

THE PROFESSIONAL EDUCATOR

The Need for More Teachers of Color



Professional educators—in the classroom, library, counseling center, or anywhere in between—share one overarching goal: ensuring all students receive the rich, well-rounded education they need to be productive, engaged citizens. In this regular feature, we explore the work of professional educators—their accomplishments and their challenges—so that the lessons they have learned can benefit students across the country. After all, listening to the professionals who do this work every day is a blueprint for success.

BY JOSÉ LUIS VILSON

If I've done the math correctly, out of the 50 or so teachers I've had in my lifetime, only two or three of them were men who were black and/or Latino. For someone who is 33 years old and was born and raised in New York City, a place often celebrated for its diversity, that's staggering.

You're allowed to wonder why that's so important. After all, teachers of all races, backgrounds, sexes, and ages have proven to be effective educators of urban youth. In fact, I love that many white people care enough about the plight of black and Latino students that they seek to work in the neighborhoods in which these students live. Throughout my own education, many of my white teachers were excellent. I understand that there needs to be

*José Luis Vilson is a blogger, speaker, and math teacher in New York City, where he has taught for 10 years. Parts of this article are drawn from his book *This Is Not a Test: A New Narrative on Race, Class, and Education* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), and are reproduced with permission of Haymarket Books.*

a diversity of experiences; our students have to survive in the same world as everyone else. A small part of me also thinks: Who better to teach students of color the tools needed to survive in a predominantly white country than white people?

But as a teacher of color, I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't disturbed by the lack of representation of black and Latino people, especially males, as teachers. Some work as principals and district administrators. Others are third-party vendors, education lawyers, and professors in institutions of higher education. Effective (and ineffective) teachers often leave the classroom in favor of these occupations; while plenty of men do great work in administration, many use it as a steppingstone to stay in education without grounding themselves in the educational practice of the classroom.

Because about 75 percent of our nation's teachers are women, many in society also view teaching as "women's work," a category that often leads to demeaning and obtuse ways of dismissing teachers' contributions. This dynamic compounds the already existing problem of society talking down to educators in our schools. Too many people don't see the need to pay teachers well

or to ensure they have proper working conditions because educators are regarded as caretakers, not professionals. While male-dominated professions like computer science or medicine garner respect, the teaching profession still has to combat patriarchy.

The fact that so many people view teaching as a second-class profession speaks volumes about our society's values. Plenty of men talk favorably about teachers, but when asked if they'd ever be teachers themselves, they respond, "I don't have the patience," and "You guys don't get paid enough." In our society, money means stature, whether we value the occupation or not. It's not just coming from the younger generation, either. My mom, whom I love dearly, on occasion wonders aloud why, with all the stress I endure as a teacher, I would put up with my job when I could make far more as a computer programmer.

There are those who have left the profession because it's really easy to become jaded about the school system *and* the human experience. I don't know any fellow black or Latino teachers who think that every student in their school is getting properly served by this system. Some conclude that the system is hopeless. Others say, "We'll continue to fight." The latter are crucial: when our students see more black or Latino sports figures populating a multimillion-dollar basketball court or football field, yet see only one black or Latino teacher in their whole grade, or two or three in their whole school, then they're probably less inspired to take their own education, inside and outside the classroom, seriously.

To be clear, I'm not speaking for every person of color here, but I'm calling things like I see them. I'm black and Latino. I'm a guy who grew up in public housing on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. You may or may not share any of these characteristics, and whether you share all of them, some of them, or none of them, you may or may not agree with me. No one group of people—people of color included—is monolithic in their thinking or experience. And just because someone is a person of color does not mean he or she grew up poor. But based on my experiences as someone who came of age in a pretty tough neighborhood, and then shocked everyone, including myself, by becoming a middle school teacher, I have some insights into schools and teaching as both a student and an educator of color.

Making a Contribution

For a decade, I have been a New York City public school teacher, teaching students math at Inwood Intermediate School (IS 52) in the neighborhood of Washington Heights. I hadn't always intended to become an educator. I attended Syracuse University seeking to

graduate with a bachelor's degree in computer science, but then my college roommate showed me the movie *Office Space* and I realized I didn't want to spend my life longing for my stapler or beating up dysfunctional printers. Instead, I wanted to teach students whose backgrounds were similar to mine. A few years after earning my undergraduate degree in computer science from Syracuse, I enrolled in the New York City Teaching Fellows program, which places candidates in schools in three high-poverty regions of New York City. I chose to work in the Manhattan neighborhood of Washington Heights/Inwood, which is predominately inhabited by people who speak Spanish.

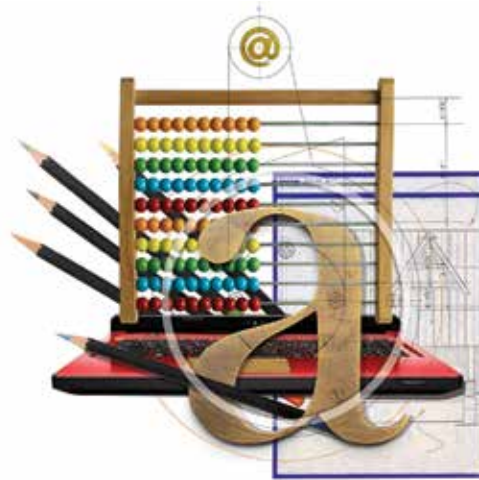
When I started teaching there, the neighborhood had already become a mostly Dominican (as in Dominican Republic) stronghold, a little DR in the United States, so to speak. But it was still home to a hodgepodge of cultures, a conglomeration of Puerto Rican, black, and Chinese blue-collar workers. As someone who grew up in similar circumstances, I came to the Heights because it's where I thought I could make a contribution.

With only seven weeks of pre-service training under my belt, I, like so many bright-eyed, bushy-tailed teachers, was filled to the brim with hope and enthusiasm. Such feelings usually fade fast, partly due to the strain of the school year, but also due to the pressure to perform miracles under deplorable learning conditions and the lack of agency to make things better. Challenges such as lack of autonomy, teacher isolation, and inadequate administrative support are easier to solve than teacher pay, yet they also fall under the top reasons why many teachers, especially

teachers of color, leave, and why those of us who *do* stay learn to temper our zeal.

My first adviser in the NYC Teaching Fellows program predicted that I wouldn't survive my first year of teaching because of the passion I exuded during my pre-service teaching. Ten years later, I tell others what I told him. I thrived then, and continue to do so now, not because of my idealism but because of my idealistic realism.

The difference between idealism and idealistic realism is that the former suggests a wishful dream far removed from reality. The latter, which I've often found with teachers of color (and those who have worked in high-poverty schools with a student body that's predominantly of color), is that we hold fast to the vision of a better country, a better town, a better neighborhood, where students find success in positive and enlightening ways. Yet, we do this in the context of their lives, and not based on our projections of what success looks like for them. We're not trying to mold them into what we believe they should be. We're trying to open doors to show them alternatives for what they could be.



As a teacher of color, I'd be lying if I told you I wasn't disturbed by the lack of representation of black and Latino people, especially males, as teachers.

In *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession*,* journalist Dana Goldstein suggests that we recruit more teachers of color, saying "A half century of research and 150 years of practical experience show teachers of color are more likely to hold high expectations for students of color."

Yet the number of teachers of color still lags far behind the number of white educators. Of the nearly 3.4 million public school teachers in the United States in 2011–2012, the year for which most recent data are available, nearly 82 percent were white, and approximately 18 percent were of color.† Only about 4 percent were men of color.¹ For that same year, nearly 52 percent of public school students were white and approximately 48 percent were of color.²

With a predominantly white profession and a student body that's now majority nonwhite, we must consider the importance of recruiting teachers of color, especially male teachers of color. Just as integration by socioeconomic status can promote racial diversity while narrowing the achievement gap between low-income and more-affluent students,‡ increasing the percentage of teachers of color would narrow what I call the vision gap—the gap that can arise in how low-income and more-affluent students view themselves as future professionals.

After all, children can't be what they can't see. By hiring more teachers of color (in particular, those who grew up economically challenged, like I did), students of color can form relationships with professionals who may share their cultural background *and* possess powerful narratives for success.

A Genuine Connection

When I first walked into the classroom as a teaching fellow, my students were mostly from low-income families and were Dominican and black. Just like me. They raised their eyebrows the first time I stood in front of them; they looked as if they had never before seen a teacher of color. At the time, most of the male adults of color at the school were deans and administrators, who had been quickly shuffled out of the classroom into their positions. My students may have had a few women of color as teachers as well, almost all of

whom were veterans with strong content and pedagogical knowledge and classroom management skills.

With only a month and a half's worth of training, I relied heavily on my ability to connect with students through their culture to survive that first year. I didn't yet have the experience that my older colleagues possessed, and I was not as sure of my teaching ability, so I was probably harder on myself than I needed to be. But according to others, I fared just fine. Some teachers in my first year approached me to ask for advice on how to handle certain situa-

tions, and I couldn't tell them because I didn't have the words for it. I usually referred them to veteran teachers in the building, who they seemed to be afraid of. I didn't understand it then, but all those times that I called my students' parents and spoke to them in Spanish, used my students' home language to help them understand math, and followed them from class to class, my genuine connection to their backgrounds was enabling me to develop a positive relationship with them. I had an instant leg up because I could see things through their eyes, and because I'd been where they'd been and still found success.

My colleagues acknowledged that my efforts were paying off. When I came into the school building one morning, a dean spotted me in the hallway as I was escorting my students to lunch and said in his burly growl, "Vilson, you're doing a yeoman's job!"

I said, "Huh?"

"A yeoman's job!"

"What?"

"You're doing a HELLUVA job, Vilson!"

"Thanks."

Despite the fact that many white teachers (like that dean) acknowledge the important contributions made by teachers of color, some still doubt the need for a diverse educator workforce. Here, I want to state clearly that we need more research, including quantitative research, on the effects of black male educators on student outcomes. For instance, a recent study suggests that teachers of color specifically could help to improve the academic achievement of students of color.³ Based on my own experiences, I believe it's important for children of color, especially male children of color, to see teachers of color, especially male teachers of color, as role models.

Whenever someone like me suggests that public schools do in fact need more teachers of color, the first question inevitably asked is, "Do you think we need to get rid of white teachers?" and, as a corollary, "Are you saying white teachers can't teach children of color?" That's not what I'm saying at all. If anything, balance matters for our students.



With a predominantly white profession and a student body that's now majority nonwhite, we must consider the importance of recruiting teachers of color.

*For an excerpt, see "Quieting the Teacher Wars" in the Spring 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/spring2015/goldstein.

†The National Center for Education Statistics identifies teachers of color as black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and two or more races.

‡For more on socioeconomic school integration, see "From All Walks of Life" in the Winter 2012–2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/ae/winter2012-2013/kahlenberg.

I would suggest that children of color need access to the ways and means of the dominant culture, and who better to teach that than white teachers and teachers of color who have mastered it? As Lisa Delpit writes in her book *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, "Teachers need to support the language that students bring to school, provide them input from an additional code, and give them the opportunity to use the new code in a nonthreatening, real communicative context." Survival in this country often depends on understanding the code to success (the phrase "college and career ready" comes to mind here), and if white teachers and teachers of color can show children of color the values and norms of our dominant culture, then we can close the vision gap for those students.

Educators of color can also make a positive impact on white students. Often, the onus of developing cultural competence falls solely on teachers of color. A more diverse teaching population can help white students interact with and understand people of different races and cultures. It would also enable them to see people of color in positions of authority. Exposure to peers and adults with different experiences and worldviews helps all children develop empathy for others and assess their own humanity.

Yet, the hiring of white teachers, which historically resulted in the removal of teachers of color, has often been, for all intents and purposes, a matter of public policy. For instance, when the Supreme Court began to mandate that southern states comply with *Brown v. Board of Education*, more than 30,000 black teachers and administrators were fired to ensure that white teachers kept their jobs. Even the 1966 merger of the National Education Association and the American Teachers Association, a historically black teachers union, didn't sway many teachers of either race to see the common struggle of teaching in America.⁴ However well intentioned, the merger didn't ultimately improve the racial and gender dynamics that continued to play out in schools and union meetings.*

Fast-forward to this century, and a closer look at teacher demographics in New York City speaks volumes as to why we need to hire teachers of color. According to a report published by the New York City Independent Budget Office, the share of teachers staffing high-poverty schools in 2011–2012, the year for which most recent data are available, was approximately 44 percent white, 25 percent black, 24 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian, with other subgroups not

reported.⁵ In low-poverty schools, the percentage of white teachers is substantially higher, at approximately 73 percent, while the percentages of black and Hispanic teachers are only 12 percent and 8 percent, respectively. Asian teachers' share is about the same, at 6 percent. The report also noted that "teachers in high-poverty schools transfer to other New York City public schools in larger numbers, suggesting that student characteristics might be an important factor in turnover decisions."



I relied heavily on my ability to connect with students through their culture to survive that first year.

When I ask some of my colleagues of color why they stay in high-poverty schools, they often say it's because they feel as if they're paying their successes forward, opening doors for their students, and teaching them to succeed. Few, if any, ever point to job protections and benefits, though both help to ensure that teachers make a career of the profession.

To further complicate matters, teachers of color leave the profession at a faster rate than their white peers,⁶ not due to salaries or benefits but because of learning and working conditions. Too often, the high-poverty schools where teachers of color typically work are either over-managed by outside consultants or in the process of being shut down by their mayor or governor. While it's certainly true that poor management and lack of funding can negatively affect teachers at any school, such problems hit our high-poverty schools the hardest and often make professional concerns personal for teachers of color.

Professional and Cultural Competence

To truly transform our education system and recruit and retain teachers of color, we must push multiple levers. One lever is ensuring the cultural competence of all educators. In October 2014, 11 civil rights groups ranging from the NAACP and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund to the National Urban League and the Southeast Asia Resource Action Center came together to lay out a handful of reforms and principles that would help narrow achievement gaps and push education in America into the 21st century. One of these principles focused on professional competence:

Systems of preparation and ongoing development should ensure that educators have the time, investments, and supports necessary to acquire the knowledge about curriculum, teaching, assessment, linguistic and cultural competence, implicit bias, and student support needed to teach students effectively. This should include additional supports for education professionals who serve children and families in historically under-resourced and disadvantaged classrooms and schools. School

*In 1957, the American Federation of Teachers expelled locals that refused to desegregate.

systems should recognize educators' abilities, particularly in working with diverse learners and students of color. They should not only create incentives for education professionals to develop or acquire additional skills, but also require professional learning to ensure their effectiveness in the classroom.⁷

Thus, professional competence and cultural competence go hand in hand. We don't just teach subject matter; we teach the students in front of us. And if we share the same skin color and cultural and socioeconomic background as they do, we can serve as immediate models for success. From an administrative standpoint, having more teachers of color in a school means there may be more teachers whom students can turn to and feel comfortable having conversations with about certain situations. I've often joked that some teachers of color could earn loads of professional development credit for all the racial situations they must address in schools, and perhaps that's a benefit administrators should consider in hiring a diverse faculty. With more teachers of color in buildings with students of color, administrators and teachers alike can turn to one another to foster a more inclusive school community and advocate for all children.



With more teachers of color, administrators and teachers alike can turn to one another to foster a more inclusive school community.

In 2011, I had the privilege of attending an event in Tarrytown, New York, held by the organization Today's Students Tomorrow's Teachers. The program was founded by Bettye Perkins to encourage more teachers of color to enter the profession through an eight-year program that provides mentorship for high school students and scholarships for college tuition; all candidates have to do is earn their certifications and become teachers. I wish such a group had existed when I first came into my own, but I'm excited that people like me have this opportunity now. I was invited to share a few remarks, which I titled "It's Not about a Salary, It's All about Reality," a quote from rapper and producer KRS-One's classic "My Philosophy":

Who gets weaker? The king or the teacher?
It's not about a salary; it's all about reality
Teachers teach and do the world good
Kings just rule and most are never understood

I shared these lines to encourage the attendees to consider the ways educators inspire students to think for themselves. I also gave a few words of advice—for example, "Sample the best teachers from your past, but make your own story."

In my first month of teaching, I told them, I had this crazy idea that I would transform my students' lives and that they would change for me the way that students of famed educator Jaime Escalante did in the movie *Stand and Deliver*. They didn't. But that first class was probably my favorite, and the one from which I learned the most.

One time, we did a lesson on percentages. I wrote my lesson using the technical aspects of finding percentages. As I began to teach it and saw the bored looks on my students' faces, I had an idea. I wrote the word "percent" out and asked my students, "Does anyone recognize a word in here?"

"Cent!"

I said, "Oh, good! Now, has anyone ever heard of the word somewhere else, even in Spanish?"

Students jumped out of their seats, they were so excited to answer.

A few shouted, "Ooh! Ooh! Centavo!"

"So what does *centavo* mean?"

"A penny!"

"And how many pennies do you need to get a dollar?"

"A hundred!"

"So when we say *percent*, we mean we're comparing one thing out of a possible hundred."

"OOHHHHH!!!"

That piece of my lesson took a few more minutes than I had planned for, I explained. But it also made a huge difference. Teachers who can relate to their students on a cultural level can reach their students in important ways.

I'm not saying people from other cultures can't help us, but every student of color could use a role model. If that role model just happens to be the teacher in front of them, that's a good thing. □

Endnotes

1. "Number and Percentage Distribution of Teachers in Public and Private Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Selected Teacher Characteristics: Selected Years, 1987–88 through 2011–12," in National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2013, table 209.10.
2. "Enrollment and Percentage Distribution of Enrollment in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools, by Race/Ethnicity and Level of Education: Fall 1998 through Fall 2023," in National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 2013, table 203.60.
3. Anna J. Egalite, Brian Kisida, and Marcus A. Winters, "Representation in the Classroom: The Effect of Own-Race Teachers on Student Achievement," *Economics of Education Review* 45 (2015): 44–52.
4. David Cecelski's *Along Freedom Road: Hyde County, North Carolina, and the Fate of Black Schools in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994) provides a detailed account of the devastation visited upon African American educators in North Carolina in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Cecelski estimates that more than 30,000 southern African American educators lost their jobs in the process of school desegregation. See also chapter 10 of Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).
5. New York City Independent Budget Office, *Demographics and Work Experience: A Statistical Portrait of New York City's Public School Teachers* (New York: Independent Budget Office, 2014), 4.
6. Richard Ingersoll and Henry May, *Recruitment, Retention and the Minority Teacher Shortage* (Philadelphia: Consortium for Policy Research in Education, 2011), 24.
7. "Civil Rights Groups Demand Accountability for Equity in Public Education," National Opportunity to Learn Campaign, October 28, 2014, www.otlcampaign.org/blog/2014/10/28/civil-rights-groups-demand-accountability-equity-public-education.