Speaking Their Truths: Teachers of Color in Diasporic Contexts

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Introduction

In the year 2000, the Rural School and Community Trust reported that 17 percent of all rural residents were minorities and 24 percent were school-age children. The federal mandate, No Child Left Behind Act, advocates for quality teachers in order to reform and improve education across the United States. The authors believe that the quality teaching advocated in this mandate reaches beyond classroom practices. It includes the representation of teachers across varying social identities in our communities' elementary and secondary schools. Pertinent evidence suggests that the presence of teachers of color not only provides students of color with role models but also increases the academic success of students of color (Dilworth, 1990; Dee, 2001). In addition, educators of color are more able to use culturally responsive communication (Dilworth, 1990) and are more likely to employ teaching practices and curricula (Ladson-Billings, 1993) that are compatible with diverse student populations.   Thus, teachers of color are essential to reforming education for diverse student populations in rural, historically monocultural communities. Moreover, an education that is culturally responsive and that promotes practices and curricula that are compatible with diverse students will broaden *all* students' horizons through promoting critical thinking (especially seeing things from multiple perspectives) and through fostering an understanding of our nation's multicultural reality. Meier, Winkle, and Polinard (1999) cite academic increases for White students when they had teachers of color.

Although the overall student population in Wyoming is decreasing, the number of the state's students of color is rising. As an indication of the influx of students of color into the state's communities, the Teton County School District in Wyoming had 50 students enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes five years ago and 250 students in 2004. It is often teachers of color who are most likely to work with these new students in ways that ease their transition to English-language schooling. Another way that teachers of color constructively intervene to diffuse

intercultural tension in rural educational settings is in serving as ethnic mediators who can identify the communication and behavioral differences of particular underrepresented students' communities (Irvine, 1989). Moreover, teachers of color may raise the level of multicultural awareness and lessen discriminatory practices at all three levels—student, educator, administrative—of the rural school system (Meier, Steward, & England, 1989).

These and other benefits that have been the subject of documented research offer compelling reasons for a diverse teaching workforce in rural schools. The challenges to teachers of color, however, are especially daunting in rural communities.   They include professional and social isolation, lack of discussion in professional contexts about diversity, and the absence of adequate mentoring. Such generalizations as these may belie the complexity of schooling. Cortes (1992) reminds us of the essential role of discovering the specific barriers in specific contexts. How, and whether, these and other barriers play themselves out in rural contexts is a worthy question to pursue.

Educators of color experience many specific and unique challenges in the teaching profession (for a comprehensive review, see Quiocho & Rios, 2000). Rural educators often experience struggles that are drastically different from those of more urban or even suburban educators, given the isolating nature of rural communities. Two suppositions follow the former statements to a certainty. First, teachers of color are less likely to teach in rural schools, schools that we term *diasporic* contexts. Second, the ratio of teachers of color to students of color in such rural, mostly monocultural areas falls dramatically short of the ratios of white teachers to white students.

A call to action follows explication of those two certainties. It is imperative to query teachers of color who opt for (or find themselves in) such diasporic settings, far from their communities of origin, to understand how they make sense of their experiences. Inquiry into the challenges, sustaining features, and needs of these teachers is critical to developing strategies and structures that attract teachers of color away from their cultural bases and support them in

cultivating longevity in those rural schools and communities. Our search for this information led to identifying, observing teaching practices of, and conducting a weekend focus group with a sampling of teachers of color working in middle and secondary education in Wyoming. The data we sought from these participants emanated from the following overarching question: How do teachers of color in isolated, relatively rural contexts make sense of their teaching experiences as marginalized people in their profession? From this main research question we drew the following derivational questions:

- What challenges do teachers of color experience as marginalized persons in the teaching profession?
- What sustains these teachers of color (facilitative factors) in these diasporic contexts?
- What professional support do they need to proceed and succeed as educators of color in these isolating, rural settings?

Definitions

The three authors of this study are referred to through the rest of the article as the researchers. The terms *people of color* and *teachers of color* refer to persons and teachers who self-identify as coming from African, Latina/o, Asian, and/or Native American heritage. Of particular importance are definitions of the terms *diaspora* and *rural* as applied in this article.

In the twentieth century, the academic field of diaspora studies came into being "to study dispersed ethnic populations … often termed *diasporic peoples*" (Wikipedia/Diaspora Studies, 2005, Para. 1). Diasporic studies encompasses myriad peoples displaced from their lands of origin who number among them the scattered peoples of Jewish, Irish, African, Indian, Afghan, Armenian, and Latin heritage, to name a few (Wikipedia, 2005, Para. 5). The definition of diaspora applied in this article most closely aligns with that of Robin Cohen. Cohen introduces a voluntaristic element to the dispersal from the homeland that may happen "in search of work, in pursuit of trade, or to further colonial ambitions" (2005, 22). This article presents the teacher of color employed and living in a predominantly White community as living a diasporic experience, removed--not by force, but by choice--from her/his ethnic community of origin.

In much the same way that the term *diasporic* illuminates a social construct in relation to a person's cultural identity and experience, the term *rural* in this article refers to a "social construct which remains with rural people throughout their lives" (Atkin, 2003, p. 6). Atkin defines rurality by size (small), remoteness (yet relatively safe), and shared land-based values (p. 2). According to the state report entitled "Why Rural Matters 2003," Wyoming is the sixteenth most rural state in the United States, with 34.9% of its inhabitants "living in places with 2,500 or fewer" people (p. 77). Over a third of Wyoming inhabitants live in rural communities, yet "nearly half of the state's public schools (48.5%) are in rural areas" (Westra, 2003, Para. 2). Of its educational system, the state report reveals that "small schools, small classes, lots of computer use, and strong parental support for teachers are characteristic of rural education in Wyoming" (Beeson, and Strange, 2003, p. 74). Both Wyoming and its educational system meet the statistical burden of being considered heavily rural in nature.

Additional investigation into its definition locates rurality as a culture of place. Morrison defines rural schools as learning institutions that "reflect a sense of the community, have close ties with families, children often attend same school as parents and grandparents, cover hundreds of square miles, and expect teachers to adhere to community standards and participate in community affairs and activities" (1997, p. 110-11). Atkin writes that the "key characteristic of rurality—or rather its influence in human capital development—is the notion of shared social space" (2003, p. 4). To the traits named earlier, Atkin therefore adds three more that he locates as inherent in the nature of rural people, that is, their "strong community feeling," "conservative and traditional values," and "slower, less pressuri[z]ed way of life" (p. 3-4). In the present article, the statistical and cultural notions of rurality of place fuse into a sense of rural as both a setting and an identity. While Wyoming is the specific location of this research study, we believe it is typical of the rural experience of teachers of color in many other states and communities.

Research Methodology

This research project developed in three phases. Phase 1 focused on identifying teachers of color (all except teachers of White European descent) from rural school districts across Wyoming. Potential invitees would have a strong sense of their racial-ethnic identity, be amenable to face-to-face interviews and classroom observation at their schools, and participate in a weekend discussion group. To access potential participants, the researchers contacted 48 superintendents representing every school district in the state and asked each superintendent to identify teachers of color within his or her district. To those whose names were received, the researchers sent an interest-in-volunteering form describing the research and requesting their participation. A questionnaire asking the teachers for information regarding their racial-ethnic identity and the implications these social group memberships had on their personal lives and professional practices was also mailed to them. Data collected were critical in assessing how important their racial-ethnic identity was in their professional contexts.

In gauging eligibility for participation, the researchers selected those for whom their racial and ethnic identities were important elements in their work. From the returned

questionnaires/consents, the researchers invited eight teachers to participate in the study. These eight teachers proceeded to the second phase of this research, which involved initial interviews, observation of them while teaching a lesson, and a post-lesson discussion, followed by an invitation to the focus-group weekend.

Phase 3 offered the first opportunity for the researchers and participants to gather as a group. This group conversation took place at a central location in Wyoming and at the expense of the researchers. It is important to note here that only six participants were able to attend this third phase. The gathering began with dinner on a Friday evening, during which introductions and initial conversations took place. On Saturday, the researchers and participants met over a period of eight hours in recorded sessions during which focus-group activities included formal group interviews, informal sharing, answering questionnaires, and responding to each others' thoughts and reactions. Only data from phase 1(questionnaire) and phase 3 (weekend focus-group discussions) have been analyzed and are presented in this article**.**

Qualitative data analysis followed an emergent, grounded research approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Looking at the data, the researchers asked themselves, "What is in this material?" The researchers began to look at the data with initial theoretical assertions anchored to the data. The themes that emerged were juxtaposed and melded to develop more robust, appropriate categories that allowed them to aggregate coded data and formulate hybrid theoretical assertions. Throughout, the researchers collaborated to help define and understand these themes and theories.

Participants

The overall sample for this study numbered eight educators of color teaching in public schools throughout the state of Wyoming. Of that number, only six participants were able to attend the weekend focus-group sessions, and it is these six participants who are the research subjects of this paper (see Appendix A). The demographic breakdown of the six focus-group participants, all middle or secondary educators, included four females and two males, three of whom self-identified as Latina/o, two as Black, and one as Asian (see Appendix A for further demographics and the use of pseudonyms throughout this article). Their areas of concentration varied broadly. Two participants taught English, one taught Social Studies, one Spanish, one Mathematics, and one a combination of Agriculture, Horticulture, Education, and Biochemistry. They all achieved post secondary education degrees, four earning Master of Science or Arts degrees and two Bachelor of Science or Arts degrees. Of their own origins, over half of the participants stated that they had grown up in towns of fewer than 100,000 residents, whereas the rest had grown up in more urban areas of 100,000 people or more (see Appendix A).

Becoming Teachers

In the course of responding to the myriad of the researchers' questions, the participants offered perceptions of why they had become teachers and why they believe people of color should become teachers. Paramount in their responses were the following four aspects: influence from family and teachers, natural abilities and early teaching experiences, the desire to impact students' lives, and the benefits of exposing students to teachers from diverse cultures. The participants convey their thoughts on each of these aspects with articulate conviction.

Influence from family and teachers

The majority of the group claimed influence to pursue teaching while they were growing up from family members and teachers. For Carolina and Victor, attending college was a strong priority, but their entrance into higher education was prompted by different motivations. Carolina recalled that "education was something that was highly encouraged in my family from the time we were very small children. College was an absolute. It was mandatory." As for teaching, Carolina felt that her "journey into teaching was a natural one. My mother and father were both educators…. I simply followed my parents' footsteps." Wiseman, Knight and Cooner (2002) reported that following a parent into teaching is the primary motivating factor for as many as one in five preservice teachers. Victor, on the other hand, was the first member of his family to graduate high school. Having surveyed available options, Victor acknowledged that "just growing up in my neighborhood, I knew that I [could] not live the same way that my Mom did, and some of my neighbors did. So I knew college was the way for me to get out of the poor areas."

The effect of influential teachers on students' career choices has been pursued by Nieto in *What Keeps Teachers Going?* wherein she writes of a teacher acknowledging that her "resolve to someday become a teacher was strengthened by [her] experience with teachers" (2003, p. 28). This theme also was in strong evidence among the participants of this study. Les spoke about joining "the teaching ranks probably because when I was in high school I had a couple of good teachers [who] influenced me." In addition to having an uncle and a brother who were teachers, Helena recalled having had inspiring teachers during her own schooling. She sees all career possibilities as emanating from teaching. Helena commented that "the one thing that stuck in my mind was, if there were no teachers, there would be no professions." Sabrina rounded out the quartet (Carolina, Les, Helena, and Sabrina) of participants who grew up in families of educators, stating that she had "an

educational background only by accident. As it happens, my mother was a third-grade teacher before I was born, but it had never occurred to me to be a teacher." Yet Sabrina did elect to become an educator. Ramanathan (2000) stated that parental influence makes a difference, whether at a covert level or boldly advocated. For most of our participants, therefore, it was adults who had the kind of "profound impact on the career decisions of these teachers when considering their occupational options" that Gordon notes is of critical importance in answering why teachers choose teaching (2002, p. 6).

Natural abilities and early teaching experiences

Three participants touched on having evolved as teachers in a way that tapped natural aptitudes. Joslyn described that, as the eldest child in the family, she was

> …always put in a position of being an example. I was the experiment. I was always looking after and teaching my younger siblings. I really enjoyed seeing other human beings grow and experience and perhaps benefit from my influence.

Sabrina fondly told of her family's love of learning and "studying for the joy of studying." She recalled that, when she was asked to take the place of a teacher who had left, "there was no reason for not doing it. I can say that in college it wouldn't have occurred to me to take education credits because I accepted the idea of the kind of person who did it, and I didn't see myself as one of those people." Les, on the other hand, professed being drawn to teaching from the time he was a coach as a student. He recalled coaching baseball in a small town and liking "the interaction that I had with the players and the ability to teach them how to play. And so, after three years of engineering, I decided to switch my [college] major."

Although practical reasons enter the conversation when teachers are asked why they chose careers in education— good hours, benefits, and pay and relative ease of entry and reentry—intangibles, such as making a "lasting contribution to society" and "love of teaching," are among the paramount reasons cited that teachers become and remain teachers (Wiseman, Knight & Cooner, 2002, p. 6; Lortie, 1975; Nieto, 2003; Ramanathan, 2000). Allusions to these intangible joys and rewards experienced in teaching recur through the foregoing comments by Joslyn, Sabrina, and Les.

Impacting students' lives

The third theme that arose had to do with the positive effect these teachers saw in the potential to have an impact on their students' lives. Les had gotten involved in architecture in high school, and his parents had envisioned a career for him as an engineer. But Les felt that in "being a teacher, I'd have a lot more impact. It was a lot better for

me. I was a pretty good teacher. I could convey my message pretty well. So, that's how I got into teaching." Victor, who had looked to college as a way out of his poor neighborhood, revealed his goal to "come back and to reach out to the minority populations at the high school." Among the many thoughts implicit in his comment, Victor alludes to the imbalance in distribution of resources to school districts by which suburban schools receive a greater proportion of materials and support than their urban counterparts do (Nieto, 2003, 92). The educators of our study are no strangers to this phenomenon, and Victor sees that he can give back to his community a dedication that can enrich the learning environment for those growing up in a place he knows well.

This imbalance notwithstanding, Les and Victor are among the vast numbers of teachers who come to their profession with a committed desire to work with children and young people and to "make a difference in their lives" (Wiseman, Knight, & Cooner, 2002, p. 6; Su, 1996). In order to be good teachers, however, Nieto cautioned that teachers of color must confront their "identities and motivations" and imbue their teaching strategies with positive instruction and cleanse them of practices that may cause long-term injury to students. Teachers, she says, "need to reflect on how a word, a gesture, or an action might inspire or wound for life" (Nieto, 2003, p. 32).

Exposing students to teachers from diverse cultures

Discussion turned to the reasons why these participants felt ethnic minorities should become teachers. A majority of the participants related strongly to seeing a highly profitable outcome from modeling other cultures for mainstream students. Su wrote of students of color who "are clearly committed to entering teaching as social change agents" (1996, p. 125). Les demonstrated how that notion works in the classroom when he equated modeling his Japanese heritage with breaking down stereotypical thinking among his students. He stated that it is

> …important for me being Japanese to be a teacher because, when I go to a small school, most of those kids don't see anybody but White people. They live on ranches, and they never get in town. And they have preconceived thoughts of Japanese people, Black people, Hispanics. And they meet me, and I kind of wreck that stereotype. So, I think it's good for minorities to teach just to give kids a view or aspect of other cultures and races.

Joslyn sees herself as a role model for her profession because she is one of a small number of teachers of color in agriculture education. She described, with justifiable pride, her perseverance in attaining schooling in the field of her choice, noting how meaningful it was for her

…to have a presence and show younger individuals of color that it is possible to get into teaching, as myself, in agriculture education. It was difficult because I was alone, basically.   But once I started teaching, I was able to influence my students because they had an affinity for working with animals.

Carolina described the importance she placed on youngsters, who are "spongelike in soaking up impressions of the world around them," having a chance to witness a broad range of role models. She felt it important for people from underrepresented groups to become teachers because she feels that it is

> …important that children, students, young teenagers have different perspectives of what it is to be a minority, that not all minorities fit into a certain stereotype…It just broadens [students'] horizons….I think I've brought a lot of authenticity to my students about my culture, in relation to the literature we study.

Sabrina, too, revealed that "as a teacher … my modeling from a perspective that my students haven't seen is just a continuation of how I've lived my life." The enlightening quality that she brings to her classroom is characterized by understanding that

> …my students have never seen a show like me, and they think that's because I'm Black. And that certainly impacts it. But what I want them to know is, no matter what teacher is in front of them, they've probably not seen that show before. They don't know that difference. They come to my class completely stunned. Not so much by my blackness, but my attitude. I didn't realize how much I teach against the grain because I never thought about it as teaching against the grain. When I teach a certain author, it is a whole lot different than the way somebody down the hall teaches a certain author, and I never planned it that way. I teach in the way I speak and the way I think.

Carolina expanded on the foregoing by noting that teachers from underrepresented groups broaden students' idea of

> …what it is to be a minority…It means being articulate and well-educated and professional and compassionate and all these wonderful things…To understand we are the same in many ways, and in ways we are different…We should be able to be aware of those differences and to accept them among each other…I would hope that my kids come out of my classroom

> with a more positive, global view of people in general.

These teachers of color are in accord that their presence in the classroom has a dynamic, enlightening effect on students' perceptions of the broader world. In fact, Ramanathan reports that this desired effect has actually born fruit for Asian-American teachers in her study who felt that their students seek them out as sources "of information about Asia" (2000, p. 9). However, there exists a "critical shortage of teachers of color in American schools" (Gordon, 2002, 3; Burant, Quiocho, & Rios, 2002). Dee echoes that sentiment and states further that, "with the pattern of projected retirements and the expected relative growth of minority enrollments, this ostensibly problematic situation is expected to worsen" (2004, p. 196). Ramanathan suggests offering "higher pay, grants and loans …, [and] school-system sponsored outreach programs" to draw people from underrepresented groups into the field of education (2000, p. 4). However, despite the importance of adults' influence on the choice of becoming educators, Burant, Quiocho, and Rios relate that teachers of color "are understandably reluctant to promote a path that has been, all too frequently, painful and problematic" (2002, p. 12). In our nation's increasingly diverse classrooms, wherein "teachers with the same background and language as the students could provide more positive role models, create better communication between teachers and students, develop more relevant curricula, and improve student attitudes toward school,…the teacher population remains mainly White and female" (Becket, 1998, p. 196). Teachers of color who accept employment in diasporic settings are among the rarest of teachers in rural schools. It is critical to understand the challenges they face in settings far from their racial-ethnic communities of origin and the factors that succor their experience in those rural schools in order to seek, hire, and retain as many as are needed to reflect an appropriate balance in the ratio to students of color.

Challenges Faced in Diasporic Settings

In reporting participants' responses to the three derivative questions named in the introduction, the researchers' attention turned to the challenges faced by these teachers of color. It is important to comment on an initial reluctance to offer information about challenges experienced. This reluctance among the participants to share information that might be critical to the study indicated fear of potential retribution, in case word got back to the small, rural communities of these teachers' employment where everybody knows everybody else.   Helena amplified this issue by expressing her discomfort with the "ongoing filming" of these group discussions, wondering how anonymity would be ensured on video. The researchers acknowledged the discomfort, stopped the video camera, and revisited the anonymity pledge in the consent-to-participate

form, which affirmed that participation in the study was voluntary and participants' decision to participate or not would in no way incur judgment. All information gathered would be kept completely secure by the researchers, and neither individual names nor specific locations would be used in a public manner. In addition, participants were at liberty to terminate their participation in the study and request that the information collected from them not be used at any time. The additional assurance, together with the developing trusting relationships among the participants and researchers, produced a level of ease that pervaded subsequent discussions.

Participants were asked to share the challenges they face as teachers in the settings in which they have chosen to work. Responses to these questions revealed a range of challenges. The researchers identified three broad themes— that of being held suspect, misperceptions, and invisibility-- that captured the diversity of the challenges related.

Suspect Qualifications

Educators of color have written on being held suspect in the classroom, on having their authority challenged because of their social group memberships (Rakow, 1991; Rhoades, 1991; Henry 1993-94, Weiler 1988; Castañeda, 2004; Nieto, 2003). Teachers of color value education themselves, yet they often "feel like they are 'less than' other teachers" (Burant, Quiocho, & Rios, 2002, p. 11). All six educators in this study identified incidences when either their academic or professional qualities were questioned. In telling these stories, the participants characterized the public as appearing to carry a general attitude that educators of color were poorly or inadequately prepared. Sabrina described being a long-term substitute teacher when a teacher with whom she had not spoken was "telling other teachers that I was not qualified."

Victor reported a pervasive stereotype about African Americans and sports. In Victor's words, there was a perception in college that, "if you are an African American, you must play sports; you can't be here for school." A majority of participants reported being viewed as suspect in content area, as well. Carolina reported being challenged by the stereotype that Hispanics should only teach Spanish. Many of her young students wondered how she could possibly "teach English instead of Spanish." In response to this attitude, Carolina found it necessary to prove that she was qualified enough to teach English. She said, "when I get started and let them know that this is my thing, this is what I do, and this is what I know and I know it very well, it then becomes my saving grace. I do have to prove myself just a little bit more than somebody else." Les was held suspect by both parents and children, but he was quick to add that he doesn't

> …worry about the kids because they are going to see me everyday, and they are going to know me. It is the parents that I

have to keep an eye on. I always send home a letter at the beginning of the year, with my syllabus on it, and I always explain my background, I went to a university, played sports, grew up in a small town, so they get the idea I am an educated person.

The challenge of being held suspect necessitated development of various coping strategies. Victor, for example, developed an attitude that "life is a game and knowing how to play the game is critical. Knowing who we can talk to, when to talk, what you can ask for and what you can't ask for is part of the game." He believed that the ability to "play the game" properly had enabled him to have largely positive professional experiences. Noted writers in the field of social justice education, including Bell, Washington, Weinstein, and Love (1997), Rakow (1991), Henry (1993-4), and Weiler (1988), have expounded on classroom challenges to the authority of teachers of color. Such challenges are reported to have "surfaced in the form of students doubting faculty's knowledge of the material, faculty's competence as instructors, and faculty's objectivity in presenting course material" (Castañeda, 2004, p. 152). Experiences related by the study's participants corroborate the vulnerability of teachers and preservice teachers to suspicions of professional inadequacy and the need for coping strategies in the wake of being held suspect by students, their parents, and/or colleagues.

Misperceptions

The challenge of "suspect" appeared to precede "misperception." For example, when educators were suspected of possessing inferior academic credentials, they also were frequently misperceived as unprepared professionally. Although participants were misperceived as possessing inferior academic and professional preparation, as incongruent as it appears a majority of the participants also reported having the reputation of being "too tough." Helena was frequently described as a "tough teacher" who prepares children for college education. Sabrina echoed this attribution, adding that she has "the reputation at the high school for being kind of tough. In fact, I hear my reputation, and I don't recognize myself." The "too tough" misperception manifested itself in a different manner for Joslyn. She was rather misperceived as "crazy." She said, "I think one kid gave me an off-handed compliment. She was talking to another student in class. One kid mentioned that I was crazy. The other one said she is really smart, she just acts crazy." It was not clear why students would equate smartness with craziness, but Joslyn was, however, aware that her area of instruction had "too much material to cover." She also had high expectations. It was interesting to note that Sabrina, an African-American educator with a great store of "knowledge and life experiences" was labeled a "freak." It is possible that, because these educators did not

fit the existing misperceptions, children had no choice but to label these qualified educators of color as "crazy and freaks." Meanwhile, Helena also reported being labeled "tough," but she was quick to add that she had high expectations for her students and thus made the effort to be very knowledgeable.   Helena believes that "being knowledgeable in your area gives you credibility no matter what color you are." It is probable, then, that the need to prove themselves has developed the necessary conditions to heighten the perceptions that educators of color are either "too tough, crazy or freaks." These misnomers notwithstanding, the consequent challenge of isolation or invisibility was an altogether real aspect of the participants' lives.

Invisibility

The challenge of invisibility was common both in the teacher credential programs and later in the teaching profession for this study's participants. For example, when Les transferred from an engineering program to education, the one thing he noticed was that, "based on my ethnicity, the Asian population went down in my classes. I was the only Asian student in my education courses." Joslyn, who had come from a multicultural atmosphere, had experienced "culture shock" at her predominantly European, rural university. She stated that her

> …fellow students in agriculture seemed to find it difficult to break through certain stereotypes they had about me. It was lonely, and I found I had to dig deep into reservoirs of myself to find strength and resilience because I did not have a social group as many of the other females did.

This sense of invisibility experienced in predominantly White, Eurocentric colleges by these participants is in accord with Su's remonstration that students of color "have fought to enter higher education and professional training, only to find that the place was not quite created for them" (1996, p. 123). Ramanathan adds that some Asian-American teachers feel the "need to adopt cultural White values and identities if they are to be successful and accepted in the school community" (2000, p. 11). Victor experienced similar isolation in college, which he alleviated by joining a student support service program. He described it as a "great program" that showed him "the ropes of the university." This, however, did not stop the isolation he experienced. As the only minority in his education classes, Victor "just kind of sat back and took it all in. Really, I didn't go out there and talk about being a Latino, or Hispanic being a great thing…It was: take it in, know who you are talking to, and kind of play the game." Sabrina experienced professional isolation in an all-White school that made her the "raisin in a sugar cookie." Les amplified her sense of isolation by crediting parents of his students for making it an issue that he was different. Lack of support from students, parents, and

administrators palpably increased the level of invisibility felt. Lack of student support was an issue for a majority of participants, the four females, which was increasingly exacerbated by administrators' decisions to side with students. Sabrina summed up this challenge thusly:

> I know that there are occasions when students will try to challenge something I do and the administration will basically side with the students. Unless I am so prepared and so documented and so absolutely over-the-top in what my response is, the students will get their way…I am the documentation queen.

In coping with the issue of isolation due to lack of support, Helena found it best to just "to let go" because

> …some kids will hate you the first day they walk into your class. As a teacher, there is nothing you can do about it. It is the student's problem. I learned to let go of that. That is the same attitude I take with parents. It is their problem. They are the ones that carry the baggage.

Far from entering a school system with the cachet experienced by White teachers in primarily White settings, or with the parity experienced in school systems primarily attended by students of color, teachers of color in diasporic contexts cope with suspicions, misperceptions, and the resultant invisibility and isolation from colleagues, administrators, parents, and students with whom they must interact. That this has a potentially destabilizing effect on the professional performance of these teachers is ameliorated, in part, by the sustaining factors that accrue from various directions, as discussed in the next section.

Sustaining Factors in Diasporic Settings

When queried about what keeps them teaching in culturally diasporic settings, the participants were eager to share and illuminate the following. As predominating factors that sustain them in these settings, they listed strong academic and professional experiences and a sense of efficacy, that is, the desire to make a positive difference. These factors were, interestingly, identical to those that initially motivated participants to enter the teaching profession.

Family support and favorable teaching departments, including both peers and administrators, were equally significant as sources of energy in building the capacity to overcome the particular challenges of teaching in rural, diasporic contexts.   Joslyn, an African-American female, credited her parents for countering outside pressure that "Blacks don't do this or that" by encouraging her to

> …do whatever I think I should do. If you want to go into teaching, and that is the star on which you have fixed your gaze, and…that is what you want, then you have

to take it upon yourself to actually make
the effort to achieve.

Speaking on the importance of departmental support, Les reported that that he had not been "discriminated against by faculty or principals. I have been fortunate not to have those experiences. I know it is out there. I have read stuff, but I have never felt it. Teachers accept me as a fellow teacher." Unlike Sabrina's isolating experience with an unsupportive administration, Helena extolled the facilitative effect of her department chair who "goes to the max. I mean, he fights for anything and everything…If I feel I have had a problem or feel I have been unjustly treated, I just go to him and, boy, he just cleans house."

Although professional themes played out in different ways for these educators, all of them identified the value of contributing culturally as a source of energy. Nieto labels racial-ethnic identity as "the motor that keeps teachers passionate about their work" (2003, p. 30). The desire to provide cultural authenticity that broadens children's horizons motivated all of the participants in this study. Carolina was gratified that she was able to bring "a different element; one that children would not get from a teacher [who] is not Hispanic." Joslyn's presence showed "younger children of color that it is possible to get into agricultural education." Sabrina concluded that it was the responsibility of "well-educated" and "articulate" professionals of color to provide "authentic" ideas about being a person of color. These educators professed pride in inspiring their students in ways that white educators could not. Helena wanted to teach issues of cultural differences because "if it weren't for me, where or who would teach them the language and the culture?" They emphasized the sense of satisfaction that came from awareness that they were fulfilling cultural and linguistic responsibilities, not only as role models to students of color in rural settings, but also to white students who would likely not otherwise be exposed to persons of color. Modeling, both in terms of ethnicity and as examples of responsible adulthood, assumed dynamic importance for our participants. Whereas white teachers can sidestep issues of heritage if they choose, teachers of color bring this visible, added set of responsibilities to their classes. When asked what "keeps us on this crazy treadmill," Nieto responds, "the kids who are watching" (2003, p. 70). She is speaking of the children in every classroom who are absorbing all manner of information from the role model at the head of the class. Sabrina is first to draw the connection between the cultural burden carried by teachers of color and the hugely daunting task that teaching would present if educators of color were not "well-educated, professional, and compassionate".

Professional Supports Needed to Succeed in Diasporic Contexts

By the end of the weekend discussion, the comments offered by the participants on issues that centered on what they needed in order to succeed in their profession in their rural, culturally isolating school districts reflected several themes. These included the need for support from colleagues, principals, and administrators; increased professional contact with other teachers of color in diasporic settings; "opportunities for professional development"; and a "positive school climate that affirms diversity" (Burant, Quiocho, & Rios, 2002, 11).

Support from Colleagues, Principals, and Administrators

Although raised far from her current teaching job in "a very traditional cultural environment" with authentic foods and music and a strong religious base, one participant, Carolina, had "been here for years, and I love it." She continued with a description quite unlike other participants on this subject. She described having a very supportive relationship with the school principal and felt securely supported and appreciated in her professional capacity by the principal and the administration. Sabrina, on the other hand, acknowledged feeling oppressed as a teacher in a county in which "education is not particularly important" and characterized her administration as "appalling." This view of administrations aligns with the more frequently reported treatment of teachers by administrators, who frequently talk down to them, fail to involve them in decision-making about educational directions, and discard teachers' responses when they do solicit their expertise (Nieto, 2003, p. 71). Also reported is unwillingness by administrators or staff either to discuss racial-ethnic issues or to accept anything other than "conformity to status quo" (Burant, Quiocho, & Rios, 2002, p. 11). These educators write, as well, of the challenges to conformity faced by teachers of color because their vision of teaching collides with traditional teaching. In consequence of their situation, Sabrina and her 11 departmental colleagues share a strong bond that extends to socializing together, which she feels "we probably would do even if our administration weren't so poor, but it is stronger because [of that]." Self-identified earlier as the "documentation queen," she explains that her administrative team "sides with a winner." After unfolding her documentation when called before the administration over an issue, she relates that

> …our principal will literally get up and sit
> by me. It infuriates me because no teacher
> should ever be in that position…But that is
> how it works, and that's what bothers me--
> because I have to spend so much of my
> time in those instances figuring out a way
> to slam-dunk whatever the issue is.

One means by which several participants countered an unsupportive administration was by being proactive. Sabrina suggested that it helps to have a student's mother or father "who will get in the face of an administrator. Then they try to make you happy. If you don't, if you have a parent [who] doesn't know how to go in with a bazooka, it's just ignored." Experience in the profession may diminish the

mystique of seeking assistance from those in higher authority. Helena recalled that years ago she

> …wouldn't have felt like going directly to the district administration saying "my principal doesn't want to listen to me, but you're going to." That door is now open, and my principal knows it…I don't feel intimidated walking through the door of the superintendent's office.

The rewards of professional recognition may thus be tied to the accessibility and supportive stance of principals and district administrations, whose mode of responding to teachers of color is elemental to creating an inviting and sustaining atmosphere for these teachers in isolating contexts.

Contact with Teachers of Color in Diasporic Settings

Nieto describes teaching as "first and foremost about relationships with students and colleagues" (2003, p. 122). She proposes that "*creating communities of learning among teachers is necessary if they are to remain connected to their profession, their students, and one another*" (p. 124, author's emphasis). A well-documented outcome of our focus-group conversations was an awareness that the opportunity of participating in this project illuminated a deficiency in the professional lives of these teacher-participants. Our participants cited this weekend group discussion as one of many types of gatherings that infuse teachers with ideas, motivation, and support, which they identified as a special need for them as teachers of color in rural settings. For Sabrina, the project allowed her to meet another educator of whom she said, "It was the first time I'd heard of anyone who had researched anything even close to what mine was, and she was even in the state. … So, it was like finding a needle in a haystack." Sabrina thus reinforces the vital need expressed by Nieto for teachers in diasporic settings: that is, the importance of sharing information with others in similar settings about "teaching and learning in diverse classrooms" (Castañeda, 2004, p. 132). Victor related that this gathering helped slake his "thirst for knowledge. When I left college, I was a little phobic because I had to go to work and not just learn." Carolina revealed a strong interest in pursuing further study in socio-linguistics. She's "passionate" about it but had set her need aside until this weekend discussion, at the end of which she "felt very stimulated with the idea of going back to school and delving into this the way I've always told myself I would."

Les told of accumulating, through these conversations, "more things we could do in our classes as far as multicultural" education is concerned. The researchers extrapolate this evidence to mean that opportunities for professional enlightenment—and this research project is one of many configurations such opportunities can take—may help fill the needs that advance the teaching practices of teachers of color. With the needs met through collegial principals and administrators and wider contact with other teachers of color, those teachers who are perhaps additionally burdened by cultural isolation in rural, diasporic contexts would reap personal and professional benefits that cannot help but infuse their teaching with enhanced energy and commitment. Benefit to their students incontrovertibly follows.

Conclusion

This study probes the meaning of teaching in rural, historically monocultural communities as it is experienced by teachers of color. The study's participants are teachers of color in the rural state of Wyoming. They acknowledge entering teaching as a career for many of the same reasons that draw educators from our nation's general population. That is, they have experienced the support and encouragement of family and other adults, they recognize a "natural teaching ability" in themselves, and they bring the desire to impact the lives of others. However, these participants bring three additional elements unique to the equation for teachers of color: the opportunity of being a role model primarily for students of color, the potential to challenge racial-ethnic stereotypes and replace them with acceptance as professional individuals, and the training and desire to bring a multicultural perspective to the schooling enterprise.

As the participants of this study have articulated, the pioneering effort to bring elements salient to teachers of color to positions in diasporic contexts places those teachers upwind of specific, inevitable challenges. The invisibility and isolation expressed by the participants reflect removal from their racial-ethnic communities of origin. At the same time, the cultural of rurality in their diasporic schools and communities defines an attitude extruded through generations of historically monocultural community members who want their single-view beliefs and values advanced in schooling their youngsters. In effect, such teachers of color find themselves lacking their cultural supports while simultaneously facing the prevailing "this is the way it has been and should be" ideology. Participants also spoke of being held suspect and misperceived variously by colleagues, administrators, students, and parents in their rural schools. They suggest that such behavior arises within an environment lacking opportunities for sustained contact with people of color. Highly significant were these attributions in terms of public policies. For example, the misperception that affirmative action and race-based support programs have led to underqualified people of color being admitted to universities and hired in school districts plays itself out in palpable behavior, as described by the participants.

Sustaining features promoted by the participants included strong academic and professional experiences and the impetus to make a difference in the lives of students. Family support and favorable teaching departments and

administrations, where found, girded classroom success and perseverance. Greatly prized were the participants' abilities as role models to bring cultural authenticity, inspiration, and multiplicity of perspective to all students in ways that White teachers could not.

Participants targeted two major areas of need for teachers of color in diasporic settings. The first was support from colleagues, principals, and administrators. These teachers of color felt that other challenges paled compared to lack of this support. They clearly see the value that they bring to the teaching profession and implicitly call on education professionals to value their assets, as well. They can thrive under the leadership of administrators who understand their challenges and work with them to address their concerns. The second major area of need involved sustained contact with other teachers of color in diasporic contexts. Participants marveled at the invigorating process of the weekend discussions for this study and resolved to further the energy it tapped by requesting more opportunities to meet with others in their professional situation. In sum, the profound challenges faced by educators of color can only be addressed in the context of strong social support, supportive leadership, and a commitment to affirm diversity in all aspects of schooling, all heightened needs for teachers of color in diasporic settings.

In pursuing this study, the researchers understood that these reports would come from few teachers of color and that their diasporic settings were rural, not only in the sense of relatively small numbers, but also in the sense of historically monocultural communities. The experiences of these few teachers of color cannot be extrapolated into generalizations. Yet, their experiences present valid and edifying insights into how they make meaning of their situations and what they need in order to succeed in highly challenging circumstances. Implications for future study include the following: looking more deeply into the experiences of teachers of color in other monocultural contexts, such as those identified as rural or as suburban; engendering statewide initiatives in states with large numbers of rural communities that might educate administrators about attracting and retaining teachers of color and providing a networking forum for them; and investigating ways to promote a "proactive" administration wherein open discussion of racial-ethnic issues is welcomed and attitudes are changed to reflect the horizon-broadening cultural capital that teachers of color bring to diasporic contexts.

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