

Experiences of Teachers of Color in the Puget Sound Region

Prepared for Puget Sound Educational Service District
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OVERVIEW

This document provides a summary of feedback obtained via focus groups with teachers of color in the Puget Sound region. These focus group conversations centered on learning more about the experiences of teachers of color and what is needed to help them feel successful and supported in their respective schools and districts.

CONTEXT

Currently, teachers of color comprise roughly ten percent of the total teacher population in Washington State. In contrast, forty-four percent of the student population in the state is made of up students of color.¹ This trend is mirrored in districts across the area served by the Puget Sound Educational Service District and highlights an acute shortage of teachers of color in the region. Studies on teacher recruitment and retention indicate that teachers of color are not only less likely to be present in classrooms; they are also less likely to remain in the teaching profession than their white counterparts.² However, the teaching force in the United States does not match the student population. Nearly fifty percent of the students in our country are students of color while only twenty percent of teachers are teachers of color. Recent studies show that teachers of color are beneficial for all students, not only students of color.³ According to studies, teacher diversity can reduce dropout rates, improve attendance and reduce suspension and expulsion rates among students of color. There are currently robust efforts underway in Washington State to diversify the teacher workforce, however there is generally little effort to retain teachers of color once they enter the classroom.

To reverse these trends, the Puget Sound Educational Service District will pilot a program that is focused on supporting and retaining teachers of color across the region called the Educators of Color Leadership Community. Participants will take part in a yearlong professional learning and networking program with the sponsorship from their schools and districts. This report summarizes the themes from a series of focus groups conducted with teachers of color currently teaching in schools across the region to better understand their needs and experiences.

¹ OSPI (2016). Key Facts About Washington Schools. <http://www.k12.wa.us/AboutUs/KeyFacts.aspx>

² Achinstein, B., Ogawa, R. T., Sexton, D., & Freitas, C. (2010). Retaining teachers of color: A pressing problem and a potential strategy for "hard-to-staff" schools. *Review of Educational Research*, 80(1), 71-107.

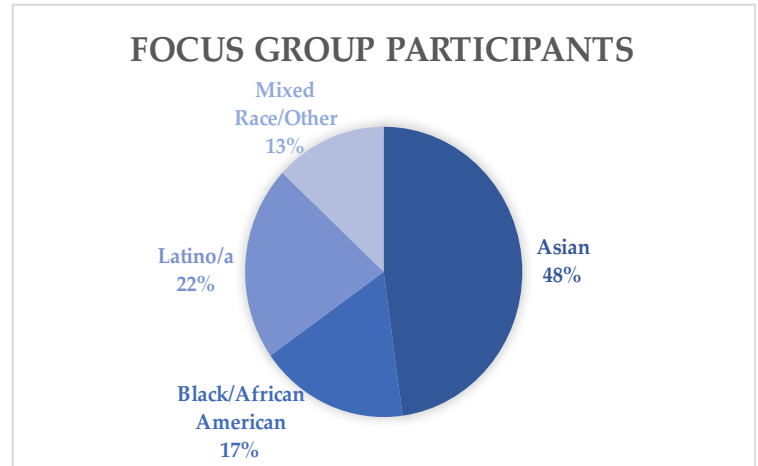
³ Gershenson, S., Hart, C., Lindsay, C., Papageorge, N. (2017) The Long-Run Impacts of Same Race Teachers. IZA institute of Labor Economics, Discussion Paper Series



INTERVIEW DETAILS

A PSESD staff member conducted focus group interviews with teachers of color during Spring 2017. Teachers voluntarily participated in the focus groups and there were twenty-one participants across seven districts in the Puget Sound region in total. The representative districts included Auburn, Bellevue, Federal Way, Highline, Issaquah, Kent and Renton. The demographics of the participants are summarized in the corresponding chart⁴.

The focus group questions focused on several themes. The first was to understand the background and context where teachers of color are teaching. The second was to surface the challenges teachers of color face in their schools and districts. The final set of questions focused on the types of supports and professional learning opportunities sought by teachers of color.



RESULTS

The section below provides a description of the themes that emerged from the focus group conversations. These results are organized into four sections a) The role of supportive leaders and colleagues, b) Racialized interactions with students and families, c) Navigating racism and racial (micro) aggressions and d) Dealing with exhaustion.

The Role of Supportive Leaders and Colleagues

Teachers of color who felt supported in their school building named their principal and/or grade level team as key figures of support. Teachers of color who felt supported by their principal described the importance of having a principal who protects, advocates and respects his/her teachers of color. Participants described supportive principals as equity leaders who maintain a strong vision for their school's success and are willing to unpack their

⁴ The racial categories are based on how the Washington Office of the Superintendent report teacher race in their annual report card. For additional details see: <http://reportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/summary.aspx?groupLevel=District&schoolId=1&reportLevel=State&yrs=2016-17&year=2016-17>



own power and privilege in order to advance an equity agenda in their school building. One participant shared that his principal supported him to start a black history club at recess and was committed to discussing his privilege as a white, male leader. Alternatively, several participants described school leaders who were not adept at navigating conversations about race and power. Participants described these leaders as individuals who lack training and often fail to recognize the assets that teachers of color bring to a school. In some cases, participants mentioned having stronger connections with principals of color, however acknowledged that the majority of school leaders in their district(s) were white and that it ultimately came down to a principal's willingness to support teachers of color his/her building regardless of their race. They acknowledged that it was not necessary for a principal to be a person of color in order to be an equity leader and/or value the contributions of the teachers of color in his/her building.

Similarly, several participants described their grade level team as key in helping them “survive” and “stay sane.” Supportive grade level colleagues helped teachers of color feel respected for their teaching ability and contributed to them feeling more prepared and effective in their own teaching practice. One participant described her grade level team as the reason she stays at her school and another participant said she and her grade level team work closely together to support struggling students, which makes her feel like she is having a greater impact at her school. Conversely, one participant described a grade level team that negatively impacted his teaching and overall experience at his school. He expressed that his team has isolated him, maintained deficit thinking about students and other teachers of color, and have not supported him in grade level planning. As the only African-American male teacher in the school, he described feeling isolated and disrespected by his grade level team. He stated that he intends to stay at his school despite this, mostly in order to support his family and continue to be a positive role model for students.

Racialized Interactions with Students and Families

Many of the participants spoke about navigating relationships with students and families. In particular, teachers of color across the board shared the perspective that teachers of color can more easily relate to students and families of color. Participants described being able to connect with students and families of color more easily based on shared experiences of poverty, racism, and/or immigration, for example. Several teachers shared that parents either come to them or other teachers send parents of color to them for support for things such as



translation, advocating for their child, and/or navigating the school system. Participants shared that many parents and students come to them because they feel “understood,” “seen,” and/or they share a common understanding of the community in which the school resides. Numerous teachers described the inspiration for them to become a teacher was to play this role for students and families of color, often based on their own experiences in school. They also described wanting to be positive role models for students of color to pursue their dreams and navigate challenges they may face. Several participants shared that they feel a responsibility to go above and beyond to support and connect with students and families of color. For example, participants said they go out of their way to share their personal stories and make sure to conduct home visits. According to participants, these activities help build a relationship with families and make them feel comfortable and welcome at school.

While participants shared that they were happy to support families of color, many felt that white teachers did not do enough to build the same connections. There was a sentiment that several participants shared that many white teachers perpetuated racial and cultural stereotypes and did not make the necessary effort to build relationships with students and families of color. In addition, participants also shared that it could be difficult engaging with white students and families as one of only a handful of teachers of color in their school/district. For example, one non-native English teacher told a story about a parent who went to her principal to complain that her English was not good enough for her to be a teacher. Similarly, a participant shared that white students often make fun of her accent or will tease her if she misspells a word. Another teacher shared the challenge of talking about race and privilege with mostly white students in a way that both honors her experience as a person of color and creates a productive learning experience for students in her class. While these experiences were not universal for all focus group participants, there was a broad sentiment that teachers of color often had to work hard for the approval of white teachers, students and/or parents.

Navigating Racism and Racial (Micro) Aggressions

Nearly every teacher of color who participated in the focus groups described challenges related to navigating racism in their school and/or district. While the severity and frequency of these experiences varied, there was an overwhelming awareness of the difficulties associated with being a teacher of color in schools with predominately white teachers and school leaders. Several teachers of color shared that they feel as though they are treated differently than their white counterparts. One teacher said that she felt as though she is not given the same respect,



and another teacher expressed that he feels like he is held to a higher standard than his white colleagues. As one teacher shared, “I am always trying to prove myself and it’s never enough.” Another teacher echoed, “I do social justice work outside of teaching, I have an advanced degree yet I do not get recognized for my expertise. I have to work harder than my white friends.” One teacher shared that teachers of color were often overlooked for leadership opportunities, such as supporting the district’s cultural competency training efforts. She said, “Cultural competency by a white male? Why is he qualified to [train] me on cultural competency?” While overlooked for formal leadership opportunities and expertise, several teachers shared that they are often asked to speak on behalf of their race and/or culture when it comes to certain issues. Many teachers felt like their opinion did not carry the same weight as the opinion of white teachers, resulting in them often feeling “invisible” or “isolated” being one of only a few teachers of color in their school and/or district.

In light of these experiences, several teachers talked about feeling powerless in the face of racist comments, policies and/or practices. A theme that emerged among focus group participants was the difficulty of reacting to instances when colleagues or school leaders say things they perceive to be racist. Several teachers stated that they felt like people make inaccurate assumptions about them based on their race or background and that it can be difficult to build relationships with other teachers as a result. One teacher said, “I’ve had some conversations with a colleague who said racist things, which bothered me. And I didn’t say anything which bothered me even more.” Another teacher shared, “They get to say things but we don’t get to be angry about it. We have to be professional but they don’t. They don’t get any consequences but if I step out of line I do.” Other participants expressed frustration that they had to be “cautious” so that they were not perceived as an angry person of color. While not all participants described having these types of experiences, it was a source of stress for the teachers who did encounter these types of situations.

Dealing with Exhaustion

Undoubtedly, the teaching profession is one that requires stamina and dedication regardless of one’s background. However, several participants spoke about an additional effort that is required of teachers of color in order to be successful in teaching and navigating the school environment. As one teacher put it, “The little things wear you down.” Teachers described providing additional support for students and families of color outside their class and grade level, having to be a voice for equity and inclusion, and working extra hard to build



relationships with colleagues. Participants shared that they are often making adjustments and suggestions for diversifying and including different perspectives in the curriculum as well. One teacher shared, “I get exhausted explaining to people that not all people who speak Spanish are Mexican. But you have to choose your battles.” One teacher explained that she is considering leaving the profession because she is having difficulty with particular students. She shared that one student recently told her that she should “learn to speak English” if she wants to be a teacher.

According to several focus group participants, some of the “invisible tax⁵” on teachers of color is mitigated by their ability to identify allies and build positive relationships with both their school leader(s) and other teachers. Teachers shared that whenever possible they lean on other teachers of color for emotional support, but in many cases they were only one or two teachers of color in a given school so this was not always a possibility. The majority of participants expressed that there were no comprehensive supports provided for teachers of color in their school or district.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the purposes of these focus groups was to better understand the experiences of teachers of color so as to inform the design of an Equity Fellows program to support teachers of color across the region. As a part of the focus group conversations, participants were asked specifically to give input into what professional learning opportunities they felt best suited their needs. The section below summarizes the feedback focus group participants provided.

Professional Development

There were several themes that emerged related to the types of professional development desired by teachers of color who participated in the focus groups. In general, most teachers agreed that more professional support, particularly at the site level. However, there was also some professional development fatigue and a desire for more professional learning offerings that are focused on race and equity. Teachers also requested professional development that is embedded in their district context and aligned with their grade level and/or content area so that it is relevant to their experiences. Several teachers suggested that more teachers of color should be given the opportunities to provide professional development for other teachers, particularly as it pertains to race, equity and cultural competency. One

⁵ King, J. (2016) *The Invisible Tax on Teachers of Color*. Washington Post



teacher also added that individuals who facilitate professional learning for teachers of color should bring both intellectual and emotional competencies to be able to create a productive space for teachers of color to share and learn together. Outside of formal professional learning opportunities, several participants suggested that they would welcome gestures that make them feel more valued in their school or district overall.

Some of the suggested professional development topics included:

- Cultural competency trainings
- How to help students feel empowered and develop positive cultural identities
- Tools on how to have conversations with students about navigating white spaces
- Resources and training on how to support students with trauma and stress
- Stress management for teachers
- Tools for courageous conversations and constructive dialogues about race
- Training for principals around culturally responsive mentoring and how to retain teachers of color

Mentoring and Networking

Most participants agreed it would be helpful to connect with other teachers of color in some capacity. There was considerable enthusiasm for being paired with another teacher who could act in a mentoring capacity, particularly among newer teachers. Teachers thought that this person should be a person of color and someone who is currently teaching students of a similar age in their district. Several teachers suggested that it would be helpful to have mentor who can help them process difficult experiences and conversations, and act as a sounding board or third party as they navigate their school environment.

The majority of teachers who provided feedback said that they would appreciate time to network with other teachers of color, particularly within their own district. Several participants said that a community of other teachers of color would be helpful for sharing experiences, processing difficult conversations and generally providing support for one another. Some networking formats were preferred over others, however. For example, there were mixed feelings among participants about happy hours as a productive space for networking with other teachers. Several teachers expressed that happy hours lack the necessary structure and focus to be productive. However, at the same time several teachers also suggested that networking opportunities need to be fun, and perhaps take place during the summer when there are fewer demands on teachers' time. Some other suggestions that



emerged were family-friendly potlucks, socratic seminars, and award ceremonies to recognize the contributions of teachers of color.

Feedback on Final Project Parameters

The general sentiment among participants was that a final project is a good opportunity for reflection and exchanging ideas. However, several teachers expressed concern that a final project would add to teachers' already heavy workloads. Numerous teachers suggested that a final project should be embedded in work teachers were already doing for their classroom or school. In addition, it was suggested that teachers should be permitted to work alone or in groups to complete the projects. A couple teachers suggested that there should be a final celebration with food and a keynote speaker where participating teachers can showcase their projects. Overall, there was openness to a final project as long as there was flexibility to ensure projects were relevant and not too burdensome.

CONCLUSION

Based on the feedback provided by focus group participants, there is an unmistakable need for additional support for teachers of color in the Puget Sound region. Many teachers of color expressed frustration, isolation, and exhaustion as a result of their experiences and offered a variety of ideas for how to mitigate some of these challenges. Thus, there was broad enthusiasm around a program designed specifically to support teachers of color.

Per the input from focus group participants, the key elements of a retention program for teachers of color in should a) connect teachers of color to one another within a given district, b) provide different types of engagement opportunities (i.e. learning, networking, mentoring), and c) create opportunities for teacher voice, expertise and leadership. In addition, there is also an opportunity to engage in dialogue with white allies and school and district leaders about how they can support teachers of color on an ongoing basis.

Ultimately, the solution to retaining teachers of color in schools across our region is a multifaceted one that will require coordination between myriad institutions that recruit, train and employ teachers of color. The program proposed by the Puget Sound Educational Service District is a critical first step towards ensuring teachers of color stay in the profession to serve the diverse students and families across our region.