Facilitating Culturally Responsive Classroom Management Professional Development for Novice Teachers in a High-Needs School With a Majority Black Population

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Abstract

In today's era of resegregation, high-needs schools that are serving mostly students of color and from poverty often hire novice teachers. These teachers are predominantly White, middle-class females who may find it difficult to relate to their students from different races, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds. I examined how I could provide four professional development (PD) sessions centered on culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) for five novice teachers working in a school with a majority Black population qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches. I studied the experiences my teachers had as participants and my facilitation of these sessions to better understand how to help novice teachers develop culturally responsive practices. Three themes emerged that related to CRCM for novice teachers: novice teacher backgrounds, novice teacher classroom challenges, and facilitation–lessons learned. This study has implications for school leaders as well as individuals who (a) design and facilitate PD, (b) lead teacher preparation and induction programs, and (c) study their own practice through action research.

Keywords: culturally responsive, classroom management, novice teachers, professional development, professional learning communities

Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been a national trend of "resegregation" of schools based on socioeconomic status and race. According to a recent study, 43% of Latino students and 38% of Black students attend intensely segregated schools with student populations of less than 10% White students (Orfield, Kucsera, & Siegle-Hawley, 2012). Many people think school desegregation was a reality supported by state and federal government accountability after the passage of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1954. However, Darling-Hammond (2010) explained that many schools were never fully desegregated, and there continues to be a trend of separate and unequal educational outcomes for students of differing socioeconomic levels, cultures, and races. This study focused on the issue of under-qualified teachers in these schools and how to better equip them in effectively meeting the needs of their students as they become more culturally responsive teachers.

One-third to one-half of teachers leave the profession within their first five years when placed in hard-to-staff schools with a high percentage of students from poverty and students of color (Borman & Dowling, 2008). First-year teachers in struggling schools face daunting everyday realities that may increase their need for support. Challenges that teachers may face include disruptive student behavior, lack of classroom management skills, pressure of increased

accountability, feelings of isolation, and a general sense of exhaustion working with students from poverty on a daily basis (Fullan, 2007).

State and Local Context

Mentoring is one form of new teacher support offered in most school districts, and in my local district a form of full-time mentoring was created to help address the need to support many first-year teachers at targeted elementary schools. The district serves over 100,000 students including about 62% White or Asian and 38% students of color (Hispanic, Black, Native American, or multiracial). It is one of the 25 largest school districts in the United States and includes 72 elementary schools. The schools that received full-time mentoring support had the highest percentage of teacher turnover when compared to the district average. At each school, at least 90% of the students were of color and received free or reduced-price lunch. In addition, these schools had declined academically in the last few school years based on their school grades (Ds or Fs). Restrictive state intervention (Differentiated Accountability Program) along with declining academics and increasing behavior problems led to high levels of teacher turnover (S. Aborn, personal communication, February 26, 2013).

Study Purpose

The purpose of my study was to examine four professional development (PD) sessions centered on CRCM with five first-year teachers at my school. I conducted this study to inform my own practice as an academic coach providing PD to new teachers. The participants in my study were four second-grade teachers and one first-grade teacher. They were all White females between the ages of 23 and 30.

My two research questions were:

1. What can I learn about first-year teachers working in a high-needs school with a majority Black population and their needs regarding culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM)?

2. How can I best facilitate PD sessions centered on CRCM with first-year teachers working in a high-needs school with a majority Black population?

Literature Review

To inform my study, I reviewed the literature related to mentoring, CRCM, PD, and professional learning communities (PLCs). These are a few highlights from my literature review that I found most applicable to this study.

Mentors and coaches must negotiate how best to support new teachers at schools that are serving mostly students of color and from poverty in the challenging transition from internships to classroom teaching. These mentors/coaches should have experience working in such settings and be able to individualize their support to meet teachers' immediate needs while maintaining a focus on PD for classroom teachers (Gardiner, 2011). Mentoring new teachers in schools designated as high-needs and underperforming is most effective if the mentor fosters a commitment to social justice within their new teachers. Examining the micro-politics and issues of power and control present within schools and society along with maintaining a focus on student learning must be balanced with the everyday tensions of survival and success new teachers face (Yendol-Hoppey, Jacobs, & Dana, 2009).

Because teachers predominantly are White, middle-class females, and the demography of students is becoming increasingly diverse, there is a need for novice and veteran teachers to examine CRCM to better reach their students (Brown, 2004). To do so, we must question how to

best facilitate this learning—how can we help prepare our new teachers to succeed in a classroom where the students come from very different cultural and sometimes economic backgrounds than they do? Professional development around CRCM is one way to address this issue.

Job embedded professional development (JEPD) is a specific type of PD that is grounded in everyday teaching practice and enhances teachers' instruction so that they improve student learning. Effective coaching and mentoring fall into the category of JEPD since the PD takes place in real time or shortly before or after instruction and is centered on the actual students and issues the teacher is working with. This kind of PD is also reform based, collaborative, and personal. JEPD is most effective if it occurs over time and support is provided for ongoing learning (Croft, Coggshall, Dolan, Powers, & Killion, 2010). Another form of JEPD is learning within teacher communities. Teachers benefit from support in collaborative, risk-free small groups, or professional learning communities (PLCs), which provide the tools to reflect on their own teaching and then translate their learning back into the classroom to improve teaching and learning (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999). By focusing on a common topic, sharing a vision/mission, and ensuring equity of voice of all members, PLCs can be powerful agents for change (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004).

In this study I combined the concept of CRCM within JEPD to support novice teachers. The core components of CRCM I chose to use in my PD sessions were from Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, and Curran (2004): (a) recognition of one's own ethnocentrism, (b) knowledge of students' cultural backgrounds, (c) understanding of the broader social, economic, and political context, (d) ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate management strategies, and (e) commitment to building caring classrooms.

Research Design

This study used practitioner inquiry research methodology. One definition of practitioner inquiry (also known as "action research") is "the systematic, intentional study by teachers of their own classroom practice" (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009, p. 6). As one form of qualitative research, this method allows practitioners to engage in the design, data collection, and analysis of their research questions. This process strengthens the knowledge generated through this kind of job-embedded research as the findings are more likely to reflect the realities of educational practice (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2009).

As a full-time mentor and researcher, I was situated within the study, facilitating PD sessions with teachers I worked with day to day. While examining the impact that these PD experiences had on my teachers, I was able to inform my own practice as a PD facilitator.

Data Collection and Analysis

This study used qualitative research methods. I recorded pre-PD interviews, had them transcribed by a professional, and listened to the recorded interviews multiple times to ensure the transcriptions provided an accurate picture of what was said in each interview.

Next, I facilitated the four PD sessions. During each session I collected artifacts from the teachers that related to the different activities we engaged in. Also, immediately after each session, I wrote in my facilitator's journal to document what went well, the challenges I faced, and next steps for the subsequent sessions. Finally, I conducted post-PD interviews with each teacher, recorded these interviews, and had them transcribed by a professional. I also reread the transcripts while listening to the interviews multiple times to ensure accuracy.

Once all the data were collected, I began organizing and analyzing my teacher interviews (pre and post), teacher artifacts, and facilitator journal entries. The data were analyzed using

inductive coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). I read through the interview transcripts, journal entries, and artifacts identifying codes to categorize what was happening (e.g., fighting, frustration, disconnect) (Creswell, 2013). I identified over 30 original codes that I collapsed into 12 categories that then influenced my three themes: novice teacher backgrounds, classroom challenges, and facilitation–lessons learned.

The participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. All five were first-year teachers at a high-needs elementary school with a majority Black population. Below is a brief description of each teacher.

> **Ann** was a second-grade teacher. She was a 23-year-old White female who attended a state university and graduated with her bachelor's degree in elementary education in May 2013.

> **Becky** was a second-grade teacher. She was a 24-year-old White female who attended a state university and graduated with her bachelor's degree in elementary education and her master's degree in special education in May 2013.

> **Carol** was a second-grade teacher. She was a 24-year-old White female who attended a state university. She graduated with her bachelor's degree in elementary education in May 2013.

> **Denise** was a second-grade teacher. She was also the team leader. She was a 31-year-old White female who attended a state university. She graduated with her bachelor's degree in elementary education in May 2013.

> **Eva** was a first-grade teacher. She was a 30-year-old White female who attended a state university. She graduated with her bachelor's degree in early childhood education in May 2013.

Overview of the Professional Development Sessions

These PD sessions were purposely planned to include follow-up with Try-it activities for the teachers to do in their classrooms with their students throughout the week before our next session together. I also intentionally used protocols to guide conversations and ensure equity of voice among the PLC group members. I specifically chose protocols that I have used as a facilitator in the past and ones that would support teachers in constructing knowledge: Connections, Consultancy, Privilege Walk, 4 A's Protocol, Text Rendering, and Paseo.

Findings

In this study, the goal was to investigate my facilitation of four CRCM PD sessions to help novice teachers during their first semester of teaching in an elementary school with a majority Black population qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches. Overall, I have evidence that although the teachers learned a great deal from the PD sessions, I was not as successful as I had hoped in helping them understand how to be more culturally responsive in their classrooms. I will present my findings by focusing on the first two of three themes: novice teacher backgrounds and novice teacher classroom challenges. The first two themes are related to and influence the third theme, facilitation–lessons learned, making them appropriate for the focus of my findings and discussion. However, the complete relationship between the three themes is represented in Figure 1.
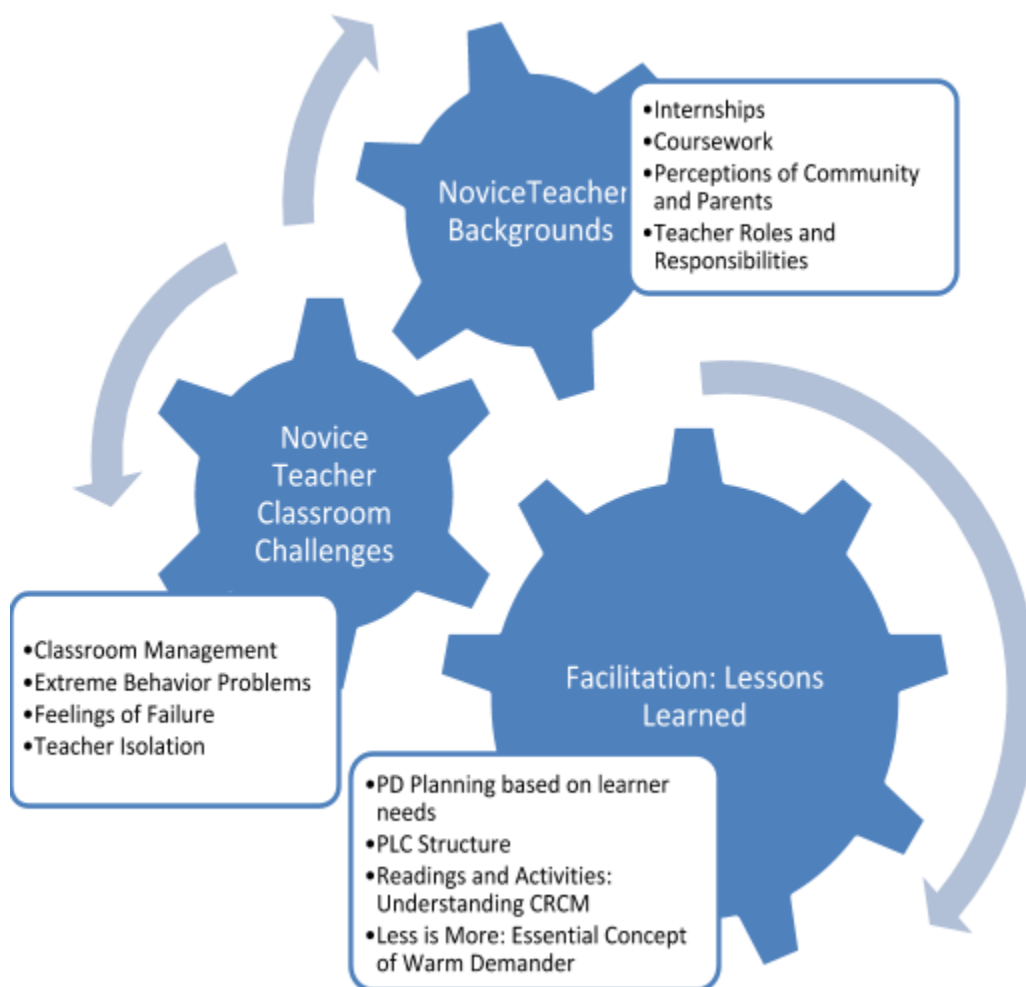
Figure 1. Three themes related to CRCM PD with novice teachers.

Novice Teacher Backgrounds

Internships

The five participants expressed how they were able to connect or disconnect their first-year teaching experiences to their experiences during college internships through their college teaching preparation programs. Although four out of five teachers interned in Title I schools, only Carol felt her school and cooperating teacher prepared her adequately to teach her first year in her current setting.

Ann and Eva explained that although they completed at least one internship at a Title I school, the student make-up was more diverse and the level of poverty that students were coming from did not seem as extreme as that experienced by their current students. Eva described the difference by referring to her internship students as mostly Latino and poor as compared to her current students who were Black and poorer than her previous students.

> I didn't think it was going to be such a drastic difference…I thought it would be right around there. That's what I thought. I figured the culture would be different from Spanish, but I didn't think the make-up would be so drastically different.

Both teachers described extreme behavior problems and feeling racially and culturally separate from their students as the major barriers they felt they weren't prepared to handle.

Coursework

In addition to internship experiences, the participants had varying levels of previous college coursework that centered on classroom management and/or working with diverse populations of students. Prior to conducting this study, it was my assumption that all college teacher preparation courses of study included these types of courses. However, after examining this through my pre-interview and post-interview data, it was clear that individual teachers had different experiences and levels of understanding regarding what would be required of them as first-year teachers in an elementary school with a majority Black population qualifying for free and reduced-price lunches.

Ann felt she was not prepared from her internship experiences nor did she take any courses that taught her how to work with students from diverse cultures and/or poverty. This was extremely surprising to me as the planner and facilitator of our CRCM sessions. In reflection, I should have taken this information into account before planning what my teachers needs were for our PD experiences together. Carol did not have any specific training on working with diverse populations in college although she did not identify that as being a cause for feeling unprepared for her first-year teaching in a school with students whose cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds differed from her own. Throughout interview data and PD sessions, she expressed how prepared she did feel from her year-long internship and effective mentoring from her cooperating internship teacher.

Becky, Denise, and Eva had some college coursework that related to working with culturally diverse students. The five teachers entered their first-year teaching as well as my CRCM PD sessions with varying levels of prior knowledge about and experiences with how to work effectively with students from diverse cultures.

Perceptions about Community and Parents

Among these first-year teachers, their perceptions of families, parents, students, and the community varied widely. Four out of the five teachers (Ann, Becky, Denise, and Eva) said they had heard the community where they would be teaching was mostly poor Black families and "ghetto." Carol, who was hired later in the summer and did not live in the same district, explained she did research on the internet before her interview and knew that typically south county addresses meant more poor and Black families, and could be considered a "rougher" area.

Becky and Denise expressed surprise at how much parental involvement they had in their classrooms. Becky discussed the level of care she had seen exhibited by her students' parents or guardians:

> They understand that education is key and that they all want what's best for their kids. They want them to be educated. I contact them using the agenda just because it's day to day. I've also had contact through the phone. I've had a few conferences. I have had parents come in and visit. I have an aunt that comes in every single day that pokes her head in.

Similarly, Denise was surprised by the level of parent communication and involvement:

> I always heard that families don't care; you will never see the mom, you'll never meet the dad, they are never going to sign the agenda. Just hearing that from people and now being in the school it's completely not the case. All my parents care a great deal.

These teachers perceived their students' parents and guardians as supportive and involved in their child's education.

Carol did not talk about parental involvement but expressed concern that parents might not be able to help at home. This perception did not limit her tireless attempts to communicate with them. Although she recognized that her students might be going home to a very different situation than she did growing up, she tried to make up for that by reaching out to parents in a variety of ways. She stated:

> They don't have the environment that we grew up with at home where they sit down every night and they have a discussion with their mom or their dad about their day and what they learned and there's no one to make sure that they do their reading every night.

In contrast, Ann and Eva felt less connected to their students' parents, and Eva even expressed levels of fear, confusion, and frustration when dealing with parents. She stated that only about 30% of her parents seemed concerned about their child's education and would blame her for any problems their children were having in class. She recognized that she should reach out to the parents but was unsure how and felt intimidated by them. She explained:

> Those parents scare me. Jasmine's mom got in my face that one day, and I'm just not used to big Black women getting [in my face]. It's just a different way of speaking. I've never been yelled at. I don't like yelling. I shut down with yelling.

Both of these teachers' experiences and perceptions of their students' parents captured an example of a culturally responsive issue that we needed to address in our PD sessions but did not because I did not plan for it. I planned the PD sessions to focus on the big CRCM concepts I thought were important for my new teachers (i.e., morning meetings, warm demander, race and privilege, etc.). I should have realized the disconnect some of my teachers were also feeling with the families of their students and allowed for some discussion on this topic as well. This is another example of the many areas new teachers in culturally and economically diverse schools need support with and how important it is to assess teacher needs when planning PD.

Teacher Roles and Responsibilities

One pervasive teacher question that emerged from analyzing the data from both interviews and PD sessions was whether teachers' roles should include teaching behavior, morals, and life skills. From my facilitator journal notes, we were able to address this "tug" that teachers feel between covering the curriculum and stopping instruction to deal with social, emotional, and/or behavioral issues.

Becky, Denise, and Carol all believed it was part of their job to not just teach academics but also prepare their students for the real world. Carol explained:

> I need to give them every opportunity I can so that they can be as privileged as they can be for the future. They definitely have a lot working against them that they have to not only catch up with, but then pass in order to break even. Anything that we can do as teachers to help them see those opportunities would be beneficial.

Similarly, Becky explained that during her morning meetings greeting she taught her students the proper way to shake hands with each other.

In contrast to these three teachers, Ann expressed frustration that she felt like all she taught was behavior. She was disappointed that she didn't seem able to get past this level of teaching and

expected to be able to teach more academics and curriculum during her first year. She struggled with her role as the teacher, stating, "I've never been in charge of anybody in my whole entire life, I just don't feel like—like when people come into my classroom, it's like, 'Oh wait, I'm the teacher.'" She further explained that she never worked in high school or college, so this was her first job as an adult. She commented that she still felt like she was sixteen. Her role as teacher was challenging, not only because of the amount of behavior management she had to do, but also because she lacked the feelings of authority needed in her new position of someone in charge of children.

Eva struggled with trying to connect with her students as a White woman. She wondered how she could overcome the racial barriers that she observed in her students and whether she could make a difference in their perceptions of White people. She expressed this concern:

> I can't break six years of parents telling them that White people are horrible, but I can at least, hopefully, make the connection to where I'm not in the pool of "all White people" but I'm Ms. ___, and I'm your teacher, and I care about you.

At the time of our interviews and PD sessions, Eva was noticing an increase in comments that her first graders were making about her being a White teacher and an overall increase in racial remarks to each other. She was very concerned about this disconnect and was unsure how to address this in her classroom.

Novice Teacher Classroom Challenges

Classroom Management

First-year teachers often struggle with classroom management, and this was evident in the data from this research. Denise expressed that it was challenging for her to find the right amount of structure to keep her classroom running smoothly, and tried setting timers, scheduling centers rotations, and implementing varied strategies to control students talking out and getting out of their seats without permission. Other aspects of classroom management that all teachers discussed were implementing effective procedures/routines, using positive reinforcement, and applying consequences consistently.

First, as a new-teacher mentor, I worked with all the teachers on how to establish and consistently maintain high expectations for all their students for following classroom procedures and routines. As mentioned before, Carol knew from the very beginning of the school year how important these structures were going to be from her internship experiences. During her pre-interview she felt like her water, pencil, and bathroom procedures were working well. However, Denise and Ann were struggling with the basics of management: routines, procedures, consistency, etc. It was as if they were still managing their classrooms on a survival level, unable to move from a basic classroom management level to a more culturally responsive one.

Second, all five teachers noted the need to be more positive and how effective positive reinforcement was in shaping their students' behaviors. Finally, applying consequences consistently was a big challenge for four of the five teachers (Becky, Ann, Denise, and Eva).

Extreme Behavior Issues

All five teachers struggled with how to de-escalate an aggressive student and/or situation before it became a physical fight. Teachers described situations in which students began having a conflict that involved screaming at each other or throwing things at each other and then suddenly there was a fight in their classroom. These teachers felt challenged and underprepared for how to intervene at the right moment so they could successfully talk the student(s) down and prevent a

potentially dangerous act of physical aggression from occurring. Ann explained, "I don't know what to do when they throw a chair. I feel like I need to know how to get the rest of them to stop doing it." This type of teacher need was difficult for me to address in our PD sessions.

As a facilitator, I struggled with which physical aggression "dilemmas" were worth discussing and whether they were an example of how a teacher can intervene in a culturally responsive way. For example, in my journal I described my own growth as a culturally responsive educator:

> I find myself questioning how far along I am in the process. For example, Ann was discussing how shocked she was by the name calling in her classroom. At first, my reaction was to agree how inappropriate and rude it was. Then I started to think about how it may be more of a form of "ribbing" which was discussed in one of my lit review articles (Ware, 2006) and how this is an acceptable form of banter between Black students. So, what do we as White middle-class female teachers do about it? Should we recognize that in their homes or neighborhoods this type of communication is accepted or even appreciated but then explain it is not ok in schools? Do we encourage "code switching" and discourage what may be a culturally acceptable behavior but leads to escalated physical aggression inside a classroom?

I did receive some help from Carol during Ann's protocol. She asked Ann if she was stopping instruction to address the smaller behaviors before they escalated. Ann did not and again referenced that struggle she had with teaching academics versus behavior. Then Carol suggested that she teach her students replacement or alternative behaviors to getting angry and acting in a physically aggressive way. She shared how this seemed to help with her students at the very beginning of the year. Teaching replacement behaviors was obviously an important and conscious effort that Carol made as a teacher:

> These children's natural instinct is to fight and to bow up and get really defensive and so we're working on talking through our feelings. I figured out if I can get it when it's like they are still in the verbal stage and help them talk through it, it's a lot easier for them to work out their problem more effectively.

Carol recognized the importance of teaching students how to communicate with each other about their problems rather than to resort to physical aggression, and this was helpful in sharing this with Ann. This is an example of CRCM since Carol focused on teaching replacement behaviors instead of just punishing students.

Teacher Isolation: Survival and Feelings of Failure

For two of the five teachers, this first year was extremely challenging. As their mentor, I expected them to struggle with feelings of failure and isolation. However, the degree to which they were struggling was alarming. Ann literally referred to herself as a "failure" and explained:

> The past three weeks have been hell in my class. I go home every day and I just want to cry. Then I feel so helpless, like I can't get them to do what I want, and I just don't know if I'm going to make it.

Eva explained how she felt "duped" into being hired at such a tough school and that she would never make the mistake again of not doing more research on the demographics before accepting a teaching position.

One positive impact our work together had on all five teachers was the opportunity to talk openly in a trusting PLC setting about their struggles and this helped to alleviate their feelings of isolation. They all commented that it was nice to realize you are not alone and to listen to the group members describe common problems they were all experiencing at their school.

Discussion

Since this study was conducted as action research and I was studying my own practice, there are limitations to the implications of these findings to a broader audience. However, there are a few big ideas to discuss. As I design PD for new teachers in the future, I need to ask the question, "Do they need it?" Carol had a strong background in being a culturally responsive teacher and managing her classroom. Although she still struggled in some areas, she was not in the same state of survival as the other four teachers. School and district leaders in areas that service culturally and economically diverse populations should be conscientious during the interview process to make sure their new teachers have had experiences in these types of settings and have the mindset it takes to work effectively with students of color and from poverty.

There is also evidence that there is a great need for further PD in this area and for mentoring support. New teacher induction programs tend to be designed and delivered in large groups with a "one size fits all" approach in large districts. Is there a way to change this and offer small groups designed as PLCs? For some teacher preparation programs, there is a need for coursework on CRCM and internships at high-needs schools with majority Black populations. New teachers need this kind of support if we expect them to not only forge ahead in their careers and remain in the profession, but most importantly, if they are to provide an equitable, high-quality education for all students they teach.

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