

From Student of Color to Teacher of Color

By Shivani Goyal



It was the first of many campus involvement fairs for me. I had just started college, and as I walked by rows of tables, older students tried to engage me in conversation about their clubs and programs. I was eager to embrace all that college was about, and I collected brochure after brochure. A table with a banner reading “*Teach*” caught my attention. I had no plans to go into education, but the person behind the table caught my eye and took advantage of the opportunity to try to recruit me. I smiled and politely declined.

Teaching had once been my goal, but now I was decidedly on the path to either a Ph.D. or medical school.

Throughout my childhood, I had loved the idea of working with kids. I remember creating pretend homework for my younger brother and making him do it, just so I could use my red pen to grade it. But somewhere along the way, the desire to pursue teaching was quieted by the nudges to do *more*. I was always told, “But Shivani, you’re so smart! You could do anything, so why teaching?” My family members and guidance counselors alike pushed me to think about business school, medical school, anything but a career in education. If I really wanted to be in the classroom, they said, I should get a Ph.D. and teach at a university, something that offered higher pay and more prestige.

These people had my best interests at heart, and I knew they wouldn’t steer me wrong, so I decided they were right. Plus, why would someone who takes honors and AP classes, and who has a 4.0 grade point average and a competitive ACT score, pursue teaching? I could be so much more than *just a teacher*.

From that point forward, whenever anybody brought up the possibility of a teaching career, tempting me to reignite my childhood dream, I refused to consider it. I recycled the teaching college brochures and deleted the emails inviting me to meetings to talk about my interest in education. For half of my college career, I remained firm in my plans. I knew the path I was on, and it didn’t involve working in a classroom.

Then, during my junior year, I took a service-learning course. I would be an after-school tutor at a local Title I elementary school. I was excited by the prospect of working with kids, but I had no way of anticipating how it would change my professional trajectory.

I stepped into Pond Gap Elementary School and saw a classroom full of children who looked like me — something I had never seen before. Every 2nd grader in the after-school program was significantly behind academically. Over the next two years of tutoring, I was confronted with many realities that I had never encountered before. I’m an Indian immigrant whose family traveled across the oceans and settled down in Knoxville, Tennessee, when I was eight years old. I attended elementary school just a few miles away from Pond Gap, but my school was predominantly white, and I was the only Indian girl. My peers didn’t look like me, and my teachers didn’t look like me, and that was that. I thought it was normal that I never had a teacher who could communicate with my parents due to the language barrier. I thought it was *normal* that I was never assigned a book written by an Indian author or featuring Indian characters. It all seemed normal because, in my school, white was the majority.

At Pond Gap, as at many schools across the United States, the majority of students are not white, but the teachers are. Nationwide, the percentage of Teachers of Color increased from 12.5% in 1987 to 19.9% in 2015. However, the enrollment of Students of Color increased even faster — reaching 51% in 2015 (Garza, 2018).

A growing body of research suggests that in schools with more teacher diversity, Students of Color tend to perform better academically and have higher graduation rates, and *all* students “report having positive perceptions of their Teachers of Color, including feeling cared for and academically challenged” (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Further, Teachers of Color tend to implement more culturally competent practices and to build a more inclusive school culture. And yet, despite the benefits of teacher

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diversity, several factors — such as relatively low teacher pay and perceived low status — make it difficult to recruit high-quality Teachers of Color.

My time at Pond Gap showed me that the norm must change. I decided it was time I developed a new conviction. Brown and Black children need to see themselves in the educators they learn from. They need to see themselves as *normal*. Just as important, they need to see the teaching profession as something to strive for — and they need to see it early on.

Because I came to this realization so late in my college career, it was no longer an option to pursue an undergraduate degree in education, so I decided to take an alternative pathway to licensure. I wish that my passion for teaching had never been extinguished at all, though. The Shivani who saw the joy of teaching at age 10 should have known all along, and especially when she walked by the table urging first-year college students to enter the teaching program, that this was the right profession for her.

As a nation, we must recruit much greater numbers of Teachers of Color, bringing student and teacher demographics into better alignment, and that begins, first of all, with boosting the numbers of Students of Color in universities — in 2013, for instance, 42% of white students ages 18-24 were

enrolled in college, compared to 34% of Black and Latinx students (Marcus, 2018).

Second, we need to become much more intentional about recruiting future teachers throughout the K-12 years. Rather than being talked out of teaching, Students of Color who have a passion for the work and the skills to excel in it should have opportunities to harness those skills through guided internships and mentoring by Teachers of Color. We need a transformative shift in what is possible for the students who fill our schools, and Teachers of Color must be part of that shift. After all, how can we move Students of Color forward if we leave Teachers of Color behind? ■

References

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