# Teacher diversity and the state of our democracy

BY CAROL D. LEE

*The Handbook of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers*, edited by Conra D. Gist and Travis J. Bristol, addresses one of the major challenges facing the field of education in the United States: the lack of diversity among public school teachers. But our teaching force didn't *always* lack diversity. During the era of Jim Crow, segregated schools were staffed primarily by Teachers of Color. Ironically, following the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which mandated the desegregation of public school systems, thousands of Black teachers and administrators lost their jobs, displaced by white teachers and administrators (Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Madkins, 2011). Nearly 70 years later, U.S. public schools remain largely segregated, but the effects of that displacement linger on. Today, the teaching force is mostly white and female, even in large urban districts that enroll few white students (Hussar et al., 2020).

If we hope to build a teacher workforce that reflects the growing diversity of our student populations, it is important that we understand both this historical legacy and the ongoing challenges we face in recruiting and sustaining teachers who are Black, Latinx, Native American, or Asian American/Pacific Islander. But it is just as important that we ask ourselves why this work *matters*. Why is it so important that we address this disjuncture between the ethnicities of our teachers and those of our students?

One answer is that it matters to students' academic outcomes —

specifically, it has been found that when the race/ethnicity of teachers and students match, students tend to score higher on standardized achievement tests. However, while it may be important to raise test scores (though it's unclear what those tests really tell us about student learning or preparation for college), I would argue that we have a much more compelling reason to care about teacher diversity: It matters to our democracy.

Education in a democracy has multiple goals. It must prepare young people to develop the skills they will need to succeed in the workforce and sustain themselves economically, as well as to cultivate their individual talents and enable them to lead fulfilling lives. Further, it must prepare them to engage in the kinds of civic reasoning, discourse, and debate that a democracy requires (Kahne & Bowyer, 2017; Lee, White, & Dong, forthcoming, 2022; Mirra & Garcia, 2020). This demands not only that they develop the disposition to participate in civic life, but also that they become well-grounded in literacy, science, mathematics, literature, history, the arts, and other subject areas, as well as understand how our government works. Moreover, it requires that they come to understand and embrace basic democratic values, including an appreciation of human diversity, respect for human rights (not just the rights of legal citizenship), and a commitment to rational deliberation, decision making, and the pursuit of compromise on issues of public importance.
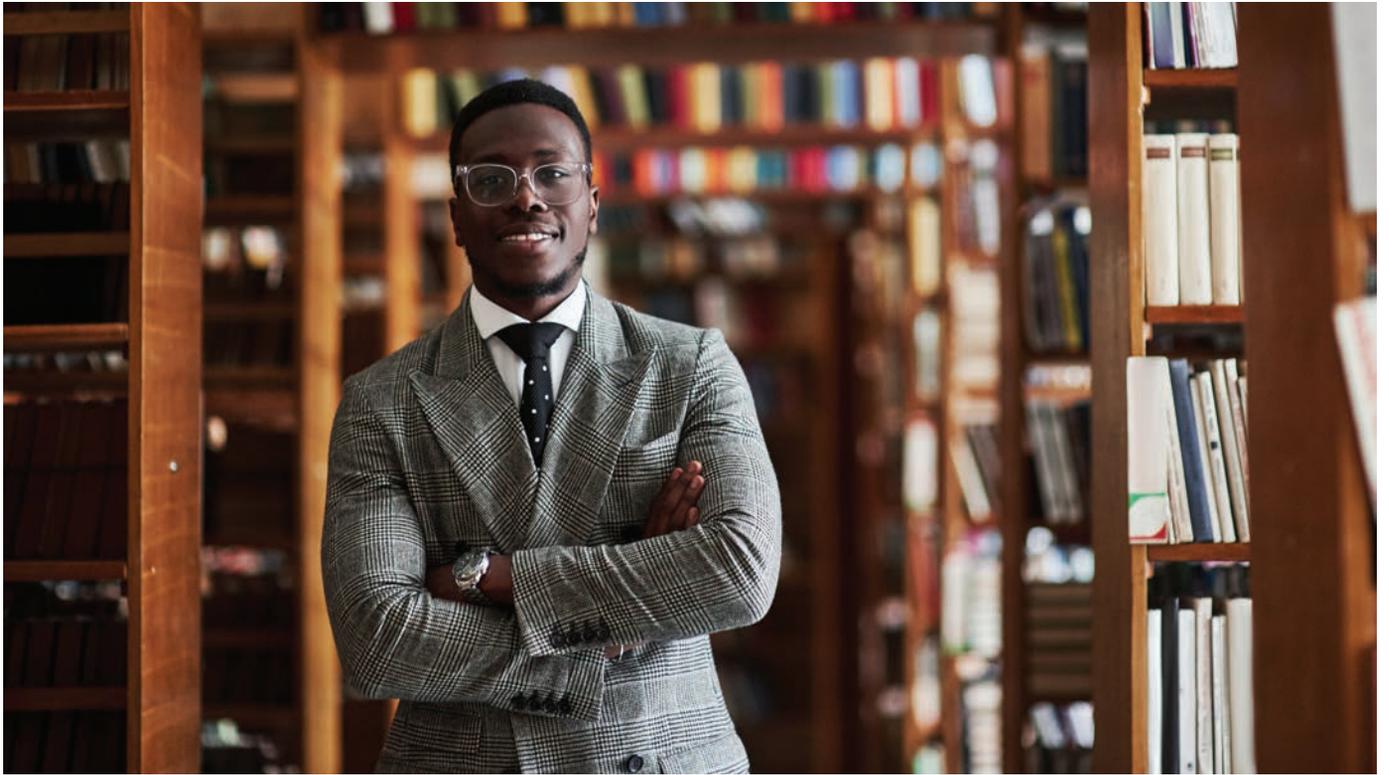
In deliberating about what our democratic values entail, and how we should prepare our children to live out those values, our country has struggled most of all over conceptions of race, class, and gender and whether it makes sense to arrange people into hierarchies based on those conceptions (Gould, 1981; Lee, 2009). As we've seen in recent months —

especially in the intense ideological partisanship and even violence surrounding the 2020 presidential election and the transition to a new administration — tensions over the significance of race, class, and gender remain as salient as ever.

So, what *is* the role of public education in preparing young people to wrestle with the demands and dilemmas of democratic decision making in such a climate (Gutmann, 1999)? More specifically, what must teachers do to ensure their students develop the capacity to perform their civic responsibilities, especially to participate in enduring debates about race, class, and gender (and, I would add, in debates about how race has been defined in relation to ethnicity, ability and disability, and other categories)? That is, what must teachers understand about the complexities of human diversity, the range of cultural practices and resources their students bring to the classroom, and the challenges involved in living in communities that are both homogeneous and woven into the heterogenous fabric of the nation (Nasir et al., 2020)?

The publications in this *Kappan* report tackle these very questions as they relate to recruiting more Teachers of Color into the profession and providing them with the kinds of preservice preparation, professional development, and broader supports needed to sustain a teaching force that is well-equipped to educate students for a diverse democracy.

Ironically, one factor contributing to the dearth of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers is the growing range of professional opportunities now available to Black, Brown, and Indigenous college graduates. During the Jim Crow era, teaching was a major route to economic progress for People of Color, but today's potential teaching candidates may view the work as less attractive and less

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competitive than other professions in terms of salary, autonomy, and working conditions.

But solutions can be found. The articles in this report address recruitment, retention, mentorship, professional development, program design, and the policies and human resources required to expand the diversity of our teaching force and retain these teachers in the profession. The authors look at the crucial role of minority-serving higher education institutions as well as the various grow-your-own programs aimed at recruiting candidates from local school communities.

By expanding the diversity of our teaching force in public education, we enhance opportunities for all our children to develop the technical skills and dispositions they need to uphold democratic values and fully participate in our democracy. In the long run, however, these challenges are not the purview of the teaching profession alone. Rather, they are challenges to our society writ large. With this special report that focuses on growing

and sustaining ethnoracial teacher diversity, *Phi Delta Kappan* offers valuable resources that will enable all of us to think about how we can best work to produce the conditions that will strengthen the teaching profession and create robust opportunities for all our children. ■

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