



# The Effectiveness of Educational Policy for Bias-Free Teacher Hiring: Critical Insights to Enhance Diversity in the Canadian Teacher Workforce

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*Book Review:*

## **The Effectiveness of Educational Policy for Bias-Free Teacher Hiring: Critical Insights to Enhance Diversity in the Canadian Teacher Workforce**

By Zuhra E. Abawi

New York: Routledge, 2021, 166 pages

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### **Reviewed by:**

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*The Effectiveness of Educational Policy for Bias-Free Teacher Hiring: Critical Insights to Enhance Diversity in the Canadian Teacher Workforce* is written by Zuhra Abawi, who is of Afghan-Scottish descent and has experience working in the Ontario education system in Canada as an early childhood educator, elementary school teacher, and college and university professor. Abawi makes a strong argument that although policies affiliated with teacher hiring are often associated with words such as equity and inclusion, they have not materialized into equitable practices and outcomes. The author explores why there continues to be a lack of racial diversity in the teacher workforce, focusing particularly on the administration level, and considers what individual and systemic factors contribute to this trend. While not poorly considered, a majority of the data and statistics examined are Ontario-based with an emphasis on race. A more comprehensive examination involving data from other geographical areas and from international contexts would strengthen the depth of analysis and arguments presented throughout the book. However, overall this book does provide a framework for educational administrators to move beyond performative language and engage in intentional actions to facilitate actualization of diversity in the teacher workforce in K–12 schools. These are timely and relevant issues nationally and globally.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 is titled “Introduction: Situating Myself in my Work,” where Abawi provides context for why the book was written. The main key term, “bias-free teacher hiring,” is defined as referring to “a colour-blind approach to diversifying the teacher population by treating all applicants equally and thus focusing on their skills, knowledge, experience, and merit” (p. 2). Abawi further situates the two guiding questions informing the study:

“How does the identity and positionality of school administrators impact their hiring decisions?” and “How might the practice of bias-free hiring perpetuate the status quo of white privilege in teacher hiring?” (p. 2). Abawi outlines Critical Race Theory and Critical Whiteness Studies as theoretical frameworks for the data analysis. While the framework here provides a good start, an intersectional approach that focuses beyond race, as individual identities are diverse and not held to one particular feature, could enhance the argument for increasing diversity in the teacher workforce along such additional lines as religion and sexuality.

Chapter 2 is titled “Historical and Contemporary Racial Inequity in the Ontario Education System,” and Chapter 3 is titled “Policies of Teacher Diversity: The Myth of Bias-Free Hiring.” As a set, the two chapters delve into the historical and socio-cultural factors influencing the trajectory of hiring practices that have led up to the current neoliberal model of education that perpetuates discourses affiliated with meritocracy and colour-blindness. Particular attention is given to the under-representation of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) in the teacher workforce, especially at the administration level. A great example discussed is the racialization of precarious employment, where there is a large representation of minoritized groups in educational services but often in precarious roles. Given the author’s experience, the chapters focus heavily on the Ontario context. Additional examination of data from other Canadian provinces and territories would help to better situate the argument. Also, connecting such trends with race-based statistics in other sectors beyond education, such as the health and justice system, would provide a more holistic analysis that could emphasize the systemic nature of such barriers.

Chapter 4 is titled “Challenging the Myth of Bias-Free Hiring through Qualitative Research with Teachers,” and Chapter 5 is titled “Teacher Experiences and the Effectiveness of Equity and Inclusive Education Policy in Relation to Hiring.” Abawi further supplements her argument about the ineffectiveness of “bias-free” hiring practices through a policy discourse analysis and examination of interview responses with 10 racialized educators. The educators were Ontario Certified Teachers working in publicly funded school boards. They varied in age, ethnicity, gender, and experience in teaching, which captured multiple lived experiences in relation to hiring practices. A thematic analysis of the interview responses identified themes affiliated with meritocracy, racialization, diversity being viewed as meeting quotas, and nepotism. While the study yielded data current to the context, a longitudinal approach and working with more participants could have helped to explore further complexities and nuances involved in experiences of racialized educators in securing permanent positions and getting into administration roles in K–12 schools.

Chapter 6 is titled “Social Location and Identity Construction in Teacher Hiring Applications,” and Chapter 7 is titled “Looking Forward to Enhance Equitable Teacher Hiring: The Equity Hiring Toolkit.” These chapters move the main ideas in the book from critique to action. The Equity Hiring Toolkit is proposed and explained with the purpose of “encouraging constructive dialogues about the operation of biases, beliefs, power, and privilege and the importance of self-examination to raise consciousness of the role of race in matters of teacher hiring” (p. 121). The toolkit is neither exhaustive nor a destination, but a framework that initiates various calls to action. It serves as a guide to ensure accountability is built into hiring processes to increase diversity in the teacher workforce in K–12 schools. Furthermore, various suggestions are outlined to disrupt the privilege of whiteness in education with respect to teacher recruitment and hiring. These include mandating race-based data collection and encouraging critical action and praxis for school administrators. Chapter 8 concludes by providing a concise overview of the significance of the book and further areas for exploration.

Overall, the book constructively addresses the importance of prioritizing hiring practices as a vantage point from which to discuss equity issues that lead to a lack of diversity in the teacher workforce. The points raised in the book move the discussion beyond the personal realm to examining larger systemic factors rooted in normalized and privileged ideologies and practices. As Abawi puts it, “Although inequities in teacher representation are discussed, the role of school administration is widely omitted [and] the policies fail to acknowledge the racialization of power relations within the education system” (p. 143). Extending these conversations beyond the role of administrators to involvement of parents, activists, and community organizations can strengthen discussions about how to disrupt normalized ideologies in education. An elaboration on how to use the Equity Hiring Toolkit from a community approach involving multiple stakeholders would also enhance implementation of the steps outlined in the book. Overall, however, this book sparks timely discussions about systemic inequities in K–12 schools and initiates various calls to action to increase teacher diversity to meet the needs of diverse students.

## **References**

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