

Representation and Preparation Matters

LaTisha S. Cole

Abstract

This interview provides insight into the lack of representation for educators of color in schools across America and explicates the importance of having education programs that are designed to develop culturally intelligent educators. The purpose of this piece is to enlighten, empower, and encourage educational entities and communities to address the gap in representation of African American and Latinx educators and educator preparation programs directly and collaboratively—not only to increase representation within the education profession but to create and implement mechanisms that will retain educators of color in the profession over the long term. The principle of ongoing professional learning typically involves educators seeking and receiving training and learning from education experts. LaTisha Cole argues that educators should instead seek authentic learning opportunities from the students and families they serve.

Keywords: cultural intelligence, retention, representation, teacher preparation, student- and parent-led professional development

Introduction

This interview was conducted during Episode 10 of “Diary of A Mad Black Teacher: The Podcast,” a podcast created and hosted by LaTisha Cole. The interview is a call for colleges and universities to create education programs that partner with urban schools, and to modify their educator prep coursework to include training and learning that will develop educators who are prepared to effectively educate marginalized students, including students of color. Enabling all stakeholders to develop a culturally responsive and sustaining mindset is only possible when they are given opportunities and platforms to co-create curriculum, content, policies, activities, and professional learning. Those opportunities build culturally responsive, intelligent, impactful, and effective educators who will create transformational learning environments that are inclusive of the entire school community.

Inspired by the thousands of stories she has heard in her 12 years as an educator, Cole created the podcast to provide a safe space for parents, educators, and others who care about students of color to learn how to educate and advocate for their students/children. The podcast enables students from marginalized groups to express themselves freely and receive information that is specifically designed to help them successfully navigate a systemically oppressive education system.

This interview is focused on two principles from the New York State Education Department (2020) culturally responsive and sustaining education framework. The strategies and practices embedded in the interview align with the framework’s principles of providing a welcoming and affirming environment, and ongoing professional learning. They provide a guide for educators and parents who wish to implement these principles in their school communities.

The principle of providing a welcoming and affirming environment is usually a focal point for schools that are trying to establish and foster strong relationships with students and their families. Cole maintains that the principle should be intentionally applied to educators as well, as it is critical to the development, success, and retention of exceptional educators. This is especially true for educators of color, who are leaving the profession in alarming numbers: “The research is clear on how teachers of color benefit students, yet many states continue to struggle with recruiting and retaining teachers of color” (Trust, 2021). Retaining these teachers is essential to student success.



JORDAN THOBY, 4TH GRADE

Interview

Ms. Cole: Hello and welcome to a special edition of “Diary of A Mad Black Teacher: The Podcast.” Today we have five loyal listeners who will ask me questions in a Q&A interview style. Our first question comes from high school student Dylan.

Dylan: How can we get more teachers who are minorities back into the schools?

Ms. Cole: That is a great question, Dylan. For years, many private, state, and federal initiatives have allocated funds to encourage and recruit people of color to go into the teaching profession. However, many of these initiatives require those individuals to already possess a bachelor’s degree, citizenship, and they cannot have a criminal record. This alone eliminates or discourages some people of color who are interested in going into education but cannot easily meet those criteria. Even when we look at people of color who can take advantage of initiatives to go into education, the statistics are discouraging. For example, in the 2003-2004 school year, approximately 47,600 minorities became teachers. By the end of next school year, more than 56,000 minority teachers had left the profession. Also, the push to close schools in impoverished neighborhoods is working in contradiction to these initiatives, which overwhelmingly negatively impacts the employment of educators of color.

Getting teachers of color back into the schools is an obstacle, but keeping teachers of color is the real challenge, in my opinion, for three main reasons that I will discuss today.

First, many teachers of color want to work in schools where the student body represents them, but unfortunately, many of those schools are underperforming, difficult places to work in, due to the high demands, minimal resources, and lack of support the job offers. But let’s not be misled: there are many high-performing schools in low-income areas or where the student population is primarily composed of students of color, but there are not enough of them. When a school is not conducive to a healthy work environment, teachers of color are more likely to leave the profession—more so than their white counterparts, who often will leave that unhealthy school and go to a predominantly white school. This is unfortunate, because predominantly white schools need

representation of educators of color too. Increasing the encounters that white students have with successful, intelligent people of color helps break down the negative narratives and connotations placed upon them.

Second, most teachers of color feel they are not supported and report feeling ostracized, overworked, and micromanaged, and suffer from working in a highly chaotic and toxic work environment. They are encouraged by initiatives or intrinsic motivation to enter the profession, but are they valued and encouraged to stay when they get there? Are they seen as a necessity for student success and treated as such? My experience leads me to answer “no” to both those questions. In the education profession, which is statistically driven, the highly positive impact teachers of color have on the educational and social-emotional experience of students of color is widely known.

Research proves over and over again that, when Black and Latinx students have teachers who share their race or ethnicity, better attendance, fewer suspensions, higher self-esteem, higher test scores, and higher graduation rates and college attendance are the results. When something is a proven factor in student success, we must approach it differently than if it is just a “bonus.” Many schools treat hiring a bilingual or educator of color as a bonus: “If we can find one great, if not it’s OK.” However, it is not OK. If there is a shortage of teachers, which there is, we see programs reaching out to recruit middle school students for summer programs to guide them into the education profession. However, we do not see this mode of urgency or creativity for the recruitment of teachers of color on a consistent basis, and we must shift that narrative—including the narrative that teaching is not a career that brilliant people go into.

Which brings me to my third reason. Many people of color and/or people from impoverished areas encourage the brilliant children in their family to become a doctor, lawyer, engineer. Being a teacher is not admired or encouraged by many families. The number of people who respect teachers but would never want to be one or for their child to be one is alarmingly high. We don’t see many people encouraging their children or students to take the route of education as a profession—largely because educators are underpaid, overworked, and unappreciated.

However, education programs at several Ivy League schools are trying to change this narrative by asking the smartest undergraduate students, specifically students of color, to enter the education profession. Harvard is one of them. Harvard asks students to make a seven-year commitment, and in return, it negotiates an admirable salary from the school they will work in upon completion of the education program. Harvard also provides these future teachers with daily access to counsel, advice, mentorship, and in-school support.

Programs like this encourage and protect teachers of color in the profession and will help them stay in the profession. We need to normalize programs like these, which have examined the reasons why we need people of color represented in schools, how we can close the representation gap, how we can better support teachers of color to stay in and be successful in the profession. These programs should lead the way in helping us get and keep educators of color.

Cynthia (parent): My question is, how do we keep teachers from quitting? I have seen so many of my son’s good black and Hispanic teachers leave before my daughter gets to have them, and my kids are only three years apart.

Ms. Cole: Thank you, Ms. Cynthia. As I recently stated, this is a collaborative effort that I believe begins with everyone understanding the value and benefits of having teachers of color in *all* our schools. Parents understanding the importance of and demanding more representation in the schools they help fund through their property taxes is crucial. Parents using their voices and exercising their power to ensure that the district administration, local officials, and board members are very clear on the communities’ and parents’ high expectations for a diversified staff that represents the student body is very important. Once parents and other stakeholders apply that pressure, school districts will be forced to implement a plan to help close the representation gap, and that plan will include mechanisms that help attract and, most importantly, keep educators of color in schools.

Lastly, I think something that is very important and so simple, but is easily a missed mark, is parents showing gratitude to the teachers who are great to their children no matter their race/ethnicity. Parents, you are partners with educators in your children's educational process. It is your responsibility to praise and acknowledge the teachers who do amazing things for your children. Those kind words and acts of gratitude play a huge part in encouraging teachers to stay in the profession. It helps them know they are needed and valued, and that the work they are doing is not in vain or going unnoticed or unappreciated. Parents should partner with other parents and the school administration to see how to celebrate or regularly make gestures of appreciation for the teachers.

Mrs. Arnold (reading specialist/instructional coach): Do you think cultural intelligence training should be mandated, and if so, how?

Ms. Cole: Hello, Mrs. Arnold, and thank you for being an ally and advocate. In short, yes, I do think cultural intelligence coursework, training, and simulations should be mandatory for all individuals, and especially education professionals. There are many ways to help build cultural intelligence. Every month, my staff and teachers must complete four hours of professional development that builds their capacity . . . for cultural intelligence and sensitivity. The best part is that the professional developments are led by students and parents. And it helps teach cultural intelligence to my teachers in a very fun way. There are workshops held weekly; for example, paella cooking class, salsa dancing class, hair-braiding class, street artwork class, paczki-making class. These classes are led and taught to our teachers by our students, their parents, and community members. Teachers pick two classes a month to go to, which satisfies their four hours of mandatory professional development, and it gets them immersed in their students' culture. It increases their positive and meaningful interactions with their students and families. The teachers and staff get incentives to bring their own family member(s) to these classes with them, because I not only want my teachers/staff to be culturally intelligent, I want their families and the people who support them at home to be as well.

This not only has increased cultural intelligence, . . . it has significantly improved the morale, culture, and climate in our building among teachers, students, and their families. Mrs. Arnold, please start by working with your school administration, local school board members, and other stakeholders to find creative ways for your school community to increase cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence is very important, and I encourage you to keep going until it is recognized as a virtue and expectation that everyone in your school community must possess.

Ms. Brown (elementary teacher/former paraprofessional): I was a paraprofessional for eight years. I am now one of four Black educators on a staff of 169. Most of our teachers are white and most of the support staff are Black or Hispanic; 67% of our students are Hispanic and 32% are Black. As a paraprofessional, teachers always expected me to be the disciplinarian for our students. I was treated poorly and talked down to. That encouraged me to become a teacher. I noticed that, in my education program, there was no training or literature on how teachers should work with support staff. Now that I am a teacher in the same building where I was a paraprofessional, I am treated a little better by my peers, but now I am always asked to lead projects for diversity or talk to the "difficult" students, or lead parent groups. I love the relationships I get to build with students and their families, but I am tired of watching other teachers do the bare minimum. I feel like if I say no to extra responsibilities, I will not be helping my students, who need me so badly. What should I do?

Ms. Cole: Ms. Brown, I would like to say thank you for noticing the need for you to be in a higher position in education and taking the necessary steps to become a teacher. We definitely need you! Unfortunately, what you described is not uncommon. In my school, all the front office support staff are Hispanic women, all the custodians are Hispanic males and females, and besides myself, all the administrators are white and 91% of teachers are white, and all the paraprofessionals are Hispanic or Black.

Having one group designated to do a task of a certain sort leads to loads of extra responsibilities delegated to very few people and requires little to no accountability from others. For example, any time teachers needed translation, they would go to the ladies in the front office; anytime diversity and equity training needed to happen, they would come to me or the black teachers. This creates burnout for some and lacks accountability for others to learn how to service their students

and families. We created teams to lighten the load of some and to hold all accountable for being culturally intelligent and present for their students and families. One example of this is that students get course credit for teaching their teachers Spanish along with the Spanish teachers, who rotate monthly and get paid a stipend to facilitate student-led afterschool Spanish courses.

Teachers who pass these courses get first pick at extracurricular duty, which pays very well, and they are celebrated all month in various ways. We have the same program to teach teachers American Sign Language, and our students also lead that course. This creates more bilingual staff, takes the load off the few to translate constantly, it builds relationships between teachers and students, allows students to earn extra credits, and empowers them by teaching their teachers. It also allows teachers to become more culturally intelligent and accessible to their students and families. We created clubs in the same way for diversity, discipline, culture, and climate. All teachers are required to serve or participate in at least one club. This ensures that the onus is taken off a few individuals and allows many people to work together instead of burning out two or three people. Now, the final question for tonight is from Dr. Monroe.

Dr. Monroe (principal): What is the best way to partner with education preparatory programs? I love getting student teachers in my building and I think it's great, but more needs to be done to help them be successful in the profession through their prep work. I don't think what these aspiring teachers are learning is applicable in a real school setting. They are learning theory and statistics from books, not the real-life challenges they will face when teaching human children, specifically human children who are poor and dealing with trauma, violence in their homes and neighborhoods, homelessness, and hunger.

Ms. Cole: Dr. Monroe, that is a great question, thank you for asking. I have many strategies and ways to go about partnering with educator prep programs, but for the sake of time, I'll share my favorite one.

Most student teachers who come into our buildings work with an experienced teacher. Two things rarely happen. Student teachers rarely work with a school administrator, and rarely do the administrator and supervising teacher work directly with the student teacher's education program dean, coordinator, evaluator, etc.

Working with a school administrator gives the student teacher insight into what the school leader will be evaluating them on. It helps them understand what the school leader's expectations are for them, and that is a game-changer for someone who is new to the profession. I do mock evaluations consistently with the student teachers in my building to give them an extra layer of meaningful feedback. I also let students and parents rate their performance through a Google survey, which gives them live feedback on how they are educating and impacting the most important people in my building and school community. This is very helpful, and they always thank me for taking the time to evaluate and share feedback with them, as that helps them perfect their craft.

Lastly, having strategic planning meetings with collegiate education programs allows you as the principal to teach them how to prepare teachers to be successful in your building. Training them on what you need in your school is much better than them teaching aspiring educators what they think will work in your school. I have meetings with the deans and coordinators of all seven nearby education preparatory programs once a month. It is a recurring meeting, where we strategically plan together, look at data from our schools and programs, the success rates of my students and their students when paired with each other, and we design backward together to ensure that we are working and progressing toward the same goals. With virtual meetings now very accessible, thanks to the pandemic, meeting with large groups is so much easier. Many education programs are thrilled to work with school administrations and other nearby education preparatory programs. I have formed a team of administrators within my district from the elementary, middle school, and high schools to ensure that the colleges get feedback and planning time with us all.

References

New York State Education Department. (2020). *Culturally responsive and sustaining education framework*. NYSED. <https://www.nysed.gov/common/nysed/files/programs/crs/culturally-responsive-and-sustaining-education-framework.pdf>

Trust, E. (2021, January 5). *Many students across the country attend schools without a single teacher of color*. The Education Trust. <https://edtrust.org/press-release/many-students-across-the-country-attend-schools-without-a-single-teacher-of-color/>

.....

LaTisha Cole holds a master's degree in educational leadership. Over the past 11 years, she has served as a high school social studies teacher, coordinator, behavioral interventionist, and head softball coach. She is currently an assistant high school principal in the Dallas Independent School District. Her expertise is in the elevation of marginalized students and students of color and in teaching those who educate children how to work to dismantle systemic oppression in the education system. She can be reached at diaryofamadblackteacher@gmail.com.