

Teacher preparation must attend to equity

By Verna Wong



I was naive to think that adding my Brown face to a predominantly white profession would be the answer to our broken education system. I was charismatic, young, intelligent, knew how to navigate whiteness, and was determined to confront inequities. Yet, after four years in an accredited teacher preparation program, I still didn't know how to practice the types of community-oriented, liberatory pedagogies that I hoped to enact. My program had prepared us to work in schools that celebrated individualism, meritocracy, and hierarchy.

It hadn't embraced the more collective ways of knowing that are valued in many Black, Indigenous, Latinx, and Asian communities, and as a result, it had done little to affirm the practices and pedagogies that had drawn me to work in education.

My earliest memories of learning are of my father teaching me Cantonese poems as a young girl, long before I developed my strong English tongue. These poems were passed down to him from his mother and her parents. It wasn't until I entered school in a white, upper-class community in Minnesota that I lost those verses, stories of wisdom passed down through oral traditions. I tucked away those memories of myself as a young girl learning from my father. And throughout my K-12 years, nobody recognized my bilingual, lyrical, communal, and familial experiences as assets.

As an undergraduate, I was hyperaware of the extent to which every class, assignment, and reading list was grounded in whiteness, leaving me racially and ideologically isolated. The curriculum seemed to be designed for the comfort and development of my peers, not for me. Whenever I heard a student or professor make a generalizing

assumption about a specific community or assert their own values to be normal and superior, I spoke back, challenging their ignorance. But the coursework provided little room for my own reflection and growth.

At the end of my program, the department held a banquet to celebrate the accomplishments of graduating teacher candidates. I was asked to deliver one of the two speeches on behalf of the class. The banquet's theme was "Along the Trail," so I drafted a speech about the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which enabled my parents to come to the U.S. as refugees. My department chair was pleased with the draft, noting that my remarks would nicely complement the second speech, which was written by an elementary teacher candidate, a white female who had also excelled in the program. It didn't seem to bother the department chair that the second speech celebrated Westward Expansion.

It was not my job to speak to this peer, nor was it my job to enlighten my department chair about the atrocities of colonial settlement. I was graduating and leaving the program; their racism would no longer affect me directly. But I was embarrassed and enraged by their sense of entitlement, their unthinking assumption that all history centers on their existence, even if that means erasing the land theft, genocide, and forced labor that "expansion" entailed, all to continue notions of white superiority, freedom, and opportunity.

On my campus, I sought out Faculty of Color. I was a teaching assistant for a Black professor and worked closely with East Asian and Southeast Asian faculty. I also had a small community of Students of Color, who became my closest companions on campus. It was in these small organic spaces where I grew the most, orienting my collective ways of knowing and my relationships to others. This community validated my cultural and racial identity that was so often ignored in my program.

Nevertheless, we were all tired of the isolation and of our lack of agency and power to craft an anti-racist vision for our institution of learning. I felt painfully disappointed at the end of my program, knowing that the teachers to whom I had addressed my speech that night — perhaps unknowingly even myself — were likely to perpetuate harmful teaching practices.

Since that time, in my 12 years as a teacher, I have had the privilege of mentoring a number of Teacher Candidates of Color, and each one has said that their program has given them no preparation in

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the sort of critical pedagogy they want to practice. Like me, they have had to seek out teachers who can model courageous leadership and practices of care in and outside the classroom. And like me, they have had to pursue professional development on their own (and using their own money) to learn how to manage the day-to-day challenges of working in an educational system that clings to white supremacy.

Minnesota's teaching force hasn't changed much since I entered the profession. Students of Color and Indigenous Students now make up 33.5% of our public school enrollment, but the number of Black, Asian, Latinx, and Indigenous teachers has remained stagnant, at 4.3% (Wilder Research, 2019). And while Minnesota has a reputation for strong schools, the truth is that students are thriving only in our white, affluent communities; our achievement gap is still one of the largest in the United States.

Retaining teachers, especially Teachers of Color and Indigenous Teachers, is a crucial means of

shifting to more equitable outcomes for our students. Teacher preparation programs must better prepare all teachers to engage in equity practices that can result in long-term changes in our education systems and the racial climates in our schools, without relying on the few Teacher Candidates and Faculty of Color to do the work for them. For us Teachers of Color, it means a dynamic and differentiated program that centers, affirms, and sustains our lived experiences, communities, and identities.

Community matters. Building support systems in which Teachers of Color can thrive is crucial for preparing *all* teachers fully for their careers in education. ■

Reference

Wilder Research. (2019). *2019 Biennial Minnesota teacher supply and demand*. Author.