

Effective mentoring practices for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers

By **Conra D. Gist, Travis J. Bristol, Belinda Bustos Flores, Socorro Herrera, & Lorena Claeys**

Mentors help teachers develop a deeper understanding of their subject matter and how to teach it, while also providing them with emotional and psychological support (Wang & Odell, 2002). Most often, mentoring is offered to aspiring and novice teachers, but it is sometimes offered to experienced teachers as well. Although mentors tend to be veteran teachers who work at the same school as the teacher being mentored, they can also be university-based teacher educators or school district staff (Waite, Mentor, & Bristol, 2018). And while mentoring is often a one-to-one relationship, it can also be offered to groups of teachers, usually as part of an induction curriculum during the first two years of teaching (Moir et al., 2009).

In short, teacher mentorship should not be assumed to have only one fixed meaning. Rather, it should be understood as a continuum of teacher development, taking various forms and occurring at any stage of the career. Of the most influential research studies on teacher mentorship published to date, few have focused specifically on issues related to race or ethnicity, whether to examine when and what sorts of mentorship is provided to Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers (Flores et al., 2011) or to examine who provides that mentorship (Wang & Odell, 2002). However, the topic has begun to attract more focused research.

For example, some studies suggest that it may be extremely valuable to provide mentoring programs designed specifically to meet the needs of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. For instance, in a small study that has gained national attention, Travis Bristol (2015) describes a peer support network, which he cofounded, for male teachers

of color participating in the Boston Teacher Residency program, on the theory that mentorship can be a way of “addressing the unique challenges of male Teachers of Color [and] would help them develop tools and strategies to navigate their school environment” (p. 37) and better serve their students (who were mostly of color and from low-income backgrounds). The network succeeded in providing both valuable socio-emotional support and useful opportunities for participants to discuss and share effective teaching strategies. Subsequently, the Boston Public Schools adopted the peer support model districtwide as part of a larger effort to improve the retention of male Teachers of Color.

Like Bristol, several other researchers have turned their attention to the mentorship support provided to novice Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. Not only have they explored the potential benefits of culturally responsive and same-race mentorship, but they also point to the need to better understand the local contexts in which teachers work and the ways in which those conditions shape the power relations between these teachers and their mentors. Three 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 by examining efforts to strengthen mentors’ cultural competence and improve their effectiveness in mentoring Teachers of Color during their clinical teaching experiences.

What the recent research shows

After implementing a study of 38 novice teachers and the narratives they tell about student teaching, Tonya Walls

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found evidence to support the “critical mentoring” model, an approach that aims to redefine the relationship between new Teachers of Color and their mentors. To become more effective at retaining and sustaining such teachers, argues Walls, mentors should begin by recognizing that novices have relevant experiential knowledge — grounded in their racial, cultural, and social identities — that they bring to their teaching and can leverage in their work within classrooms and schools. When provided with critical mentorship paired with critical professional development situated within a social justice framework (Kohli et al., 2015; Weiston-Serdan, 2017), these teachers develop positive attitudes toward teaching, are encouraged to continue to teach with a racial justice orientation, expand their informal support networks, and begin the process of becoming teacher leaders. Walls concludes that critical mentorship can help ensure that these teachers experience their profession in more culturally sustaining (Paris, 2012) and humanizing ways. This is consistent with research that affirms the value of critical mentorship for improving how such teachers experience the racial and cultural climates within the schools in which they serve (Kohli, 2018).

Along similar lines, Amanda Morales and colleagues describe the ways in which critical mentoring involves shifting from traditional, vertical relations — in which mentors avoid explicit discussion of teachers’ racial/ethnic identities and funds of knowledge they bring to the classroom — to a more horizontal orientation. This approach focuses attention on topics related to racial identity, encourages efforts to build informal mentoring networks, and explicitly addresses teachers’ experiences with racial aggressions in their early careers. Focus groups and interview evidence from this study suggest that effective mentoring for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers tends to be relational, not transactional, in nature, with effective mentors appearing to understand their role as a co-learner with the Teacher of Color. In contrast to mentors in more generic programs, critical mentors value the teachers’ culturally relevant expertise and racialized experiences and perspectives, while also providing *authentic care* (Valenzuela, 1999) and collaborative support. Teachers in the study who received this type of critical mentoring experienced a greater sense of confidence and agency, as well as a stronger professional identity early in their careers.

Finally, Belinda Flores and colleagues have studied a model for preparing mentors — with support from a community of practice — to provide culturally responsive induction to new Teachers of Color. They find that this model provides mentors with a safe and trusting space in which to discuss the personal, academic, and professional needs of their mentees. Further, while traditional mentorship models typically ignore the race, culture, and language of mentors and mentees, this approach foregrounds issues of identity and perspective taking, and it asks mentors to consider the demographics of the schools and classrooms in which they and their mentees work.

In short, we see growing interest among researchers in testing out and refining mentorship models and processes that make visible the racialized experiences of new Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, putting those experiences on the table for discussion. Further, recent studies have made use of research methods — teacher testimony, storytelling, and counter-narratives — that highlight the importance of listening carefully to what teachers have to say about their experiences. Critical mentoring, these researchers argue, must seek out and learn from diverse perspectives about the challenges new teachers face and the kinds of mentorship they need.

What we don’t know yet

While recent studies have looked closely at individual mentors and their communities of practice, researchers haven’t filled in the bigger picture, collecting data that show broad patterns and trends in the mentoring Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers receive, or whether they receive more or less the same kinds of mentoring as white teachers. Nor do we have clear information, as yet, as to how the needs of these teachers might differ from those of white teachers,

Research topics to explore

- Critical and culturally effective frameworks for mentorship program designs.
- How Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers experience the different mentorship models — for example, school-based mentoring, community mentoring, co-mentoring, and informal mentoring.
- The varying orientations toward teacher learning within mentoring relationships — for example, critical constructivist, humanistic, critical race and justice, and situated apprenticeship approaches.
- Differentiated mentorship approaches at different stages of teacher development — for example, field and clinical experiences, induction approaches, and targeted support for both novice and veteran Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- The selection and training of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers as mentors and the influence of same-race mentors on their mentees.
- The ways in which supports are tailored to tap the strengths of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers so that they can offer meaningful guidance.

or whether Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian American Pacific-Islander teachers might differ from each other in the kinds of mentoring that benefit them. For instance, perhaps certain forms of mentorship — one-to-one mentoring, small-group mentoring, co-mentoring, and community mentoring — tend to be especially helpful for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, or perhaps the sociopolitical context of the educator preparation program, or of the school or district has an influence on the mentoring relationship.

Further, we do not know much about the types of mentoring that are most helpful at different stages of teachers' development (from early field experiences to clinical teaching, induction, and mid-career), or about the power relations associated with mentors and mentees of differing races, genders, and class backgrounds and how these power relations influence teachers' experiences.

Finally, researchers have only just begun to explore how best to prepare culturally effective Mentors of Color and Indigenous Mentors and to measure their influence on teachers' beliefs, instructional practices, and career development.

Implications for policy and practice

- Culturally responsive and sustaining mentors should recognize their own identity, position, and privilege

and how these affect the mentoring relationship.

- In their work with diverse mentee populations, culturally responsive and sustaining mentors engage in critical reflection that allows for valuable perspective taking.
- Critical mentoring practices should center the personal and professional experiences of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. Culturally responsive and sustaining mentors create communities of practice that are safe, trusting, and nonevaluative spaces for dialogue about instructional concerns, power dynamics, and ethnoracial and social injustices. These communities also prioritize discussions about teachers' personal and professional goals. ■

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Research studies to conduct

- *Practitioner studies*: Given the dearth of research on Mentors of Color and Indigenous Mentors, self-study of practice would expand the knowledge base. Of special interest are the different groups of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, the various school settings in which they work, the variety of engagement and development strategies, and effective approaches for reflecting on and strengthening mentorship expertise.
- *Interpretive studies*: In schools and districts that have substantive mentorship programs in place, field-based observations, interviews and focus groups, and both single case studies and comparative case studies are needed to explore the ways in which these programs address race and racism. Such studies can also look at the structure of mentorship programs, racial stratification between Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers and their mentors, and the various compositions and functions of informal and formal mentoring supports.
- *Design-based studies*: Partners can develop mentorship interventions across diverse school contexts and racial compositions that take into account the percentage of Students, Teachers, and School Leaders of Color as compared to the general school population. Such interventions might examine how to refine mentorship designs to support specific teacher outcomes (for example, teacher learning and engagement) as well as to improve teachers' self-reports of program effectiveness.
- *Effect studies*: Partners can examine causal relationships among mentorship models, designs, or leaders. They can look at Teacher of Color and Indigenous Teacher outcomes related to job satisfaction and retention, as well as student learning outcomes that include nontraditional assessments. Where possible, it's important to use large data sets and pair them with qualitative evidence of mentorship practices to provide more robust explanations related to outcomes.

Example: If the problem of practice is a lack of effective and responsive Mentors of Color and Indigenous Mentors, then partners may work together to craft a theory of change that guides the creation of a critical mentor development program.



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