# Listening to Teacher Candidates of Color

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**Abstract:** As part of one predominantly White institution's efforts to better support teacher candidates of Color (TCOCs), researchers held focus group discussions with TCOCs. Findings include TCOCs' diverse identities and shared experiences of "onlyness" in educational settings (Harper et al., 2011). Recommendations include racial affinity groups and highlighting teacher diversity in curricula. This work was supported by the McElhattan Foundation.

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## Introduction

The critical shortage of teachers of Color (TOCs) across the state of Pennsylvania is well documented (Fontana & Lapp, 2018). Recent data reflects a majority of Pennsylvania schools employ predominantly White teachers with 37% of districts across the Commonwealth employing only White teachers (Shaw-Amoah et al., 2020). The disproportionate rates between students of Color (SOCs) and TOCs is among the highest in the nation. Between 2013 and 2020 the percentage of SOCs across the commonwealth increased from 30.5% to 35.8% while TOCs increased from 5.4% to 6.0% (Shaw-Amoah et al., 2020). Strong evidence supports the notion that having a TOC is of significant benefit for students of all races, but most especially important for SOCs. A federal and statewide response to address the critical shortage of educators and lack of diversity in the field is needed more now than perhaps ever before.

### Diversifying the Teacher Workforce

Arguments for a diverse teacher workforce include providing mirrors for SOCs, providing diverse role models for all students, and disrupting patterns of discrimination in schools (Goodwin & McIntosh, 2008; Villegas & Lucas, 2004). Empirical research has shown that race-congruent teachers can improve students' academic achievement in the short term and long term (Egalite et al., 2015), leading to, for example, increased probability for low-income students to attend a four-year college, or for Black male students, a reduced likelihood to drop out of high school (Gershenson et al., 2017). Gershenson et al. (2016) found that Black teachers' expectations for Black students are significantly higher than those of White teachers, and Cherng and Helpin (2016) found that all students perceived their Black teachers as having higher academic expectations.

The lack of diversity in the teacher workforce is a result of historical oppression and a cause of continued oppression. Historically, education has been used as a tool of cultural erasure and assimilation, such as in decades of government run American Indian Residential Schools (Goodwin & McIntosh, 2008). Arguing for reframing the narrative around an imbalanced White teacher workforce, Carter Andrews et al. (2018) described the discriminatory actions after Brown vs. Board of Education that "pushed out" many Black teachers and administrators, an organized workforce that had for decades advocated for and provided Black children's educations (Hale, 2018; Oakley, et al., 2009; Ramsey, 2022). Carter Andrews et al. (2018) go on to argue that both policymakers and teacher educators ought to study the effects of civil rights laws and education policies on the racial makeup of the educator workforce "so that history does not repeat itself" (p. 7). As states increasingly consider and pass laws limiting educators' freedoms to discuss race, sexuality, and identity in the classroom, this warning is not being heard (Przybyla & Edelman, 2022).

Although state and federal policies have and will continue to shape the teacher workforce, we argue that educator preparation programs (EPPs) also have a foundational role to play in rebuilding a diverse and culturally responsive teacher workforce. EPPs can commit to recruiting, retaining, and educating teacher candidates of Color (TCOCs) and developing culturally responsive and sustaining educators (Carter Andrews et al., 2018; Goodloe et al., 2020; Grooms et al., 2021). Curricular interventions designed to develop teacher candidates' (TCs) awareness of social justice, however, often end up relying on

and fueling "deficit stances" towards people of Color (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 12). Carter Andrews et al. (2019), drawing from Tuck's theory of damage-centered research (2009), catalogs such approaches as "damage centered"; although designed to develop White TCs' critical consciousness around identity and equity, focusing on "people's pain and brokenness" (Tuck, 2009, as cited in Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 7) can instead reinforce deficit perspectives. Such orientations do not just emphasize damage—in their focus on developing White TCs' critical consciousness, they can do damage to TCOCs. Within the contexts of predominantly White institutions (PWIs), this damage contributes to overarching program cultures that center Whiteness, othering people of Color (Carter Andrews et al., 2018).

An important component of "disrupting . . . dominant culture ideologies" (Haddix, 2017, p. 144) within EPPs includes researching the experiences of both TCOCs and TOCs (Endo, 2015; Griffin, 2018; Grooms et al., 2021; Ingersoll et al., 2017; Kohli, 2019). Research has shown that TCOCs and TOCs navigate a host of racialized challenges within EPPs, in the field, and in their jobs as teachers, including racism, microaggressions, damage-centered teaching, and racial isolation (Carter Andrews et al., 2018; Endo, 2015; Griffin, 2018; Kohli, 2019). We position this study as part of efforts to 1) better understand our TCOCs' experiences within our local context, a mid-sized PWI state institution in Western Pennsylvania and to 2) recommend ways similar EPPs can support TCOCs, disrupting structures of Whiteness within their programs.

## Methodology

Adopting an asset-based approach, this study aimed to further understand the experiences of TCOCs in a PWI in Western Pennsylvania (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Utilizing the recruitment toolkit published by the Pennsylvania Education Diversity Consortium's (PEDC) (2021), our team designed a culturally informed protocol for focus group discussions with TCOCs. We replicated the focus group discussions 5 times, with anywhere from 2-9 participants at a time. PEDC's (2021) recruitment toolkit was created to help individuals and institutions across Pennsylvania recruit high school SOCs to the teaching profession by providing conversation entry points; it includes in-depth descriptions of recruitment strategies along with case studies and implementation recommendations. The toolkit highlights five culturally responsive recruitment statements, which served as our organizing structure for the discussions:

1. People like me can become a teacher.
2. Students need a teacher like me.
3. Teaching is a form of social justice and community liberation.
4. I know what it takes to become a teacher and feel supported to achieve it.
5. Teaching is a stable, respectable profession. (PEDC, 2021, p. 9)

After being presented with each statement, TCOCs discussed their reactions: whether or not they agreed, disagreed, felt unsure, and why. PEDC's (2021) culturally informed statements allowed TCOCs to articulate their strengths and visions for teaching while also sharing barriers they had encountered on their journeys thus far, including the negative impacts of a predominantly White teacher workforce.

PEDC's (2021) recruitment toolkit offers guidance on who will most effectively deliver each recruitment statement to SOCs, which led us to conclude the focus groups would be most culturally responsive if
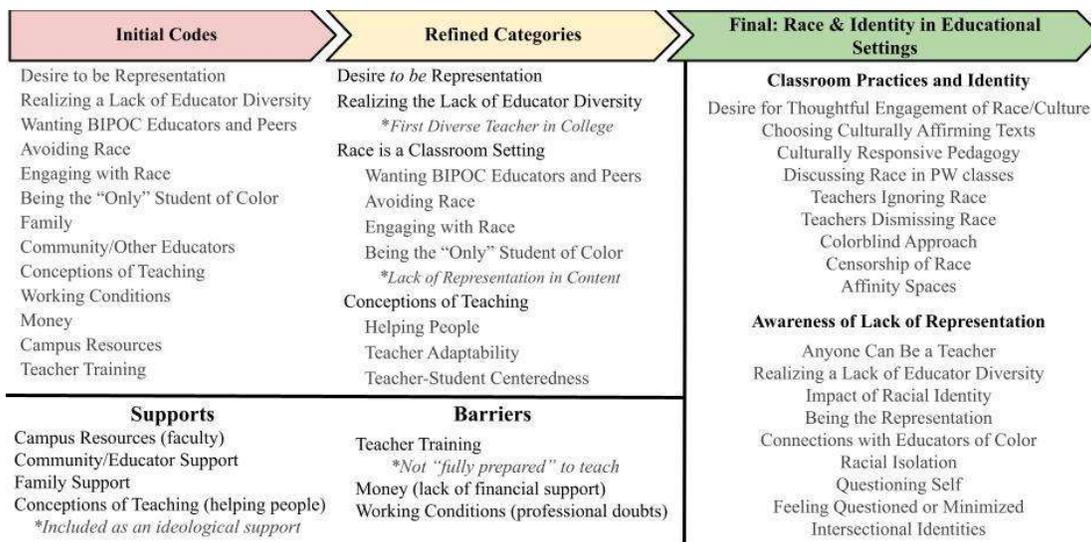
facilitated by a person of Color. Roger, an African American man, facilitated 4 of the 5 focus groups, and Emily, a White woman, facilitated the fifth. Data were collected from a total 21 participants during the Fall 2021 semester. These 45-minute discussions took place both face-to-face (2) on campus and remotely (3) through a video conferencing service. In the recruitment stage, 95 TCOC undergraduates were emailed across our university's multiple Educator Preparation Programs. Participants' racial identities were based on self-selected labels reported to the university: Black Non-Hispanic (8), Hispanic (5), Asian or Pacific Islander (4), Multiracial (3), and American Indian (1).

All identifying data were removed from the transcriptions before analysis. After the initial two workshops, both face-to-face, we used grounded theory to identity repeated themes among participants' experiences. Once all workshops were transcribed and initially coded, resulting in a number of initial codes, (see Figure 1), we then labeled each code as "barrier" or "support," determined by a negative or positive expression from participants. Initial codes included a range of similar statements. For example, "Money" was labeled as a "barrier" and included statements like, "I'm paying my own tuition," "I'm not financially supported by my parents," and "And if that means working like two or three jobs, I will." Once we had a list of barriers and supports, we grouped codes into larger subcategories and then narrowed our data to moments dealing with race and identity in educational settings. Once narrowed, we recoded the data line by line, adding more precise codes to our initial list and solidifying conceptually congruent categories. This stage led us to two overarching categories and a final list of codes: (1) Classroom Practices and Identity and (2) Awareness of Lack of Representation.

**Figure 1:** *Coding Process*



| Initial Codes | Refined Categories | Final: Race & Identity in Educational Settings |
|---|---|---|
| Desire to be Representation | Desire *to be* Representation | **Classroom Practices and Identity** |
| Realizing a Lack of Educator Diversity | Realizing the Lack of Educator Diversity | Desire for Thoughtful Engagement of Race/Culture |
| Wanting BIPOC Educators and Peers | *First Diverse Teacher in College* | Choosing Culturally Affirming Texts |
| Avoiding Race | Race is a Classroom Setting | Culturally Responsive Pedagogy |
| Engaging with Race | Wanting BIPOC Educators and Peers | Discussing Race in PW classes |
| Being the "Only" Student of Color | Avoiding Race | Teachers Ignoring Race |
| Family | Engaging with Race | Teachers Dismissing Race |
| Community/Other Educators | Being the "Only" Student of Color | Colorblind Approach |
| Conceptions of Teaching | *Lack of Representation in Content* | Censorship of Race |
| Working Conditions | Conceptions of Teaching | Affinity Spaces |
| Money | Helping People | |
| Campus Resources | Teacher Adaptability | **Awareness of Lack of Representation** |
| Teacher Training | Teacher-Student Centeredness | Anyone Can Be a Teacher |
| | | Realizing a Lack of Educator Diversity |
| **Supports** | **Barriers** | Impact of Racial Identity |
| Campus Resources (faculty) | Teacher Training | Being the Representation |
| Community/Educator Support | *Not "fully prepared" to teach* | Connections with Educators of Color |
| Family Support | Money (lack of financial support) | Racial Isolation |
| Conceptions of Teaching (helping people) | Working Conditions (professional doubts) | Questioning Self |
| *Included as an ideological support* | | Feeling Questioned or Minimized |
| | | Intersectional Identities |

# Findings

## Critical Consciousness

TCOCs understood the lack of teacher diversity in their lives on various levels—some knew it as a sociopolitical problem, and some categorized it only by their personal experiences. In responding to the statement, "I could have used a teacher like me," some candidates described the deleterious effects of a largely White teacher workforce, including decreased academic achievement, lower expectations, and decreased connections and support for SOCs. Similarly, in response to "People like me can become a teacher," some candidates pointed to a lack of representation as a barrier in fully embracing that statement for themselves: "I agree to a certain extent . . . I just don't see a lot of Asian American teachers so . . . it's just not a common thing across the nation." Several candidates shared that they had their first teacher of Color in college. For one candidate, having her first teacher of Color was impactful because the instructor was more able and willing to explore race within their classroom context. Another candidate shared how one of her college professors of Color explicitly taught her culturally responsive pedagogy, something she had been "yelling about for years," as her all-girls high school had been "predominantly African American," yet they "read books about White girls or White people."

In one focus group, both candidates chose not to talk about race in response to the statement "People like me can become a teacher," adopting a colorblind approach. Participant 1 shared, "I don't want to sound like *people like me*," and Participant 2 agreed: "It doesn't really matter. Like what race you are, what your ethnicity is or what background you come from." Participant 1 eventually did acknowledge that race could play a positive role, but only by positing its effects on assumed White children: "It's good for people like us to be teachers because then children are seeing that there's people different from them."

Later in the discussion, the same two candidates shared that neither of them had had a teacher of Color, which led them to think more deeply about teacher representation:

> Participant 1: White women was pretty much all I had as my teachers. And there's nothing wrong with that. But I never thought about my race going into it. But then as I got older, I was like, I've never had a teacher of Color.

As Participant 1 continued to think out loud, she realized multiple ways having a TOC could have impacted her or other SOCs: SOCs could "feel more comfortable," instead of feeling like they "stick out like a sore thumb." On top of that, she added, more SOCs might even think about becoming teachers themselves. Participant 2 began to share how she, too, had never had a teacher of Color, also reconsidering how TOCs could potentially inspire SOCs to imagine themselves as teachers: "So they're [SOCs] not being able to notice like what it involves to be . . . this . . . I don't even know how to explain it . . . that's why in a way it would have been nice to have like a different teacher."

## Complex Identities

Candidates in more than one focus group responded to the standing statement, "People like me can become a teacher," by emphasizing that their racial identities were just one aspect of who they are, often pointing to personality traits that have led them to pursue teaching: "I didn't just think of it in terms of like Black people can be teachers and minorities can be teachers, but more so like people passionate about certain things, like very excited people, very

talkative." Other candidates mentioned "patience" or "drive." One participant offered that it's a "mindset that pushes you into teaching rather than what you are."

At the same time, candidates also responded to the statement "People like me can become a teacher" by connecting their racial identity to other marginalized identities, such as in the following exchange about gender and sexual orientation:

> Participant 6: But I think also like when I think about race or like for me, I'm also thinking about sexuality a lot, like, um, I'm a queer.

> Participant 7: I agree with the statement because I identify as gay slash nonbinary, and I've never had any teachers who were out and open in that way.

Candidates also referenced the importance of teachers seeing them as whole people. One candidate connected the idea of recognizing students' lives beyond the classroom to a pivotal memory of being punished in school:

> My little sister was just born like a newborn, crying. We shared a room like my mom, my mom was in the period, where she was just letting her cry. And I was like, cool. So I'm up all night. And I fell asleep in class and my teacher made me stand against [the wall]. And then I fell asleep on the wall and I got in trouble and I was like, I was like, you gotta just let me sleep. Like, I'm not a bad student.

In this case, the teacher dehumanized the participant; we read this situation as emblematic of the way cultural bias and implicit assumptions fuel harmful and punitive measures in schools (Castro Atwater, 2008).

## Structures of Whiteness in Schools

Although all candidates discussed feeling supported by professors and many shared the support of their mentor teachers, multiple candidates brought up racial isolation, microaggressions, and racism in school spaces, including both past schooling and current field experiences as teacher candidates or in paid positions: for example, "I was always the only Black child in the classroom," "It's hard to feel support kind of in the schools for me just because there's not many African Americans," or "I worked in a school . . . I do get the stares." One candidate tied her experience of being racially isolated in her own schooling to the empathy she felt for the one student of Color in her field experience: "I feel for you, like, I understand where you're coming from."

Other candidates shared stories of their racial identities being dismissed and ignored by teachers, such as the prior example of being in a predominantly African American school yet reading books about White people. One candidate shared that although she went to a racially diverse school, she remembered the experience of being dismissed when asking about Black History Month: "She [the teacher] was like, you can do that in your other classes, we're doing [the] Holocaust, and like at the time I was like, okay, but now that I'm older I'm like—that was messed up . . . her to just be like . . . we're not worried about that right now." During one focus group discussion, candidates shared their fear to talk about Black Lives Matter in the classroom because of censorship by administrators, schools, or parent groups.

## Discussion and Recommendations

"This is good to have, you know?": Providing Racial Affinity Group Settings

Racial isolation emerged as a major part of many candidates' educational experiences, and at a PWI, that isolation continues for TCOCs in most of their classes. Two candidates mentioned conversations about race being harder when White professors led them, and one candidate shared that it was difficult to talk about race "with a classroom of White people." This same candidate went on to comment on the focus group as a racial affinity space itself: "This is good to have, you know?" The focus group discussions provided a space to center the experiences of TCOCs and also offered connections across program divisions.

Harper et al. (2011) characterize the "psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one's same racial or ethnic group as 'onlyness'" (p. 190). Most candidates shared some educational experience of "onlyness." One candidate described microaggressions from the students in her current school placement: "They don't understand. They'll see like another African American [and] will ask me if that's like my sibling, so it's hard to feel supported in the school." Kohli (2019) found that racial affinity groups helped mitigate against the "hostile racial climates" of schools for TOCs (p. 40). For her participants, "Being in exclusively teacher of Color spaces offered a sanctuary from the exhausting experience of being a minority in a predominantly White profession" (p. 48). Kohli (2019) recommends not only providing racial affinity spaces for TCOC but "legitimizing" them through course credit, recognizing the work TCOC do as active participants in those spaces (p. 48). The work of developing racial literacy—or "the ability to see, name, and unpack the enduring racism embedded in our society" (Kohli, 2019, p. 40)—needs to be woven throughout EPPs for all TCs, yet racial affinity spaces could also serve as one way for TCOCs to share experiences navigating Whiteness in schools.

We also see the potential for the racial affinity group model to support TCOCs' ongoing visions for themselves as teachers. Teacher identity research suggests that teachers' vision and purpose leads to greater resiliency in the field (Beltman et al., 2015; Mascarenhas et al., 2010). As TCs move through their preparation journeys and they are exposed to the systems of schools and the demands of the profession, including impacts of White supremacy, their identities and motivations shift. This study suggests that TCOCs would benefit from opportunities to develop and revise their visions of themselves as teachers within racial affinity group settings, especially in ways that draw both on their strengths as individuals and as a collective. Determining how best to start and sustain racial affinity spaces for TCOCs in PWIs goes beyond this study, but we suggest working with campus resources and leaders of Color beyond teacher education as well as building partnerships with organizations committed to teacher diversity.

"Unfortunately, I never had a teacher like me": Diversifying Teacher Education

Just as we need more racially diverse teachers in our schools, we also need more racially diverse teacher educators. Several of our participants shared that college was the first time they had a teacher of Color, describing the positive impacts of that experience—learning about culturally responsive pedagogy from a same-race teacher, for example, or talking about race in meaningful ways in the classroom. Yet some candidates shared that they had still never had a TOC. Candidates who had had TOCs acknowledged that that representation was still few and far between: "I mean I'm not

satisfied with not seeing enough, yes, that looks like me, but I'm satisfied that I at least had three," shared one candidate. We recognize that a racially diverse teacher workforce is deeply intertwined with a racially diverse teacher education faculty. Many institutions of higher education have made diversity, equity, and inclusion a priority in hiring, recognizing the dramatic imbalance between the number of postsecondary faculty of Color and the undergraduate students of Color that they teach (Davis & Fry, 2019; Huff, 2021), but discussions of the pipeline and retention of TCOCs should also include the significance of a diverse teacher education faculty for recruiting, retaining, and graduating TCOCs. EPPs ought to consider how, where, and when their TCOCs' racial identities are represented within their programs.

EPPs also ought to consider curricular moments for highlighting historical causes of a predominantly White teacher workforce and why teacher diversity matters for students. Some candidates came to these discussions with an understanding that teacher diversity is a studied and systemic problem, but others lacked that critical awareness. Although this study did not include White TCs, they would also benefit from developing a critical understanding of the significance of teacher diversity, including how they can support educator diversity in their future roles as colleagues. Courses or units of study on the history of education, theories of learning, educational research, and education's role in a multicultural society are just some of the possible places to address the impact of Brown vs. Board of Education or the effects of representation on learning. Building in opportunities for all TCs to reflect on moments in their lives when representation of one or more of their identities impacted them positively can help introduce and

underscore how TOCs have increased academic outcomes for SOCs.

## "Your students are not just students": Recognizing Intersectionality

TCOCs are diverse, and any programmatic or curricular changes designed to support TCOCs should recognize and invite forward candidates' many identities and contexts. In this study, candidates expressed their identities in varied ways. In focus group conversations, candidates defined themselves as teachers through personality attributes: "I'm a talker," "I'm good at explaining things. And that's what being a teacher is about," or "I'm doing it because I love children, and I want to make a difference in their life." With a wide range of schooling experiences, hometowns, and racial identities, TCOCs also had diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and families. Several candidates spoke about their families' struggles to support them financially, while one candidate shared that everyone in her family was a "psychologist" or a "lawyer." Of the 21 participants in the study, 2 verbally volunteered their queer identities, noting that their gender or sexuality was also marginalized.

Our focus group conversations demonstrated that people have multiple identities, some in tension with each other, and some layered in ways that deeply connect them. but all part of a candidate's whole sense of self. Through an intersectional lens, individuals can be both socially and historically empowered and disempowered, experiencing simultaneous privilege and oppression. Individuals can also be marginalized in multiple ways, such as the two TCOCs who shared their queer identities and noted the absence of queer teachers. Yet research has shown that both teacher education research (Pugach et al., 2018) and curriculum often approach students as monolithic groups, reinforcing

deficit stances that fail to recognize "whole students" (Carter Andrews et al., 2019, p. 6) or to consider the ways all TCs have "multiple social identities" (Gaither, 2018, p. 447). Although we are recommending a racial affinity group space for TCOCs, it is imperative that TCOCs are seen as diverse individuals within these spaces and EPP's broader curricula. EPP coursework should disrupt monolithic assumptions of any student group, recognizing and inviting TCs to reflect on their multiple shared and diverging identities as well as those of their current and future students.

## Conclusion

This research is one example of how a PWI might investigate the strengths, needs, and experiences of TCOCs as part of programmatic efforts to diversify the teacher pipeline. Our findings stress TCOCs' diverse backgrounds and identities, but they also highlight significant shared experiences, namely the weight of "onlyness" in educational settings (Harper et al., 2011) and having few or no TOCs. Not all TCOCs came to the focus group discussions with the sociopolitical awareness of why teacher diversity matters. For TCOCs in particular, we see this critical awareness as a crucial step in integrating their racial identities into their visions for themselves as teachers (something we believe all TCs should do while in their EPP). Ultimately, we recommend identifying curricular moments to highlight teacher diversity as a historical and pressing issue, providing racial affinity group spaces for TCOCs, increasing teacher educator diversity within EPPs, and adopting asset-based approaches in social justice curricula.

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