Diversifying Faculty to Inspire Students: A Review of Current Research

Fieldwork Activities Assignment

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The topic of diversity within faculties of elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions has been prevalent in the past several decades among educators and policymakers in the United States. As our population has become more ethnically diverse, ethnic and racial diversity within student populations has grown proportionally. A multitude of literature has been written to outline various studies on the topic. The articles reviewed in this paper echo differing sentiments at times, but most share a similar theoretical basis: Diversifying the teaching force is a worthwhile goal for many reasons, but particularly due to the fact that minority educators are positive role models for all students.

Ana Maria Villegas and Jacqueline Jordan Irvine’s article “Diversifying the Teaching Force: An Examination of Major Arguments” published in April 2010 provides a thorough breakdown of the issue of diversifying the American population of educators. They identify reasons for policymakers to strive towards this goal and the flaws in initiatives that have taken place thus far. Villegas and Irvine’s main issue is the fact that, according to their claims, none of the initiatives put in place in the past several decades are based on research. While this “gap in the literature” (Villegas and Irvine, 2010, p. 175) is discussed at length, the authors acknowledge the positive intentions of the initiatives put in place and agree with the arguments in favor of teacher diversifying. Villegas and Irvine identify these three main points as 1) minority teachers are positive role models for all students, 2) teachers of color improve educational outcomes and experiences for students of color, 3) implications of impact on the workforce.
Villegas and Irvine discuss the role model argument as simply “compelling,” which is why, as they state, it is discussed frequently in literature on the topic. However, they “were unable to locate any empirical studies that tested the claims inherent in the argument” (Villegas and Irvine, 2010, p. 178). This flawed lack of research is a considerable issue and the authors’ seek to point that out with their article. “Given the current emphasis on empirical-based decision-making in matters related to public policies, such lack of evidence dramatically limits the practical value of the role model argument” (Villegas and Irvine, 2010, p. 178.) Without the data to support this main argument in favor of diversifying the teaching force, policymakers are less likely to make any significant moves towards making a change. The authors discuss the allegation of funding in areas of education as being entirely research-based, thus, providing little hope for those in favor of this cause.

Villegas and Irvine’s second and somewhat related argument, that teachers of color could potentially increase the positive impact had on the academic experience and outcome of students’ of color, was also discussed in Frances A. Maher and Mary Kay Tetreault’s article “Diversity and Privilege,” published in February 2009. Maher and Tetreault’s efforts to outline a historical background of the relationship between diversity and privilege reflect many of Villegas and Irvine’s arguments. Their study is focused on three institutions of higher education: Rutgers University – Newark, Stanford University, and the University of Michigan. The authors discussed the trends in the changing cultural climate between the Civil Rights Era and beyond, and the need for diversity in the classroom. As the student bodies of American universities began to diversify in the 1970s and 1980s, the need for
multicultural learning, research, and faculty became more prevalent. They discuss how “university and departmental attention shifted from affirmative action initiatives and discrimination complaints to debates about the legitimacy of feminist and multicultural research” (Maher and Tetreault, 2009, p. 2). According to the article, this turn of events was due to the fact that universities were beginning to see the indisputable connection between diversity and excellence. As Villegas and Irvine also claim, students of color are more likely to have a positive learning experience from faculty of color. They quote a study by Hazel Markus of Stanford’s Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, which “described a move from a ‘fairness’ justification for hiring minority faculty to a ‘role model’ justification.” The Stanford study went on to discuss the additional burden of expectations had on professors of color due to this added variable in connection with their students of color: “People see it would be good for Latinas to see a Latina up in front of the classroom. But [it is harder] to see how, because of your race, ethnicity, gender [or] cultural background, you have engaged with a set of contexts and have likely developed a [unique] set of perspectives... because of how you have been positioned” (Maher and Tetreault, 2009, p. 5).

Maher and Tetreault’s article brings up an additional point that is echoed in literature written on this topic, which is the idea of faculty of color providing subliminal messages to all students by simply being in a professional position, and a position of power. Villegas and Irvine outlined it as their third main argument, and other authors, such as Steven M. Hubbard and Frances K. Stage in their June 2009 article “Attitudes, Perceptions, and Preferences of Faculty at Hispanic Serving
Predominantly Black Institutions.” The literature describes this message as coming across via minority faculty’s mere presence in the classroom. It provides students of color with a role model to look up to and someone with whom they are likely to connect, as Hubbard and Stage describe in their research. Minority faculty also present as a figure in a professional space, sending the message to White students that people of color belong in this professional sphere. This makes White students less likely to subliminally link people of color to “lesser” societal status, as Maher and Tetreault discuss in their analysis of the diversity-privilege relationship.

Similarly, Hubbard and Stage’s study provides an in-depth look at Hispanic and Black institutions, examining trends related to minority faculty within those institutions: their perspectives and opinions, curricular goals and student relationships. The authors describe the goal of their study: “By examining variations in faculty attitudes, opinions about students, and satisfaction with their profession, we can explore differences in learning environments for students attending minority serving institutions” (Hubbard and Stage, 2009, p. 274). Hubbard and Stage quote a study by Nelson Laird, Morelon-Quainoo, and Salinas Holmes (2007), which found that African American students at Historically Black Colleges and Universities “reported significantly more support, more student-faculty interaction, and more gains in cognitive and personal development than African American students at predominantly White institutions” (Hubbard and Stage, 2009, p. 273).

Villegas and Irvine agree, stating that “teachers of color use their insider knowledge about the language, culture, and life experiences of students of color to improve their academic outcomes and school experiences” (Villegas and Irvine, 2010, p. 185).
The research Villegas and Irvine examined to support that claim was based on “large-scale” data such as test scores, high school completion rates, college matriculation rates, school attendance, and enrollment in academically rigorous classes (Villegas and Irvine, 2009, p. 273). Villegas and Irvine quote several qualitative studies that researched the reasons for this increased academic success rate for students of color taught by minority teachers. One study by Irvine (1990) described how “teachers of color serve as advocates and mentors for students of color, helping them navigate the culture of the school, which is often contradictory and antithetical to their own cultures” (Villegas and Irvine, 2010, p. 184). To summarize, students of color are more likely to succeed when taught by a teacher of color due to the automatic connection and positive reinforcement provided by that faculty member.

In their article “Inclusive Teaching Circles: Mechanisms for Creating Welcoming Classrooms” published in January 2010, Sharon Moore, Sherri L. Wallace, Gina Schack, M. Shelley Thomas, Linda Lewis, Linda Wilson, Shawnsie Miller, and Joan D’Antoni, provide tools for inclusive instruction in classrooms that have continually become more diverse. The methods of inclusive teaching outlined in the article stem from the College of Arts and Sciences Office of Diversity and Outreach at the University of Louisville. The university began the program by prompting their faculty and staff to participate in an alternative form of professional development, called Inclusive Teaching Circles (ITCs). “The ITCs were created to foster and broaden faculty and staff professional development to further actualize the university’s mission, which ‘strives to foster and sustain an environment of
inclusiveness that empowers... all to achieve our highest potential without fear of prejudice of bias... building an exemplary educational community that offers a nurturing and challenging intellectual climate, a respect for the spectrum of human diversity, and a genuine understanding of the many differences... that enrich a vibrant metropolitan research university” (Moore, Wallace, Schack, Thomas, Lewis, Wilson, Miller, and D’Antoni, 2010, p. 15). The authors provide a variety of activities, (directions and worksheets attached to their article) designed with the goal of inclusivity in a diverse classroom. These activities are a product of the ITCs, and included icebreaker games, ways to use snack times as opportunities to infuse culture, and the positive influence of pop culture on students. To connect the results of the ITCs’ findings and the other articles discussed in this paper, the goal of the ITCs was to provide all teachers (teachers of color, and White teachers) with the instructional tools necessary to make all students feel welcome in their classrooms. While the ITCs reflected noble effort towards providing those tools, it seems, that the efforts to diversify the teaching force should be emphasized and supported by policymakers and educators.

In contrast to the benefits of faculty diversity outlined above, Kitae Sohn’s article “Teacher Turnover: An Issue of Workgroup Diversity,” published in June 2009 discusses a related issue of possible negative effects of diversifying faculties. Sohn’s research examined the rate of teacher turnover with the amount of diversity present at a given school. Her data reflected a direct relationship between the two: the more ethnic and racial diversity present, the more likely white teachers were to leave their positions. “The probability of contact with Black teachers is higher for
white teachers when white is the minority race and vice versa... Hence, the relationship between racial diversity and turnover is an empirical question. Whether studies are experimental or field studies, they agree that racial diversity increases turnover” (Sohn, 2009, p. 4). Sohn hypothesizes this trend to be an issue due to the fact that people prefer to be around groups of those who are similar to them. While Sohn’s research provides a devil’s advocate argument for the others discussed in this paper, it seems as if her findings present a double-edged sword. The higher rate of teacher turnover that, as Sohn claims, is due to greater diversity within teaching communities allows for newer, fresher faculty to enter the scene and bring their new and diverse experiences to the constantly evolving body of students.

While Sohn’s study provided the negative aspect to diversifying faculties, the other research outlined seems to agree that increasing ethnic and racial diversity within educational institutions is important and necessary for the sake of our growing population. The arguments presented in these articles paralleled each other. The two main arguments that appeared frequently were the role model argument and the school success rate for students of color argument. When keeping in mind the fact that our society continues to become more and more ethnically diverse, Sohn’s negative impact argument seems moot. As America continues to diversify, our teaching force must do the same. The future of our students and thus, our country, requires it.
Works Cited


Moore, Sharon.; Wallace, Sherri L.; Schack, Gina; Thomas, M. Shelley; Lewis, Linda; Wilson, Linda; Miller, Shawnise; and D’Antoni, Joan. Inclusive Teaching Circles: Mechanisms for Creating Welcoming Classrooms. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 10*. (1) 14-27.
