

# Effective supports for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers

By Conra D. Gist, Travis J. Bristol, & Rita Kohli

As an extension of the teacher learning cycle, professional development stretches far beyond the reach of traditional educator preparation programs to support the development of teachers over the trajectory of their careers (Gist et al., 2018). Teachers' needs vary and, as such, development programs vary in structure, time, and focus, but they generally include support for effective instruction in specific content areas, active learning experiences, opportunities for collaboration, and opportunities to study models of effective practice (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; DeMonte, 2017).

The need for professional development support for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers has grown more pronounced as evidence continues to surface that these teachers are leaving the profession at a higher rate than their white

counterparts (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015; Keigher, 2010). However, despite the pressing need for targeted professional development to help Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers navigate the racialized contexts in which they work, few such supports are available (Kohli, 2019).

Although professional development opportunities are commonly offered in schools across the United States, efforts to provide differentiated teacher learning are rare, and past research has suggested that the field of education lags behind other professions in offering such supports (Booth, 1995; Grossman et al., 2009), largely due to the ongoing struggle to define teaching as a profession in which continual growth is expected (Cochran-Smith et al., 2017; Milner, 2013). Today, as calls escalate for professional development that responds to the needs, assets, and commitments of Teachers of Color

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and Indigenous Teachers, the demand for such support becomes all the more pronounced.

In a review of the existing research on professional development models specifically designed to serve Teachers of Color, Rita Kohli (2019) finds that three approaches have received the most attention from researchers: critical literacy development, racial affinity groupings, and teacher-led learning. All three are informed by the particular challenges Teachers of Color experience within their schools (Waite, Mentor, & Bristol, 2018). In response to the experiences of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, some schools and teachers have adopted a “critical professional development” framework that nurtures teachers’ commitment to political and racial justice. Four recent studies described in the *Handbook of Research on Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers* (Gist & Bristol, forthcoming, 2022) highlight the value of these critical professional development frameworks.

### What the recent research shows

Wanda Watson and Natalee Kēhaulani Bauer examine a university-affiliated professional development program focusing on critical literacy development, run by Teacher Educators of Color for Elementary Teachers of Color who are committed to ethnic studies. In response to the sense of racial and ideological isolation these teachers experienced at work, the teacher educators turned to critical race inquiry as a means of creating community and disrupting racism in the teachers’ schools. Based on an analysis of teacher interviews, the researchers find that participants valued this professional development because it drew on their collective experiences, enabled them to learn in community, and held them accountable to an ongoing process of learning about and reflecting on how they might develop and teach their own ethnic studies curriculum despite resistance or even hostility from their colleagues. After participating in the program, the teachers became more active in confronting racism at their schools by speaking up about bias, leading equity-centered and antiracist professional development, and explaining why they rejected the given curriculum and intended to replace it with culturally relevant lessons and materials. They also participated in larger school- and districtwide efforts to adopt ethnic studies throughout their K-8 grade curriculum, as well as antiracist, antibias curriculum and related professional development.

In a study of the use of racial affinity spaces in teacher development, Belinda Bellinger and Micia Mosely examine the Black Teacher Project (BTP), a professional learning community for Black teachers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The authors, who were also participants in the program, used journaling, archival notes, interviews of each other, and ethnographic field notes to understand how the BTP supports Black teachers. For Bellinger, having a space to reflect on and share openly about her school-based challenges helped

her to address microaggressions from fellow teachers, parents, and students, and to understand that Black teachers in other Bay-area schools had similar experiences. Moreover, the researchers describe how participating in BTP created “healing practices” that allowed participants to better serve their students.

In their research on another aspect of professional development, Anna Lees and colleagues examine a statewide teacher-led model in which Indigenous Educators — rejecting what they see as a Eurocentric approach to teaching and learning — provide professional development to settler teachers (that is, non-indigenous teachers). The model focuses on land education, which emphasizes Indigenous Peoples’ relationship with their nonhuman relatives and sacred landscapes (Cajete, 2000; Deloria & Wildcat, 2001; Simpson, 2017). This Indigenous Teacher-led model aims

### Research topics to explore

- Critically conscious and racial justice-oriented professional development design, curriculum, and assessments.
- How professional development can support agency, advocacy, or community engagement among Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- The relationship between critically conscious and racial justice-oriented professional development support and student and teacher outcomes.
- The intersection between critically conscious and racial justice-oriented professional development and the psycho-socio-emotional development and well-being of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- The integration of critically conscious and racial justice-oriented professionals alongside or in concert with induction and mentorship supports for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- The nature, formation, and function of informal professional development networks for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.
- The feasibility of professional development generated by Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers and an assessment of the labor burden involved.
- The roles that school leaders and working conditions play in influencing the efficacy and impact of professional development for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers.

to confront the logic behind settler colonialism, promote practices that will secure positive Indigenous futures, and center the political goal of decolonization (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014).

Finally, Rita Kohli and colleagues describe research that expands the concept of critical professional development to encompass supporting the holistic needs of Teachers of Color, including their professional, socio-emotional, and physical well-being. Through an analysis of data collected from Teachers of Color who attended a continuing professional development session, the authors find that those who were struggling in their schools increased their self-efficacy and sense of belonging in the profession by having professional development that focused on three specific concerns: 1) addressing the impact of racism by providing a space for reflecting, healing, and developing skills to resist, 2) responding to their racial and ideological isolation by facilitating community building, and 3) offering opportunities for culturally sustaining professional growth. Because Teachers of Color are struggling with more than just how to engage students through curriculum or pedagogy, their professional development must respond to the complex struggles of working on behalf of communities of color in a predominantly white and often hostile professional context.

What's clear from the small body of research into critical professional development is that Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers often have to seek the support they need outside the school building. Further, if the schools in which these teachers are placed lack a commitment to

educational and racial justice for students, it's unrealistic to expect that such commitments will extend to teachers. Thus, studies informed by these kinds of support should be conducted in schools committed to racial and educational justice.

### What we don't know yet

To offer more effective support, we need to understand the types of professional development, including critical professional development, that are most meaningful for Teachers of Color after their first two or three years of teaching. These might include critical consciousness and racial justice-focused sessions, content-focused instruction, active learning experiences, opportunities for collaboration, or models of effective practice. Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers from different disciplinary backgrounds, school types, geographic locations, working conditions, or years of teaching or leading in schools might assess specific professional development opportunities differently. Understanding these differences would be helpful.

We need to learn more about the kinds of professional development networks that Teachers of Color cultivate and sustain, as well as the role that school leaders play in supporting them. How effective are these networks in fostering positive teacher outcomes, such as retention, teacher effectiveness, teacher engagement, and persistence? What types of school or district policies and practices best support these networks? We need to identify the barriers to providing such networks and learn how to effectively address those barriers.

## Research studies to conduct

- *Interpretive studies:* Researchers can use the critical professional development framework (Kohli, 2019) to design comparative case studies across different geographic and sociopolitical contexts that examine professional development approaches — such as online, small-group, whole-group, or coaching models — and the ways in which Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers experience and make meaning of them.
- *Design-based studies:* Researchers can create critical professional development design interventions, such as leadership development programs, teacher agency curricula, or programs dealing with racial microaggressions and resilience in school contexts. They can then refine these interventions to support such teacher outcomes as leadership growth, an increase in agency and advocacy, and an increase in socio-emotional support and tools.
- *Effect studies:* Differentiating for school context, researchers can examine the relationship between the provision or absence of critically conscious and racial justice-oriented professional development support and the persistence and retention of Teachers of Color, student learning outcomes, and teacher self-reports of psycho-socio-emotional well-being.

**Example:** If the problem of practice is the number of Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers reporting a hostile racial climate in collegial interactions, then research might focus on implementing evidence-based programmatic interventions tailored to meet the teachers' needs. Additional partners for addressing this problem could include racial climate and organizational psychology researchers, experts in racial battle fatigue, designers of equity and racial justice learning experiences, and business and education leadership scholars.

We also need to look beyond traditional forms of professional development to more informal and holistic approaches, such as racial affinity groupings, self-guided or teacher-led structures, and approaches that seek to cultivate teachers' critical consciousness to support their socio-emotional, physical, and spiritual health.

## Implications for policy and practice

- Provide differentiated and tailored professional support for Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers that extends beyond the teacher induction period. These supports should enhance the teachers' ability to resist their racialization, acknowledge and attend to their intersecting identities, and augment their ability to succeed and thrive in the profession.
- Routinely create safe and culturally sustaining feedback loops or forums in which Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers can voice their professional needs and drive the creation of policies, practices, and procedures to address those needs in both the short and long term.
- Offer district and school leadership training on effective professional development pedagogies and practices for supporting and developing Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers. ■

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