Focus Groups with Massachusetts Teachers on Racial Equity and Culturally Responsive Instruction

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Introduction

In 2019, the Massachusetts State Legislature passed the *Student Opportunity Act*, which mandated policies for "addressing persistent disparities in achievement among student subgroups, [and] improving educational opportunities for all students." The same year, State Commissioner of Education Jeffrey Riley committed to addressing "troubling" trends in academic outcomes for students of color. Teachers are a key influence on students' academic trajectories, and teacher preparation and licensure systems are primary levers for Massachusetts to influence the quality of teachers.

In 2021, the Institute of Education Sciences awarded the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) a grant to study the extent to which teacher preparation and licensure systems perpetuate, exacerbate, or disrupt patterns of inequity for students of color. In particular, the study will explore the way in which state licensure and preparation policy can improve the quality of instruction for students of color in Massachusetts. The preparation and licensure systems include four primary policy levers for influencing the state's public teaching workforce: (1) the review and accreditation of the state's educator preparation providers (EPPs), (2) the establishment of licensing pathways for incoming and continuing teachers, (3) the development of licensure and program completion requirements for these pathways, and (4) state guidance to districts and EPPs.

The current framework for the review and approval of EPPs was established in 2014, when DESE implemented new regulatory requirements for the EPP approval process; this process is important because nearly two thirds of new teachers in the state graduated from in-state EPPs. As part of this process, DESE evaluates EPPs across five domains: (1) organization—is the EPP set up to support and sustain effective preparation programs? (2) partnerships—is educator preparation from the EPP meeting the needs of the PreK–12 system? (3) continuous improvement—is the EPP driven by continuous improvement efforts that result in better prepared educators? (4) candidate experience—is the teacher candidates' experience throughout the EPP program contributing to their effective preparation? and (5) field-based experiences—do candidates have the necessary preservice experiences in the field to be ready for their role? All EPP practices that fall into one of these domains represent potential policy levers that could be emphasized as part of EPP approval. Specifically, DESE is nearing the end of a 7-year, full review cycle and is revising the criteria and processes for the upcoming cycle. The study will directly influence the measures and evidence built into the next accountability design, particularly around DESE expectations regarding racial equity and culturally responsive teaching.

As part of this research, DESE convened focus groups with recent program completers in Massachusetts to better understand their experiences with racial equity and culturally responsive teaching during their preparation programs and early careers. The focus groups were intended to provide educators with an opportunity to describe how well they were prepared to meet the needs of students of color and to inform the direction of the quantitative research.

Summary of Key Findings

- About one third of teachers agreed that racial equity was a focus of their programs.
- Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) classes were commonly cited as the main part of their programs that addressed racial equity and culturally responsive teaching practices.
- Although teachers reported that, during their programs, they had more exposure to culturally responsive teaching than to racial equity, most described these efforts as relatively limited or lacking in specificity about ways to translate these concepts into the classroom.
- Teachers had a wide range of experiences with their field placements. While some had positive experiences, most teachers reported that their field placements did not advance their teaching through a lens of racial equity.
- Being at a racially diverse school for a field placement was not a guarantee that teachers would observe practices that advanced racial equity. Seven teachers who were placed in racially diverse schools reported highly negative experiences.
- Teachers who reported learning about racial equity and/or culturally responsive practices during their field placements often did not attribute the learning to an intentional policy but rather to "luck of the draw" with regard to supervising practitioners or colleagues.
- Teachers cited a number of barriers to developing more race-equity-driven and culturally responsive teaching practices, including lack of diversity of students and faculty in programs, scheduling constraints, lack of an understanding about the ways to translate theory into classroom practices, hesitancy to talk about race and/or equity, and speed of the program.
- Multiple teachers reported taking the initiative for their own learning about racial equity and culturally responsive practices, either during their programs or as classroom teachers.

About the Focus Groups

The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) and the American Institutes for Research (AIR) researchers reached out to 2,442 participants who had completed an initial licensure teacher-training program at one of 15 selected providers between 2019 and 2021 and who were employed at some point during the 2020 through 2022 academic years. Outreach emails were cosigned by program coordinators at nine of the participating 15 institutions. Recipients were invited to register for focus groups through an online registration system. Participants were given gift cards as compensation for their time. Across the 15 institutions, we interviewed 45 recent completers.

Table 1 describes the programs and number of teachers who participated in the focus groups. Three of the programs (Teach for America, UMass-Boston's Teach Next Year program, and Boston Teacher Residency) use apprenticeship or teacher of record models for certification.

Table 1: Participants, by Teacher Preparation Program

Teacher preparation program	Number of participants
Teach for America	8
University of Massachusetts–Boston, Teach Next Year	7
Bridgewater State University	5
Mount Holyoke	4
Salem State University	4
University of Massachusetts–Amherst	4
Merrimack College	4
Endicott College	2
Fitchburg State University	1
Westfield State University	1
Boston Teacher Residency	1
University of Massachusetts–Boston, Boston Teacher Residency	1
Elms College	1
Emerson College	1
Brandeis University	1

All focus groups were conducted virtually over Zoom between June and July 2022. For each focus group, we followed a structured protocol for participants' experiences in their teacher preparation programs, including their field placements, with regard to racial equity and culturally responsive practices. We conducted two focus groups with educators of color who requested to participate in a focus group with other educators of color. Additional educators of color chose to participate in focus groups that were not specifically grouped by race. Altogether, 36% of participants were teachers of color. All focus groups were recorded, transcribed, and reviewed for common and divergent themes in teachers' experiences.

We provided the following definitions for all participants in the chat function of Zoom: by **racial equity**, we mean a situation in which one's racial identity (specifically Black, Hispanic/Latino, Asian, Indigenous, and Multiracial) can no longer be used to predict social, economic, and educational outcomes. Enacting steps toward racial equity means ensuring that opportunities and supports to eliminate bias and structural barriers are operationalized at every level of society. By **culturally responsive practices,** we mean an approach to viewing students' culture and identity (including race, ethnicity, and multilingualism) as assets and creating learning experiences and environments that value and empower them. Culturally responsive instruction promotes academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness for students.

Racial Equity as Focus of Teacher Preparation Programs

After presenting participants with definitions of racial equity and culturally responsive practices, we asked if racial equity was a focus of their teacher training programs. Approximately one third of teachers (16 teachers) agreed that racial equity was a focus of their programs. One teacher, who was an exception, reported that the majority of her courses included a focus on racial equity. Other teachers reported courses, discussions, and "internal work" looking at their own biases as ways in which racial equity was a focus. It is important to note that some teachers who attended the same program during the same time period had differing perspectives on the extent to which racial equity was a focus of their program. Their views also varied about whether the sessions on diversity, equity, and inclusion counted as a focus and/or prepared them for the classroom.

The specific ways in which racial equity was a focus varied across participants, programs, and activities, including the following:

- coursework
- the SEI class

- instructional strategies
- discussions

More than one dozen teachers reported taking courses that focused on race in some or all of the sessions. According to teachers' descriptions, the content of these courses differed considerably. Two teachers attended programs focused on teaching bilingual education. These teachers described racial equity as being a focus of their programs—in terms of readings, instructional strategies, and discussions. Another teacher described a course that examined data that documented racial gaps in educational outcomes. One teacher referenced a class that was focused on "race, language, and power." A different teacher referred to a course on "sociocultural foundations" that examined "race, class, language, and ethnicity" in the context of education. Another teacher reported taking a course on racism and inequality in school. Other teachers, who attended the same preparation program, described a behavioral management course that incorporated racial equity. Still another teacher reported that two or three of the mandatory classes had racial equity as a focus; in these classes, the students "spent multiple days talking about racial biases, about social justice, and about different perspectives on pedagogy." However, another teacher, who had an entire course on racism, sexism, and gender identity, found the discussions to be "superficial." A different teacher reported having a lot of conversations about inequity and learning in diverse settings. Despite having these conversations, according to this teacher, they did not discuss what to do in the classroom. This teacher explained, "I would have really liked how to address" these inequities. All the courses that these teachers described were requirements of their specific programs and appeared to have addressed the topic in multiple ways.

Most teachers reported that their SEI classes were the only ones in which racial equity was discussed, if the topic was addressed at all. Several teachers, when describing their SEI classes, reported that they included racial equity but also acknowledged that they were focused on teaching multilingual students, with more explicit focus on culturally responsive and inclusive teaching than on racial equity. Teachers gave their SEI classes mixed reviews in terms of the quality of their discussions on racial equity. One teacher explained that the SEI class "was really the only one where we were looking at perspectives." However, another teacher described her SEI class as if it were "ticking a box." She stated that it did not give her "any thorough understanding of racial equity or really any culturally responsive practices." A third teacher said that these topics were included in her SEI class but that the discussions were "vague" and she did not believe that she would have had the necessary tools had she gone to a diverse district on completion of her program.

In addition to courses, other teachers described discussion and sessions that focused on race. One teacher recalled sessions on diversity, equity, and inclusion. In those sessions, teachers discussed "race in America and how sometimes how it intersected with education." Another teacher remembered informal conversations among students because of President Trump's election.

In contrast, the majority of teachers reported that their programs did not have an explicit focus on racial equity. One teacher answered, "I don't remember anything that was explicitly on racial equity." Another teacher agreed, stating, "There weren't any courses really designed for that or any that even touched on the subject of racial inequalities." Some teachers recalled the topic coming up but describe the discussions as "very brief" or "surface level." Another teacher referred to one unit on race in "one session within one semester" in her adolescent psychology class. Another teacher said, "I'm not sure if [racial equity] was ever explicitly talked about, *per se*, other than acknowledging that we needed to do it." One teacher reported that they talked about their own identity "but nothing about racial equity in terms of inside the classroom or culturally responsive practices. Another teacher stated, "I feel like I learned all of this after I started actually teaching in the classroom." Similarly, a teacher who is currently teaching in a diverse district did not remember "anything around racial equity or culturally responsive practices" in his preparation program. According to this teacher, racial equity and culturally responsive practices are now a district and school priority, and he described his own knowledge from on-the-job learning.

Several teachers believed that their programs had shifted since their time. One teacher explained that "there was a huge shift after BLM in 2020." Even so, this teacher described the program as recognizing inequities but offering little information about "what to do or how to do it." Other teachers referred to changes after the murder of George Floyd. They did not, however, report specific information about changes in their programs.

Several teachers described advancing their own understandings of racial equity in different ways. Some teachers reported doing a lot of "internal work" to understand their own positions and biases. One teacher recalled writing an essay in which she reflected on her own schooling and the way her teachers talked about difference. Another teacher reported, "I did my own PD [professional development]." Still another teacher explained that she "has always been interested in racial equity in regard to special education specifically." As a result, she chose paper topics that examined disciplinary practices and exclusionary practices for special education students and students of color, but she stated that those topics were her "personal choice" and that racial equity was not an explicit part of her program. Another teacher echoed this perspective, explaining that he "read papers and books outside of the program" to further

his own education. One teacher reported buying a lesson from the Teachers Pay Teachers website on ways to introduce the concept of talking about race. A different teacher reported taking a class on African American literature, which was not required in her program. Another teacher summarized program coverage of racial equity as "something I had to seek out, not something that was a requirement of me." Teachers differed in their views about the extent to which racial equity was a focus of their programs, even among teachers who attended the same program. Because it was a topic of interest for many teachers and part of their motivation for entering the teaching field, multiple teachers reported taking the initiative to learn about racial equity, either within or outside their program.

Limited Instructional Practices to Advance Racial Equity

Teachers reported limited exposure to instructional practices that advanced racial equity. The types of instructional practices varied from engaging families to grading policies to using students' lived experiences. Several teachers pointed out that the terms "racial equity" or "antiracist teaching" were not used during their time in their programs, although sometimes the sentiments were part of their programs.

Teachers reported mixed experiences regarding the extent to which their program taught specific instructional practices that advanced racial equity, but the majority of teachers did not recall being taught such practices. Eight teachers described specific ways in which they learned about instructional practices that helped advance racial equity. Several teachers reported learning about family engagement and working with families as partners. One teacher recalled her professor's inviting local families into their classroom so that the class could "practice hosting family conferences with peoples of all different backgrounds." Another teacher described having conversations with her supervising practitioner and looking at different data points. A third teacher recalled his professor's "inviting folks who hold more privileged identities to step back at first and listen more." A fourth teacher reported conversations about student voice in the classroom and "making sure you're using equitable grading and data practices." A fifth teacher listed "being able to give feedback, using generative themes, have people provided lived experiences to inform the way we were engaging with the material" as examples of instructional practices from his program.

A few teachers described the efforts of their programs to include instructional practices that advanced racial equity as limited and insufficient. For instance, one teacher said she had watched videos, but she did not think the discussion was genuine. Rather, she explained, the students were "mimicking what we thought people wanted to hear and not so much an actual

conversation." She also reported that the videos and terminology were "a little dated." A different teacher reported learning the importance of pronouncing students' names correctly. A third teacher recalled an assignment for which they had to prepare a lesson plan that was "relevant to the community." A fourth teacher who currently teaches in an urban school did not think that the faculty at her program "had enough on-the-ground experience" to effectively discuss ways to engage in conversations about being a white teacher in a community that is predominantly students of color. In this case, her faculty stressed the importance but did not discuss specific strategies or practices.

Several teachers recalled professors who drew on their own personal experiences about inequities. One teacher emphasized being taught to support all learners and to build "an inclusive classroom" without naming racial equity; it was up to the individual professor or student to "make those connections more explicit." Often, these conversations were in the context of discussing students with disabilities. Other teachers reported varying experiences that were dependent on the individual professor.

More than half of teachers could not recall learning any instructional practices that advanced racial equity. Referring to coaches who observed her teaching, one teacher stated that racial equity and culturally responsive teaching "wasn't something that they wanted to talk about." Another teacher explained that her program was focused on "how to become a better educator, not really giving us all the awareness of cultural responsiveness and equal justice." Many teachers struggled to remember specific instances in their programs that address racial equity within instructional practices.

Racial Equity as a Focus of Field Placements

The structure and length of field placements varied across program. The field placements varied in terms of whether

- teachers had their own classrooms or worked under classroom teachers;
- programs required both an urban and suburban placement;
- teachers worked in a predominantly white school setting or a racially diverse school;
- teachers found their placements on their own or teachers had any choice about their placements; and
- teachers were new to their schools or were already working at the schools as paraprofessionals.

While some teachers described positive experiences regarding a focus on advancing racially equitable teaching practices, others had neutral experiences and some teachers had explicitly negative experiences. The teachers with negative experiences were placed in both district and charter schools and were in schools with large numbers of students of color. These teachers reported significant gaps between what was talked about in the school with regards to equity, and the practices and policies that they saw. Teachers' experiences with and perceptions of their supervising practitioners varied; in some cases, their supervising practitioners positively contributed to their practices that advanced racial equity, while other teachers described their supervising practitioners as racially biased or holding negative views about their students.

Among those teachers who reported that their field placements strengthened their abilities to teach through a lens of racial equity, their experiences varied. At one school, a teacher described "a lot of PD on inclusive practices," including antiracism. Another teacher explained that the murder of George Floyd significantly changed the direction of his school. As a result, the school changed the way staff used language and addressed students. In addition, diversity, equity, and inclusion became a focus of their professional development. A third teacher had the opportunity to participate on a racial equity task force within her school. A different teacher reported informal conversations with her colleagues that helped her see "what was possible" in terms of representing all students.

Several teachers credited their supervising practitioners for making racial equity a priority. A teacher described her supervising practitioner as having "a lot of experience of looking and seeing racial equity in the schools," and "he made it a priority for me" and helping her to "think critically and reflect on my own teaching practices to better serve the students." An educator of color described her supervising practitioner, who was also an educator of color, as "amazing" and as helping her understand "what it meant to be a Black teacher." A third teacher reported that his supervising practitioner was "really challenging me to think about equity and being culturally responsive." Another teacher described a "fabulous [supervising practitioner]" who "did a great job exemplifying culturally responsive teaching and who created a very respectful and safe classroom." These teachers reported learning a great deal from their supervising practitioners, who helped to advance the teachers' practice.

These positive experiences notwithstanding, most teachers reported that their field experience did not advance their abilities to teach through a lens of racial equity. A few teachers were placed in settings that were not diverse. In other cases, racial equity was not a focus of their school or those teachers did not receive support from their supervising practitioners. One teacher described her placement in an urban school as a "cultural shock." Another teacher explained that, although 90% of the students were Latinx, the school "danced around that

issue." She stated that she "was not prepared." A third teacher, who was working with English learner students, reported, "We never really had conversations about how we support them." One educator of color stated that her field placement did not advance racial equity and that, at her school, they were "still trying to grapple with it."

Seven teachers whose field placements were in diverse schools and included both district and charter schools were highly critical of the practices in those schools. One teacher explained that her "placement was the manifestation of racism in the education system and the manifestation of the school-to-prison pipeline." She described adults' "barking and yelling" at students and "students' being dragged away and locked into rooms when they had really big emotions." She reported "literally teaching to the MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System]." A teacher in a different school described her school as being "founded with a white savior mindset." According to that teacher, the school was "constantly talking about racial equity" but the practices of the school were incongruent with equity and "there were a lot of really problematic disciplinary practices." She also recalled an activity in which the school mimicked an ancient Greek festival "where the slaves would pretend to be the masters for a day and the students were pretending to be the teachers." Similarly, another teacher at a different school stated that "the actual practice of antiracist education" was "really lacking." He reported that his supervising practitioner was "verbally abusive to children" and used a "behavior model [based] on fear." Another teacher explained her colleagues as "having a lot of deficit-based mindsets around our students and making comments about kids and families," although this particular teacher acknowledged a lot of positive changes during her time in the school.

Other teachers had negative experiences with their supervising practitioners. One teacher switched schools after a negative first placement with three supervising practitioners. She explained, "What I experienced from them was a variety of microaggressions, in the ways they spoke about students, parents, colleagues. I heard them make comments that I considered to be racially biased, that I considered to be homophobic, that I considered to be derogatory toward students." Similarly, another teacher at a different school described "the actual practice of antiracist education" as "really lacking." He found his supervising practitioner to be "verbally abusive to children" and used a "behavior model [based] on fear." These teachers experienced a large gap between the rhetoric of racial equity and the practices and policies of the schools in which they were placed. One teacher reported that her supervising practitioner "was shocking in some of the things that she would say out loud." This teacher believed that this teacher had a negative attitude toward the kids. A different teacher explained that he "had about as much experience in a diverse setting" as his field supervisor did. Similarly, another teacher stated that neither her field supervisor nor her supervising practitioner "did anything in terms of equity."

Being at a diverse school was not a guarantee that teachers would observe and advance racial equity practices.

Some teachers reported learning more about racial equity and/or culturally responsive practices during their field placements; they often did not attribute the learning to their programs. A few teachers described themselves as fortunate to have good supervising practitioners or colleagues from whom they could learn. One teacher reported that she was not prepared and learned "a lot from her co-teacher and her [supervising practitioner]." Another teacher explained that she "received better education from colleagues [who were] not from the program." These teachers believed that learning about racial equity in the field was "luck of the draw" rather than any intentional policy of their programs.

Exposure to Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices

The topic of culturally responsive teaching was widespread across most teachers' preparation programs, much more so than racial equity. With the exception of a few teachers, all the teachers reported learning about culturally responsive teaching practices to some degree. Some teachers read books and had discussions about including all students' identities and using an asset-based framework. One teacher reported taking a required culturally responsive teaching class.

The SEI course was a common location for these discussions. Despite the prevalence of the topic, many teachers in both groups found the discussions lacking in specificity about what to do in the classroom, leading one teacher to call the term "culturally responsive" a buzzword. Five teachers cited their SEI course as the place where that learning took place, although they described the learning as basic. Several other teachers reported a lack of specificity about what culturally responsive practices looked like in the classroom.

Some teachers reported reading books on culturally responsive teaching. The most commonly cited book was *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, by Zaretta Hammond. Other books included *The Dreamkeepers*, by Gloria Ladson-Billings; *Young, Gifted, and Black*, by Jamia Wilson; and *Fostering Resilient Learners*, by Kristin Souers and Pete Hall. Two teachers reported some teachers speaking in a foreign language during a class session to "help us understand what it is like to not understand the language." Other teachers described learning about the importance of representation, of using an asset-based approach, creating a safe environment, cultural differences in discipline, using different cultural terms to describe math concepts, using technology to see the viewpoints of other people, activating background knowledge, and using students as experts in their own lived experiences. One teacher reported learning about best

practices for supporting LGBTQ students. Another teacher described learning about "how to be culturally responsive within science teaching" and about racial bias in the MCAS.

Teachers recalled culturally responsive teaching as being a part of their preparation, although many believed that the coverage lacked depth and specific strategies for the classroom. Several teachers described efforts as being "broad brush strokes" and learning much more in their first years of teaching. One of the teachers who reported learning about safe learning environments explained that the program emphasized the importance of this for all students but taught nothing specifically about diverse students. One special education teacher observed general education teachers "struggle to create a culturally responsible classroom and, as a result, over-referring English learner students or other culturally diverse students for evaluations. In addition, teachers reported taking the initiative on their own to better understand culturally responsive practices. Another teacher explains that it was "on you as the teacher to decide how deep you want to go into [culturally responsive teaching]." Teachers reported specific practices they learned during their preparation programs to implement culturally responsive practices; yet they also described these efforts as relatively limited and lacking specificity.

Barriers to Learning About Racial Equity and Culturally Responsive Practices

Teachers reported a variety of barriers to their ability to learn about racial equity and culturally responsive teaching practices. Students in the alternative certification programs specifically cited time as a constraint in terms of the condensed structure of their programs. Teachers concluded that it often depended on individual professors or students, who were often students of color, to raise the issue, and students often had to take the initiative on their own to learn about the topics.

The most common barrier was the speed of their program. Even among teachers who attended regular programs, several believed that the speed of their programs and the online programming were barriers. They reported limited time to delve into these topics. Teachers stated that they did not have the opportunity to take a full load of courses. In addition, they were trying to get their initial licenses by the end of the program, which meant that "time was an issue." Constraints on time and scheduling challenges prevented other teachers from taking classes that might have addressed racial equity and culturally responsive practices.

In addition to time, barriers reported included the following:

* lack of diverse professors who had the lived experiences

- academically focused professors

- being at one placement for a full year

- lack of diversity in students

- scheduling constraints

- lack of an understanding of the ways to translate theory into classroom practices

- time spent on preparing students for standardized testing

- hesitancy to talk about race and/or equity

- COVID

Several teachers reported that COVID interrupted their studies, either during the field placement or the coursework that was focused on racial equity. Two teachers described a "lack of opportunity to really delve into [these topics.]" Rather, "it was very much up to the individual to carve out your own path and bring these topics to the table." According to several teachers, learning about these topics depended on the individual professors or students. Three teachers reported that their programs included theories about race and/or equity but lacked concrete examples of ways to apply the theory in the classroom. Another teacher spoke of a "lack of understanding of how to translate things to the actual classroom." She explained that "we might have values that guide our work but we don't have an understanding of how to enact them."

A few teachers reported their programs' avoiding the topic of race. One teacher reported that their program "tiptoed" around the topic. This teacher explained that "nobody really wanted to talk about race and talk about equity." Similarly, another teacher explains that, in her field placement, "equity" and "privilege" were not in the vocabulary of the school until recently" and that there was a hesitancy to "even talk about it." Although one teacher reported no barriers, she also concluded that "just no one was talking about it" and that race was not part of the conversations. These barriers meant, for the most part, that teachers had to take the initiative for their own learning about racial equity and culturally responsive practices.

Educators of Color

We conducted two focus groups with educators of color who requested to participate in a focus group with other educators of color. In addition, some educators of color participated in the other 13 focus groups. Several educators of color raised issues specifically pertaining to their identity as people of color. One educator of color stated that she "wanted more support on how to be a black educator." She referred to challenges of her colleagues' thinking of her either

as not competent or as "the voice for all Black people." She wished that her program had offered more support on ways to navigate these situations. One of her colleagues agreed, referring to the "unique challenges of being an educator of color and needing that specific sort of mentoring."

Another educator of color reported not feeling included in her school. She described some "really racist things happening" in the school and commented, "If this is being said to me and about me, then I can only imaging what's happening with our kids of color when there are no other adults in the space with them." She talked about needing to "code switch in front of teachers" in order not to "have them think I was inferior because I didn't know that chunking a text was called chunking a text." Another educator of color agreed, explaining that "there are certain words" you are supposed to use. She described the school environment as passive aggressive. On the other hand, both these teachers talked about their ability to develop relationships and trust with their students because of their race. One reported getting respect from students who would say that was because she looked "like my mother." Several educators of color raised additional challenges based on their identities and stated that they wished their programs had provided more support for their specific challenges.

Recommended Changes

Overall, teachers agreed that changes were needed in their programs to better prepare them to teach through a lens of racial equity and culturally responsiveness. They recommended the following:

- the topics of racial equality and culturally responsive practices infused throughout their programs
- more opportunities for discussion
- opportunities to learn from diverse people
- more access to data and information
- emphasis on translation of the concepts into concrete practices for the classroom

Several teachers talked about the importance of incorporating the topics into every class. One teacher explained that "from the outset, it needs to be infused in conversations." Second, several teachers recommended the opportunity to learn from diverse people. Two teachers recommended multiple placements instead of a single placement. Other teachers talked about the opportunity to "observe real situations, not TED talks and modeled classrooms" where "everything is perfect." Still others focused on the need to "teach us how to translate" these concepts into the

classroom. Multiple teachers emphasized the need for classes to be "more practical" and to include more interactions with students and "real-life examples" that reflected "real kids, real environments." Several teachers called for more focus on trauma-informed practices.

Two teachers recommended more access to data and information and the "time and space to have those discussions, especially for white teachers teaching students of color." Finally, some teachers thought that more time in their programs was needed in order to be fully prepared "for the breadth of needs of a community." A different teacher recommended bringing students of color into the conversation to learn from them what they need. Two teachers recommended more discussion and actual practice of classroom management. A different teacher observed a disconnect with the faculty because they had been out of the classroom for many years and did not reflect the diversity of student populations. One teacher wanted to "have constant exposure and be able to talk about [racial equity]." Similarly, another teacher recommended that programs delve into "how do we have these conversations" about race.

In addition, several teachers reported that racial equity was a priority for their current schools. Teachers reported receiving professional development, participating in book clubs, and participating on committees. However, those experiences were not uniform across teachers. And finally, one teacher reported a lack of support from her administration.

Concluding Thoughts

About one third of the teachers who participated in the focus groups agreed that racial equity was a focus of their programs. It is important to note that, in some cases, teachers who were in the same program had different opinions about the extent to which racial equity was a focus. This could be the result of either different experiences within the same program or differing expectations about the focus. We do not know if the views of the people who participated in the focus groups are representative of all recent completers. In addition, there was wide variation in teachers' understanding of racial equity and culturally responsive teaching practices, as evidenced by the specificity and depth of their responses. Moreover, multiple teachers referenced BLM and the murder of George Floyd as events that changed the course of their programs and/or the environment of their placements. It is possible that programs have changed their approach, even in a relatively short period of time.

Overall, the majority of teachers reported limited focus on racial equity and culturally responsive practices in their preparation programs and field placements. To the extent that these topics were covered, teachers often found them to be too theoretical, superficial, and lacking in specificity. If the topics were included, this was often the result of an individual

professor or student's raising the topic. Some teachers learned about these practices during their field placements, but teachers' experiences with field placements were not consistent. Rather, teachers reported wide variation in their field experiences. Some had supervising practitioners who prioritized racial equity and culturally responsive practices, while others had distinctly negative experiences and others had neutral experiences. According to some teachers, their supervising practitioners and/or their school's policies and practices were perpetuating racist practices. These teachers' experiences suggest that a diverse placement does not equate with a focus on racial equity. When teachers had positive experiences with their supervising practitioners or field placements, they often attributed their experiences to the "luck of draw" rather than intentional policies of their program. In light of these focus group findings, researchers will be further examining the roles of field-based placements and supervising practitioners. This research will explore whether supervising practitioners who promote inclusive learning environments in their own schools can inculcate culturally responsive teaching practices in their student teachers.

Some teachers have taken the initiative on their own to advance culturally responsive practices and racial equity. They took this initiative because the topic was important to them and part of their motivation for entering the teaching field. Overall, most teachers see a need for programs to address racial equity and culturally responsive practices more systemically, with concrete strategies and instruction as part of their preparation.

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