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Reflecting on Modern Public-School Teacher Experience: An Overview of Select Challenges Facing the Educator Workforce with an Emphasis on Teachers of Color

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Reflecting on Modern Public-School Teacher Experience: An Overview of Select Challenges Facing the Educator Workforce with an Emphasis on Teachers of Color

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New demographic research shows that the school-aged population in the U.S. is rapidly diversifying in terms of student racial and ethnic identity. However, as the educator workforce also diversifies, teachers of color are less likely than White teachers to remain in the profession and persist at their current school. This backgrounder reviews a growing body of research outlining the multiple social and academic benefits associated with increasing diversity in the educator workforce. In addition, research on school working conditions, with a specific focus on accountability reforms and practices, and its impact on the retention of teachers of color is discussed. The backgrounder concludes by framing additional areas of research related to the current experiences of teachers and the workforce.

Decades of research indicates that teachers are the single most important factor determining student learning (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sander, 2007; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Gershenson, 2015; Greenwald, Hedges, & Laine, 1996; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Rockoff, 2004). There is evidence that the benefits of a good teacher can follow a student well into adulthood (Chetty, Friedman, & Rockoff, 2014; Hanushek, 2011). While most of this research uses test scores and achievement as measures of teacher quality, a growing body of literature outlines the lasting social and emotional benefits that teachers provide students well into their post-secondary endeavors and career trajectories (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Pedersen, Faucher, & Eaton, 1978; Pianta, 2015).

In terms of role-modeling, teachers are often the first community leaders that students encounter. Paulu and Winters (1998) note teachers' multiple roles: providing front-line knowledge of classroom issues and the culture of schools while also serving as the fulcrum by which parents and community members engage with a school. Historically, teachers have occupied important moral and political roles in society (Goldstein, 2014). Teachers feature centrally in U.S. schools, driving students' long term educational goals within the pursuit of democratic equality. They facilitate environments leading to academic and social success for students and prepare children to occupy constructive roles in a democratic society (Labaree, 1997).

With this in mind, it is important to revisit what we know about the experiences of current teachers, and outline the challenges they face while continuing to strive towards academic, social, and democratic goals for students. This backgrounder examines several important challenges facing modern teachers, with a specific focus on the experiences of teachers of color¹ (TOC). Two areas of teacher experience will be explored in depth: **identity** and **working conditions** as influenced by testing and accountability.

Three pieces of original work will follow this introduction to current teacher experiences. Each piece will provide a more in-depth investigation of the modern American teacher. The first piece (Maddox) will highlight one high school teacher's experience within a district where

policies influencing student socioeconomic diversity are being explored. The second work (Kemper) is conceptual, integrating research on teacher turnover, working conditions, and leadership, while bringing attention to new models of schools where teachers are given more formal decision-making power. The third paper (Williamson) will present findings from original research and provide analyses of the ways in which secondary English teachers adapt their instruction in an atmosphere of high-stakes state accountability policies.

The remaining sections of this backgrounder are organized into two sections. First, I will explore descriptive data that gives the research community and policy makers a better picture of the demographic make-up of the current educator workforce. This initial section will outline why a focus on the experiences of teachers of color (TOC) is so important to current and future generations of students. Working conditions are often cited within research exploring reasons why TOC leave schools (e.g., Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010). Therefore, I will discuss research on working conditions in schools, with an emphasis on the ways accountability policies influence the experiences of TOC. I will conclude with a discussion of how demographic identity and teachers' working conditions interact and what this means as modern teachers prepare future generations of students.

Demographic Shifts in Teacher Identity

Today's teachers have been tasked with the challenge of delivering instruction to meet the needs of learners who are more diverse than ever in terms of cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic, and class backgrounds. This challenge is prevalent throughout the history of American education, yet there is reason to believe that teachers now more than ever must enter the classroom prepared to share knowledge and develop critical thinking with a culturally responsive approach (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Such an approach advocates for teachers to view the individual and collective strengths and assets of their students. However, an educator workforce that is racially and ethnically homogenous will likely struggle to meet the educational needs of a diverse student population. Without varying perspectives and viewpoints, instructional and social supports for students will fall short. This is especially true considering the evidence that students of color should be supported by culturally relevant pedagogy, student advocacy, mentoring, and cultural brokering (Villegas & Davis, 2008). Despite the challenge in providing rich educational environments, there is reason to be optimistic about the future of our teachers and the students they serve. Part of that optimism is reflected in new data indicating an increase in educator diversity.

For the past several decades, the educator workforce has been slowly diversifying (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017). New demographic data indicate that both students of color and White students will have more opportunities to engage with TOC. This new descriptive evidence pairs well with research showing that both students of color and their White classmates benefit when learning from teachers of color (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015). In the following paragraphs, I will explore the current racial and ethnic make-up of teachers and discuss implications of a diverse workforce as it relates to teacher experience.

Race and Ethnicity

To understand the experiences of teachers it is important to first understand the characteristics of the current educator workforce. As shown in Table 1, an analysis of federally

collected demographic data indicate that roughly 17 percent of the educators in the workforce are teachers of color, while around 44 percent of the student population are students of color. In the past few years, researchers have called attention to this data in order to explore new policies addressing the racial and ethnic mismatch often seen in classrooms across the country (Ingersoll, 2015; Sutchter, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Despite this racial/ethnic gap, a new analysis by Ingersoll and Merill (2017), using nationally representative data shows that as a group, the number of TOC has more than doubled over the span of approximately 25 years while the number of White teachers is steadily declining (see Figure 1). Yet, as the sheer number and proportion of TOC in the workforce slowly grows, the student population remains starkly more diverse by comparison.

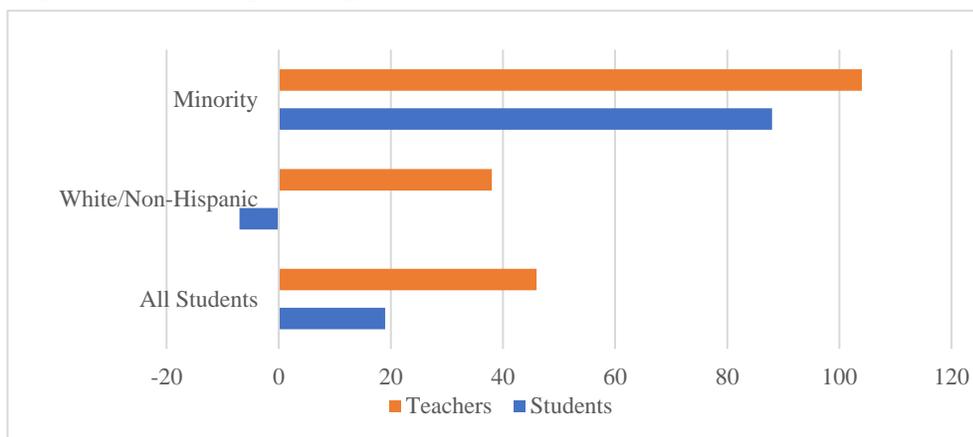
Table 1

Trends in the Nation’s Population, K-12 Student Enrollment and the K-12 Educator Work Force, by Race and Ethnicity, 1987-2012

	1987-88 School Year	1990-91 School Year	1993-94 School Year	1999-00 School Year	2003-04 School Year	2007-08 School Year	2011-12 School Year	% Increase, 1987-88 to 2011-12
Percent Minority Population U.S.	23.1	24.5	25.6	28.1	32.1	34.4	37	
Total Student Enrollment	45,220,953	44,777,577	46,592,207	50,629,075	52,375,110	53,644,872	53,988,330	19
Number White, non-Hispanic Students	31,641,098	31,213,142	31,895,394	32,700,441	32,419,640	31,864,127	30,164,827	-5
Number Minority Students	12,335,372	13,564,435	14,696,813	17,928,634	19,955,470	21,780,745	23,825,612	93
Percent Minority Students	27.3	30.3	31.5	35.4	38.1	40.6	44.1	
Total Teaching Force	2,630,335	2,915,774	2,939,659	3,451,316	3,717,998	3,894,065	3,850,058	46
Number White, non-Hispanic Teachers	2,303,094	2,542,720	2,564,416	2,993,591	3,113,249	3,252,234	3,183,837	38
Number Minority Teachers	327,241	373,054	375,243	517,725	604,749	641,830	666,221	104
Percent Minority Teachers	12.4	12.8	12.8	15.0	16.3	16.5	17.3	

Note: This figure is based on analyses of data from two cycles of the Schools and Staffing Survey—1987–88 and 2011–12. SOURCE: Ingersoll, R. “The State of Teacher Diversity in American Education: What Do the National Data Tell Us about Minority Teacher Shortages?” Washington, DC: Albert Shanker Institute, September 2015.

Figure 1. Percentage change in students and teachers, by race/ethnicity, 1987-88 to 2011-12.



Note: This figure is based on analyses of data from two cycles of the Schools and Staffing Survey—1987–88 and 2011–12. SOURCE: Ingersoll, R., and L. Merill. “A Quarter Century of Changes in the Elementary and Secondary Teaching Force: From 1987 to 2012.” National Center for Educational Statistics, April 11, 2017. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=201709>

To summarize, there are signs that more TOC are entering the workforce, which is important considering the racial and ethnic diversity evident in the K-12 school aged population. Unfortunately, the diversification of the workforce is slow in comparison to the change in student demographics. New research finding high rates of turnover and attrition for TOC partially explains the persistent gap in teacher/student diversity and indicates the need for policies improving TOC retention rates (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017). In the section that follows, I outline recent research suggesting that TOC are more effective at producing student achievement outcomes for students of color and White students. Additionally, I discuss key non-academic benefits to increasing the proportion of TOC in the workforce. This research is important to establishing a rationale for improving the poor working conditions experienced by TOC, often cited as the reason for their departure from the profession.

Outcomes Associated with Teacher Diversity

As some policy makers and researchers press for a more diverse educator workforce, others raise questions about practicality (i.e., how this change will occur?) and impact (i.e., what are the implications for teachers and students?). First, it is important to note what existing research states about the benefits TOC contribute to all students. Therefore, in this section I will review research discussing TOC and their impact on social and academic outcomes, student expectations, and the broader school community.

Social Outcomes

A report released last year by the U.S. Department of Education (2016) draws on research by Villegas and Irvine (2010) to suggest that, “compared with their peers, teachers of color are more likely to have higher expectations of students of color, confront issues of racism, and develop more trusting relationships with all students, particularly those with whom they share a cultural background,” (p. 2). The authors make a case for increasing the numbers of TOC based on their ability to add value to current social supports at the campuses where they teach.

Further, a recent study by Cherng and Halpin (2016) included analysis of student perceptions of roughly 3,000 teachers across 317 schools and six districts. They found that all student groups had more positive perceptions of TOC, including White and Asian American students. Cherng and Halpin (2016) also noted that TOC in their sample could “translate their experiences and identities to form rapports with students that do not share the same race or ethnicity” (p. 10). This research highlights broader claims which have consistently positioned teachers as advocates, role-models, and mentors for students. The authors’ findings indicate the potential of TOC to confirm these claims and provide social support benefits for students regardless of their racial and ethnic identity.

Academic Outcomes

Beyond higher expectations, student advocacy, and positive perceptions, research also shows that TOC contribute to a range of academic outcomes for all students including improved test scores, graduation rates, and post-secondary degree attainment (Dee, 2004; Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Klopfenstein, 2005). This body of research indicates that these academic gains hold for White students as well as students of color. The results of these studies support the call

for increased efforts to recruit teachers of color and the potential that this effort has to generate important achievement gains for all students. However, as Dee (2004) noted over a decade ago, there remains a need to better understand the mechanisms by which TOC influence student achievement. For example, it is important to grasp how TOC can impact interactions within the school community and how this could potentially strengthen student academic gains. This topic will be discussed in the following section.

Fostering a School/Community Connection

Aside from common academic measures of teacher effectiveness such as test scores and graduation rates, there is evidence that a more diverse educator workforce can improve relationships between schools and the communities they serve. Parent interaction with schools is often initiated and facilitated by the teachers within a school community. And there is an established body of research indicating that community and parent involvement leads to improved achievement outcomes for students, such as test scores and graduation rates (Hill et al., 2004; Jeynes, 2005; Marschall, 2006). This literature also highlights the social and behavioral growth for students stemming from parent involvement (Brody, Flor, & Gibson, 1999).

More recent research underlines the continued importance of a parent's role in student success and the ways that teachers support parent efforts to become more involved (Epstein, 2010; Ingram, Wolfe, & Lieberman, 2007). However, there are existing institutional barriers to involvement for parents of color such as monolingual community events, untranslated school information, and the scheduling of school organizational meetings during hours of the day that are not accommodating for working parents (Cooper, 2009; Zarate, 2007). In their book entitled *Chang(ed) Agents*, Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) point out that TOC may serve as an important bridge to cultural understandings between home and school. Specifically, racially and ethnically diverse teachers hold a range of skillsets and various forms of capital to facilitate relationships with students' families and communities.

Therefore, aside from the achievement outcomes mentioned, research also outlines that a diverse workforce can increase levels of school and community involvement. These findings provide a reason to review past research investigating increased rates of departure from the profession for TOC. While this section outlined positive outcomes associated with increased teacher diversity, the next section will review how working conditions influence teacher experience and their decisions whether or not to persist within the workforce.

Working Conditions

School working conditions play a central role in determining whether teachers decide to leave a school. This is particularly true for TOC. Ingersoll and Merrill (2017) find that despite increased recruitment into the profession, teachers of color leave the field at higher rates than White teachers. Part of this increased turnover is related to *where* teachers teach. Researchers find that TOC work in schools where poverty, student trauma, teacher turnover, principal turnover, and less funding are more frequent. Simply put, these poor working conditions exist in schools where TOC are more likely find jobs (Ingersoll, 2015; Ingersoll & May, 2011; Sutchter et al., 2016). And amongst the many other factors mentioned that can influence the working conditions of TOC, accountability policies arguably have the widest reach due to federal mandates for testing in both elementary and secondary schools. Therefore, I next review how

TOC, and indeed all teachers, experience school working conditions in an era characterized by increased accountability.

Accountability and Working Conditions

As mentioned, poor working conditions are often cited as reasons why all teachers leave schools, not just TOC. However, the intersection of teacher identity and school working conditions are important indicators of why TOC exit the profession at higher rates. In general, a higher proportion of TOC enter the workforce to support historically marginalized communities which are often similar to the ones they grew up in (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). Unfortunately, the desire that TOC have to contribute to these communities can run directly counter to policies promoting testing and non-culturally inclusive curricula. This, in turn, can ultimately influence TOC experiences and decisions to leave a school.

In their investigation of 22 early-career TOC, Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) found that the decision to leave a school is complex. Their qualitative analysis indicated that TOC desired to serve a community similar to the one where they grew up. However, this desire was often drowned out by an overemphasis on accountability and testing at the state and district level. The authors drew from Bateson (1972) and the notion of a “double-bind,” to demonstrate how TOC in their study were caught between altruistic motivations for teaching and the structural inequities often found in the context of schools and school systems:

The paradox that confronted the new teachers of color who participated in our study was rooted in the *systemic contradiction* of the transformational versus reproductive functions of schooling in the United States. The personal and professional commitments of the teachers to improve educational opportunities for students from low-income and culturally/linguistically non-dominant communities reflects the transformational view of schooling that was supported systemically by the teachers’ families and cultural communities and by the education profession. The challenges that teachers faced in attempting to act on their commitments reflect the reproductive purpose of schooling as embedded in the “subtractive” structures of schools and reinforced by schools’ responses to state and federal accountability policies. (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011, p. 7)

Overall, teachers in the study expressed their resistance to the notion of becoming one part of a systemic reproduction of inequality (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Valenzuela, 2010). This has implications for working conditions because of the fact that TOC, as compared to White teachers, are more likely to start their careers in an environment where a focus on testing and accountability is at the forefront of administrator decisions and teacher actions.

Stigma and Loss of Autonomy

Since the passage of the federal *No Child Left Behind* act (NCLB), punitive approaches to school improvement policy have led to the creation of various failing labels for schools and the stigmatization of the students and teachers in those schools. This stigmatization can contribute to a high-stakes and high-anxiety environment and create poor working conditions for TOC who are more likely to teach in such contexts.

Beyond the impact of negative stigmas, the state- and district-level pressure to “turnaround” a failing school trickles down into classrooms and can make it more difficult for TOC to add creativity and originality to their instruction. In such contexts, they are also less

likely to draw on culturally-responsive pedagogy, and more likely to feel the need to “teach to the test.” In fact, for all teachers, the professional independence that was the norm in the past is now increasingly compromised by accountability pressures. This trend results in a loss of autonomy which is one of the leading factors cited by teachers to explain why they eventually leave a school or exit the profession (Ingersoll, 2001).

Research confirms that a loss of autonomy due to emphasis on accountability is associated with poor working conditions (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speigman, 2004; Clotfelter, Ladd, Vigdor, & Diaz, 2004; Hanushek & Raymond, 2004). In sum, these working conditions are affected by an era increasingly focused on accountability measures. This decline directly impacts teacher experience and is more pronounced for teachers of color. In an effort to avoid poor working conditions and teacher dissatisfaction, policies and practices that minimize the loss of teacher autonomy and teacher turnover, while improving teacher working conditions, should be considered.

Conclusion

This backgrounder sought to address experiences of current teachers, with an emphasis on teachers of color. The demographics of the K-12 student population highlight a concerning racial and ethnic mismatch between teachers and students. New analysis of this demographic shift in the workforce is pertinent as research points to the strong academic and social student benefits of maintaining a racially and ethnically diverse workforce. As new policies aim to strengthen the recruitment and retention of TOC, it is important to consider evidence of their current experiences in the workforce. To that end, the discussion here sought to emphasize the benefits of diverse teachers but also the detriment that a strict accountability focus throughout U.S. schools can have on teacher working conditions.

In what follows, three additional authors will expand on many of the topics that were briefly explored here. These articles significantly add to the discussion, emphasizing three additional areas of research important to understanding the nuances of teacher experience. The first author, Will Maddox, a former high school teacher, explores how racial and socioeconomic diversity intersect with teacher experience in one large urban Texas school district. The second author, Sara Kemper, is a doctoral candidate at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities. Her work hones in on how a new movement towards teacher leadership has the potential to influence working conditions and retention. Moving from broader levels of analysis to classroom practices and policies, the final piece will share and reflect on original data collected in the field. This research, conducted by Thea Williamson, a doctoral candidate at The University of Texas at Austin, documents the ways in which high school English teachers respond to state and district accountability pressures. Each of these contributions adds to the overall picture of current teacher experience and demonstrates the complexity of the profession. It is the goal of this issue to generate discussion around existing research hopefully leading to new ideas that can improve the experiences of all current and future elementary and secondary educators.

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Suggested Readings

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¹ In this backgrounder, the terms teachers/students of color and minority teachers/students refers to any non-White teachers/students.