VCU School of Education
Minority Education Center

SUPPORTING BLACK TEACHERS AND TEACHER CANDIDATES THROUGH AFFINITY GROUPS

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Introduction

The growing racial and cultural diversity of the K-12 student populations in the United States is in direct contrast with the racial demographics of teachers, with 79% of the teacher workforce comprised of White teachers (with only 48% of the student population made up of White students) and 7% comprised of Black teachers (with 15% of the student population made up of Black student)(The Condition of Education, 2020). There is a clear need for increased numbers of Black teachers in U.S. schools. Research has shown that Black students can benefit from being taught by Black teachers, including having better social-emotional health and higher academic achievements (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). Various strategies are being used to recruit and retain Black teachers. These strategies include, but are not limited to, scholarship and loan forgiveness programs, teacher residency models, targeted recruiting, grow your own programs, and continual mentoring or support (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Falling under the category of continual mentoring or support, affinity groups, which are a group of people having shared characteristics who meet to share similar experiences and learn together are currently being put into practice at Virginia Commonwealth University (Douglas, 2008; Segal, 2013).

Problem and recommendations

Problem: Black teachers experience unique challenges in teacher preparation programs and while working within school systems. Black teachers are often forced to navigate systems with ingrained racism and may also experience a "loner effect" when in primarily White preparation programs and working in K-12 schools (Bristol, 2018; Bristol et al., 2020; Gist, 2017).

Recommendation: Establish affinity groups for Black preservice and in-service teachers. Officials at the Minority Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Equity Center (MERREC) have funded several affinity groups, and in a few of the affinity groups, members are focusing on improving the social-emotional health of Black preservice and in-service teachers and providing requested professional development to members of the groups.

Current Experiences of Black Pre-Service and In-Service Teachers

The institutional racism that exists in school systems leaves many Black teachers and potential teachers in a "double bind" (Gist, 2017, p. 928). Black teachers and potential teachers have felt called to be educators to improve the school systems but are often worn down or emotionally damaged by the systemic inequities that they have encountered (Gist, 2017). Gist (2018) found that preservice teachers of color struggle to find a sense of belonging in their programs. It was found that preservice teachers of color felt they had to "battle" against the traditional views of their programs (Gist, 2018, p. 524). In-service teachers of color face similar challenges, especially those who work in schools with predominately White teachers. Researchers have shown that in-service teachers of color may experience a "loner effect," in which they do not feel fully welcomed by their coworkers, do not receive the professional development they need, and are overburdened with duties outside of their job descriptions (Bristol, 2018).

Affinity Groups

Bristol (2020) found, in his study of Black male teachers, that affinity groups provided a safe space for participants to discuss their needs, share skills, and feel empowered to advocate for themselves and others. Gist (2018) echoed the findings of Bristol (2020) and recommended that groups such as affinity groups be formed to support teachers of color.

Social-Emotional Support

Social-emotional support is one of the critical elements of affinity groups for Black teachers. Meeting with other Black teachers allowed the participants to feel free to share their experiences and concerns without worrying about the feelings of their White colleagues (Picower & Kohli, 2017). As a result of sharing their experiences, members of the group were able to form a "critical camaraderie" where they developed a sense of trust and comfort within the group (Pour-Khorshid, 2018, p. 322).

and comfort within the group (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). Based on the sense of trust found in the affinity groups, Black teachers felt more connected and supported within their profession (Will, 2020).

Critical Professional Development

Mosely (2018) suggested that allowing Black teachers to engage in professional development within affinity groups allows them to become better teachers and results in better retention of Black teachers. One reason was that Black teachers learned from veterans in the field who had encountered similar challenges (Mosely, 2018). Bristol (2020) found similar results in his study of affinity groups for Black male teachers who were participating in an alternative certification program. The Black male pre-service teachers that participated in the program reported working with a veteran Black male teacher allowed them to learn classroom practices more easily than they would have within a traditional class because the veteran Black male teacher had knowledge that was unique to him as a man of color (Bristol, 2020).

Advocacy

Advocacy is another important element of affinity groups. Mosely (2018) found that participants in affinity groups were able to learn how to advocate for themselves and others without the strong negative emotional effects that can occur from constantly navigating and advocating in a space where they are the minority. Bristol (2020) found that affinity group members learned about self-advocacy. Specifically, participants reported learning to advocate for their own professional development within their schools and setting boundaries to promote self-care (Bristol, 2020).

> **"Some of the self-care practices and understanding it is okay to say no as a new teacher... [We] forget to take care of ourselves, and we have learned that it's okay to say no sometimes."**
> **- Mario (p. 493, Bristol, 2020)**

About MERREC affinity groups

The goal of the leaders of VCU's Minority Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Equity Center (MERREC) is to use their resources to support both preservice and in-service teachers from historically underrepresented groups (e.g., teachers of color) (MERREC, 2021). MERREC began implementing the support resource of affinity groups in fall 2020. Particular areas of need were indicated based on results from a survey sent to VCU School of Education students and Alumni, and groups were created based on the needs. Initial areas of need that were indicated were groups for teachers of color, first-generation college students, LGBTQ+, and mental health. Based on the interest of leaders and participants in the fall, individuals from MERREC currently facilitate several affinity groups, with a few formed by Black teachers: Male Teachers of Color, Teachers of Color, and Wellness for Black Doctoral Students. The Collective, a group that was previously formed at VCU, has also joined MERREC as an affinity group. In each of these groups, a volunteer leader or leaders conducts the group activities with support and funds provided to their group through MERREC.

The goals of the affinity groups are varied. Leaders of The Collective aim to bring an antiracist infrastructure to VCU, while the leaders of the Wellness for Black Doctoral Students group focus on supporting health using fictive kinship and African ancestral traditions. However, members of all groups are working towards a common goal of creating a safe space for historically underrepresented minority teachers to meet, make connections, and receive support. Group members have planned some of the following activities for this year: book groups, inviting speakers to share at meetings, creating resource libraries for other minority educators, attending conferences, and providing professional development.

This session reflected the purpose of the group and was a meaningful use of my time.

20%
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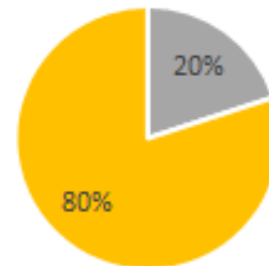
■ Agree ■ Strongly Agree

Participant responses to the affinity groups have been very positive. After each session, participants of each affinity group complete a survey responding to questions about what activities they participated in and how they felt supported the activities. As seen in the graph above, 100% of responses have indicated that the group sessions have been meaningful, with 20% of participants agreeing and 80% of participants strongly agreeing. Many participants have shared they enjoyed having conversations with other teachers of color. One participant shared a benefit of the session was, "Listening to shared experiences of being the only Black male in a unit/department/school. It was encouraging to know that others had experienced this as well. The ability to share my story and it to be appreciated was heartfelt and encouraging."

"I believe the biggest benefit of this group is the opportunity to connect with men of color in a safe space while also learning how to navigate the field of education" MERREC affinity group member

Recommendations for practice

Recommendation One: Allocate funding to facilitate the creation of affinity groups.

Allocate funding to facilitate the creation of affinity groups. Teacher preparation program leaders and school district officials should allocate money in their budgets to supporting affinity groups. Not only do affinity groups improve and support the well-being and professional development of their members, but participation in affinity groups also improves the retention of teachers of color (Mosely, 2018).

Recommendation Two: Gauge the needs of the community to determine what groups should be created.

Gauge the needs of community members to determine what groups should be created. Affinity groups can be created based on many different types of shared characteristics. In the field of education, a majority of research has been conducted regarding racial affinity groups. However, groups may also be formed based on other characteristics, such as a group for LGBTQ+ individuals, or based on a shared goal. The groups should be formed based on the wants and needs of the members of the communities they are designed to support.

Recommendation Three: Encourage affinity groups to advocate in their communities.

Encourage affinity groups' members to advocate in their communities. Advocacy is an essential part of affinity groups (Bristol, 2020). Group members use advocacy to connect to and make improvements within their communities. Advocacy efforts should be supported by teacher preparation program leaders and school district officials, even when it is found to challenge a current status quo.

Conclusion

Greater diversity among teachers is required within the field of education to reflect the diversity in schools. Only 7% of teachers in the United States are Black, which comprises less than half the percentage of students in the United States who are Black (The Condition of Education). Thus, Black students may go through school without ever having a teacher of the same race. The goal of recruiting and retaining more Black teachers often has been impeded by challenges caused by systematic racism that exists in both teacher preparation programs and K-12 school systems (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Black teachers need social-emotional and professional support to address the extra challenges they face in their field. Participation in affinity groups has shown effectiveness in supporting both the social-emotional needs and professional development of Black teachers (Bristol 2020, Gist 2017, Pour-Khorshid 2018). However, for affinity groups to exist and be effective, the groups must receive both funding and support from their communities.

Limitations

Initially, members of each affinity group were going to meet twice monthly. However, based on the current high demand on teachers' time as they navigate teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings were reduced to once a month. The affinity groups at VCU are new in the year 2020, and data collection has just begun. Overall, data collection regarding affinity groups in the field of education is limited. The studies that were conducted previously were largely qualitative in nature and involved small sample sizes (Bristol 2020; Mosely 2018; Pickover 2017; Pour-Khorshid 2018; Will 2020).

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