

Learning from the voices of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color educators

Charting new directions for research, policy, and practice

BY CONRA D. GIST &
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According to recent federal data, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) make up roughly 37% of the adult population (age 18 and older) and 50% of children (birth to age 18) in the United States. However, BIPOC teachers make up just 19% of the nation's public school teaching force (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). And while their representation has increased somewhat over the past two decades (up from 16% in 2000), researchers estimate that if current trends in teacher recruitment, preparation, licensure, hiring, and attrition hold steady, then Black and Brown educators will remain underrepresented in the nation's teaching force until at least the year 2060 (Putnam et al., 2016).

However, there is no simple way to diversify the teaching profession more quickly. We will have to make progress in a number of areas all at once, rather than pinning our hopes on any single policy or reform strategy. For example, it will do no good to *recruit* more aspiring Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers unless we simultaneously take steps to fix our leaky teacher

development pipeline (Bristol, 2020; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Gist, Bianco, & Lynn, 2019), enabling greater numbers of those aspiring teachers to go on to complete the preparation process, become fully certified and licensed, and find appropriate teaching positions. Likewise, it will do no good to *place* a more diverse cadre of newly certified and employed Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers unless we also take steps to provide them with better early-career support and improve the conditions in which they work. Otherwise, given the sky-high attrition rates among new Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, any gains in new-teacher diversity will likely evaporate within a few years.

When considering these issues, it's important to understand the ties that bind and distinguish BIPOC teachers. For one, BIPOC teachers tend to share sociopolitical histories of transformative and community-based practices for developing and sharing knowledge that are also problematically coupled with their past and present marginalization within K-12 educational settings. At the same time, BIPOC teachers embody a range of complex and differing experiences that are not uniform, so what is

true for many teachers within one ethnoracial group will not be true for all of them. Still, describing teachers from a group standpoint allows us to better understand how educational systems and policies frequently shape their group experiences. Given this, we use the terms Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) teachers, and Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers interchangeably, and we do so to advance research and policy efforts that can support the academic and professional development of this complex and critical mass of educators.

To gain a better understanding of the challenges involved in increasing teacher diversity, and how to overcome them, we've spent the last two years leading the production of the *Handbook of Research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers* (Gist & Bristol, forthcoming, 2022), a major effort to synthesize the knowledge base in this area and identify promising trends in research, policy, and practice. More specifically, the *Handbook* describes what has been learned, to date, from 11 strands of research — we call them domains of inquiry — that can help inform efforts to build and sustain ethnoracial teacher diversity, including

In this special issue, we've chosen to capitalize the terms Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers to position group standpoints from a perspective of solidarity that can create equitable and engaging educational opportunities. There is also an intentional naming of Teachers of Color *and* Indigenous Teachers, in contrast to the term Teachers of Color. The history of Indigenous People's sovereignty and solidarity makes their association with the social construction of race and racism fraught and distinct, and the intentional naming of Indigenous Teachers in solidarity with the term Teachers of Color reflects a commitment to honor the legacy and sovereignty of Indigenous People. Guided by the same rationale that prompted the use and capitalization of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, throughout the research briefs and teacher testimonies, terms such as Students of Color and Indigenous Students, Mentors of Color and Indigenous Mentors, Scholars of Color and Indigenous Scholars, and People of Color and Indigenous People are also capitalized.

studies of the educational effects of teacher diversity, teacher mentorship, professional development, the design of preparation programs, teacher recruitment, teacher retention, policy influences on teachers, pedagogical and leadership practices, the influence of minority-serving institutions, human resource development, and teachers' experiences of intersectionality.

Research handbooks provide a valuable means by which to take stock of a given field, helping the research community to map out the knowledge base, learn about emerging areas of study, and identify priorities for new lines of research. However, we aim not just to inform other researchers, but also to share what we've learned with policy makers and practitioners across the country. To that end, we've partnered with PDK International to develop and distribute this special *Kappan* report, which provides brief overviews of the 11 domains of inquiry that we (along with a wide range of contributors) explore at greater length in the *Handbook*. Further, because we aim also to bring Teachers of Color, Indigenous Teachers, and other educators into the conversation about how best to diversify the teaching profession, we've paired these research briefs with teacher-written testimonies that highlight the ways

in which the research speaks to their own professional lives.

Broad priorities for the field

We've found that researchers have made greater headway in some of these 11 domains of inquiry than others. For example, a number of rigorous, large-scale studies have shown that teacher diversity tends to have significant educational benefits for all students, with particularly strong benefits for Students of Color. However, we know of only a few small studies that focus on the effectiveness of recruitment programs and strategies designed to increase teacher diversity. In short, much of this research is still relatively new and yet to fully emerge. Thus, we've chosen to conclude each brief not only by describing the implications of the existing research for educational policy and practice, but also by noting what we have yet to learn in that area, as well as suggesting topics that researchers have yet to explore and studies that might help illuminate those topics.

At the same time, though, our work on the *Handbook* has also allowed us to identify some broad research priorities that cut across the entire field. As you turn to the specific recommendations that we and our colleagues make in the research briefs, please keep in mind that across all 11 domains of inquiry, we see an ongoing need for

research into:

The structural implications of race and racism, which continue to present challenges for the academic and professional development of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. In particular, we see an urgent need for more research — perhaps grounded in critical and decolonial theoretical frameworks — into the cultural narratives, institutional practices, disciplinary policies, and interpersonal dynamics that bear upon teachers' professional lives, from recruitment and preparation all the way through retirement.

The psychological, social, and emotional experiences of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, including studies that take a holistic perspective on topics such as teacher induction, mentorship, and professional development, addressing not just the practical challenges to be faced, but also the effects of historical inequity on the everyday lives of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. While a small number of scholars have pursued such research, little is



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known, as yet, about the psycho-socio-emotional burdens that these teachers bear, what can be done to mitigate those effects, and what kinds of structural, institutional, and policy reforms can make K-12 education a healthier work environment for them.

Teacher diversity in context.

To date, researchers have found strong evidence that, in the aggregate, the presence of Teachers of Color has a positive impact on student achievement, engagement, and other outcomes, especially for Students of Color, and advocates often cite that evidence when arguing that diversifying the teaching force will lead to greater educational equity in U.S. schools. However, we see no reason to assume that simply *hiring* more Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers will have a positive impact, in and of itself (regardless of how those teachers are prepared, where they work, what kinds of professional development they receive, and other factors). Much more needs to be learned about the contexts and conditions under which teacher diversity benefits particular kinds of students, as well as the sorts of school environments, teaching assignments, and support systems that will need to be put in place to enable larger numbers of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers not just to enter the profession but to thrive in various kinds of schools and classrooms.

Teachers' local problems of practice. Most of the studies cited in the *Handbook* were conducted by university-based researchers, using data obtained through school and district records or gathered through

surveys, observations, and interviews of teachers. However, like a growing number of scholars and practitioners in K-12 education (e.g., see *Kappan's* April 2021 issue), we embrace the recent emergence of research-practice partnerships (RPPs), in which educators are fully involved in identifying the problems that should be studied, the research questions that ought to be asked, and the ways in which local context needs to be taken into account. Forming intentional, strategic, and genuine RPPs is no longer an ancillary recommendation but an urgent priority for the study of teacher diversity. The analysis of federal, state, and local data provides important information about demographic trends among teachers and students and associations among teachers' characteristics and students' outcomes. But if we hope to understand and overcome the complex challenges involved in recruiting, preparing, mentoring, supporting, and retaining Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, then we need to pay attention to the local problems they face, and we need to devise solutions that meet their specific needs — and this will require researchers to work hand in hand with *local* teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders.

Finally, in addition to calling attention to these broad research recommendations, our work on the *Handbook* has led us to identify two ways in which the *infrastructure* of educational research will need to be improved as well. If we hope to make greater progress in learning about Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, understanding the personal and professional challenges they face, and increasing their representation in the nation's public school classrooms,

then we should make it a priority to:

Invest in a National Center for Research on Educator Diversity.

In recent years, the research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers has progressed by leaps and bounds. Still, though, the field could progress much more quickly if it had support from a coordinating body, one that sponsors and facilitates efforts to identify key research questions, define a systematic research agenda, and share findings and resources. More specifically, such a center could (1) maintain national and state databases for the collection of data on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers; (2) further establish the knowledge domains regarding this population of teachers using evidence-based outcomes; (3) disseminate the knowledge base to a wide range of researchers, scholars, and practitioners, and (4) apply evidence from the knowledge domains through the formation of various research-practice partnerships committed to educator diversity. At present, a number of the contributors to the *Handbook* are working to develop such a research center (see <https://uh.edu/education/research-convening-ed-diversity>).

Secure long-term funding for this research.

To be sustainable over time, the study of teacher diversity will require steady sources of support from both public and private donors, including a combination of (1) grant initiatives for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, (2) funding streams that support research-practice partnerships at the state and district levels, and (3) grassroots efforts to fund a research agenda driven by the

voices of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers in solidarity with communities of Color and Indigenous communities. The research that we summarize in this special report offers a promising foundation. But if we aim to build a truly robust knowledge base, one that reliably informs efforts to diversify the nation's teaching force, then we will need to provide researchers and their partners with the resources they need to do that work. ■

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