

The power of intersectional interventions for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers

By **Conra D. Gist, Travis J. Bristol, Boni Wozolek, Jason Irizarry, & Ed Brockenbrough**

It's well understood that people's identities are complex and that no single marker can define who a person is. Similarly, a variety of power dynamics shape how people live within our society, specifically the ways they are relegated to the margins and rendered invisible. The term intersectionality is often used to describe these various and sometimes competing identities that affect how individuals navigate societal structures, cultural differences, and interpersonal relationships.

An awareness of these intersectional dynamics is important when considering how teachers are developed and supported over the trajectory of their careers; otherwise, discussions about how best to support teachers can easily become dominated by the experiences of white female teachers, given their large numbers within the profession. Yet, when attempting to consider nondominant perspectives, we must be careful not to view Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers as monolithic groups. Efforts to expand the conversation to include Teachers of Color (Waite, Mentor, & Bristol, 2018) should not distract us from conversations about how race interfaces with these teachers' sexuality or sexual orientation, gender, class, nationality, immigrant status, indigeneity, racio-linguistic status, and (dis)ability.

In short, the field must consider the *multiple* identities that belong to every Teacher of Color and Indigenous Teacher, as well as the complex ways those identities are experienced within different sociopolitical and geographic contexts. This allows us to consider what it is like, for example, to work as a Black, bisexual teacher in a rural Southern school, or how a biracial (Hmong-white) first-generation college graduate experiences teaching English in a wealthy suburban district in the Midwest.

Recent years have seen the emergence of numerous lines of inquiry into the multiple identities of Teachers and Students of Color related to how race and gender affect workplace experiences (Macias & Stephens, 2019); how the confluence of sexuality, race, and school climate can shape academic identities (Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016), and how complex, multiple, and intersecting identities can be used to foster commitments to social justice in teacher education (Pugach, Gomez-Najarro, & Matewos, 2019). Still, significantly more research is needed to advance our understanding of the ways in which intersectional analysis, methodology, and theories can prepare the field to diversify the educator workforce. Five recent studies highlighted in the *Handbook of Research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers* (Gist & Bristol, forthcoming, 2022) expand the research base in this area.

What the recent research shows

In one study, Tanja Burkhard and colleagues explore how conversations about race among four Black women educators surfaced the ways these women have been marginalized not only by race, but also by gender, language, and place. The authors suggest that, despite the complexity and difficulty of engaging in conversations about the intersections of multiple identities, such "race talk" is necessary for enabling Educators of Color to cocreate the knowledge they need to navigate educational and professional spaces, and, perhaps, to build meaningful connections that honor and affirm the complexity of their experiences (Nash, 2019). In addition, they note that these teachers' stories illustrate how policies that *prohibit* conversations about race (as seen in the school district of Kaye-Ann, one of the study's coauthors) can harm Teachers and Students of Color by rendering racist

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experiences as “unverifiable” and treating them as individual incidents rather than outgrowths of white supremacy. The stories also show that these conversations are important even in educational spaces where People of Color hold leadership positions.

In another study, Allison Mattheis and colleagues investigate how the creation of a Queer Studies in Education course at a Latinx-serving institution can support the learning of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. Through observations and interviews with student participants, the authors document how preservice and practicing educators engaged with learning about their own identities and how those identities affected their teaching practice. The educators taking the course noted how narrow understandings of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and ability limit opportunities for expression in schools. By applying theory to practice and working collaboratively, the teacher participants proposed ways of disrupting these limitations for themselves and young people (e.g., through individual identity development and collective solidarity building) and imagining transformational spaces that embrace difference.

A study by Grace Player and Jason Irizarry supports four key recommendations for how teacher educators and program leaders can use an intersectional framework to decenter white perspectives within their teacher education programs. First, these educators should expand the racial literacy of preservice teachers by creating opportunities for them to unpack and critique how whiteness defines and informs the types of knowledge that are valued in education systems. Second, they need to recognize how teacher education programs use People of Color and Indigenous People to represent diversity without critiquing the structural racism that has kept them on the margins of these programs. Third, they need to examine

application and selection processes that elevate white experiences, but treat Students of Color and Indigenous Students as tokens, who are admitted to improve program diversity numbers without valuing their knowledge as assets that can challenge whiteness and expand critical learning experiences in teacher education. Finally, they should create opportunities for centering the voices of Students of Color and Indigenous Students in efforts to change program practices, procedures, and policies.

Drawing on data from two ethnographic case studies of two grassroots social justice collectives in California that were led and organized by critical Educators of Color (i.e., those committed to and actively engaged in resisting and dismantling oppressive education systems and practices while still working within them), Farima Pour-Khorshid and colleagues explore how the collectives created their own grassroots learning spaces to center intersectionality and collective vulnerability as a form of resistance and liberation. Intersectionality was centered in these critical affinity spaces through healing practices (such as *testimonio*, in which participants explore how various forms of oppression have molded them) and pedagogical practices (such as using curricular and instructional strategies to teach about intersectionality as a way of disrupting various forms of oppression in schools). Specifically, the authors focus on how these groups shaped the participants’ pedagogies, politics, and experiences, finding that discussing how their various identities affected their work lives and made them feel vulnerable promoted healing and helped them uncover opportunities for transformative resistance.

Finally, a study by Boni Wozolek explores the notion of *assemblages of violence*, arguing that “instead of looking at singular, discrete identities, assemblage speaks to the multi-

dimensional, far-reaching impact of multiple forms of oppression as they are manifested across identity categories as they are reconciled in one body or one set of ideas.” Reflecting on her own identity as a queer biracial woman, Wozolek considers how certain present forms of emotional, physical, or intellectual violence are always built on past iterations of aggression and lead to future ones. In schools and across scholarly communities, this often occurs in the form of narrowly defined identity politics that do not account for a range of multiple and varying perspectives, which can not only negatively affect students’ sociocultural understandings, but also further marginalize Faculty of Color who are overlooked or rendered invisible by these perspectives. As a person whose identities have caused her to be characterized as not “Brown enough” or “queer enough,” Wozolek expresses concern for future generations, namely her own children, whose multiracial identities are in some ways more complex than her own. This study challenges educators to consider how identity politics can mask and ignore the multilayered forms of oppression that Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers experience and navigate in schools.

What we don’t know yet

Although there is clearly a need for scholarship on ethnographically diverse educators, given the rapidly changing demographics in our nation, simplistic and monolithic

Research topics to explore

- How the differences among Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers within and across various groups relate to their experiences at each stage of their development as teachers.
- The intersectionality of race, gender, language, and place for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- How understanding the intersections among their different identities can promote teacher agency, advocacy, or organizing.
- Innovative methodologies for exploring and investigating intersectionality and Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- How Teachers of Color might use intersectional frameworks in the classroom and/or with Students of Color and Indigenous Students.
- Intersectional pedagogy, learning, and engagement for preservice and in-service teachers.

descriptions of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers will be inadequate to advance the field in the future. As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, close systematic investigation of differences within, between, and among ethnoracial groups that also examine interactions with other identity markers (i.e., sexuality or sexual orientation, gender, class, nationality, immigrant status, indigeneity, racio-linguistic status, and [dis]ability) are imperative if research is to drive policy and practice in meaningful ways.

Indeed, there is a need for more intersectional scholarship within each of the 10 other domains of inquiry reviewed in the *Handbook* — recruitment, program design, minority-serving institutions, human resource development and induction, mentorship, professional development, educational impact, pedagogical and leadership practices, retention, and policy. Ultimately, expanding intersectional research in these domains could significantly advance current understandings of how to best remove barriers to supporting the academic and professional advancement for different groups of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers in more tailored and effective ways. In sum, research into educators’ intersectional identities is growing, yet there is significantly more research needed to advance our understanding of the ways in which intersectional analysis, methodology, and theories can prepare the field to diversify the educator workforce.

Implications for policy and practice

- Avoid simplistic categorizations of the race of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers and recognize the variety of difference that exists within each racial category.
- Differentiate teaching and learning experiences at each stage of the teacher development continuum in ways that take into account how Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers vary within and across a range of identities — for example, sexuality and sexual orientation, gender, class, nationality, immigrant status, racio-linguistic status, and (dis)ability.
- Honor the complex experiences of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers within and across different school systems and geographic locations. ■

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Research studies to conduct

- **Interpretive studies:** Researchers can develop ethnographies, autoethnographies, field-based observations, case studies, and other methodologies that center nondominant voices to understand how teachers of various identities experience preparation, pedagogy and leadership, mentorship, induction, and professional development programs or practices tailored for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. They explore the subjective experiences of teachers and the degree to which they experience feelings of oppression across and within racial, gender, linguistic, place, and class positions.
- **Design-based studies:** Researchers can create and test intersectional preparation, pedagogy and leadership, mentorship, induction, and professional development programs for teachers of various overlapping and competing identities.
- **Effect studies:** Researchers can investigate causal relationships among relevant data points (for example, admittance rates in teacher education programs) and the intersectional identities of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers (for example, Black male economically distressed teacher candidates). Data points might include program patterns (for example, placement in certain types of schools); preparation and evaluation policies (for example, certification exam and coursework requirements), and academic and nonacademic outcomes (for example, student engagement metrics).

Example: If the problem of practice is the marginalization of Asian American and Indigenous Teachers in rural schools, then partners may engage in a set of interpretive studies to understand the nuanced and complex experiences of the teachers (e.g., intersections with other identity markers such as gender, sexuality or sexual orientation, and/or class, and differences related to content expertise in STEAM, English language arts, and so on) and the policies, practices, and education system in which they work. On the basis of their findings, partners would begin to develop interventions that address the marginalization of these teachers in rural schools. Additional partners for this line of inquiry may include women, ethnic, and/or global studies scholars, gender equity community-based organizations, and district human resource and professional development officers.