

Strengths and Shortcomings of a Teacher Preparation Program: Learning from Racially Diverse Preservice Teachers

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Abstract

Racially diverse teachers are valuable sources of knowledge in school systems. However, a lack of diversity among teachers has demonstrated long-standing issues with how racially diverse teachers are prepared for teaching. The present study sought to expand on prior research by examining the viewpoints of racially diverse preservice teachers concerning the strengths and shortcomings of their teacher preparation program using a transformative qualitative research design. We recruited participation among six racially diverse preservice teachers enrolled in a teacher preparation program affiliated with a university identified as a Hispanic-Serving Institution. We collected data through focus group interviews held during a two-week period and analyzed data systemically with two levels of coding. Our findings consisted of three main themes: Interactions with Peers and Teacher Preparation Program Stakeholders, Navigating Teacher Preparation Program Complexities, and Views of Preparedness/Unpreparedness to Teach. We provided a discussion of these themes, used critical race theory to identify examples of institutional racism, and issued three recommendations to university administrators for ways in which they may remove systemic barriers for racially diverse preservice teachers.

Key Words: Critical race theory, racially diverse preservice teachers, teacher preparation

Introduction

During the past two decades, the number and proportion of racially diverse teachers in the United States has increased significantly (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017). However, closer inspection of data trends have demonstrated that racially diverse teachers remain drastically underrepresented in the teaching force, particularly when compared to the number of racially diverse students enrolled in elementary- and secondary-level public schools (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017; King, McIntosh, & Bell-Ellwanger, 2016). To illustrate, data from the 2011-2012 school year showed significant increases among the number of teachers who were Asian, Black, and Hispanic when compared to data from the 1987-1988 school year (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017). Despite these increases, the number of racially diverse students was overwhelmingly greater than the number of racially diverse teachers during this same school year (In

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gersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014).

A growing body of literature has acknowledged a number of benefits associated with a racially diversified teacher workforce. For example, studies have shown that racially diverse students who were assigned to race-congruent teachers may experience enhanced academic performance (Dee, 2004; Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Montes, 2012; Ocasio, 2014), decreased disciplinary issues (Lindsay & Hart, 2017), are held to higher academic standards (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016), and have greater access to gifted education programs (Grissom, Rodriguez, & Kern, 2017). Studies have also revealed ways in which racially diverse teachers draw upon their own lived experiences and employ a critical and transformative pedagogy that ensures educational equity, promotes activism, and fosters social literacy among students from racial groups who have been historically underrepresented in society (Albers & Frederick, 2013; Hayes, Juarez, & Escoffery-Runnels, 2014; Milner, 2006). Ultimately, a racially diversified teacher workforce brings individuals into the teaching profession who have personal understandings about race and discrimination that parallel the experiences of racially diverse students (Kohli, 2009; Monzó & Rueda, 2001; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). As such, racially diverse teachers are valuable sources of knowledge who can empathize with racially diverse students, challenge issues involving racism, and promote the use of culturally responsive teaching practices.

Researchers have posited myriad reasons for the lack of a racially diversified teacher workforce, including discriminatory hiring practices in school districts, negative stereotypes and portrayals of racially diverse teachers, racial disparities with high school graduation rates, and racially-biased standardized testing and teacher certification exams (D'Amico, Pawlewick, Earley, & McGeehan, 2017; Hrabowski & Sanders, 2013). Furthermore, researchers have recognized barriers within teacher preparation programs, such as the marginalization of racially diverse preservice teachers and ineffective retention and recruitment practices (Brown, 2014; Bryan & Williams, 2017; Martinez Valle-Riestra, Williams Shealey, & Cramer, 2011; Rodriguez & Cho, 2011). These phenomena are deeply concerning and undermine efforts intended to attract, train, and produce racially diverse teachers.

Educating and supporting preservice teachers during initial teacher preparation is a well-researched topic. However, little research has focused on racially diverse individuals who aspire to become teachers. Given that educating and supporting historically underrepresented individuals in higher education contexts may require specialized attention, the goal of the present study was to investigate the viewpoints of six racially diverse undergraduate students who were persisting through a university-based teacher preparation program. Specifically, the present study sought to expand on previous research by examining the following research question: What do racially diverse preservice teachers view as strengths and shortcomings of their teacher preparation program?

Theoretical framework and literature review

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the 1970s from critical legal studies on race issues in education, such as the issue of school desegregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* (Milner, 2008). Critical race theorists realized that traditional legal discourse presented inadequate and narrow views of equity and failed to consider “unconscious motivations derived from an acculturation process into the dominant cultural set of beliefs” (Brown & Jackson, 2013, p. 17). Hence, CRT seeks to move beyond the notion of Whiteness as property, which has guaranteed privileges to members of the dominant White culture that have been “affirmed, legitimated, and protected by the law” (Harris, 1993, p. 1713).

CRT has provided researchers with an analytical lens with which to examine race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In the field of education, scholars have used tenets of CRT as a theoretical framework to interrogate and critique teacher preparation policies and practices. For example, Milner (2008) applied interest convergence to teacher preparation to conceptualize race and interests and highlighted how these interests have impacted teacher preparation curriculum and instructional approaches, as well as the recruitment and retention of racially diverse preservice teachers. Similarly, Brown (2014) applied the CRT tenets of interest convergence, counter-storytelling, and Whiteness as property during an examination of peer-reviewed scholarship concerned with the challenges that racially diverse preservice teachers encounter during teacher preparation. More recently, Sleeter (2017) applied the CRT tenets of interest convergence, claims to neutrality and color blindness, and counter-storytelling to expose the continued pattern of Whiteness in teacher preparation programs. These scholars and others have brought attention to deeply ingrained institutional racism and emphasized a need to confront, disrupt, and eradicate inequities to promote the recruitment and retention of racially diverse pre-service teachers.

In the present study, CRT provided a theoretical lens for understanding inequities in a teacher preparation program and establishing a basis for reform. We used counter-storytelling to prioritize the voices of our research participants and confront normalized discourses that perpetuate racial stereotypes (Matsuda, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). We also employed the CRT tenets of Whiteness as property and claims to neutrality and color blindness to recognize and challenge institutional practices and policies that perpetuate racial discrimination (Bell, 1992). Additionally, the CRT tenet of interest convergence helped reveal instances where those among the dominant culture were incentivized to eradicate racism only to advance their own interests (Bell, 1980). Furthermore, our use of CRT as a theoretical lens enabled us to take into account the multiple dimensions of an individual’s identity, such as race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991).

Methodology

Research design

The present study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the viewpoints of six racially diverse preservice teachers guided by the following research question: What do racially diverse preservice teachers view as strengths and shortcomings of their teacher preparation program? Due to the nature of our research question, we employed a qualitative research design that emphasized a transformative approach (Creswell, 2014). We saw ourselves as change agents and wanted our findings to stimulate social action that removes barriers for racially diverse preservice teachers. As researchers, we focused on how participants in the present study navigated a space in higher education that was not designed for them. In order to learn from and build trust among participants, we conducted focus group interviews (Mertens, 2009). During each focus group interview, we posed broad questions, facilitated interactive dialogue, and encouraged participants to describe their experiences fully and freely. As participants shared their voices, we examined their lived experiences to gain greater insights concerning the institutionalization and maintenance of racism within a university-based teacher preparation program.

Research setting

We conducted the present study at an accredited public university located in the South Central United States, which we identified with the pseudonym South Central University. South Central University was a large Master's College and University (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2015) and served over 10,000 students enrolled in 59 undergraduate and 39 graduate degree programs. Since the fall of 2014, over 25% of the South Central University's undergraduate full-time equivalent student enrollment was Hispanic, thereby designating the university as a Hispanic-Serving Institution (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2017). The university employed 235 full-time faculty members with the following racial composition: 86% White, 8% Hispanic, 3% Unknown, 2% Black, and 1% Asian.

At the time of the present study, South Central University had 714 undergraduate students of all classifications (i.e., freshman, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) who were education majors. Of these students, 303 were preservice teachers who had been formally admitted to South Central University's teacher preparation program and sought initial state-level teacher certification for a wide variety of grade levels (i.e., elementary, middle, high school) and content areas (e.g., elementary generalist, math, English, Spanish, special education). The racial composition of these students were 60% White, 29% Hispanic, 4% Multiple Races, 4% Black, 2% Unknown, and 1% American Indian.

Positionality of researchers

As researchers in the present study, we represented two major backgrounds: academe and PK-12 school administration. Yet, were bounded by our common experience of working with racially diverse preservice teachers. When the present study commenced, we disclosed our positioning to each other and discussed the impact of our personal characteristics and experiences on this research endeavor (Berger, 2015). We also used reflexivity to monitor our involvement and detachment throughout the research process.

AUTHOR 1. I am a White female who is employed as a faculty member at South Central University. I have eight years of experiences as a teacher educator at two different university-based teacher preparation programs and five years of experiences as a 4th and 5th grade classroom teacher in two different public school districts. When I was a classroom teacher, I supported English language learners with sheltered English instruction to promote their development of English proficiency and mastery of academic content. As a teacher educator, I teach a variety of education and literacy courses to prepare preservice teachers for teacher certification at the elementary, middle, and high school grade levels. In my professional experiences, I have become keenly aware of institutional racism and its pernicious influence on the educational experiences of racially diverse individuals. This awareness has shaped who I am as an individual, researcher, and teacher educator today and informs my reflexivities.

AUTHOR 2. I am a Latina female who is employed at South Central School District (a pseudonym), a PK-12 school district whose teaching force is composed mainly of completers from South Central University's teacher preparation program. As a skilled action researcher, I joined South Central School District's central administration team to help identify research-informed solutions that reduce the school district's student-teacher racial gap. Based upon these research findings, I helped develop the Cultivating Our Rising Educators (CORE) scholars program, a Grow Your Own teacher initiative to enhance teacher diversity in South Central School District. Through the CORE scholars program, racially diverse students who see their future as a teacher in the South Central School District are provided with mentorship, professional development, and funding to help them enroll and matriculate from South Central University as a certified teacher. During the first year of program implementation, 21 racially diverse high school seniors were selected as CORE scholars. As we write this paper, efforts are currently underway in South Central School District to recruit a second cohort of CORE scholars.

My personal background also influences my dispositions. My family and I immigrated from Mexico to the United States when I was five years old, and we faced many instances of discrimination and racism. We grew up in poverty and were undocumented for 10 years. I am the first in my family to secure a college degree and am cognizant of the many struggles that racially diverse students face while navigating academic

spaces that were not historically designed for them. My personal and professional experiences press me to both understand how academic institutions perpetuate structural inequality and the agency of people of color to persist, resist, and reject oppression.

AUTHOR 3. I am a Mexican-American female but also identify myself as a Chicana. I am employed as a faculty member at South Central University and have ten years of experiences as a teacher educator in South Central University's teacher preparation program. I also have sixteen years of experiences as a bilingual classroom teacher and a Reading Recovery teacher in a public school district. When I was a classroom teacher, I taught 1st, 2nd, and 3rd grade at Title 1 schools and a charter school supported by the school district. As a teacher educator, I teach a variety of education and literacy courses to prepare undergraduate students for teacher certification at the elementary grades levels. I also teach graduate courses affiliated with South Central University's alternative teacher certification program. As a first-generation Latina in higher education, I have become keenly aware of the importance of cultural competence among racially diverse individuals who must navigate the intricacies of higher education. I myself have lived the varied experiences of many of the students whom I teach. This awareness has shaped who I am as an individual, researcher, teacher educator, and advocate.

Research participants

We recruited participants using purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2013). We contacted South Central University's institutional research department and obtained a list of all current undergraduate students who were education majors seeking teacher licensure in any content area and classified as juniors (i.e., completed 60-89 college-level hours) or seniors (i.e., completed 90 or more college-level hours). This list included 303 students, so we sent an email to them expressing our desire to provide a quality teacher preparation program that meets the needs of racially diverse students and schools. We explained that we were forming small focus groups to ascertain viewpoints of South Central University students who were preservice teachers. We also stated that focus group participants would be entered into a random drawing for a \$25 Visa gift card.

Students who were interested in participating in focus group interviews completed a Google Form electronic questionnaire. The questionnaire collected demographic information from prospective participants, including their full name, email address, admission status in South Central University's teacher preparation program, gender, and race/ethnicity. The questionnaire also collected logistical information concerning prospective participants' geographic location and availability to participate. We accepted responses from prospective participants for four weeks and resent the email at the beginning of the second week and fourth week to encourage participation. Our recruitment efforts resulted in receipt of 52 completed questionnaires.

In order to achieve the purpose of the present study, we filtered the completed questionnaires to include only preservice teachers who were racially diverse individuals and formally admitted to South Central University's teacher preparation program. This reduced the pool of potential participants to 22 individuals who identified as female ($n = 17$) or male ($n = 5$) and indicated their race/ethnicity as American Indian or Alaskan Native ($n = 1$); Black or African American ($n = 1$); Latinx or Hispanic ($n = 15$); White, American Indian, or Alaskan Native ($n = 2$); or White, Latinx, or Hispanic ($n = 3$). We emailed these individuals to indicate their selection as study participants and asked them to contact us back to confirm their continued interest. We received confirmation from ten individuals, of which six individuals actually participated. We identified these participants with the pseudonyms Anna, Camila, Gilbert, María, Tómas, and Valeria.

Anna. Anna was a nontraditional student who was classified as a senior at the time of the present study. Anna was seeking a Bachelor of Arts in History, along with teacher certification in social studies for grades 7-12. Anna transferred to South Central University with 53 semester credit hours she earned from a community college. Anna was 34 years old and identified as a female of American Indian descent. In her personal life, Anna and her husband were parents to two young boys.

Camila. Camila was a nontraditional, first-generation student who was classified as a senior at the time of the present study. Camila was seeking a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies, along with teacher certification for early childhood through grade 6. Camila transferred to South Central University with 59 semester credit hours she earned from a community college. Camila was 35 years old and identified as a female of Hispanic descent. In her personal life, Camila and her husband were parents to two young boys.

Gilbert. Gilbert was a nontraditional, first-generation student who was classified as a senior at the time of the study. Gilbert was seeking a Bachelor of Science in Interdisciplinary Studies, along with teacher certification for early childhood through grade 6. Gilbert originally began his studies at a community college as a nursing major and changed his major to education before he transferred to South Central University with 63 semester credit hours. Gilbert was 32 years old and identified as a male of Hispanic descent. In his personal life, Gilbert and his wife were parents to a young daughter and son.

María. María was a traditional, first-generation student who was classified as a senior at the time of the study. María was seeking a Bachelor of Music in Music Performance with an instrumental emphasis, as well as teacher certification in music for all grade levels. After graduating from high school, María immediately began her studies at South Central University. María was 22 years old and identified as a female of Hispanic descent.

Tómas. Tómas was a nontraditional, first-generation student who was classified

as a senior at the time of the present study. Tómas was seeking a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish, along with teacher certification in Spanish for all grade levels. Tómas transferred to South Central University with 46 semester credit hours he earned from a community college. Tómas was 58 years old and identified as a male of Hispanic descent. In his personal life, Tómas was divorced and had one adult daughter.

Valeria. Valeria was a traditional, first-generation student who was classified as a senior at the time of the study. Valeria was seeking a Bachelor of Music in Music Performance and teacher certification in music for all grade levels. After graduating from high school, Valeria immediately began her studies at South Central University as a music therapy major. After one year, she moved out of state and enrolled in a community college with a major in non-profit studies. Several years later, Valeria returned to South Central University with 77 semester credit hours. Valeria was seeking a Bachelor of Music in Music Performance, as well as teacher certification in music for all grade levels. Valeria was 23 years old and identified as a female of Hispanic descent.

Data collection and analysis

We collected data primarily through focus group interviews conducted during a two-week period (Kruegar & Casey, 2015). In order to provide participants with a quiet space where they felt comfortable to speak freely, we held focus group interviews away from the university campus at two different sites. The first site was a meeting room at a city-owned community center located approximately five miles from the university. The second site was a meeting room at South Central School District's administration building located approximately 15 miles from the university. Using information participants provided in the questionnaire, we identified optimal days and times to schedule two different focus group interviews at each site. We emailed the schedule to the ten individuals who had confirmed their interest to participate and requested an email reply with their selected date and time (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Focus Group Interview Schedule

Date	Times	Location	Participants
11-07-17	5:00 PM – 8:00 PM	Community Center	Anna, Tómas
11-10-17	8:30 AM – 11:30 AM	School District	María*
11-14-17	5:00 PM – 8:00 PM	School District	Gilbert**
11-17-17	8:30 AM – 11:30 AM	Community Center	Camila, Valeria**

* Two other potential participants were scheduled but did not show.

** One other potential participant was scheduled but did not show.

We allotted a three-hour period for each focus group interview, and two members of the research team (i.e., AUTHOR 1 and AUTHOR 2) attended. Before each focus

group interview, we arrived at least 30 minutes before the scheduled start time to ensure the room was clean and welcoming (Kruegar & Casey, 2015). We also arranged the seating to accommodate a small group setting, prepared our paperwork, and set up two audio recording devices. We greeted each participant upon their arrival, offered light refreshments, and made small talk to create a friendly and warm environment. During this time, AUTHOR 1 ensured that each participant read, understood, and signed the consent form. AUTHOR 1 then entered their name into the gift card drawing.

We began each focus group interview on time, and AUTHOR 2 served as the primary moderator (Kruegar & Casey, 2015). As primary moderator, AUTHOR 2 began each focus group interview by welcoming participants and providing an overview of the present study. She also informed participants that we were audio recording the interview to ensure we captured everything discussed and assured participants that their confidentiality would be protected. AUTHOR 2 employed a semi-structured approach during focus group interviews and asked a set of nine preformed questions with probes (e.g., "Tell me more.") to prompt elaboration when needed (see Figure 1). Our focus group interview questions did not directly hone in on race because we wanted participants to feel comfortable sharing their stories in their own words and to avoid question bias. AUTHOR 1 served as the assistant moderator and recorded notes about the discussion, quotes from participants, and detailed descriptions. At the end of each focus group interview, AUTHOR 1 and AUTHOR 2 invited questions from participants, thanked them for their time, and held the gift card drawing.

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. What factors inspire you to become a teacher?
2. What would be your ideal first-year classroom?
3. What has your experience been like in the teacher preparation program?
4. Who or what consists of your support system in this program?
5. What concerns, if any, do you have about being ready to transition into the classroom?
6. From your perspective, what are the strengths of the teacher preparation program?
7. From your perspective, how can the teacher preparation program be improved?
8. In what ways are you taking responsibility for becoming an effective teacher?
9. If you could sit in a room with current teachers, what burning questions would you have for them?

Figure 1. Interview questions

We used a transcription service to transcribe the audio recordings from each focus group interview to text. Once the transcriptions were completed, AUTHOR 1 shared them with AUTHOR 2 and AUTHOR 3, along with the corresponding audio record-

ings. We then held a preliminary research team meeting to discuss logistics, establish data analysis procedures, and settle on coding conventions (Fernald & Duclos, 2005). During this meeting, we decided to code data inductively and systematically using a two-phase approach. In the first phase, we coded data from one focus group interview independently. After familiarizing ourselves with the data (i.e., reading through the transcript text, consulting the audio recording), we used two coding cycles to analyze and reanalyze data (Saldaña, 2016). We used initial coding to label data segments with tentative codes, followed by axial coding to organize similar codes into categories. While coding independently, we intentionally examined data for experiences related to power, race, and racism and documented our ideas, questions, and reflections with analytic memos. In the second phase, we met as a research team to compare codes and categories that emerged during our independent analyses, shared interpretations, and engaged in discussion until we reached a group consensus. AUTHOR 1 maintained a codebook and added all of the codes we agreed upon, corresponding definitions, and data examples (see Figure 2 for an excerpt from the codebook).

Codes	Definitions	Data Examples
Advising & Communication	Information about a participant's experiences with program advisement and the exchange of information.	"From what I understood as a history education major, you stay with your history advisor... I understand the reason for that. There is a separate course load that you have to do and specific steps you have to take as a history major." (Anna)
Microaggressions	Indirect or subtle behaviors a participant experienced that express discriminatory attitudes towards members of a marginalized group.	"The teacher told us that the United States citizen is the one that has European decent." (Tomás)
Peer Interactions	Information about a participant's experiences with peers in the teacher preparation program.	"I actually spoke to another history education major, and he had the same experience. He was the one that said, 'No, go and do this, and do that. See what classes you can get done immediately.'" (Anna)
Preparedness & Unpreparedness	A participant's sense of capacity and competency to teach, as well as actions they take to improve their capacity and competency to teach.	"What I have been doing is actually going online to YouTube and seeing different classroom management things and then also reading up on child psychology books." (Anna)
Recommendations	A participant's suggestions for how to improve the teacher preparation program.	"I wish the education department had something specific in place where we can go and talk about these painful things. Like the experience, like how we are advancing as students." (Tomás)
Support System	Information about the individuals outside of the teacher preparation program who provide participants with encouragement.	"Definitely my family, my husband, my in-laws, and obviously my kids." (Anna)
Teacher Educator Interactions	Information about the experiences and relationships a participant has with faculty members affiliated with the teacher preparation program.	"He [a history faculty member] is a great encourager. He knew my background. He knew that I was helping to take care of my grandmother. He knew that my son has autism and that my youngest was in NICU [newborn intensive care unit] for a month." (Anna)
Teacher Preparation Program Aspects	Information about a participant's experiences with certification, coursework, clinical teaching, field experiences, and testing within the teacher preparation program.	"Nothing is going to make sense until you are out of the classroom. You can see everything. You can see all the aspects of the education. You can see all the aspects of the content, and you say, 'Okay, that's perfect. Now it makes sense.' Because you are going to see all the puzzle together." (Tomás)

Figure 2. Codebook excerpt

Findings

Three main themes emerged from data analysis that contributed to our understanding of the institutionalization and maintenance of racism in a university-based teacher preparation program. These themes were Interactions with Peers and Teacher Preparation Program Stakeholders, Navigating Teacher Preparation Program Complexities,

and Views of Preparedness/Unpreparedness to Teach. We have provided a description of each theme below and included verbatim quotations from participants to retain the voices of Anna, Camila, Gilbert, María, Tómas, and Valeria.

Interactions with peers and teacher preparation program stakeholders

Participants shared a multitude of ways in which they interacted with fellow pre-service teachers enrolled in South Central University's teacher preparation program. In some cases, participants consulted with other preservice teachers to gain needed information concerning their progression through the teacher preparation program. For example, Anna explained that since her undergraduate degree was in history, her primary advisor was in the history department. After consulting with preservice teachers who were also history majors seeking teacher certification, Anna came to realize that she was behind in the required coursework offered in the education department. Anna noted that coordinating requirements between two different academic departments was "a little bit disjointed" and she "just somehow fell through the cracks." Tómas encountered similar challenges while attempting to coordinate requirements for the degree in the Spanish department and teacher certification requirements in the education department. Tómas shared, "People were telling me exactly the same thing, 'Oh that [advisor] is horrible and not telling me the classes I have to take.'" As with Anna, Tómas found fellow preservice teachers were a valuable resource to assist with navigating institutional requirements.

Camila, Gilbert, and Valeria also described interactions they had with preservice teachers that were more personal in nature. As a nontraditional student, Camila admitted that she faced a number of challenges associated with balancing being a wife, mother, and full-time student. In order to experience success with balancing family and school responsibilities, Camila described how she and other nontraditional preservice teachers established an informal support system:

I've met a lot of women who have gone through a lot of their own struggles and who have the same concerns as I do. You know, moms and wives. I just think we've learned to depend on each other a lot. Like, you know, "Hey, I'm going to go to class," or "Hey, did you understand what she was saying?" I think it's been a really good experience.

Like Camila, Gilbert also referenced how preservice teachers who were nontraditional students "help each other out most of the times." In a similar manner, Valeria sought out fellow preservice teachers as role models. Valeria indicated that she held a tremendous amount of respect for nontraditional students who were mothers because they "look really well put together while taking care of kids and families." In addition, Valeria found other preservice teachers "who are on top of their stuff" inspirational because they motivate "the people who aren't as attentive to that, people like me, who

just keep on going and going and going.”

Participants also described interactions they have with stakeholders affiliated with South Central University’s teacher preparation program. These stakeholders included faculty members in the education department and other academic departments. Anna, Camila, Gilbert, María, Tómas, and Valeria all expressed mostly positive interactions with faculty members throughout the university and described them as “caring” professionals who exuded “energy and enthusiasm,” which created “excitement for teaching.” Unfortunately, Anna and Tómas referenced separate occasions when they both had an extremely negative interaction with a specific faculty member from the Spanish department. Tómas said that this “bad experience” took place during a class session when the faculty member pontificated, “A real U.S. citizen is the one that has European decent and European blood.” Anna explained how she responded to this microaggression:

I had a conversation after that class with [the Spanish faculty member]. I told her I was offended because, while I do have some European blood in me, I also have a good deal of Indian blood in me. And, I saw the faces of some of the other students in the class. It was like, I can’t let that one slide.

Navigating teacher preparation program complexities

Participants each described how they navigated the complexities of South Central University’s teacher preparation program. For participants, the flow of communication from stakeholders affiliated with the teacher preparation program to preservice teachers posed major challenges. In the university, preservice teachers who were majors in other academic departments and seeking teacher certification primarily worked with an advisor in the discipline of their major. However, Tómas explained, “We have some information from our advisor, and then we go to the education department and they have something different. They don’t communicate too well among themselves.” The lack of communication was often frustrating for preservice teachers, and it sometimes had an adverse impact. For example, María disclosed, “Technically, I’m supposed to be student teaching this upcoming fall, but I had some classes and hours get mixed up. So, I’m taking an extra semester to get those classes caught up.” Every participant who was affiliated with academic departments outside of education (i.e., Anna, Tómas, María, Valeria) expressed frustration with the teacher preparation program’s communication process, as conveyed by Valeria:

The [preservice teachers] who graduated, I don’t know where they found out all of the information! I assume that a lot of them probably went to the education office because if I hadn’t gone to the education office, then I wouldn’t have been able to student teach this semester. Because there are a ton of forms that my advisor [in the music department] didn’t know about. Sometimes we are told in class that some information was emailed to us, and

then we have to search in our emails for emails that usually didn't get sent. Also, there is a lot of communication that is very last minute. I mean it's very frustrating, extremely frustrating for us. I'm frustrated with the whole process and feel like I'm just going around in circles.

Another layer of complexity that participants grappled with was the dynamism of teacher preparation program personnel and policies. Regarding the dynamism of personnel, Gilbert described a situation that had a major impact on preservice teachers. Gilbert recalled:

There was an issue when Amy (a pseudonym) moved away one summer. Apparently, we needed an ID number to register for our certification exams. But, we weren't given these ID numbers until the fall. So, we had been that whole summer without being able to take our certification exam. Then, they gave us a short time period to take our certification test. So, a lot of people were trapped in time by stuff that was out of our hands and control.

Similarly, Camila described difficulties she encountered while navigating a change made in the teacher preparation program's testing policy for teacher certification. The new policy was created in response to data provided by the state's education agency that reflected lower pass rates on teacher certification exams, particularly among racially diverse preservice teachers. With this new testing policy, South Central University's teacher preparation program moved up the point at which preservice teachers were required to take and pass their certification tests. Camila relayed a dialogue exchange with Bill (a pseudonym), the director of South Central University's teacher preparation program, and a chain of events that transpired during her attempt to register for the required teacher certification tests:

Bill said, "You can't take the test yet because we changed something. So, now you got to wait until you take this class." So, I took the class, and when I got to the end of the semester in May, Bill said, "I'll give you a form to fill out and upload to Dropbox and then you're good to go." So, I'm like, "Where is the Dropbox?" And, Bill said, "Oh, I forgot. We are going to start that next semester." So, then I'm like, "Okay, but like all these forms are here, and my kids go to school, I go to school, and my husband is also in school. So, I only have this window right now." So, Bill said, "Okay, you can do this now, but you have to pay for the test now." And, I'm like, "Okay, fine." So, the minute I get the forms, I sit in my car and I fill them out and then turn them in because I don't have an hour and a half to drive back and forth. So, then Bill told me I still can't take the tests! I'm like, "Why? I just want to take the tests." So, it was like September when I finally got released to take my tests. By then, [South Central University's teacher preparation

program] released everybody at one time, so everybody was bottlenecked. Like, I literally went to my laptop and signed up the minute Bill said, “Okay, you’re in the system.” But, since we were all bottlenecked trying to register for certification testing, I had to go all the way to another city that was over an hour away.

Views of preparedness/unpreparedness to teach

Participants described ways in which they felt prepared and unprepared to teach. With respect to preparedness, Anna emphasized that the faculty members in the education department “want you to succeed and that they want you to be able to swim on your own, not just go out there and kind of doggy paddle fish around.” She often expressed concerns she had to different faculty members who would then point her to specific resources. Anna indicated that this approach showed her how to “take ownership of the situation” by consulting various teaching resources “to figure it out.” Tómas also affirmed the education department’s commitment to teacher preparation. He explained:

When you leave [South Central University’s teacher preparation program], you are going to be ready. I’m still taking classes, and I can tell you I’m ready for teaching because I am already planning lessons and the semester is not even over. At the beginning, it’s stressful because you don’t have the practice and you don’t know what to do. But, when you are in the classroom and you can see everything, you are going to see all of the puzzle pieces together.

With respect to unpreparedness, María revealed apprehensions she had about “the transition from being student to being teacher,” particularly with how “to deal with administration and having restrictions or being constrained on my way of teaching.” Camila also shared concerns she had about teaching by stating, “Teachers start to teach to the tests since they are required. In reality, that’s what happens. How do you keep that enthusiasm of teaching to teach and not just teach to the dreadful test?” As a future music teacher, Valeria indicated that she felt ill equipped to manage a large number of students who were in class at one time. Valeria also questioned, “Where is that line between students enjoying music but then also having an ending goal for them to perform better?”

Discussion

In order to promote a more racially diverse teacher workforce, it is important for researchers to investigate the experiences of racially diverse preservice teachers during their enrollment in teacher preparation programs. Many researchers have already identified barriers in teacher preparation programs that undermine efforts intended to

attract, train, and produce racially diverse teachers (Brown, 2014; Bryan & Williams, 2017; Martinez Valle-Riestra et al., 2011; Rodriguez & Cho, 2011). We sought to add to these findings by examining what six racially diverse preservice teachers viewed as strengths and shortcomings of a university-based teacher preparation program that was affiliated with a Hispanic-Serving Institution located in the South Central United States. In the present study, we provided Anna, Camila, Gilbert, María, Tómas, and Valeria the opportunity “to speak their truths” and used CRT as a method of analysis to interpret their “lived experiences” (Ledesma & Calderon, 2015, p. 218). Essentially, CRT provided a framework for unveiling and critiquing power structures, education inequities, and institutional racism in the university’s teacher preparation program. We have provided a discussion of these below and suggested potential solutions to disrupt institutional racism and better support racially diverse preservice teachers.

Our findings demonstrated how Whiteness perpetrates in the preparation of teachers, as evidenced by Camila’s reference to changes that the teacher preparation program made to their testing policy for teacher certification. CRT challenges Whiteness as property and claims to neutrality and color blindness in teacher certification testing that “reinforce White dominance,” rather than ensure certified teachers “are of high quality” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 161). While state policy makers seek to enact policies that increase the quality of the teacher workforce through more rigorous certification testing requirements (Shuls, 2018), these policies turn a blind eye to cultural biases (Bennett, McWhorter, & Kuykendall, 2006) and racial performance gaps (Tyler et al., 2011) on state teacher certification tests.

We found it interesting that the teacher preparation program’s response to improve pass rates, particularly among racially diverse preservice teachers, was to require successful completion of teacher certification tests at an earlier point in teacher preparation programming. By doing so, teacher certification tests become “gatekeepers” among preservice teachers who must now achieve desirable performance well before they complete all required coursework and field experiences (Petchauer, 2015, p. 852). Without adequate preparation, racially diverse preservice teachers enrolled in South Central University’s teacher preparation program will likely continue to experience the disparate impact of teacher certification testing (Barnes-Johnson, 2008; Goldhaber & Hansen, 2010). Moreover, the new testing policy for teacher certification advances Bell’s (1980) interest convergence principle by preserving a Eurocentric- and White-dominated teacher education curriculum, rather than making substantial curriculum changes that better prepare racially diverse preservice teachers for success on teacher certification tests (Milner, 2008).

Our findings also brought forth counter-stories that “reveal experiences” of pre-service teachers who “are routinely unheard” (Sleeter, 2017, p. 162). Anna, Tómas, María, and Valeria each described deficiencies with the communication process in South Central University’s teacher preparation program for preservice teachers affili-

ated with academic departments outside of education. In some cases, they were able to resolve issues through consultations with fellow preservice teachers. In other cases, though, they experienced adverse effects and had to complete additional semesters of coursework. Based on these counter-stories, communication issues seem commonplace between South Central University's teacher preparation program and academic departments throughout the university.

The counter-stories in the present study also presented interesting findings concerning interactions between racially diverse preservice teachers and others. Many interactions were positive, such as the informal peer support systems that Camila, Gilbert, and Valeria developed. Every participant also experienced very positive interactions with many different faculty members throughout South Central University, especially those in the education department. Participants appreciated the deep commitment that faculty members in the education department had to high-quality teacher preparation. Although Tómas recognized that future teaching experiences were necessary to realize the full benefits of teacher preparation, María, Camila, and Valeria did point out specific areas in which they already felt unprepared.

Unfortunately, some interactions described in counter-stories were negative. For example, Anna and Tómas experienced microaggressions from a faculty member in the Spanish department that appeared to occur in her classes on a regular basis. Additionally, Camila delineated interactions she had with the director of the teacher preparation program, along with a series of events that caused her a great deal of confusion and frustration. We were unsure why a routine requirement (i.e., registering for teacher certification testing) was such an ambiguous and nebulous process for Camila.

Conclusion

Based on our findings in the present study, we offer three recommendations for administrators who are stakeholders in university-based teacher preparation programs. We have specifically identified administrators, such as college deans, academic department chairs, and program directors, because they are often the decision-makers who influence the policies and practices of their respective teacher preparation programs. First, administrators must offer continuous professional learning activities for culturally responsive practices to all stakeholders who interact with preservice teachers, such as faculty and staff members from all academic departments. Employing a culturally responsive pedagogy in teacher preparation establishes an inclusive culture for all types of differences, maximizes learning among all preservice teachers (Baumgartner, Bay, Lopez-Reyna, Snowden, & Maiorano, 2015), and develops critical consciousness among those who interact with preservice teachers (Stachowiak, 2015). Second, administrators must infuse support structures throughout the teacher preparation program for racially diverse preservice teachers, such as mentoring approaches. Mentoring approaches may be formal or informal and led by a mentor who "promotes the very

best of one's profession" (Figueroa & Rodriguez, 2015, p. 27). Lastly, administrators must implement initiatives and guide strategic efforts to restructure existing teacher preparation programs (Haddix, 2017). Restructuring efforts must begin with an evaluation of the predominance of Whiteness within the teacher preparation program. Once stakeholders become aware of complicity in preserving Whiteness, administrators may then facilitate collaborations among stakeholders to dismantle the current structure and establish a "culturally relevant and social justice-oriented curriculum and pedagogy" (p. 146). It is equally important that restructuring efforts include a plan that reforms leadership and positions of authority.

We recognize the daunting nature of our recommendations. However, it is of great importance that teacher educators, university administrators, and other stakeholders in teacher preparation program have heightened awareness of institutional racism, address discriminatory practices, and remove systemic barriers encountered by racially diverse preservice teachers. Findings in the present study have also suggested a need for developing cultural capital among preservice teachers to promote their agency in navigating an educational system that was not designed for them. We emphasize the urgency in this call since the need for a more racially diversified teacher workforce is in high demand.

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