



Personnel perspectives: Supporting professional learning for Teachers of Color with a critical affinity group

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ABSTRACT

Despite growing student diversity in U.S. K–12 classrooms, Teachers of Color (TOC) remain severely underrepresented. One way to support TOC is through professional learning within critical affinity groups. Critical affinity groups are spaces where TOC engage in critical pedagogy that addresses systems of oppression in educational spaces through recognition of racial and cultural strengths. This study examines how Women of Color personnel in the Urban Public School district designed a critical affinity program to support the retention and development of the district's experienced TOC. Using semi-structured interviews, participants' illuminated how their own lived experiences as former TOC shaped their understanding of the necessity of critical affinity spaces and how these groups support TOC. The Women of Color personnel identified monthly meetings, mentorship, support, and networking, as well as participation in policy-change workshops as the best ways support TOC. The information gained from this study supports using racial affinity groups as professional learning for TOC to offer culturally responsive mentorship and leadership opportunities that provide professional and personal transformation.

Keywords: Teachers of Color, professional learning, critical affinity groups, professional development

INTRODUCTION

Teachers of Color (TOC) are severely underrepresented in U.S. K-12 classrooms with 79% of public school K-12 teachers identifying as White non-Hispanic (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). In contrast, K-12 public school students reflect greater diversity (NCES, 2020). Student demographics in 2020 showed 45.4 % White, 15.1 % Black, 27.7 % Hispanic, 5.7 % Asian, 0.4 % Pacific Islander, 0.9 % American Indian/Native Alaskan, and 5 % two or more races (NCES, 2020), but by 2030, these demographics are expected to shift further, with increases in Hispanic (2%), Asian (5%), and students of two or more races (26.5%), and

White student demographics expecting a 10% decline (NCES, 2024). Despite growing attention to the racial mismatch between the increasingly diverse K-12 student population and the predominantly White teaching workforce (NCES, 2020), limited research examines district-level strategies that support the retention of TOC. Extant studies acknowledge the importance of TOC in classrooms (Villegas & Irvine, 2010), as well as the use of racial affinity spaces to support these educators (Kohli, 2018; Mosely, 2018). However, a gap exists in how affinity spaces function as a retention and professional development strategy within school districts. This study addresses this gap by investigating how district personnel envision a racial affinity group fostering equitable and inclusive school communities for Teachers of Color.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors Contributing to Fewer TOC

The assertion that the TOC shortage is an issue of retention rather than recruitment oversimplifies the issue and disregards its historical roots. Following the abolition of slavery, Black children were taught by Black teachers under Jim Crow laws (Duncan, 2020). However, post *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), Black educators were disproportionately pushed out, viewed as unfit to teach White children (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). This led to discriminatory hiring practices, demotions, and increased licensure barriers (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Stovall & Sullivan, 2022).

Today, TOC face continued barriers. Achinstein et al. (2010), highlight structural inequities, such as unfair compensation and sub-par working conditions. Navarro et al. (2019) and Pizarro and Kohli (2018) document emotional costs TOC face due to isolation from being one, or one of few Educators of Color, as well racial battle fatigue. Navarro et al. (2019) further highlights institutional factors, such as “poor administrative leadership, low status and wages of teaching (and subsequently, more promising job opportunities in other fields), exhaustion caused by changing preps, secondary emotional trauma, continued racial animus and job instability” (p. 284) as TOC push-out factors. These residual post-desegregation push-out factors, coupled with the continued perpetuation of White dominant school culture prolong TOC recruitment and retention issues (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Kohli, 2019), and efforts to increase TOC presence in schools continue.

Why Retention Matters

Teachers of Color benefit schools. TOC serve as role models for both Students of Color (SOC) and White students (Villegas & Irvine, 2010) by providing students with someone to look up to, as well as impacting the types of curricula students experience (Fregni, 2023). TOC improve SOC academic outcomes in reading and math (Western Governors University [WGU], 2020), while also improving SOC exposure to educational experiences, such as entry into gifted programs (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). TOC also teach, and stay, hard-to-staff schools (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

TOC as Role Models

Schools influence students' academic knowledge and values. Madkins (2011) and Morgan (2019) emphasize that a lack of TOC signals to Students of Color that only White people are suited for a teaching career. As such, Teachers of Color serve as role models and champions for SOC in schools because their presence creates visibility and advocacy for SOC (Morgan, 2019). Studies also show TOC hold higher expectations for students. Morgan (2019) highlights how schools with few Black teachers reduces the chance of Black students entering into gifted education programs. Levy (2017), on the other hand, provides empirical evidence that Black students are three time more likely to be accepted into gifted education when educated by a Black teacher.

White students also benefit from Teachers of Color. TOC model for White students that People of Color (POC) are successful and contributing members of society, thereby dispensing racial inferiority myths (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). When White students experience greater diversity in their K-12 classrooms, they are better able to address bias and racism, and they gain deeper appreciation for people of different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds (WGU, 2020). Raudenbush and Jean (2014) showed that Teachers of Color are rated as caring more deeply for students than White teachers because they possess an ethic of warm but demanding care, while learning about, and valuing, their students' cultural backgrounds (Holliman & Spires, 2022).

TOC Improve Student Outcomes

The academic advantages associated with TOC instruction are well documented. Hwang et al. (2023) found that Black and White students in elementary school make gains in ELA coursework when taught by a TOC. Delhommer (2022) showed that Black and Asian students perform better on standardized tests when matched with a same-race teacher, and that Black and Hispanic students are more likely to enroll in STEM fields when pursuing higher education if they are taught by a race-paired STEM educator in high school. These findings provide empirical evidence for long-standing claims about the value of teacher diversity (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Non-academic metrics are also positively influenced by TOC. Holt and Gershenson (2015) demonstrate that Black classroom educators with primarily Black students experience fewer discipline referrals and reduce chronic absenteeism. SOC are also more likely to be placed into gifted programs and to matriculate into vocational and higher educational institutions when they are taught by TOC or attend schools with diverse faculty (Grissom & Redding, 2016; Hawes, 2022; Morgan, 2019). Anderson (n.d.) also highlights that TOC improve White student school experience by providing contrast to a one-sided Eurocentric education and preparing White students for an increasingly diverse world.

TOC Stay in Schools with Students of Color

School systems with high numbers of SOC suffer teacher shortages due to the high turnover rate of White teachers (Carver-Thomas, 2018). However, TOC are significantly more likely to teach in schools that serve large populations of SOC and students living in poverty—schools that are frequently underfunded and come with difficult working conditions (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Achinstein et al. (2010) break down “working conditions” into factors like student demographics, funding, social capital, and power dynamics—all of which influence teacher retention. Their study found that TOC are more often placed in schools with poor working conditions. Despite this, many TOC intentionally choose to work in underserved schools to support Students of Color and improve educational outcomes (Edwards, 2024). For many Black educators, teaching is a “calling” and a means of community empowerment (Williams, 2024). Given the high attrition of White teachers in hard-to-staff schools—up 17% post-COVID—compared to just 5% for Black and Hispanic teachers, TOC are increasingly positioned to address staffing gaps (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2023; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Professional Development to Increase Retention

Federal education policy, including NCLB (2001) and ESSA (2015), mandates professional development (PD) for educators, yet definitions of “high-quality” PD remain vague (Borko, 2004). Traditional PD is often fragmented and misaligned with how teachers learn and grow (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Putnam & Borko, 1997). Kohli et al. (2021) argue that traditional PD lacks political vision and culture—factors in which TOC value. Affinity groups are a promising PD alternative—providing culturally sustaining, equity-focused learning spaces that align with the needs of TOC (Kohli et al., 2021).

Development through affinity groups

Teachers of Color experience not only the “psychological burdens” of classroom teaching, but also systems of oppression and institutional racism (Mosely, 2018). Specifically, TOC are often given additional roles, such as mentoring Students of Color (SOC) and other TOC (Dixon et al., 2019; Warren-Grice & Parker, 2017). TOC also experience microaggressions (Flores et al., 2023; Kohli, 2018), such as having their ideas undervalued and being evaluated more harshly than their White counterparts (Drake et al., 2019). TOC also navigate complex sociocultural differences between themselves and SOC whose sociocultural identities differ from their own (Blazar, 2021; Cormier et al., 2023). Considering emotional labor and institutional barriers TOC face, PD via racial affinity groups hold potential as a mechanism of support, retention, and development of TOC.

Affinity groups are gatherings of individuals with shared identities—such as race (Great Schools Partnership, 2020) who “engage in racial dialogue, process institutional harm, and build collective resistance” (Warren-Grice, 2021, p. 1437). In educational systems, affinity groups can provide targeted PD aimed at giving TOC tools and techniques to address racism and oppression in educational spaces (Mosely, 2018), as well as the critical pedagogy needed for success in today’s diverse classrooms (Kohli et al., 2015; Mosely, 2018). Affinity groups promote dialogue, collectivity, and critical consciousness (Mosely, 2018), while addressing the emotional labor and institutional barriers TOC face (Dixon et al., 2019; Flores et al., 2023; Kohli, 2018). Affinity groups also alleviate pressures felt by TOC by building support networks and reaffirming professional purpose (Warren-Grice, 2021). PD within affinity groups strengthens racial literacy, allowing TOC to “identify routine forms of racism and to develop strategies for countering and coping with them” (Mosely, 2018). Affinity groups raise racial consciousness in TOC in order to address racism and transform educational spaces through action, while also reducing the impact of Racial Battle Fatigue (RBF) (Mosely, 2018). Using affinity groups to support the professional learning of TOC, school districts can affirm TOC goals, values, racial identity and humanity, while also providing mentorship, and a sense of community that may assist in retaining current TOC and recruiting new TOC to the profession (Warren-Grice, 2021).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical Race Theory (CRT) grounds this study. CRT examines how systemic racism is embedded in institutions, such as schools, due to the perpetuation dominant White ideologies that sustain racial hierarchies (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The five core tenets of CRT inform this study. First, CRT posits that racism is an everyday experience for POC (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Second, CRT proposes that advancements in racial equity only occur when they converge with the interests of dominant groups (Bell, 1980). Third, CRT maintains that race is a social construct, created to uphold White supremacy (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Fourth, CRT recognizes that dominant groups construct and reproduce stereotypes of racial minorities to serve their own interests and maintain racial status quo. Lastly, CRT embraces intersectionality, asserting that individuals do not have a single, fixed identity—rather, experiences of race are interconnected with other aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality, class, and religion (Crenshaw, 1991).

Guided by these tenets, critical affinity groups serve as a site of resistance and healing for TOC by providing a space where these educators engage in professional learning that addresses systems of oppression in schools, such as microaggressions and exclusion from opportunities provided to their White teacher counterparts (Kohli, 2018). Critical affinity groups provide critical professional development (CPD), which center TOC experiences, and offers mentorship, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and leadership development grounded in racial consciousness (Pour-Khorshid, 2018; Kohli, 2019). As such, racial affinity groups act as a strategy for retention and transformation for TOC by challenging institutional cultures that push TOC out.

While CRT is the primary analytical lens, this study also engages with culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) (Gay, 2018) and transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) to further examine how racial affinity spaces

support TOC. CRP emphasizes the importance of cultural identities in school structures—complimenting CRT’s call for systemic change and asset-based thinking. Transformative learning theory, on the other hand, supports the goals of critical affinity groups by helping TOC analyze systemic oppression and reflect on their own position within those structures (Mezirow, 2012). Taken holistically, these frameworks highlight how professional learning can go beyond surface-level equity training and instead, provide critically reflective professional learning that builds TOC capacity.

RESEARCH METHODS

Design

This study uses a phenomenological approach to explore how Women of Color (WOC) personnel in the Urban Public School (UPS) system created and sustained a racial affinity group for TOC. Phenomenology, a qualitative method focused on lived experience and meaning-making (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), centers lived experiences as a guide in understanding of how affinity programs function as a retention strategy for TOC. This approach aligns with the study’s aim to understand how a racial affinity group can function as a TOC retention and development strategy.

Participants

Four WOC personnel in the UPS district were chosen for this study due to ease of accessibility and proximity to the researcher. Although a sample of convenience, the UPS district closely mirrors broader Massachusetts and national trends in terms of student and teacher diversity (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MA DESE], 2020). The WOC personnel in the UPS district were directly responsible for the creation, implementation, and support of the racial affinity program designed to support TOC in the district. While the sample size is small, it represents a complete census of the interviewed population.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. This approach allowed participants to describe their experiences, in their own words, about key topics—such as leadership, equity, and support for Teachers of Color. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible structure to pose open-ended questions and follow up with probes to elicit deeper insights (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). The flexibility of this approach allowed participants to describe how they navigated their own systemic challenges as Educators of Color (EOC) in educational spaces and in turn, explain how they incorporated these insights into the TOC affinity program they designed to center EOC experiences and leadership development.

Questions asked how the affinity program started, as well what program elements, learning activities, protocols, expectations, and requirements these personnel believed would specifically support K-12 TOC. Semi-structured interviews were recorded and automatically transcribed using the Zoom platform. Each interview lasted approximately 30-60 minutes. The transcripts of each interview were cleaned to improve readability. Each transcript was read in its entirety to provide a general sense of the information via repeated handling (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Data Analysis

Participant answers are the primary data source; however, some participants did share district presentations and program curriculum guides to help explain the goals and content of the TOC affinity program. Inductive coding and thematic analyses were utilized to evaluate the data; moving from “small units of information to uncover a larger picture that emerges” (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013, p. 435). Inductive coding involved grouping

repeated words or synonyms together to develop themes, without pre-defining the categories. Themes were validated when repeated patterns and shared experiences emerged across interviews, confirming their relevance and consistency. The recurrence of similar language provided strong internal validity, ensuring the data reflected deep, contextually grounded perspectives essential to understanding the inception and impact of the affinity program.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Participants' lived experiences shaped understanding of why critical affinity spaces are necessary for TOC. The following section introduces participants and their ideas about how to meet the professional learning needs of TOC in the UPS district. Pseudonyms are used to protect their identities.

Grace

Grace is the assistant director of human resources (HR) in the UPS district. She revealed how her experiences as a student and educator in the UPS district shaped her thinking about how to support TOC in the district. She explains:

I'm a product of the UPS district, so I can tell you that I have never had a teacher that looked like me, or could connect to me. As a child I struggled with differences in not just language, but also culture. Back then, I had a teacher who pulled my face so that I would look at her because she felt like I was disrespecting her. I couldn't look at her because in my [Asian] culture I have to look away. I use this example all of the time because there was no bad intention, but it was clearly a misunderstanding and a cultural mismatch. I also think back to what could have made a difference in the beginning of my journey into education. If I had a group, as a new teacher, who were able to make me feel more comfortable, give me some classroom guidance, or help me look at what I need to do to get to the next level, it wouldn't have taken me this long to get to where I am. We're facing this huge cultural mismatch in the district, and with these personal experiences, it really adds to why I feel strongly that we need to help diversify our workforce.

Grace's experience highlights the importance of representation. For Asian students, a teacher requiring a student look them in the eye perpetuates a White dominant communication style, and requires SOC to negate their culture (Sue et al., 2007). When Grace became an educator, she still did not see herself in her institution; having no one she felt comfortable with and who could support her career trajectory. This macro-level microaggression demonstrates to POC that there is only "so far they can go" in the field (Sue et al., 2007).

Cindy

Cindy is the program director of the community non-profit organization that develops and coordinates innovative programs for the UPS district. However, before becoming a program director, Cindy, who is Asian, was a biology teacher in different school district. Cindy also believes she would have benefitted from a TOC affinity program during her time as a K-12 teacher.

I think this initiative is something that resonates with me because I've had a lot of these experiences...being a teacher, being in the classroom. You don't always feel valued...you kind of look around your school community, and not everyone looks like me.

Mary

Mary is the UPS district chief equity officer (CEO). For Mary, schools serve society, and Mary's familial stories about being "Native American, Filipino, and African American" in school systems that were "harmful and

negative experiences for my grandparents”, meant she saw first-hand how schools “impacted my parents”. Mary believes having TOC, who look like and share experiences with their students, is a way to elevate learning for everyone.

I feel really strongly about students having teachers who understand the importance of academic content, but also about school as the spaces where you're forming your thoughts about yourself and other communities and social justice. When I look at our Teacher of Color affinity program, it's not just about the symbolism of having more brown faces; it's about people who bring in diverse perspectives, different lived experiences, and who can also deliver expectations in the classroom that enable our kids to determine their future.

Mary’s familial experience, learning from her parents and grandparents that schools are adversarial places for POC, demonstrates how schools contribute to racial trauma, which gets passed on through generations (Saleem et al., 2020). Generational racial trauma explains why Mary believes that schools need diverse perspectives. Increasing TOC in schools promotes racial pride, increases awareness and acknowledgement of race, and reduces the consequences of racial stress and trauma for POC by creating a safe and racially empowering environment (Saleem et al., 2020, p. 8).

Carlotta

Carlotta, a Black principal at one of UPS districts’ middle schools, previously taught in a larger K-12 school district. During her time as a TOC, she recognized how well she connected with students. However, her understanding of why did not become clear until she began directing trainings and facilitating PD around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). DEI work allowed Carlotta to “learn more about myself and Black women”. Carlotta acknowledged she “grew up in predominately White settings and just didn’t see race as a barrier”. When Carlotta started working with Gene Thompson-Grove on the School Reform Initiative (SRI), she learned that SRI work is grounded in equity-based conversations. This work allowed her to facilitate DEI and SRI conversations. This experience led to her passion for DEI work and was the reason she helped Mary, the CEO, develop the critical affinity program for the UPS district and served as the lead facilitator for the first two years.

Critical Affinity Groups as High-quality Professional Development

The WOC believe offering a race-based affinity program is a major part of the high-quality professional development (HQPd) that TOC need. HQPD programs are coherent learning experiences that are systematic, purposeful, and structured over a sustained period with the goal of improving teacher practice and student outcomes (MA DESE, 2023). Since TOC benefits to SOC are known, supporting TOC in the profession, via racial affinity groups, is a high-impact PD practice that directly supports teaching practice and may retain TOC in the profession and produce the outcomes expected of HQPD (White, 2022).

The WOC who created the critical affinity program for UPS Teachers of Color designed core program components aimed at recruiting, hiring, and retaining diverse educators (Urban Public Schools, 2022). As seen in **Table 1**, the WOC personnel spoke on monthly meetings, mentorship, support, and networking, policy workshops, and culturally responsive pedagogy best serving the district’s TOC.

Monthly community meetings

The non-profit director, Cindy, believed monthly meetings and summer workshops support TOC in the district by offering more PD time.

They are getting that extra PD and there is a set schedule and structure around that.

TOC need differentiated professional learning (PL) that targets their needs, assets, and commitments (Gist et al., 2021). Building supportive teaching structures improves teacher preparation, and monthly meetings

Table 1. Themes by participant across key areas of the affinity program

Participant / Role	Monthly Community Meetings	Mentorship, Support, and Networking	Workshops	Culturally Responsive Pedagogy
Cindy (Non-profit director)	Extra PD time and structured support for Teachers of Color.	Ongoing mentorship by experts of Color helps reduce isolation and increase satisfaction.	Participants demonstrate how they are applying what they learn.	—
Mary (CEO)	Addressed uneven understanding of culturally responsive practices; focused on identity and self-knowledge.	—	Enabled participants to extend impact beyond instruction and into policy work.	Led sessions on bias, power, and identity to help teachers disrupt racism in schools.
Carlotta (Middle school principal)	Highlighted importance of cross-district community-building among TOC.	—	Revealed leadership skills needed to manage broader school functions.	Collaborated with university to assess and expand CPD understanding and agency.
Grace (Human resources)	—	Suggested mentorship between experienced and novice TOC may improve certification and retention.	—	—

provide opportunity for PL covering a “range of topics, including culturally responsive teaching and implicit bias” (Carver-Thomas, 2018, p.20). Mary explains,

We did not want to assume everyone had a strong foundation about culturally responsive practices. But we wanted teachers using these practices...using formal language to talk about what they are. So, that was our focus, integrating culturally responsive practices into the platform...concept of identity, identity markers, social markers, and our staff understanding who they are, and then understanding who their students are.

The monthly meetings brought together TOC across the district, something Carlotta, the middle school principal, indicated had not previously occurred.

We do nothing that's cross district. I think bringing people together and building community was huge.

To Carlotta, this is the way to build a strong network of TOC who form a professional learning community (PLC). Carlotta also believed partnering with a local university was a way to provide the TOC in the district a chance to participate in professional learning from different lenses.

I don't think that everyone's going to have the same level of knowledge or understanding around culturally responsive pedagogy. Pairing with the local university allowed us to stop and think about what people know, to have a baseline of where people are at, to build their knowledge. This allowed us to create strategies and a toolkit for TOC to learn how to facilitate conversations and to build their agency and self-efficacy around teacher leadership.

According to the district personnel, monthly community meetings provided structured PD spaces where TOC engaged in culturally responsive practices and identity work. For these Women of Color, monthly meetings were crucial in building a cross-district community, an innovation not previously seen in the district, as noted by Carlotta. Having TOC from across the district work together offered differentiated PD by acknowledging the diverse knowledge levels among TOC in the district, and provided a baseline for growth. Levels of knowledge within Educators of Color (EOC) has also been observed in other studies. Pham (2019) demonstrated that

“novice” EOC should be seen as experts because they draw on their lived experiences as both learners and experts, which enhances their teacher preparation programs. Kulkarni et al. (2022) showed that a Special Education Teachers of Color (SETOC) affinity group, consisting of SETOC in different district schools, was able to reduce feelings of imposter syndrome among the teachers and reposition the SETOC as “smart, good, and wise” (p. 56) due to the fact that SETOC affinity group brought critical consciousness to their racial identities. As such, integrating identity markers, social markers, and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) into affinity group monthly meeting signals a commitment to professional learning that supports personal and pedagogical transformation. This theme directly aligns with the study’s objective by illustrating how the WOC personnel believed sustained, relevant, and culturally grounded PD can support TOC development and retention. It also contributes new knowledge by showing that cross-district TOC affinity groups are an effective mechanism for dismantling racial biases and building community resilience.

Mentorship, support, and networking

One goal of the program was to foster mentorship by pairing experienced and novice TOC with experienced Consultants of Color. Grace, from human resources, believed “having consultants in to speak would help train experienced educators to assist new teachers, which may advance their certification.” Grace emphasized that the mentorship, offered by Consultants of Color, was not only about supporting new teachers but also about offering leadership pathways for seasoned educators. For veteran TOC, becoming mentors within educational spaces allows educators to be seen as valued leaders, as well as feel connected to their colleagues (Mosely, 2018). This racial congruence among Consultants and TOC helped address feelings of isolation—an often-cited reason for TOC attrition (Kohli, 2018)—and provided connections to experts who could help Educators of Color in the district navigate their schools and enact change (Kohli, 2018).

This data expands current understanding by suggesting that culturally responsive mentorship structures may be more impactful than generic mentoring models, especially in districts with limited TOC representation. This aligns with Achinstein and Ogawa (2011), who argue that generic mentoring programs often reinforce dominant cultural norms, marginalizing TOC and limiting the effectiveness of such supports. Similarly, Castro et al. (2010) found that when mentorship lacks cultural identity congruence, TOC may experience increased pressure to assimilate rather than thrive. However, the culturally responsive mentorship structure in this program affirmed teachers’ racial identities while supporting their professional growth. Notably, there are several national networks supporting critical race work for educators—such as The New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE), Teachers 4 Social Justice in San Francisco, and The People’s Education Movement in Los Angeles (Kohli, 2018). However, this model demonstrates that mentorship, support, and networking can also be effectively embedded locally within school districts by bringing in Experts of Color. It should be noted, however, while culturally aligned mentorship can be highly beneficial, cross-racial mentorships can still succeed, particularly if the mentor’s personality (e.g., warmth, caring, good listener) and skills support the professional needs of the TOC (Thorne et al., 2021). This raises an important consideration for scalability and sustainability, particularly in districts where racial or ethnic matching is not always possible. Furthermore, while mentorship mitigates retention, it is not the only lever. Ingersoll and May (2011) emphasize broader structural factors—such as administrative support, equitable workloads, and school climate—as more central to TOC retention. This suggests that while culturally grounded mentorship is critical, it should be part of a multi-pronged approach that addresses both relational and systemic conditions.

Workshops

Workshops, such as parent and community engagement and TOC recruitment, were built into the affinity program to allow participants to collaborate and revise district policies focused on creating anti-racist and culturally responsive school communities. This policy work created opportunity for TOC to use culturally responsive pedagogy to remove embedded racist policies in the district, thereby building teacher leader

agency and self-efficacy (Urban Public Schools, 2022). According to Mary, the CEO, the participants benefitted from these projects because they provided opportunity for TOC to

branch outside of their day to day instruction, and to think about how they can impact other policy areas.

Cindy, the non-profit director, believed the workshops allowed participants to demonstrate

how they are using the information that they're learning.

For Carlotta, the middle school principal, this type of work provided leadership insight to TOC by demonstrating

what it takes to run a school or what it takes to deal with all the different aspects of running a school.

Workshops can be an effective form of PD because when the content is focused, incorporates active learning, supports collaboration, participants are able to use workshop content in job-embedded and meaningful ways (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

The workshops addressed policy change, parent and community engagement, and leadership development. Unlike traditional PD, these sessions were designed to encourage TOC to think beyond the classroom and consider their roles in shaping district-level policies. Mary, for example, described how the workshops created space for TOC to impact systemic change. This theme illustrates how professional learning can be both reflective and action-oriented. It supports the study's objective by showing that empowerment does not stem solely from skill-building, but from being positioned as policy influencers. This expands the current understanding of PD by demonstrating that TOC experiential knowledge can—and should—be central in institutional transformation (Pour-Khorshid, 2018).

These findings align with Picower (2012) and Kohli et al. (2015), who emphasize that critical professional development—when rooted in racial justice—equips educators not only to navigate inequitable systems, but to actively challenge and transform them. While Desimone's (2009) framework of effective PD highlights elements like content focus and active learning, it does not fully account for the sociopolitical dimensions that matter deeply to TOC, such as race, power, and voice. Moreover, this study adds to Santoro's (2011) argument that teacher dissatisfaction often arises from ethical and moral concerns about systemic inequities, not just burnout or workload. By creating opportunities for TOC to engage with policy reform, the workshops addressed moral dimensions and contributed to participants' renewed sense of purpose. Gist and Bristol (2021a) further argue that PD must affirm the lived experiences and leadership potential of Educators of Color. The workshops in this study reflect that imperative by positioning TOC as not just recipients of professional learning, but as architects of institutional change. Taken together, these comparisons emphasize the need for professional learning models that center racial equity, educator agency, and systemic transformation—particularly for those whose voices have historically been excluded from decision-making spaces.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

The chief equity officer, Mary, believed content focused on identity and culturally responsive practices would empower TOC to address racism in UPS district schools.

Teachers learned identity markers and social markers so that staff understand who they are and who their students are. We talked about bias, racism, and the role of power within racism. We had a session on unconscious bias, bystander effect, and how to disrupt racism and racist talk in your schools.

Providing culturally relevant principles allows TOC a chance to reflect, heal, and develop skills to resist and combat racism in educational spaces, thereby facilitating community building and healing for Persons of Color

in educational spaces (Gist et al., 2021b; Kohli, 2019). Moreover, once TOC have learned about themselves, they are better able to become learners of their students' experiences and realities, and work towards gathering resources that embed the experiences of their students in the classroom (Adjapong, 2017).

Culturally responsive pedagogy was not only a content area but also a method of engagement in the affinity program. The WOC who designed the TOC affinity program required participants to explore identity, bias, racism, and power dynamics so that TOC educators would gain tools that confront systemic inequities in their schools. Mary emphasized that these sessions allowed TOC to understand themselves more deeply. This theme supports the WOC personnel's goal of TOC leadership development in the district by providing educators with tools to advocate for equitable educational practices. It contributes new knowledge by showing how CRP, when embedded within TOC affinity groups, serves both as professional development and as a healing practice. This builds on Ladson-Billings' (2006) work, which defines CRP as a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, and emotionally by connecting learning to their cultural contexts.

While there are criticisms about the superficial use of CRP in many school reforms, particularly those that celebrate culture without challenging structural inequities (Sleeter, 2012), the WOC personnel in this study demonstrate the utility of culturally responsive pedagogy by embedding CRP within the TOC affinity-based space such that TOC in the UPS district could engage in race-conscious discourse—often absent in mainstream PD (Carrier, 2024). More importantly few studies explore how CRP impacts teachers themselves, particularly TOC. This study addresses that gap by showing how CRP can function as both a professional and personal transformation process for educators. In this way, the findings resonate with Paris and Alim's (2014) framework of Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy, which pushes CRP further by emphasizing the importance of sustaining and evolving teachers' cultural practices.

CONCLUSION

This study addresses a critical gaps by illustrating how sustained, affinity-based professional development—grounded in culturally responsive pedagogy and mentorship—can foster both the professional growth and personal empowerment of TOC, offering an alternative to conventional PD models that often overlook the significance of race, identity, and systemic transformation. As such, the information in this study could serve as a theory of action for developing a professional learning program, specifically a critical affinity group, to support the retention of K-12 Teachers of Color, both novice and experienced. The design of the UPS critical affinity group utilized action based workshops and critical pedagogy training to lessen schools as adversarial places for POC in the district (Kohli, 2019). This work transformed the leadership abilities and skills of the districts' experienced TOC (Pour-Khorshid, 2018). The UPS critical affinity group format allowed for the district's TOC to address racism and biases within their educational institutions, creating stronger TOC who may stay in the classroom longer and who develop as leaders in their school communities (Mosely, 2018).

Implications for Future Research

The findings from this study offer several implications for future research on affinity-based professional development programs designed to support Teachers of Color.

Affinity-based professional learning as a retention strategy

This study reinforces prior research suggesting that affinity spaces are crucial for the retention and growth of TOC (Carver-Thomas, 2018; Gist et al., 2021b). Monthly meetings and cross-district collaboration allow for differentiated professional development that recognizes the varied experience levels and cultural assets of TOC. Consistent with Kulkarni et al. (2022), this study demonstrates that when educators are taught to engage in identity-affirming community, they are better positioned to resist deficit narratives and build professional

confidence. Future research should further explore how district-level affinity groups might serve as foundational—not supplemental—structures for the retention and development of TOC.

Culturally responsive mentorship as a transformative framework

The mentorship model within this study supports critiques of dominant, “colorblind” mentorship programs that reinforce whiteness as the norm (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011). By centering shared racial identity and lived experience, culturally responsive mentorship structures validate participants’ professional and personal identities. This aligns with Kohli (2018) and Mosely (2018), who argue that culturally grounded mentorship can mitigate isolation and elevate TOC as school leaders. Future research should examine the long-term impacts of such models and how they might be adapted in contexts where racial matching is not possible (Thorne et al., 2021).

Culturally responsive pedagogy as professional and personal transformation

Culturally responsive pedagogy was not merely a content area in this program; it functioned as a methodology for self-reflection, healing, and resistance. This extends Ladson-Billings’ (2006) and Kohli’s (2019) frameworks by showing how CRP can serve as a mechanism for both personal and pedagogical transformation. The findings also support Paris and Alim’s (2014) concept of culturally sustaining pedagogy by illustrating how the WOC personnel in the UPS district built the capacity of the district’s TOC to resist systemic inequities while also sustaining their cultural knowledge. Researchers should further explore CRP not only as a classroom practice, but as a professional development tool.

Redefining effective professional development

Traditional definitions of effective professional development often emphasize content focus, active learning, and coherence (Desimone, 2009). While these remain important, the findings from this study affirm the necessity of integrating sociopolitical dimensions into PD—especially for TOC whose dissatisfaction is frequently rooted in equity concerns (Santoro, 2011). The workshops provided participants with opportunities to enact policy reform and engage in systemic critique, reflecting the kind of justice-oriented learning advocated by Picower (2012) and Kohli et al. (2015). Researchers are encouraged to examine how PD models can better position educators as policy actors and institutional change-makers, not just practitioners.

Scalability and sustainability considerations

While the benefits of culturally responsive, identity-based mentorship are well-supported, questions remain about how to scale such programs in districts with fewer TOC. Thorne et al. (2021) provide a useful framework for understanding how effective cross-racial mentorships can still occur when relational trust, empathy, and listening are emphasized. This study suggests that mentorship training for White mentors should include race-conscious pedagogies and identity-affirming practices to replicate some of the benefits of affinity-based models. Future research should examine how such training can support scalability without diluting the core values of culturally sustaining mentorship.

Limitations

Given the small sample size, the findings of this study are not statistically generalizable. However, qualitative research—particularly when centered on the experiences of historically marginalized educators—privileges depth, contextual specificity, and theoretical transferability over breadth (Patton, 2015). The insights offered by participants highlight the potential of PD, CRP, and cross-district affinity groups to transform the professional lives of TOC when these efforts are intentionally designed to center identity, mentorship, and racial equity. Although these findings are not representative of all TOC, they provide generalizability by demonstrating mechanisms through which identity-affirming PD structures can enhance teacher retention and leadership capacity in schools. As Stake (2005) argues, richly contextualized narrative accounts can offer valuable

insights when readers are able to find resonance with their own educational contexts. In this way, the situated knowledge shared by participants contributes to broader conversations about justice-oriented professional development (Gutiérrez & Jurow, 2016). Furthermore, emerging research supports the value of small-scale, affinity-based interventions in improving TOC well-being, belonging, and retention, especially when tailored to local sociopolitical contexts (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Gist & Bristol, 2021b).

In addition to the small sample size, the effectiveness of affinity spaces as professional learning remains debated. Sims and Fletcher-Wood (2020) identify key features of effective PD, including sustained duration, group learning, expert facilitation, and content-specific practice. Yet, effectiveness is often judged by student outcomes—a point raised by Mary, who stressed tracking academic gains in classrooms led by TOC. Without such data, the impact of affinity-based PD remains uncertain. However, Hill and Papay (2022) argue that conventional PD metrics often ignore equity and diverse teacher experiences. Given the known benefits of TOC for student success (Carver-Thomas, 2018), retaining TOC should itself be viewed as a valid indicator of PD effectiveness. In this light, racial affinity groups may offer a meaningful and equity-driven model of professional learning.

STATEMENTS AND DECLARATIONS

Ethical Considerations

This study was approved by the Office of Research Integrity at the University of Massachusetts Lowell (approval no. 22-128) on August 08, 2022.

Consent to Participate

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating.

Declaration of Conflicting Interest

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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