



Voices from the Field: Supportive Environments for BIPOC Leadership Growth

Introduction

Organizations across the nation are embedding diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) into their values and mission statements. Despite these efforts, nurturing Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) leadership development remains a priority that is urgent and persistent across the home visiting field. Addressing this priority requires learning about the circumstances, experiences, and structures that shape and influence BIPOC home visitor career pathways and leadership development. One strategy to increase equitable home visiting leadership representation is creating and sustaining supportive professional environments to nurture BIPOC home visitor leadership growth. Two BIPOC home visitors, Clare Williamson (Home Visitor/Parent Educator, Georgetown University Parenting Support Program) and Claudette Kabera (Family Case Manager, Community of Hope) served as project leaders on the project, [*Leadership Pathways for Home Visitors of Color: An Exploration*](#). The goal of this project was to hear from home visitors and supervisors of color about how leadership is defined, what challenges the workforce faces when pursuing leadership and advancement opportunities, and what is needed to support and sustain leadership for home visitors and supervisors of color. Clare and Claudette also engaged in conversation to discuss their insights into how to support leadership pathways for BIPOC home visitors. We share the highlights of these valuable insights below.

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Supporting Leadership Pathways

1. Proactively invest in and support BIPOC home visitor's growth.

BIPOC home visitors are often seeking to gain experiences, professional development, and higher education opportunities to increase their skills and knowledge preparing them for leadership positions. These high-quality professional development opportunities are essential along the leadership pathway.

Home visitors benefit from having supervisors and mentors committed to investing in their growth. According to Claudette, “I think most, if not all, BIPOC home visitors go into this field because we have a passion for it. But, somewhere along the way, that passion turns into excitement and then despair. We need to find a way to keep that passion – that’s how we will grow this workforce. That’s the magic sauce!!” Engaging BIPOC home visitors in leadership development opportunities is integral for leadership pathways and staff retention. Collective approaches, where action is taken by multiple people (e.g., mentors, supervisors, funders, advocates) to invest in BIPOC growth, will strengthen teams while building a stronger pipeline of talent.

In addition to leadership development opportunities, BIPOC home visitors also desire work-life balance and mental health support. Data from the [Leadership Pathways for Home Visitors of Color Project](#) suggest a needed focus on creating mental health supports, including consideration of the additional burdens experienced uniquely by BIPOC home visitors. Clare suggested creating a community of practice, providing BIPOC home visitors a platform for decompressing and sharing strategies as one potential solution for mental health support.

Claudette summed it up perfectly, “When home visitors feel supported in their work, they are more able to see a future in home visiting. They are more likely to feel invested in by their program, feel capable of doing more and less likely to burn out. As a home visitor, if I feel valued, I’m more likely to stay”.

“BIPOC home visitors are the backbone of the communities in which they serve and deserve to be recognized and celebrated.”

CLAUDETTE KABERA AND CLARE WILLIAMSON

2. Reduce barriers, provide resources, and prepare BIPOC home visitors for successful growth and learning experiences.

Meaningful leadership development opportunities must be offered in supportive and safe places. One of the best ways to provide safety is by establishing an emotional connection between home visitors and their supervisors and members of the organization’s leadership team. Emotional

connection happens when leadership is accessible, responsive, and engaged, resulting in home visitors that feel safe and more appreciated.

BIPOC home visitors can also feel a sense of safety when mistakes are viewed as a learning opportunity rather than result in disciplinary action or termination. This empowers home visitors to try new ways of working and different approaches to working with families.

Home visiting programs can establish formalized mentorship programs, including leadership pathway mentorship for BIPOC home visitors. This will not only help BIPOC home visitors feel valued but will also help identify growth opportunities, learning experiences, and potential leadership opportunities needed for career advancement.

3. Foster trusting, transparent, and safe relationships between the home visitor and supervisor.

Reflective supervision is a commonly used practice in home visiting. During reflective supervision, the home visiting supervisor and supervisee work as a team to understand emotions related to the work and to identify challenges. This practice works best when built on a foundation of trust, transparency, and safety. When these are present, people bring their best self to the conversation resulting in a supportive environment.

One strategy for improving trusting and safe relationships between the home visitor and supervisor is to encourage non-BIPOC individuals to work on uncovering and dismantling their unconscious bias. Failing to recognize unconscious biases leads to a lack of trust by devaluing BIPOC expertise and qualifications.

Supervisors also strengthen relationships by being transparent and approaching situations with a sense of curiosity. Through the reflective supervision process, supervisors and home visitors can learn and grow together, especially by sharing constructive feedback.

4. Intentionally have BIPOC home visitors share their experiences and ideas for leadership development (what's working, what's not working and how can we change or how can we improve).

Creating an open forum or a community of practice designed for BIPOC home visitors to share their experiences and ideas for leadership development can reap valuable rewards. These opportunities to connect with like-minded peers can be used for mentoring, networking, and forging meaningful connections for BIPOC home visitors and leaders.

In addition to networking opportunities, space must be made for including BIPOC voices into conversations in a meaningful and authentic way. It is important to note that BIPOC home visitors are often asked to represent the entire BIPOC community. This often results in a feeling of pressure to overperform. This pressure increases the fear of failure. Diversifying staff helps reduce the internalized pressure on BIPOC home visitors. Both Claudette and Clare shared their insight into capturing BIPOC voices:

“There is value in having a team seen and heard and taking everyone everyone's opinion and concerns with equal measure, regardless of seniority or position. It can feel lonely as a home visitor, we can create a sense of belonging by making sure that BIPOC home visitors have a voice and a safe space to express themselves. Leadership needs to make an effort to seek out views and voices of BIPOC home visitors and give them a seat at the table when big decisions are made,” said Claudette.

Clare added, “It's not enough to just get in the room, right? Getting into the room is progress but it doesn't seem like what I'm saying is really being heard, and that can make me feel like I don't belong. If I'm asked to be part of the conversation and I consistently share barriers to success and strategies and suggestions on how it could be better, but they are not implemented and there is no follow-up or updates on what I offered, I feel like my voice is wasted on deaf ears.”

Unfortunately, power dynamics exist and should not be ignored. It is vitally important to avoid tokenism with BIPOC home visitors.

Home visitors know their community and the families they work with, and their expertise should be an opportunity to work side-by-side with people across the home visiting field on solutions.

“True leadership,” Claudette explained, “is making everyone on the team feel valued, seen and heard. Taking everyone's opinion and concerns with equal measure, irrespective of seniority or position.



Tokenism is believing that only leadership knowledge matters and everyone else's opinion or concerns are just that and they are not to be taken seriously. Tokenism is also promoting those who look like you or who have certain degrees.”

Remember, it is impossible to know how BIPOC home visitors are feeling and what they are experiencing without creating and fostering a safe environment to engage home visitors in conversations. It is important to ask BIPOC home visitors what they need and how you can support them as a leader. Do not assume you know what individual BIPOC home visitors need along their leadership pathway.

5. Develop and implement clear, concrete, and equitable policies and strategies that not only allow BIPOC home visitors to elevate to leadership positions but also allow them to thrive.

Organizations wishing to cultivate a strong, diverse, and inclusive workforce can create policies and practices related to recruitment, retention, and professional development strategies. These

policies and practices may include providing unconscious bias, racial and ethnic equity, and microaggression training to all staff. Additionally, organizations can provide opportunities for staff to engage with and learn from subject matter experts in systemic racism and ethnic discrimination. Organizations should also monitor and evaluate the impact of their racial and ethnic equity efforts, making changes when needed.

Another strategy is for organizations to have and implement a comprehensive racial and ethnic equity strategy which could complement and inform recruitment practices and staffing succession planning. This can look like organizations identifying and preparing a diverse pool of candidates for leadership positions to ensure and support smooth leadership transitions. Additional examples of a racial and ethnic equity strategy in practice include: 1) making sure that job advertisements and job descriptions clearly state the organization's commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging as well as racial and ethnic equity, 2) posting job advertisements specifically to recruit racially and ethnically diverse candidates using methods such as non-traditional job sourcing sites (e.g., ethnic/race-specific job boards; HBCUS; TCUs), and 3) having hiring committees reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of the organization and surrounding community.

Conclusion

Investment in increasing BIPOC leaders in the home visiting field is critical and comes with many benefits to families, providers, practices, and policies. By providing professional learning, advancement, and leadership opportunities for BIPOC home visitors, organizations and systems can support BIPOC home visitors to share their expertise, provide innovative thinking, address how leadership can show up in many forms, and most importantly have a seat at the highest decision-making tables. [Click here](#) for more ideas on creating leadership pathways, developed by the voices of BIPOC home visitors. ⁷

¹ All materials from the Leadership Pathways project can be found here:
<https://www.startearly.org/resource/leadership-pathways-for-home-visitors-of-color>

Bios

Clare Williamson

Home Visitor/Parent Educator, Georgetown University Parenting Support Program

Originally from upstate New York, Clare Williamson has been a Home Visitor in the DMV supporting parents with intellectual disabilities for the past eight years. With Georgetown University's Parenting Support Program, Clare's passion for building trusting relationships is implemented with a strength-based and person-centered approach.

Claudette Kabera

Family Case Manager, Community of Hope

A transplant from the West Coast, Claudette Kabera is a home visitor with a local NGO in D.C for almost 5 years, working with pregnant mothers, new and seasoned parents using the Parent As Teachers model to provide education, support and empowerment. Prior to this, Claudette worked as a Health Education Specialist for San Bernardino County Department of Public Health's Perinatal Substance Use Intervention program. Claudette got her BAs in French and International Studies at Oregon State University and an MPH in Global Health at Loma Linda University.

Colleen Murphy

Vice President, Early Childhood Community Systems Building, Start Early

Dr. Colleen Murphy has 30 years' experience working with early childhood programs at the local, state, and national level including Head Start, Help Me Grow, MIECHV Home Visitation, Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems, Child Care Licensing, and Early Intervention. She has also provided technical assistance to communities and states on topics such as early childhood system building, data integration, measurement strategies, home visiting, and developmental screening initiatives. Colleen holds a PhD in Infant and Early Childhood with an emphasis in Social-Emotional Development and Master of Science degrees from Benedictine University in Management and Organizational Behavior and a Master of Arts in Infant and Early Childhood Development with an emphasis in Mental Health & Developmental Disorders from Fielding Graduate University.



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