

DOMINICANA

What Schools Can Learn From the Lived Experiences of Dominican Women Working in Urban K-12 Education

A research-to-practice brief by Dr. Alaina D. Bearden



Representation is not only about who enters education. It is about whether systems are designed so people can remain, grow, lead, and contribute fully.

WHY THIS BRIEF MATTERS

Representation requires more than recruitment.

Schools and districts often approach educator diversity as a recruitment challenge. *Dominicana* points to a more complete question: what conditions make it possible for educators to be visible, sustained, and empowered across the educator trajectory?

The qualitative testimonio study centered eight Dominican women working across urban K-12 educational roles. It explored lived experiences, challenges, community cultural wealth, and visions for a transformed education system. The implications extend beyond one population: schools need structures that recognize expertise, remove unnecessary barriers, and support long-term flourishing.

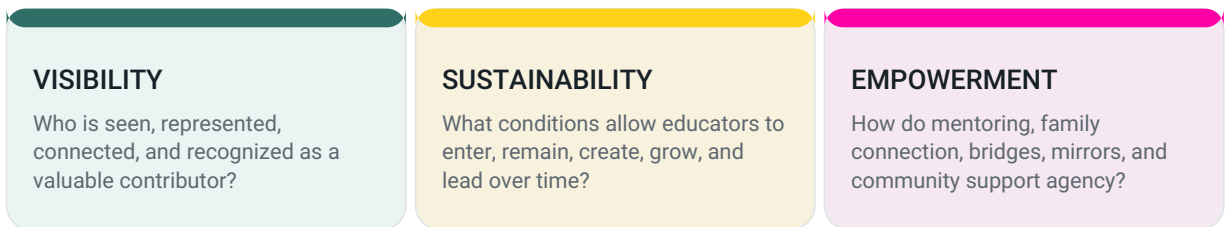
THE STUDY AT A GLANCE

Methodology	Qualitative testimonio interviews that treated participants as experts in their own experiences.
Participants	Eight Dominican women working in varied K-12 educational roles.
Questions	Lived experiences, challenges, cultural wealth, and how K-12 work could be improved.
Lenses	Identity theory, critical race theory, LatCrit, decoloniality, community cultural wealth, and La Frontera.

A PARTICIPANT-SHAPED FRAMEWORK

Visibility. Sustainability. Empowerment.

The study began with an emphasis on visibility, preparation, and empowerment. Through participant involvement, the framework shifted to visibility, sustainability, and empowerment. That change matters: representation is not meaningful if people are invited into systems that do not support their long-term flourishing.



WHAT THE TESTIMONIOS REVEALED

Six lessons for sustainable school design

1. Community responsibility

A deep commitment to students, families, and community can be a source of purpose. It can also become a source of strain when systems depend on invisible labor.

2. Transparent feedback

Direct, respectful, culturally responsive feedback supports growth more effectively than ambiguity, passive aggression, or opaque evaluation.

3. Creativity and belonging

Artistic expression, joy, and identity are not peripheral. They can sustain educators and strengthen learning communities.

4. Pathway barriers

Licensure exams, preparation costs, compensation, and professional status shape who can enter and remain in education.

5. Cultural wealth

Representation, family engagement, multilingualism, navigational knowledge, and culturally sustaining practice are assets schools should build upon.

6. Mentoring and networks

Mentors, sponsors, role models, bridges, mirrors, and communities of practice help educators persist, lead, and advocate.

FROM FINDINGS TO SCHOOL DESIGN

Visibility	Structural erasure, representation, networking, and identity dislocation	Whose expertise and labor are visible, valued, and reflected in decisions?
Sustainability	Creativity, financial security, licensure exams, and evaluation practices	Which barriers make entry and persistence harder than they need to be?
Empowerment	Mentoring, bridges and mirrors, community responsibility, and family connection	Where do educators find mentors, role models, sponsors, and meaningful agency?

PRACTICAL ACTIONS

Move from recruitment to sustainable pathways.

Make expertise visible. Recognize cultural, linguistic, relational, and community-facing labor as expertise - not an informal favor.

Build pathways and remove barriers. Pair recruitment with licensure support, exam preparation, financial assistance, flexible scheduling, and clear advancement opportunities.

Make mentoring structural. Create supported mentoring, sponsorship, affinity, and community-of-practice structures rather than leaving connection to chance.

Redesign feedback and evaluation. Use clear, direct, culturally responsive feedback practices that build trust and professional growth.

Invest in belonging and community connection. Engage families, local organizations, colleges, and community leaders in recruitment, retention, and improvement efforts.

Preserve creativity and cultural expression. Treat the arts, multilingualism, biculturalism, and culturally sustaining practice as assets that strengthen schools.

Create leadership opportunities. Support community-connected educators to lead teams, mentor colleagues, shape policy, and influence systems.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Where does our organization depend on invisible cultural, linguistic, relational, or emotional labor?
- Which staff members are asked to bridge gaps between institutions and families? How is that work supported?
- What barriers in hiring, licensure, evaluation, compensation, or scheduling limit who enters and remains?
- How transparent and culturally responsive are our feedback practices?
- Where do new educators find mentors, sponsors, role models, and communities of practice?
- What would it look like to move from recruiting diverse educators to building systems where they can thrive and lead?

CONNECTION TO THE GREATER LEARNING

The findings of Dominicana reinforce a core premise: sustainable improvement requires organizations to recognize the expertise already present in their communities and redesign the conditions surrounding the work.

The goal is not to ask individuals to become more resilient inside fragmented systems. The goal is to build coherent, collaborative conditions where people can flourish.



SELECTED REFERENCES

Research foundations

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ABOUT THE GREATER LEARNING

The Greater Learning helps schools, education organizations, and learning communities build coherent systems, collaborative practice, and sustainable pathways for growth.

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