

Supporting New Teachers of Color and Cultural Diversity

Betty Achinstein, Rodney T. Ogawa, Lisa Johnson, Casia Freitas
New Teacher Center, University of California, Santa Cruz

Educators and policy makers are calling for increasing the racial and cultural diversity of the teacher workforce, given the widening cultural gap between students and teachers (see Figure 1), and the widening achievement gap between students of color and White students. Some research suggests teachers of color can address the needs of students of color through culturally relevant practices (Quiocho & Rios, 2000). However, recent studies reveal teachers of color suffer greater job dissatisfaction and higher turnover than White teachers (Ingersoll & Connor, 2008; Marvel et al., 2007). Furthermore, cultural practices of teachers of color, if valued in our schools, need to be developed rather than assumed (Sheets, 2000). Given these circumstances, educators are faced with the following questions:

- What factors impact retention and attrition of new teachers of color?
- What factors support new teachers of color to develop and implement practices that address the needs of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds?

These questions are addressed by a team of researchers at the New Teacher Center, UCSC in a study that followed 21 teachers of color over five years, from preparation through four years of teaching in high-need California schools serving low-income and high-minority student populations.

FIGURE 1. TEACHER-STUDENT CULTURAL GAP

	Students of Color	Teachers of Color
Nationally	40% (projected 50% by 2025)	17%
California	65%	25%

Sources: National Center for Education Statistics, 2004; California Department of Education, 2006

The Study

The study involved 21 new teachers including Latino/a, African American, Asian, and mixed-race secondary teachers in multiple subject areas. Participants were selected from one of two well-regarded teacher preservice programs that have a commitment to recruiting teachers of color, placing them in urban diverse settings, and providing them with formal classes on diversity and culturally relevant and socially just teaching. The study asked the following questions: 1) What are the career paths and retention patterns of new teachers of color? 2) What supports and challenges do they experience in learning to teach in urban, high-need schools? and 3) What factors shape their practices in support of culturally diverse student populations? Researchers interviewed and surveyed teachers, administrators, and students; observed classroom practice; and documented school contexts.

The term “people of color” describes groups such as African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos, emerged from the communities themselves, and “implies important connections among the groups and underlines some common experiences” (Nieto, 2000, p. 30). However, the existence of connections does not equate to a uniform experience. Thus, the intention of this work is not to treat distinct groups as homogeneous. Furthermore, even within subgroups a single label encompasses considerable variety and fails to capture differences of class, national origin, immigration status, gender, age, language, and the like.

Culturally relevant teaching is defined as follows: connecting content to student cultures and differentiating instruction for diverse learners, involving students in collaborative construction of knowledge and making the classroom environment inclusive of all students, promoting high expectations and student achievement, and fostering a social justice perspective. This study does not suggest that White teachers cannot be effective teachers of students of color or adopt culturally relevant practices, teachers of color cannot teach effectively outside of their own ethnic/racial group, all teachers of color are effective with students of color, or teachers of color will easily be able to access their cultural resources in practice with students of color.

As findings of this study reveal, in order to retain new teachers of color and tap their cultural resources that support diverse students, schools need to encourage the development of teachers of color who sustain their commitments to culturally relevant teaching.

The Case of Carmen and Alejandra

Subtractive vs. Supportive Socialization into the Profession

Carmen, a first-generation Mexican American, explained why she became a teacher: “There’s such a need for Chicana educators, and there’s not many of us... I really wanted to become a teacher to promote that philosophy of social justice.” The school in which she chose to teach lacked a professional culture, support for new teachers, connections to the parent community, high expectations for students of color, and support for culturally relevant teaching. Carmen felt that the school did not create conditions that accessed her or her students’ cultural knowledge or life experiences. Carmen described what happened to her professional vision:

I’ve lost my vision by being at this school. I need to find another school. I’ve lost my direction... The socially just and culturally relevant teaching we talked about in preservice—I don’t even know what that is anymore. That’s not talked about at all. We go to teach. We do not connect to students. It’s growing on me, it’s suffocating. I want to leave... I have to reevaluate why I wanted to become a teacher. I’m there to help the students. I have to go back to [my beliefs]. I forgot my own intent. [Two] years at this school and I’ve become a teacher with no guidance.

Alejandra is also a first-generation Mexican-American teacher inspired to teach in order to empower students of color to change society. Alejandra’s school, in contrast to Carmen’s, built a professional culture, strongly supported new teachers, fostered connections to the parent community, held high expectations for students of color, and had a school mission and norms committed to culturally relevant practices. She explained, “*This is a focus of the school. We try to make things culturally relevant to the kids that we serve... It’s embedded in everything we do, the way we run the school, the way we talk about students.*” The school connected its curriculum to the cultural backgrounds of its students. “They don’t have to abandon their culture to get an education.” This support for cultural practices was reflected in the professional norms for teachers in what Alejandra described as “a culture of talking about race/ethnicity with our staff.”

As Carmen’s story demonstrates, new teachers of color may not be supported in ways that acknowledge, value, and develop their cultural practices. Thus, they experience a form of “subtractive socialization,”¹ where becoming a professional can mean leaving one’s cultural assets at the schoolhouse door. Subtractive socialization may inhibit teachers of color by constricting their roles and access to learning, and their ability to enact cultural practices that may have drawn them into the profession. Alternatively, supportive socialization of new teachers of color, as Alejandra experienced, affirms teachers’ and students’ cultural resources.

¹ This builds on Valenzuela’s (1999) term *subtractive schooling (vs. additive)*, which she identifies for Mexican-descent youth who experience schools that dismiss students’ cultural resources and promote assimilationist approaches that undermine students’ culture.

Findings

Retention of Teachers of Color

Nationally, teachers of color are underrepresented in the profession and experience high turnover (those who move schools or leave the profession) with rates of 19.4%, compared to 16.4% for Whites over the school year 2004–2005 (Ingersoll & Connor, 2008; Marvel et al., 2007). Ingersoll and Connor also reported that over 100,000 teachers of color newly entered the school year 2003–2004; by school-year end, a similar percentage moved from or left their schools.

Teachers of color are more likely than White teachers to work in high-need urban schools that serve high proportions of students from low-income and racially and culturally non-dominant communities. While they work under conditions that increase teacher turnover rates, they are more likely than White teachers to remain in these schools (Connor, 2008; Hanushek et al., 2004; Kirby et al., 1999; Scafidi et al., 2007). The new teachers of color in the NTC study had lower rates of attrition after four years (17% left teaching) than national projections of attrition rates after four years for the general new teacher population including Whites (36%), based on Ingersoll & Connor (2008).

Almost 30% of the teachers in the study moved to different high-need schools with high proportions of low-income and minority students within their first four years (whereas White teachers tend to move to schools with lower proportions of low-income and minority students). The predominant reason the new teachers of color reported for moving schools or leaving the profession related to unsupportive organizational contexts, including lack of support from administrators or colleagues. This aligns with Ingersoll & Connor’s national analyses which show that retention rates of teachers of color are negatively affected by low levels of the following: administrative support, teacher classroom autonomy, and faculty influence in decision making.

Organizational Contexts

Organizational factors also matter for tapping the cultural resources of new teachers of color. Teachers in our study described how a school’s professional culture, support for cultural relevance, parent relations, and responses to accountability demands shaped their experiences and influenced their capacity to teach in culturally relevant and socially just ways (see Figure 2).

In many cases, schools inhibited the very cultural practices that inspired the new teachers to enter the

FIGURE 2. SPECTRUM OF ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS TO DEVELOP CULTURAL RESOURCES OF NEW TEACHERS OF COLOR

	Less Supportive Contexts ←	→ More Supportive Contexts
Professional Cultures	Top down control over decision making; low teacher control over curriculum and pedagogy; culture of isolation, low collaboration and little professional support for new teachers	Systems for and enactment of shared decision making, teacher voice in curriculum and pedagogy; systems, norms and structures for and enactment of collaborative professional culture, and extensive new teacher support
Culturally Relevant Practices	School orientation that does not advance culturally relevant teaching; school culture ignores issues of race/culture of teachers, and does not focus on or meet the needs of students of color; inequities remain unaddressed; no specific supports for teachers of color	School orientation, practices, and enactment that affirm culturally relevant teaching; schoolwide engagement with issues of race/culture of teachers and students; equitable climate; professional development related to culture; cultural events; and policies promoting recruitment and support teachers of color
Community Relations	Low levels of connection between school and parent communities; barriers to relationship building with community	School norms, structures, and practices that bridge to parent communities; school accesses community resources/knowledge for student and professional learning
Accountability Responses	School responses to district/state standards, curriculum, instruction, pacing, testing, and accountability limit teachers’ capacity to meet the needs of diverse learners	School responses to accountability allow for teacher decision making to meet the needs of diverse learners while holding high expectations for all students

profession and to teach in high-need schools serving culturally and linguistically diverse youth. In these schools, teachers felt constrained by instructional policies that limited them from connecting with students' lives, by the lack of a professional community with which to dialogue about race/equity, and by a lack of connection with the broader community. Alternatively, teachers in supportive schools felt empowered to enact their cultural principles by the very norms, structures, and practices of their school, colleagues, leadership, and community (See Achinstein & Ogawa, 2008 for further discussion).

Although all of the teachers were committed to and prepared for culturally relevant teaching through preservice programs, they varied in the extent to which they were able to engage in this instructional approach. Among the 17 teachers active in the study in their second year of teaching, 77% described challenges in enacting culturally relevant teaching while only 6% (1 teacher) reported receiving professional support focused on the needs of students of color. In the second year, 53% reported little-to-no professional support for connecting their teaching of content to students' cultures, and no teachers reported support focused on meeting the needs of new teachers of color. Four critical organizational contexts mattered in accessing cultural resources of new teachers of color, discussed below.

Professional Cultures. Some of new teachers of color in the study described more professionally oriented cultures with supportive administrators who shared a vision of cultural relevance and social justice. In such cultures teachers were involved in shared decision making, exerted curriculum control, were involved in extensive professional collaboration, and received quality new teacher mentoring and induction support in line with their commitments.

Teacher collaboration was embedded in structures and norms of such schools. Teachers were provided time to discuss teaching and learning as grade-level teams, departments, and school-wide groups. In regards to curriculum control, teachers made decisions about what and how to teach, while working closely with their grade-level teams. One teacher explained: "We have liberty with the curriculum. We look at culturally relevant texts and ones that also give access to the culture of power."

These schools tended to provide substantial support to new teachers. For example, one teacher met weekly with her department for 90 minutes and enjoyed interacting with like-minded colleagues. She received high levels of targeted new-teacher support, including intensive mentoring for two years, meetings every two weeks to plan lessons and get feedback on teaching, professional development from new-teacher workshops, support to attend multiple conferences, and the support of her department chair to meet the needs of diverse youth.

In contrast, some teachers portrayed "a top down system," focused on compliance, where teachers had very little input in decision making, particularly about what and how to teach. In these schools, new teachers experienced low levels of community and little-to-no targeted support. Many described feeling physically and emotionally isolated from colleagues.

While the state mandated a formal mentoring and induction program, many of these teachers did not receive mentoring due to budget cuts or bureaucratic interference. For example, one teacher explained that he did not have a mentor. While he collaborated some with his department team, he characterized it as "checking in" on their alignment with the pacing plan. Another teacher noted philosophical divisions within the department about how to teach and a lack of connection to other departments, which made her feel "pretty isolated." In that teacher's second year, the district did not provide funding for a mentor.

Culturally Relevant Practices. Some participants described their schools as affirming cultural diversity, connecting to students' and teachers' cultures, and addressing inequity. One teacher said: "We make a strong point of teaching cultural relevance, tapping students' previous knowledge... We also want them to have access to the culture of power and resources to be successful." She continued, "My school supports socially-just teaching through the kinds of experiences it offers kids... It's never questioned, it's expected."

Teachers described school missions and norms of dialogue about culture, race, and equity. In one school, teachers succeeded in having the district's world history curriculum rewritten to include cultures that were more representative of the district's diverse student body. A teacher pointed to the cultural relevance of a Latino club, a Latina literature project, and school-endorsed activities such as a summer trip that exposed students to the history of the civil rights movement.

In other schools there was little dialogue about culture, minimal or no professional support for culturally relevant practices, and lowered expectations about students of color. Many teachers noted little support for them to access their own or their students' cultural resources. One teacher said, "I had to struggle through a few years of figuring out how to use my Mexican identity as a leverage in [teaching]... It would have been nice to have that conversation." Another teacher said he did not know to whom he could turn to learn more about addressing students' cultures in the curriculum. Many reported curricular constraints that limited cultural practices.

Many faced an unexpected challenge when students began questioning teachers about their cultural backgrounds, and sometimes challenged their authenticity/loyalty to students from similar cultural backgrounds (e.g., "Why are you acting or talking White?") (See Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008). These

teachers found little support in addressing these challenges. One teacher was told by an administrator not to talk about race even when students brought it up, saying it was not for math class. Still others described staffs as having low expectations or negative views of students of color. A teacher noted that affirming her students' cultures was inhibited by school structures, including a racially/linguistically tracked school where English learners received the poorest resources.

Community Relations. In schools where teachers identified positive community relations, some teachers noted that their schools connected with parents through parent groups, parent centers, parent liaisons, education activities, teacher-advisories with families, and connections with local churches. In one teacher's school, which had extended ties to parents through an advisory system, teachers formed a study group to examine how to connect better with the community, learn more about parent needs and learn from the parents.

Alternatively, in schools where teachers reported a lack of community ties, teachers noted a divide between their schools and parents. One teacher reported: "There's still this big gap between parents and our school and our teachers. It's seen as the school is just another system of authority, and it's separate from the community."

Others described a negative environment for parents with "closed doors," language barriers, and unaccommodating schedules. One novice noted both the absence of Spanish speakers on the school's staff, and the fact that school administrators scheduled parent meetings when parents were working and unable to attend. She organized parent meetings in the evening to address the needs of parents of English learner students, but felt restricted by administrators: "I'm being looked at like, you're not supposed to be doing this, or why are you getting parents too informed?"

Accountability Responses. While recent accountability measures focus educators on equity and closing the achievement gap, the ways schools approached implementation of such measures impacted the cultural practices of new teachers of color. A small number of new teachers of color felt their schools' responses to accountability pressures did not interfere with their ability to use culturally relevant teaching. Some teachers were buffered from restrictive environments for a variety of reasons: their grade level was not tested, they taught advanced courses, or they taught in high-achieving schools. Others worked in schools where teachers exercised a great deal of discretion over curriculum with opportunities to incorporate culturally relevant teaching.

Alternatively, many of the teachers experienced a tension between their desire to reflect their own and students' cultures in their teaching and their schools' emphasis on teaching a uniform, standards-based curriculum. Some teachers believed that focus on standardized test scores as the basis for accountability worked against including the cultural knowledge of themselves and their students from non-dominant communities.

A teacher of English learners noted, "I believe that our students are smart and have a lot of funds of knowledge that they can demonstrate in other ways than filling in bubbles. I'm against this constant teach and test, teach and test." Another teacher said that school practices that arose in response to accountability policies left many students behind, not allowing for flexibility to adapt to individual student needs and, in some cases, holding students back to repeat classes in order to improve school-wide test scores.

Conclusions

As educational and policy leaders draw conclusions from this study, recall what Sheets (2000) charges: cultural resources among teachers of color, if valued, need to be developed, rather than assumed. Findings from this study reveal that even though new teachers of color are deeply committed to and well trained in culturally relevant practices, this does not guarantee such practices will be carried out once they begin teaching. Furthermore, school contexts matter in enacting such practices, and ultimately in the retention of teachers of color.

Educational leaders, induction leaders, and policy makers should examine how the call for diversifying the teaching profession means rethinking schooling contexts. This might mean fostering

- Strong professional cultures with teacher agency, collaboration, new teacher support/mentoring that supports new teachers of color to develop their professional commitments and practices
- Culturally relevant practices that are additive rather than subtractive and access cultural knowledge of teachers and students from non-dominant communities
- Community relations that build bridges rather than barriers and draw on community resources to support student and professional learning
- Accountability approaches that support teacher decision-making capabilities in order to address the needs of diverse learners, maintain high expectations, and improve student learning.

This study highlights the need to understand and pursue schooling contexts that support retention of new teachers of color and their efforts to meet the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse youth in urban high-need schools. Therein lies the possibility of fulfilling the promise of teachers of color to transform educational opportunities for students currently underserved in U.S. schools.

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About The New Teacher Center

The New Teacher Center (NTC) was established in 1998 as a national resource focused on teacher and administrator induction. NTC implements and promotes induction best practices through a variety of innovative professional development opportunities and materials that assist educators and policy makers in supporting the next generation of education professionals. Using an integrated, collaborative approach, NTC strives to support essential research, well-informed policy, and thoughtful practice that encourage teacher development from pre-service throughout the career of a teacher.

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