

# Enduring Problems, Rethinking Process, Fulfilling Promises: Reflections on the Continuing Shortage of Teachers of Color

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## Abstract

Thirty years ago, “Problems, process, and promise: Reflections on a collaborative approach to the solution of the minority teacher shortage” (Goodwin, 1991) offered a perspective on an approach to the *minority* teacher shortage. That piece represented the start of the author’s life-long work on teacher preparation, with a particular focus on the recruitment and retention of teachers of color in response to growing numbers of students of color juxtaposed against a predominantly white teaching force. Now, several decades later, this article is her opportunity to reflect on those early thoughts, framed by the question: What progress have we made (or not) as a profession, and a society, in addressing this imperative? In pondering this question, this piece returns to the focus of the original article to think anew about problems, process, and promise as conceptual lenses for assessing how far we have come and where we now need to go.

## Keywords

Teachers of Color; Teacher recruitment; Teacher retention; African American teachers;

Thirty years ago, I wrote about one approach to the *minority* teacher shortage (Goodwin, 1991). That was at the start of my work on teacher preparation, with a particular focus on the recruitment and retention of teachers of color in response to growing numbers of students of color juxtaposed against a predominantly White teaching force. Now, with several decades of experience behind me, this opportunity to reflect on that work is a welcome gift. What progress have we made (or not) as a profession, and a society, in addressing this imperative? In pondering this question, I return to the focus of my original article to think anew about problems, process, and promise as conceptual lenses for assessing how far we have come and where we now need to go.

## Enduring Problems

In 1991, I wrote about the “significant decline in . . . college graduates choosing teaching” and that “colleges will graduate just under half the 1.5 million teachers needed in the 1990s” (p. 28). Moreover, we faced a “growing disparity between the proportion of *minority* students in elementary and high schools and the proportion of *minority* teachers available to instruct them” (Southern Education Foundation, 1988, p. 4), with shortages of “African American educators as particularly acute” (p. 28). Recent statistics reveal the enduring nature of racial disproportionality between teachers and students. Teachers of color in the United States remain a rare resource at only about 20% of the profession (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Grissom et al., 2015; National Center for Education

Statistics (NCES), 2020) compared to 50% students of color. According to the “Teacher Diversity Index . . . almost every state has a significant diversity gap” (Boser, 2014, pp. 1–2), and “teacher diversity numbers have only gotten worse since 2012” (Brown & Boser, 2017, para. 4). Numerous reports echo these findings (cf. Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Albert Shanker Institute, 2015; American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2013; Feistritzer, 2011), highlighting “the (continuing) overwhelming presence of whiteness” in the teaching profession (Sleeter, 2001, p. 94).

Thirty years later, a shortfall of 1.5 million teachers needed over the next decade is a familiar refrain (Wiggan et al., 2021), with demand projected to significantly outpace supply, due to retirements, high attrition rates, and 35% fewer entrants to teacher preparation, coupled with rising student enrollments (Sutcher et al., 2016). Indeed, data indicate that “nearly half (44 percent) of public schools currently report full- or part-time teaching vacancies” (NCES, 2022b, para. 1) and that amid these shortages, “agreement between the race and ethnicity of teachers and the majority race of the student population of schools was most pronounced for White teachers”; the converse was true for Black, Hispanic, and Asian teachers, even where the majority race of the

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students was the same as the teachers (NCES, 2020, para. 3). Even in schools where the majority of students were of color, “a larger percentage of teachers were White than of the same race/ethnicity as the majority of students” (NCES, 2020, para. 4). All this points to a dire need for teachers of color, especially African American teachers for whom shortages continue to be, as they were three decades ago, “particularly acute” (Carr, 2022). Apparently, the more things change, the more they stay the same.

## Rethinking Process

The stagnant numbers of people of color in teaching are disappointing. Despite the efforts of many independent and government-sponsored programs aimed at diversifying the profession, which have actually helped to boost recruitment such that “the number of teachers from underrepresented racial and ethnic groups more than doubled over the last 30 years” (Carr, 2022, para. 12), teachers of color remain incommensurate with the growing number of diverse students occupying our classrooms (Goodwin, 2021; NCES, 2022a). We find ourselves running in place. This signals the need to rethink process, that is, assess and re-examine the ways in which we have addressed the shortages of teachers of color. One observation is that efforts need to move beyond prioritizing larger numbers of entrants to the profession via front-loaded initiatives, to consider more long-term solutions as well as systemic reforms that keep teachers in teaching by sustaining them over time. We pay far too little attention to retention, deliberate induction, mentoring, and the developmental nature of learning, including learning to teach. Essentially, we need to look across the entire span of a teacher’s career to design strategies and tailored supports that meet the varying and unique needs of teachers as they traverse the professional trajectory. Much research has shown that induction matters for retention (Ingersoll, 2012; New Teacher Center, 2018), as does meaningful, ongoing professional development that is integrally relevant to teachers’ practice and their pedagogical concerns, versus the more typical ad hoc, fragmented workshops (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Comprehensive preparation also keeps teachers in the classroom (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Jackson & Watson, 2021) as data indicate that candidates who enter teaching via alternative routes are more likely to leave in their first year (Partnership for the Future of Learning, 2021; Redding & Henry, 2019). This finding is particularly troubling—and instructive—in the context of candidates of color who complete alternative certification programs at almost twice the rate of Whites (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Feistritzer, 2011) and are also more likely than Whites to leave teaching (Ingersoll et al., 2019; Partelow et al., 2017).

More important than the presence of structural supports, such as induction to keep teachers and candidates of color in the classroom, is how they *experience* the profession from preparation through entry. The quality of this experience—how

it reflects, supports, respects, and values them, their communities, their cultures and traditions, their perspectives, and their humanity—is a critical aspect of the process of becoming, and then staying, a teacher. Evidence reveals that teachers of color experience the profession very differently from their White counterparts (Roegman et al., 2021). Beginning with teacher preparation, programs are populated predominantly by White students and taught by majority White faculty, which “has huge ramifications for what happens in teacher education programs, including how curriculum is designed and what is taught” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 4). Rendered invisible by their preparation experiences, clinical experiences further confirm “the worst fears of candidates of color—that the system is indeed racist, perhaps insurmountably so, and they [end] the program feeling more marginalized than when they entered” (Roegman et al., 2021, p. 210). Once in the field, teachers of color experience hostile school environments characterized by racism, marginalization, and microaggressions from both colleagues and students’ families (Carr, 2022; Jackson & Watson, 2021; Kohli, 2018). Teachers of color also pay an extra tax as matters related to diversity are funneled their way, further adding to their workload and stress, at the same time that they are considered less competent and are more likely to receive lower effectiveness ratings (Drake et al., 2019). “Racial battle fatigue” (Smith et al., 2020) is a major contributing factor to teachers of color, especially African American teachers, deciding to leave the teaching profession in disproportionate numbers (Barmore, 2021). “The realization of the intractability of racism” for educators of color (Roegman et al., 2021, p. 210) is further exacerbated by challenging work conditions, low pay, poor school leadership, and a lack of voice in decision-making (Ingersoll et al., 2019). All this within a U.S. socio-political context that is increasingly antagonistic toward teachers, repressive and overtly White supremacist in ideology.

## Fulfilling Promises

How can we fulfill the promise that research has overwhelmingly underscored—that teachers of color make a profoundly positive difference in the lives of children of color (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Egalite et al., 2015; Phillips, 2014; Redding, 2019). Undoubtedly, there has been concerted effort since the 1990s on drawing teachers of color into the profession—we can take some satisfaction in progress made. But still, now, as then, “little attention has been paid to where *minority* teachers tend to be employed, what happens to *minority* teachers once they are employed, or to the role of the employing organizations in teacher staffing problems” (Ingersoll et al., 2019, p. 5). We have focused on only one part of the issue. But it is clear that teacher-of-color shortages are not simply a matter of quantity, but quality—not of candidates, as important as that may be, but of teaching lives, teaching conditions, and teacher wellness. In our fixation on the percentages of teachers of color, we have failed to turn our gaze on ourselves—the teaching profession and teacher education establishment—to

acknowledge our own complicity in the problem and commit to self-work as well as systemic changes designed to deliberately dismantle racist ideation, practices (hiring, instruction, assessment, resource distribution, etc.), curriculum, and policies. Fulfilling promises to children of color cannot rest solely on the backs of teachers of color. We need to partner with them as they journey into their careers—running resistance, re-shaping support structures, changing how we prepare school leaders as well as teacher educators, listening to teachers of color and learning from them, and re-imagining what it means to support teachers of color for the long haul. It won't be easy, but it is vital. Do we have the will?

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