

The Color of Teaching

June A. Gordon



Educational Change and Development

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The Color of Teaching

One of the major concerns in education at present is how to recruit and attract more teachers of color to the profession. In an attempt to move beyond the superficial and simplistic responses as to why students of color are not entering teaching, *The Color of Teaching* presents in-depth interviews with over two hundred persons of color from four ethnic groups: African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans and Latinos in the United States.

These interviewees, many of them teachers or education professionals, express their attitude towards teaching and their understanding of why students of color may not be selecting teaching as a career.

One of the most significant and surprising findings is that, regardless of academic or socio-economic standing, students of color tend not to be encouraged to enter the teaching profession by their own families, communities, and peers. The book concludes with a discussion of programmatic changes and calls for the reconceptualization of the role of teachers. Such changes can only arise out of a fundamental change in attitude of communities of color towards teaching which must be led by teachers themselves.

The Color of Teaching will appeal to a wide audience of teachers in training and in practice, educational policy makers, and educational administrators.

June A. Gordon is Assistant Professor of Education at the University of California, Santa Cruz. She teaches courses in social and cultural diversity with an emphasis on urban education. Her research focuses on the various factors that hinder the access and success of marginalized students in the United States, England, and Japan.

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Foreword

John U.Ogbu

This book addresses the important problem of increasing the participation of minorities in the teaching profession. Dr Gordon approaches the problem through a comparative study of community forces that potentially influence the decision of minorities to become teachers. Community forces are the ideas or images of teachers and the teaching profession held by members of a minority community or group.

Researchers have examined structural and institutional barriers that limit minority entry into the profession. Dr Gordon, however, believes that in order to fully understand why more minorities do not choose teaching as a career option, we have to study the community forces that influence their decisions. Minorities develop an image of the teaching profession from their own experiences in the educational system, especially with teachers, as well as from their perceptions of career options. The author argues that adults communicate to children images of teachers and the teaching profession as well as their hopes of future careers for them. Teachers also help shape children's images through the way they present themselves and their profession. Thus, both community forces and teachers influence children's decisions to become or not to become teachers. The comparative study covered four major minority groups: African American, Asian American, Latino American and Native American. Teachers from these groups were interviewed in Cincinnati in Ohio, Long Beach in California, and Seattle in Washington. Additional interviews with Asian American community members in the San Francisco Bay Area were conducted to offset the low number of available Asian American teachers.

Dr Gordon's research strongly suggests that community forces can potentially influence the choice of becoming teachers by minorities. The findings also demonstrate the importance of the comparative approach; although the groups share several factors in the community forces, there are also significant differences.

An important factor in developing a positive or negative image of the teaching profession is an individual's or group's historical experience with public schooling. Although these groups differ in specific encounters with the public schools, nonetheless those of African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans have been, according to the author 'fraught with similar hostility, misunderstanding and distrust.' The Asian Americans interviewed, in contrast, did not see schooling as oppositional. This, however, does not mean that Asian Americans have not encountered conflicts with the schools; for example, earlier Asian immigrants experienced a great deal of conflict in educating their children in San Francisco.

Dr Gordon discusses community forces in terms of 'sociocultural factors.' These include perceptions of racism, cultural differences in the images of the teaching profession, and how minorities interpret the educational process. African American teachers believe that their people's experience of racism in K-12 schooling discourages them from considering teaching as a career since it would require them to return to the

site of their struggle: the classroom. Native Americans, however, speak the most passionately about racism and how the mislabeling of their children has had a profound affect on school completion, undermining an interest in teaching. Latino teachers also point to high drop-out rates, based partially on the low expectations of counselors and teachers, in stalling the academic progress of their students and, hence, their ability to consider teaching as a career. Asians are primarily confounded by the complex demands placed on teachers in the US which are unrelated to academics.

The way minority groups interpret schooling in terms of their collective identity plays a major role in their decisions to become teachers. For some, schooling is a source of conflict threatening family and traditional values. It is an experience marked by what one Native American teacher calls 'cultural dissonance with the White man's ways.' This interpretation of schooling discourages minorities from going into teaching in two ways. One is that it discourages good academic performance which is crucial for admission into college preparation and quality performance in the teaching profession. The other is that families and communities with this perception discourage their members from going into teaching.

The connection between success in school and choice of teaching varies in form among the ethnic groups represented by the teachers interviewed. The most important school factor for African Americans, Latinos and Native Americans, but not for Asian Americans, is the inadequate academic preparation of minority students at pre-college level. Latino teachers believe that a major reason for the paucity of Latinos going into teaching is their poor academic achievement at precollege level and the low graduation rates. Native American teachers feel the same way. The specific reasons for the lack of good academic preparation include misplacement of children in ELS/LED language classes, inability to use their primary languages, being ostracized by peers who think that those who do well in school are not authentically Latinos, Native Americans, etc. Because of these experiences potential minority teachers either do not meet requirements for admission to teacher training programs or have difficulty passing teacher competency tests. Latino parents and community also expressed concern that the more education their children have or the longer they stay in school, the more they are alienated from their traditional values, customs, and community. For Native Americans, schooling may be interpreted as going to 'learn how to be a White man.' Among African Americans, the informants stated that students may not understand or value the career options that depend upon good academic performance. The author argues that interpretations like these can result in alienation from schooling and/or a sense of betrayal of one's family and group related to the choice of teaching as a profession. The Asian American community discourages its members from going into teaching in a different way. These immigrant minorities arrive in the United States with a positive pre-emigration image of teachers and the teaching profession which is in sharp contrast with the negative images they discover perpetuated in American society. Dr Gordon informs us that the low status of American teachers in combination with high standards for teachers within Asian cultures constitutes one of the major reasons for Asian American students not choosing teaching as a career option.

Teachers from the four minority groups go on to discuss at length the issues of image, respect, and status of the teaching profession and how these factors discouraged teaching as a career option in their respective communities. The author cautions that these factors

are complex and interrelated. African Americans believe that the teaching profession in integrated American society does not have as high a status as it once had in their community prior to 1970. One reason is that mainstream America perceives teaching as a low-paying, low-status job. Another reason given by African Americans for loss of status and respect for teachers is the practice by many white teachers in inner-city schools to attempt to align themselves with their students by dressing informally and creating non-hierarchical relationships with their students. Like African Americans, Asian Americans are concerned with visible status: they generally prefer fields which pay more money and confer more prestige. Latino teachers do not consider low pay to be the main discouragement of Latinos from entering the teaching profession. This group, in fact, thinks that teaching pays well when compared to other jobs requiring comparable education. Likewise, economic reward does not appear to be a major impediment for Native Americans in considering teaching as a career.

The teachers have some ideas of their own about how to increase minority representation in the teaching profession. All emphasize the importance of a strong academic preparation of students in K-12 grades. As one teacher put it, 'Preparation is the key.' Some African American, Latino and Native American teachers would consider recruiting minorities to teach in schools where the students come mostly from their own groups. Asian American teachers do not share this view; race-matched teaching was not of significance. Three suggestions made to increase the numbers of minorities entering the teaching profession include: first, teachers and minority communities become more aware of the powerful influence they have in discouraging youth from entering the teaching profession and how this will play itself out in future generations; second, parents and teachers support academic engagement and achievement; and third, help students make the historical connections between the importance that education has made to their predecessors and how they can contribute to the success of future generations.

I share Dr Gordon's view that community forces can potentially influence the decisions of minority students to become teachers. We already know about various structural and institutional barriers. What we do not yet know about are the community forces. One important contribution of the present work is to draw our attention to their existence and potential influence. This study, therefore, opens a new area of inquiry for knowledge that can be used for policy and practices to increase the representation of minorities in the teaching profession. I hope that future researchers will include more non-teachers, such as minority students as well as non-teacher members of minority communities. The inclusion of wider representation from the minority community will increase our knowledge of the range of community forces.

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While not one of Ogbu's students, I am indebted to him not only for his professional contributions to the field that have assisted me in framing my own inquiry but also for his continued support. Without his encouragement and prodding, this book might never have materialized.

But then if it had not been for Goodlad's invitation to be one of his last graduate students, I might never have pursued the academic course that led me to this work. Goodlad's genuine interest in my research (on the impediments that working-class students and students of color face in moving through the system) and his offer to assist both financially and academically in my doctoral study afforded me the opportunity to not only conduct the type of research I felt most suitable but also to work at the Center for Educational Renewal as his research assistant.

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In addition to these academic mentors, the research for this book would never have been possible if not for the numerous teachers and community members who offered their time and stories to provide an important lens through which to understand the shortage of students of color in colleges of education and the role that community forces play in influencing young people's career decision making. Their trust in me and my students as well as their desire to have their voices heard are the driving forces that have propelled this book forward. For access to the three school districts that provided the basis for the original study, I want to thank Carl Cohn, Superintendent of Long Beach Unified School District, Marie MacArthur, Assistant to the Superintendent of the Cincinnati School District, and Alice Houston, Director of Human Resources for the Seattle Public Schools. These three individuals have significantly influenced my life as well as the context of this book. I also want to extend my thanks to the nine UCSC students who worked with me to gain a greater understanding of Asian American attitudes toward teachers and the teaching profession in the San Francisco Bay Area.

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June A.Gordon, Ph.D.
University of California, Santa Cruz
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The Issues and the Research

Crisis in Urban Schools

No matter what one's orientation to public schooling in the United States, there appears to be a consensus that we need more teachers of color. The reasons include the increasingly low academic performance of students of color (Dentzer and Wheelock, 1990; Moore and Pachon, 1985); the inability and/or the unwillingness of middle-class teachers to teach low-income children of color (Book, Byers, and Freeman, 1983); the desire for communities of color to educate their own people (Milliard, 1988); the need for all children to gain from a multiethnic teaching force (Banks and Banks, 1989); the high cost of prisons and welfare (Doston and Bolden, 1991); and the desire for a more honest representation in the curriculum of the diversity of ideas and skills that have contributed to the development of America (Gay, 1990). In addition, there are economic and world market competitive concerns that suggest the need to develop more adequately the human potential of all citizens (Sowell, 1983).

United States schools will have record enrollments of 52.7 million elementary and secondary students in the 1999 school year. Enrollment in public and private schools is 500,000 greater than in 1998. The United States Education Department projects that 2.2 million public school teachers must be hired in the next decade—both to replace those leaving the profession and to accommodate the growth in student population. According to Education Secretary Riley, the need for more teachers will pressure school districts to hire individuals who are not certified. Twenty-seven percent of newly hired teachers failed to meet state licensing requirements and nearly one-third of all teachers are teaching in a field they did not study as either a major or a minor subject in college. If hiring patterns remain as they are now, one-half to two-thirds of the millions of teachers hired in the next ten years will be first-time teachers.

Clearly, the shortage of teachers for urban youth verges on a national crisis. Although colleges of education continue to produce capable teachers, few of them are able or willing to work with the diversity demanded in urban school districts, regardless of their own ethnicity. Meeting the need for teachers who can understand the complexity of cultures that populate our school yards is essential for both the children's success and our collective well-being. All communities must share the responsibility for ensuring the educational success of their youth, in part so that more of those youth will have the option of serving their communities as teachers. The knowledge required to educate the youth of today cannot be left to any one group or individual—we need the resources and skills of every community.

Although there is little research to demonstrate that an increase in teachers of color alone is sufficient to enhance academic achievement in students of color, there is evidence that a larger pool of teachers of color could make a difference in the futures of

many minority children (King, 1993; Foster, 1997). The desire for an increase in minority participation in the teaching profession, however, is not based solely on the need for teachers of color to teach their own people; the demand for teachers of color in White communities is gaining momentum (Grant and Secada, 1989; Gifford, 1986). Many parents of today's generation of school children have finally come to realize that White children in homogenous schools face deficiencies in their education that could handicap their effective functioning in a multicultural world (Grant and Sleeter, 1989). Positive role models and the removal of stereotypes are as important for White children as for children of color. Teachers of color are pivotal in this awesome task of breaking down the centuries of misinformation and fear that have kept us separated and ignorant (Comer, 1988; Dilworth, 1992).

If the needs are apparently so great, then why the common perception that students of color are not interested in the field of teaching? The dominant view suggests that the resistance to selecting teaching as a career is because of low pay relative to other professions and increased alternative employment opportunities available to students of color (Robinson, 1981; Dupre, 1986). Although these may be reasons for some, they do not fully explain the lack of students of color in the profession. The choice to enter a profession, any profession, is influenced long before college by the perceptions and attitudes held within the families, communities and schools from which students emerge. Over the past twenty-five years as communities have become more fragmented because of job loss, increased mobility, and the fallout of desegregation, few working-class youth obtain their identities or images of career choice through contact with employed individuals within their communities (Aronowitz, 1992; Matute-Bianchi, 1991). Most young people are deluded by media images of unattainable success (Giroux, 1994). Simultaneously, many students are tracked into programs designed to reproduce the existing class structure based predominantly on socioeconomic conditions with outward manifestations of behavior, dialect, and dress. Bowles and Gintis (1976) set the stage for later critical theorists in insisting that occupational options are predetermined by hierarchical educational training. Historically, many students who were thus tracked into vocational programs lacked what Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) called 'cultural capital,' or skills and qualities associated with middle-class norms. Nevertheless, since working-class jobs were still available and respected, the lack of cultural capital in the sixties and seventies did not condemn one to a life of poverty (Sklar, 1995; W.Wilson, 1991; Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991). Working-class lives were not equated with poverty. Times have changed.

The issues related to increasing the participation of ethnic minority youth in teaching careers are nested and need to be seen in relationship rather than in isolation. The apparent reasons for low numbers of students of color entering the teaching profession vary among ethnic categories as well as within each category because of gender, immigrant status, regionalism, family educational and occupational background, as well as socioeconomic class. The proportion of college graduates entering teaching careers may be sufficiently high for African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans but the absolute number is low due to lower rates of college completion. The research of Murnane and associates (Murnane, et al., 1991; Vegas, et al., 1998) suggests that we must distinguish between the total numbers of students choosing to teach and the proportion of students in each ethnic group so choosing. In some cases, the relative attractiveness of a

career in teaching is less of an impediment than the lack of success in schooling that limits career options. Asian Americans offer a contrasting scenario of high rates of college completion but low interest in teaching.

The Need for Competent and Caring Teachers

One of the major educational concerns of our lifetime is the search for qualified and caring teachers for low-income immigrant and minority children who have become the majority population in American urban schools. My work is based on the premise that teachers of color are crucial contributors in their knowledge and number to the needs of urban schools. Teachers of color also provide an essential immediacy to the continuing multicultural education of fellow teachers. A more thorough understanding of the reasons why individuals of color do not choose the teaching profession should result in policies and programs designed to attract more students of color to the field. I argue that such an effort would also result in an improvement in teacher education programs training teachers to work in multicultural settings.

Although the need for teachers of color is embedded in a context of school desegregation, higher education elitism, racism, poverty, and urban decay, these societal and structural impediments cannot account fully for the resistance, hesitancy, or inability among students of color to pursue teaching as a career. What has not been discussed in previous work is how the images of professionalism and related cultural values of communities of color can undermine the aspirations of students of color who wish to enter teaching as a career. The most significant contribution of the research reported in this book comes in the form of opening up a new avenue for understanding low minority participation in teaching. Policies and programs in the past that have focused on structural and institutional barriers remain impotent without an understanding of the importance of history, culture, community attitudes, and expectations in shaping career choice, including the decision to embrace or eschew the teaching profession.

The distinctive qualities of one's ethnic community's experience and perception of schooling, past, present, and future, affect career decision making. How one perceives the impact of schooling on one's community and culture, how one is currently experiencing schooling, and how schooling is seen as a determinant in one's future options, all combine to develop an image of schooling and its professional practitioners. These attitudes, often based on stories and experiences passed down through families and communities, either encourage or discourage young people in their consideration of teaching as a career. As harmless, or as truthful, as these stories may be, they have a tremendous impact not only on a young person's view of education and their role in it as a student, but also on their willingness as a young adult to take on responsibility for the education of 'other people's children' (Delpit, 1995). This book suggests that the images of teachers and the teaching profession as developed and sustained within various American cultural and economic communities are as much a contribution to any shortage of teachers of color as are the structural impediments so frequently cited. If individuals have had negative educational experiences, and/or if they did not receive support or respect for their views while in school, they will have difficulty entertaining plans for a life-long occupation requiring their active participation and success in schooling. If