

Uncovering the Professional Lives of Suburban Teachers of Color

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Introduction

Prior to becoming a teacher educator, I was an Asian-American English teacher in mainly White suburban school districts for seven years. My interest in studying teachers of color who worked in other suburban school districts emerged from personal experiences I have had integrating into school cultures where I did not encounter many teachers who looked like me.

When I began the present study, I was discouraged to learn that little research exists that captures the professional experiences of teachers of color, particularly in suburban schools. Yet studies about teachers of color in these settings are critical in light of the fact that they comprise only 16.9% of the total teaching force in the U.S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2007). These statistics illuminate the skewed representation of European-American teachers compared to teachers of color in most public schools.

More specifically, the field lacks an understanding of how teachers of color are socialized into predominantly European-American suburban schools. According to Burant et al. (2002), teachers of color face “powerful socializing pressure to minimize their cultural capital...to be (or at least appear to be) just like all the other (mainly Euro-American) teachers to be successful” (p. 6).

The literature on African-American teachers who taught during desegregation in the U.S. (Fairclough, 2007; Foster, 1997) and, more recently, those in the research conducted by Mabokela and Madsen (2003, 2005) support Burant et al.’s argument that teachers of color are often expected to emulate the teaching styles and behaviors of European-American teachers.

In this article, I discuss the findings of a qualitative study that examined the socialization experiences of eight teachers of color who taught in two predominantly European-American suburban high schools in the Northeast region of the U.S. The findings from the study offer critical insights into the specific issues and challenges that the participants encountered in their schools.

A Vast and Nuanced Field

For a field of study that is as vast and nuanced as multicultural education, it is difficult to find a single theory or definition that encompasses the diverse perspectives and voices that have shaped it. Sleeter (1996) describes the historical roots of multicultural education as being “grounded in a vision of equality and served as a mobilizing site for struggle within education” (p. 10).

There are two particular dimensions of multicultural education that inform the present study: transforming school culture (Banks, 2001) and identity formation (Gay, 1999). Banks argues that school cultures are “cultural systems” that need to be examined and reformed when they fail to provide equitable education for all students (p. 15). All aspects of schooling from teachers’ subtle attitudes towards students, behavior of school personnel, and schooling practices need to be interrogated to reduce incidents of bias towards any group (p. 15).

Multicultural theorists have also explored the area of ethnic identity in gaining an understanding of how minority individuals conceptualize and construct their identities. Gay (1999) contends that for some minorities, their identities are connected to broader categories of race, culture, gender, religion, or language (p. 201). Other social dimensions, such as sexuality or socioeconomic standing, can also inform their identities.

Furthermore, Sleeter (1996) reminds us that multicultural educators have

questioned and complicated “essentialized categories of race, ethnicity, nation, sex, gender” (p. 105), and individuals do not necessarily position themselves within one social category. Nieto (2008) also states that individuals can have “multiple identities” (p. 22) that connect to various cultural groups and reflect “different life experiences” (p. 22).

Teachers of Color in Schools

Consistent themes emerge from the limited selection of empirical studies that have investigated the experiences of teachers of color in suburban school settings. The findings illuminate the following ideas: these teachers encountered challenges to their professional expertise (Hoggard, 1973; Mabokela & Madsen, 2003), they felt isolated in their school buildings (Agee, 1998), they experienced pressure to emulate European-American teachers (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003), and they faced indirect and direct forms of prejudice (Madsen & Mabokela, 2005). Madsen and Mabokela (2005) also noted how the African-American teachers in their study experienced frequent pressure to be a “token representative” of their racial/ethnic group (p. 31), and they did not receive adequate recognition or acknowledgement for their contributions as educators.

Studies about teachers of color in other school settings reflected similar findings in terms of the participants’ professional experiences within their schools. Castaneda et al.’s (2006) research on teachers of color in rural schools revealed that these educators encountered obstacles that included “professional and social isolation” (p. 13) and having their professional qualifications questioned by European-American parents or colleagues (p. 17). Goodwin et al.’s (2006) study of Asian-American preservice and inservice teachers demonstrated how the participants experienced racism, felt isolated and voiceless, and their language

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abilities were often questioned (p. 105). Alternatively, Ramanathan's (2000) research on 47 Asian-American teachers revealed troubling findings in which a third of the participants expressed a desire to imitate their European-American colleagues and "adopt[ed] cultural White values and identities" (p. 11).

Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study reported here was to examine the socialization experiences of eight teachers of color who taught in two different high schools in a large suburban school district in the Northeast region of the US. The following questions were investigated:

- ◆ How are teachers of color socialized into predominantly European-American suburban high schools?
- ◆ How do their experiences illuminate issues of identity, isolation, and scrutiny that they encountered in their schools?

Methodology

Research Site and Participants

The study took place in a large suburban school district called Pine Ridge.¹ The town is located outside of a major metropolitan city, it is regarded as a middle to upper-middle class community, and the schools are reputed to be academically rigorous and competitive.

The participants were recruited from the two high schools in the district: Taft High School and Roosevelt High School. Table 1 describes the participants in terms of their age at the time of the study, their school affiliation, teaching position, ethnic/racial identification, and the number of years they had been teaching:

Data Collection

The study began in February 2009 and continued through the second part of the school year. At the beginning of the research process, I made the decision to co-construct the research design with the participants so the teachers felt a sense of ownership over the study, and as a way of consciously subverting the imbalance of power that often exists between researchers and participants (Creswell, 2007, p. 39).

Based on the feedback I received from the participants, the main method of collecting data evolved into weekly semi-structured interviews and monthly group meetings. I audio-recorded 9-to-10 individual interviews and three groups.

Each interview lasted between 40-to-60 minutes in length, and each group meeting lasted 60 minutes. See Table 2 for examples of the responses the participants offered to one of the questions I presented to them during one-on-one interviews.

While a range of perspectives was presented by the participants, most of their responses suggested challenges in their professional experiences. I will highlight a few of these in the "Findings" section.

Data Analysis

I utilized Glaser and Strauss' (1967) "Constant Comparative Method" as a framework for analyzing the large volume of data I collected from the monthly discussion group meetings as well as the weekly conversations with the participants. I carefully examined the transcripts and found approximately 136 stories or ideas that related to the category of "socialization experiences."

I created specific themes that represented the complex "properties" (Seale, 1999, p. 96) of the socialization incidents. I also utilized member checks to verify the

accuracy of the data by reviewing specific transcripts with each participant that were going to be used in the final write up of the study.

Findings

Questionable Scrutiny

The first theme found when analyzing the data is that the participants felt unfairly and uncomfortably scrutinized by some of the European-American parents, teachers, and administrators at their high schools. This reinforces the idea held by many that teachers of color are judged differently from their European-American colleagues. Their knowledge of the subject matter and how they present themselves to their schooling communities are subject to scrutiny, while their European-American co-workers experience a lesser degree of social and professional surveillance.

The idea of scrutiny emerged from the participants' responses to several different questions I asked. These questions were asked with the intention of helping me understand what the teachers' socialization experiences had been like in their schools.

Table 1
Characteristics of the Participants

Name	Age	School	Subjects Taught	Race/Ethnicity	# of Yrs Teaching
Corey Smith	37	Roosevelt	French and Spanish	African American	7
James Moore	51	Roosevelt	Mathematics	Indian American	28
David Lyons	42	Taft	Special Education	African American	16
Larry Charles	49	Taft	Applied Technology, Small Engines	African American	26
Sophia Lewis	30	Taft	Mathematics	African American	8
Rebecca Williams	57	Taft	Spanish	African American	17
Mary Riley	65	Taft	English, U.S. History, African American Studies	African American	44
Lauren Davis	41	Taft	Math	Hispanic American	17

Table 2
Sample Responses: Professional Experience

Question	Participant Responses
Describe your experience being a minority teacher in this high school.	Within my department great...outside of [it] a little rough.
	It's hard...I always felt different.
	Very positive because of the diversity of people working here (math department).
	Earlier in my career they were not as considerate of my presence as they are now.
	It's definitely challenging...you do feel isolated.
	Basically, a good experience [even though] I don't have a lot of friends.
	Here's where the problem comes [from]...I think [it's] their (European-American teachers) view of other people (teachers of color).

I asked David Lyons the following question: "What could Taft High School do to offer more support to the minority teachers?" In his response, he shared a story about the time when he was first hired to teach at Taft. The district put him on "sub pay" because he was teaching with an emergency certificate until he took a teaching examination and received his permanent teaching certificate. Soon after he was hired, he attended an inservice day for all of the teachers in his building, and he learned that a European-American mathematics teacher was talking about his credentials to other teachers:

"Does Mr. Lyons have his credentials?" [She was] going around asking everyone and saying, "I don't think he does...she was doing this during lunch...she was going around from table to table, "Hey does Mr. Lyons have his degree? I don't think he does." This is how it is. This is it. (D. Lyons, personal communication, February 29, 2009)

According to Madsen and Mabokela (2005) the African-American male teachers in their study had to "dispel the misperceptions of the African-American male, to prove their worth to the organization" (p. 24). David experienced a similar situation as the new teacher at the high school in which a European-American colleague publicly questioned his credentials to find out if he was even qualified to teach in their school. Not only did she raise questions about whether he had his teaching certification or not, she also wondered if he had a college degree.

David wants the school administrators to address a problem that he sees in the high school with how teachers of color are treated by their colleagues. He believes "there's a blind eye to what's really happening" and he wants this to change. At the first group meeting, Sophia also echoed David's sentiment and commented that the minority teachers at Taft felt "[in]validated in one way or another" (S. Lewis, personal communication, March 18, 2009) by colleagues who wanted to know how they got their teaching positions in their school.

During my interviews with Rebecca, Mary, David, and Sophia, they all cited the same two incidents in their responses to the following questions: "Describe your experience being a minority teacher at this high school? Do the minority teachers and European American teachers interact well in this high school?"

The first incident involved the time when students from the African-American Club asked Sophia, their advisor, if they

could watch President Obama's inauguration together as a group. She thought it was a great idea and invited the other African-American teachers to watch it with them. When some of the European-American teachers heard about this, they were upset that they were not asked to join them. She said, "I wanted people to be around [us] who were happy that he's president but my colleagues couldn't understand and they thought it was reverse racism" (S. Lewis, personal communication, February 17, 2009).

Sophia wanted to be with people who shared the same culture and history, and understood this historic moment through those lenses: "I didn't want to be in a room where I was uncomfortable to cry or I was afraid to clap." Darder (1991) states that it is important for European-American teachers to validate culturally diverse individuals who seek solidarity with each other, and "acknowledg[e] the manner in which people of color have been historically discriminated against" (p. 121). However, when the European-American teachers labeled the African-American teachers' need for solidarity to be "reverse racism," their response illuminated a lack of understanding for what President Obama's inauguration meant to the African-American teachers from personal and sociopolitical perspectives.

The second incident mentioned by the four participants referred to the time when David Lyons invited all of them over to his house after school. When one of the European-American teachers saw the invitation in the teacher's lounge, the news about the party started to spread among the other teachers. A different teacher told Mary that her feelings were hurt when she discovered that she was not invited to the party:

What I'm saying is, if it had been a group of Italians who had a party, it would have been fine. If it had been a group of Polish people...it would have been fine. But the problem is...it's okay for everybody else to meet in their own ethnic group and discuss their culture...why is it that everybody's mumbling, "The Black teachers are having a party?" Why is it a big deal? (M. Riley, personal communication, February 25, 2009)

In Mary's estimation, the European-American teachers turned a casual party at David's house into a needless controversy. She believed that the African-American teachers were being singled out in instances when they wanted to socialize together, but other groups of teachers were

not receiving the same level of scrutiny. These incidents also connect to Burant et al's (2002) assertion that teachers of color face "socializing pressure to minimize their cultural capital" (p. 6), and this idea is visible in the ways in which some of the European-American teachers misinterpreted and criticized the interactions between the African-American teachers.

Consciously Constructing an Identity

The second major theme relates to the conscious decisions the participants made about which parts of their identities they were willing to share with others at their schools, and which parts they were not willing to reveal. I asked the participants specific questions related to their identities inside/outside of their schools: "How would you describe your identity outside of the high school? Does your identity change or remain the same when you are in this school?" The responses that the participants offered were quite revealing in the sense that some of the teachers purposely hid certain aspects of their identities (e.g., sexual) in order to feel more comfortable around their European-American colleagues, or to fit into the normative culture of the school.

Corey responded to my questions by talking about his experiences working in one of the middle schools when he was first hired by Pine Ridge. At the time of the study, he had only been teaching at Roosevelt for a few months. He also revealed to me that he is a gay man, but he found it difficult to share this aspect of his identity with the teachers he worked with at the middle school. He felt like he had to wear "a mask" because of his fear that his co-workers would not be ready to embrace a teacher who is gay:

So I always feel like there's this little masquerade. I'm much better about it now than when I first started teaching. When I first started teaching it was a major problem... kind of felt like everything had to be a lie...I always feel like I have that little mask on coming through the door because not everybody can handle it. (C. Smith, personal communication, February 25, 2009)

He made it clear to me that he learned to cope with teaching and interacting in what he perceived to be a predominantly heterosexual schooling community by hiding his identity as a gay man. Not only was Corey the only teacher of color in the middle school, but as far as he knew, he was the only gay teacher as well. The process of silencing this very important aspect of

his identity was difficult for him, and he was cautious about being open about his sexuality because he believed that “not everybody can handle it.” In Smith et al.’s survey (2008) of 514 LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) educators, researchers concluded that the participants did not disclose their sexual identities because they “perceived the climate in their workplace as homophobic...and transphobic” (p. 19). For Corey, the fear of the consequences that might occur from coming out as a gay teacher in his school was enough to keep him silent about this part of his life.

Sophia offered a response to the questions that reflected her discomfort with showing certain aspects of herself that are rooted in familial/cultural practices because she did not want to perpetuate or reinforce stereotypes about African Americans. She was highly conscious about projecting any sort of preconceived notions her mathematics colleagues might have about African Americans by avoiding behaviors, mannerisms, food, clothing, or any other practice that they might readily connect to her racial/ethnic background:

Like if we’re all going to eat like the math department, I won’t order fried chicken... just because I don’t want to feel like, oh that’s typical (of an African American to do order this)...and maybe it’s my own uncomfortableness or I’ll try to discretely add hot sauce to something for spice or flavor. Now my girlfriend (a colleague) that I’ve gotten really close with we’ll go out and eat buffalo wings...I feel comfortable around her, but I try to do non-Black stereotypical things. (S. Lewis, personal communication, February 17, 2009)

Sophia described how she hid certain aspects of her African-American identity from her mainly European-American coworkers. Her desire to deflect stereotypes about racial/ethnic group is understandable because, as several participants had commented, they believe the African-American teachers are scrutinized more than any other group at Taft. In this example, Sophia is highly conscious of her colleagues’ responses and behaviors toward her, and she did not want to attract unwanted attention by behaving, speaking, or appearing in a manner that might be viewed as a “stereotypical Black thing.”

Involuntary Isolation

The third major theme refers to the incidents of involuntary social and professional isolation reported by some of the participants. They expressed a desire for

more meaningful engagement with other teachers, and they pointed to factors such as teaching schedules and lack of opportunities as reasons for their feelings of isolation. Their “involuntary isolation” also stemmed from negative interactions with European-American colleagues who marginalized them based on perceptions about their professional knowledge.

David Lyons responded to my question about his experiences being a minority teacher at Taft by specifically referring to his interactions with the biology teachers in his department. He commented: “I am a Black American who works in a predominantly White high school with predominantly White teachers and I work in an all-White biology department and I’m a special education teacher” (D. Lyons, personal communication, February 29, 2009).

He believes the racial make-up of the biology department is significant because his colleagues have undermined his authority as the students’ special education teacher: “They go completely over my head...they’re constantly questioning me...They’re tell[ing] me how to do my job, [that] I’m certified to do.”

He was teaching in two different inclusion biology classrooms at the time of the study, and when he tried to talk to the regular education teachers about his responsibilities to the special education students, one teacher complained to the department head about David, and the other abruptly ended the conversation with him: “So that’s the type of thing that goes on. When you are few, you’re out...They go back to their little cubby and talk about me.”

Similar to David’s experience with the biology teachers, the Asian-American teachers in Goodwin et al.’s (2006) study reported having their abilities challenged by their European-American colleagues, and they felt “invisible” (p. 105) in the sense that their presence and knowledge did not matter. In David’s case, the biology department marginalized him because he confronted the two teachers who interfered with his work with the special education students, and because he asserted himself as the expert on matters pertaining to his field. He also felt isolated and “out” of the group because he was one of the few minority teachers at the school as well as within the department.

Upon asking other participants about their experiences being a minority teacher at their high school, Larry and Mary stated that they felt isolated due to the low presence of other teachers of color in their schools as well as an absence of op-

portunities offered through their schools to assist them in building a community and a support system with other minority faculty. At the first group meeting, the participants discussed McIntosh’s (2000) essay on White privilege. Sophia talked about the ideas in the essay that resonated with her experiences at Taft:

[I] realize that just the fact that their staff is the majority...the people look like them, the kids look like them, and everything else like that. I don’t see me walking around here. There’s what five of us here? I don’t see them very often either, so I’m always faced with dealing with somebody different and they’re kind of not. (S. Lewis, personal communication, March 18, 2009)

Sophia recognized how White privilege was present at Taft High School just in the fact that the European-American teachers are surrounded by people that “look like them” all the time and they rarely experienced any form of isolation in the same ways that some of the teachers of color have in working and teaching in predominantly European-American schools.

She also argued that the European-American teachers do not have to “deal with somebody different” whereas she has to constantly interact with adults and students from different ethnic/racial backgrounds since there are only a few minority students in any of her classes. According to Banks (2001), in order to transform school cultures into places that foster equity for all school members, it requires intensive examination of the “latent and manifest culture” (p. 14) and how it fosters inequity for school members who feel excluded from that culture.

Discussion

These stories that the study participants shared raise troubling concerns about the ways in which they were socialized into their schools. Returning to Burant et al.’s (2002) argument that teachers of color face “socializing pressure to minimize their cultural capital” (p. 6), we see evidence of this idea in the data that was collected. The intergroup interactions between the African-American teachers were met with suspicion and misunderstanding on the part of some of the European-American teachers. They do not understand “why” the teachers wanted to meet together among themselves, and seeing them together made their European-American colleagues feel uncomfortable.

Furthermore, Sophia and Corey’s decision to consciously hide their racial,

cultural, and/or sexual identities was done in response to the immense “socializing pressure” they experienced, and to deflect unwanted scrutiny or repercussions for assuming these identities within their schools. Corey also reminds us that teachers of color can have multiple identities (Sleeter, 1996) that go beyond racial or ethnic affiliations, and that his experiences within the Pine Ridge schools are informed through these complicated, myriad social locations.

The implicit expectations and rules that govern how teachers are socialized within these schools are different for teachers of color compared to the European-American teachers. As Sophia pointed out, the European-American teachers are in a school where they can interact freely with other White school members, but the African-American teachers get accused of practicing “reverse racism” for sharing a historic moment together.

These differences are also highlighted in the way that some of the European-American teachers questioned the competencies of the teachers of color. As David and Sophia shared, some of their colleagues wondered “how” they got their jobs at Taft, and these questions belie an unspoken belief that teachers of color are not really qualified to teach there. A deeper interrogation of the “latent and manifest” culture (Banks, 2001) is necessary in order to expose the societal forces of power, privilege, and prejudice that sustain “intergroup conflict” (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003) within schools.

Implications and Conclusions

The findings from this study offer many implications for suburban schools with a large number of European-American students and teachers compared to teachers and students of color. However, I would caution that due to the small sample size, the experiences of the participants in this study do not necessarily speak for teachers of color in other similar settings.

Nevertheless, the data strongly suggest that teachers of color need support within their buildings. School administrators need to provide opportunities for teachers of color to meet together by scheduling common “prep periods,” creating parallel teaching schedules and lunch periods,

and sponsoring district-wide activities and programs that provide a forum where they can talk about topics/issues that arise for them in their schools.

Moreover, certain faculty meetings or inservice days should be aimed at fostering understanding and heightened awareness of the cross-cultural and racial issues that affect the social interactions between White teachers and teachers of color. “One and done” workshops are not effective means of promoting real diversity and acceptance. What is needed are sustained, meaningful conversations about underlying beliefs and schooling practices that marginalize students and teachers from diverse backgrounds.

As the findings from this study have indicated, issues of diversity should not be the burden solely of teachers of color. To cultivate school cultures of equity and acceptance in suburban schools will require the commitment of everyone to transform such institutions (Nieto & Bode, 2008).

Note

¹ All names of the town, schools, and teachers are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the study participants.

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