WORKFORCE: CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY

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PROBLEM
For several decades, the early childhood education workforce has experienced an increasingly widening disparity between the racial, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of teachers and the children in their classrooms. The National Association of Independent Schools asserts, “Although there has been an increase in classroom diversity, the demographics of the teachers in U.S. classrooms...have changed little over the past decades, creating a cultural mismatch between students and teachers”.¹ This imbalance reflects the historical shortage of diverse teacher candidates entering the pipeline.

Moreover, the diversity of children and families served in early childhood programs has changed dramatically over the past 20 years. There has been notable growth of both immigrants and non-English speaking families entering early childhood education programs, and this trend is expected to continue. Projected student growth from 2005 through 2020 will largely come from the children of immigrants.² Nationally, African American and Latino students make up 40.7 percent of the public-school population. Although many school populations – both urban and rural – are increasingly made up of Black and Latino students, over 40 percent of public schools lack a single teacher of color. Many urban and high-poverty schools are predominately staffed with White teachers while teachers of color are disproportionately absent from the teacher

² Fry R.(2008)
workforce. Furthermore, the 2016 Early Childhood Workforce Index published by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment found that 63 percent of center-based teaching staff in the early childhood workforce are White, with only 17 percent and 5 percent representing African Americans and Latinos, respectively.\(^3\)

Research supports that a lack of teachers of color has adverse effects on the establishment of cultural links between home and school, the expectations of students of color, the creation of inclusive environments, and turnover rates in hard-to-staff schools. Furthermore, the Yale Child Study Center found that preschool teachers show signs of implicit bias when administering discipline and concluded that the race of the teacher plays a large role in the outcome.\(^4\) This may account for the higher expulsion rates of Latino and African American preschoolers with nearly three preschoolers expelled for every 1,000 enrolled.\(^5\)

In 2017, in response to what some call a “pre-school to prison pipeline,” Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner signed Public Act 100-0105 that protects all children from expulsion in publicly-funded early childhood programs.\(^6\)

High-quality early childhood education programs can lead to significant successes for children of color. However, as children in early childhood programs increasingly reflect diverse backgrounds,\(^7\) it is essential for the teaching workforce to also reflect diversity, affirmatively respond to their cultural and racial identities, and provide a well-rounded and inclusive education. Preliminary findings from the 2017 Illinois Early Childhood Workforce Hiring Survey highlight that the most difficult position to hire is a lead teacher who is licensed by the Illinois Board of Education (ISBE) with an endorsement in early childhood education.\(^8\) The inability to retain highly effective teachers of color, like all teachers, is also a challenge for many early childhood programs.

“In ECE [Early Childhood Education], maintaining the current culturally and linguistically diverse workforce, especially in light of increasing qualifications, as well as reducing stratification by race and language among lead teachers and.

\(^3\) “Early Childhood Workforce Index 2016.” Berkely.edu.


\(^8\) Illinois Early Childhood Workforce Hiring Survey 2017
program leaders poses...challenges.” It has been found that, for children younger than five, having teachers who speak their home language is a critical component in promoting their school readiness.

One study concluded that students of color perform better with teachers of color because culturally and linguistically diverse teachers tend to have higher expectations for students of color. A 2016 study conducted by John Hopkins University found that White teachers—who constitute 82 percent of the profession—are less likely to expect academic success with Black students and this was especially the case with Black boys. The presence of a workforce that is not diverse can have long-term effects on students of color. According to a report by the Center for American Progress, in the instance when “a black student has both a black and nonblack teacher, it is the black teacher who tends to have a much higher estimation of the student’s academic abilities.” The lack of diversity among teachers in addition to differing interpretations of student ability and behavior can provide an explanation as to why students of color have suspension and expulsion rates which are disproportionate at every level of schooling. This increases the risk of academic disengagement and the likelihood that they will later drop out of school. A teacher’s high or low expectations of a student are highly indicative of the student’s future academic success; this is referred to as the “Pygmalion Effect.” Such expectations and mindsets may not be intentional, but the long-term effects on students cannot be ignored.

CAUSE
The shortage of teachers of color in increasingly diverse early education classrooms cannot be linked to a single cause as there are many complex factors and entities that have contributed to the inception and augmentation of the problem. Some examples include limited interest in pursuing a teaching career or fewer candidates of color with the skills and qualifications to enter the field.

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9 Whitebook, Marcy. “Building a Skilled Teacher Workforce Shared and Divergent Challenges in Early Care and Education and in Grades K-12.” Berkely.edu.
13 Partelow et al.
The root cause of limited skills and qualifications can be attributed to the K-12 education system that fails children of color who may eventually pursue a teaching degree. There are well-documented achievement gaps for students of color that start as early as kindergarten entry. In their book, *Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School*, authors Valeria Lee and David Burkam drew a number of conclusions based on analysis of the U.S. Department of Education’s Early Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort. Amongst other things, they concluded “there are substantial differences by race and ethnicity in children’s test scores as they begin kindergarten.” Average math achievement for Latino kindergartners is 19 percent lower than white students and 21 percent lower for Blacks.14 Many students of color are at a disadvantage for securing academic success later in life as this gap becomes increasingly harder to close while children matriculate through the school system. According to the Center for American Progress, a major consequence is that fewer people of color attend and complete college compared to their White peers.15

In the same way, the fairness of teacher licensure exams has become a growing issue as there have been signs of suspected racial biases in the creation of these exams.16 According to research collected by the Center for American Progress, “Teacher trainees who are members of communities of color score lower on licensure exams that serve as passports to teaching careers.” Therefore, it is imperative to take note that these exams can be a hindrance to students of color seeking to become educators. In addition to racial achievement gaps in the educational system and suspected bias on licensure exams, the role of the government – or the lack thereof – has contributed to an increasing disparity of teachers of color in early childhood classrooms. Only a few states have created rigorous programs to increase diversity in teaching professionals.17

**SOLUTION**

A system must be developed that creates educator pathways to ensure that people of color and those with diverse language backgrounds can begin to reflect the diversity of the young child population. Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive response that includes attention to socioeconomic,

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14 Lee, Valerie E., and David T. Burkam. *Inequality at the Starting Gate: Social Background Differences in Achievement as Children Begin School*. Economic Policy Institute, 2002.
ethnic, cultural, and language inequities. Closing these gaps is fundamental to the success of each child and can be accomplished through the following:

- Increase government oversight of and improve accountability for teacher preparation programs. This would ensure that teachers of color emerge from teacher preparation programs with the skills to be effective teachers with the abilities and practices needed to provide high-quality education.

- Reduce the costs accumulated from pursuing a teaching career. This can be achieved through the creation of more avenues by which potential educators of color can enter the field and by augmenting the number of qualified credential organizations.

- Create statewide initiatives that would fund teacher preparation programs specifically designed to recruit qualified and diverse candidates.

- Collaborate with junior colleges and high schools to target juniors and seniors interested in pursuing a career in teaching. Collaboration efforts should result in provisions for incentivized and increased post-secondary educational and financial support for diverse students who are studying to become teachers. “By increasing positive exposure to the teaching profession in high school through leveraging existing Career and Technical Education (CTE) Career Fairs, as well as promoting education pathways programs in high schools, Illinois could maximize the number of students entering college with a strong interest in education and with experience in the profession.”18 Some Illinois school districts have education pathway programs that can be used to model the aforementioned career exploration statewide. Through such programs, high school students have the opportunity to earn dual credit, are exposed to education as a content area and are offered classes in child development and education. As a part of these education pathways programs, partnerships are created with local universities. For instance, Rockford Public Schools has partnered with Rockford University which, as an incentive, offers reduced tuition to students who have completed the program and wish to pursue a degree in education. Career exploration and workforce readiness of this sort

could be easily embedded within a variety of initiatives within the state.¹⁹

• Provide support for culturally and linguistically diverse teachers to strengthen retention, especially of those who teach in more challenging schools. Retention strategies can include induction and mentoring programs, venues by which their opinions and ideas can be openly expressed and heard, and the creation of more intentional career ladders and varied roles for diverse teachers.

There is growing evidence that a representative teaching workforce has auspicious potential to help students of color reach greater levels of success. The presence of diverse teachers enhances academic outcomes and bolsters the likelihood of eventual college matriculation. “Diverse teachers might also influence instructional context, such as through the development of culturally relevant curricula and pedagogy and by introducing a topic from a perspective that students can relate to.”²⁰ A racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse teaching workforce provides students with multiple perspectives that allows them to gain a greater understanding of the world around them.

OUTCOME

While it is true that a diverse teacher workforce poses a variety of benefits for diverse students, teachers alone cannot single-handedly close the achievement gap.²¹ Effective and intentional strategies such as those previously listed can contribute to an increase in the number of diverse teachers in the early childhood education workforce. Documented academic benefits occur when students and teachers share the same race or ethnicity. In certain instances, these teachers act as “role models, mentors, advocates, or cultural translators” for their students. Specifically, one study found significant positive effects when Black and White students were taught by race-congruent teachers. The research also found that the performance levels of lower-performing Black and White students benefited from being assigned to teachers of their own race.²²

¹⁹ “Improving Teacher Preparation Policy and Programs: Building a High-Quality Teacher Workforce in the State of Illinois,” 12