

Meritocracy, Backlash, and Fatalism

Tempering Discourses in Teacher Diversity Efforts

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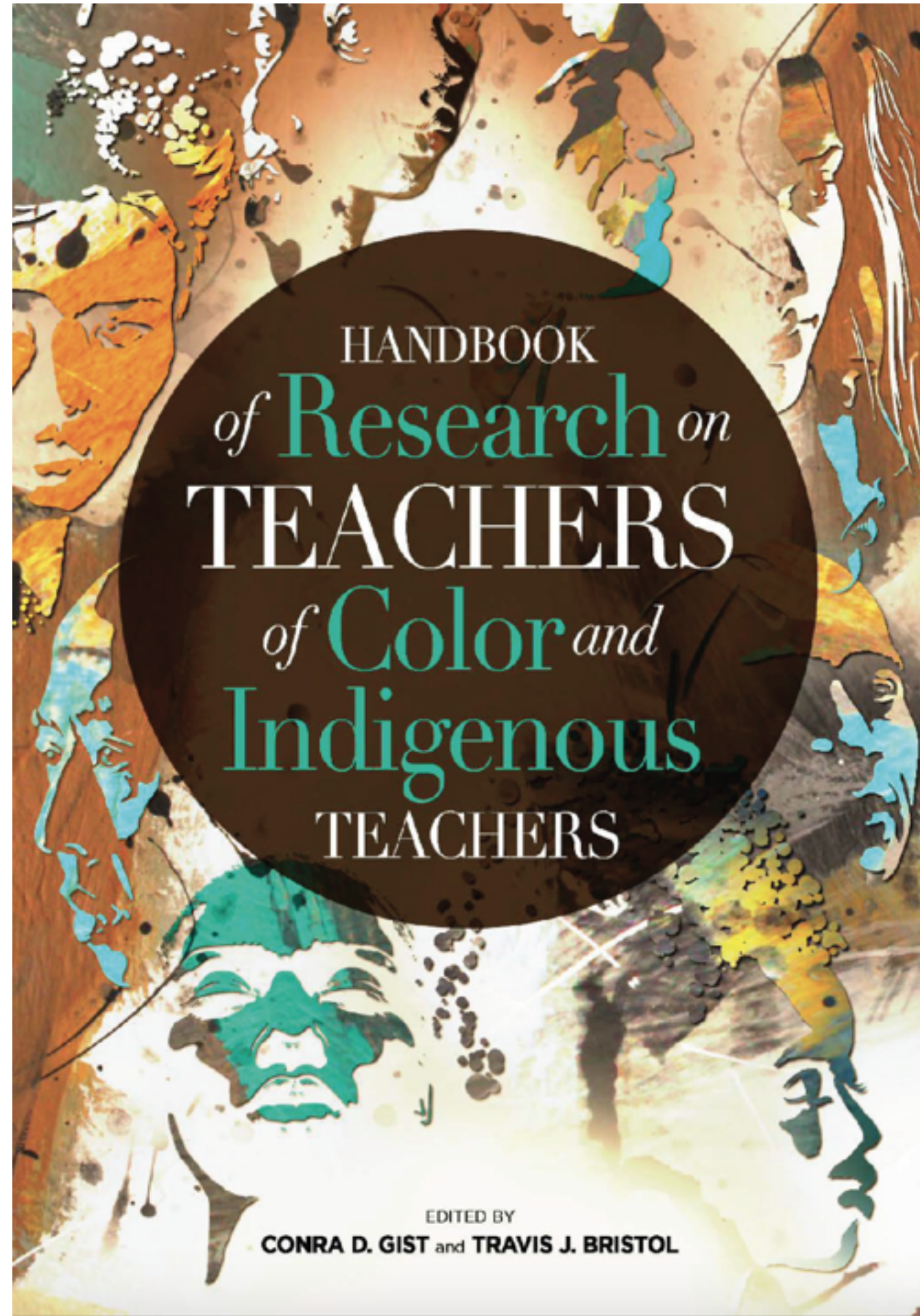
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THE STATE OF RACIAL DIVERSITY IN THE EDUCATOR WORKFORCE

2016

Framing the Research



Noonan, J., & Bristol, T. J. (2020). “Taking care of your own”: Parochialism, pride of place, and the drive to diversify teaching. *AERA Open*, 6(4), 1–12.



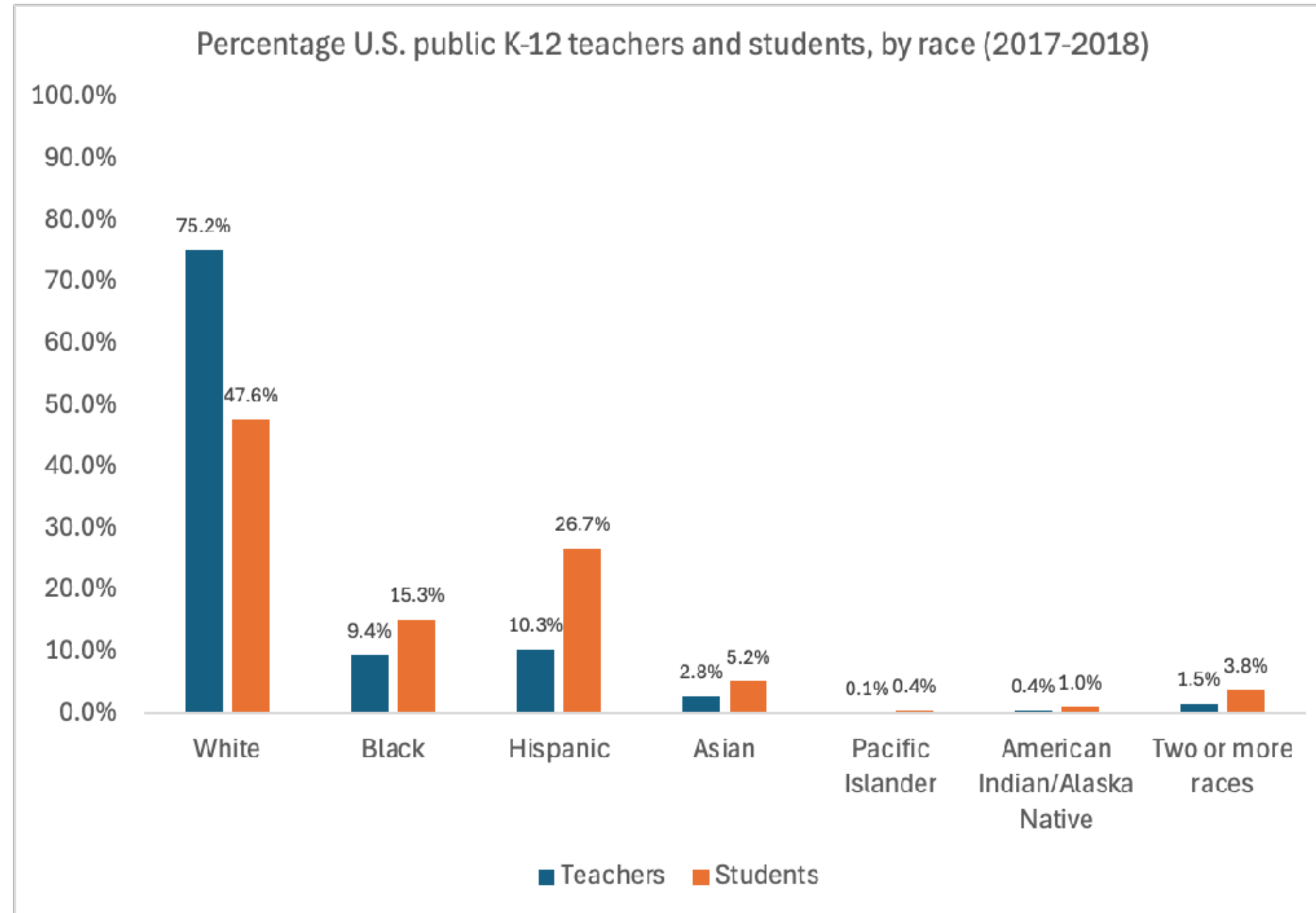
Bristol, T. J., Jones, M. E., & Noonan, J. (2024). Mixed messages and diversity management: Misalignment between district intention and action aimed at hiring teachers of color. *American Journal of Education*, 130(3), 339–362.

The Benefits

- Ethnoracial match between teachers and students of color is related to numerous benefits:
- Positive social emotional and behavioral development (Blazar, 2021; White et al., 2024; Wright et al., 2017)
- Reductions in discipline disparities (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Shirrell et al., 2024)
- Improved academic outcomes, especially for Black students (Dee, 2004; Easton-Brooks, 2019, Redding, 2019)



The Numbers



Source: NCES, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/2018menu_tables.asp



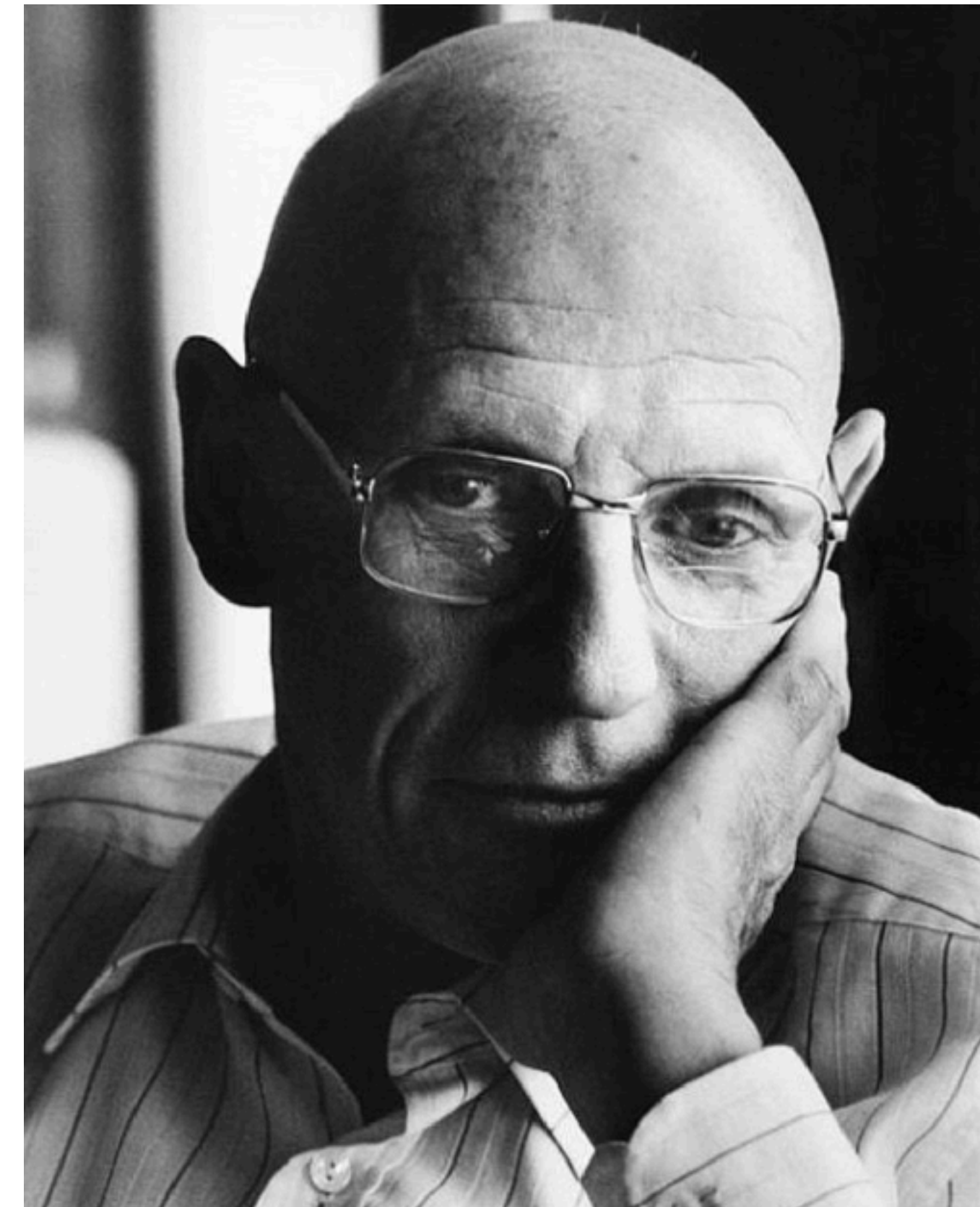
One Obstacle

- Competing discourses are not merely struggles for ideas but struggles for power (Foucault, 1972, 1980)

Diversity

Meritocracy

- Indeed, persistent bias in hiring may be driven in part by White hiring managers' beliefs about "fairness" (Durrani & Rajagopal, 2016; Quillian et al., 2017)



Methods

- **Research Site: “Millridge”**
 - 6,000 students (42.7% White); 500 teachers (90.7% White)
 - A new superintendent, a strategic plan with equity as a focus
- **Data**
 - Semi-structured interviews with educators across four school sites and district leadership (n=41)
 - Subsample of White staff (n=22): 6 district leaders, 5 school leaders, 11 teachers
- **Analytic Strategy**
 - Multiple rounds of descriptive coding (Saldaña, 2013)
 - Participant profiles (Seidman, 2013)
 - Thematic memos to surface discourse patterns



Findings

Support for Teacher Diversity

“I think that **there are educational benefits to having a diverse staff...** I think it makes for a stronger team. I think the sort of marketplace of ideas improves when you've got different perspectives... I believe that my core and believe that there has to be -- as a result needs to be something that Millridge schools focuses on. I also think it's good for our kids to see um, their faces reflected in staff and know that there are things that they can aspire, too, to become educators, become leaders within Millridge schools.”

—Superintendent

“[Diversity] is important in hiring because it is part of students' healthy development and their forming of relationships and also families to have many types of different people represented in a school. So **it's important because it helps students.**”

—MS Principal

“We’re in charge of helping all students to be successful. And if we have a student population, whether it is 5%, 10%, whatever, and **there is nobody in the building who can assimilate to what their needs truly are, then that whole population is missing,** because we don’t understand what they want or need.”

—HS teacher



Findings

Three Competing Discourses

- **Meritocracy**

privileging the need for “colorblind” or race-neutral hiring and a belief applicants should be judged on their merits and not their demographic markers (Augoustinos et al., 2005; Castilla & Benard, 2010; Son Hing et al., 2011)

- **Backlash**

centered on perceived or anticipated White grievance and fears of potential blowback to diversity efforts (Irby et al., 2019; Neal-Stanley et al., 2024)

- **Fatalism**

centered on a belief that radical or transformative change was not possible, hampered by a range of variables beyond one’s control (Kessler & Low, 2021; Tyack & Cuban, 1995)

Findings

Meritocracy Discourse

“You just can’t hire somebody because they’re diverse... And we have, you know, we’ve run into that issue before where we hire somebody because we think they fit a certain thing and it turns out they're not a good teacher.”

— HS teacher

“I’m not going to sacrifice my own—okay, I consider them my children. But like our students here are not going to get lesser education **just because we went with the person that fills the quota.** Like I won’t stand for something like that.”

— Elementary AP

Findings

Backlash Discourse

Table 1. Incidences of discourses within unique participant profiles, by role (admin vs. teacher)			
	Meritocracy	Backlash	Fatalism
School or District Administrator (n=11)	7	8	6
Teacher (n=11)	7	3	6
Total	14	11	12

“I smile, I nod. And I generally then try to walk away. You know, I don't want to make enemies.”

— HR Director

Findings

Fatalism Discourse

There aren't enough diverse candidates

- “It’s hard also because... the pool of applicants isn’t always diverse and that, you know, so what do you do about that?”

They wouldn't come here anyway

- “There’s a lot of competition for the diverse candidates... We’re not, in Millridge, the most likely winner of that process.”
- Prospective candidates of color “would walk around, probably see the lack of diversity for a stint, and I wonder if that would be a factor of them taking a job or not.”

Implications

Meritocracy



Credit: Kayana Szymczak, NY Times

Backlash



Credit: Paul Hennessey, Associated Press

Fatalism



Implications

The Problem of Whiteness

- **Research**

Focus on how White people came to accept meritocracy as culturally important, the complex and layered nature of White grievance (e.g., Leonardo, 2009; Picower, 2009; Yoon, 2012)

- **Practice**

Communities of practice as spaces for White people to explore and interrogate whiteness (e.g., Martin, 2014; Obear, 2023)

- **Policy**

Attention to the intersection of race and class, especially in rural White districts (e.g., Lavalley, 2018; Tieken, 2014)



Thank you

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