

Teaching a World of Color

By Deidre Alexander



When you hear the word *minority*, what comes to mind? Disadvantaged? Poverty? How about the words *minority-serving institution*? Perhaps that brings to mind peeling paint, old textbooks, and low achievement scores? Many of us unconsciously associate these terms with something that is “less than” or “not good enough.” I challenge you, though, to let go of those impressions. Think instead of *Institutions of Color*, *People of Color*, *Teachers of Color*, *Students of Color*. Colors provide beauty, enriching our world. Institutions of color provide

opportunities, expanding what we can see and do. Teacher preparation programs at Institutions of Color empower aspiring educators with the self-awareness needed to advocate for all students.

I am a proud graduate of “Thee” Jackson State University (JSU), a historically Black university that, in many ways, is a poster child for what Institutions of Color can offer. At Jackson State, I was fortunate to receive my education through an African American lens, studying a curriculum and learning in ways that perfectly fit my needs. In predominantly white institutions, students tend to be exposed to multicultural practices through a onetime course, often taught by the only Person of Color on the teaching staff. This inadvertently reduces the significance of diversity in education to just that — a single course. But my university taught me that diversity is ever breathing and evolving, just as colors are. Most of my professors were Educators of Color, and my peers and I could talk openly about race and racism. We could be honest about what we needed to do to bring about changes in underserved minority communities. It was safe.

Jackson State is located in the heart of Jackson, Mississippi, a city with one of the state’s largest minority school districts. The predominantly

Black school district has faced many struggles, like most underserved communities experience. JSU’s education faculty know the local schools well, and they understand how valuable it is to prepare well-skilled Teachers of Color to work there. Like many of my classmates, I felt compelled to teach in such a district, and I welcomed my professors’ encouragement to become deeply engaged in the community. In fact, all students at Jackson State, no matter their degree track, were obligated to do volunteer work in the area, helping out in “minority” spaces.

Rather than associating those spaces with disadvantage, our professors had a way of showing them to us in the most complimentary light, one that revealed Jackson and the people who lived there in their full color. That was certainly true of the school where I was placed. My teaching internship site mirrored many other underserved schools across the United States in that its needs were dire and its resources were stretched too thin. But it also had great leadership and staff who came to their work with a great sense of urgency. I was placed with a kindergarten teacher who masterfully wove together whole-class lessons and differentiated learning stations to serve her 27 students. There, in that classroom on Bailey Avenue, I fell in love with the art of teaching and developed a passion for working in underserved communities. After graduating, I was hired as a kindergarten teacher by that same school district, and my teaching journey began.

As a young, impressionable Black woman, I was taught at Jackson State in ways that would serve me not just as a college student, but for years to come. In every educational program, there is a hidden curriculum, made up of values and beliefs that every student learns just by being there. At my college, that unspoken curriculum emphasized self-awareness and advocacy. They were constant themes, strengthened by every class we took. Just being on the campus gave us a great sense of pride.

The faculty continually impressed upon us just how urgent the work of teaching is for society. They made sure we knew the statistics about racial achievement gaps, that we understood the historical and socioeconomic pressures that bear on Students of Color, and that we recognized that all People of Color bear some level of trauma just from having to navigate the challenges of our day-to-day lives. They also helped us unpack our own internalized biases, which I didn’t even recognize at first, and they taught us how to advocate for quality

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education for all students. Inside and outside of our classes, we discussed what an equitable system looks like for all students, and how we can dismantle the current systems that fail and marginalize many children. Finally, they encouraged us to talk about our own school experiences — most of us went through the very same systems we were working to unravel. Sometimes our college classes felt like a therapy session and a Sunday morning church service wrapped into one.

I carry these experiences with me everywhere I go. When I'm in spaces where I see clear injustices, microaggressions, and oppressive and predatory curriculum practices, I'm compelled to act, thanks to the sense of agency and the advocacy skills I developed at Jackson State.

Some believe that minority-serving institutions are too isolating. They worry that students who attend those schools will not be prepared to work in predominantly white communities and that if we do decide to work in such communities, we will

struggle to see the world in a new way or to teach effectively in that new environment.

But let's look at reality. Educators of Color often report feeling overwhelmed by how underserved their Students of Color are. They also report microaggressions and macroaggressions from administrators, teachers, and even students. Teachers of Color want to shine a light on systematic inequality within their schools, but many do not do so out of fear of retaliation. Eventually, many of these teachers leave their schools or the teaching profession altogether.

That's why it's so important for all education preparation programs to require their students to take an array of courses on equity and inclusion. Teacher candidates should also be required to go through self-awareness and advocacy training. It should not be left solely to People of Color and minority-serving institutions to help the world see the complexity and the beauty of hues that People of Color bring to the world. ■