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Moving Beyond Recruitment and Hiring: Including and Actualizing the Voices of Teachers of Color in a Suburban School District

Jennifer Ann Rowe

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

MOVING BEYOND RECRUITMENT AND HIRING:
INCLUDING AND ACTUALIZING THE VOICES OF
TEACHERS OF COLOR IN A SUBURBAN SCHOOL DISTRICT

A CAPSTONE PROJECT SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

PROGRAM IN ADMINISTRATION AND SUPERVISION

BY

JENNIFER ROWE

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

AUGUST 2021

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many steps in my journey as an educator have taken me on pathways that allow me to see firsthand the gaps that exist in this country for people of color, especially Black Americans. School, and the impact of an education, has never been lost on me – and both my parents instilled in all of their children the value of knowledge and the need for one to be an active seeker of truth, as well as being responsible for the message they tell. I am so very grateful for their fierce love for each other and their babies, and their ability to always sing together through every storm.

I am so very thankful for the Perrault men as they truly are the center of my universe. Building a family with my husband, Stephan, and our two sons, Aidan and Aaron, has been my greatest joy. I am so appreciative of all of their love and support as they never waiver in helping me to accomplish all that I find the need to take on – this capstone being just one more of the many things I had to add to the list!

I am also so very thankful to my sister as well as to the many sister-friends in my life who continue to believe in me and have given me the confidence to use my voice. Their encouragement has provided invaluable guidance to carry me through to this moment.

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ABSTRACT

This capstone identifies, as a problem of educational practice in American secondary schools, the failure of our school systems to equally value and validate Black and brown educators as compared with their white counterparts, consequently preventing the cultivation of an environment that would encourage these educators to flourish in the profession rather than presenting barriers to their success. Calling upon the prevailing research, Ms. Rowe evaluates approaches that school districts can take to overcome these roadblocks and foster supportive academic communities that encourage the hiring and retention of teachers of color who can create classroom experiences that will help all students, especially students of color, to achieve greater success in school.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I will never forget packing up my belongings and driving to a new life in Chicago soon after completing my student teaching program. I was still processing all that I had learned about teaching in such a diverse place as the San Francisco Bay area. My students truly represented the globe, with a majority of them being Black and brown students of color. As the kids became accustomed to seeing me around campus and in the classes, I was teaching, I noticed how all of them wanted to know about my background and racial identity. Being a Black woman from mixed parentage, I blended in well within the sea of brown faces that came from places such as Samoa, Cambodia, China, Nigeria and Mexico. After I looked out and beyond the faces of my students, and eventually found my way to the faculty lounge, I soon realized that as the student teacher I was the only teacher of color in the school. It was not long before I found myself being asked to sponsor the Black Student Union Club, challenging other more experienced teachers about the demands of reading *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and whether they should read the “N” word out loud. Being that only voice, or the “absolute numerical minority,” I felt that my voice was not valued, and my sense of isolation continued to grow (Bristol & Shirrell, 2019). My feelings of exhaustion and disconnection intensified when no one seemed to notice how much the kids and their families were reaching out to me for support, putting me in a situation that moved well

beyond the scope of my classroom and teaching experience. I thought about speaking to my two cooperating teachers or other staff members, but I, too, did not find much understanding from them. Even in this most cosmopolitan city, and in this school that was so different from my own predominantly Black public school in Cincinnati, I began to ask myself, “*Where are the other teachers of color that could help support these kids and me?*”

Once I arrived in Chicago, I realized that I had no real idea about what it would be like to teach in such a large and historically segregated city. However, I was eager to make my mark as a new English teacher and, while I began to apply for my first full-time teaching positions, I was hopeful about finding a place that more closely mirrored my own school experience. As I was getting my bearings on next steps, I noticed an article in the paper about an all-Black, all-male Catholic high school on the South Side of Chicago. I soon found myself interviewing with the English Department Chair, and got a call with a job offer by the time I made it home for what would be my first full-time job as an English teacher. Not long afterwards, I was teaching nearly 100 Black boys in my American Literature class, and was wrapped up in support from a master teacher who had opted to come to the school to teach after her retirement from the Chicago Public Schools. This was a private Franciscan school, but these boys experienced all of the difficulties that too often become the norm of growing up Black and male on Chicago’s South Side. Even though these young men were “dressed up,” their uniforms only masked their struggles with poverty, grief and loss, and the many stereotypes that are too frequently yoked around their necks. With too few resources to support the needs of my

students and their families, I ultimately found myself extending my boundaries and having little time to do much beyond school. We had no library, so I needed to create one; basic supplies were not available, so I would get them donated; and families required assistance with basic needs, so our little school became the main resource they would turn to for help. Even though I had the emotional support of my department chair – as she modeled what a Black teacher can do for Black children – this was not enough. The extra burden that came with the compounding needs of my students and their families, along with no system or resources, caused me to become completely burned out by the end of my first year. I began to wonder, *“Can I continue to fulfill all of these roles that I am being asked to do with no support?”*

My next position, working in a private, Jesuit high school on Chicago’s North Shore, opened up an entirely new world to me, one where I was able to connect with many teachers at other Catholic schools across the city. This private academy, which was located in one of the wealthiest school districts in the state of Illinois, was attended by the children of many families of means and notoriety – but also served the children of Chicago teachers, police officers, and other public servants. This school was much closer to my home than my current school was, and I had contacted the school to observe some of their classes as part of a professional development day. When I arrived on campus, it was immediately obvious that I was not what they expected. They knew that I was a visiting teacher from a Catholic school on the South Side of the city, but they did not know that I was a woman of color. I could literally see the interest in me change as I was introduced and passed along from one teacher to another. After observing several classes

and receiving a tour of the campus, I was dropped off at my final class, which was being taught by the department chair. The class was reading Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, and I could already feel my Black presence being leveraged as the class began. After introductions, I was asked if I would like to share about the play, and I now felt myself being placed in the spotlight. I was being identified as an expert who would have greater insight into the world that Hansberry was revealing in the play. My Blackness was now valuable to reveal some truth to the White children that were in the audience, and I was being given the chance to share my truth with them. I found myself excited for this opportunity to showcase my passion for African American Literature, but this was tinged with a bit of frustration, as my skills were not limited to this one genre. With all of this inner angst taking place, I stood up and proceeded to lead the discussion as I had done with this play in my own classes. The department chair asked me to continue, and we moved through the entire period with me instructing the class. This chance experience launched me into a place of resources, support and privilege – but it, too, came with a cost.

I now found myself working in a school without a Black population that was my own lived experience, in fact without a diverse student population at all, but in a white-dominant space that was kind, but not inclusive. My teaching associates were thoughtful and had good intentions, but their experiences with a colleague of color was limited to just one other teacher on the staff. The other support staff of color in the building were so proud to have me at the school – and they often came to me to discuss concerns surrounding issues that impacted the Black and brown students at this North Shore

academy, who would often confide in them when they were struggling. The added work and stress that comes to Black educators is a kind of “invisible tax” that they must pay as they are expected to support Black students in the school, often causing stress and burnout (King, 2016). My role at the school soon took on a trajectory of working with children having more learning differences, in a course that also had a few more children of color. I soon began to teach the African American Literature course and co-sponsored the Black Student Association (BSA). All things Black, all things “diversity” were open to me. When I expressed ideas for change, had a desire to lead, or move beyond my constraints, I could feel some hesitation. Even with so many people who cared for me, I felt that I was never seen as a complete person that truly deserved to be there due to my gifts and talents. Teachers of color can often be pigeonholed in these ways, such as with expectations of working with Black students and their discipline problems (Dillard, 2021). It was clear that I was not going to be tapped for opportunities to grow in new directions. After staying and stagnating for many years, I was determined to find a place that would see all that I had to offer. I had begun to question, *“What school and district will appreciate all that I can bring to the table?”*

Problem of Practice

The experiences I have had throughout my own journey as a teacher of color (TOC) have influenced my work, and have impacted my desire to shape the system in which I operate as a leader at the district level. During my interview for the position of Executive Director of Educational Equity for a prominent school district located in the Western Suburbs of Chicago, I was asked about how I would be able to assist with the

hiring process to establish a more equity-centered system of practice. I had come to know this district, which I shall refer to as the Western Suburban School District (WSSD), as a community of educators that values diversity in its teaching staff, and strives to hire and retain quality teachers of color. Just like this community, districts all across the country are looking at the teacher shortage crisis, and much attention is being given to the front part of the pipeline. However, the very human and much overlooked and undervalued part of the teacher pipeline is in the area of retention. Teachers of color are leaving the profession at much higher rates than their white peers. Specifically, TOC leave the workforce at around 19%, with White teachers leaving at 15% (Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2017). These numbers are harsh for our profession as a whole, but drilling down to understand what are the barriers and obstacles that school systems are operationalizing is important to making real systemic change. Districts look at their data to see the number of teachers they have turned over each year, often utilizing a standardized exit survey for feedback.

When examining the health of a community, one of the most valuable assets are schools and their teachers. As America continues to battle over how they fund and support schools, the teacher workforce is struggling to keep a robust pipeline entering the profession. The report put out by the Economic Policy Institute highlights the reality of this growing teacher shortage, and that issues surrounding credentialing, teacher training and challenging working conditions are all impacting schools and their ability to hire and retain teachers (Garica & Weiss, 2019). One's zip code, instructional pedagogy, curriculum and inclusion of equitable practices all impact the classroom experience. The

teacher, however, is at the center – making the need for a diverse teaching force that both respects and reflects the student a goal for districts across the nation. In *The Condition of Education*, the annual report put out by the National Center for Educational Statistics, data is presented that in the 2017-2018 school year, nearly 79% of teachers identified as White. This number has gone down, but so, too, have the number of Black teachers, dropping from 8% to 7% since the 1999-2000 school year (NCES). Teachers supporting children in high poverty schools, which are where teachers of color are concentrated, are too often not receiving the training, support and resources that they need as they work to confront the many challenges that their students face. This stressful environment can often be the driving force for teachers to transfer or just leave the profession entirely (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

The success or failure of students is also impacted by their own identities, which often do not mirror those of the teachers that are instructing them in schools across all regions, from cities to suburbs and in rural areas, also. As our communities become more diverse, the educators supporting the classrooms are increasingly not a reflection of their students. By 2024, according to the NCES, it is predicted the percentage of white students being educated in public schools will drop to 46% (*The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce, 2016 Report*). By contrast, the children that are growing in numbers are Black and brown students, with the expectancy that their numbers will comprise 56% of students in public schools by this same time (*The State of Racial Diversity in the Educator Workforce, 2016 Report*).

The success of children from historically marginalized communities is imperative, and the need for hiring and retaining more teachers of color is a concern not just for urban school districts, but also for suburban districts as well. In his open letter to school leaders, educator and activist Sharif El-Mekki (2020) speaks about how “The likelihood that most Black students will go through 13 years of public school education without being taught by a Black educator weighs heavily on us.” Schools need the tools, skills and teachers that understand and value their culturally, historically and linguistically rich learning styles, as well as a pedagogy that will assist these children to thrive. School is the launching pad for a successful life, and teachers of color provide many benefits to schools and all of their students.

Studies show that it is especially beneficial to Black and brown children to be taught by teachers of color (Carver-Thomas, 2018). In contrast to white teachers, teachers of color hold their students of color to higher expectations, and even recommend students of color to gifted programs at much higher rates than their white counterparts (Wells, 2020). Racial bias and the lack of teachers of color to help teach and identify children of color continue the pattern of low numbers in gifted education programs (Morgan, 2019). With the absence of these teachers, barriers to success can emerge, negatively impacting students of color. Research, such as the longitudinal study in North Carolina, is showing the positive impact that teachers of color can have on Black and brown students from an early age. They found that by having just one teacher of color in grades 3, 4, or 5, students of color had a higher rate for graduation and also for attending college (El-Mekki, 2020). The presence of these teachers can also help impact the social-

emotional health of students, while also acting as role models. Many studies are now also looking at the positive impact that Black male teachers have on students, and how their presence as a part of the education of Black children can impact dropout rates, test scores, as well as support a positive view of school (Underwood et al., 2019). The chances of students receiving exclusionary discipline, in particular in the elementary grades, is lower when the teacher matches the background of the student (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

In order to achieve these educational foundations, schools need to have not just a plan for hiring, but also a plan designed to retain teachers of color in order to begin to make schools a place where these teachers can flourish, giving them the space to nourish their students, especially children of color that have too often been left behind. Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*, Black teachers were battling America's history of segregation that was ever present in the classroom; they understood that their very presence was a foundation for American children of color and often the only support available to them, and it signified to the Black and brown population that education could change their condition (Epstein, 2005). The problem of practice identified for this capstone project is that, without truly seeing teachers of color and valuing what they experience each day on multiple fronts, school systems will continue to struggle to retain their teachers, while also continuing to limit what they can achieve. My goal for the Western Suburban School District and for all schools across this country is to recognize, validate and actualize teachers of color in order to find a place to see and value all their

potential contributions to the classroom. Their full identities as educators are needed, as our schools cannot move forward to meet the needs of all children without them.

Statement of Purpose

As the Executive Director of Educational Equity for Western Suburban School District #204 (WSSD) in the suburbs of Chicago, the focus of my work is to be the educational leader who helps to design and guide the district's equity efforts and its creation of an equity plan. The research I am doing for this capstone project is a vehicle to deepen my grasp on the prevailing ideology surrounding equity in our schools, with a focus on understanding the barriers and obstacles that occur in the hiring and retention process as it pertains to teachers of color, which in turn will inform my development of a process for equitable hiring and retention practices to be implemented at WSSD.

My work with this capstone project is designed to impact WSSD's equity practices, especially as the district embarks to support its educators of color to not just stay, but also to thrive in its schools as teachers and leaders. My work will utilize research that examines the experiences of teachers of color as I strive to understand the conditions that shape their experiences, ultimately determining their sense of belonging to the district and their desire to remain in the profession. I will apply this knowledge to the writing of WSSD's equity plan, with hiring and retention as the focal point, as the district works to create a staff that is supportive and reflective of all students, families and the stated values for equity as outlined in its Board Equity Statement.

This capstone project refers to people of color, which is inclusive of all non-white educators. Due to the vast availability of research as well as the connection to my own

background as a Black educator, much of the research that is used in this work is framed around the experiences of Black educators, but is also touching on the collective experiences that connect Latinx teachers and other teachers of color.

The end result of this capstone project will be to utilize the research and knowledge I have gained to develop a plan of action, which I will refer to as my *intervention program*, that will support the work of not just hiring, but also retaining the teachers of color being hired in District 204 to teach as well as lead in the K-12 schools of the Western Suburban School District.

Specifically, this capstone project asks these questions:

- What does WSSD look like in comparison to the national trends surrounding hiring and retention of teachers of color?
- How is the lack of a diverse teaching staff acting as an injustice to students, especially students of color, as WSSD works to help all to achieve their greatest potential?
- What do teachers of color need to feel valued and to remain in the district?
- What does WSSD need to include in its equity plan to systematically create a culture that ensures that it supports the retention of teachers of color?

Injustice that is Occurring: The Lack of Equity and

Diversity in the Teacher Workforce

When looking specifically at WSSD in the context of the questions outlined above, we find many of the national statistics eclipsed on a local level. The issues have not gone unnoticed by the district community at large. The community, especially voices

from the P3 Coalition (which represents Black parents from all three of the district's high schools), have shared their staffing concerns. The school board listened and then charged the district with the goal to "Hire and retain high quality, effective teachers, school leaders and support staff." WSSD's 2019-2020 hiring data shows that it is making progress in terms of interviewing and hiring staff members of color, with new hires of color representing just over 26%. The historical numbers have represented closer to 11%, showing that the district's change in practice is having an impact. However, reviewing current staffing numbers as reflected in the Illinois State Report Card shows that the percentage of white teachers is higher than the national average, with white teachers on average representing 88.6% overall. Black and Latinx teachers make up only 6.6% in the district, with the student makeup from these same groups representing 21.6% of the population. It is also noteworthy that the district's Asian population and students identifying as two or more races have grown significantly. WSSD's Asian population now makes up 33.3%, while members of the teaching staff from this same demographic total just 3.6%. Our students who identify as two or more races now make up 4.5% of the total student body, further reflecting how the community overall is continuing to evolve and change.

The conclusion here is that much work still needs to be done. Even with the recent success in hiring, WSSD's teaching force is far from representative of the students that comprise the district, and a step towards parity in hiring is only a part of the equation. When reflecting on the current data regarding teacher staffing, it is important to shift the focus beyond these numbers and begin to examine how the district is making space for

different voices that can enrich its schools and the work that educators are charged to do with students, day-in and day-out. In order to facilitate these teachers of color operating not in isolation, we must look to see all of who they are, and to provide them with supportive spaces that value their perspectives, in all aspects of their work. In my capstone project, the problem of practice that I will address is the need to plan for equity in the hiring and retention practices in our schools, and the necessity to strategically develop opportunities that will support teachers of color as they experience a work environment that is often exclusionary, and can cause them to feel alienated from the school culture or can even push them out of the school or even the occupation as a whole.

A Snapshot of the District

For the purpose of using the Western Suburban School District as a model to which I will demonstrate the validity of applying my recommended course of action to enable change, I'd like to step back and provide a baseline of information about this district. The Western Suburban School District serves families that represent various racial, ethnic, economic and religious backgrounds, and is the fourth largest district in the state of Illinois. WSSD is located just 40 miles west of Chicago, just off Interstate 88, and comprises more than 27,000 students throughout 33 schools, hailing from the cities of Aurora, Naperville, Plainfield and Bolingbrook. While diversity is challenging to find in most American classrooms and, in fact, does not exist in the majority of American schools, a major component of WSSD's identity is, in fact, the diversity of its student body. As a unit district that encompasses a preschool program, elementary, middle, high, as well as alternative and transitional programs, it has experienced a tremendous amount

of growth and change in recent years. The district is continuing its growth as several new developments break ground on single-family and multiunit housing within its confines, and redistricting is looming as WSSD looks to create a balance of students in all buildings. The current demographics of the district from the 2020 Illinois State Report Card indicate that the white population makes up 40% of the district's student body, with the largest minority group being Asian, representing 33.3% of the students in the district. The Latinx/Hispanic population represents just over 12% of the population, with the Black population representing just over nine percent. The district's diversity can also be seen in the number of students that identify as two or more races, and this portion of the district's student demographics has grown to represent 4.5%. English learners comprise 11% of the population, and students with disabilities represent 12%. Even with high expectations for achievement, the district's expenditure per pupil is \$12,641, or almost \$2,000 less than the state average (Illinois State Report Card, 2020).

Despite a focus on equity and diversity (as represented by WSSD's board and stated goals), the district is not reflecting these values in its current staffing numbers. With a student population that is roughly 60% nonwhite, as shown in Figure 1, diverse representation is not reflected in the overall teaching body of the district. Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate that the teaching staff is mostly female and white, with more than 88 percent of teachers identifying as white. It has been found that this lack of parity is impacting the district's ability to live by its mission to "Inspire all children to achieve their greatest potential" (WSSD Board of Education 2021).

Figure 1

WSSD Student Racial-Ethnic Diversity 2020

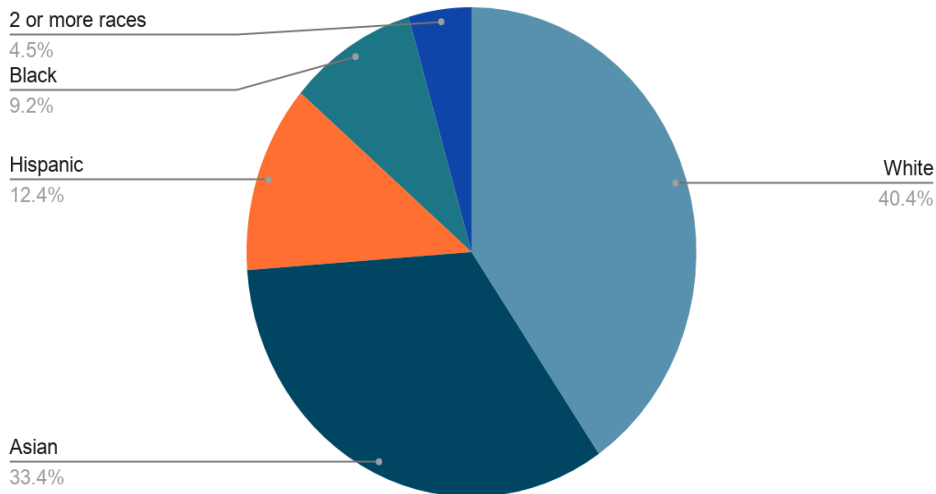


Figure 1. WSSD Student Racial-Ethnic Diversity 2020

Figure 2

WSSD Teacher Demographics by Race(2020) with FTE of 1,770

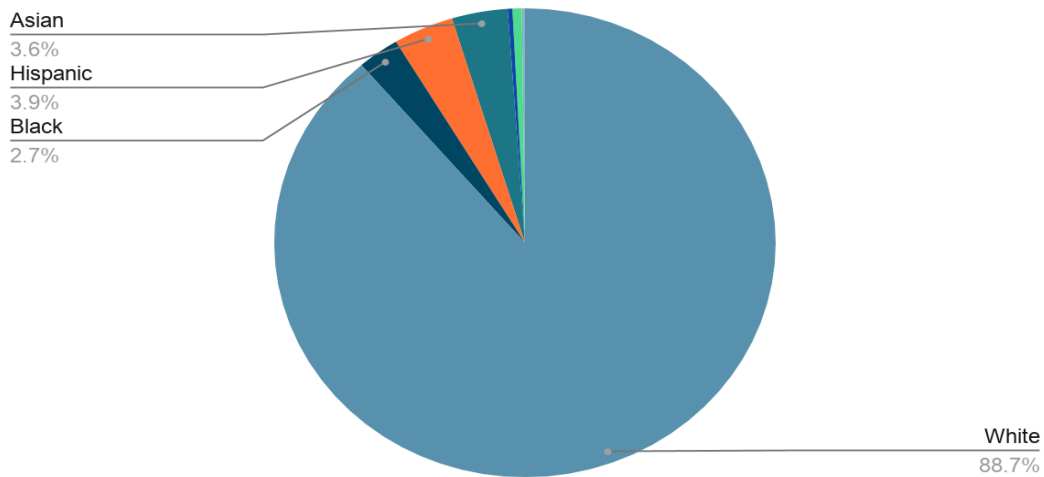


Figure 2. WSSD Teacher Demographics by Race (2020) with FTE of 1,770

Figure 3

Gender(2020) with FTE of 1,770

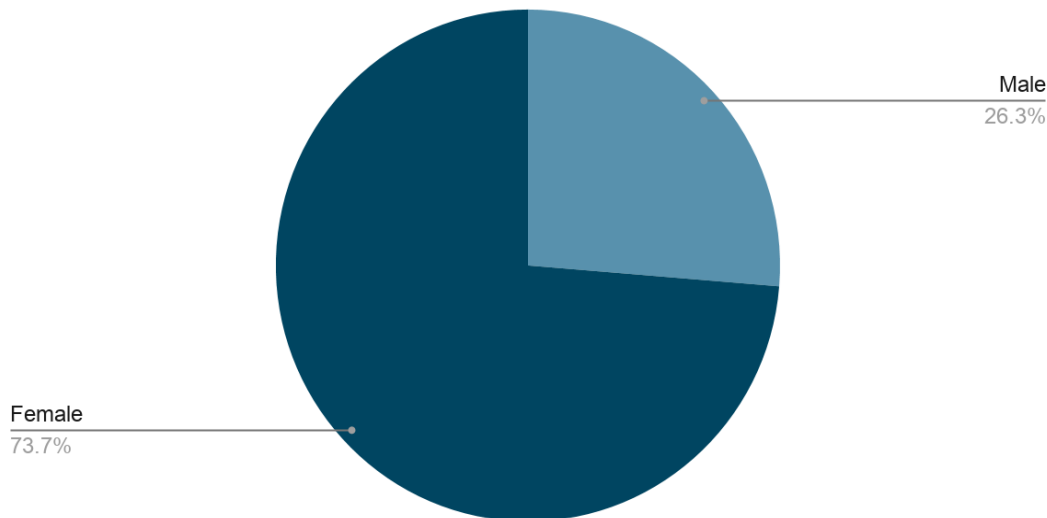


Figure 3. Gender (2020) with FTE of 1,770

The Need for Planning and Leading for Equity

At this time, much attention is being placed on the issue of hiring and retention, especially as they pertain to the experiences of teachers of color. The next major step lies in examining how we make space for these educators in our schools, and this moves beyond merely adding them to a team without making changes to its culture. To create a more just and equitable school district for all students, WSSD's staff must better understand how to approach and engage the Black and brown youth that is in its classrooms, while also recognizing that this work cannot be done without including teachers of color as an integral part of the educational system.

Factors that Impact the Problem of Practice

There are many factors that impact the ability to hire and retain teachers of color throughout the teacher pipeline. Understanding the impact of these barriers and obstacles is necessary in order to address the major issues of social justice that they give rise to. These barriers seemingly continue to replicate a culture that disadvantages students of color and all too often limits the success, or even pushes out teachers of color that could support real impact in schools (Bristol et al., 2020). The research has established many factors that must be addressed in order to realize change for teachers of color. The major factors that will be examined in this chapter are:

- Limiting the Identities of Teachers of Color
- The Shifting Demographics of the Teaching Workforce
- Considering the Reasons Teachers of Color are Important and are Needed
- Stages and Challenges in the Teacher Pipeline
- High School Graduation: The Obstacle of Building a Foundation to Access
- High Stakes Testing: The Gatekeeper to College and Education Programs
- Teacher Licensure Exams (Praxis I & II): Locking Out Teachers of Color
- Obstacles Found in the Interview and Hiring Process
- The Lack of Professional Development and Emotional Support

Having a clear understanding of the factors that impact teachers of color is important as schools and districts work to disrupt this pattern and culture that does not value all that these teachers have to offer. By shifting focus and changing how they work

to support teachers of color, school districts cannot only hire them more readily, but they will better be able to keep them in the classroom (Griffin & Tackle, 2017).

The Need for Creating Systemic Change

By 2045, the entire population of the United States is estimated to be minority white, with a quarter of the population being Latinx (Frey, 2018). The literature reflects the findings that teachers of color are continuing to be underrepresented in American schools, and are also leaving secondary education overall at higher rates (Ingersoll et al., 2017). In a report published by the Ed Trust, *If You Listen, We Will Stay* (2019), there are five challenges presented that were found to have emerged in the workforce as shared by teachers of color:

1. An antagonistic work culture that made TOC feel unwelcome or invisible
2. Undervaluation and being not recognized for the work they take on (lack of compensation)
3. Deprivation of agency and autonomy
4. Lack of supports needed to help them grow as professionals, and
5. Overall wellness and the impact both psychologically and financially on teachers of color.

These challenges are important and demonstrate how the voices of teachers of color must be heard in order to effect real change. In the paper, *School Context: Implications for Teachers of Color*, the researchers build on the literature to examine how traditional school contexts along with the impact of intergroup conflicts can make it more difficult for teachers of color to connect in these environments and, ultimately, to remain

in them (Madsen et al., 2019). Their work not only presents many of the challenges that teachers of color experience, but outlines the implications of these challenges if schools do not address them as they work to retain teachers of color and help them to be their true authentic selves in their work.

The body of work documenting the value of teachers of color – in particular, Black teachers – is vast, echoing the belief of their positive impact on all students (Dixon et al., 2019). These teachers bring to the table different experiences, pedagogies, and historically and “culturally relevant” instructional practices (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In addition, they are poised to bring with them their knowledge and experiences to the work they are doing in the classroom, making connections for their students that help them find success in school (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). As demographics continue to change with more non-white students in public schools, the cultural divide between students and teachers is continuing to grow. Confronting the obstacles to the success of teachers of color is needed in order to retain them in our schools as fully engaged members that are seen and valued (Griffin, 2018).

Limiting the Identities of Teachers of Color

One of the common challenges that teachers of color experience is the concept of centralizing their diversity, and this is where they are often forced into the role as cultural expert. In focus groups centering on hearing the voices of Black teachers, a common theme emerges around the idea of having connections to Black students and feeling “called” to the classroom to help teach them. A consequence of the positive relationship and outcomes of TOC with many Black students, teachers shared that they were often

limited by expectations of working primarily with Black students (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). In a study by Madsen and Mabokela (2014), Black teachers expressed that colleagues would come to them to help resolve conflicts with Black students and their families, which they were otherwise uncomfortable addressing on their own. The Black teachers shared how they were thrust into the role of being the “Black expert,” which caused them much angst as their cultural capital was leveraged in ways that did not focus on their pedagogical knowledge. The only value that is often extolled and shown to have merit from these teachers is based upon “Black issues,” causing them to be boxed into only solving problems that extend from their racial identity. White teachers have fewer cultural experiences and background knowledge outside of what they experience in school. When challenges arise, the Black teacher is often co-opted to interpret these experiences and conflicts taking place with Black children. The areas of opportunity often focus on experiences related to multicultural activities and issues of diversity. The parameters of expertise were found to have been limited, and teachers of color shared that they felt pigeonholed in this type of role in their school, and were overburdened with an unspoken mandate to be in complete ownership of the schools’ “minority causes” (Madsen & Mabokela, 2014).

Inequitable Value of Skills: Cultural Capital Verses Pedagogical Expertise

The work of teachers of color is often fixated around cultural capital, seldom allowing them to showcase their pedagogical expertise. The notion that teachers of color are hired to act as role models, to help diversify the staff or to teach minority students, serves to limit their ability to be seen and utilized as instructional experts that have much

to offer their colleagues in terms of educational practices. Mabokela and Madsen (2014) found that there was a misconception by white teachers about the abilities and skills that their colleagues of color possessed, and teachers of color often felt like they had to prove their value and worth (Madsen et al., 2019). The cultural knowledge of teachers of color was observed to be undervalued by white teachers and administrators. The teachers of color shared a constant need to navigate expectations with a lack of value shown for their skill and identity. This seeming lack of care renders their contributions to that of being virtually invisible (Dixon et al., 2019).

In one study that focused on Latinx teachers, a common theme that emerged was the perception of them as being able to bridge the cultural divide – to translate (both literally and figuratively) – while not being seen as candidates for other opportunities (Griffin, 2018). The teachers of color were often used in disciplinary roles, being called upon to support behavior, in contrast to being utilized for their knowledge and expertise in curriculum and instruction (Madsen & Mabokela, 2014). In the report issued by the Ed Trust, *Through Their Eyes*, teachers in the focus group shared that due to their ability to work with challenging students, their white peers thought of them more as “enforcers,” limiting their identities as educators who are able to support the instructional needs of all students (Griffin & Tackie, 2017).

Ignoring the Need for Agency, Autonomy and Voice

Another challenge that impacts how teachers of color see themselves in schools is the concept of autonomy, agency and lack of voice. In the study, *Teachers of Color Creating and Recreating Identities in Suburban Schools*, the notion that the body of

knowledge about what teachers of color experience in white-dominant schools is limited, especially when “their identities are negotiated in places where the presence of other minority teachers is few and far between” (Lee, 2013, p. 1). In the report by the Ed Trust, teachers shared about not connecting with the curriculum themselves, and having little agency to help their students to “see themselves in the curriculum” (Dixon et al., 2019). The dominant school culture typically leverages the culture of minority teachers, ceding much autonomy and power out of their control (Lee, 2013). The power of the dominant group can be somewhat imposing, helping to maintain more homogeneous values and practices. This experience can be particularly challenging for men of color, as schools are mostly white and female.

In his study of Black male educators, Bristol and Shirrell (2019) found that these teachers felt that they were unable to be their “authentic selves,” and this impacted their ability to share their voices. This environment can make it difficult for the voices of teachers of color to be heard, which can impair and limit their ability to feel valued as agents of change in their schools (Lee, 2013). In her work, Gay (1999) looks at how some teachers of color shape their own identity around their experiences with race, religious beliefs, culture, language and gender. Lee (2013) writes, “There is a correlation between the self-actualization process of teachers and the extent to which they will discuss identity issues with their students” (p. 2). When teachers are unable to have a voice and present all of their experiences and identity in the work they are doing in schools, they can often begin to feel invisible (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003). The connections to community and social justice as a mode of learning for teachers of color

do not always revolve around the Eurocentric educational framework, and not valuing these experiences can be limiting for teachers of color. The inability to share and teach to your whole experience and to be able to advocate for their communities through their work can marginalize teachers of color (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). The culture of the school plays a role here, and teachers of color can experience a negative climate that is full of microaggressions and bias (Dixon et al., 2019). The lack of diversity in leadership also can contribute to this feeling of being invisible, as many teachers of color report that the voices of white teachers are given more value and authority (Dixon et al., 2019).

Lack of Pedagogical and Emotional Support

The mere design of school systems around a Eurocentric cultural framework places teachers of color at odds with what they are working to accomplish in the classroom with students, while brushing up against their peers and the culture of school in this country (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). Being the minority voice in schools can be very challenging, and the lack of support can contribute to a sense of isolation (Lee, 2013). The dominance of white teachers and their views of instructional practices can be in conflict with those utilized by teachers of color as they work to reach their students. In Bristol's (2019) study with Black male teachers, this knowledge gap is presented, and the Black male teachers shared how their work to connect to students' cultures, experiences and styles were misinterpreted and not valued by their white peers. The moments of trying to explain and to prove pedagogical skills were not valued, and the Black male teachers expressed deepening feelings of isolation. Professional development (PD) that will help teachers of color bridge these gaps is often lacking, not allowing them to build

the skills needed to support students in their work. Teachers in a focus group shared that they could see the lack of representation while even attending PD opportunities, where the other teachers did not match their identities, and the information did not match the needs of their students (Griffin & Tackie, 2017).

Teachers of color are all too aware of their limited presence in their own schools, districts and in the profession nationwide. Not only is there a significantly low percentage of teachers of color, but Black teachers are working in primarily urban schools, especially in the South. Many made the decision to work in these under-resourced schools because they felt they were called to help solve the problem that was impacting their own community (Farinde-Wu, 2018). For teachers of color in white-dominant spaces, they can be faced with issues surrounding racial and ethnic stereotypes, and have few vehicles of support to help navigate their feelings and experiences (Lee, 2013). The resources in these schools need to be targeted to help them navigate the environments they are in, ideally pairing them with a mentor from a similar background (Dixon et al., 2019). The challenges that teachers of color experience are multifaceted, and the support they receive should connect to both pedagogical challenges as well as the impact of racial inequity that is a part of the system they are operating in at school (Mosely, 2018).

The HR Equity and Diversity Impact Assessment from Minneapolis Public Schools (2018) frames the experiences that teachers of color have to endure when in the workplace. The study builds on the research that shows how teachers of color often experience microaggressions from peers and bias, which can contribute to feelings of

isolation. The research presents teachers of color as not being able to bring their authentic selves into the workplace, and that they must give up or leave out a part of their identities when in school. In Lee's (2013) study, one of her subjects shared about having to wear a "mask" when it came to their identity. The lack of sufficient support for teachers of color can take a toll on not just the professional work of the teacher, but also on their health and well-being (Minneapolis Public Schools, 2018). This sense of isolation can often be extreme, especially for a TOC who may be the only one in their building and have no shared identity with colleagues. In his research surrounding Black male teachers, which make up less than two percent of the teacher workforce, Bristol and Shirrell (2019) found that these single teachers felt like tokens, were hyper-aware of how they were perceived, and felt isolated due to their single identity. The impact of feeling unwelcome is vast. Without offering spaces and a culture that embraces teachers of color, schools will continue to be seen as not desirable places for teachers of color to remain – and such schools will continue to struggle to diversify (Farinde-Wu, 2018).

The Shifting Demographics of the Teaching Workforce

While schools work to meet the varied needs of students, the teaching workforce is not keeping up with the diversity taking place in its classrooms. Over the last 25 years, the number of students of color in public schools has doubled, while the representation of teachers of color has remained low (DiCarlo & Cervantes, 2018). In the report published by Digital Promise, *Pipeline and the Teachers of Color*, it is shown how the demographics of the U.S. have been shifting and changing over the last few decades, with over 50% of the K-12 students in public schools now being children of color (Gold,

2020). Latinx students represent 25% of the students, and even with their growing numbers, Latinx teachers only make up 8% of teachers (Griffin, 2018). As the White population is aging, the youth population that the country will depend upon to sustain it will be ever more brown, with the highest percentage of growth being Asian and Latinx. By 2060, the projections of the census indicate that only 36% of the population under the age of 18 will be White (Frey, 2018). The need for the success of this youth population is connected to their ability to learn and thrive in our schools, and many students are and will continue to lack the experience and benefits of having a teacher from a different background (Griffin, 2018). All of the data, however, is emphasizing how the demographics are changing the face of America, but the identities of the teaching force is not representing this shift. Some critics argue that the opposite is taking place, with the teaching force becoming more universally white, with less diversity (Ingersoll et al., 2017).

The impact on learning is significant as the lack of cultural capital, implicit bias, and the impact of systemic racism cannot be left out of the equation when looking at the lack of parity between the identities of the students as compared to the teachers that are leading them in the classroom (Gold, 2020). The data about exclusionary discipline practices and the “school-to-prison pipeline” are paired with the concerns surrounding the lack of teacher diversity (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). Teaching diversity matters and many studies are indicating the positive impacts that teachers of color have on their students, especially students of color (Ingersoll et al., 2017). The benefits for students of color in having a teacher of color connects to higher expectations, classroom performance and in

general an understanding of lived experiences (Ingersoll & May, 2011). With the teacher workforce being around 18% of teachers of color, the reach of these teachers on students, especially other students of color, can be limited or nonexistent. The benefits of having these different voices in the classroom is being confirmed in the research; however, a majority of teachers of color are concentrated in urban schools that support students with the highest rates of poverty (Ingersoll et al., 2017). These teachers of color are also concentrated in Southern states, with other parts of the country having very low numbers of teacher diversity in their states (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Considering the Reasons Teachers of Color are Important and Needed

The students that will be shaping the future of the country are entering schools that do not reflect all of whom they are and can be. The lack of representation and limited perspective continues to be validated via the curriculum, the instructional methodology as well as through the lack of diversity represented in the instructors that are teaching them. Schools are beginning to see the value in having a more diverse staff, and have worked to have some representation that can speak to the needs of all students, especially their children of color. Many studies are looking into the academic impact on students of color that also are taught by a teacher of color. This burden is often placed on the shoulders of a single teacher of color or on a small number of educators that have to navigate the challenges of teaching and also working in school systems that were not built for them (Mosely, 2018). The need to bridge not only the achievement gap but also the culture gap is imperative – and this is challenged by the lack of parity in our teacher workforce (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011).

Teachers of color have much riding on their success. They are placed in the spotlight to function as role models for all of their students, but in a different way to their students of color. Teachers of color bring into the classroom rich connections to the communities and the lived experiences of their students. These connections also act as a focal point on their desire to teach and to empower their students of color that they encounter in their classrooms (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). The impact of bias is not exempt when it comes to our schools and to teachers, and the notion of who one chooses to help is shaped by these beliefs. Teacher knowledge of students and their backgrounds can represent a lack of cultural synchronization, impacting the expectations they have of students of color (Mattai et al., 2010). It is important to have diverse voices in the classroom as teachers of color are able to connect to their students and are more likely to see the potential of their students of color (Dee, 2005). In the Ed Trust report, *Our Stories, Our Struggles, Our Strengths*, Latinx teachers give insight into their experiences and how they operate as “lifeguards,” assisting students with how to navigate the school system, while also protecting and providing support (Griffin, 2018). Not only are these teachers able to do so for Latinx students, but one of their strengths is their ability to build relationships and make connections with both students and teachers across racial groups (Griffin, 2018).

Teachers of color often share how they became teachers due to their deep connections to their origins, and that they want to return to contribute to the development of high academic standards for children of color (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). Teachers of color bring into the classroom a focus on the whole child, and a focus on needing to not

just teach, but to also empower (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). In a study of Black female teachers, the research found that these teachers not only wanted to work with children of color as a response to the need for high-quality teachers, but that they also saw students and their behaviors through a cultural lens. These Black women educators maintained high expectations for their students, and understood the cultural connections to their students' behavior, without focusing on the negative or punitive as a response (Farinde-Wu, 2018).

Stages and Challenges in the Teacher Pipeline

The teaching profession in the United States has become a white profession where over 80% of teachers identify as white (NCES, 2020). The impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 changed the American education system forever, and a part of its legacy is the impact it had on Black educators and their place in schools. An impact from the *Brown* decision was that Black teachers were pushed out of the teacher workspace in large numbers, and white teachers were put in their places to teach the Black children that would now be entering schools through integration. The field of education once was considered a noble profession within the Black community, and these educators saw it as an important role to educate Black children. After *Brown*, school systems experienced the loss of over 38,000 Black teachers by 1970 (Ahmad & Boser, 2014). Being displaced from the field of education, and with new doors opening in other fields to Blacks and other people of color, the trend has continued to represent low entry into teaching. The teachers that are entering the workforce are overwhelmingly being educated in teacher preparation programs at HBCUs, even with these colleges only representing four percent

of American colleges (Underwood et al., 2019). Even with the low numbers entering the field, there is a higher attrition rate by teachers of color as compared to their white counterparts (Gold, 2020). Making up only around 18% of the teaching workforce today, understanding the stages and challenges that impact the teacher pipeline are important in order to change the narrative for teachers of color.

High School Graduation: The Obstacle of Building a Foundation to Access

When looking at the pathway to a career in education, the first step is completing high school and having the qualifications to apply to college and a teacher education program. At this time, the graduation rates are the highest they have ever been with the 2017-2018 data showing a graduation rate of 85% overall (NCES, 2020). However, the graduation rates are not this high for all demographics; Native American students have the lowest graduation rate, with only 74% of students completing high school. The average for white students in the United States is 89%, with a 10-point gap between the rates of Black students, who have a graduation rate of 79% (NCES, 2020). The challenges that impact students of color include limited opportunities in the most rigorous courses, resources to prepare for testing, as well as support for college planning. Even with improved efforts for more diversity in Advanced Placement courses, students of color are still not having the same participation in these rigorous courses as their white peers. In addition, African American students continue to be the most underrepresented in these advanced courses (The 10th Annual AP Report to the Nation, 2014).

High Stakes Testing: The Gatekeeper to College and Education Programs

Even with a diploma, students need to meet the college entrance requirements, with another obstacle being the college entrance exams, such as the ACT or SAT (Ahmad & Boser, 2014). Students of color are not attaining the scores that are needed to enter college and education programs, thus causing another barrier to creating a rich pool of diverse teacher candidates (Ahmad & Boser, 2014). In 2018, 52% of American high school graduates were projected to have taken the ACT, and the composite score for White students was 22.2. When looking at students of color, their scores were much lower, with the composite scores of Hispanic/Latinx students coming in at 18.8. Black students were even lower, with a composite score of 16.9 (NCES, 2021). Barriers are built into the system as students of color tend to have fewer opportunities to help them prepare for these tests due to the high costs of college preparatory courses (Ahmad & Boser, 2014). Even if students of color are able to enter a four-year institution and teacher preparation program, the teacher licensure requirements can often derail these candidates from entering the teaching pool (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

Teacher Licensure Exams (Praxis I & II): Locking Out Teachers of Color

The barriers for teacher candidates of color continue as they move through the process to enter the field as licensed teachers. Every state determines the process for licensure. Generally, teacher candidates are required to pass standardized assessments, such as the Praxis I and II, to either be admitted into a teacher preparation program, or gain a teacher license (Gold, 2020). The trend that has been established is one where Black and Latinx teacher candidates fail these exams disproportionately when comparing

them to the scores of their white peers (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Research shows many causes for the lack of success on these exams, and one key area is the racial and ethnic group bias that exists in these exams (Darling-Hammond et al., 1996). The impact of these disparities directly correlates to the numbers of teachers moving through teacher education programs. Research has also been examining the validity of the Praxis exams and their overall ability to measure the efficacy and skills of teachers. One study explored the limitations of applying the same licensure testing standards to all teachers as the outcome with students varied due to teacher matching. The study found that Black and other students of color that were taught by Black teachers, no matter their score on the Praxis, experienced positive academic outcomes and benefitted from having a Black teacher. As well, Black teachers had a positive impact on the level of having students being taught by the highest-testing white teachers (Nettles et al., 2011). The barrier of these examinations is evident, and now many states are providing alternative avenues to demonstrate skills via performance tasks, in contrast to the traditional teacher licensing protocols (Gold, 2020).

Obstacles Found in the Interview and Hiring Process

Once teachers of color complete student teaching and receive their teaching license, they must then work to find their way into a teaching position. The interview process can provide another layer of obstacles that place most teachers in a context where there are few people that look like them. Teachers applying for jobs may experience discrimination or implicit bias that can impact their being offered a teaching position (Gold, 2020). One research study that explored a large and diverse school district found

that job offers were not given to Black candidates, even when they had advanced degrees or more experience than their white peers (D'Amico et al., 2017). This study found that out of the 1,221 new teacher hires that were made, only 49 were made to Black teachers. Black teachers that applied to middle school positions were 66% less likely to receive an offer in comparison to a White peer (D'Amico et al., 2017). Once teachers of color find a placement in a school, the next major hurdle is how they are able to navigate the challenges of being a new teacher, along with the compounded challenges they may feel due to the limited support or lack thereof they may receive from their colleagues, principal and/or district at large.

The Lack of Professional Development and Emotional Support

As districts work to retain teachers of color, they are seeing the gaps that exist as it pertains to meeting the very specific challenges that impact teachers of color. A part of this process has been the need to reflect on the impact of working conditions that are not always inclusive and welcoming to teachers of color, and the need for principals to create a more affirming school culture and climate that include the beliefs and values of TOC (Dixon et al., 2019). This culture extends to collegiality and the need for inclusive treatment from other teachers that can impact teachers of color and their entry as members into the teaching community (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In his article "Teacher Diversity Starts with Belonging," Coburn discusses the idea that schools can be hostile and unwelcoming spaces for teachers of color and students of color alike. In particular, he espouses that school leadership should prioritize making connections with teachers of color through mentoring and other ways to demonstrate to

these teachers that they are valued and belong in the school community (Coburn, 2020). Coburn is speaking to the essential process of helping teachers of color build both community connections as well as skill development. Mentoring can assist with the development of content and pedagogical skills, while also supporting the overall occupational growth of these teachers to help them feel valued.

Proposed Intervention: Centering the Voices of Teachers of Color

Right after I was hired in the equity position for the Western Suburban School District, I was invited to discuss the recent resignation of one of our Black teachers. Within days, we learned that another one of our Black teachers, and the only Black male teacher instructing science, was also leaving. This came as a blow to our leadership, and they wanted to uncover why we were losing these two very talented teachers to other neighboring districts. We were fortunate enough to be able to set up a time to meet with both teachers together for an open forum where they could share their voices with us. Their perspectives as well as their concerns about the district came through loud and clear, echoing my own experiences of unrest due to the lack of fulfillment in the schools in which I had taught years before. Listening to these two teachers and their experiences gave voice to what I saw as a lack of support and acknowledgement to the experiences of teachers of color in the district, some of which were the only Black or brown teachers in their schools. One of these teachers wrote in an article after leaving that “The invisible tax had become too much to bear” (Rembert, 2019). Her words became a confirmation as well as affirmation to me about the complex feelings and challenges that surround being a teacher of color and that can produce a “dual loss,” impacting both the staff and

students (Rembert, 2019). Being a teacher of color, and one of the only ones in a white-dominant space, can be fundamentally isolating and unfulfilling – and when these teachers leave, gaping holes can remain for all to fill.

After listening to their voices, a larger picture was being revealed, one that is etched across our district and others around the country, that illustrates the necessity for district and school leadership to be targeted and intentional in our efforts to create teaching environments where teachers of color can find success. The lived experiences of these Black teachers affirmed my own experiences as being legitimate, rational and valid. Moving forward, the Western Suburban School District's work as an educational entity that values equity must address not only hiring, but also cultivating a learning space where teachers of color can bring who they are into the classroom. It must address ways to ensure that teachers of color can be valued and seen. In the district's planning for hiring and retention, leadership must evolve to be intentional in their practices to create places where teachers of color can experience a sense of belonging and can thrive. Without creating these environments, the district's recruitment efforts will continue to only address a part of the problem, and will not support the development of the talent that school leaders have worked so hard to attract. The development of the WSSD equity plan that includes a strand that centers our hiring and retention practices through a lens that sees teachers of color differently will be a focal point of the district's ongoing equity work as school leaders move to create a more just system that provides a learning environment ensuring all of WSSD's students can achieve and succeed.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW: *TEACHERS OF COLOR MATTER: CREATING A CULTURE THAT SUPPORTS HIRING, RETAINING AND VALUING ALL THAT THEY BRING TO THE CLASSROOM*

The literature reviewed for this capstone project examines the trends that are occurring surrounding the changing demographics of students that are entering schools, along with the impact a majority white teaching force is having on students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond 2017). Recent studies present a growing body of research that demonstrates the benefits of teachers of color. However, due to systemic barriers and obstacles that exist for these teachers, entrance into the teaching profession is challenging, thus causing a major deterrence to attracting and maintaining teachers of color in the workforce (Carver-Thomas, 2018). The research is also indicating the significance of creating more equitable practices that will allow for greater support for teachers of color as they work to enter, remain and thrive in the teacher workforce (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). The research is providing a greater understanding as to why teachers of color often feel alienated in schools, and what systemic changes need to take place in order to allow them to bring their cultural and pedagogical values and strengths to the classroom to support all students (Kohli, 2018).

Needs for Hiring Teachers of Color

The demographics of the United States are changing, yet the teaching population is still predominantly white and female (U.S. Department of Education). The lack of diversity in the teacher workforce is impacting the learning outcomes of students, especially students of color, as the delivery gap is so highly focused on and originating from a white perspective (Pour-Khorshid 2018). Numerous studies are finding that students of color experience benefits from having teachers of the same race (Goe & Roth, 2019). Today, the number of teachers of color is growing, yet they represent only 17.5% of the teacher workforce (Goe & Roth, 2019). Prior to *Brown v. Board of Education*, estimates are that 82,000 Black teachers worked with close to two million Black children in schools (Brown & Thomas, 2020). Within the Black community, the role of the teacher was revered, but this foundation of Black educators was disrupted after *Brown*, seeing roughly 30,000 Black teachers being purged from the profession by the early 1970's (Brown, 2019). Currently, Black and other teachers of color are extremely underrepresented, despite their acknowledged importance in helping to resolve the academic disparities that exist for students of color (Kohli, 2018). Prevailing research now clearly demonstrates that teachers of color matter, and that they make a positive impact on all students, but especially students of color. However, as the American population has steadily diversified, more students of color are finding that they have fewer teachers of color guiding them. This is precisely because changes in the teaching force have remained largely static, thus causing an ever-increasing mismatch between the identities of teachers and the students they teach. Ultimately, this mismatch is detrimental

to students of color, and is why efforts are needed to bring about parity in the teacher workforce (Ingersoll et al., 2017).

Recent research shows how students of color are experiencing higher academic performance, increased graduation rates and higher attendance rates when they are taught by a teacher of color (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Teachers of color are also more positive in their outlook and effusive regarding the abilities and potential of their students of color, while also holding them to higher expectations (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). In this analysis, it is important to include other educators of color as well – who serve as role models for all students, but also make a huge impact on students of color as they are often looked at from a deficit model (Bristol & Shirrell, 2019). Black teachers can bring a distinct ideology to the classroom that can benefit students of color, and this includes kinship-like roles (other mothering/fathering) as well as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 1999). Not only are students of color impacted by having teachers and educational role models of color, but the learning environment is enhanced for all by this diversity. That is, it has been found that white students also benefit when they, too, see people of color in leadership positions in their schools and community at large (Brown, 2019).

Other findings have shown how Black students who are taught by a Black teacher are less likely to receive exclusionary discipline practices, more likely to have higher attendance rates, and more often have higher performance on standardized tests (Noonan & Bristol, 2020). It is important to examine the experiences and perceptions of these students as they pertain to the impact of teachers of color in the classroom as a part of the discussion of why teacher diversity matters. Researchers Cherng and Halpin (2016)

examine how students feel about teachers of color and their impact on the educational experience. In their study, Cherng and Halpin indicate the importance of minority teacher recruitment and retention, showing data of how American schools are currently attended by a majority of students that are racially and ethnically diverse, while only around 20% of teachers are racial/ethnic minorities. The demographic divide is where they begin, building off earlier research concluding that students of color have a more favorable perception of teachers of color, and that this perception can ultimately connect to positive impacts on student motivation, grades, attendance and interest in school. Researchers Kohli and Pizarro (2016) seek to demonstrate that having a more diverse and robust teaching workforce is needed as teachers of color assist in bringing diverse perspectives, cultural knowledge and contributions of learning styles that are not centered on a Eurocentric framework – thus better representing the students that are entering today’s classrooms. The lack of parity is impacting schools on all levels, and teacher mismatch can be harmful to students of color (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Noonan & Bristol, 2020).

The different styles of teaching and pedagogical frameworks that teachers of color often bring to the classroom can impact the experiences and relationships that students of color have with school (Lee, 2013). The perceptions of their abilities and expectations for achievement by White educators is often lower than that of their White and Asian peers. These perceptions of students of color are shown to affect them, and influence their views of their own abilities and potential (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). Cherng and Halpin found that students did have more favorable perceptions of their Black and Latinx teachers than

of their white teachers. Their study also showed that Latinx teachers were more positively perceived by students, and Black teachers were perceived to have higher academic standards and to show higher levels of support than white teachers. Cherng and Halpin also noted variations in perceptions from among students of color. For example, teacher matching did not have the same impact for Latinx students that it did for Black students, and Latinx students involved in the study did not demonstrate through the seven measures that they held a higher perception of Latinx teachers. By contrast, Black students did indicate having more positive experiences with Black teachers that were statistically significant across all seven outcome measures. These findings were consistent with those in other studies showing how Black students respond more favorably when they are matched with Black teachers in the classroom (Darling-Hammond et al., 1996). Overall, however, perceptions of Black teachers and other teachers of color are favorable by racially diverse students (Cherng & Halpin, 2016).

Beyond the perceptions and affinity that has been demonstrated through these studies to exist on the part of students of color for teachers of color and vice versa, the bottom line for all students is their ability to learn and to achieve in our schools. It is clear that, for years, students of color have been attending schools where they are not achieving at the same levels as their white peers. This knowledge gap is due, in large part, to the fact that they are consistently being taught by teachers who do not come from a background that matches their own (Lee, 2013). Students are being impacted in the way it matters most – their ability to learn – by this lack of teacher diversity. Introducing more teachers of color to the classroom is needed now more than ever as our public school

systems continue to support more Black and brown students each year. Historically, schools have not been designed to help and serve communities of color, and schools now have to work to create a sense of belonging for their teachers of color and students of color, alike. The contributions of communities of color have been devalued and ignored within the curriculum, impacting students of color and their ability to build a strong sense of self-worth and academic capital to achieve success in school (Kohli, 2018). As schools work to hire diverse teachers, each one must examine the culture that it is cultivating, and determine if it is inclusive, or if it promotes a racially hostile climate, making it difficult for teachers of color to remain and to grow professionally (Kohli, 2018).

Barriers to Recruiting and Hiring Teachers of Color

The existing literature indicates that there are many reasons for the lack of diversity in the teacher workforce, and a significant issue in the pipeline is the beginning: the recruitment of teachers – where teachers of color can experience obstacles as they work to attain a teaching position (Carver-Thomas, 2018). It is important for schools and school districts to have equitable hiring practices that promote diversity and inclusion when recruiting new teachers (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Noonan & Bristol, 2020). The research also presents the challenges that can exist when the prevailing system being utilized does not look to promote equitable hiring practices (D’Amico et al., 2017). The research also demonstrates that districts can have a well formed culture of hiring that replicates the same outcomes in their practices, even when they have the focus and desire to create more diversity in their staffing (Noonan & Bristol, 2020).

In the study, *Minority Teacher Recruitment, Employment and Retention: 1987 to 2013*, the authors look to ground the research surrounding the teacher shortage and its impact on minority teachers in the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2017). Their research shows how gains have been made over the past quarter century or so, with minority teacher numbers growing from 12% in the 1980s to representing close to 19% by 2012. Even with this growth, however, the study indicates that more research is needed to understand what happens to teachers once they are hired as well as what they experience once they are in schools, along with a need for greater understanding of the underlying problems that cause teachers to leave at a much higher rate than their White colleagues. As found in the body of research, teachers of color have shared many reasons for their desire to leave education, such as feeling devalued, lack of autonomy, and lack of support (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). TOC express many reasons that would account for their high turnover rate, but the two major factors expressed for departure are dissatisfaction with working conditions and the desire for better paying work opportunities (Ingersoll et al., 2017).

Teachers who leave the field of education overall report that they are dissatisfied with the administrative aspects of school and the challenges that come from the many student assessments that impact the organization of instruction, causing lack of autonomy of teaching (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). Ingersoll et al. (2017) showed, however, that teachers of color tend to move into schools that have higher numbers of students and faculty of color, while white teachers move out of these schools at a higher rate. The recruitment of teachers of color has brought more teachers of all backgrounds into

schools, but more work is needed to bring about the desired outcome of these recruitment initiatives – namely teachers of color. Hiring practices are only a part of the plan that is needed as districts look to hire, retain and support teachers of color. Much of the research pertaining to the retention of teachers of color indicates many problems that can cause them to feel unwelcome and ultimately cause many to leave a school community or the field of education altogether (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). Efforts are needed to counter this loss of qualified, certified instructors of color who leave teaching as a career, never to return. In addition, leadership, policies, practices and overall working conditions must improve and are considerations that will help retain teachers of color (Ingersoll et al., 2017).

The research indicates that a course of action supporting the hiring and retention of teachers of color must be espoused and implemented in order to make schools more inclusive to the achievement of all students (Ingersoll et al., 2017). Because of the many unique barriers that exist for TOC as they work to gain access into the profession, a variety of pathways must be utilized in concert in order to directly respond to these barriers and achieve a diverse teacher workforce (Carver-Thomas, 2018). A key point highlighted by Carver-Thomas is the lack of mentoring for pre-service teachers, along with a lack of high-quality preparation. The emphasis on teacher licensure exams has also posed another barrier that is disproportionately impacting teacher-candidates of color, who fail these exams at much higher rates than their white peers (Carver-Thomas, 2018).

When looking at the low numbers of teachers of color entering the field, a further examination of the experiences of Black male teachers is needed, as the barriers they face differ from those of Black women and other teachers of color (Bristol et al., 2020). Black males only make up two percent of the teaching workforce, and research is showing that a major barrier to recruitment is the relationship Black males report having with school. These experiences are often reported by Black males to be so overwhelmingly negative and also racially hostile towards them that they drastically decrease any desire for them to consider a profession in the classroom, thus disrupting access to them further down the teacher pipeline (Brown & Thomas, 2020). In their research, Brown and Thomas look at how Black males are both racialized and gendered in their experiences with school as they are working in spaces that are mostly white and female, with their voices being virtually undervalued, misunderstood and silenced. These experiences can cause Black males to leave education before starting a career, or to never truly consider it at all. In Pabon et al.'s (2011) research, this is defined as how Black male preservice teachers are “Schooled Out,” as they are silenced in their programs and are given little support or validation. Due to this essential lack of a Black male presence in schools, there is a concern that all students are missing their important insights, contributions and perspectives (Underwood et al., 2019).

Much research looks at the barriers that exist in the hiring pipeline with an emphasis on the supply side – that is, the low numbers of TOC entering and graduating from teacher education programs. In the study, *Where are All the Black Teachers? Discrimination in the Teacher Labor Market*, the researchers examined what occurred in

the teacher hiring process of a large school district with 180,000 students in order to determine racial makeup of those who were extended job offers to teach in the district. The researchers looked at how attention centered on supply, but little attention was focused on the actual demand for Black teachers in the labor market (D'Amico et al., 2017). D'Amico et al. found that Black teachers, when compared to their equally qualified white peers, were less likely to receive a job offer, identifying barriers in the process that were continuing to keep them from entering the classroom.

Another issue is the slow amount of change that is occurring in schools that pay organizational lip service to diversifying their teaching staff. In their study, "*Taking Care of Your Own*"; *Parochialism, Pride of Place and the Drive to Diversify Teaching*, Noonan and Bristol (2020) consider this problem and how many communities have barriers surrounding recruitment, hiring and retention due to their own systematically entrenched patterns that replicate outcomes. These patterns revolved around pride of hiring graduates, along with the parochial connections of being a part of the local community. However, the negative impact was that hiring decisions often favored locals, making it more challenging for others to be given opportunities to be hired (Noonan & Bristol, 2020). That is, it was found that the impact of localism and connections to the community have an impact on perspectives and hiring decisions (D'Amico et al., 2017). Having knowledge about a district, being from the area or being a graduate from the school all provided greater opportunities to teacher candidates, most of whom were white (D'Amico et al., 2017; Noonan & Bristol, 2020). Noonan and Bristol present the conflict that exists between understanding the positive impact that teachers of color can have on

their students and the culture inherent in these same districts that can too often impact their hiring decisions, resulting in barriers to hiring teachers of color despite expressed initiatives designed to effect the contrary.

Discriminatory practices have to be addressed as they are continuing to shape the identities of our schools and the teachers that are able to influence the students in their classrooms (D'Amico et al., 2017). In a review of the data regarding teachers applying for jobs, teachers of color were found to be offered positions at much lower rates than their white peers at all levels. In addition, the Black candidates that received offers were also more educated (D'Amico et al., 2017). The analysis of the hiring data also showed that building leadership as well as student demographics impacted hiring. The Black teacher candidates who received offers were also more highly concentrated in schools that had higher Black student populations as well as those with low-income students. The findings from this study highlight the degree to which identifying TOC to apply for teaching positions is only one part of the problem, but that the willingness to hire is another that must be examined as districts work to diversify their teaching staffs. Systemic racial bias is baked into the pipeline, and equity in hiring practices is needed in order to begin to open up spaces for more teachers of color that will ultimately benefit all students in our schools (Noonan & Bristol, 2020).

Noonan and Bristol (2020) present the conflict that exists between understanding the positive impact that teachers of color can have on their students and the culture inherent in these same districts that can too often impact their hiring decisions, resulting in barriers to hiring teachers of color despite initiatives designed to the contrary.

Educators share that they value their diverse students and the benefits that a diverse teaching staff offers to the academic and overall support of their students (Noonan & Bristol 2020). However, resistance surrounding hiring practices can exist that challenge the ability to hire diverse candidates (D’Amico et al., 2017). These converging and conflicting perspectives persist, pushing up against the belief in a meritocracy in hiring, with many hiring decisions being made based on community attachment and connections, as well as on the shared identity candidates have with the school community (Noonan & Bristol, 2020). This parochialism, which the researchers define as “a general social process aimed at maintaining productive (though exclusive) bonds,” creates a system that makes it difficult for teachers of color to enter the community, no matter their qualifications (Noonan & Bristol, 2020).

Through the teacher interviews conducted by Noonan and Bristol (2020), along with a review of prior hiring practices, a pattern emerged that showed the district giving preferential treatment to natives of the community, especially those who were White. The beliefs in diversity were not transferring over to hiring practices as the connections to community were so entrenched in the hiring culture. In order to begin to shift these outcomes in hiring, a transparent and fair process for hiring was subsequently created – developed with the help of various stakeholders. The rubric assisted in balancing out the skills of the candidates with that of connection to the community, which often shifted hiring to those candidates who were graduates of the school. Noonan and Bristol found that the implementation of the common hiring rubric assisted in reducing bias in the hiring process overall.

Challenges to Retaining Teachers of Color

Throughout the research, teachers of color are clearly demonstrating that there are so many factors impacting their ability to work. In order to combat the teacher shortage crisis, along with the parity gap between teachers and students in schools, the issue of retention of TOC has to be addressed (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Teachers of color are leaving the profession at much higher rates than their white peers (Ingersoll & May, 2011). One reason, according to Pour-Khorshid (2018), is that teachers of color and their voices can often be undervalued and marginalized in schools, making it difficult for them to want to remain in the classroom, as well as considering the profession in the first place.

Much research is now focused on the supports provided to teachers of color as they make connections to their own identities and the need for social justice, while they work to find their voices in the work they are undertaking with students. This can often be in conflict with the focus that is set on the lens of the dominant perspective coming from their schools or the greater teaching community around them. In their work, *Fighting to Educate Our Own: Teachers of Color, Relational Accountability, and the Struggle for Racial Justice*, Kohli and Pizarro (2016) build off their own experiences as teachers of color to examine how community-oriented TOC are limited in schools, as well as how little attention is given to their experiences during teacher training. Kohli and Pizarro look at how schools can often isolate teachers of color and their identities, and that TOC can withdraw from their white peers.

The body of research continues to show a common theme that teachers of color are underappreciated and even silenced in their schools (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). The

experiences that challenge teachers of color in school can also be tied to the curriculum that is often “culturally disconnected,” and does not reflect their identities or the identities of the children they want to uplift (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). In *Fighting to Educate Our Own*, the authors shared how their focus was on supporting students from a lens of justice and equity, but this was in conflict with the culture of the school. Teachers of color lacked a safe space to share and develop their ideas, and also lacked real support and opportunities to grow. This study is just one of many that concludes that the underlying yet inherent racism existent in American schools continues to influence the retention of teachers of color, necessitating this factor to continue to be examined as a part of the work to retain TOC in our schools.

The research study by Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) center their work around what happens to Black teachers in the workforce, what causes them to leave the profession (attrition) or move to other schools (turnover), and what changes need to occur in the system to help them to stay or return to work in schools. In *Why Black Teachers Leave and What Can Be Done About It*, the authors work to provide a better understanding of what policies and practices schools can implement in order to make systemic changes that will improve the conditions that allow teachers of color to remain in the profession. Their work builds on previous research and findings regarding variables that indicate teacher attrition, which include pay (absolute and perceived salaries), work conditions, teacher preparation, as well as student characteristics. This is the first study to analyze the impact of these conditions on Black women teachers,

drawing their data from the SASS survey and the National Center of Education Statistics Schools and Staffing Survey (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In their work, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) found that Black teachers continue to be underrepresented in teacher workforces and that their numbers have gone down since the 1990s, when they represented 8.3% of teachers. The analysis of teacher data also showed how Black teachers are concentrated in the South – in schools that serve mostly low-income and Black and brown students. Just over 70% of Black teachers are working in schools in the South, leaving the rest of the country with little representation of Black teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). When looking at the data, the trends for departing the profession were vastly greater for Black teachers, with their turnover rates being 60% higher than non-Black teachers. In the South, the Black teacher turnover rate is 26%, which is much higher than the national average (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The pattern that was presented in the study was the impact of involuntary turnover identified to be occurring with Black teachers (12%), and how it was disproportionate to non-Black teachers (10%). When digging into the reasons why Black women teachers opted to leave, this group centered much of their decision-making around issues related to working conditions, and with the perceived respect attributed to them by their peers (Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2017).

In *Why Black Teachers Leave*, the different experiences of Black women teachers were particularly noteworthy as they entered the profession, especially as they were more likely to come to the profession via alternative certification programs. The support they

received upon starting their new careers was also very different, in terms of quality and frequency. The induction and mentoring experiences of first-year Black teachers were identified to be less effective, with only 56 percent of them reporting that they met with their mentor at least once or twice a month. In contrast, the average reported for teachers as a whole was 66 percent (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

The Black teachers also presented concerns with working conditions that made their work more challenging. The lack of resources, concerns with pay and fears related to job security, along with classroom autonomy, defined the dissatisfaction with the overall working conditions they were experiencing. Black teachers strongly felt that they were not provided with the resources and materials they needed to do their work effectively. Another major theme was that of collegiality, and the lack of support from other teachers (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

The experiences of teachers of color and what they frequently encounter as they work in schools is important to understand, as the microaggressions found in the teaching environment can be a part of the reason they feel isolated, marginalized and silenced in schools. Understanding these experiences so as to work to change the culture of schools, and striving to lessen the alienation of professional experiences of teachers of color are essential steps to improving the retention of teachers of color. In her study, *African American Teachers' Experiences with Racial Microaggressions*, Ericka Brown (2019) outlines the themes that these teachers experience while at work in schools. Brown follows 29 African American teachers in California and shares their experiences with

nonminority teachers and how they negatively impacted further experiences in the classroom as well as their overall feelings of belonging in the profession.

In her research, Brown (2019) found that the Black teachers studied held themselves to a high standard as they were confronted with the myth of meritocracy, which focuses on the dominant culture's belief that success comes to those who work hard and are the most deserving. The Black teachers were up against a community that did not value their work, pitting them against the stereotype that Black people are not hard workers. These TOC perceived that they were regularly held to different standards than their white peers, based on experiences they had with other teachers, families and administrators. The work they were doing in their classrooms was not recognized by administrators, thus causing feelings of being "devalued" (Brown, 2019).

Brown's (2019) research also sheds light on the differences that occur between the communication styles of the dominant white culture and that of Black teachers of color. Cross-cultural differences in communication style were present, and the Black teachers experienced a devaluation in their mode and style of speaking, and of sharing and communicating overall. These teachers expressed that they had to watch their tone, along with their direct and straightforward approach as their white peers would often complain about them being angry, aggressive or hostile. The Black teachers had to adapt or alter their behaviors in order to fit into the system that was valued in their school, while the dominant culture teachers remained ignorant of the harm that was taking place. The Black teachers shared an overall concern about their limited ability to speak and be seen in the schools (Brown, 2019).

As schools look to retain teachers of color, Brown's work continues to resonate with themes that signify the many ways that schools are not creating a welcoming environment, and are causing teachers of color to feel like "second-class citizens" (Brown, 2019). The many microaggressions reported by TOC fixated around stereotypes about intelligence, work-ethic and competency. These experiences came from all fronts, including colleagues and parents. They felt their authority was questioned; their role as teacher went unrecognized; and they felt that they were given fewer supports for their work. The feeling of alienation and isolation was a major theme reported by the teachers, many of whom expressed not being seen in their roles, and, also being ignored when it came to opportunities for growth and advancement. Whether these experiences were intentional or not, Brown shows that more care needs to be directed to supporting teachers of color and that awareness is needed in order to begin to address and change the conditions that are not validating the lived experiences of not just Black teachers, but other minority teachers that schools need to retain.

In her work, *Behind School Doors: The Impact of Hostile Racial Climates on Urban Teachers of Color*, Kohli (2016) examines the experiences of TOC through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Through her work, she found that teachers of color experienced racism on a regular basis through color blindness – ignoring racial differences, or racial microaggressions (subtle racial insults or assaults). After analyzing the research data, Kohli found that this repeated exposure to these experiences impacted the health of the teachers of color, impacted their growth in the profession, and also impacted the retention of these teachers in the profession.

School districts and teacher preparation programs are continuing to speak about the need for avenues to recruit and hire more teachers of color, but difficulty has been identified in the lack of a real paradigm shift that moves beyond recruitment, and shifts to responding to the specific needs of teachers of color in the workforce (Kohli, 2016). In *Behind Closed Doors*, teachers shared data through the use of a questionnaire that provided insight into their experiences. One of the major themes surrounding racism was based on color blindness, which is inclusive of the intersectionalities of race, culture, language and immigration status. The teachers in the study shared that, when integrating social justice-centered ideas into their curricula, they were often on their own. These teachers of color expressed feeling isolated from their peers and even being silenced when addressing racialized issues and working against deficit thinking. Raising concerns was also very difficult for those teachers of color that were the only TOC in their school. Some expressed the “overburden” of social/racial justice work, and shared how this caused them to feel exhausted and to experience burnout. Kohli also found that microaggressions, or repeated racial slights and insults, were experienced by teachers of color, thus causing them to feel isolated and alone in their work in schools.

The teachers in Kohli’s (2016) study revealed that they were often used in ways to support students of color, such as with language barriers or with family or other cultural connections, but then were treated with distrust when they were not fulfilling a specific need or service. The teachers of color in the study shared that their instructional practices and understanding of educational pedagogy was often challenged by their white peers, as it was often in contradiction to that of the dominant group. The teachers of color felt

stereotyped and expressed being questioned about their instructional practices, causing them to feel disrespected. These TOC went on to express feelings of invisibility and of also being “othered.” In addition, teachers of color shared that they were not invited in or given as many opportunities to make decisions in their schools. A common response was about the added work being taken on in schools to support students, but with little support for developing their professional skills. One teacher of color shared that “I feel I am constantly being pushed out of my school and ultimately the profession” (Kohli, 2016). The lack of encouragement for growth, mentorship, and opportunities to help shape school culture as shown by Kohli plays a significant role in understanding why so many teachers of color are leaving education.

Changes in Practice: Making Space for Teachers of Color to Experience a Sense of Belonging

The implications for schools is that the efforts they are making to hire teachers of color is only the start of the transformation they need to undergo in order to retain and support the teachers of color they have hired in their schools. The research is continuing to grow that demonstrates the need to create school environments that are able to affirm and also value the identities that teachers of color embody in order not just to recruit them, but also to sustain them in their work in schools (Kohli, 2018). Improving the overall working conditions that are challenging teachers of color is also presented in the research as essential, especially with a focus on developing the relationships they experience in schools and also on the development of instructional practices (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The ability to provide more robust and culturally

affirming professional learning opportunities that center both personal and professional growth is rising out of the prevailing research. The empowerment to bring more than just their education and capabilities into their work in schools – that is, their background and experiences and insights – is a necessary part of the evolution that will ensure that teachers of color are able to have a sense of real belonging in their roles in our schools (Pour-Khorshid, 2018).

The teachers, too, are shown by this body of research to benefit from being afforded spaces that let them retain their identities and connect them to their engagement with and support of students in their classrooms. The use of affinity groups are suggested as being another way to help foster spaces where teachers of color can show up and bring all of who they are to their work, allowing them to gain a community that supports their development in all aspects of their life (Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Nonan & Bristol, 2020). Research presenting the need for targeted professional development with the inclusion of supportive affinity spaces will be discussed in chapter three through the presentation of an equity plan for hiring and retention in the Western Suburban School District.

The work of recruiting teachers of color and getting them into schools is important, but shifting practices to see and value these educators is an essential first step in order to keep them in schools and to develop the school culture that values their voices and contributions (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016). Through their research, Kohli and Pazzaro present the necessary paradigm shift that would focus on community orientation, not individualism, allowing for the valuing of communities of color. Simply put, helping teachers of color to have a place and voice in schools, investing in their growth and goals,

and helping them to have the latitude to share with other teachers of color, are ways to help retain and create “transformative educational spaces” (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016).

In their study, Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) present many policy changes that can help to increase the numbers of Black teachers, while also retaining them in the teacher workforce. One of the major ways to support Black teachers is to address the issues with teacher compensation. Addressing salaries, loan forgiveness programs, housing incentives as well as childcare options all were presented as avenues for impacting the ability to retain Black teachers in schools. One impact for TOC has been their high level of participation in alternative programs for teacher credentialing. This often results in less experience in traditional school settings, thus the need for a robust mentoring program as they work to build their skills in the field. A combination of supports is recommended, especially since Black teachers are less likely than their peers to experience the most comprehensive combination of supports (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Improving working conditions, especially as they pertain to building leadership, is one of the most effective ways to keep teachers in the classroom. Leadership that is able to develop a culturally responsive environment, provide relevant professional learning opportunities and can create an equitable environment, all help to keep Black teachers in their schools (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

In *Cultivating Sacred Spaces: A Racial Affinity Group Approach to Support Critical Educators of Color*, Farima Pour-Khorshid (2018) shares her findings after working with an affinity group for two years. The study documents how Pour-Khorshid developed a space to center the voices of a group of teachers of color in order to sustain

their identities and values in their schools. According to Pour-Khorshid, creating safe spaces for teachers of color is necessary to allow them the ability to find ways to affirm their identities and pedagogical practices. It is essential for school communities to appreciate social justice practices to facilitate pathways for teachers of color to support their students in schools that do not mirror their identities and values. Having a voice and the ability to actualize their entire person was reported to be important to these teachers. The affinity space centered on the sharing of stories and experiences from their work in schools – in particular, the challenges of being teachers of color. The stories allowed the members of this group to present the injustices to which they were subjected, and gain affirmation and support from the others. One group member shared that they were able to “engage in our practice more holistically by being able to show up as whole humans, not just as teachers, but as people of color who carry trauma as queer people, as non-binary folks, as whoever we are in the world because we’ve intentionally made space for all of those identities” (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). This type of support community is important to helping teachers of color learn, grow and deal with the frustrations that can come with working in white-dominant spaces. Pour-Khorshid discussed how the participants in the affinity space she studied consistently shared how thankful they were to have a space that allowed them “a forum to escape from Whiteness.” The body of research is continuing to grow surrounding the benefits for teachers of color that can result from their participation in affinity groups such as this one, indicating that such settings can help maintain their own cultural identity, provide a space for healing and

reflection, as well as ongoing support for navigating the educational institution (Noonan & Bristol, 2020).

In Kohli's (2018) study, a major insight was the need to not look at hiring teachers of color as a "commodity," with a certain type of value, but that a more holistic and humanistic approach is needed as schools work to retain and support TOC. Teaching programs that are working with teachers of color and the schools that wish to hire and retain them must begin to value and better serve the needs of these teachers. Schools also need to provide mentorship to help teachers of color navigate the workplace, providing them with dedicated space and time to meet and discuss their experiences, goals and unique needs. Moreover, schools should work to create more inclusive environments that actively strive for equity and social justice. This cannot be work done solely by teachers of color, but must be a part of a school's culture – valued, shared and performed by all (Kohli, 2018).

In a later study by Kohli (2018), *Lessons for Teacher Education: The Role of Critical Professional Development in Teacher of Color Retention*, she examines veteran educators of color and their work in creating professional development that affirms TOC and their experiences, while also giving them validation, community supports and resources to equip them to navigate and shine in their work. Kohli shares the need to move away from just looking at retention, and the efforts required to shift toward what teacher supports are necessary to not only retain TOC in their work, but also allow them to use their work as a vehicle for social justice in general, and to education as a transformative experience.

Kohli (2018) uses critical inquiry and storytelling to gain insights from this group of 11 diverse, veteran teachers. Her research is building a narrative for how teachers of color are racially marginalized throughout the teacher pipeline, and the negative experiences TOC have that can impact their ability to grow and remain in the profession. Schools have not traditionally been institutions that have welcomed teachers of color, but rather more typically are hostile environments to them. Traditional teacher certification programs have done very little to provide TOC with the skills to navigate the racial hostilities they can experience in schools, causing them to be at greater risk of being pushed out of the field by being ill-equipped to handle this adversity. In fact, a common theme in *Lessons for Teacher Education* is the lack of preparation felt by these teachers for the work they are asked to do, where the beliefs and values they hold are often at odds with the curriculum and perspectives prevalent in the school.

The teachers presented in the study are actively involved in Critical Professional Development as a means to help them transform community through social justice work in teaching. They discuss the support they gained from this learning community and how it helped to sustain them, serving as a lifeline when they were not valued by their peers. One teacher shared that they often would “disengage” for self-preservation and that the group gave them an outlet to develop their knowledge and skills to help fight against oppression (Kohli, 2018). Kohli connects the concept of being culturally responsive, not just regarding the work with students, but also about what schools and white colleagues should think and act as they work with other educators of color that are required to perform the work taking place in schools. Schools and teacher preparation programs

should be introducing all teachers to critical frameworks that give them the knowledge and tools to help create a more equitable education system (Kohli, 2018). In the literature, the supports for teachers of color include many opportunities that will impact the development of their professional skills, support the understanding and skills of white colleagues, and also allow space for the unique needs of teachers of color that connect to their identities (Pour-Khorsid, 2019; Gobir, 2021).

A growing body of research indicates that Black students that have a Black teacher are less likely to receive exclusionary discipline practices, have higher attendance, and often higher performance on standardized tests (Noonan & Bristol, 2020). Hiring more teachers of color can also help to reduce the impact of implicit bias in schools, which negatively impacts the educational experiences of Black and brown students (Gold, 2020). To counter this problem of social justice, supporting the hiring and retention of teachers of color is a course of action that is needed in order to make schools more inclusive to the achievement of all students (Ingersoll et al., 2017). A major component of ensuring that teachers of color remain in schools is also creating an environment that fosters a sense of belonging, ultimately allowing them to bring all of who they are into their work (Dixon et al., 2019).

The existing literature indicates that there are many reasons for the lack of diversity in the teacher workforce, and one issue in the pipeline is the actual recruitment of teachers, where teachers of color can experience obstacles as they work to attain a teaching position (Carver-Thomas, 2018). It is important for schools and school districts to have equitable hiring practices that promote diversity and inclusion when hiring new

teachers (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Noonan & Bristol, 2020). Hiring practices are only a part of the plan that is needed as districts look to hire, retain and support teachers of color. Much of the research pertaining to the retention of teachers of color indicate many problems that can cause them to feel unwelcome and ultimately cause many to leave a school community or the field of education as a whole (Griffin & Tackie, 2017; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). Workplace conditions that have little resources and support, lack of validation by peers and school leaders, and lack of opportunities to grow and advance are all challenges that impact teachers of color and how they feel about their places in schools (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). To keep teachers of color in the workforce, changes are necessary regarding policies and practices that impact professional development and hiring (Griffin, 2018).

In the literature, the supports for teachers of color include many opportunities that will impact the development of their professional skills, support the understanding and skills of white colleagues, while also making space for the unique needs of TOC that connect to their identities (Pour-Khorsid, 2019; Gobir, 2021). In the development of an equity plan for hiring and retention, incorporating the use of affinity groups can provide a significant measure of the needed support for teachers of color as they navigate schools and find community.

Summary

The demographics of the United States are shifting, with more children of color attending public schools. Even with these changes in our national demography, the teaching population continues to remain mostly female and white (NCES, 2020). This

lack of parity is a major issue that is impacting schools on all levels. Research is continuing to show that the absence of teacher diversity is negatively impacting all students, who are shown to benefit from having teachers of color – but especially Black and brown students (Gold, 2020). Much of the research examined in the preparation for the development of an implementation plan designed to facilitate change in American school districts toward embracing TOC highlighted the importance of listening to the voices of these teachers and understanding why they opted to go into education, along with what practices need to be centered in order to help them to remain. Teachers of color must be valued and seen in their school communities, and the development of opportunities to support their growth and to validate their identities is vital to help them not just to remain, but also to thrive in our schools (Dixon et al., 2019). The ensuing section will outline the part of the strategic equity plan that is focused on hiring and retention, and the development of community.

The work being done for the Western Suburban School District is inclusive of all teachers as the district strives to create equity in its approaches to hiring and retention. Herein, I have highlighted areas of growth in order to address the specific needs that impact teachers of color. In addition, the major areas of focus presented in this implementation plan surround how to support teachers of color by developing a greater sense of belonging, which is demonstrated through the development of affinity groups in this district. In the development of an equity plan for hiring and retention, incorporating the use of affinity groups can provide the needed support for teachers of color. In an interview with Travis Bristol, he shares that “Within the intimate confines of an affinity

group, educators can address challenges, engage in honest dialogue and cultivate critical thought-partnership with colleagues and trained facilitators” (Gobir, 2021). This plan outlines what these spaces look like at this time, and gives some insight into their progress as we complete our first year after a pilot season that includes two initial groups.

CHAPTER III

PLANNING FOR EQUITY IN HIRING AND RETENTION PRACTICES:

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES TO CONNECT, REFLECT AND BELONG

I have taught for fourteen years and in three different buildings. In every building, at some point, I was the only teacher of color. – 204 Teacher

This teacher's experience is not uncommon for many of the educators that are working in schools all across America, and certainly in the Western Suburban School District, as well. In January 2021, the Western Suburban School Board confirmed an equity statement, and it, along with the Board goals for the district, placed a focus on equity in all aspects of the district's functioning – with the charge to diversify staff perhaps chief among these mandates. A list of guiding questions informed the review of literature that was used to support the foundation of knowledge that ultimately helped to outline the activities that would be used for development of an equity plan and its goal of impacting the hiring and retention of teachers of color. The questions are:

- What does WSSD look like in comparison to the national trends surrounding hiring and retention of teachers of color?
- How is the lack of a diverse teaching staff acting as an injustice to students, especially students of color, as WSSD works to help all to achieve their greatest potential?
- What do teachers of color need to feel valued and to remain in the district?

- What does WSSD need to include in its equity plan to systematically create a culture that ensures that it supports the retention of teachers of color?

I have focused my recommended intervention program to address these questions, with a series of inputs and outputs detailed to follow, which will drive the success of this program as it is applied to the Western Suburban School District, or other schools where such challenges exist.

Description of the Intervention Program: Hiring and Retaining Teachers of Color

After the establishment of goals and creation of an equity statement, the intervention that is necessary to realize a shift toward equity in WSSD begins with the development of an *equity plan*. This plan guides the strategic development and implementation structure to enable change to be realized. A major component of this plan is to create a process for hiring and retaining diverse hires. This work is derivative of forging connections with parent and community groups as well as with regional universities in order to establish a pipeline of teacher candidates of color. It is necessary to operationalize the district's hiring practices to ensure that all leaders are following the stipulated protocol, and even more important, that they understand the need to hire and lead from an equity lens. Finally, it is necessary to refine the district culture by not just providing pieces of training on equity, but by enabling forums that will allow staff to build both personal and professional relationships with other colleagues who are also from various under-represented groups (Mosely, 2018).

In order to grow as a more inclusive, diverse and culturally responsive learning community, the equity plan is designed to strategically engage all employees of the

district in its equity undertaking over the span of three years. This will allow the district a manageable period of time to build capacity. There will be “waypoints” set into the three-year program to allow for progress monitoring, reflection and feedback to help course correct and further develop this ongoing work.

The initial portion of the intervention program is centered on the work being done surrounding hiring and retention. The program looks to create layered initiatives that will impact the hiring practices and the work taking place with the district’s administrative leaders. It will also focus on the development of professional learning opportunities that help to shape the pedagogical knowledge and district culture that grounds equity for all staff, and fosters a true sense of belonging for teachers of color. These practices will provide the first steps to move away from such school scenarios as having a single teacher of color, or where diverse staff members feel disconnected from the school community as a whole. By examining hiring data, exit surveys and through the use of affinity group feedback presentations, the district can monitor its hiring and retention performance, continuously adjusting opportunities to support positive outcomes for TOC, while working to develop a diverse and thriving staff.

Liberatory Consciousness Framework

The approach that will be used to support the work for this intervention program will utilize the Liberatory Consciousness Framework, developed by Barbara J. Love. The framework is appropriate as it works to enact change in systems and institutions striving to create equity and social justice from within. The Liberatory Consciousness Framework (LCF) encompasses four elements that will be used in the implementation of

each of the key areas that are defined in the intervention program, namely: Awareness, Analysis, Action, and Accountability or Allyship. *Awareness* herein refers to the establishment of a foundation for knowledge – what is sometimes referred to colloquially today as being “woke.” The *Analysis* component deals with acknowledging the issue that is having an impact, rather than ignoring it or disregarding the necessity of investigating what is taking place. *Action* moves into the realm of what steps are required to effect change, as well as the elements needed to help transform society. And *Accountability* or *Allyship* is largely to do with the sharing of perspectives; working collectively rather than on the basis of individualized experiences in order to create opportunities designed to eliminate systems of oppression (Love, 2020).

Logic Model

For the component of my intervention program that is designed to devise a method of optimizing hiring and retention, an activities approach will be used, in which various activities such as affinity groups, equity book clubs and modifications to hiring protocol will be developed, deployed and progress-monitored to determine their impact as they pertain to targeted outcomes. The layering of these activities will strengthen the platform of the district’s equity plan as WSSD prioritizes equity in all aspects of school life. Such an effort requires an investment on the part of any district’s leadership, and the stipulated equity goals of WSSD’s board of education are to:

1. Help all students grow socially, emotionally, and academically
2. Hire and retain high quality, effective teachers, school leaders and support staff

3. Manage resources efficiently and effectively, and
4. Be student- and community-focused

Building on these goals, the ultimate outcome desired by WSSD from its equity work is the hiring and retention of a more diverse staff along with fostering an inclusive and culturally responsive educational environment for all students.

Short- and Long-Term Outcomes

In following WSSD's equity plan, the primary long-term outcome of this intervention program is to retain a diverse teaching staff that is more representative of the community, as calculated by a periodic review of the district's annual hiring data. All outcomes must reflect a systemic approach to supporting and maintaining equitable hiring practices that are incrementally yet consistently improved over time. The development of an annual training for all principals is one such identified outcome that will result from realizing systemic, district-wide change. In addition, all WSSD principals will be expected to outline how their hiring goals are impacted by an equity approach, which includes the selection of a diverse interview team. This equity-in-hiring planning document is another outcome driven by the equity goals of the WSSD board. The inclusion of two equity questions as a required element for each interview is yet an additional tool to maintaining a culture of equitable hiring practices over time.

Another long-term outcome is the cultivation of a culture of learning together. This requires providing more than one-time training sessions, but rather developing layers of learning that teachers can embrace and can access any time of the year within their buildings, or as individuals via a learning group made up of other colleagues from

across the district. Progress monitoring will occur through the review of registration data regarding staff participation in the various professional learning opportunities (primarily affinity groups and book clubs). In addition, each participant will be asked to complete a feedback survey at the end of the professional learning opportunity, and the use of this feedback data will allow for insight as district leaders work to create impact. WSSD is also taking strides to turn the lens on itself, seeking to understand how it is making space for faculty of color to have a voice and to feel seen and valued, while also amplifying those voices through allyship.

One of the most essential long-term outcomes is the constitution of a sustained sense of belonging on the part of teachers of color. The foregoing long-term outcomes will play a role in cultivating this one; however, an important short-term outcome that will help in the formation of a sense of belonging is the creation of affinity spaces for TOC to congregate, and to determine whether staff choose to access them. These affinity groups can take the form of book clubs, curriculum planning, community outreach teams, even clubs built around crafts or hobbies – the cultivation of allyship is, as has been stated, the primary goal, after all. However, an emphasis on voice is an important part of both the planning process for the establishment of any affinity group or club, as well as its ongoing health. The need for the involvement of the teacher voice influences much of the development and delivery of learning experiences that occur within an affinity space. District equity leaders can review the registration data of these spaces to identify the level of participation in established affinity groups on the part of Black and brown staff. Moreover, a staff participation survey can be used to provide feedback surrounding the

level of connectedness that teachers of color are experiencing, along with other feedback methodology that each affinity group is able to utilize and share at the end of the year as a result of the experiences within their group.

Striving Toward Equity in WSSD 204: Enacting an Intervention Program

I have taught for fourteen years and in three different buildings. In every building, at some point, I was the only teacher of color. It was challenging to walk into work every day and see no one that looked like me, especially when I needed support and wanted greatly to fellowship with my colleagues. – 204 Teacher

The evolution of the hiring and retention plan being implemented for the Western Suburban School District includes many aspects that, when interrelated and layered in place with intentionality and allegiance, is designed to enact significant change toward an equity approach (see Figure 4). Providing a methodology to communicate these changes and cultivate alignment across the district community is the first step in the process.

Community/University Engagement	Hiring Practices	Affinity Groups/ Professional Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Parent Group Collaboration <input type="checkbox"/> University Partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Training on Equitable Interviewing Practices <input type="checkbox"/> Equity Interview Questions <input type="checkbox"/> Teach in 204 Open House <input type="checkbox"/> Diverserve Interview Panel <input type="checkbox"/> HBCU Outreach/Job Fairs <input type="checkbox"/> Onboarding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Affinity Groups <input type="checkbox"/> Book Clubs <input type="checkbox"/> New Teacher Professional Learning Opportunities <input type="checkbox"/> Teacher Induction

Figure 4. Hiring and Retention Plan Overview

The Hiring Process: Building a Diverse Teaching Team

As a function of the Equity Department and the Human Resources Department of the Western Suburban School District, an annual equity training is organized to be delivered to all building-level administrators who oversee the interview process in their buildings. The training, *Hiring from an Equity Lens*, speaks to how building leaders should look to colleagues outside of their own schools to participate in the interview process. This training is given at the end of February as the district prepares to begin the hiring process for the upcoming year. At the end of the hiring season, assistant superintendents debrief with principals and department chairs to review their hiring practices and to review outcomes of the hiring process for that season. The *Hiring from an Equity Lens* planning document that each principal utilizes throughout this period is brought to the debriefing as a tool to help audit the outcomes. In addition, all hiring data is shared with the team as they review and discuss their practices.

The purpose of this annual training is to ensure that administrators are well prepared to organize and lead their interviews using best practices that avoid negatively impacting candidates of color due to biases embedded in their procedures (Carver-Thomas, 2018). The training includes an overview of recent hiring data and a dialogue over what was experienced from the previous year. Each training includes a series of recent reading selections that are presented to leaders in advance for their review. Small groups discuss the readings and a sharing time occurs in order to build a foundational knowledge. The training is also focused on sharing the experiences of staff. Their stories become a major part of the training, which helps leaders in each school building to

understand the importance of following these protocols in the hiring process. The teams either read the scenarios out loud or view video clips from staff members before launching into a reflective dialogue designed to help internalize the work necessary to lead in all interviews.

Planning for equity of voice has been a priority of the training, and it has been found that formalizing a process for developing and reflecting on the makeup of these interview teams is extremely valuable in helping to change outcomes. In order to achieve this, the WSSD HR and Equity Teams have created a guidelines document that outlines appropriate steps to be taken in interviews to ensure an equity process is followed. The training reviews the various parts of the process, with a particular focus on examining the data. Building leaders define the team for which hiring is being undertaken in terms of its “makeup” (that is, gender, race, total members of the team). Working from that data, leaders then stipulate what is perceived to be most needed in order to achieve representation on their team. The focus here is on identifying what voice is missing. The leaders are then asked to identify the members of their interview team, in order to underscore the importance of having representation at all levels of the interview process. Some WSSD buildings have much less representation than others, so the district has begun to work on intentionally evolving the culture of these buildings through this work (Dixon et al., 2019).

Outcomes

- Create a systemic approach and a culture of hiring from an equity perspective
- Develop a consistent methodology to dialogue and reflect on hiring practices and protocols

Interview Teams

A major component of an effective equity hiring process is the identification and assembly of an interview team that provides diversity of voice and perspective in order to ensure that teachers of color are not just interviewed, but are valued in the process and able to be successfully on boarded. Building leadership is asked to identify the members of their interview team, with the focus of having a diverse representation of voice. Since some buildings lack this diversity on their staff, WSSD has worked to establish a culture of collaboration in order to ensure that representation exists on all hiring teams (*The Educator Diversity Playbook*, 2019). To facilitate this, the district has developed a list of colleagues having knowledge in a variety of disciplines, who are available to be called upon to support buildings in their interview process. In preparation for the hiring process each year, this list is reviewed and updated. The result of this initiative is the significant shared value achieved from the inclusion of a voice from outside of one's own school community, while simultaneously expanding the institutional knowledge that is held across the district. District leadership has been encouraged to see how this change of practice will continue to impact hiring practices as WSSD focuses on teaching and learning beyond the confines of any given school building.

Outcomes

- Operationalize the process of planning an interview team that has diversity of voice
- Ensure that all buildings have the resources needed to create inclusive interview teams

Interview Questions/Scenarios

As a part of the interview process, building leadership is provided a list of equity-centered interview questions and scenarios that can be utilized in an interview for any position. Each year the Equity Ambassador Team reviews these questions and works to ensure that they are representing the equity concerns of the community, as well as being ones that will support interview teams as they work to determine if candidates embrace educational practices and relationships from an equity lens. The directive from the district is that every interview must include a minimum of two equity questions/scenarios as a part of the process with any single candidate. The updated interview questions are included in the interview packet that is maintained by the HR Department. These questions are presented annually as a part of the *Interviewing from an Equity Lens* training.

Outcomes

- Development and refinement of equity-centered questions to assist in achieving an effective equity interview process
- Ensure that all leadership has access to and is utilizing equity questions in the interview process

Equity Ambassadors: Teacher-Leaders Cultivating Space

In beginning its evolution to a more equity-centered hiring approach, it was quickly seen at WSSD that the development of a support system of personnel would be foundational to fully implement such a program. This began with the engagement of a diverse group of teacher-leaders who saw a real need to expand the equity focus for all staff, while maintaining a continuous eye on hiring more diverse teachers and continually reflecting on the question, “What will help these teachers to want to stay in the district?”

These *Equity Ambassadors* come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, and represent elementary, middle and high school, and teach across the spectrum subjects. Once this team was in place, these teacher-leaders began to work together to create affinity spaces – equity book clubs and other groups. The Ambassadors looked to their own time within the district and to the gaps in support they experienced or perceived, and then worked to create spaces that would support others. These teacher-leaders are now working in tandem with the Executive Director of Educational Equity in order to foster the resources, tools and professional learning experiences that are at the heart of the district’s ongoing equity journey. The Equity Ambassadors have proven essential in the problem-solving process, as the district has looked to find avenues to support all its teachers and provide them with opportunities to connect with others and grow on both a professional and personal level.

- **Inputs:** Create the Equity Ambassador Team to lead professional learning
- **Outputs:** Equity Ambassadors create various affinity groups designed to share knowledge and enhance allyship

- **Outcomes:** Staff members register and participate in all of the groups

Engaging the Community: P3 Coalition and the Voices of Black Parents

Another key component of an evolved equity approach to hiring and retention at WSSD is the engagement of constituents outside of the school buildings – chief among these engaged parents. Significant efforts have been put in play to develop collaborative partnerships with parent groups as well as other advocacy groups in the communities in which the district is situated. The three major high schools each have an active Black parent group (PAGES, PACES, and PATHS), which collectively represent the P3 Coalition. The coalition meets regularly to establish specific goals for the district, with one consistent charge being the hiring of more Black teachers and other teachers of color. District leadership reviews these goals annually, and the Executive Director of Educational Equity operates as a direct liaison to support the goals stipulated by these groups. During the regular meetings and communications between the district and the P3 Coalition, there is ongoing dissemination of information about the community, the needs of recent graduates entering the workforce or other student issues, as well as information about Black teacher candidates. As the leaders of the P3 Coalition have direct access to district leadership, they are able to share questions or issues directly and can be assured that their voices are heard and their concerns addressed.

The P3 Coalition also hosts an annual state-of-the-state event which is focused on the academic performance of Black children, a review of the district's discipline data as it pertains to race and gender, along with an update on hiring as it pertains to Black and brown educators. This is a major event that allows families to meet with the

superintendent, principals, school board members and other district leadership to learn how the district's equity work has been progressing, review the goals set out by the P3 Coalition, and to hear from voices of the community as WSSD engages in a collaborative dialogue to foster understanding and to problem-solve in a collective manner.

Outcomes

- Build relationships based on goals of the organization
- Create an inclusive process where ideas can be shared
- Be active in the partnership, and share information to keep the community engaged

Teach in 204: Multiple Layers of Building a Diverse Workforce

University Engagement

We believe in the School of Education of Aurora University that secondary schools are stronger and informed when people of varied backgrounds, experiences and perspectives work and learn alongside each other, thereby enriching the administration, teachers, staff, students and the community as a whole. – University Professor/Partner

To identify prospective TOC candidates, it was noted that stronger ties to regional education degree programs and the colleges that offer them would be beneficial.

Strengthening these relationships has been an essential part of the equity outreach approach taken by the district, which has developed a *Teach in 204* campaign to communicate the importance of bringing new Black and brown educators to the district. A part of the Teach in 204 initiative is the focus on connecting with education students that are in their earlier stages of training. The district HR Department, Curriculum and Instruction Department and the Equity Department collaborated to create a values

presentation that can be delivered in person or virtually to showcase the district to these prospective teachers. The presentation highlights the diversity of the school community and the value placed on the diversity of staff within it. The team that presents to the universities reflects these values as well. This outreach has allowed the district to build personal relationships with education students, and has provided them with direct contacts with the district as they work toward establishing clinical experiences and student-teaching placements.

Recruitment: Minority Job Fairs and HBCUs

The HR Department at WSSD has actively participated in recruiting at local universities to share opportunities that can be found in the district. However, district HR personnel have also started working to target teachers of color by attending job fairs that are specifically designed to reach minority teacher candidates. In addition, the HR team has also been recruiting at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Many HBCUs are concentrated in the South, and many of these teacher candidates traditionally have not been interested in relocating to the Chicagoland area. So WSSD has shifted its recruitment efforts to building relationships with HBCUs that are in greater proximity, such as Central State and Kentucky State. The district is currently working on recruiting by connecting with these HBCUs and their teacher candidates in person and also through virtual connections.

Teach in 204 Open House

In the past, the Western Suburban School District has been more conservative in seeking teacher candidates, using job fairs and job postings as the major modes of finding

these prospects. The district is now looking to cultivate relationships with graduates, universities and also student teachers that are already working both inside district buildings, as well as in the greater community. One way WSSD is expanding its reach to these teacher candidates is by hosting an Open House event. Here, invitations are extended to all student teachers that are working in the district, as well as to university partners to help engage other student-teacher candidates to attend the event. WSSD also reaches out to the community at large to help engage others to attend this Open House experience. The goal of the event is to disseminate information about the district, share personal experiences and facilitate connections to prospective teachers – and even to begin the process of providing skill development for new teachers as they begin the interview process.

The Open House occurs once per semester, and principals, assistant principals, teachers and district administration personnel all come out to participate. These district leaders provide an overview of WSSD, its schools, as well as personal stories from staff members – helping to flesh out a fuller picture of the district’s culture. The focal point of the evening is a series of small group sessions, where teacher candidates are able to meet and dialogue with district staff. These conversations have allowed the district to build a solid initial relationship with new teachers, and have provided connections that enable administration to further support new teacher candidates with résumé assistance or with preparation for the interview process.

These early contacts have also allowed WSSD to be actively engaged as a district team in identifying teachers that the team has targeted to champion through the process.

The team even shares directly with these teachers about what positions will be available, and also with some job opportunities they can apply for right away to help them gain experience. One of the most valuable parts of this process has been the facilitation of time to develop heightened and sometimes very personal connections with new teacher candidates, along with the ability to support them as they work to enter the field and possibly find employment in the district. Each participant is asked to participate in a follow-up survey and is encouraged to complete a preliminary online job application. The HR team at WSSD then actively tracks the data collected from each Open House event, which can be compared to prior data to ascertain growth in attendance and interest on the part of teacher candidates of color.

Outcomes

- Build relationships and inform teachers about teaching in the district
- Share about the diversity that is found in the district
- Hire diverse teachers

Professional Learning: Affinity Groups and Equity Book Clubs

Affinity Groups

Being exposed to repeated microaggressions, othering and implicit bias, whether intentional or unintentional, creates an invisible macrocosm of bottled frustration without an outlet. Many times, there are no people who look like you to share in the experience; therefore, many African American educators shoulder the burden of what many of our counterparts will never understand. – Educator

Much research is taking place surrounding the impact of affinity groups in the workforce, and how they can provide teachers of color with a greater sense of belonging when navigating often hostile workplaces. In his research, Bristol et al. (2020) found that

“affinity groups can facilitate self-reflection and emotional well being, and provide a forum for sharing targeted professional strategies.” The purpose of an affinity group is to provide a supportive space for members of the district to have access to community, resources and support, while also providing opportunity for the development of a sense of belonging in the district community as a whole. Affinity groups at WSSD are open to all staff, but most participants are classroom teachers. Members of the Equity Ambassador Team, some building principals, along with the Executive Director of Educational Equity, all lead these various groups.

Staff members receive a menu each semester that includes a roster of available affinity groups, along with a link to register. Each affinity group creates its own semester schedule, with the expectation that the group will meet for a minimum of four sessions; however, most groups meet once a month. The affinity groups are represented under the district’s *Teaching and Learning* offerings, allowing all participants to receive professional development hours for their time. At the end of each school year, a part of the WSSD’s progress monitoring process is to review feedback data from each of the affinity groups, administered in the form of surveys. These surveys provide feedback on the overall experience, support of the facilitator, areas of need, along with additional feedback. There are currently eight affinity groups across the district that focus on equity, wellness, identity, allyship, leadership and instructional practices. Four of the eight affinity groups directly support teachers of color, or staff from other marginalized groups.

Outcomes

- Retain teachers of color in the district
- Create a space where teachers of color can come together to create community
- Support growth, empowerment and development

Current Affinity Groups

- TEAM (Teaching - Equity - Application - Mental Health)
- Black and Brown (B&B) Leadership
- BEST (Black/Brown Educators Supporting Teaching)
- Culturally Responsive Teaching Cohort
- Latinx Educators
- LGBTQ+ Pride and Allyship
- Men Who Teach
- Teacher Leadership & Activism
- Middle School GSA Sponsors

Black and Brown Leadership Affinity Group

In Western Suburban School District 204, we have a space that has been created to support and encourage each other as we do the work to shed light on equity. Acknowledging the need for this type of space for Brown and Black Educators, makes working in WSSD 204 the best experience I have had as an educator in a Suburban School District. – Assistant Principal

Black and Brown (B&B) Leadership Affinity Group

The Black and Brown Leadership (B&B) Affinity Group invites members of the teaching community to a space where they can connect with other educators from across the district that are interested in growing their skills as leaders in the field. Members that

participate in the group come from all professional levels in the district – from teaching assistants, to teachers, to administration. Group members primarily represent educators of color, but the space is also open to allies that are interested in learning more as they work to support other staff of color in their school community.

The B&B Affinity Space meets once per month, and works to connect teachers with other colleagues from across the district. The group members share their experiences and focus on a goal that will impact their work in the profession. The group is exposed to various resources, such as guest speakers, podcasts and also book studies. The group is able to determine what their areas of interest are and can determine what focus they would like to take collectively in their group. A primary focus is on allowing the group to have a place to speak together – a place that allows them to develop a community where they feel welcome and connected. Teachers are learning important skills through this process as well; in particular, how to navigate challenging issues they experience in the classroom, and also outside of the classroom with colleagues and even parents. Due to the demographics in WSSD, many of the teachers may be the only Black or brown educator in their building. The affinity space is functioning as a place to allow these teachers a sense of community that is not present in their schools, and to help them build their professional skills as they work to advance their careers.

BEST (Black and Brown Educators Supporting Teaching)

Everyone wants to feel included, even teachers. That is why I am so excited about the book clubs, affinity groups, and leadership teams Western Suburban School District 204 is offering. Opportunities like these are excellent for teachers of color, not only to find the support they need, but this is also a chance for them to reach back out and support others. – Teacher

BEST was designed in response to the information that was being shared with the district about the challenges surrounding being a teacher of color in WSSD schools. Some of the primary concerns that this affinity group is addressing are best practices for the support of TOC, addressing their experiences of feeling undervalued, their experiences of invisibility, and also their sense of not truly belonging in their school and the district. This affinity group is set up to be a safe space where participants are able to share their experiences, meet new colleagues, establish friendships and also network and collaborate in a welcoming and nonjudgmental space. Participants from across the district can connect with each other, as they are often lacking any same-identity peers in their schools. The group is inclusive of all staff from varying backgrounds, but the majority of participants are teachers, with some administrators and teaching assistants also participating. The emotional support is extremely important, with a focus on not just helping to make staff feel valued and having a sense of belonging in the school or district, but also being able to listen and find opportunities to improve the culture of the district. BEST is co-facilitated by the Executive Director of Educational Equity along with one Equity Ambassador, who is on staff at one of the elementary schools as a Reading Specialist. The facilitators collaborate together to prepare for the discussion space, work to share resources for the group, and also follow up with group members to provide any support they may need outside of the group setting.

Latinx Affinity Group

Even when we are not facing a pandemic, the Latinx educator experience can be very isolating. The connection that the Latinx Affinity Group has created has been critical now and will continue to be critical moving forward as we cultivate our space and identity within the 204 community. – Teacher

The Latinx Affinity Group was designed to provide a welcoming space for teachers of Latin heritage to connect and share about their experiences in the district. Many of our Latinx teachers are working in settings that support students in ELL, Special Education or Spanish language education. These teachers often feel separated from the rest of the staff, and they may even be one of the only Latinx teachers in their building. The affinity group invites teachers from all across the district to participate, and has experienced representation from all levels (elementary, middle and high). The group provides a place where teachers can share their experiences that can often be challenging, and can gain validation and support to help navigate these obstacles. The group also works to celebrate one another by providing a forum that uplifts and affirms the work they are doing in their classrooms and schools. Resources are shared, and networking is facilitated. The group meets once per month, and is currently led by one teacher-leader from the Equity Ambassador Team who also identifies as Latinx.

LGBTQ+ Pride and Allyship

Being a part of LGBTQ+ Affinity Group has allowed me to not only share my story, but more importantly, has given me the opportunity to listen to others and to gain perspective from my colleagues and their unique experiences. – Staff Member

The LGBTQ+ Allyship Affinity Group is a space that is supporting staff in different ways from our other affinity spaces. This group is made up of staff from all areas of the district – representing the LGBTQ+ community, staff with children/family who are from the community, and other allies. An ally is defined as “A person who is not a part of a particular marginalized group but who stands up for and advocates for the rights of people in that group (Gainsburg, 2020). The focus of this affinity group is to

create a welcoming space where all participants can share their experiences, establish connections and friendships, find needed support and allyship, while also having a platform to share their voice in an effort to help create change. Members of this group have spent significant time not just processing their own experiences, but also discussing how they can disseminate more information about the LGBTQ+ community in order to cultivate positive change for students and other staff through greater awareness. This affinity group is actively engaged in providing resources to the district community, and a part of their work has been to develop and organize events to help grow foundational knowledge that helps make an impact in the district.

Reflecting on Feedback: Hearing the Voices of Teachers

The learning communities that we have established through our book studies and affinity groups are spaces that bring educators from all levels and locations together to grow and learn collaboratively. A major function of these groups has been providing a space where people are given permission to think, discuss and solve problems. At the end of each Professional Learning experience, participants are asked to complete a survey that provides feedback, which is then used to help not just improve the course, but also to begin to shape future offerings and practices. The book clubs and affinity group members, however, take a more active role to ensure that their ideas and voices are heard. Each group has the opportunity to submit a group reflection, where they are able to offer suggestions and provide feedback about growth opportunities that will be shared with district leadership and to all building principals, as well.

Equity Book Clubs

Both as a host of book studies and as a participant in the book talks and affinity groups, I have been given an opportunity to help ground my own education and have conversations with colleagues at all levels (and thus understand all levels of children, not just the students in my classroom). – Teacher-Leader

Professional learning opportunities are extremely important to the growth and development of instructional leaders at all levels of a school system. As districts work to diversify their staffs, leaders also need training to ensure their hiring practices are equitable and that they create an environment that is conducive to the success of teachers of color. One tool that is helping members of the WSSD staff to grow professionally while also creating a culture of learning together has been equity book clubs. Throughout the year, these small learning groups offer a platform for educators from all levels to connect across all corners of the district, and to delve deeper into areas that impact the work that they do. One important aspect of the book club that has emerged is the significance of developing a culture that values learning together, where administrators, nurses, teachers and teaching assistants all come together to connect, converse and collaborate. The development of the district's teacher-leaders has been seen to be a major benefit in WSSD through its equity book clubs, as this platform allows them to refine their skills beyond the classroom, and others in the district are able to see them and the impact of their leadership in the district ecosystem. The book club's sphere of influence is also growing as these groups are meeting virtually, allowing more people to participate, with staff connecting from all instructional levels and buildings. Staff members receive updates on a regular basis about various book study opportunities and how to register for them in the district's Teaching and Learning System. Once staff

members have registered for a book club, they receive a copy of the book and perhaps some notes for consideration related to its themes. Staff members also receive professional development hours for their participation. Book clubs occur three times a year, running during the fall and winter semesters, and also as a part of the district's summer learning opportunities.

Current Core Texts for Books Studies

- Cultivating Genius
- Letting Go of Literary Whiteness
- An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States
- White Fragility
- Achieving Equity in Gifted Education
- Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain

Outcomes

- Develop meaningful entry points to learning and skill development surrounding equity, diversity and inclusion
- Foster an inclusive culture across the district

Onboarding New Teachers: Establishing a Culture of Equity

All new hires participate in an induction process that assists them in learning the district culture and all of the information they will need to successfully acclimate to their position in the district. This experience takes place over the course of three days, and is designed to provide new teachers with all of the information and resources they will need to successfully begin their teaching career. Each teacher is also assigned a building-level

mentor who will help guide them through their first year as a teacher. As a part of the three-day induction process, teachers participate in a district overview, with sessions exposing them to various district departments and issues, such as human resources, professional learning opportunities, technology, and equity. This first Equity 101 presentation is a foundational one that is given at the beginning of a new teacher's initial experience in the Western Suburban School District, allowing new hires to see how WSSD centers equity across all aspects of the district's functioning. New teachers are invited to participate in the various affinity groups as a way to provide them with more support as they begin their careers in the district. The online exit survey tool allows for monitoring areas of need and to respond to specific questions to assist new teachers as they begin their teaching careers in WSSD.

Defining Equity

The initial Equity 101 training introduces new hires to the district's commitment to equity work. The training is presented by the district Executive Director of Educational Equity, who discusses the purpose of this role for the district – why her job exists – and how it impacts the equity work taking place in all its schools. In the training, new hires are provided foundational knowledge by seeing how the district defines equity, educational equity, as well as culturally responsive teaching. The board equity statement is also shared and the group works to unpack the expectations that are outlined in the statement. New hires are engaged in conversation about the diversity represented in the district and how WSSD sees diversity as its greatest asset. New hires are also given an overview of the district's Equity Professional Learning opportunities and resources that

they can access to support their growth and development. This training time has also allowed for more individual connections – that is, for personal conversations to take place about affinity spaces and learning groups. The power of a personal invitation has been extremely important, and it has been noted that many new teachers have opted to participate due to these personal moments of connection and invitation.

Outcomes

- Establish a foundational knowledge of Equity for all new teachers
- Support new hires to view all aspects of their work through an equity lens
- Share Equity Professional Learning Opportunities

New Teacher Induction: A Foundation of Support

As a new African American teacher in the district who took a job in a predominantly white district, I was elated that all new hires had equity and implicit bias training! It showed me that our district prioritizes the development of the educator as a whole. – New Teacher

All new teachers participate in 14 hours of targeted professional learning opportunities via sessions that are presented throughout the year in order to strategically address issues that will impact all aspects of their work as educators in WSSD. Teachers receive support with grading, parent communication, Social-Emotional Learning, as well as with classroom management and student learning differences. Another of these professional learning opportunities that all new teachers are required to attend is a two-hour workshop on equity and implicit bias.

Implicit Bias Training

All teachers in the district are provided a foundational implicit bias training as part of their new teacher-training schedule, which is implemented by the Executive

Director of Educational Equity. This two-hour session is offered four times throughout the year. New teachers are given an overview of implicit bias, and they learn about where we see it in our lives and work. They also examine the impact of implicit bias, and ways we can work to counteract its impact. New teachers in WSSD are also given opportunities to reflect on their practices, engage in small group discussions, and apply what they have learned to their direct experiences to date in the classroom with students.

Outcomes

- Establish a foundational knowledge surrounding Implicit Bias
- Create community with a foundation grounded in equity, diversity and inclusion

Taking the Next Step: Growing in Our Work

Due to the engagement that came out of the district's work with the *Cultivating Genius* book club, the entire district was impacted. The teachers and administrators provided feedback about the need to use this framework in its ongoing work across the district. Recent initiatives have included seminars for the administrative team provided by such prominent national experts as Dr. Gholdy Muhammad. WSSD, in partnership with a neighboring district, hosted a book club event with Dr. Muhammad, and engaged her to work with educators for the district's annual Institute Day. Teachers from some of the district's equity book clubs were invited to participate in a "train-the-trainer" workshop with Dr. Muhammad, to be held during summer, 2021. These teachers will learn to implement Dr. Muhammad's Culturally Responsive Teaching model in the

development of instructional lessons, and will work with other teachers to apply this framework to their subject matter lessons.

In addition, the feedback from WSSD's affinity groups has been the need to add another group that is solely focused on supporting new teachers, which WSSD is now planning to offer in fall 2021. As the district continues to support growth and development, teachers have also suggested having a space to grow and learn more about supporting students with diverse learning needs. The dialogue and feedback from multiple groups has indicated that a learning cohort surrounding supporting inclusive classrooms would be beneficial as the district strives to create classrooms where all students can find success.

New Affinity Groups for 2021-2022

- New Educators Workshop (NEW)
- Inclusive Classrooms

New Texts to Support the Ongoing Work

- How to Be Good With Words
- First and Only: A Black Woman's Guide to Thriving at Work and In Life
- The Savvy Ally: A Guide for Becoming a Skilled LGBTQ+ Advocate
- Your Students, My Students, Our Students: Rethinking Equitable and Inclusive Classrooms
- En Comunidad

Summary

The work WSSD is doing throughout its schools surrounding equity, hiring and retention is reshaping how administrator leaders are looking at overall practices and the provisions in place to support all teachers and staff. The implementation of protocols for hiring from an equity perspective is already impacting hiring outcomes, and the district is working on continuing to improve its equity practices each year in preparation for each new hiring season. The affinity groups have already begun to reshape district practices and how WSSD is able to support teachers and other staff in the district. Equity leaders district-wide are excited to expand these small learning spaces and book clubs that are bringing people together on deeper and more personal levels, helping to impact the district's culture and make room for voices that have not felt supported – ultimately giving permission for all to learn and grow together.

CHAPTER IV

REFLECTION – EXPERIENCE, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE:

WHAT HAVE I LEARNED AND HOW THIS JOURNEY IS SHAPING MY CURRENT WORK AS I OPERATE FROM A POSITION OF LEADERSHIP

Impact on the Field of Education

As I come to the end of my capstone project, I think that it is important to acknowledge the journey I have taken to arrive at this point. The experiences I have had as a Black woman in education have not been easy, and the system in which I am operating has challenged my belief in myself as a person and in my instructional practices as a teacher of English, a building-level administrator, and now, as a cabinet-level leader. When I first came into the field as a classroom teacher, I was not prepared for the harsh realities of how my own identity would not match those of a majority of my colleagues. During my decade in the classroom, I was generally one of the only teachers of color in my department, and I experienced microaggressions on a regular basis that challenged my place and my work in every school in which I taught. As I endeavored to move out of the classroom, my vision for the next steps I would take were centered around the area where I had received the most praise, and that was on how well I was able to meet and maintain the behaviors of children of color that were often a challenge for other teachers.

Even as my district worked to open an entirely new high school, I was not tapped for being – nor was I able to see myself as being – a department chair in English. This

type of position would have allowed me to utilize my sound instructional pedagogy and value for culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. However, I did perceive myself as a person who could work as a disciplinarian and could help students of color navigate challenges in school. So, when the positions were posted for the new school, I decided to apply for the Dean of Students job. The next phase of my educational career was spent in this traditional role, and ultimately it was one that I loved because I was able to make it my own. I was particularly able to do this because we were constituting a new school without an established school culture. As part of this, I was more than willing to take on additional duties and add responsibilities that were not a part of the job description. Ultimately, my work was far greater than that being done by my other colleagues in the same role, and they felt no obligation to support or take on any of these additional work duties that mostly went uncompensated. My belief in social justice, and in the importance of my position as being a necessary role model, and then in internalizing the belief that “I had to work twice as hard as others to be seen as equal” drove me to take on more in order to ensure that my students, especially my students of color, could see themselves and know that they had a place in our school.

After a decade in my position as Dean of Students, the district’s equity position was available. I was now ready for something new that would allow me to bring all of my experiences, skills and drive together to take on this important work for a district that supports close to 28,000 students. Once I stepped into the role as the Executive Director of Educational Equity, however, I was overwhelmed with the enormity of the work as well as the pressure to make a real impact. I was so fortunate to have some allies in the

district that also have worked to center equity. Their unwavering support has helped me to find the strength and ability within myself to begin to unpack who we are as a school district and to start planning for and making systemic changes to how we educate, lead and move forward from a lens of equity.

Grounding Practice in Research

The work on my capstone project has also challenged me to grow in terms of my depth of knowledge, providing me with a much richer catalogue of information, which I can now access and internalize as it applies to my work. Taking the time to conceptualize a project and examine so much research that is directly impacting the work I do on a daily basis has been highly beneficial, and I have literally seen my own responses become more targeted and insightful as I am now able to bring into daily dialogue the foundations of pivotal research along with the most current work taking place in the field.

Importance of Planning for Equity and Hiring from an Equity Lens

With hindsight, in reflecting back on the stages of my career, the true importance of planning for equity and the need for emphasizing how it touches on all aspects of the work that educators perform daily in schools is very readily apparent to me now. There are so many competing initiatives in the daily work of any school, and equity can be seen as that one extra thing – in contrast to recognizing how it needs to be the lens through which one views the entire world and all the work we do in schools. This is a real paradigm shift, and it is one that is challenging for educators to see as it connects more to who they are, and is not merely a new strategy, program or building initiative (Gorski, 2019). In order to center equity on the district level, leaders must plan strategically for

the needs of their schools and organizations as a whole. For WSSD, planning for equity – in my role and through the work of the district – is critical as this district works to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body each year, thus amplifying the necessity to be ever-more culturally responsive to that diverse community.

As has been presented, a major component of my work has been the development of an equity plan that will support the vision of the Western Suburban School District's strategic plan, and the work district leadership is doing on multiple levels. A part of this work has been focused on hiring practices and what is being done to ensure that all district personnel value diversity. As a leadership team, WSSD has been actively engaged in bringing diverse voices into its schools to teach with and work for all students.

Through efforts with principals as they plan to interview for new teaching staff, I have learned that it is imperative that they have the tools and skills that will best support our efforts to make space for teachers of color. I have learned that it is necessary to have a process for reflecting on the experiences of teachers of color, as well as on the impact they are having in their schools, in their work with other colleagues, and most important, in their work with students. Working with district principals on the development of diverse interview teams, having prepared interview questions that examine equity as a norm in this process, and revisiting standard practices each year in preparation for the hiring season has begun to shift the outcomes seen in the district. That is, WSSD is seeing less reliance on the old traditions and the notions of cultural "fit" with little connection to systemic practices that do not center equity and diversity.

As I reflect on my own interview experiences, I can say that I have never been more insecure about my place and my skills as when I have entered a room and no one around the table is a person of color. The feelings of not being understood and valued have come to the fore, and even with experience, it was hard to navigate through a process that was not designed for me, or that did not work to create a space that centers who I am as bringing value to that table. Through my research and work on equity hiring practices, I am hopeful that I will continue to help create spaces where all candidates, especially candidates of color, are able to be seen and are able to be welcomed into the district 204.

Representation Matters

As a child who attended Cincinnati Public Schools from the 1970s, graduating in 1990, my experiences began in a very different place. At that time, my teachers and school leaders were extremely diverse and allowed me to see myself each day on all levels in school. Through my research for this capstone project, I now understand that I experienced the high point of Black teacher employment in schools during the 1980s, but that the decline of Black representation among the national teaching body was already underway, with so many leaving the profession in the ensuing years after my departure from secondary school. I did benefit from attending a diverse elementary school as this was the pinnacle of bussing for integration, and my classmates came to my neighborhood school that offered a dual-language program that I was fortunate to have so close to home. This opportunity allowed me to see teachers who spoke both English and Spanish, and these amazing teachers were all shades of the color spectrum, again reaffirming my

understanding that I belonged and that teachers represented not just me, but all of my classmates.

Right now, we are at a crossroads, where the field of education is struggling to recruit young people into the profession, and the overall numbers of nonwhite teacher candidates are extremely low. When I look at the staff of the Western Suburban School District, even with the gains that have been made, the district is still 88% White. Even though the district's largest nonwhite subgroup is Asian/Indian (representing 33.3% of the student population) and WSSD's Black, Latinx and multiracial subgroups represent 30% collectively, it is likely that the majority of WSSD's students will move through their schools never having a teacher that looks like them, or even having a single teacher of color. Through my research for this capstone, I have been able to move beyond my own experiences as well as the trends that are taking place in the district, to see how the lack of representation is impacting the entire educational ecosystem, and that the work to effect change has to come at all levels simultaneously (Gold, 2020).

Our students are so hungry to learn and to make connections to who they are and where their place is in this world – even how or why they have a place at all. This has been amplified through the experiences of the pandemic, and talking with students and their families during this challenging season has made it very clear that school has to be a place that embraces all voices, and can no longer center one collective story, one history, through a single lens. What we, as educators, bring with us through our own lived experiences shapes and defines the work we do with our students each day. As a WSSD educator who continues to espouse equity in all aspects of the work undertaken in the

district, the most significant element for me has been the importance of representation (Cherng & Helpin, 2016). The work of our equity book clubs is helping to make space for different perspectives, and is acting as a launching point for deeper knowledge and opportunities to examine ways to ensure representation in the district's curriculum and in its instructional practices.

As educators, what we most value in our lives and experiences is what comes out in our work in schools. Even with our best intentions, it is challenging to center what we do not know, to champion what we have not experienced, to celebrate what we do not value, to discuss and talk about what we cannot see (Griffin, 2018). Our teachers and building leaders can unknowingly perpetuate educational practices and curricular narratives that are not inclusive and do not validate and affirm students. Even with the goal of making classrooms welcoming to all, this can be difficult to do without systemic changes that can only truly occur by having other voices at the table. Having one or two voices that are burdened with representing and speaking is not enough to impact a school culture, and to make our schools places for students of color, our staff needs to more closely represent them (Farinde-Wu, 2018). The district's equity plan and its focus on supporting teachers of color has already started to impact change in the 204 school community. The development of affinity groups, even after just two school years, has already started to demonstrate a notable impact. Participants continue to share how they feel supported, valued and that they have resources to help them in their work and also in their personal lived experiences. In my role, I am extremely fortunate to be an active participant in several WSSD affinity groups. This layering of support that impacts

personal experiences and pedagogical practices is completely enmeshed. It is so representative of the role of educator, being both a job and a calling, and is evident in every session as folks share their stories and provide support. Ultimately, the essence of community is the undercurrent, making a necessary impact on teachers and conveying that the district wants them to empower its students in their classrooms today and for years to come.

Even as we have had to navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 Pandemic, along with the unrest due to systemic racism, our district was able to hire its first Black superintendent. Right before we went on lockdown, we were able to announce his hiring and had a meet-and-greet, where he was able to engage with the community. The image that will forever be emblazoned in my memory will be that of a Black mother introducing herself and her son to our new superintendent. This moment meant so much to me, personally – and truly seemed to me emblematic of how we must give all of our children role models of all types, and that they must be able to see themselves in order to know that they, too, can fill such roles – and then even to have the courage to look beyond them.

Importance of Creating Opportunities for Educators of Color

In 2009, when I was tapped to be on the opening team of the new high school in district 204, people were surprised by my selection for the position of Dean of Students. My resume and practices were sound, and I came prepared with a plan to help develop a climate and culture through the use of PBS and Restorative Practices, which was not the traditional way of exploring discipline for high schools. I came prepared with a plan, had

the credentials and was coming to the table with institutional knowledge. However, I attribute my selection for the job to the mentoring of a single Black female administrator, and her subsequent impact on changing the perception of the other all-white administrative personnel involved in the hiring process.

This administrator's decision to support me and foster my growth and development was the key to me being able to move on to the next level. Under the watchful and encouraging eye of this lone female administrator of color, I was pushed to develop my skills, develop confidence in my work, and was also exposed to opportunities that would have been otherwise unknown to me. When it came time for me to interview for the dean's position, I was more than ready to find success at the interview table, but also in the position. My experiences are not unique, but rather they represent a systemic issue in the way we are operating in schools and in our work to support teachers of color. Being intentional in terms of creating opportunity is something that I have experienced and have internalized as a part of the work I must do. Throughout my research for this project, many of the responses from the teachers of color in the studies cited herein were that they were not seen, valued and given opportunities to grow and develop their skills. Moreover, a common theme in my research was the need for providing teachers with opportunities to have mentors, to be allowed space to express their identities, and also to be shown value for all of their skills – not just those emanating from their racial or cultural backgrounds (Kohli, 2018). Through WSSD's work in our affinity groups and equity book clubs, veteran and new educators have had greater opportunities to come together to learn from one another. Each group has had its own dynamics, but the

common experiences shared have been the ability to experience spaces where they could learn together, create opportunities to develop skills, as well as find support to grow and learn. The knowledge gained along with the confidence to enact change has been key, and the information gained has gone back into buildings and has helped to drive this equity work across the district.

When I look back upon all the administrators in my career with whom I interacted in my various schools, they all treated me with kindness and respect. The element that was missing, however, was any interest in me beyond being just another classroom teacher – interest in me as one who might be able to bring something else to the table. Throughout the work for this project, my research repeatedly has shown how teachers of color, especially Black teachers, have struggled to be seen and valued in their schools for the unique perspectives they bring, and that opportunities for the development of their skills and also for other leadership positions were not extended to them in their work (D’Amico et al., 2017).

The opportunity that I was afforded by this one Black female administrator was not unique to me. In my time working with her, I saw how she opened up doors for many other educators and helped to shine a light on their many gifts and talents. Her perspective also began to shape the way the school’s leadership team viewed equity, and they, too, began to shift their focus, with the outcome being vastly different staffing at the new high school and on the overall look of that opening staff. Her impact truly touched on every aspect of the school, as she helped to create a culture where it was the expectation to examine who was participating and being celebrated and who was not.

Just as I found in so much of the research for this capstone, representation matters; it is the only way to truly shift the lens through which we see the work and culture of school, thus opening it up for others to shape it into a more inclusive institution (Dixon et al., 2019).

Creating Spaces for Teachers of Color

After being at the Western Suburban School District's newest high school, Metea Valley, for ten years, and even though the staff was predominantly white, the district was in the position of rebuilding the staff from the ground up, and thus was able to develop a more diverse staff in all positions. During this time, I experienced working with the first and only Black principal on the high school level in the district's history. Even though our classroom teachers were still a majority white, the staff in general of this high school is one of the most diverse in the district. I was able to cultivate collegial and social relationships with people from various backgrounds. This experience impacted me in so many ways, ultimately allowing me to cultivate relationships with other educators of color who helped amplify my voice as well as overall confidence in my work. Upon moving to the new role as Executive Director of Educational Equity, I was removed from my familiar environment and experienced an immediate and drastic change, as most of my peers at the district level are White. However, this, too, is changing as the district has seen recent hires that are helping to bring more diversity to the highest levels of the district – a slow shift that is bringing with it many challenges and not a small amount of discomfort for some members of the community and even staff to see and experience.

Once I moved into my role at the district level and began to dig into our work on hiring and retention, I did find that the level of diversity I was experiencing was not the case in many buildings across the district. I observed that the most diverse teams reside in district buildings that have the highest populations of Black and brown as well as low-income students, mirroring what was presented in the research I encountered for my capstone project. As I began to meet more of the district's new hires of color – as well as veteran teachers of color that have been scattered across the district's 33 different schools – many of them began to share their stories of isolation and their desire to be valued and connected to other teachers of color. The development of WSSD's various affinity groups has provided an essential avenue to help connect teachers and other educators from across the district, and to provide a platform for them to be able to meet and create community.

The ability to connect with other colleagues of color on new levels has been a real shift in practice for WSSD. The affinity groups have grown and expanded over the last two years, and shifting into a virtual realm just recently due to the pandemic has helped them to grow and include even more voices. I was inspired to look into hiring and retention with teachers of color due to my experiences in the affinity spaces since so many of the teachers were sharing their feelings of isolation and lack of affirmation in their school communities. The research for my capstone helped me to gain a more global understanding of this phenomenon and how teachers of color are challenged across the country, and are sharing much of the same feelings as expressed by the teachers in my learning community.

Just giving teachers the ability to join an affinity group, however, is not the end goal. The goal must be to create school as a place where all teachers, and ultimately all students, find to be welcoming and valuing. The research for my capstone has guided me to recognize that it is not enough to build spaces for teachers of color to process through the challenges they experience in our schools – but rather, we must actively engage all teachers to help reshape the culture that allows TOC to bring their entire selves into their work (Noonan & Bristol, 2020). My current focus has been on developing this culture through ongoing equity efforts that center around the empowerment of equity teams and their targeted building-level work, and through establishing spaces for greater learning opportunities. These spaces have allowed for enlarged circles of knowledge-building as well as cross-community relationships, ultimately laying the foundation for a greater capacity for hearing and centering the voices of our staffs of color, and from other marginalized communities as well (Pour-Khorshid, 2018).

My Responsibility as an Educator of Color: Being the Leader I Needed

I came to focus on hiring, retention and the need for belongingness as it pertains to teachers of color for my capstone due to the fact that this has been a major part of my own journey as a Black woman in a field that seldom affirms my identity – a field that does not often recognize my rightful place in it. Now that I am in my twenty-second year in education and have the opportunity to work with all of the teachers and leaders in the district, I find that I am constantly looking back at the face of my younger self, especially as I work with mostly white administrators now who are trying to hire and support teachers of color.

On my very first day in my new equity role at WSSD, I received an email from a (White) principal who wanted to connect with me about his school and how some of his Black students had shared that they did not feel welcome in the school. He also wanted to talk about how the Black parents shared that they felt he had missed an opportunity when he was interviewing for his open assistant principal position. Even though four of the nine candidates who presented were of color, this principal hired one of the five – another White person, causing the leadership team of his school to remain 100% White. The value of cultivating diversity on his leadership team did not play a role in this principal's hiring process. It did not occur to him that part of the solution to his concern over students “not feeling welcome” in his school could be the hiring of an administrator of color. This principal and I spent a great deal of time together over my first year, and I was so appreciative of how he invited me in to work with his staff, one of his student groups, and also his leadership team. As we moved into the spring hiring season, I was invited back to be a part of an interview team, which also included other voices that made the team more reflective of the school community. The outcome of the interview process this time around was very different – a Black teacher was hired who was more than qualified for the job.

Even though I am not in one building and not engaged routinely with one group of leaders and teachers, I have worked very hard to be accessible and supportive of all school staff members across the district. This has meant that I am providing presentations with grade-level teams, participating in book studies, leading affinity groups, developing and giving presentations to building staff, doing one-on-one sessions

with teachers, and taking time to perform regular coaching sessions. Through the many challenges I have had over the years, I have been able to remain and thrive in the field of education, and my wish has always been that I would be able to make an impact on the next generation of teachers. My work currently is allowing me the opportunity to center my identity while also connecting with a variety of teachers to help shepherd them toward an understanding of equity, as we all work together to place equity at the center of all we do. My hope is that I can be a leader that impacts teachers, especially one who reaches back around to help our teachers of color as they work to find space in schools and in this great profession.

The work executed for this project has truly aided in grounding my research practices and in applying all of what I have learned to the equity plan as well as the professional learning opportunities that are at the center of our equity work. What has been most impactful for me, however, has been that I am visible, seen and valued – actively working with our teachers of color so that they know that they have a space and a place in our district and in this work I am championing. I am hopeful that our targeted efforts for hiring and retention, along with this most personal investment, that of giving of myself, will help these teachers to remain and thrive – ultimately chipping away at the gap that exists for educators of color in our schools.

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VITA

Jennifer Rowe was born and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio. Before completing the doctoral program, Jennifer attended Loyola University Chicago where she earned a Masters in Education in 2001. Jennifer also attended the University of Cincinnati, where she earned her Bachelors in English Literature in 1995.

Jennifer has been an educator for 22 years, where she has worked both as an English teacher and a dean. Currently, Jennifer is the Executive Director of Educational Equity for Indian Prairie School District. While working for the district, she has been honored to receive the *Boys to Men Phenomenal Woman Award*, *The A+ Teacher Award*, *PDAC Equity Champion Award*, *The Metea Valley Women of Impact Award*, and was also the first recipient of the SciTech Museum's *Steam Champion Award*. Jennifer lives in Batavia, Illinois with her husband and two sons.

CAPSTONE PROJECT COMMITTEE

The capstone project submitted by Jennifer Rowe has been read and approved by the following committee:

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