policies that limit discussions of race and topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion must be addressed. EPPs and LEAs must advocate for systemic change to ensure policies align with democratic principles that support a culture of representation and belonging. The jarring contradiction between educational organizations that claim to be culturally responsive and inclusive but are restricted by educational policies that limit any such efforts is problematic, particularly when historically oppressive and discriminatory policies served to build the foundation for systemic barriers that perpetuate the current issue of underrepresentation of teachers of color in the field. Corresponding with existing research, findings underscore the need for targeted efforts to ensure that advocacy efforts are centered on advancing policies that positively impact the recruitment and retainment of teachers of color, as their presence is crucial for fostering an inclusive and equitable educational environment (Mun et al., 2020).

Actionable Insights for Change

Findings from this study support prior research that highlights and support prior research that illustrates the multifaceted challenges faced by teachers of color, emphasizing the need for systemic change to address underrepresentation, employment inequities, and attrition (Endo, 2015; Grooms et al., 2021; Mun et al., 2020). Teachers of color bring unique perspectives and experiences that enrich the learning environment and positively impact student outcomes, particularly for students of color. However, systemic barriers—such as microaggressions, inequitable workloads, and lack of meaningful support—continue to undermine their retention and advancement which perpetuates the problem of underrepresentation (Darling-Hammond, 2020). As such, we contend that actionable insights for change must be considered.

We believe EPPs are uniquely positioned to address these challenges by fostering diverse pipelines and creating inclusive learning environments for teacher candidates. Suggestions for EPPs include:

1. **Enhancing Recruitment Practices:** EPPs should partner with minority-serving institutions and community organizations to attract diverse candidates. Establishing scholarships, fellowships, and targeted outreach initiatives can further encourage students of color to pursue teaching careers and related opportunities in the field of education.
2. **Providing Culturally Responsive Training:** Programs should integrate coursework and experiential learning opportunities that focus on cultural responsiveness, equity, and anti-bias practices. Training must prepare teacher candidates to effectively support diverse classrooms and advocate for inclusive policies within schools.
3. **Mentorship and Affinity Groups:** Establishing mentorship opportunities with experienced educators of color can provide teacher candidates with role models and support systems. Similarly, affinity groups within EPPs can offer spaces for teacher candidates of color to share experiences, build networks of support, and develop professional capacity and resilience.
4. **Addressing Systemic Bias in Curriculum and Faculty Composition:** EPPs must critically evaluate their curricula to ensure they reflect diverse perspectives and inclusive histories. Increasing the racial diversity of faculty members can also provide candidates with role models, opportunities for discussion of shared experiences, and an increased sense of belonging.
5. **Collaboration with Local Education Agencies (LEAs):** EPPs should work closely with LEAs to design internships and residencies that place teacher candidates in schools that serve diverse student populations. This collaboration and exposure can also ensure seamless transitions into teaching roles by aligning preparation with real-world contexts.

While EPPs play a critical role in developing and preparing a diverse teaching workforce, their efforts must align with broader systemic changes in education. LEAs must also create supportive school climates where teachers of color feel valued and empowered. Additionally, policies that undermine, restrict, or limit discussions of equity and inclusion must be actively challenged to promote environments where diversity is not only represented but valued.

Conclusion

While it may not be the intent of educators or educational institutions, the literature and findings of this study reveal that teachers of color can feel unheard and believe their voices are often devalued in educational spaces (Grooms et al., 2021; Mun et al., 2020). Therefore, it is evident that norms, practices, and policies must be (re)envisioned and reshaped in a way that both support and understand the needs of students and educators who have historically been placed on the margins (Bettini et al., 2021; Merod, 2021). While educational institutions often proclaim commitments to equity and justice, a contradiction is often exposed when closely examining educational contexts. Race must no longer be silenced, but rather be centered in the discourse as shifts are made, especially with the continuance of vast inequalities related to access, opportunities, and outcomes for both students and educators of color (Mason et al., 2021). To inform and advance practices that support students and teachers of color, as well as strengthen recruitment and retention, it is

essential to consider beliefs, actions, and systems, not in relation to intention, but rather frame them regarding impact (Grooms et al., 2021; Mun et al., 2020). No matter how well-intentioned, if beliefs, actions, systems, or curriculum do not support and advance equity, inclusion, and social justice, they must be disrupted and reframed (Darling-Hammond, 2020). By addressing these interconnected challenges, EPPs and LEAs can strengthen recruitment and retention efforts, ensuring a teaching workforce that reflects the diversity of the student population (Endo, 2015; Grooms et al., 2021; Mun et al., 2020). This commitment to equity and inclusion will not only benefit educators but also create more just and effective learning environments where all voices are heard and valued.

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