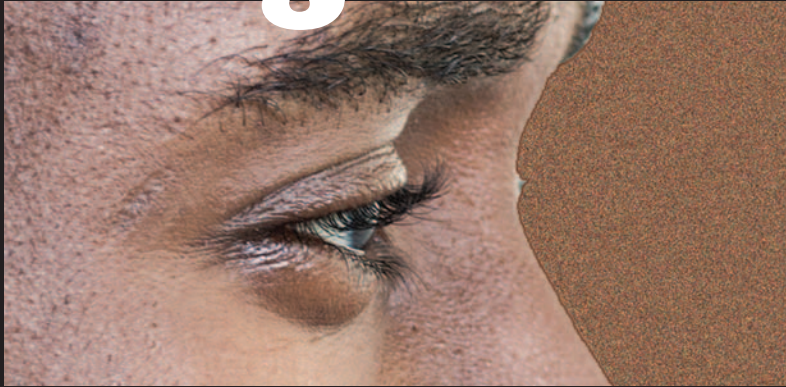# Through our eyes

Perspectives from black teachers

Black teachers bring unique skills to their work that often go far beyond their roles as content experts and instructors.

By Ashley Griffin and Hilary Tackie

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"The difference I would like to make is a difference that my 5th-grade teacher, an African-American woman, made on me," says an elementary teacher from Oakland, Calif., 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: The skills that black teachers bring to their work often go far beyond their roles as content experts and instructors. As role models, parental figures, and advocates, they tend to build relationships with students of color that help those students feel connected to their schools (King, 1993). In the classroom, they tend to be "warm demanders," holding all students to high expectations, both academically and as members of a disciplined learning community (Ware, 2006). As colleagues, they tend to enhance cultural understanding among teachers and administrators of differing races and backgrounds (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). Further, black teachers are especially likely to teach in high-need schools that predominantly serve students of color and low-income students (Achinstein et al., 2010), and they are more likely than other teachers to continue working over many years in schools serving black students (Simon, Johnson, & Reinhorn, 2015).

And yet, for all the strengths they bring to the profession, black teachers comprise just 7% of the teaching population in the nation's public schools. (Altogether, teachers of color represent 18% of the teaching force.) Black students make up about 16% of the K-12 student enrollment.

Recognizing the need to diversify the teacher workforce, many state and district leaders have made it a priority over the past two decades to recruit greater numbers of black and Hispanic teachers (Neason, 2016; O'Connor, 2015; Cavazos, 2015). And their efforts appear to be paying off: From 1987 to 2012, the percentage of teachers of color entering the profession grew twice as quickly as the percentage of white teachers (Casey et al., 2015). However, while school systems have made significant progress in recruiting and hiring more teachers of color, they have done little to keep them in the classroom over time. Indeed, teachers of color tend to exit the profession at higher rates than other teachers.

> ## "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."

Simply put, while diversifying the teaching force through recruitment and hiring remains critically important, school leaders must give just as much priority to holding on to teachers of color. In turn, this will require them to understand those teachers' unique experiences, perspectives, and professional needs. And how better to learn about these things than to hear from teachers themselves?

That's why my organization, the Education Trust, recently invited over 150 black teachers to join us for a series of focus groups in various parts of the country (Griffin & Tackie, 2016). Using data from the U.S. Department of Education's Schools and Staffing Survey (2012), we identified states and districts with high numbers of black teachers, and we reached out to local schools and teacher organizations to recommend participants. Our goal: to better understand their unique experiences, why they teach, what they believe they bring to the classroom and the field, their perspectives on the state of education as a whole, and the challenges they confront in the workplace. Here, we present the main themes and ideas to emerge from these discussions (and in forthcoming work we will share what we heard in focus groups with Hispanic teachers).

Connecting with black students

Echoing the views aired by black teachers in earlier

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research studies, many of our focus group participants said it has been relatively easy for them to build positive working relationships with students, especially black students, because of perceived cultural and experiential similarities. This immediate, surface-level connection, they said, tends to encourage black students to feel safe in their care. As a teacher from North Carolina put it, "I think we don't have the trust barrier sometimes that other teachers of a different ethnicity may . . . because they see someone who looks like them . . . (and) they tend to be more trusting."

Participants described this ability to connect with black students as an important and much-appreciated instructional resource. Said one teacher, "We bring familiarity to our students. You know, they do like to look up and say, 'Oh, OK, there is my auntie,' or 'There is my grandma,' or 'There is my cousin.' " And having students see them as familiar, even familial, often allows black teachers to share information that goes well beyond the usual academic content. For example, a teacher from Alabama said, "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."

Further, many of the teachers said they empathize with students' out-of-school experiences differently than do their white colleagues and that this has an effect on the quality of their instruction. For example, a teacher from North Carolina observed that because of this personal connection, she does not rush to judge students as quickly or negatively as do other teachers: "Where I'm at, sometimes there are Caucasian teachers that don't even have patience with the kids. Or the kids will do one thing wrong, and they're ready to nail them to the cross."

Participants told us that their distinct understanding of hardship, in particular, allows many black teachers to have compassion for students while also holding them to high expectations. Said one teacher from Tennessee, "When you don't have the same background . . . you may feel sorry for a student because you see what they're going through — they might be in poverty. But sometimes when you feel sorry for a person, you make excuses." For her, though, that's not true, she added. "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."

At the same time, however, participants were careful to point out that black teachers can't be expected to have a strong connection with every black student any more than white teachers can be expected to have a natural rapport with every white student. In many schools, though, people do tend to make that assumption, which creates a burden for black educators. As a teacher from Texas said, "We become the representative for every child of color . . . whether we relate to them, whether our culture is the same or not. We become the representative for all of those children."

Moreover, to the extent that black teachers and black students feel a special sense of connection, this can become a two-edged sword: It can encourage students to become more engaged in learning, but it also can tempt them to take advantage of their teachers' apparent understanding. For example, black students may assume that they don't have to watch their language when talking to black teachers or that they can ignore those teachers' classroom rules or dismiss their professional authority. In our focus groups, some participants even argued that because black students don't share the same connection and familiarity with white teachers, they often behave more respectfully toward them.

Several teachers in our sample also mentioned the possibility that some black teachers can have a negative influence, particularly on black students. Expected to be relatable, a discouraging or unsupportive black teacher can devastate a black student who is looking for someone to trust.

Supporting the whole student

The teachers in our focus groups expressed a strong sense of obligation not only to help black students learn academic content and skills but also to ensure that their broader developmental needs are

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being met. As a teacher from Alabama described it, she feels responsible to support students (particularly those who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds) in ways that go far beyond the typical professional duties of an educator: "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."

In addition to embracing a parental role, focus group members likened themselves to hairdressers, chauffeurs, advocates, counselors, cheerleaders, and more. "One day," recalled a teacher from Tennessee, "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 because it was always 'Ms. H this,' or 'Ms. H that.' "

Further, focus group members said they felt a constant pressure to carry themselves in particular ways in order to present themselves as good role models, especially for students who did not have such role models at home. Said another teacher from Tennessee, "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 . . . character building, just how they carry themselves. I don't know if they (white teachers) are coming into the role and thinking, 'I want to make sure these students of color . . . have good hygiene, . . . (are) performing at their best,' and all of that."

The pressure to be a role model also motivates many black teachers to be explicit in telling students of color about the challenges and obstacles that they have overcome, in order to show them what it will take to be successful. "I think my influence on the children I teach is very important," said a teacher from North Carolina. "Your home life may be rough, you know. 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."

However, while focus group members embraced these roles, they also described their sense of obliga-tion as a significant source of professional and personal stress, which is only intensified by their acute awareness of their own under-representation in teaching and administration. The limited number of black colleagues becomes particularly glaring when they consider their district and state education leaders, they told us, and also when they attend professional development meetings, which rarely address the kinds of issues they face. As a result, they find that if they want to respond to their students' needs, they often have no choice but to rely on their own ingenuity and resources. Said a teacher from California, "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."

A number of teachers added that when it comes to providing black students with academic opportunities, they feel an extra sense of responsibility. Other teachers may not hold these children to high expectations, they worry, or encourage their academic ambitions. A teacher from Tennessee put it bluntly: "I felt it was my obligation to teach my students, I mean my race. I knew that [white teachers] would put them in a corner somewhere and just leave them there, and . . . I felt I had to. I had to."

Looking ahead: Toward a stronger profession

In the focus groups across the country, we heard over and over again from black teachers about their high expectations for students, their passion for teaching, and their drive to empower young people with knowledge. Many of them felt they were "called" to be in the classroom. Many told us that they remain in the teaching profession because they love their students and their work, and they want to be able to fully contribute to the educational success of their kids.

Too often, though, black teachers said they also feel hindered professionally. Some spoke of finding themselves restricted to teaching black students only; some told us that no matter how much extra time and effort they put into their classroom instruction, their voices were stifled in staff meetings; some said that no matter how well they related to students, they were asked to "tone down" their personalities

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and behave in a more "professional" manner; and many reported that they have been pigeonholed by colleagues, parents, and administrators, pressured to take on the same few teaching assignments and leadership roles over and over again. In short, many participants said they felt undervalued and unappreciated, given few opportunities to build their pedagogical and subject-matter expertise and advance as professionals.

In turn, that brings us to perhaps the most powerful lesson to emerge from our focus group discussions: While we learned much about the strengths and ideals that black teachers tend to bring to their work, we were struck mainly by the urgent need to support those teachers professionally and help them build long, productive, and satisfying careers in the public schools. Understanding and appreciating the many contributions that they make to student success, both in and out of the classroom, is important. But even more important is developing mature, respectful, and diverse working environments in which black teachers and all of their colleagues can thrive. ⬛

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