THROUGH
OUR EYES

Perspectives and Reflections From Black Teachers

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Through Our Eyes:
Perspectives and Reflections From Black Teachers

BY ASHLEY GRIFFIN AND HILARY TACKIE

"The difference I would like to make is a difference that my fifth-grade teacher, an African American woman, made [for] me," says an elementary teacher from Oakland, California, who is also a Black woman. She credits that teacher with instilling in her a love of math, but also with fostering the self-confidence that would buoy her when other teachers doubted her ability. Now, she tries to give all her students — and especially her Black students — that same assurance. "I make sure I get to know each and every one of my kids, and let them know that they can do it."

This teacher experienced what research has shown: Teachers of color bring benefits to classrooms beyond content knowledge and pedagogy. As role models, parental figures, and advocates, they can build relationships with students of color that help those students feel connected to their schools.[1] And they are more likely to be able to enhance cultural understanding among white colleagues, teachers, and students.[2] Acting as "warm demanders," they more frequently hold high expectations for all students and use connections with students to establish structured classroom discipline.[3] Furthermore, they are more likely to teach in high-need schools that predominantly serve students of color and low-income students.[4] Black teachers especially are more likely to stay in schools serving Black students.[5]

And yet, teachers of color represent only 18 percent of the teaching population in the U.S. (Black teachers are 7 percent.)[6] State and district leaders recognize the need to diversify the teacher workforce and are working to recruit more Black and Hispanic teachers.[7] And their efforts may be paying off: Research shows that the percentage of teachers of color in the workforce grew at twice the rate of White teachers from 1987 to 2012.[8] But while leaders have been busy trying to pour teachers of color into the profession, they have not plugged the drain through which too many exit. Indeed, teachers of color, are exiting the profession at higher rates than other teachers.[9]

Simply recruiting more teachers of color only gets them in the door; we must pay equal attention to creating the conditions to keep them. And while it is critical to diversify the teaching force, just having a Black or Hispanic teacher in the classroom isn't enough. They must be strong teachers, so diversity and excellence go hand in hand.

Holding on to teachers of color, though, requires education leaders to understand their unique experiences and perspectives. And who better to learn from than the teachers themselves.

In March 2015, our research team set out to hear from teachers of color, hosting a series of focus groups with Black and Latino teachers around the country.[10] We used data from the Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS, 2012) to target states and districts with high numbers of teachers of color and solicited participants through schools, districts, and teacher organizations. Our goal: to better understand their unique experiences, why they teach, their perspectives on the state of education, what they believe they bring to the classroom and the field, and challenges they may experience in the workplace because of their race. In this brief, we present findings from our discussions with Black teachers. In forthcoming work, we will share what we heard from Latino teachers, as well.

LISTENING TO BLACK TEACHERS

As we traveled, a distinct narrative began to unfold, chronicling the experiences of Black teachers. Participating teachers shared with us the many ways they felt they benefit students and are experts in their field. They had high expectations for their students, passion for teaching, and the capacity to empower students with knowledge. Many of them felt they were "called" to be in the classroom.

The same qualities that they (and others) perceived as strengths, however, often hindered their professional growth. We listened to teachers who had a penchant for teaching and serving Black students well, but found themselves restricted to *only* teaching Black students; teachers who were limited to acting as disciplinarians instead of being respected for their ability to manage their classrooms; teachers who put in extra time and effort, but still weren't heard in staff meetings; and teachers who related well to students, but had to "tone down" their personalities to be seen as professionals.

They reported being pigeonholed by peers, parents, and administrators into specific roles based on these strengths, thereby limiting and diminishing their capabilities. Without the acknowledgment of (or the chance to build) the pedagogical and subject matter expertise essential to their profession, they felt they lacked opportunities for advancement and were undervalued and unappreciated.
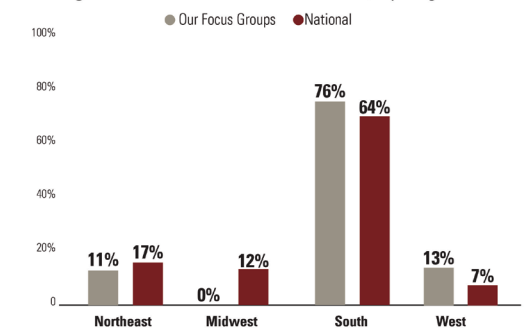
We heard similar sentiments everywhere we went, proving the ubiquitous nature of some of these issues regardless of context

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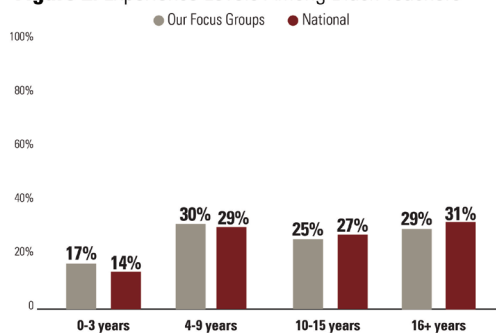
ABOUT OUR FOCUS GROUPS

Our sample included 150 Black teachers in public and public charter schools in seven states. Participants spanned grade levels and experience. Eighty percent of participants were women, nearly one-third were veteran teachers with more than 15 years of experience, and the majority (90 percent) taught in cities. Our sample was representative of Black teachers in the U.S. (*see Figure 1 and Figure 2*).

Figure 1: Percent of Black Teachers, by Region

● Our Focus Groups ● National

	Northeast	Midwest	South	West
Our Focus Groups	11%	0%	76%	13%
National	17%	12%	64%	7%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), Public Teachers Data File 2011-12.

Figure 2: Experience Levels Among Black Teachers

● Our Focus Groups ● National

	0-3 years	4-9 years	10-15 years	16+ years
Our Focus Groups	17%	30%	25%	29%
National	14%	29%	27%	31%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), Public Teachers Data File 2011-12.

Teachers volunteered to take part in 90-minute focus groups held, for teacher comfort and convenience, in classrooms, school media centers, or public libraries. All focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. We then analyzed the data, creating themes (or codes) based on topics and expressions commonly shared by participating teachers. To be sure that themes were consistent across researchers and that the themes accurately represented the voices of teachers, transcripts were coded multiple times, once per researcher. ■

or geography. The Black teachers we spoke with were frustrated. They remain teachers, they say, because they love their students, their work, and want to be able to fully contribute to the educational success of their kids.

To be clear, our findings are not entirely new. What *is* new is qualitative findings on Black teachers that are representative of the nation. Over the years, both quantitative and qualitative researchers have examined the impact of teachers of color.[11] And, while national data expose retention and hiring trends, qualitative data is necessary to expand and understand attrition trends among Black teachers.[12] To date, and by methodological tradition, qualitative studies have focused on small pockets of teachers often within a given state or even a specific district. We have expanded that qualitative data to gain an understanding of teachers across the nation and to present findings that can be extended to an entire population of Black teachers and are useful to multiple stakeholder groups.

In the following sections, we summarize themes articulated by Black teachers in our sample — discussions that illuminate their experiences, challenges, and contributions to the teaching profession. While our findings don't identify the specific supports needed for Black teachers, nor the immediate methods to address these issues, they do signal a need to understand the existing policies regarding professional development, school culture and climate, and overall working conditions related to race within a school. They also can be used to begin a conversation about diversity and excellence within the teaching profession. As schools, districts, and state leaders look to recruit and retain more teachers of color, they first need to critically examine both qualitative and quantitative data. That probably should begin with a deeper dive into hiring, retention, attrition, and teacher evaluation data to understand the nature of the problem, but should also include listening and learning via small focus groups and surveys.

CONNECTING WITH BLACK STUDENTS

Black teachers in our sample, much like in other research, felt they had an easier time building connections with students, especially Black students, because of perceived cultural and experiential similarities. They said this immediate, surface-level connection with many Black students helped those students trust them and feel safe in their care.

"I think we don't have the trust barrier sometimes that other teachers of a different ethnicity may … because they see someone who they consider automatically, by the skin color that looks like them — then they tend to be more trusting."

"You can pull a student out of a classroom — and I've not encountered the student — but as soon as they step out and see my face, as opposed to the other teacher or instructor, they feel comfortable enough to share some things that they might not have with the teacher of a different ethnicity."

CONNECTING WITH BLACK STUDENTS

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ENFORCING VERSUS EDUCATING

"I WAS THE ONLY BLACK TEACHER THERE, BUT I HANDLED BASICALLY ALL THE DISCIPLINE PROBLEMS."

For the teachers in our study, relating to students was a clear strength that they said they appreciated and leveraged to engage with their students. One teacher expressed, *"We bring familiarity to our students. You know, they do like to look up and say, 'Oh, okay, there is my auntie,' or 'There is my grandma,' or 'There is my cousin.'"* And having students see them as familiar, and even familial, allowed many of the Black teachers we spoke with to take on a number of responsibilities beyond teaching content to their students. This appeared in how they approached their practice and the information they felt was important to share with students.

> *"I think we bring history, a lot of history, and some of us have lived that history. We're not just reading it from the books. We have actually lived that history, and we're able to share that with our students, and I think help them to understand a little better that this is what it takes to be successful, in this world."*

This responsibility was more cogent for teachers when they understood students' challenges, whether it was their home lives, their relationships to their parents and communities, or discrimination or trauma that students may have experienced. As one teacher said, *"So we can share the challenges … with students of color. 'This is what you're going to have to deal with, but look at us. You can be successful. This is the focus you have to have.'"*

Black teachers felt that they empathize with students' out-of-school experiences differently than do caring, White teacher colleagues. Their empathy often combined with other strengths necessary to provide a quality education to children. One teacher, for instance, said it gave her patience with students, above and beyond that of her White colleagues: *"Where I'm at, sometimes there are Caucasian teachers that don't even have the patience with the kids. Or the kids will do one thing wrong, and they're ready to nail them to the cross."*

Understanding hardship, in particular, allowed Black teachers to have compassion for their students while also holding high expectations. Another teacher said, *"When you don't have the same background, and I can say White sometimes, you tend to feel sorry for that student because you see what they're going through, they might be in poverty. And sometimes when you feel sorry for a person, you make excuses … Even though I sympathize with you, I'm still going to challenge you, and I'm not going to be afraid to make you do what you're supposed to do."*

On one hand, our research, like other research, demonstrates that Black teachers understand that, in reality, it is natural for Black teachers to relate to Black students. Yet, while this may come naturally for some Black teachers, for others it can be difficult to understand students who look like them but come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, home lives, and cultures. Moreover, Black teachers voiced they were often burdened and taxed because they are perceived by others to relate to every Black child.

> *"I mean, and most of the time you can, but even when you can't, it's assumed that you are supposed to touch every African American child that crosses your path."*

> *"We become the representative for every child of color, I mean, whether we relate to them, whether our culture is the same or not. We become the representative for all of those children."*

The emphasis on Black teachers and their relationships with Black students does not only come from administrators or other teachers, but also from students. Students, who may trust teachers in a way that complements learning, can also become overly familiar with teachers and attempt to take advantage of their commonalities. Students, for instance, may speak to Black teachers using slang or inappropriate language, or they may just be disrespectful to Black teachers. Some teachers even noted that Black students often spoke more respectfully to White teachers because they did not have these relational commonalities.

Several teachers in our sample also mentioned the possibility of having negative influences on Black students. Expected to be relatable, a discouraging or unsupportive Black teacher can devastate a Black student looking for someone to trust. Black teachers stressed the need for teachers who care for their students and who try to connect with them over teachers who simply look like their students. Being able to superficially relate to particular students often facilitated a connection, but teachers saw building that connection and supporting students as a greater priority.

ENFORCING VERSUS EDUCATING

Black teachers expressed that they were uniquely able to leverage cultural similarities to manage their classrooms. But being able to easily discipline students often led others to see them as enforcers rather than educators — a reductive stereotype that we heard throughout the focus groups. These teachers were assumed to be tough and strict instead of being able to connect to their students and use that connection to establish order and create a classroom environment conducive to learning.

> *"I didn't have to get loud or do anything. It was just, I had a no-nonsense kind of attitude, where it's a lot of nonverbal cues. 'I expect more from you.' You know, it was just, it's a different vibe than other teachers, where they kind of make excuses, and 'Oh, I can't handle you. I'm afraid of you. I want you to be my friend.' No. They're going to respect me."*

Many teachers asserted that the ability to manage a classroom and students who are perceived to be difficult could also lead to an inability to strengthen their subject matter content knowledge and pedagogical skills. Why? Because now, these teachers became the disciplinarians for the entire building, handling not only the behavioral issues of their own students, but those of other teachers' students as well. This extra responsibility took away from their planning time, professional development opportunities, and disrupted their time with their own students.

"I was the only Black teacher there, but I handled basically all the discipline problems."

Teachers indicated that being labeled as the disciplinarian meant that their colleagues and administrators believed they could only teach the troublesome or lower performing students. This tension resulted in yet another area of frustration: Because of Black teachers' strengths in classroom management, they were not afforded the opportunity to teach students performing at other performance levels. Teachers told us that they rarely get an opportunity to advance to teaching courses that recognize them as subject matter experts, such as honors or Advanced Placement. This was frustrating because they want to learn to teach new things and enhance their professional skills.

"'You do it so well, let's just keep you here.' If I'm doing the ABCs every day, I never really get to do anything of a higher caliber. I think a lot of times, as African American teachers, we get stuck in a certain group, because you do it well."

"I'll teach the low level, but I have to have a high level to balance it out, so that for one, I can actually talk to people during the course of the day who care, and so that I can make sure that I'm still knowing stuff."

PROVING THEIR WORTH

Black teachers expressed that they were often perceived as subpar educators. The assumption that Black teachers are best to teach Black children creates a subtle — and obviously inaccurate —undercurrent that Black teachers do not have the ability to teach all children. One teacher noted, *"I can deal with all kids, so put me in another class, and let me see how that goes."* Several teachers expressed a tension between wanting the opportunity to teach at different levels and with diverse populations and being happy and committed to teaching Black children.

Another perception that Black teachers revealed is that they are often viewed as not as educated or as knowledgeable as their counterparts. Black teachers encountered this from administrators, parents, and students. Their qualifications were often openly questioned, and several teachers shared stories about having to explicitly mention where they earned their degrees and which certifications they held in order to be taken seriously by parents or administrators.

"I think one of the challenges I dealt with was convincing parents that our decisions are the right decisions. And I say that because a lot of parents would look to the White teachers and whatever they say was golden. There was no questioning them. Whatever they said was the right thing. But when it came to the African American teachers, it was always a question. There was always some pushback. There was some uncertainty around 'What is it exactly? Why do you know that?' And so I think that was one of the challenges I had, having to always go an extra step to convince people that what we're doing is the right thing."

The dismissal of Black teachers as experts and professionals (beyond discipline) led Black teachers to feel they were passed over for advancement opportunities, despite being just as — or more — qualified than their colleagues.

"I think it's just stereotypes that are there, that exist of people of color that we are not as educated or knowledgeable as our counter[parts]. I think that mindset is still there, that fixed mindset that's there. And so I think it creates the challenge of seeing me as someone who is informed and educated and can contribute just as well as anyone else sitting at the table. And so you have to get beyond that mindset, first of all, in order to even offer me a position or feel like I'm qualified for an advancement."

SUPPORTING THE WHOLE STUDENT

Black teachers expressed a sense of obligation to teach Black students well beyond the academic curriculum. Because of this, they experienced additional professional and personal stressors. It was often noted that their sense of obligation, and the stress that goes along with it, was intensified by their limited representation in the teaching workforce and the field of education at large. Teachers felt particularly aware of their small number when looking at district and state representation and attending professional development, which often did not cater to the kinds of schools they worked in or the kinds of issues they faced. This lack of adequate resources and support often led Black teachers to navigate challenges on their own and rely on whatever they had to in order to serve their students.

"There are a lot of challenges, and there will be a lot of challenges because we are a minority of people who teach in the teaching profession. There are not a lot of us."

In our study, we found Black teachers overwhelmingly spoke about the additional responsibilities they face in serving underserved children. Black teachers felt a responsibility to nurture Black children as whole beings and be a stable support for them. Many of these responsibilities were personal obligations teachers felt to take care of Black students and make sure their needs, academic and non-academic, were being met.

"Well, I don't think I can separate being a parent from my job as a teacher. Because I'm teaching my own children. I look at the children that I serve as an extension of me. I want them to go out and be their very best, because they represent me."

Academically, Black teachers spoke about feeling a burden to serve Black students well because another teacher may not. Black teachers shared a fear that if they did not teach, Black children would not be held to high expectations or encouraged to reach academic success.

"I felt it was my obligation to teach my students, I mean my race. I knew that they will put them in a corner somewhere and just leave them there, and I felt it was my — you know, it was my — as a teacher, I felt I had to. I had to."

PROVING THEIR WORTH

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SUPPORTING THE WHOLE STUDENT

"SO THEY COME TO MS. H. I'M A NURSE; I'M A THERAPIST. ONE DAY I SAID IT. I SAID, 'I DON'T THINK I TAUGHT TODAY. I FELT LIKE I WAS A NURSE, A THERAPIST, A FAN, A MENTOR.'"

This feeling of obligation to educate students went beyond academics. By acting as a parent, a hairdresser, a chauffeur, an advocate, a counselor, or a cheerleader, teachers felt they went above and beyond the responsibilities of a "typical" teacher. Supporting the whole student was seen as part of their professional responsibilities, and they felt OK taking money out of their own pockets to make sure their students had what they needed.

> *"So they come to Ms. H. I'm a nurse; I'm a therapist. One day I said it. I said, 'I don't think I taught today. I felt like I was a nurse, a therapist, a fan, a mentor.' I was like, 'I don't even know how I floated through this day,' I said, 'because it was Ms. H this, or Ms. H this, [or] that. Band-Aids, this, oh my goodness, my sister!'"*

This pressure to be everything they can be for their students encouraged teachers to carry themselves in particular ways in order to be a proper role model, especially for students who did not have role models at home.

> *"I feel like I have an obligation as a woman of color, who's a teacher, to provide the best type of example of a model — what my students should do, like as a person, you know, as they're character-building, and just how they carry themselves. And I do think that differs from White teachers. I don't know if they [White teachers] are coming into the role and thinking, 'I want to make sure these students of color, I don't know, have good hygiene, you know, [are] performing at their best,' and all of that."*

The pressure to be a role model also motivates Black teachers to explicitly share with students of color the ways in which they have also experienced life challenges and obstacles in order to relate to and inspire their students and show them that it is possible to be successful.

> *"I think my influence on the children I teach is very important. Your home life may be rough, you know. We already know that, but you can see somebody, me, I'm just like you. And for me, I let them know personal things about myself, when I was a child, what I did … They don't have the confidence, but they see it in you."*

The Black teachers in our sample often said they became teachers because they wanted to give back to their community and make a difference. The professional pressures that cause many Black teachers to feel obligated to teach and serve their students also reflect their motivations to encourage educational success. While these challenges are admirable traits in teachers, the continuous pull on their professional lives is also strenuous.

"OTHERING" AND DEVALUING BLACK TEACHERS

Black teachers experience both professional and personal challenges that devalue or "other" them. Not only are their expertise and professional contributions dismissed, but often they experience negative treatment and lack of individual or personal recognition from their colleagues.

One teacher shared a story about a time he experienced great success, but faced disdain — rather than congratulations — from his colleagues:

> *"Just one of my experiences, I received a lot of praise as a kindergarten teacher, being a Black man in kindergarten. And I was working with two other Caucasian kindergarten teachers, and once, I received the praise and the higher scores. It was not pretty — rumors I'm not a good teacher, 'Let me come and sit in his classroom and see what he's doing.' … 'He does nothing all day.' 'I didn't see anything special that he was doing in his classroom.'… It was almost like bullying."*

This teacher was not at all supported or encouraged for being successful with his students, but instead he was alienated and insulted. Other teachers sympathized with this kind of hostility or spoke about how difficult it was for them to be recognized for their efforts.

Black teachers expressed frustration at the amount of work that they put in, saying that they often worked twice as hard and were required to do more work, but rarely received the same reward or praise as White colleagues.

> *"I've put in a lot of work, and there are a lot of things that I've implemented and have shared with other people and other teachers, and then they get the credit. And I told one of my co-workers — it's been recently, and she is a White coworker, and she recognized it, too — and I told her, 'It's starting to piss me off, because I'm putting in this work, and someone else is getting recognized for something that they really didn't do, or someone else is looking to be more qualified with less years and less time in the position.'"*

The need to work harder in order to be seen as adequate and professional also made Black teachers feel pressured to police their own behavior so they could be seen as more professional. Assumptions about their demeanor — that they were too loud or too harsh, for instance — often required teachers to "code switch," or regulate their behavior based on context in order to fit into their school. By trying not to fulfill other's stereotypes of them, teachers hoped that meeting a particular standard of professionalism would remove any distracting idiosyncrasies and allow them to be recognized for their work.

> *"I feel like there's a level of professionalism that I have always kind of internalized, like I need to be on my P's and Q's, because I'm the Black woman. So I don't want to be judged as not being professional, in regards to the role I had last year. I wanted to make sure I was always dressed professionally, you know, punctual, all of those things. And that's because I was also, you know, being looked at by my fellow colleagues."*

Black teachers expressed having several other issues with being seen as valued members of the school community, such as having their opinions, suggestions for improvement, and complaints go unheard. As one teacher said, *"I was kind of dismissed at times. It makes me not want to say anything."*

"OTHERING" AND DEVALUING BLACK TEACHERS

"I'M PUTTING IN THIS WORK, AND SOMEONE ELSE IS GETTING RECOGNIZED FOR SOMETHING THAT THEY REALLY DIDN'T DO, OR SOMEONE ELSE IS LOOKING TO BE MORE QUALIFIED WITH LESS YEARS AND LESS TIME IN THE POSITION."

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

"Because you don't even see what I can bring to the table. ... [A]ll you do see is that I don't belong at your table."

Building a diverse teacher workforce is complex. It is about more than just increasing the numbers of Black teachers in a given school, district, or state. Understanding and critically examining the intricate and nuanced nature of Black teacher experiences is paramount. The unfiltered perspective shared in this project provides evidence exposing the racial bias that exists in schools and school systems across the nation. These conditions impact not only Black teachers, but all the students they serve.

Black teachers represent a small fraction of the workforce nationwide, but it's not because they can't or don't want to teach. They face racial discrimination and stereotyping that leave them feeling alienated and restricted from participating in the school community, impacting their ability to be effective and ultimately their desire to remain in the profession. Despite their feelings of alienation, they take on extra responsibilities and are often assigned additional duties because of their unique strengths, leaving them burdened and taxed. These same abilities and attributes can often leave Black teachers stuck in such rigid positions as the school disciplinarian. These unyielding categorizations often limit their opportunities, advancement, and abilities to hone their craft.

The issues that stifle the development and empowerment of Black teachers are so deep-seated that it will take honest and critical examinations of school cultures and systemic processes in order for school and district leaders to develop the trust, support, and collegial working environments needed to recruit and retain teachers of color. These critiques are imperative, not only for diversifying the workforce, but for building an educator workforce more representative of its population and more capable of serving an increasingly diverse population of students. How can our education system perform at its best when so much potential remains suppressed? ■

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

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[A]LL YOU DO SEE IS THAT I DON'T BELONG AT YOUR TABLE."

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ABOUT THE EDUCATION TRUST

The Education Trust promotes high academic achievement for all students at all levels — pre-kindergarten through college. We work alongside parents, educators, and community and business leaders across the country in transforming schools and colleges into institutions that serve all students well. Lessons learned in these efforts, together with unflinching data analyses, shape our state and national policy agendas. Our goal is to close the gaps in opportunity and achievement that consign far too many young people — especially those who are black, Latino, American Indian, or from low-income families — to lives on the margins of the American mainstream.

The Education Trust

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