

SAME-RACE MENTORS FOR PRESERVICE ALTERNATIVE-PATHWAY EDUCATORS

Written by Rachel Walker Bowman, MERREC



Introduction

Although researchers have demonstrated that having a diverse workforce can narrow the achievement gap and improve student outcomes, a shortage of special education teachers exists, especially teachers of color (Billingsley et al., 2019). Additionally, school system leaders need more robust induction programs for new teachers. Leaders of the Minority Educator Researcher, Recruitment, and Equity Center (MERREC) are piloting two mentoring programs for historically underrepresented educators who are enrolled in alternative pathway programs for special education. The goals of the MERREC leaders are to create a program that improves retention for historically underrepresented minority educators and help new educators begin strong careers in their chosen fields.

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Key Messages and Recommendations

Problem: Historically underrepresented educators do not have access to a same-race mentor in their fields.

Recommendations:

- Match mentors and mentees by a shared racial, ethnic, or cultural identities.
- Match mentors and mentees based on their teaching focuses.
- Require structured mentoring of at least two years for novice teachers.

"My mentee and I are growing and glowing and having a good time together...I am so appreciative of this opportunity to be able to mentor these students and be able to make a difference and share my small wealth of knowledge that I do have."

What Is Known

The field of special education has racial disparities affecting the identification, placements, and achievement of historically underrepresented minority students with disabilities. Based on a report presented to members of the U.S. Congress regarding the implementation of IDEA, 12% of Black students received special education services, compared to only 8.5% of White students (Department of Education, 2016). Black students with disabilities are less likely to graduate with standard diplomas (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2020) and more likely to be referred for disciplinary action (Gage et al., 2019). Additionally, 47% of special education students are people of color, compared to 18% percent of their teachers (Billingsley et al., 2019).

While being educated in a school with culturally diverse staff members benefits all students, the impact for students of color can be vital (Billingsley et al., 2019). Some researchers indicated that teachers of color tend to have higher expectations for their students of color compared to White teachers (Gershenson et al., 2016). Additionally, having same-race teachers has been associated with fewer instances of exclusionary discipline for Black students (Lindsay & Hart, 2017), and having same-race teachers can positively affect achievement for students of color generally (Egalite et al., 2015). However, teachers of color are vastly underrepresented in U.S. schools (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Scott & Alexander, 2019). Although recruitment efforts aimed at minority teachers have been largely successful, minority teachers also experience higher rates of turnover than White teachers (Ingersoll et al., 2019). A notable factor contributing to minority teacher turnover has been the quality of induction programs for new teachers; the quality of the programs can be significantly improved through effective mentoring programs. Mentoring programs are a common strategy found in the literature on retaining educators of color (Harris & Davis, 2018; Scott, 2019; Scott & Alexander, 2019).

Mentoring is valuable for all novice teachers but is considered more valuable for teachers involved in the often confusing, isolating, and complicated job of special education (Wasburn et al., 2012). Mentoring programs offer new and preservice teachers personal guidance from a seasoned veteran in their field (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Mentors support new teachers in navigating the demands of teaching by coplanning, providing feedback, reflecting, and creating an environment for teachers to practice and hone their skills (Sanchez et al., 2016). However, mentoring programs have varied widely among U.S. states, districts, and within teacher preparation programs. Currently, officials in 29 states require mentoring for new teachers, yet, officials in 11 U.S. states do not expect it beyond the first year of service (Goldrick, 2019). Additionally, the intensity and duration of programs fluctuates among different programs (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Goldrick (2019) found two years of mentoring would benefit new teachers. A randomized controlled trials by Glazerman et al. (2010) were used to support Goldrick's (2019) findings, in which classes led by teachers who received two years of induction support performed higher than those led by teachers with only one year. Additionally, some program leaders may require nothing more than a single meeting between a mentor and mentee, while others are highly structured (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Also, mentoring programs differ in the methods leaders use to match, train, and compensate mentors (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). School system leaders should refer to the current literature when designing robust mentoring programs.

Mentoring programs can be utilized to address the shortage of teachers of color by matching mentors and mentees using a shared racial, ethnic, or cultural background, educational focus, and gender (Harris & Davis, 2018). For new teachers, having mentors who share their diverse backgrounds could positively affect their experiences in many ways (Harris & Davis, 2018; Scott, 2019; Scott & Alexander, 2019). Harris and Davis (2018) found that race and ethnicity matching can improve induction for math teachers of color by supporting retention and helping them navigate challenges at their schools. Furthermore, Scott and Alexander (2019) found Black male preservice special education teachers credited the use of race and gender-matched mentors with influencing them to continue working in the field. More research in matching mentors and mentees is needed to identify further characteristics of successful mentorship for minority teachers.

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What We Do: Mentoring Programs

Leaders at the MERREC at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) developed a mentoring program designed to address the needs of preservice educators of color after some students recommended mentoring from individuals who reflected their cultural backgrounds. In the MERREC pilot program, leaders primarily focused on students enrolled in alternative-pathway special education programs, including the Richmond Teacher Residency (RTR) and an Instructional Assistant (IA) pathway through RTR. However, several students in other teacher education programs take advantage of mentorship through MERREC. The program leaders matched preservice teachers with faculty members and alumni from the School of Education and in the local school community. Most mentors are educators or faculty members of color in the Richmond area whose experiences closely align with their mentees. Mentors and mentees both receive training and financial compensation for participating in mentorship.

At the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester, mentoring pairs comprised of a mentor and mentee discussed the mentee's progress, strengths, and needs to identify a problem of practice. Problems of practice have included improving engagement in virtual learning, building stronger relationships within the school faculty members at the school, and navigating the pressures of balancing academics and teaching. Mentors and mentees were tasked with holding weekly one-on-one meetings in which the mentors helped the mentees set goals for addressing the problems of practice and discussed progress and challenges.

While similarly structured to address problems of practice, a single mentor employed by MERREC runs an instructional assistant mentoring program. The mentor is a Black female with a background in special education and K-12 administrator experience.

What We Learned: Initial Results

Between both programs, mentoring pairs identified 33 problems of practice from Fall 2020 to early Spring 2021. An approximate breakdown of the categories of problems of practice are described in Table 1 below.

Table 1 |

Problems of Practice

Type of Problem	Engagement in Virtual Learning	Building Relationships	Instructional Strategies	Academic	Personal
Percentage	21%	12%	21%	27%	18%
Examples	Creating engaging lessons through google slides	Improving team dynamics	Encouraging students to turn in completed work on time	Backward planning when writing papers/ studying for the VCLA	Handling school on top of an upcoming wedding

Successes

Of the 33 problems of practice identified during the semester, mentoring pairs reported progress for 17 problems. Examples of success included:

- Mentee began prioritizing self-care.
- Mentee was staying motivated to pass the VCLA.
- Mentee was able to reach out to individual families of students.
- Mentee finished the semester with straight As.
- Mentee felt like she had mastered engagement strategies.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Consider implications for matching mentors and mentees based on shared racial, ethnic, or cultural backgrounds.

Mentoring programs should acknowledge the unique challenges that historically underrepresented minority teachers face and consider the benefits of matching mentees with mentors that understand the context. Program leaders should take deliberate steps to diversify the mentor pool and increase the number of underrepresented minority mentors available to preservice and novice teachers. If diverse faculty members have limited availability, program leaders should establish partnerships with local school officials who employ model teachers.

Recommendation 2: Match mentors and mentees by their teaching focuses.

Different fields of education carry unique demands. An elementary general education teacher unlikely to be able to relate to the requirements and stressors of being a special education teacher. Caseloads, paperwork, testing, and instructional strategies are vastly different between the two fields. Likewise, since pedagogy differs between content areas, secondary teachers in a specialized field would benefit more from teachers with similar content backgrounds. When mentors in the same content area are unavailable within a school, program leaders should establish partnerships with other officials at other schools to fill the needs.

Recommendation 3: Require structured mentoring for novice teachers for at least two years.

Officials in many states do not currently require mentoring beyond the first year of teaching (Goldrick 2019). However, teachers are susceptible to leaving in the first three years, and mentoring has been found to be more effective when it extends beyond the first year. (Glazerman et al., 2010). Extending mentoring programs to a minimum of two years may improve retention and induction.

Limitations

MERREC's mentoring program occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020/2021. The majority of mentees were engaging in virtual teaching and learning and connected with their mentors over the internet. "Zoom fatigue," (Bailenson, 2021) and overall burnout and anxiety from teaching during a pandemic (Pressley, 2021) may have contributed to low engagement between some mentees and their mentors

Conclusion

All students can benefit from learning from a diverse faculty. However, minority teachers are struggling to remain in the field, particularly in special education. Providing preservice and novice teachers with robust mentoring programs that span multiple years can help alleviate many of the challenges minority teachers face. Matching new teachers with mentors who share their cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds can prove to be a valuable asset in improving retention. Ensuring that mentors have experience in their mentee's content areas can also enhance mentoring outcomes.

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