

Diverse Classrooms, Diverse Teachers: Representing Cultural Diversity in the Teaching Profession and Implications
for Pre-Service Admissions

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Abstract

This article challenges the homogeneity of the teaching profession in Canada by articulating the pressing need for a more diverse teaching body, as it relates to students' academic achievement and social well being. Given the subject location and interest of the author, literature reviewed in this paper primarily revolves around research on Black educators. The essential themes that underscore this paper are: teachers of colour as role models, culturally relevant pedagogy, and pedagogies of Black teachers. While there is a growing body of literature on teachers of colour in the American context, there still exists a paucity of Canadian research on teacher diversity, and the ways in which pre-service programs are implicated in the recruitment and retention of racialized teacher candidates. Using an anti-racist lens, I examine the role of Black educators within the nexus of representation and pedagogical diversity. Finally, I elucidate the integral role of Faculties of Education in responding to an equitable representation of Canadian teachers.

Introduction

Although Canadian classrooms are becoming more diverse, the influx in students of colour has not significantly altered the demographics of the teaching population (Dlamini & Martinvoic, 2007). Student diversity is largely attributed to current immigration statistics (Statistics Canada, 2005), which reveals an increased representation of visible minorities in the Canadian context. While racialized students continue to constitute the majority of the student population however, racialized teachers are still noticeably underrepresented in the teaching profession (Solomon, 1997; Toronto District School Board, 2006). The visible lack of teachers from diverse backgrounds has engendered incisive arguments centered on students' academic achievement, and the need for an education system consistent with the ideals of equity and social justice. Recent Canadian research (Ryan, Pollock, & Antonelli, 2009) adds to the extant body of scholarship on the representation of teachers of colour; and the implications for diverse learning experiences, facilitated by pedagogies of non-White educators.

An examination of this literature reveals two recurring themes: teachers of colour as role models and culturally relevant pedagogy. The aim of this article is to revisit these major arguments so as to advance scholarship on teacher diversity and its implications in anti-racist praxis. In the first section of this paper, I examine teachers of colour as role models and its salient critiques. Next, I address culturally relevant pedagogy and the convergences with discourses on inclusive classrooms that validate students' identities and lived experiences. Equally pertinent to the discourse on teachers of colour is the pedagogies of African-Canadian and African American teachers, which I explore in the ensuing section. Finally, I conclude with a discussion on the implications of pre-service admissions to attract and retain students of colour in teacher training programs.

Subject Location

In the anti-racism discourse, subject location is an attendant precept as it engages with the positionality and lived experiences of those affected by social injustices, and who as a result, are motivated to produce fundamental changes whether in educational contexts, larger society or both (Dei, 2000). I am a Black female Trinidadian-

Canadian and I received my post-secondary education in Canada, including my teacher training. I have taught in diverse school settings, primarily inner city schools, where the majority of the student population were Black (African-Canadian, Caribbean, or African). My experiences in these schools have provided the impetus for this paper. I have encountered situations where students remarked, “we need more Black teachers”. However, it was the overt, subtle reactions to my presence that engendered my reflections on the representation of teachers of colour and its effects in the classroom. Therefore, this paper interweaves an analysis of race based on my experiential knowledge as well as the theoretical underpinnings of the anti-racism framework.

Theoretical Framework: Anti-Racism Education

Anti-racism theory can be defined as an action oriented framework that aims to challenge and dismantle prevailing societal inequalities, perpetuated by structures of dominance instituted and sustained by the dominant group (Dei, 1996a). It upholds the notion that race is in fact socially constructed, and legitimizes the lived experiences of racialized bodies (Dei, 1996b). In contrast to multiculturalism where racism is reduced to individual practices, anti-racism broadens the sites of oppression by integrating systemic and institutional mechanisms of dominance. Inherent in this discourse is also an integrative approach where intersecting social markers of difference such as class, gender, ability and sexuality are interrogated, with race as an overarching entry point of analysis (Dei, 2006). Although the aforementioned axes of difference are equally pertinent to the anti-racism paradigm, it must be noted that race is not subsumed or privileged within these categories; rather it is accorded a “saliency even when other dimensions of oppression co-exist with racial ones” (Dei, 1996b, p. 255).

In the context of this paper, there are salient precepts of anti-racism which are applicable to the representation of Black teachers and teachers of colour. Calliste (2000) and Dei (1996b) both contended that the anti-racism framework brings to the forefront a critical analysis on the increasingly diverse cultural and racial landscape of Canadian society. Their arguments, however, go beyond a simple aesthetic acknowledgement, to one which addresses hegemony in power relations demarcated along racial lines, and enacted in educational contexts and larger society. The imbalance of privilege and power evident in the underrepresentation of Black teachers speaks to the fundamental principle of anti-racism that problematizes the relationship among knowledge production, identity and schooling. Dei (2006) remarked:

the harm that is perpetuated is that learners are not presented with difference in ways that can enrich the learning process. Students do not get the learning opportunities to benefit from the diversity that can be reflected in the teaching staff. (p. 34)

The pedagogies of Black teachers and the experiences of Black educators all can be classified as alternate forms of knowledges which depart from the mainstream, but which, nevertheless can create possibilities for students’ success.

Teachers of Colour as Role Models

Dee (2004a) argued that,

for underprivileged black students, the presence of a black teacher may encourage them to update their prior beliefs about their educational possibilities. Similarly, students may feel more comfortable and focused in the presence of an own race teacher regardless of the teacher’s actual behaviour. (pp. 195-96)

The fact that for example, Black students are motivated to perform and can positively relate to their teacher, is echoed by Foster (1990) and Ladson-Billings (1994) in their research on African American teachers and students. Beauboeuf-Lafontant, (1999), Foster, (1997), Henry, (1992), and Irvine, (1990; 1999) have extensively researched the pedagogies and practices of African American teachers, elucidating alternate paradigms of instruction, and the influential role they play in the lives of their students. In the Canadian context, Solomon (1997) also highlighted the impact of a diverse teaching population on students, using the experiences of in service educators. In responding to difference, and how minority candidates understood their role as teachers, one participant revealed that, “[y]ou don’t have to be a Caribbean teacher or an Iranian teacher or a Chinese teacher, just someone who reflects a difference is important” (Solomon, 1997, p. 402). It is evident that the presence of minority teachers has encompassing

implications related to students' interconnected sense of well-being. The representation of difference as so profoundly articulated in Solomon research yields persisting questions about the need for a more diverse teaching population. Embedded in this discourse is also the required interrogation of the prevailing educational inequalities affecting minority students, and how teachers from diverse groups can offset this deleterious trend.

One particular example commonly referred to is the achievement disparity between students of colour and those from the dominant group. From a Canadian perspective, Dei's (1995) work on black students' experiences in the Ontario schools presented a rich and qualitative dimension to the low academic achievement of minority students. His research suggests that Black students are not only "disengaged" by the material, but also by a school culture which provides little opportunities for cultural validation and individual empowerment. For these students, schooling produces marginalizing experiences, which in turn affect their self-esteem, and potential for success. Dei posited a renewed exegesis of disengagement, positioning a critical inquiry of the diversity of the teaching profession, embedded in a critique of the curriculum, and other systemic issues that engender negative experiences for students of colour.

It is often argued that a crucial intervention to this problem is a diverse teaching population coupled with an inclusive curriculum where all students can engage in a process of learning that validates their identities, and experiences. Johnson and Prom-Jackson (1986) furthered this argument by indicating that the presence of minority educators facilitates a relationship built on similar lived realities, which can also significantly impact on students' academic success. Conversely, for students of the dominant group, Black educators for example, signify an alternate representation of Black bodies, as opposed to the prevailing stereotypes grounded in assertions of Eurocentric superiority.

Although the role model argument has been firmly established in the research, it has not escaped vigorous critiques. Cizek (1995), for instance, asserted:

It would be unwise to suggest that African American teachers are de facto better teachers of minority students than are teachers of other ethnic backgrounds without substantial empirical evidence. The suggestion would have serious consequences effecting a whole range of policy considerations encompassing the training, hiring, and assignment of teachers. What is needed most is an understanding of the factors that might make minority teachers better at addressing the needs of minority children. Such an understanding would be a great benefit because it would provide a means for enhancing the skills of all teachers who work with minority children. (p. 90)

Dee (2004b) also pointed out the deficiency of the role model hypothesis, echoing Cizek's (1995) critique on the lack of research that clearly demonstrates a correlation between students' achievement and race of the teacher. It is evident that these are valid points; however, it minimizes the social interaction between teacher and student, and the reality that race is indeed a social construct, with very real consequences for non-dominant groups. Perhaps, the best manner in which to unearth the complexities of the presence of the minority teacher in the classroom, and the effects of students of colour, is to contextualize it within the "politics of the body" discourse. To quote Dei and James (1998), "belonging to an 'other' establishes a relationship of alterity with one's fellow members, a feeling of sharing and belongingness, and a perception of a common threat or injustice" (p. 5). The unifying thread between politics of body discourse and "racialized" identity is that the body is deconstructed and perceived (in the context of Black teachers and students) based on shared group affiliation, grounded in similar lived realities and social locations. It must be cautioned that race is not the sole signifier associated with difference; however, for the purpose of this argument, it is used to legitimize its saliency for students of colour in the classroom.

Cultural Relevant Pedagogy

Additional work in the literature focuses on the culturally relevancy that educators infuse in their practice and the ways in which these create a positive effect on students' achievement. Cultural relevant pedagogy therefore, is a praxis rooted in an understanding and application of students' backgrounds to enhance the quality of one's teaching practice (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). Irvine (1999) contended, "Because the cultures of African Americans and other students of colour are different and often misunderstood, ignored, or discounted, these students are likely to experience cultural discontinuity in schools" (p. 247). According to Irvine, this cultural discrepancy has the

possibility of engendering negative outcomes for students, particularly as it relates to the teacher-student relationship, and academic achievement.

The relationship that teachers forge with their students is a significant component in the cultural relevant discourse (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999). It is commonly asserted that teachers of colour may be more inclined to engage in cultural relevant teaching practices (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 1999; Irvine, 1990). However, it must be noted that not all teachers of colour can be automatically considered culturally relevant practitioners. In doing so, one runs the risk of producing a homogenous interpretation of race. Although African-Canadians or African-American teachers may share a common identity with their students, intersecting axes of differences also affect how individuals may perceive and experience their racial background—for example, class, gender, and ability. In fact, it is possible for teachers of any race to implement culturally relevant pedagogy in their classrooms once they are genuinely interested in pursuing the dismantling of educational barriers; however, Irvine (1990) and Ladson-Billings (1995) provided compelling research on the relationship between the presence and support of African American teachers and the notable academic success of Black students. The underlying theme in both the role model and cultural relevant pedagogy arguments is the significance of difference, or as Quijano and Rios (2000) poignantly exclaimed in the title of their article, “the power of their presence”. Black teachers and by extension, teachers of colour represent to their students that success and intelligence is not predetermined by one’s racial background. In other words, teachers of colour represent a renewed sense of hope where all students can engage with education in meaningful, empowering and holistic ways.

Pedagogies and Practices of Black Educators: Towards a Revolutionary Praxis

As discussed earlier, the key arguments for the recruitment of Black teachers is based on the premise that they are potential role models, and they are also more capable of engaging in culturally relevant pedagogy. Additionally, Black teachers also bring to their classroom different teaching practices and perspectives - one that is shaped and informed by their lived experiences and social location. Using African American teachers as an example, this section will excavate central issues in the discourse of care as it pertains to the enactment of alternate pedagogies in the classroom.

Extensive scholarly literature exists on the pedagogies of female teachers (Grumet, 1988; Noddings, 1984; Ruddick, 1989), little work, however, has been undertaken on how teachers’ practices, specifically, “care”, is conceptualized, and influenced by their racial backgrounds (Case, 1997). In particular, these studies have failed to address the teaching philosophies and experiences of African American teachers and the influential role they play in the lives of their students (Foster, 1997). Foster (1993) further noted, “rarely are the views of teachers ever considered in discussions about education. And because they are doubly marginalized, the voices of black teachers are even less likely to be heard” (p. 102). The pedagogies of Black teachers are profoundly salient as it contributes to a dismantling of binaries and hierarchies that privilege Eurocentric paradigms of teaching. It is overwhelming apparent that Black teachers exercise an important role in the classroom. As the literature indicates, these teachers often serve as role models, challenging students to realize their full potential, regardless of their racial backgrounds.

Pedagogy of Care: An Overview

Educational philosopher Noddings, (1984; 1999; 2005) has written extensively on the importance of infusing care in teachers’ pedagogies and the curriculum. In the context of this paper however, care is referenced only as it pertains to teachers’ philosophies. Noddings (1984) wrote, “caring involves stepping out of one’s personal frame of reference into the others. When we care, we consider the other’s point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us” (p. 24). Similarly, Mayeroff (1971) explained, “to care for another person in the most significant service is to help him grow and actualize himself” (p. 3). These definitions point to the reciprocal relationship of the ethics of care, and the ways in which it is grounded in moral concern and regard for others.

Further, caring is an encompassing aspect of teaching, which influences classroom practices and facilitates a positive relationship with students. An equally important factor to consider is students’ perceptions of being valued and cared for; this cognizance is a key contributor to fostering a welcoming classroom environment and successful teacher-student relationship (Noddings, 2005). Based on this premise, it can be safely argued that a positive rapport is

essential to engendering effective teaching practices. A salient critique which undergirds this literature, is the failure of care theorists to account for race and class differences and how these are manifested in the pedagogies of non-European teachers. According to Thompson (1998), “theories of care emerged as a corrective to the adrocentrism of theories of justice (p. 4). Such theories, for example Kohlberg’s moral reasoning, positioned a superiority of public universal principles framed from a male’s perspective, over the private relationships and moral concerns of their female counterparts (Thompson, 1998). While care theorists have challenged the universality of principles entrenched in Kohlberg’s moral reasoning theory, Thompson asserted that their fundamental underpinnings are still embedded within a White middle class female perspective. Further, such perspectives are grounded in colorblind ideologies, which “fail to acknowledge and address the whiteness of embedded political and cultural assumptions” (p. 4). Colorblind ideologies are counterproductive to an ethics of care in that it asserts a hegemonic paradigm for all teachers despite their racial identities. It also fails to historicize practices of past and contemporary educators who employ(ed) an Africentric model of teaching and care in the classroom. A shift in consciousness is, therefore, needed, to interrogate the prevailing “color blindness” of the pedagogy of care and its inherent exclusionary effect on Black teachers and students.

In their work on Black teachers, Foster (1990; 1997), Henry (1992), Irvine, (1990; 1999), and Ladson-Billings, (1994) identified the ways in which Black educators interpreted their role as teachers, positioning themselves, their community and their backgrounds as key to their success in the classroom. Significant themes embedded in this research include: connectedness, “other mothering,” and community responsibility. Foster (1993) noted “Connectedness is a prominent theme among scholars who have examined family and community life” (p. 104). In the context of this literature, connectedness refers to the shared realities between Black teachers and students in the classroom, which play an integral role in their sense of communal responsibility towards students. It is this connectedness that propels teachers to motivate their students, and assist them in overcoming obstacles. In Henry’s study, her participants pointed out that, “When you look at the children, you see your own”. She further argued that, “they often speak of Black children at Bedford as “my children, my kids, and “our Black kids”, endearments reflective of their perceived responsibility to children in the African Canadian community-at-large” (Henry, 1992, p. 399). It is this connectedness that engenders a pedagogy situated in a Black ethics of care that allows the classroom to be transformed into a site of agency, and collective support.

Congruent with both connectedness and community responsibility, is that of “other mothering”. Collins (1991) maintained, “community other mothers work on behalf of the Black community by expressing ethics of caring and personal accountability, which embrace conceptions of transformative power and mutuality” (p. 132). In other words, Black female educators bridge the gap between the community and the school, by engaging in a teaching practice that recognizes the student and their well being as both an individual and community accomplishment. The correlation between Black female teachers and other mothering is not a contemporary one; Black female teachers constituted the majority of Black teachers since the early 20th century, which firmly embedded their role as community mothers, especially, in the education context (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002).

They form a relationship with their students, based on a paradigm of caring, where they edify, transform, and provide opportunities for their students to excel and realize their full innate potential. They are reminiscent of earlier Black female educators—for example, Mary-Ann Shadd and Julia Turner—who combined a commitment to their community with a passion for education and liberation, guided by an unwavering pedagogy of hope. However, it must be noted that research on Black educators is not limited to the practices and philosophies of Black females. Black male educators have also made a significant contribution to their students and their community. However, as the literature on other mothering and teaching is a valuable addition to the burgeoning research on the education of Black students, it was necessary to integrate these significant exegeses in the aforementioned review.

Implications for Pre-service Admissions

The purpose of this paper was to recapitulate the central arguments in the recruitment of minority teachers, with a specific focus on Black teachers. Throughout this review, three essential themes were explored: teachers as role models; culturally relevant pedagogy; and alternate practices of African American and African Canadian educators. While these arguments contain valid critiques, the necessity of a diverse teaching population cannot be ignored. The underachievement of racialized students, coupled with curricula that are largely based on Eurocentric knowledges, produces in some cases, marginalizing experiences for students of colour. If the overarching Canadian goal of

education is to create equitable and inclusive learning experiences, then the recruitment of minority teachers is central to realizing this auspicious goal. At the pre-service admissions level, an ongoing systematic evaluation of admission policies is essential to ensuring an equitable representation of the teaching population. Additionally, attempts must be made to create support networks for students from diverse backgrounds as research has indicated (Escayg, 2008) that students often encounter isolation in predominantly White teacher education programs. Thus, it is incumbent upon faculties of Education to redefine their goals as teacher training institutions, where students are prepared for diverse classrooms and anti-racist praxis. Although ongoing commendable attempts have been made in this regard, the work is far yet from being completed. Thus, the guiding precept in the continued efforts of teacher education reform should be grounded in the motivation to create inclusive classrooms which legitimize multiples knowledges and social locations. A teacher education program based on this premise affords students the opportunity to engage in critical social issues, and also challenge its manifestations in the education system. It is this type of program that is needed to respond to the increasing diverse student population; a program that will compel teacher candidates to further the cause for a more just social order.

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