

The Ethics of Recruiting Educators of Color

Doris A. Santoro, Julia Hazel, with Cara Furman

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Cara Furman: What is the ethics of teacher recruitment, retention and development with attention to demoralization? To get at this question, we offer a dialogue. Philosophy used to be a discipline of dialogue, or oral communication. There is a lively tradition of feminist thinkers, and feminist thinkers of color in particular, writing in dialogue. We, as teachers, are always talking to other people but often these dialogues are not visible as scholarly product. This chance to be in dialogue, and to bring that dialogue forward, is exciting and important.

Doris Santoro: I am a professor of education at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine. There, I am a teacher educator and I teach a wide variety of courses. I identify as a philosopher of education who engages in empirical research. I am a former educator, and I am white. I have been studying the phenomenon of what I call teacher demoralization for about 15 years. I developed the term demoralization to contrast it with the ubiquitous label of burnout that had been applied to teachers who were dissatisfied with their work.

Burnout focuses significantly on the individual and their store of resources, and their ability to either protect or replenish those resources. Demoralization focuses on the environment in which an individual works and their ability, or their lack thereof, to be able to access the moral rewards of their work. The

moral rewards are what makes this work good. What makes it rewarding beyond material rewards of salary and even time? Does it give you a sense that you're contributing to your community? Does it give you the satisfaction that you are giving students what they need or deserve? I've thought about demoralization in terms of if teachers believe they are able to do good by their profession, and if they're able to do good by their students.

I've also described an aspect of demoralization that happens when a teacher does not have their moral claims recognized as moral. That might be the case when someone says, what we're doing here in the curriculum is really problematic because it's not serving students, and we need to change it and go in this direction. An example of those moral claims not being recognized as moral might be when a leader or policy maker assumes "Oh, you're lazy and you don't want to change or you don't want to try this new thing" rather than being open to the interpretation, "Oh, we hear that you're concerned about students, and their welfare." The moral concern is interpreted as personal and selfish rather than one that might be professional or other-regarding.

What we're going to talk about today with Julia is a new form of demoralization that's emerged through research that I have been doing with Julia and the

rest of our research team.¹ I have come to wonder: What happens when the teachers making moral claims, by virtue of being people of color, are not recognized as capable of making moral claims at all? What are the implications of that? I recognize that in doing this research, focusing solely on the experience of the *moral* concerns of educators of color, that it's not just that their moral concerns aren't being heard, but they're not even being recognized as people who are expressing moral concerns.

Julia Hazel: I am a Black queer educator. I was a public school teacher for sixteen years at the elementary and middle school levels; first in Brooklyn, New York for several years, and then in Portland, Maine. During much of the time that I was teaching in Portland, I was also informally organizing BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] staff, and doing work to develop professional development around antiracism for teachers. And then in 2021, almost exactly a year ago, I stepped into a new role for the Portland Public Schools as Director of BIPOC Career Pathways and Leadership Development. In a nutshell, it's really about recruitment and retention of BIPOC educators to our district as well as listening to people's career goals and helping to advance them. This is obviously closely tied to Doris' research because of the moral implications of recruitment.

I have also lived the experience of demoralization at different points in my teaching career as well as the experience of having been one of the only, or one of a couple, BIPOC teachers in a building. In my current role, as well as in my research with Doris and Alberto Morales, it really complicates this idea that, you know, the work is just to change the

numbers [of BIPOC educators in schools], and then everything else will follow.²

Doris Santoro: That's a great setup for the concerns that I wanted to be in dialogue with you about today. In our research together, we have asked BIPOC educators: What are the changes that need to happen to make schools good for BIPOC educators? The philosophical language I use around that is flourishing. Put another way, how can schools be environments where BIPOC educators can thrive personally and professionally?

As a white educator, until I interviewed many BIPOC educators, I couldn't see that it wasn't only that BIPOC educators' claims were not being recognized as moral claims, but that BIPOC educators were not being recognized as moral subjects. What I mean by that is BIPOC educators are not being seen as persons who can make moral claims or who have moral selfhood.

One thing I do want to be abundantly clear about is that when I say moral, I don't mean some form of righteousness. I mean having concerns that some people might call ethical, or that we might say involve goodness, rightness, and justice. For instance, consider the following scenario: A white administrator penalizes a BIPOC educator for their deliberate and anti-racist choices about how they are approaching discipline with Black boys. While I don't know what the white administrator was thinking, I do know, from interviews, that the BIPOC educator was making moral choices about how Black boys should be treated in the context of anti-Black racism and a carceral state. Instead of the administrator recognizing these as morally purposeful moves, the administrator conveyed their

¹ The research team includes Julia Hazel, Doris Santoro, Keith Benson, Alberto Morales, Dave Stieber, and Darryl Yong.

² Doris, Julia and Alberto Morales conducted and wrote the 2021 Portland Public Schools [Educators of Color Insights Report](#), [Executive Summary](#), and Doris A.

Santoro, Julia Hazel, Alberto Morales, "Cultivating Anti-Racist Professional Cultures that Support Educators of Color," *Kappan* 104, no. 1 (2022): 22-27. <https://kappanonline.org/anti-racist-professional-cultures-educators-of-color-santoro-hazel-morales/>.

interpretation of the BIPOC educator's actions as laxness, incompetence, or/and a failure to adhere to behavioral norms.

The administrator did not initiate a conversation about the choices the BIPOC educator made, why they were making them, thus opening the door to a potential moral disagreement. Instead, the BIPOC educator felt as though it was assumed that there was no moral motivation behind what they were doing with these Black boys.

Cara Furman: Could you explicitly connect the dots between morality and decisions about management and transition?

Doris Santoro: We're coming back to this idea of goodness, rightness, and justice. The BIPOC educator was making decisions about what is good for Black boys what is good for a classroom community. What is the right way to teach Black boys in a culture of anti-Blackness? And what is the just way to treat all of their students in the classroom? Yet, the educator believed that they were not viewed by their supervisor as engaging in deliberate moral and pedagogical choices.

It is problematic when anyone experiences moral nonrecognition. However, I think that this is a particular problem concerning BIPOC educators for two reasons. One, white educators are the vast majority of teachers; white educators and teacher educators tend to be people who occupy recruiting roles. We, white educators, are recruiting people into a profession where they should have the opportunity to thrive, to flourish. But it is a place where BIPOC educators are diminished and demoralized. Yet, there's another level of this. So much of this recruitment of BIPOC educators is because we hope

to make schools better places: To have teachers be more representative of the students they're teaching; we expect BIPOC teachers will help transform curriculum; and help to shift institutional racism. But if the people that we are recruiting are experiencing moral nonrecognition, they never end up having the opportunity to get any traction to make those changes.

One example that I'm quite compelled by, and disappointed that it's still relevant, familiar to many educators, is Lisa Delpit's article, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator."³ In it, she raises questions as a Black educator about the proper form of literacy instruction for black children. The ways white colleagues dismiss Delpit matches this description that I'm hearing from BIPOC educators today of moral disregard or moral nonrecognition.⁴ Delpit's critique of reading instruction is heard by her white colleagues as idiosyncratic, something that's just her opinion, rather than a result of the deep expertise and wisdom that she brings to this work. So, according to the logic of recruiting a more diverse teaching cadre of teachers, we were hoping that hiring a Lisa Delpit might improve our school, but then a Lisa Delpit shows up and we white educators completely disregard not only *what* she says but *who* she is.

How are we going to transform schools that are places that philosopher Chris LeBron calls places of bad character?⁵ He explains that we learn our racial lessons from institutions. My white daughter learns racial lessons in school when all of the kids in her advanced reading group are white, even when she is in a school with a majority of BIPOC students. She learns a moral lesson and a racial lesson that white students are smarter than Black students. And thus, we can imagine that extending to a moral lesson of

³ Lisa A. Delpit, "Skills and Other Dilemmas of a Progressive Black Educator," *Harvard Educational Review* 56, no. 4 (1986): 379-385.

⁴ The reaction of Delpit's white colleagues is explored in Lisa A. Delpit, "The Silenced Dialogue: Power and

Pedagogy in Educating Other People's Children," *Harvard Educational Review* 58, no. 3 (1988): 280-298.

⁵ Christopher J. Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

white students are better than Black students or BIPOC students.

Schools also retain their bad character by teaching us (white educators) the moral lesson that BIPOC educators don't have anything to say about how we should transform schools.

Julia Hazel: There are so many significant points along the recruitment and retention path. Initially, I was thinking that the crucial point was who gets offered the job. I've since realized that after people get offered the job, they must navigate this environment that has been constructed by white people with power. For instance, BIPOC educators have to be a part of grade-level teams where they might be the only person of color. They have to do the work on a daily basis of proving legitimacy, proving competency, qualifications, and intelligence to their colleagues, and sometimes to their students. In professional development meetings they face a choice: Do I speak or do I not speak? Which is going to cost me more? Do I listen to my own ethics and knowledge? Or do I swallow what I want to say because I know it won't be heard? BIPOC educators think: I know I need to sort of strategically decide when I'm going to try to take a stance because, you know, it's quite possible that coming in here, like, there's a lot that's messed up, there's a lot that's harming children of color. And now I have this like, little bit of power, how do I try to use that?

I've been reflecting on the fact that we talk a lot about "getting the numbers better"—that if we have proportionate BIPOC educators to BIPOC students, then things will be different. Things will be more

equitable. There is an element of this belief that is true, but I also think it's shorthand for something a lot more complex. I recognize that we still have white staff who struggle to accept the premise we're saying—that we need more BIPOC staff. Yet, there's a growing group of people who accept that we shouldn't have this disparity where we have 50 percent of our students are BIPOC, but only 7 percent of our teachers are.⁶ The next place it goes to is: Can people articulate why that's important? How do they expect that to change things for students? I just think about how problematic it is when we view those BIPOC individuals as the people who we expect to be the ones to be the voice for change and the ones to point out things that aren't equitable. Then, we expect BIPOC educators to say, "I think we should do this differently." The resistance from their white colleagues to that is extraordinary.

I resonate with your comment, Doris, about BIPOC teachers being hired with a vague idea that they will make schools better. Then, we often don't have the traction to make changes or changes are resisted when they become more tangible. I think about my own experience coming into a school being the only BIPOC teacher. I had self-knowledge that I had experience; I had important ideas. And, I had lived experience as a person of color—knowing that I brought all those things. I met a lot of resistance, because there was definitely an idea that I should stay in my place; that it wasn't my place to be disrupting the status quo.

I really resonated with the Chris LeBron quotes about that dependency on the hierarchy in institutions with bad character.⁷ The racial hierarchy

⁶ These figures are for Portland Public Schools. The numbers are not that much different for the U.S. overall, about 51 percent students of color and about 12 percent educators of color.

⁷ Many of us in education might understand these background operations as what we would call the hidden curriculum. All institutions educate, not just schools. Most institutions, explains LeBron, depend on hierarchy and these hierarchies will tend to reflect what is valued by

the institution, for instance, profit or a particular kind of skill. The racialized context of the US has warped institutions; the hierarchy represents not only *what* is valued, but *who* is valued. He says, "We in very large part learn our socio-normative lessons from the institutional regimes in which we find ourselves" (Lebron, 61). The

functions so well in our schools. When you have staff that's predominantly white, it's that much easier, I think, to maintain that racial hierarchy.

Cara Furman

I hear the crux of what you're both saying is the subtle cruelty of being asked to come in to fix a particular place, and then being told to stay in "one's place." When this happens, one's moral agency is jeopardized. Can you give a concrete example of being brought in to stay in one's place?

Julia Hazel: There are people who want to work on a more diverse team and to have a more diverse school staff. They think: This is going to look good, this is going to feel good. This enthusiasm does not acknowledge the fact that if we truly include a more diverse group of people in our teaching roles and in our leadership roles, there's going to be conflict between cultural values and approaches. Introducing people who approach things differently means that you're going to be shaken up a bit. And I think that that is not well understood. Added with the fact that recruitment and promotion is only happening at a trickle. It's quite simple and subtle to stay with dominant perspective and view people who suggest or behave in ways outside of the norm as doing something wrong.

Doris Santoro: I was thinking, Julia, that moral nonrecognition is a strategy to maintain the status quo. Because if I, as a white colleague, end up not recognizing that the BIPOC is making moral claims or having the capacity to make moral claims, then they cannot challenge my own moral claims. We don't have to have a conflict and we definitely don't have to have a moral conflict.

Julia Hazel: And I think it's a little analogous to how in our culture women are discredited by being called crazy.

lessons we learn about our and others' value much depend upon our location in the social hierarchy.

Doris Santoro: I've uncritically celebrated the successes of my teacher education program, which I'm very proud of, in terms of our being able to create structures that engage, sustain, and support educators of color. About 50 percent of the students we credential in our small program are educators of color. The more I've done this research into the experiences of educators of color, I've really been asking: What am I recruiting them to go out into?

What are my responsibilities in terms of educating white pre-service educators and current white educators and leaders? I've been thinking about the power that white educators have to say, "Well, this is how we've always done it," or for a leader to write that negative evaluation about the BIPOC teacher who was making deliberate choices about how they were supporting and giving consequences to Black boys. How am I creating a teacher education program where a white teacher, who "yessed" their BIPOC colleague in a private conversation, chooses to stand up with them in the meeting and support what they're saying? For many white educators, that decision to stand up or not with the BIPOC colleague might feel trivial, at the level of, "Do I feel like it or not, or I should I just walk across the room and get a cookie right now?" I want to help white educators to recognize the extraordinary moral and political significance of that moment, and to recognize that it is a choice for real solidarity, and an opportunity to interrupt the bad character of schools.

Julia Hazel: The onus of the transformation of our schools has to be done by the white people in them, including moves like the one you just mentioned. You don't need to have like a degree in cross cultural communication. You don't have to have read all the books. It's fairly basic. Making the choice in that moment to be willing to chime in, to support, and own your power, as maybe having been in that

school community longer or being from the dominant racial group. You can choose to be deliberately inclusive.

Some of our new BIPOC teachers are doing this beautiful, incredible, skilled work that is just stunning. It's rigorous and loving. These same folks are feeling so demoralized, they want to leave. And it's not because the work is hard, the teaching is hard. It's not because the students are hard. It's because their colleagues make them feel horrible about themselves, make them feel like they don't belong. Their white colleagues communicate disrespect to them. I mean, this dissonance between what these amazing BIPOC educators are doing and how they feel about themselves in this professional context fuels my work.

I don't think people are asking the question: Why are some people making it and not others? Why is it that the new white teachers have a sense of confidence and invulnerability? That they convey that they know what they're doing? And then why is it that our new BIPOC teachers are so strong, but then feel so undermined and so criticized for, say, their non-traditional pathways to teaching or their accents?

Cara Furman: Both of you have mentioned actions to improve things, one of them being to “stand next to” a colleague in meetings. I wonder if we could close with a few other suggestions for action items at the teacher level to improve the culture of schools and create more breathing space.

Doris Santoro: Echoing Julia, this is not rocket science for white teachers to take a moment to just check ourselves and say, I might not know. Let me just listen to my BIPOC colleagues.

Julia Hazel: I think listening is really big. And by listening, you're really positioning yourself with openness. And really hearing the content, but also the emotion. But that's not enough, then you need to

change the way you think and the way you act as a response to what you learn.

I think another lens is to assume intentionality *and* morality in what you see your BIPOC colleagues doing, and bring to this a curiosity. Recognizing that BIPOC staff members have different lived experiences and that that is going to inform the choices they make as educators. These differences should present learning opportunities rather than invite dismissiveness.

As humans, we've all experienced inclusion in different places, places where we really felt we belonged. And, and then thinking about what the opposite feels like, what is what does it felt like to be excluded? You know, those experiences are really painful. And I think that it came out so clearly in the research that Doris, Alberto, and I did. Experiences of exclusion are very typical, and are overwhelmingly what BIPOC staff experience on a regular basis to the point where I think it is just considered how it is and will be. And that is a great strain to put on people.

We talk about inclusion in terms of students all the time. I think we often project to students and say this is safe, or we do the same for staff. I think like, really trying to consider like, we know that our BIPOC staff aren't feeling safe and included the way things are. So what can we do that would change, that would create moves so that an inclusive culture is made with intentionality?

Cara Furman: I appreciate both of you taking the time to talk this through, and I'm so impressed with the work that that's happening. Thank you. Any last words?

Doris Santoro: I'm grateful to be able to work with two friends. It makes doing this academic work an absolute joy and pleasure even when it's heavy stuff. And I want to recognize, Julia, the additional emotional labor that you bring to this and that you

carry all the time as a Black queer woman. Thank you. I hear the emotion in your voice, and I just want to thank you for staying with us and teaching me a lot.

Julia Hazel: It's good to be here. I think we can do this. I think we can be better. I really want to see that happen. I think one of the beautiful things about this

professional role that I'm in . . . it's one thing to be trying to make a space for yourself, but now there are all these stories that I hold, all these people who I know whom I care deeply about. I'm eager to create spaces for them to be able to thrive as educators and I know we can do it. It will take commitment. It will take changes, but we can do it and it will make a tremendous difference. So let's do this.