

Beyond Envisioning Equity: Situating Teacher of Color Voices



Greater racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity among our nation's teachers is an increasingly urgent need, as classrooms in the United States become increasingly diverse (Heubach, 2020; National Education Association, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The imbalance in representation between teachers of color (TOCs) and students of color (SOCs) in the educational system has implications for teaching, learning, and society at large. Within schools, TOCs frequently struggle to have their voices heard, given the lack of a critical mass within predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Administrators are challenged to retain talented TOCs who often have a deeper understanding of what it means to nurture academic potential and build relationships of trust with SOCs and their families. Research highlights the academic benefits to SOCs when they are taught by teachers who reflect their racial and ethnic backgrounds (Crowley & Knepper, 2018; Easton-Brooks, 2014; Goldhaber, Theobald, & Tien, 2015). Emergent bilinguals also benefit from bilingual and bicultural teachers who understand firsthand the process and challenges of second language acquisition and are prepared to advocate on their behalf (Flores, Claeys, & Gist, 2018; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Systemic issues surrounding imbalances in privilege and power help to shape a multitude of inequities (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Kendi, 2019; Taylor, Gillborn, & Ladson-Billings, 2016). The imperative to create teaching and learning spaces that honor the knowledge, skills, and experiences of TOCs and that sustain the cultures and languages of students requires introspection and critical reflection (Herrera & Murry, 2016; Paris & Alim, 2017). No educator is immune to the influences of society upon their ways of knowing and being, valuing and perceiving, which then have an impact on perceptions and expectations of self and others (Gee, 2014). By working across differences, educators can benefit from a wider range of experiences and gain insights that offer opportunities to interrogate long-held beliefs, reassess desired educational outcomes, and reconceptualize the best ways to achieve those aims.

While acknowledging the conceptual and theoretical contributions that may serve to fuel enhanced efforts to eliminate racial and linguistic inequities in schools, the theme of this conference serves as a call to *action*. Now, more than ever, we must collaborate as researchers, policymakers, educators, and community members in transforming our systems to create asset-based, race-visible, and culturally responsive/sustaining learning spaces (Herrera, 2016; Kohli, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2017; Whitaker, Hardee, Johnson, & McFaden, 2018). The voices of TOCs need to illuminate equity-focused conversations, which often highlight good intentions but reveal limitations regarding understanding of the questions to ask and the variables to consider as we chart paths forward.

This conference brings together leading voices in the field whose experiences, research, and professional insights will shed light on policies and praxis that can inform our next steps. Key research strands and questions to be explored include:

Intersectionality: Identity, Language, & Epistemologies – Intersectionality supports understanding of the multifaceted nature of identity to reflect differences in race, ethnicity, language, and other social characteristics that influence individual ways of knowing, being, perceiving, interpreting, and interacting. TOCs often are uniquely qualified, given their lived experiences and educational backgrounds, to lead efforts surrounding decolonizing and antiracist efforts. However, institutions and systems often silence the voices that could otherwise inform educational change and empower students, families, and communities.

This strand invites dialogue surrounding questions such as: In what ways can an intersectionality-informed lens allow us to problematize simplistic notions of what it means to be a TOC? How do TOCs embrace or distance themselves from aspects of their identity as they engage in predominantly white spaces? How have intersections of identity influenced the ability of TOCs to reach and teach students of all backgrounds?

Higher Education Recruitment, Advising, & Retention – Trends in decreased enrollment and shifting demographics have led institutions of higher education to take action to increase the number of SOCs on their campuses. In doing so, they frequently have increased bilingual marketing and added recruitment and retention programs targeting students considered “at risk.” Such efforts, however, fail to address systemic practices that make systems (rather than students) at risk of failing. Implications of testing, financial resource allocation, curricula, and preparedness of advisors, instructors, and other decision makers for cross-cultural competence are rarely considered, much less re-envisioned, to support greater student success.

This strand explores answers to questions such as: How can collaboration among high schools, community colleges, and universities be used to increase the number of candidates of color recruited into teacher preparation programs? What roles do student advising and program policies play in retaining future TOCs who are recruited? In what ways are TOCs being prepared to leverage their cultural and linguistic resources in the classroom? What changes to faculty readiness, programming, course content, and candidate support and mentorship at PWIs are needed to recruit, retain, and graduate TOCs, especially those who are also multilingual?

Recruiting, Inducting, Mentoring, and Retaining Teachers of Color – Increased attention has been devoted to TOC-focused programs, initiatives, and collaborations across the continuum of recruitment, induction, mentorship, and retention. Such efforts frequently fail to achieve desired outcomes or fulfill their potential as catalysts for disrupting oppressive systems, structures, and practices. Moreover, few TOCs have been prepared to fully maximize their cultural and linguistic assets in the classroom. Those who are ready to leverage their skill sets encounter hurdles embedded in the realities of their teaching context (e.g., curricula, colleagues, administrator expectations) that reflect limiting views of their capabilities and those of their SOCs. Use of the native language, for example, becomes a double-edged sword. Native language use during instruction is often deemed unacceptable, and TOCs are suppressed or silenced. Yet that same language is then relied upon for school communication with parents, families, and community stakeholders.

This strand asks us to grapple with questions such as: What district strategies and human resource policies and practices are most effective for attracting and hiring TOCs? How can administrators avoid taxation of TOCs and foster new teachers’ sense of belonging? What do TOCs view as essential elements of effective mentoring programs? What structures, collaborations, and/or incentives enhance TOC retention, change agency, leadership, and advancement?

Preparing White Educators for Pedagogical Action – White educators frequently are socialized in spaces that reflect dominant racial, cultural, and linguistic identities and hegemonic paradigms. Higher education institutions and programs rarely elicit the level of critical reflection on positionality, understanding of oppressive systems and structures, and skill with anti-racist, culturally responsive/sustaining practices needed to effect change. Ill-prepared for the diversity among students and families in their school communities and classrooms, these

teachers then rely on professional development opportunities and administrator leadership to support capacity building.

This strand challenges us to consider questions such as: How do white teachers translate equity-focused professional development into asset-driven, culturally responsive/sustaining classroom practices? In what ways can white educators best develop relationships of trust with culturally and linguistically diverse families? What types of preparation fosters the knowledge, skills, and dispositions of white educators to be advocates for SOCs? What professional development, dispositions, and/or understandings enable white educators to be suitable mentors for TOCs who are new to a given placement?

Education Policy – National, state, and local educational policies provide guidance that often constrains forward-thinking action and circumscribes the range of possible solutions to context-specific challenges. Such policies derive from longstanding ways of knowing and doing that are ethnocentric and situated within a monocultural, monolingual perspective. Liability is often invoked as a reason for not attending to oppressive conditions and unforeseen ramifications or pursuing alternative ways of viewing challenges, exposing underlying issues, and proposing new types of responses.

This strand explores policy-related questions, which have implications for each of the other strands, including: What types of policies might strengthen the TOC pipeline? What types of changes are needed in district and school policies, as well as implementation practices, to foster needed support, mentoring, and retention of TOCs? What strategies can be used to bolster implementation of equity-focused policies at the local level? How can the experiences of TOCs translate to better informed decision making and policy development?

These research areas and questions serve as entry points to the types of dialogue, collaboration, and action that will be required to achieve equity in education. Join us March 5-6, 2021, to be part of the conversation as, together, we help examine multifaceted and intersectional ways of recruiting, mentoring, retaining, and advancing TOCs for increasingly complex and diverse educational settings.

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