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Teacher Recruitment, Preparation, and Retention in Mississippi: Issues and Solutions

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Located in the southeastern United States, Mississippi is known as the Magnolia State, full of hospitality and vitality. Mississippi has eight colleges and universities that prepare personnel for special education and/or related services, and two community colleges that also offer programs.

This paper reviews national issues in the supply of and demand for teachers, particularly teachers from diverse racial/ethnic populations, and provides data on these issues as they occur in Mississippi. It also discusses current initiatives and recommendations for recruitment and retention in Mississippi, and concludes with an overview of the Responsive Educator Model which is the conceptual framework for teacher preparation at Jackson State University.

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The National Picture

The issue of the recruitment and retention of minority teachers entered into public policy and academic discourse during the 1980s when major concerns were raised about the diminishing pool of minority teachers (Cole, 1986). Researchers and policy makers recognized the widening racial/ethnic disparity between the student and teacher populations. While the United States student enrollment was becoming more diverse, the opposite appeared to be occurring among the nation's public school teachers. This contrast continues, and has become complicated by recent economic and educational changes, such as large impending teacher retirements, increasing attrition, rising student enrollments, and reductions in class sizes as part of school improvement initiatives.

There are several reasons why the minority teacher shortage continues to be a challenge. Some teachers of all races face burnout and frustrations on the job, such as discipline problems, school violence, poor working conditions, and lack of support from colleagues and the school district (Enwefa & Enwefa, 1999; Spellman, 1988). Teachers' salaries are low compared to salary for other professionals, and this continues to lower the prestige and career interest for many diverse teachers (Enwefa & Enwefa, 1999). Teachers also find alternative career opportunities outside of the teaching field.

As the 20th century concluded, the national teacher population was 90 percent white and 74 percent female (Snyder, 1998). In contrast, approximately 35 percent of students in classrooms nationally were from minority populations:

16 percent African American; 14 percent Hispanic; 3.8 percent Asian/Pacific Islander; 1 percent American Indian/Alaskan Native; and 64.2 percent white (Snyder, 1998). A study earlier in the 1990s showed that, the higher the number of minority students in a school, the higher the percentage of minority teachers; 68 percent of African American teachers worked in schools whose minority enrollment was more than 50 percent; and 67 percent of white teachers worked in schools with a minority enrollment of 30 percent or less (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1994).

Today about one-third of school-aged children in the United States are children of color. It has been projected that, from 1990 to 2010, the school-aged population will increase by more than 20 percent -- from 34 million to 42 million (Snyder, 1998). The number of teachers in the United States is estimated by the National Center for Education Statistics to be 3.1 million (Snyder, 1998). In order to meet the rising student enrollments and teacher retirements, school districts will have to hire approximately 200,000 teachers annually over the next decade (Fideler & Haselkorn, 1999). By the year 2020, children of color will make up 46 percent of the public school population, yet fewer than 5 percent of the teachers will be persons of color if present trends continue (Snyder, 1998). In addition, 9 percent of teachers leave the profession in the first year of teaching while another 30 percent or more leave within the first five years nationally (Yasin, 1994). The populations most affected by this attrition live in urban and poor communities.

Despite the need for teachers from diverse backgrounds, and despite various initiatives to meet this need across the country, their numbers continue to remain low. Some researchers have cited the lack of academic, financial, and moral support as primary obstacles to minority teachers entering in the field of teaching (Yasin, 1994). Others point to low prestige, low salaries, and social mobility factors as significant obstacles which, in comparison to other professions, adversely affect the teaching profession (Robinson, 1981; Dupre, 1986). Moreover, it is contended

that standardized tests such as the National Teacher Examination (NTE) and Praxis series are barriers to the recruitment of minority teachers and greatly contribute to the low minority representation in the teaching force (Darling-Hammond & Dilworth, 1990; Gifford, 1985).

School districts across the country have been faced with a magnitude of challenges concerning teacher recruitment and retention. The longer the problem continues, the more serious its effects on the educational system.

Mississippi's Study of Recruitment and Retention

Predominantly a rural state, Mississippi has struggled for years with teacher recruitment and retention and also faces a serious shortage of minority teachers. In 1997, a Public Education Forum, composed collaboratively of business, education, and legislative partners, began to examine systematically Mississippi's educator population. The ultimate goal has been to develop and recommend strategies for attracting, supporting, and retaining quality educators. The Forum identified four major objectives:

- * Prepare a profile of practitioners in the State's K-12 system;
- * Develop a profile of graduates from all teacher education programs in the state;
- * Identify benchmarks to monitor the vitality of the educator pipeline; and
- * Formulate a long-range plan to address recruitment and retention.

The initial efforts have focused on profiling the teacher workforce and evaluating supply and demand issues. The Mississippi Department of Education, the institutions for higher learning (IHLs), The Public Employees Retirement System, and The Forum's Center for Educational Analysis have also collected information on what motivates practicing educators in the field. The data that were compiled were used to develop profiles of Mississippi teachers, administrators, and teacher education graduates.

Mississippi Findings

Table 1 shows that the demand for teachers has been expanding (Enwefa, Enwefa, Jurden, Banks, & Buckley, 2001). Table 2 shows that the majority of Mississippi's teachers are Caucasian and female (Enwefa et al., 2001). However, the State's school districts employ a higher percentage of African American teachers (27.8 percent) than the average hired within the Southeast region (17 percent) and substantially higher than the national average (7 percent). Nonetheless, Mississippi's proportion of African American teachers contrasts sharply with its school-aged population: 45 percent of children under age 18 are African American, and 52 percent are white (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2001).

Too many teachers decide to leave their positions. Across the State's 152 counties, more than 40 percent of teachers work in education for one to two years and then relocate out of state for various reasons. The number of teachers who are leaving exceeds the number of new teachers who are entering positions in Mississippi's public schools (Enwefa et al., 2001). (See Tables 3 and 5.) In addition, a rapidly growing number of Mississippi teachers and administrators are on the verge of becoming eligible to retire, and there are serious concerns about how to replace them (Enwefa et al., 2001). (See Table 4.) In 1995, if all teachers eligible to retire had done so, more than 4,000 new teachers would have been needed to fill the vacancies.

Although demand has been increasing, the number of teachers entering positions in Mississippi's public schools profession is not sufficient (Table 5). Further, prospective teachers have been affected by various licensure tests that tend to screen out minorities disproportionately.

Table 1. Teachers Employed in Mississippi Public Schools, 1998-99 to 2000-01

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Teachers Employed</u>
1998-1999	29,939
1999-2000	30,782
2000-2001	31,017

Table 2. Racial/Ethnic Characteristics of Mississippi Teachers, 2000-2001

<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>	<u>Year</u>
Caucasian	22,857
African American	8,058
Other race/ethnicity	102

Table 3: Teachers Leaving Employment in Mississippi, 1997-2000

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Teachers Leaving Positions</u>
1997-1999	2,524
1998-2000	2,471
2000-2001	2,868

Table 4. Teachers at Retirement Age in Mississippi, 1998-99 to 2000-01

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Teachers at Retirement Age</u>
1998-1999	5,236
1999-2000	5,755
2000-2001	5,900

Table 5. New Teachers Entering Mississippi Public Schools, 1998-99 to 2000-01

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of New Teachers Entering Positions</u>
1998-1999	1,953
1999-2000	2,373
2000-2001	2,112

Regional Findings

By and large, teachers in the Southeastern region are Caucasian and female. The typical teacher has been in the classroom for 14 years, and is paid far less than teachers in other regions of the United States. Approximately 42 percent hold advanced degrees -- far fewer than the national average of 56 percent. Only two states (Alabama and Kentucky) can claim that a greater share of their teachers have master's degrees than the national average. Teachers in the Southeast are also more likely than teachers in other regions to plan to leave teaching as soon as possible, more likely to perceive their efforts as a waste of time, and less likely to remain as long as they are able in the teaching profession.

Incentives for Teaching in Mississippi

The Mississippi State Department of Education developed a survey instrument to measure the attitudes of educators entering and leaving the profession. Based on the survey results, the State's educational system has developed several incentives to encourage teachers to remain in and move to Mississippi.

- The Critical Needs Teacher Scholarship Program provides such benefits as tuition, fees, books, and costs of room and board for teacher education candidates preparing to work in areas of critical need.
- The William F. Winter Scholar Loan Program offers up to \$1,000 for college freshmen and sophomores, and \$300 for juniors and seniors.
- The Mississippi Teacher Fellowship Program (MTFP) provides tuition, books, materials and fees for a maximum of three years.
- The Mississippi School Administrator Sabbatical Program pays teacher salary with fringe benefits for teachers who attend and complete preparation programs to certify in school administration.
- Moving expenses of up to \$1,000 are reimbursed for teachers relocating in Mississippi.
- Housing assistance for teachers consists of loans of up to \$6,000 for down payments and closing costs of teachers relocating to teach in critical shortage areas.
- The Mississippi Teacher Center was created to educate high school students on the importance of teaching as a career. The Center is also responsible for recruitment and retention of teachers in critical shortage areas (biology, math, physical sciences, English, and elementary education).

Other Suggestions for Improving Recruitment and Retention in Mississippi

There are many reasons why the teacher shortage continues to be a challenge. Some teachers face burnout and frustrations on the job, such as discipline problems, school violence, poor working conditions, and lack of support from colleagues and the school district. Salaries are low as compared to salaries for other professionals, which continues to reduce the prestige of the profession. Many teachers find other career opportunities outside of the teaching field. Despite many efforts, the number of minority teachers continues to decline. Listed as follows are some suggestions for improving recruitment and retention in Mississippi, as adapted from Enwefa, Enwefa, Jurden, Banks, and Buckley (2001).

- Collaboration among all K-12 schools, colleges, universities, and community colleges;
- Creation and funding of mentoring programs for beginning teachers that provide supports and enhance their teaching skills;
- Development of high-quality pathways into teaching for recent graduates in related fields, mid-career changers, and paraprofessionals already in the classroom;
- Reallocation of resources in order to invest in preparing more teachers and in technoliteracy among teachers;
- Field experiences directly related to inclusive classroom teaching;
- Development of extended graduate-level teacher preparation programs that provide year-long internships in school settings that serve a diversity of learning needs;
- Rewards that acknowledge the contributions of minority teachers to quality education of all children;
- Connections with local churches and community organizations, along with public forums about education and teacher education;
- Development of email buddy systems for teachers, and of local teachers' clubs;
- Development of pre-collegiate programs to interest students in teaching careers;
- Recruitment initiatives that involve community colleges.

Historically Black College Universities

Today there are 117 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) in the United States. Many of the HBCUs have implemented a variety of teacher education programs at the undergraduate and graduate level to reflect their dedication and mission for improving the disproportionately low number of minority teachers. In existence for more than 130 years, HBCUs have developed significant capacities for preparing general and special educators of diverse backgrounds. A number of these institutions have put in place the recruitment and retention initiatives described above.

There are three HBCU institutions in Mississippi that have been producing a large number of teachers. Jackson State University, Mississippi Valley State University, and Alcorn State University all sponsor various annual job fairs; offer mentoring and tutoring; provide individual advisement programs; and support various internships, recruitment packages, technical assistance activities, and supports for students.

The driving force for State initiatives to recruit and retain minority teachers began as a result of legislative actions by State boards of teacher education and teacher certification commissions (Darling-Hammond & Dilworth, 1997). However, these initiatives to address minority teacher shortages did not arrive as quickly as needed (Clewell, 1995), although, according to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (1994, 1998), most States have instituted some type of minority teacher recruitment and retention program. Some important activities that have been State-initiated include: organizing task forces to examine the extent of the problem; hiring and designating State employees to work on minority teacher recruitment efforts; offering financial incentives to prospective trainees; mandating school districts and teacher education programs to develop minority recruitment plans and making State funds available to them for this purpose (Clewell, 1995).

Although the Federal government's efforts to increase the representation of minority teachers may not be as conspicuous as that of the States and private organizations, an often cited national effort is the Consortium for Minorities in Teaching Careers (CMTC) (Enwefa & Enwefa, 1999). In special education, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs has funded the Alliance Project at Vanderbilt University to encourage the preparation of more graduates from HBCUs and other minority institutions of higher education. Private organizations' initiatives have also contributed greatly to minority teacher recruitment efforts. Most private sector activities have focused on four groups: pre-collegiate, collegiate, paraprofessional, and mid-career populations. Privately-supported programs are often designed to remove obstacles to the recruitment of minority teachers, such as educational background, cultural and community concerns, social and economic issues (Gordon, 1994).

Jackson State University's Responsive Educator Model

Jackson State University has implemented programs in Mississippi to address the teacher shortage, particularly in rural districts that are unable to attract sufficient numbers of certified teachers to fill vacancies. The recruitment and preparation of educators who are best able to meet the needs of our diverse student population is one strategy to reduce the disproportionate representation of African American children in special education classes across Mississippi and the United States (Enwefa & Enwefa, 1999). The teacher characteristics and qualities to be valued are embodied in the tenets of the *Responsive Educator Model* (Jackson State University, 2001), which is the conceptual framework that guides the selection and preparation of teacher candidates at Jackson State University. This framework posits the following beliefs and principles about effective education, and consequently, effective educators.

Effective education is responsive to social change. Social change, such as that caused by the industrial revolution -- and now the technological revolution -- brings new knowledge bases and new paradigms for conceptualizing how we should do what we must do. This change signals the need for educators to develop new competencies in order to sustain the home-school relationships that are essential to supporting the education of all children. Overall, educators must be sensitive to new knowledge bases that emerge from social change, and understand how they impact education and subsequently influence the need for change in the schools.

Effective education is responsive to diverse student populations. A joint publication released by the American Council on Education and The Education Commission of the States showed not only that ethnic minorities account for at least one-third of the American population but also that these groups continue to grow seven times faster than the European-American population groups (Banks, 1996). Children of color are the majority school-age population in the nation's 25 largest school districts. The American tapestry becomes even more diverse when one factors in the unprecedented numbers of "new wave" immigrants from Southeast Asia and other countries, along with the indigenous groups who now feel empowered to demand full recognition of their cultural heritage and unique identities they once felt compelled to hide. Further, new skills are needed to address the needs of children referred to as "English language learners," who do not possess fluency in any dialect of the English language.

Traditionally, schools have responded well primarily to those children who possess the "right" characteristics or cultural capital (MacLeod, 1988). School appears to be made for these children, as their experiences, values, and beliefs are consistent with the expectations of the institution. These children seem to fit in with relative ease and therefore benefit from the opportunities schools provide, because these opportunities are structured in ways that embrace the values and beliefs they possess by virtue of belonging to the more privileged social class.

When examining the challenges posed by massive diversity, however, it is imperative to understand that public schools present numerous opportunities that many children cannot enjoy equally because of the fundamental differences in the cultural capital that diverse children possess. Cultural capital refers to the general cultural backgrounds, knowledge, dispositions and skills that are passed on from one generation to the next. Clearly, children from more privileged backgrounds inherit cultural capital that is substantially different from their less affluent peers (Colvin, 1921), but schools value and emphasize the former at the expense of the latter.

If we are truly committed to teaching all the nation's children, we must prepare educators who can adjust methods, curriculum, and service approaches to accommodate the cultural diversity of learners, i.e., educators who truly understand how these learners best experience learning. When educators possess the knowledge base and understanding to respond to and respect diversity, culture, and ethnicity, this paves the way to improve service delivery for all children (Enwefa & Enwefa, in press a).

Effective education is responsive to demands for educational service that demonstrates creativity, diverse knowledge, and a repertoire of professional education skills. This principle is logically linked to the previous discussion about diversity. To help students learn, teachers in K-12 settings and institutions of higher learning must possess a repertoire of educational strategies and skills that enable them to share knowledge effectively with diverse learners and suggest that diverse classroom practices be accompanied by diverse assessment tools. Despite the incongruent language and linguistic patterns now germane to the schoolhouse and the diverse cultural backgrounds of school children, educators continue to make critical decisions about children and their futures on the basis of traditional assessment procedures that have been institutionalized. In both early and recent work on assessment (e.g., Colvin, 1921; Figueroa & Garcia, 1997), it has been emphasized that the validity of all mental measurements rests on the fundamental assumption that those being assessed have had common opportunity to learn the skills, facts, principles, and methods or procedure exemplified in the assessment instruments. Thus, the use of standardized instruments to determine the futures of children must be regarded as ludicrous, misguided practice. Rather, educators must build repertoires of professional skills, assessment tools and procedures that do a better job of identifying the talents and abilities of

culturally different children -- including both formal and informal screening and assessment procedures (Obiakor, Algozzine, Thurlow, Gwalla-Ogisi, Enwefa, Enwefa, & McIntosh, 2002).

Effective education is responsive to the need for critical thinking. Educators who can think beyond the status quo are needed at all levels. Urabanski (1988) observed that the problem with schools is not that they are no longer as good as they once were. The real problem is that today's schools are precisely what they always were, while the world around them has changed significantly. Schools should become restructured as centers of inquiry and reflection, and teachers should be trained to think beyond those pedagogical practices that are rooted in unexamined traditions.

Effective education is responsive to the interdependent relationship between communication and learning. Essentially, educators must demonstrate effective communication skills in a variety of forms and through a variety of technologies and media. Technology can provide help in ways different from past educational approaches to assist all categories of students to learn and to become critical thinkers and problem solvers (Enwefa & Enwefa, in press b). Skills in the use of new technologies require the development of techno-literacy. Techno-literacy suggests that we as educators have a responsibility to make schools better places for meeting the needs of children, all of whom must be given the opportunity to acquire skills needed to function in a highly technological society (Banks, Searcy, & Omoregie, 1998).

We must come to grips with the reality that changes that accompany the movement into an economy driven by information and information technologies are as profound as those which accompanied the earlier movement from agriculture to industry. As we examine traditions that guide pedagogical practices, we must examine, as well, the ways we communicate with each other and with our children, and the ways we empower children to communicate within a global economy.

Effective education is responsive to the need for accountability in education and to the need for sharing the responsibility for education. Accountability must extend to educators at colleges and universities who must accept responsibility for ensuring that the practitioners who are prepared really possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to provide effective professional service to diverse children and in diverse settings. All stakeholders must work to ensure that research-based standards used to accredit programs and certify personnel are tied to successful learner outcomes. Professionals must further ensure that such standards are met by all who have any share of responsibility for educating children. Educators must be able to work successfully together and collaborate within communities to promote effective education for all.

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