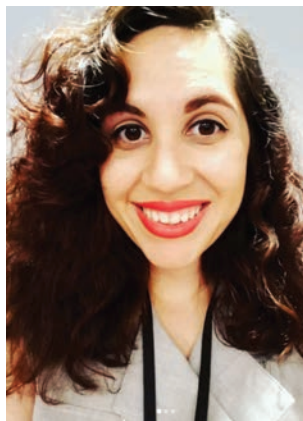


We need more diversity in mentoring

By **Fernanda Pierre**



Having great mentors is crucial to the success and retention of all novice teachers. However, for novice Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, mentors tend to be hard to find, given how underrepresented we are in the profession. In Texas, where I teach, Students of Color account for 73% of public school enrollment (Texas Education Agency, 2019), but Teachers of Color make up just 41% of the faculty (Smith, 2020). If states like Texas truly want to diversify the teaching force, then they will have to build a more diverse network of

mentors, one that provides all new teachers with the support they need.

During my first year of teaching, I was assigned three teacher mentors, all of whom were white women with at least five years of teaching experience. I was comforted to know that these women had demonstrated success in the classroom, but I was disappointed to realize that whoever assigned them to me either assumed it wasn't important for me to work with a diverse team of mentors, or they simply couldn't locate such people.

My primary mentor was an instructional coach provided by my alternative certification program, and the other two included the dean of instruction from my campus and a mentor teacher provided by Teach for America. Fortunately, these women were outstanding coaches, and I had a largely positive experience with them. Still, though, it concerned me that I had no one to talk to about what it was like to work as a Teacher of Color in our school system. During coaching sessions, I felt limited in my ability to express myself authentically, without having to code-switch (i.e., speak in white English). I felt

somewhat vulnerable, and I was hesitant to share some of the more glaring challenges I experienced during my first year of teaching.

Another point of discomfort was that all three of these mentors guided their coaching conversations using a rubric. Even if their feedback didn't count as an official evaluation, I knew I had to appear as successful as possible to make progress on a teacher checklist. I felt pressured to perform, rather than show vulnerability and seek help. Ideally, mentors and novice teachers form personal bonds, allowing them to talk honestly about their personal and professional challenges. But our conversations had to do almost entirely with meeting specific goals and objectives, which left little room to build meaningful relationships.

Instead of resigning myself to spending the year without the sort of mentorship I needed, I drew on networks from my undergraduate days — including friends and members of the university's affinity groups — to assemble a diverse set of additional mentors. I was lucky in that I had friends who were a few years older than me and were already experienced Teachers of Color. With them, I didn't feel the need to put on a persona and conceal what I was actually going through, and when I ran into difficulties, I could immediately go to them for support, including emotional support, without waiting for a scheduled coaching session. Further, they were willing to model their own vulnerability, sharing with me their early-career struggles. Some even admitted that, like me, they felt disappointed in themselves for not having had as big an impact as they wanted on students who reminded them of themselves and their communities. They gave me space to share my failures without having to worry that my remarks would somewhere, somehow be recorded on a report or performance tracker. And they contributed enormously to my initial and continued success in the classroom. By my fifth year of teaching, over 90% of my 8th-grade students passed the state test for Algebra I, which is typically a course students take as 9th graders.

Some might argue that mentor diversity doesn't matter and that great mentors can model and give feedback on good teaching regardless of their background or personal experiences. Indeed, my instructional coaches did help me make dramatic improvements in teaching practice. But that's not the only factor that makes novice teachers feel successful and supported enough to stay in the profession.

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Novice Teachers of Color deserve professional *and personal* support, something that tends to be more readily available to their white counterparts.

I managed to find the support I needed, but it should not be up to novice Teachers of Color to do so on their own, even as they manage all of their other responsibilities and challenges. Nor can we afford to leave their mentoring to chance, or to recruit the same few Mentors of Color year after year, overburdening them. Schools and districts can and should certainly do more to prepare white educators to serve as effective mentors for all new teachers. But they should also take proactive steps

to establish much broader networks among Teachers of Color, creating opportunities for novices to build the professional and personal relationships that will sustain them throughout their careers. ■

References

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