

# Racial Tensions and Teacher Engagement in Professional Learning

By Ronald F. Ferguson

The proposition that public school teachers should experience continuous improvement through active, broad-based participation in professional learning communities is now widely accepted. Unfortunately, in too many schools, participation is neither active nor broad based. This article concerns one category of explanations. It reports new findings on ways that racial tensions can affect patterns of participation in professional learning communities and discusses associated challenges for school leaders.

Data come from more than eighteen-hundred teachers surveyed in 59 secondary schools from across the United States. For these teachers, several factors predict patterns in learning community participation. These factors include the teacher's own race, his or her comfort level with students from different backgrounds, the racial composition of the school staff, and racial tensions among the adults in the building. The specific forms of participation considered are how frequently colleagues observe one another's classrooms and how often they engage together in discussing student work.

On the basis of these findings, I suggest that school leaders should not leave participation in professional learning communities to chance. Instead, they should endeavor systematically to organize and supervise professional learning activities in ways that engage teachers from all segments of the community, especially those most alienated and reluctant to become involved on their own.

## Engagement in Professional Learning

The conceptual foundation for this article comes from the Tripod Project for School Improvement. One version of the framework concerns student engagement in classrooms. However, with only minor modifications, the same framework applies to adult engagement in a school's professional learning community. The framework identifies multiple dimensions within which to consider how race-related perceptions and attitudes might affect participation in collaborative work. Applied to teachers, the framework emphasizes *Five Targets for Teacher Engagement*, *Five Types of Professional Development Incentives*, and *Five Types of Professional Community Norms and Capacities*.

Specifically, teachers will participate most actively and effectively as members of professional learning communities if they achieve the following *Five Targets for Teacher Engagement*:

(1) They **feel safe and trustful** in relationship to students, colleagues and administrators and **interested** in the work of school improvement (instead of mistrustful and uninterested);

(2) They experience a good **balance between administrative control and teacher autonomy** (instead of too little or too much of either control or autonomy);

(3) They are **ambitiously goal-oriented in their professional learning** (instead

of feeling uncommitted or ambivalent);

(4) They **work industriously** in pursuing their goals for improvement (instead of becoming disillusioned, discouraged, or disengaged in the face of difficulty); and

(5) They **experience success** in mastering professional skills and **effectiveness** teaching students in the classroom (instead of failure at mastering skills and a sense of futility in work with students).



School leaders—both administrators and teacher leaders—can influence the degrees to which teachers achieve the above by cultivating the following *Five Types of Professional Development Incentives*:

(1) **Feasibility of Success:** Goals that seem plausible, concerning both professional development and student performance;

(2) **Sense of Urgency:** A shared sense that the school's goals for teaching and learning are highly important and worth achieving as quickly as possible, without wasted time;

(3) **Stimulation:** Professional development activities and experiences that are interesting, appropriately challenging, and directly related to opportunities and challenges that teachers face in the classroom;

(4) **Supervisory Support and Relentlessness:** Supervisors who are encouraging, supportive, and relentlessly ambitious in the goals they set and the broad-based involvement they seek; and

(5) **Peer Support:** Colleagues who positively reinforce one another's efforts to improve and actively encourage broad-based participation by peers in school-level activities to achieve high goals.

For both white teachers and teachers of color, “racial tensions appear to be important impediments to professional participation.”

In addition, effective professional learning communities are characterized by the following *Five Types of Professional Community Norms and Capacities*:

- (1) **Climate:** School climates characterized by high support and high press for all, including adults;
- (2) **Distributed Leadership:** Multiple people play leadership roles and there is shared, mutual accountability for effort and outcomes;
- (3) **Professional Development Curriculum:** Leaders of professional development have (or work on developing) deep professional knowledge and focus collectively on developing and using relevant, challenging, coherent, and streamlined curricula for adult learning;
- (4) **Adult Learning Activities:** Adult learning activities are thoughtfully designed, appropriately differentiated (for subjects or skill levels) and implemented in ways that effectively involve teachers from across the school community; and
- (5) **Monitoring and Feedback:** Implementation following professional development is monitored and feedback to teachers supports effective learning for teachers at all skill levels.

Tripod Project surveys of students and teachers measure ways that conditions in schools and classrooms lead to teacher and student engagement. Here, I use data from teacher surveys in 59 schools to examine ways that a teacher's identity characteristics and those of his or her colleagues correlate with professional behaviors and experiences related to issues in the Tripod Project framework.

### The Data

The 59 schools discussed in this article represent both inner-city and suburban communities from across the nation. They come from the East Coast, the West Coast, and several states in between where the leaders have commissioned the Tripod Project organization to conduct surveys of students and teach-

ers. Hence, they represent schools and communities where leaders aim to take student and teacher perceptions into account as they plan for improvement.

Table 1 shows the percentage representation by teacher respondents of each major racial group (“race” means both race and ethnicity, including Hispanic) in three groups of schools. The three groups are defined by the percentages that white teachers represent — i.e., “40 to 60 percent,” “60 to 80 percent,” and “80 to 100 percent” — among teachers responding to the survey. Total numbers of schools and teacher respondents in each category are shown at the bottom of the table. Since teachers of color from individual groups (i.e., blacks, Hispanics,

Asians and others) represent relatively small percentages in most cells of Table 1, the remainder of this article focuses on whites as one group, and “teachers of color” as the other. Finally, we have no information about the numbers or racial composition of teachers not responding to the survey. As an approximation, the rest of this article treats the racial composition among respondents as representing the composition at the school.

Table 1

#### Racial Compositions of Teachers Responding in Four Groups of Schools

(Column Percentages)

Teacher Race	Percent White Teachers among a School's Respondents			Total
	40 to 60	60 to 80	80 to 100	
White	49%	70%	92%	
Black	11%	7%	2%	
Hispanic	15%	10%	2%	
Asian	8%	3%	1%	
Other	16%	10%	4%	
<b>Total</b>	100%	100%	100%	
<b>#Schools</b>	11	15	33	59
<b>#Teachers</b>	481	472	914	1867

### Perceptions of Racial Tension

The first of the *Five Targets for Teacher Engagement* is that teachers should feel safe and trustful of other people in the school, including students, teachers, and administrators. Here, we consider two survey items related to this target and examine the racial patterns. With regard to students, the survey asks teachers whether they agree that, “I feel equally close to students from all racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds.” With regard to other teachers, the survey asks whether, “Racial

and ethnic differences among the adults in the building create tensions.”

Panel A of Table 2 shows that white teachers and teachers of color are quite similar in their propensities to feel close to students from all backgrounds. However, it is notable that for both whites and teachers of color, the percentage that “always” feels equally close to all groups is lower when the percentage of white teachers is higher. Analysis not shown in this article establishes that the pattern is actually due to the correlation between the percentage of white teachers on the faculty and the percentage of white students in the school. White students represent four percent of the students in schools that are “40-to-60” percent white teachers, thirty-one percent in schools that are “60-to-80” percent white teachers and fifty-six percent in the schools that are “80-to-100” percent white teachers. Supplementary analysis shows that there is no relationship between the racial composition of the teaching staff and how close teachers feel to students, once we take account of the racial composition of the student body.

...no matter what the racial composition of the teaching staff, **teachers of color** are more likely than **whites** to perceive **racial tensions** among the adults in the building.

If some people are more sensitive to race-related tensions or experience them more than others, these sensitivities may manifest themselves in relationships with both students and colleagues. Accordingly, Exhibit 1 combines consideration of racial tensions among the adults with consideration of feelings about students. It makes two types of distinctions. One is the distinction between teachers who “always” versus “not always” feel equally close to students from all racial, ethnic and social class backgrounds. The Exhibit distinguishes:

Table 2

**Indicators of Teachers’ Perceptions of Safety and Trust in Their Schools as Represented by Responses to Two Survey Items**

	Panel A			Panel B		
	Percent White Teachers among a School’s Respondents			Percent White Teachers among a School’s Respondents		
	40 to 60	60 to 80	80 to 100	40 to 60	60 to 80	80 to 100
	Percentages of teachers responding “Always,” to the statement, “I feel equally close to students from all racial, ethnic and social class backgrounds.”			Percentages of teachers who agree at least slightly that, “Racial and ethnic differences among the adults in the building create tensions.”		
<b>Teachers of Color</b>	68%	63%	56%	36%	21%	23%
<b>White Teachers</b>	66%	61%	54%	18%	12%	7%

Perhaps more importantly for the present article, Panel B of Table 2 shows that no matter what the racial composition of the teaching staff, teachers of color are more likely than whites to perceive racial tensions among the adults in the building. Generally, Panel B shows that teachers of color are two- to three-times more likely than whites to perceive such tensions. Racial tensions are highest when the composition of the teaching force is 40-to-60 percent white—the most evenly split between whites and teachers of color. Conversely, tensions are lowest when whites represent the vast majority. (Note, however, that there are no schools in this sample where teachers of color are the vast majority, so there is no evidence here concerning racial tensions when white teachers are a clear minority.)

- Teachers of color, not always equally close to students from all backgrounds.
- Teachers of color, always equally close to students of all backgrounds.
- White teachers, not always equally close to students of all backgrounds.
- White teachers, always equally close to students of all backgrounds.

The other distinction concerns racial tensions among adults. For each of the four groups of teachers listed directly above, Exhibit 1 displays the percentage that agrees at least slightly that racial and ethnic differences among the adults in the building create tensions.

**Exhibit 1: Percentages of teachers who perceive racial tensions among the adults in the building.**

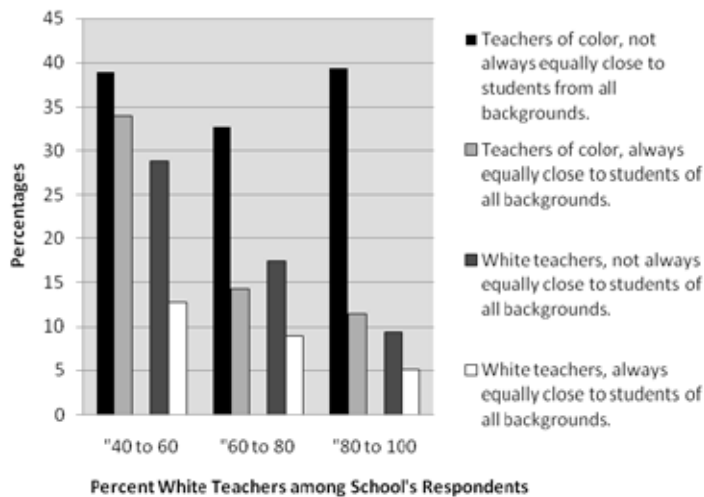


Exhibit 1 shows several patterns. First, teachers who do not always feel equally close to students from all backgrounds perceive more racial tensions among adults than teachers who do feel equally close to students from all groups. Second, teachers of color are more likely than white teachers to perceive racial tensions among adults. Third, the perception of racial tensions among teachers tends to be lowest when white teachers represent more than eighty percent of the faculty. However, the teachers of color who do not always feel equally close to students of all backgrounds represent an exception to the generalization. They are the only subgroup for whom perceptions of racial tensions are as high when whites are over 80 percent of the teachers, as when whites are only 40-to-60 percent.

### Engagement in Professional Learning

The Tripod Project teacher survey asks explicitly about two common types of professional learning community activity. Specifically, it asks, "How often, if ever, has another teacher visited your class to watch you teach for at least twenty minutes?" It also asks, "How often, if ever, have you participated in a small group discussion lasting at least half an hour, looking at student work with other teachers and brainstorming together about how to help students perform more successfully on such work?"



Exhibit 2 reports the percentages of teachers who have experienced each of these activities — visits from other teachers and discussions of student work — at least once during the survey year. For both whites and teachers of color, the Exhibit distinguishes teachers who perceive racial tensions from those who do not. Hence, the four groups that the Exhibit distinguishes are:

- Teachers of color who perceive racial tensions
- Teachers of color who do not perceive racial tensions.
- White teachers who perceive racial tensions.
- White teachers who do not perceive racial tensions.

Similarly, Exhibit 3 reports the percentages of these same four groups in relationship to the statement, "I would hesitate to ask advice from most teachers at this school, even if I needed it."

Exhibit 2 shows several interesting patterns. First, for whites in schools with 40-to-60 percent white teachers and for teachers of color in schools with 60-to-80 percent white teachers, teachers who do not perceive racial tension are much more likely to participate in professional learning community activities — classroom visitations and discussions of student work — than those who do perceive tension. Indeed, for schools with 40-to-60 percent white teachers, whites who report racial tension are only half as likely (about 30 percent) to participate in visits and discussions as white teachers who do not report tensions (almost 60 percent).

**Exhibit 2: Percentages participating at least once during the survey year in both classroom visits from colleagues and discussions of student work.**

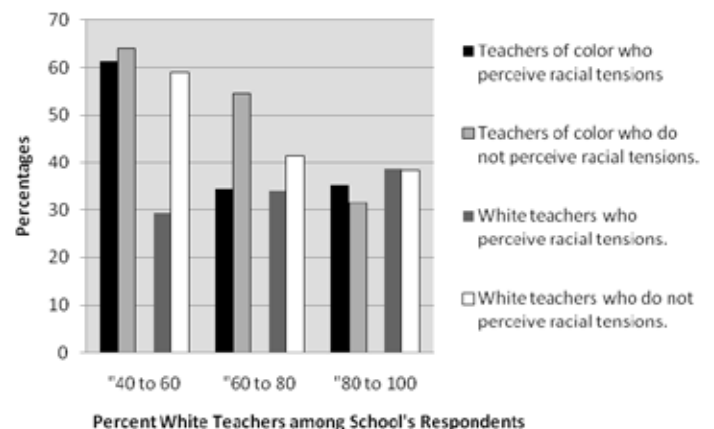
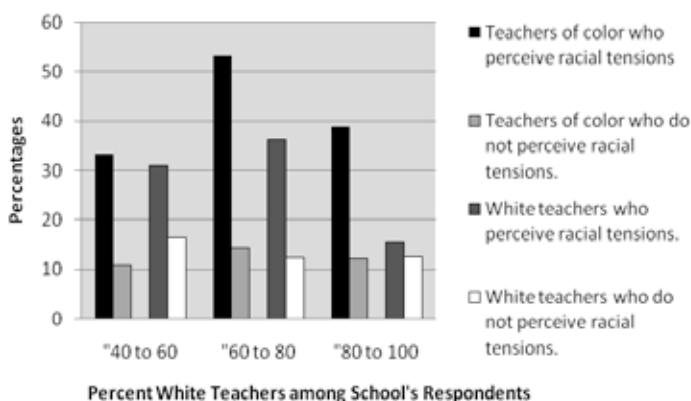


Exhibit 3 raises even more concern. One third of the teachers who report racial tensions report a reluctance to ask advice from colleagues. Specifically, they agree at least slightly that, "I would hesitate to ask advice from most teachers at this school, even if I needed it." The only group for which racial tensions do not have major implications for seeking advice from colleagues, is white teachers at schools where almost all of their colleagues are white.

**Exhibit 3: Percentages indicating they might hesitate to ask advice from most teachers at the school, even if they needed it.**



### Some Implications

The 1800 teachers and 59 secondary schools that this article discusses are not a national random sample. Instead, these schools specifically invited the survey; therefore, the findings may not generalize to the nation at large. Furthermore, views that respondents expressed may not represent colleagues at the same schools who did not answer the survey, which is another reason that the findings may not be fully representative. Nonetheless, the findings raise important issues that school leaders should consider as they endeavor to build professional communities in racially diverse schools.

This article reports evidence that racial tensions help predict both formal and informal patterns of participation in professional learning communities. While these patterns do not prove causation, the findings clearly suggest that racial tensions cause some teachers to behave in ways that retard professional growth. Perceptions of racial tension most strongly predict classroom visits and participation in discussions of student work among white teachers at schools where roughly half of their colleagues are teachers of color. Even for teachers of color, racial tensions appear to be important impediments to professional participation. As shown in Exhibit 3, over half of the teachers of color who perceive racial tension in schools where 60-to-80 percent of their colleagues are white report at least some hesitation to seek advice from colleagues. Percentages that hesitate to seek advice are lower in schools with other racial compositions, but still high enough to be of concern. In addition, the fact that teachers who perceive racial tensions are less likely than others to feel equally close to students from all racial, ethnic, and social class backgrounds suggests that racial sensitivities may have deep roots among many of the teachers who report them.

The Tripod Project framework offers a number of distinctions that school leaders might usefully keep in mind as they seek to address the issues that this article raises. For example, leaders should recognize that racial tensions among adults in school buildings can interfere with teacher engagement regarding all

five targets for teacher engagement: they make teachers feel less welcome among colleagues; cause ambiguous feelings about authority figures; interfere with ambition; impede active efforts to improve; and undermine confidence. In this mix, failures of trust underlay some of the tensions. Adults need to trust their colleagues to be supportive, competent, dependable, and collegial.

I believe that the most effective ways of building trust, reducing racial tensions, and increasing teacher engagement in diverse learning communities involve redoubling efforts to engage teachers around improving the craft of teaching. There is much room for progress in the schools upon which this article is based. Professional community participation among teachers in these schools is often informal, half-hearted, and voluntary. Survey responses indicate that even among teachers not reporting racial tensions, far too many never visit one another's classes and never join in discussions of student work.

The Tripod Project's *Five Types of Professional Development Incentives* and the *Five Types of Professional Community Norms and Capacities* are relevant here. When school leaders communicate support for teachers of all racial and ethnic backgrounds and relentlessly press for improvement, they can make raising student achievement and narrowing gaps feasible, urgent, and highly stimulating for teachers. Equipped with well-conceived plans for adult learning, leaders can insist with authority and confidence that even their most reluctant colleagues should participate constructively. Leaders should strive to reduce racial tensions at the same time that they monitor instructional improvement activities, provide constructive feedback, and hold people accountable for effective implementation. Ultimately, we need leaders who can blend reduction of racial tensions with measures to build exemplary professional communities — well-functioning, racially diverse learning communities, relentless about achieving excellence with equity in American classrooms.

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Access a wide range of videos and PowerPoints (including those from Ron Ferguson, Mica Pollock, and others) from The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University: <http://www.agi.harvard.edu/Search/SearchAllVideo.php>