

Context Matters: An Exploration of the Black Teacher Experience

SURG | Social Sciences & Journalism (SSJ) | *Tags: Interviews; Qualitative Data Analysis*

*This cover page is meant to focus your reading of the sample proposal, summarizing important aspects of proposal writing that the author did well, or could have improved. **Review the following sections before reading the sample.** The proposal is also annotated throughout to highlight key elements of the proposal's structure and content.*



| Proposal Strengths | Areas for Improvement |
|---|--|
| The introduction acts as a funnel, taking the reader from the broad topic of diversity in education to narrowed scope of the student's project on the experience of black teachers. | Interview methods are not very clear in the methods section. Student should refer to their Appendix A, which included a list of interview questions. |
| The background section goes beyond summarizing past work, and instead has situating sentences throughout that interpret previous research in terms of what it means for the problems being addressed in this project. | |
| The student uses the background section to illuminate a gap in current knowledge. | |
| The student justifies their methodology, and it includes information on how participants will be recruited, how data will be collected, and how data will be analyzed | |



| Other Key Features to Take Note Of |
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| Conducting research in/with Chicago Public Schools (CPS) (as well as other school districts) requires an extensive approval process that is often long and bureaucratic. Similar to other vulnerable populations, a student-researcher should consider constraints to "access." Students who think they may want to work in/with CPS should work closely with their advisor early. |
| With many broad topics that can be studied anywhere, it is important to justify the geographic location of your work. |
| SURG proposals do not require IRB submission at time of application. However, the students must include CITI Training Certificate in Social and Behavioral Research in the appendix of their grant application; this appendix was removed from the sample grant for anonymity. Please see the Human Subjects Research section of our website for additional details. |

"Diversity" is certainly a buzz word in the realm of education. While minority teachers generally, and black teachers specifically, are sought nationwide through targeted teacher recruitment policies, there has not been an equal emphasis on developing strategies to retain these "diverse" candidates. This summer I plan to interview high school teachers in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in an effort to understand the implications that varying school contexts hold for the experiences of black educators. I am drawn to this project because of my interest in teaching at an urban public school and because of the implications this research holds for the development of innovative teacher retention strategies. Due to the limited amount of qualitative data about the experiences of black teachers, particularly mindful of the ways in which school context influences their work, this research is important. I intend for the data I collect this summer to become part of my SESP honors thesis project.

Moves from broad topic to particular project/research aim

Between 1990-2010, 36 states adopted policies that aim to recruit more people of color into the teaching profession.¹ In 2013, 50% of the students in public elementary and secondary schools nationwide were white. By the end of the next decade, non-white students are projected to outnumber white students nationwide.² Unfortunately, the racial demographics of our nation's teachers are not changing in similar ways. During the 2011-2012 year, over 80% of our nation's teachers were white, a number that has changed little over the past two decades.³ Crucially, the most significant barrier to achieving a nationally representative teaching force is not found in recruitment and hiring practices. Nationally, teachers of color are being hired at rates higher than those of white teacher candidates. The problem, therefore, lies in teacher attrition.⁴ As federal data indicates, nearly 22% of black public school teachers and about 20.5% of Hispanic teachers moved schools or left the profession during the 2012-2013 school year, while only 15 percent of white, non-Hispanic teachers did so.⁵ While research is needed to understand the unique experiences of all minority teachers, I am particularly interested in studying the experiences of black teachers when considering their especially significant attrition rates.

Goes beyond summary, interprets background in the context of the project

In Chicago, the number of black teachers in CPS has been declining for more than a decade. For example, in 2000, 40% of the teachers in CPS were black, whereas they make up about 1/5 of the CPS teaching force today.⁶ In addition to other unknown reasons for attrition, black teachers in Chicago have been disproportionately hit by layoffs.⁷ Given the disappearance of black teachers from CPS, the city of Chicago provides for an interesting analysis of the intersections between blackness and education because the data currently available suggests that black teachers in CPS, on the whole, may be feeling overburdened, experiencing dissatisfaction, or encountering tension. While the most comprehensive national qualitative study, published in November 2016 by the Education Trust found that black teachers often "found themselves restricted to only teaching Black students, [restricted] to acting as disciplinarians instead of being respected for their ability to manage their classrooms, and [forced] to 'tone down' their personalities to be seen as professionals" (p. 2), this study failed to capture a more nuanced depiction of the experiences of black teachers, given that black teachers can be found in a variety of different school settings and school environments.⁸ This study, along with a collection of articles written by individual black teachers for outlets such as *The Atlantic* and *Huffington Post* form the bulk of the literature on the experiences of black teachers, and, to date, very little is known about the influence of school context or the intersection of school context and racial identity.

Justifies location of work by reviewing site-specific background literature

Identifies gap in knowledge

This project is critical because understanding the unique experiences of black teachers in varying school contexts is the first step in determining how to develop, support, and retain them. Black teachers play an important role in the American public education system. Significantly, black teachers are crucial to improving the academic outcomes of black students. The 1985 Tennessee Project STAR experiment, one of the nation's largest studies employing the random assignment of students and teachers, found that having a black teacher for a year was associated with a statistically significant 3 to 5 percentile increase in math among black

Shows why gap should be filled

elementary students.⁹ Furthermore, while black students are half as likely to be placed in a gifted program as their white counterparts, research indicates that black students are referred to gifted programs, particularly in reading, at significantly lower rates when taught by non-black teachers.¹⁰ While the benefits of black teachers for black students is clear, research also indicates that the positive impact of black teachers for students extends to other ethno-racial groups. For example, black teachers are often viewed more favorably by all students than their white counterparts, they more frequently hold high expectations for all students, and they are more likely to enhance cultural understanding among their white colleagues and students.¹¹ Given their impact, my intention to understand the experiences of black teachers in CPS is important due to its potential to shed light on retention strategies, and, in turn, how to improve student experiences and outcomes.

Refined research aim

This summer, I plan to interview 24 high school teachers who work at public schools in Chicago. I will do this by interviewing 8 teachers at each of the 3 schools I choose for my analysis. At each school, I will speak to equal numbers of black and white teachers. The white comparison population will be important to understanding what I suspect to be an important interaction between race and school context that shapes black teachers experiences. Each of my 3 schools have varying proportions of black students: low (>25% black), medium (~50% black), and high (nearly 100% black). My first school, Lincoln Park High School (LPHS) is racially diverse with a 24% Black, 33% Hispanic, 10.5% Asian, and 28% White student demographic.¹² Much of this student diversity is due to the presence of their strong IB program and the fact that students travel from around the city to participate. I will be working at LPHS full time during the Spring 2017 quarter as a SESP practicum student intern in their college and career office. Therefore, I am confident I will connect with eligible research subjects. Through the relationships I build with teachers during my practicum, I plan to gather names and contact information for other black teachers in the CPS. Additionally, by working with SESP advisors to identify black alumni who teach in CPS public high schools, I will collect even more names. Based on the references I gather and the student racial compositions I am looking for, I will then select a second and third school for analysis. After collecting all my data and transcribing each interview, I will start developing a coding scheme using the open coding technique, a method of analysis drawing from grounded theory, in which analytic categories and concepts are created through a close reading of the data.¹³ This method of analysis will help mitigate bias and capture important nuances. Through this experience I hope to learn about how racial context matters to the art of teaching, particularly in relation to the retention of black teachers.

Good justification of participants

Great explanation of recruitment methods

Should refer to Interview questions in Appendix B and give an example of the questions

Shows how student has access to study population

Could have strengthened analysis description by adding a hypothetical category/concept that the student may find

I have had a number of educational experiences that have prepared me to pursue this project. This quarter I am enrolled in a SESP qualitative research methods class where I am learning how to conduct interviews, complete field observations, write field notes, practice open coding, and develop a coding scheme. This class has provided me with a thorough introduction to qualitative research methods using a grounded theory approach. I plan to gain even more skills next quarter by taking the SESP thesis project pre-requisite class, Advanced Research Methods. I will use this time to hone my qualitative research skills. In addition, given that the work I do this summer will serve as the beginning steps to my senior thesis project, I will be able to use time in the Advanced Methods class to identify and recruit interview subjects, continue to refine my interview protocol, and map out the trajectory of this project.

My experience as a restorative justice research assistant provided me insight on how school climate and environmental factors influence the ways in which teachers talk about students. I am eager to start a project of my own and delve deeper into issues of school climate and environment in relation to race. Perhaps most importantly, as an aspiring black educator myself, I could not be more excited to embark on this project. I am passionate about mitigating the achievement and opportunity gaps black students face with regard to education and believe that increasing and retaining the number of black individuals in the teaching workforce can be part of a solution.

References

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- ⁹ Dee, T. (2004). Teachers, race and student achievement in a randomized experiment. *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 86(1), 195-210.
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- ¹¹ Griffin, A., & Tackie, H. (2016). Through Our Eyes: Perspectives and Reflections from Black Teachers. The Education Trust. Retrieved from: <https://edtrust.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/ThroughOurEyes.pdf>
- ¹² Lincoln Park High School. Illinois Report Card. Retrieved from: <https://illinoisreportcard.com/school.aspx?schoolid=150162990250047&source=studentcharacteristics&source2=studentdemographics>
- ¹³ Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage Publications.

Appendix A

Preliminary Interview Protocol

1. Why did you become a teacher?
2. Tell me about your school.
3. Can you tell me why you selected to teach at this particular high school?
4. In your perspective, what is unique about this high school?
5. What are some of the challenges you face being a teacher at this school?
6. How do you identify racially?
7. How do you feel about being (however they indicated they identify racially)?
8. How do you think your racial identity influences your role as a teacher?
9. How would you describe the experiences of black students at this school?
10. How would you describe the experiences of students of other backgrounds at your school?
11. How do you think black students are viewed by other teachers, staff, and administrators at this school?
12. How do you feel you are perceived by your students?
13. How do you feel you are perceived by your fellow teachers, school staff and administrators?
14. How would you describe the relationships you have with your fellow teachers and school administrators?
15. How would you describe the role that you play in this school?
16. Can you talk a little about a time where you felt you were able to build a strong relationship with a student?
17. Describe a time when you felt your racial identity was especially salient as a teacher.