Northwest Journal of Teacher Education

Volume 6
Issue 1 *Northwest Passage: Journal of
Educational Practices*

Article 4

January 2008

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Recommended Citation

Favela, Alejandra and Torres, Danielle (2008) "Support New Minority Teachers through Culture, Community and Collaboration," *Northwest Journal of Teacher Education*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15760/nwjte.2008.6.1.4>

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Support New Minority Teachers through Culture, Community and Collaboration

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Introduction

While it is always a challenge to support and retain new teachers, supporting minority¹ educators is especially significant if we are ever to reach a more equitable demographic balance in schools. Many teachers can feel overwhelmed and under-prepared to effectively address the cultural and linguistic diversity prevalent in today's classrooms. Additionally, minority teachers often experience distinct developmental issues too often neglected in support programs designed for new teachers.

Although many minority teachers are able to adjust well to their new environments and teaching demands, more can be done to support and mentor this group. Some Northwest districts have made special efforts to recruit minority teachers from other regions. Once hired however, personnel specialists often report that these teachers experience difficulty in adjusting to their new environments as they struggle to find communities of similar professionals, as well as familiar cultural comforts, events, and services. Being far from family, friends, and other supportive relationships are frequently cited as challenges for recruitment and retention of teachers of color.

In this paper we will hear from minority teachers in three Oregon districts. The following sections will discuss the unique advantages, needs, and challenges faced by a diverse teaching force and also highlight important elements to consider in designing alternative models of support and mentoring.

The Need for Diversity in the Teaching Profession

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) has consistently stressed the need to recruit and retain more teachers of color (1987; 1989). In 2004, an *Assessment of Diversity in America's Teaching Force* was published by the National Education Association (NEA) in collaboration with more than twenty national educational organizations.² This report concluded that "little attention has been paid to the issues of cultural competence and diversity in the teacher workforce—critical factors in improving the performance of students of color" (p. 3).

Furthermore, the NEA report found that: 1) Minority teachers had higher performance expectations for children of color; 2) Students of color tended to perform better—academically, personally, and socially—when taught by teachers from their own ethnic groups; and 3) Culturally responsive techniques and content

specific TAG approaches resulted in significant gains for minority students (2004). National Education Association President, Reg Weaver, agreed with the report findings, saying that:

It is important to expose children to a diverse teaching staff within each of our schools. Every child has a basic right to a great public school with a qualified and caring staff, including educators who look like them, who share similar cultural experiences, and who can serve as role models demonstrating that education and achievement are things to be respected. (Weaver, 2004).

NEA statistics indicate that 84% of teachers continue to be White while 40% of students fall into the minority category. Also significant is that 40% of U.S. schools have no teachers of color on staff whatsoever (NEA, 2004). Moreover, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003) highlight a significant discrepancy between students and teachers of color. For example, NCES data from 2001-02, indicates the following national figures for public school students:

- 60% White
- 17% Black
- 17% Latino
- 4% Asian/Pacific Islander
- 1% Native American

In contrast, 90% of teachers were identified as White, 6% were Black, and fewer than 5% fell into other ethnic categories (NCES, 2003).

Also of concern is evidence reported by NEA that indicates that the "Highly Qualified" criteria under the No Child Left Behind Act may have inadvertently created additional barriers to recruiting teachers of color. For example, NEA figures indicate that fewer than 50% of Latino and African American candidates are prepared

to pass teacher entrance exams (2004).

Recruiting and Retaining Minority Teachers: Critical Themes

Literature in the area of recruitment and retention of minority teachers points to several critical themes. The primary themes that emerge include A) Cultural Brokering, B) Minority Networks, and C) Sustained Support. As we look toward solutions to increase the number of minority teachers in America's schools; we weave these considerations throughout potential plans for intervention.

Cultural Brokering

Several studies (Darder, 1992; Heath, 1983; Moll & Ruiz, 2002) have indicated that achievement can be negatively impacted by cultural dissonance when students' behavior, language, home environments, and values are different from those of the dominant school culture. In such cases, it can be critical to have teachers of color who can serve as advocates for students of color.

Apart from providing academic support, minority teachers often play key roles as cultural brokers, mediators and advocates for minority students. Numerous other studies have also found that minority teachers' beliefs and practices can contribute significantly to the academic success of students, and especially for students of color (Dee, 2004; Expósito & Favela, 2003; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999; Villegas & Lucas, 2002).

Often these teachers serve as cultural "brokers" by bridging, linking, or mediating between groups or persons of different cultural backgrounds for the purpose of reducing conflict or producing change. Cooper, Denner, & Lopez (1999) have documented this brokering role among Mexican-American teachers. Gay

(1993) observed the same process among African-American teachers, and studies by Páez & McCarty (1997) and Haynes (2000), document this cultural brokering role among ESL teachers.

Minority Networks

Unless minority teachers develop a strong sense of community, belonging, and support, they are not likely to stay in their districts. The role of collaborative networks in supporting new teachers is especially critical. Wong and Breau (2003) argue for schools to provide study groups in which new teachers can network and build support, commitment, and leadership within a learning community. Similarly, Darling-Hammond & Sykes (2000) emphasize the need for teachers to feel connected to their schools and colleagues in order to thrive.

Along with the collaborative structures required by all novices, teachers of color also need safe spaces with similar colleagues to network and freely discuss the challenges of being minorities and community brokers in schools. Unfortunately, the stress of being inexperienced combined with feelings of minority tokenism and isolation can result in teacher attrition or transience.

Sustained Support

Culturally diverse teachers not only need designated time and space to network, they also need sustained support from their school districts in order to have long and successful careers in education. New teachers of color provide tremendous benefits to their students and districts and must be provided with sustained support in order to thrive. Too often, retention goals are undermined when minority teachers feel there is a lack of support and understanding regarding the additional burdens they experience.

Minority teachers report that they are more likely to remain in districts where they feel supported and valued by administrators, have relationships with colleagues founded on trust and respect, and opportunities for continued growth (Ankeny & Zanville, 2002). New teachers' perceptions of administrative support strongly influence their decisions to stay in the field (Ingersoll, 1999). Pesek (1993) recommends that entire communities, not only the immediate district environment, work together to develop comprehensive support strategies that aim to retain teachers.

Minority Teachers in Oregon

Oregon provides one example of a state that has experienced significant changes in student demographics and relatively small changes in teacher demographics. Between 1995 and 2000, the number of minority teachers in Oregon increased from 5.4% to 8%. During this same period, the student minority population increased from 13.3% to 19.3%. The biggest student increase has been in the Latino student population. In 2000, 10.3% of students were Latino, compared to only 1.6% of Latino teachers (Ankeny & Zanville, 2002).

Three Oregon districts—Beaverton 48J, Woodburn 103J, and Eugene 4J—have sought to understand the unique challenges faced by minority teachers and have made special efforts to recruit and retain a more diverse teaching pool. In fact, Beaverton with 11%, and Woodburn with 23%, have among the highest percentage of minority teachers in Oregon.

In 2005, the Eugene 4J School District Equity and Diversity Coordinator conducted focus groups with 23 classified and certified staff of color to learn more about the experiences, challenges, and opportunities they faced while living and working in Eugene, Oregon

(Leary, 2005). Feedback gathered through the district study provided insightful perspectives and ideas for supporting minority teachers in the Northwest region.

Minority participants were proud of their achievements as role models and cultural brokers to their students of color but described the climate in Eugene as one of “survival, invisibility, and vulnerability” (p.11). To combat feelings of culture shock and “tokenism,” participants emphasized hiring people from the area who were familiar with the local culture and had social supports already in place. Eugene minority educators also stressed the need to hire more bilingual staff, strengthen minority networks, provide more district support, and encourage diversity training for *all* staff.

As a reflection of new minority teacher voices everywhere, and particularly in Oregon, the authors of this article found the Eugene 4J School District report exceptionally interesting. What might be done to incorporate the themes and suggestions that have emerged as vital components for working with teachers of color? We utilized the ideas from the literature and from the previous focus group study as a basis and “jumping off point” for the current minority teacher recruitment and retention project, The Oregon New Minority Teacher Institute.

The Oregon New Minority Teacher Institute (ONMTI)

In response to the needs of local teachers of color, the authors initiated the development of The Oregon New Minority Teacher Institute (ONMTI) which was supported through a grant from the Oregon Department of Education. Nineteen teachers participated in The Oregon New Minority Teacher Institute during the summer of 2005, which was hosted at Lewis & Clark College. The ONMTI was designed to support recently hired minority teachers from Beaverton

and Woodburn school districts who had taught for four years or fewer.

The goals of the ONMTI were two-fold: 1) to learn about the distinct experiences, strengths, and challenges faced by new minority teachers; and 2) to establish a support system amongst minority colleagues, faculty members, community liaisons, and district personnel.

Participants

The Beaverton and Woodburn school districts have made concerted efforts to hire and retain minority teachers by requesting critical feedback, and by participating in various enrichment and mentoring programs. These districts were identified as having the most significant need for, and interest in, the ONMTI program. Eligible participants had zero to four years of teaching experience, were employed in the Woodburn or Beaverton School District, and came from bilingual and/or minority backgrounds. “Minority” was defined as an under-represented ethnic minority in Oregon, including but not limited to Latino/a, African-American, Asian-American, and Native American teachers.

Participants were recruited with the assistance of Human Resources departments of the respective school districts. School administrators and personnel staff also provided names and contact information of recently hired minority teachers. Districts were encouraged to identify teachers who would benefit from developing collaborative and multicultural leadership skills. Each district selected 10 new minority teachers to participate in the project. Teachers were then sent an initial letter of invitation outlining the institute and registration information, and recruits were contacted personally by both their district personnel departments and Lewis & Clark faculty. Confirmation letters were sent to all participating teachers. A stipend and tuition

waiver for continuing education credits were provided through grant support from the Oregon Department of Education. Due to an unforeseen scheduling conflict, one confirmed teacher was not able to participate.

The 19 participants self-identified as Latino/a ($n = 9$), African-American ($n = 3$), Asian-American ($n = 3$), Native-American ($n = 2$), and Multi-Racial ($n = 2$). The participants included 13 females and 6 males. The teachers also represented a range of school grade levels, with eight at the elementary level, six at the middle school level, and five at the high school level.

Activities. During the summer institute, school teams, faculty experts, district personnel and community organization consultants came together to support the participating new teachers of color. The topics addressed included: the sharing of cultural experiences, reading and discussion of the books *What Keeps Teachers Going?* (Nieto, 2003) and *The Courage to Teach* (Palmer, 1998), journaling, self-care strategies to prevent burnout, communicating with school administrators, working with student and family communities, professional development opportunities in their respective districts, and exchanging support via the group blog. They also investigated research pertinent to new teachers, culturally relevant pedagogy, and issues related specifically to new minority teachers such as isolation, finding mentors, advocating for students of color, and negotiating their roles in school. Meals and socializing were also valuable activities during the Institute.

Many of the activities presented during the ONMTI were designed to honor and support minority teachers in their developmental processes as new educators and as biculturally skilled professionals. To this end, ONMTI activities encouraged participants to share their own cultural histories and unique teaching contributions. Participating teachers engaged in

personal discussions, writing and reflection, and team-building activities. Also key to the Institute was the presence and participation of district administrators who personally recruited participants and attended the institute themselves, thereby enacting the district's commitment to diversity goals.

Ongoing Activities.

As an augment to the summer institute event, participating teachers continued to consult and contact one another via an online blog developed specifically for the group. The site allows participants to exchange dialogues about professional issues, post questions about or share professional/personal resources, and post upcoming announcements and events. The authors also made several site visits to Beaverton and Woodburn school sites during the academic year. Several follow-up events, including group dinners and a trip to a bilingual theater production were well-attended. Participants were encouraged to establish ongoing, informal relationships with one another in their districts and in their buildings. Lastly, the authors maintained contact with all participants via mailings, phone calls, and email communication.

ONMTI Evaluation

Survey Instrument

At the conclusion of the Oregon New Minority Teacher Institute, participating teachers completed an evaluation survey. The survey was based on the goals and activities guiding the Institute. The first part of the survey consisted of demographic items, including ethnicity, gender, and teaching level. The subsequent section posed three questions regarding the goals of the Institute, using a five-point Likert response scale. The next section included 10 items that explored the participants' perceptions of the value of specific Institute activities, also utilizing a five-point

Likert response scale. Responses to the scale items ranged from “Strongly Disagree (1)” to “Strongly Agree (5).” A higher scale indicated more agreement for meeting the goal, or for the value of the activity. The last section included two open-ended questions pertaining to the overall Institute experience and recommendations for future programming.

Analysis. The demographic information for ethnicity, gender, and teaching level was compiled based on participants’ self-reported responses. The responses to the 10 Likert-scale questions were analyzed using the *Statistical Program for Social Sciences (SPSS)* program for statistical descriptors. To analyze the open-ended data collected using the final questions, the authors examined each response and coded it for content. The data themes were then reviewed by the two authors, confirmed in existing literature, and

re-examined for agreement.

Result

The evaluation survey asked participants to rank the value of the Oregon New Minority Teacher Institute goals and activities on a scale from “Strongly Disagree (1)” to “Strongly Agree (5).” Table 1 presents each item and the corresponding results.

Participants responded similarly to the three items related to the Institute goals. There was strong agreement (100% of participants responded “Strongly Agree” or “Agree”) with the statements asserting that the networking and supportive priorities of the Institute were met. The goal for planning for future continued support was also highly rated (95% of participants responded “Strongly Agree” or “Agree”).

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Scale Items of Evaluation Survey

Item	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
1. Participating in this inter-district program helped me to identify resources and strategies to support my work.	4.7	.48	19
2. I found the opportunity to share experiences and network with other minority teachers to be useful to myself and my district.	4.7	.45	19
3. I feel that I have developed a realistic plan for continued support and networking with the Institute participants.	4.6	.61	19
<i>The following topics were useful to me as a new minority teacher:</i>			
4. Identifying and utilizing our cultural assets, sharing our stories	4.4	.61	19
5. Maintaining our passion and commitment, self-care strategies	4.5	.61	19
6. Developing supportive networks at your school and district	4.4	.68	19
7. Accessing community resources	4.5	.61	19
8. Professional development and leadership opportunities	4.6	.61	19
9. District administrator speakers	4.8	.38	19
10. Community resource speakers	4.6	.51	19

Note: Score range is 1-5. Higher scores indicate a greater amount of agreement with the statement.

The specific activities during the Institute were also rated highly. There was agreement for the items related to sharing stories ($M = 4.4$, $SD = .61$), developing networks ($M = 4.5$, $SD = .61$), and developing supportive networks in their local school communities ($M = 4.4$, $SD = .68$). Participants indicated that the community aspects of the Institute were also valuable ($M = 4.5$, $SD = .61$ for item 7; $M = 4.6$, $SD = .51$ for item 10). The highest rated activity was the inclusion of administrators from the respective participating districts, several of whom had recruited the teachers to their current jobs ($M = 4.8$, $SD = .38$).

In addition to the quantitative data, participants provided feedback via the open-ended questions. Results of the analysis are presented within the critical themes that emerged from the literature with regard to cultural brokering, minority networks, and sustained support.

Minority Teachers' Roles as a Cultural Brokers: "I learned to dream of a better future"

The recognition of their personal roles as a minority educators struck a deep chord among participants. As one teacher put it, "I realize how important we are as minority teachers and how our role will help students find models." Another teacher vowed to "obtain resources from real life experiences that will allow me to connect at a deeper [cultural] level with my students." One participant simply stated, "It is very important to know who we are in relation to the world around us."

During an ONMTI activity based on the book *Family Pictures/Cuadros de Familia* (Lomas Garza, 1990), each teacher was asked to write and illustrate a formative childhood experience that has molded his or her identity and work. A Latino high school teacher from Woodburn drew a picture of agricultural rows and wrote the accompanying story: "Every sum-

mer during my childhood my family worked in the fields. Unlike most students I dreaded the end of the school year. Yet, I would not change any of that experience. It is in those fields that I developed my strong work ethic. But most importantly I learned to dream of a better future."

Often, these teachers reported that they felt required to take on extra professional and community responsibilities to make up for the lack of diverse representation at their schools. These extra responsibilities frequently involve important cultural bridging and translation work and special pleas from community members who see these teachers as key role models and advocates. Minority teachers may serve on more than their share of committees and can feel overwhelmed as they strive to represent the needs of their minority students and families. These teachers may also feel the unrealistic expectation of being experts on all aspects of diversity and of knowing about the intricacies of other cultures beyond their own.

A striking observation made by nearly all institute participants was that they had not had teachers who "looked like me," during their own schooling experience and vowed as a result to make a difference in the lives of their own minority students. Like their students, many of the teachers in this study have had to negotiate their identities, languages and cultures through the schooling process. Minority teachers were able to honor and support minority students because they recognized the benefits of developing skills and connections in more than one culture and language. This was consistent with Olsen's (1997) assertion that minority teachers in particular may be able to "create the conditions and support for young people to be able to claim their own cultural world, appreciate and learn about other cultural realities, and gain the skills to build bridges across cultures, religious faiths and languages" (2002, pp. 14-15).

**The Importance of Minority Networks:
“Most of us face the same situations”**

In terms of building minority networks, the ONMTI participants expressed their appreciation for having space to discuss difficult issues unique to their experiences. A sense of community, safety, and solidarity was reinforced by having time to discuss pertinent issues with other minority peers. Several ONMTI teachers conveyed the idea that “It was nice to have a safe space to talk about the issues we face on a daily basis.”

Valuable space and time were provided to help minority teachers establish networks to combat feelings of isolation and tokenism. Most teachers had also been minorities in their teacher training programs. One teacher responded that she wished she “had something like this during my graduate program. I felt safe and at home to share with this extraordinary and empathetic group.” Several survey respondents indicated that one of the main benefits of participating in the ONMTI was the opportunity to establish critical connections with other novice minority teachers. “I think that developing supportive networks,” explained one institute participant, “is the largest issue facing minority teachers.” Another participant wrote that, “It was very helpful meeting other new teachers and sharing their cultural experiences, finding that most of us face the same situations.” Several teachers expressed concern for other friends and colleagues who did not have the opportunity to participate in projects like the ONMTI because they were even more likely to be isolated as lone minority representatives in smaller and more remote Oregon districts.

ONMTI teachers also appreciated the opportunity to extend their circles of support after learning about key community liaisons in their districts. A Mexican community liaison and a Russian community liaison from Wood-

burn and Beaverton discussed key strategies for working with the large Latino and Slavic population in their districts. Several ONMTI teachers echoed the remark that “We need to know what is available to help our students learn in school and connect to the community.”

**A Plan for Sustained Support: “I now know
that there is support out there”**

The importance of sustained support beyond the Institute was also addressed in the results of the open-ended questions. The participating teachers felt that “networking is really important—if only to connect with another person of color.” Repeatedly, participant comments stressed the importance of relationships with district administrators who participated in the summer institute and other cultural events throughout year. Many echoed the feedback that “The involvement of administrators was highly valuable.” Other comments expressed appreciation for information regarding available resources and personnel: “As a fairly new teacher, I felt in the dark about the resources that my district offered. I now know that there is support out there.”

During the Institute, a much-respected African-American principal from Beaverton encouraged teachers to establish networks with minority administrators and colleagues and inspired participants through her personal stories as one of the first Blacks to attend college in the newly desegregated South. Students commented that the time spent with this administrator and others provided a unique opportunity to “connect” and establish a valuable mentoring relationship early in their careers.

Teachers in this study found their work to be highly rewarding, but also noted that it could be emotionally draining and time-consuming and was often “invisible,” and therefore not

usually recognized or financially compensated. It is important for administrators to remember that the establishment of boundaries that protect the time and responsibilities of new teachers is often not enforced or encouraged within schools with high-needs students.

To summarize, participant survey results stressed the need for minority teachers to feel genuinely valued, adequately mentored, and supported to overcome the typical barriers faced by new minority teachers.

Reflections and Recommendations

Providing support to new minority teachers is critical, particularly during the first three years of teaching when they are most likely to leave the profession (Ingersoll & Kralik, 2004). Traditional support programs designed for new teachers are helpful, but too often they neglect the distinct developmental issues often faced by minority educators. Districts wishing to increase the diversity of their teaching staff will first need to learn more about the distinct experiences, strengths, and challenges faced by new minority teachers.

Until there is a more diverse teaching pool, the small number of minority teachers will continue to shoulder the burden of providing for the cultural and linguistic needs of their students and districts. Feedback from the Eugene 4J survey and the ONMTI participants highlights the valuable but tiring role that minority teachers often play as “cultural brokers” between their students and schools. In order to survive and thrive, these teachers will need mentorship, safe spaces, and opportunities to build relationships with other minority colleagues, faculty members, community liaisons, and district personnel.

Administrators can support minority teachers by publicly acknowledging their efforts

and by helping them to protect their time and boundaries. In addition, districts can provide cultural competency training to all personnel so that the responsibility does not overtax those who are most vulnerable. Administrators can also provide minority teachers with encouragement through professional development opportunities and extra support with challenges such as certification.

Lastly, results from this project suggest the need to strengthen cohort-based models of new minority teacher support that honors their cultural histories and unique contributions to the teaching profession. This paper also speaks to the role that teacher education institutes can play in providing continued support in partnership with districts beyond the initial licensure and induction phase. To recruit and retain diverse teachers, more mentorship models like the ONMTI will be needed that support teachers in their roles as cultural brokers through the elements of culture, community and collaboration.

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