

Diversifying the Pool of Teacher Candidates: Identifying Hurdles to Program Completion for Students of Color and English Learners in a Predominantly white Teacher Education Setting

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Abstract

Numeric data indicate that few students of color are admitted to, and/or graduate from, the teacher education program at the studied university. This research provides qualitative insight into the factors that drive these low numbers. Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with students who identified as students of color, half of whom were English learners. Participants were asked detailed questions about their experiences within the studied teacher education program. Two clear hurdles to program admission and completion were uncovered, including, a perceived lack of support for cultural heritage and a lack of personalized academic support. Recommendations are made to help increase the abilities of post-secondary institutions to attract and graduate more students of color.

Keywords: race, students of color, student retention, graduation, teacher education

Introduction

Over the years the size of the racial graduation gap has modulated to some degree, but for all groups of historically underrepresented students, it remains in the double digits (Swial, Redd, & Perna, 2003). *The Chronicle of Education*, citing Department of Education statistics, asserts that nationwide, the six-year graduation rate for African American students at four-year institutions is about twenty percent lower than their white counterparts (Engle & Theokas, 2010; Schmidt, 2008). Looking directly at National Center for Educational Statistics' data, one can see that, at all levels, associate's, bachelor's, master's, and at the doctoral level, white students are far more likely to be admitted and to graduate than are Asian, Latino/a, American Indian, and African American college students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014). Additionally, the racial graduation gap is especially pronounced at public universities and at schools with less selective admission requirements (Thomas, 2010). Low college graduation rates for students of color are especially troubling for teacher preparatory programs. From coast to coast and border to border, one thing is evident when looking at American public schools, and that is – change. In 2011, for the first time in history, the United States Census recorded more children born to non-white families than to white families (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). This means by September of 2016, more children of color than white students will step into kindergarten classrooms. Students of color already outnumber white students in many states, particularly in the southern U.S. (Southern Education Foundation, 2010). This will be the reality for many more states in the near future. Adding to the changing demographics, every year growing numbers of children and their families relocate to the United States speaking languages other than English. Today in California, for example, 28% of the public school population is an English Language Learner and in Texas that number is 15% (Samson & Collins, 2012). However, one datum from the public schools that has not changed much over the decades is the composition of the American teaching force: primarily white, middle class, and English speaking (Gay, 2002; Gloria Ladson-Billings, 2006). Post-secondary schools of education shoulder significant responsibility to change this reality.

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The colleges and universities that train, and ultimately license, teachers have done a poor job at admitting, retaining, and graduating diverse teachers (Santos, Cabrera, & Fosnacht, 2010). While the number of African American and Latina/o public school students is rising at an unprecedented rate, the chances of one of these students seeing an African American or Latina/o teachers in one of their classrooms is not rising at all (Irizarry & Donaldson, 2012; Pabon, Anderson, & Kharem, 2011). When students of color (SOC) look to the front of the room and see the person they call "teacher," they should more often than not, see a man or woman who looks like them. This paper bolsters and adds to existing research guiding education program designers, faculty, and administrators as they work to redesign teacher education program admissions, supports, and assessments in order to open doors for more teachers of color to take their seats in front of the classrooms.

Conceptual Framework

Research cited in a report by *The Education Alliance* indicated that African Americans, Native Americans, Latino/as and Asians are underrepresented as public school educators, not because of a lack of interest in the field but, rather, because they are unable to gain entrance and complete their teacher preparatory programs (Torres, Santos, Peck, & Cortez, 2004). This failure should be placed squarely on the shoulders of the gate-keeping apparatus that governs entrance into the ranks of public school educators, not on students. Schools of education should search for embedded racist policies and practices, which are often cloaked in the "business as usual" mentality of the day-to-day operations of a college or university's school of education. Often well-meaning program planners and faculty focus their attention on solving these race-based education gaps by suggesting ways that students of color can adapt to better meet the needs and requirements of the program. However, to truly address race-based inequity in teacher education, the spotlight of reform should be placed on the institutions themselves. (Banks, 2001; Gay & Kirkland, 2003; Singleton & Linton, 2006; Yosso, 2005). Racist and discriminatory policies and practices are more likely to be found in the details of the daily operations of teacher education programs than in individual shortcomings of students (Gillborn, 2008; Matsuda, Lawnece, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009). To facilitate equitable program access that does not discriminate based on race, teacher education programs and faculty need first to look at the "givens," the daily operations of the program that seem immovable, including but not limited to admission requirements such as minimum grade point averages, test scores, prerequisite course requirements, reliance on writing, the necessity of state mandated standardized tests, class scheduling, cultural/racial sensitivity of faculty and support staff, and program costs, both direct and indirect. This study draws its framework from critical race theory, which holds among other tenets, that race and racism are central and permanent concepts in society which are essential to be considered when analyzing and interpreting life in America (Bell, 1992). Through the narratives of SOCs who participated in this study, we hope to gain deeper, more critical understandings about how and, in what ways, the "systems" at the studied Mid-Western University (SMU), when acted upon and carried out, intentionally or unintentionally prevent students of color from being successful.

Objectives and Research Questions

Across the nation many students of color struggle to gain admission into, persist in, and graduate from their teacher preparatory programs. Several studies have looked specifically at Southeast Asian students, a group that accounts for more than half of the participants in this study. These studies have identified hurdles to program completion, including limited access to program information, families' inability to support students academically and financially, lack of pre-college preparation, and the effects of living in a racist society (Lee & Green, 2008; McClain-Ruelle & Xiong, 2005; Root, Rudawski, Taylor, & Rochon, 2003; Thao, 2003; Um, 2003). Similar work focusing on Latino/as (Frey, 2002; Hernandez & Lopez, 2007), African Americans (Holmes, Ebbers, Robinson, & Mugenda, 2007; Robinson, 1990; Schwartz & Washington, 2007), and American Indian students (Belgarde & LoRe, 2007) replicated patterns of low graduation rates and consistency with regard to the hurdles that stand in the way of program admission and completion. Through in-depth interviews this study seeks to provide specific explanations as to why so few students of color, and students of color who are also English learners, complete their teacher education program. Beyond the SMU, this study hopes to advance the conversation by providing increased depth surrounding the known hurdles and by presenting a new focused look at the hurdles to program admission and completion for students of color who also self-identify as nonnative speakers of English.

The findings in this paper are valuable to all teacher preparation programs that wish to critically evaluate their systems for attracting, yielding, retaining, and graduating students of color and students of color who are also English learners.

Methodology

To respond to the questions presented in this paper, data were collected using transcripts from in-depth, one-on-one interviews with students who self-identified with the university as a person of color and/or an English learner. At the time of the interview, these students were either currently affiliated with the teacher education program at the SMU or recently separated. The teacher education program studied is housed in what would best be described as a “public comprehensive” or a “regional public” university. The institution enrolls about eleven thousand undergraduate students. As described by the 2013 U.S. Census, this Midwestern university is located in an urban area. The town and the immediate area surrounding the town have a population of 102,852 people. There are two large urban city centers in the vicinity, the closest is 90 miles away and the other, 180 miles away. In between the large cities and the town where the SMU is located, the landscape is mostly farmland. According to U.S. Census figures from 2011, the town’s racial make-up is as follows: 93% White, 1% African American, .6% American Indian, 3% Asian, mostly Hmong.²

Participants

When students enroll at the SMU, they are asked to provide information about their race. These data are stored by the college and may be accessed when requested. Each participant in this study identified him- or herself to the college as a person of color. The participants’ stated racial and language affiliations are listed in table 1.

Table 1: SMU Teacher Education Program Interviewee Data

Racial identification	Total interviewees	English learners
Southeast Asian	12	9
Asian (Chinese)	1	0
African American	3	0
Latino/a	1	0
American Indian	3	0

Conducting Interviews

A semi-structured interview style (Creswell, 1998; I. E. Seidman, 1991) was used with the interview questions serving as the focal point for the conversation. Interviewers asked each participant the same principle questions, but also had the freedom to pursue important follow-up lines of inquiries and explore unanticipated topics raised by the interviewees. Digital recording of the interviews freed the interviewers to focus on listening carefully and making consistent eye contact with the interviewee. This helped to establish comfort and rapport so that interviewees would express themselves more honestly. Other techniques to build rapport included the sequencing of questions from straightforward to complex, listening carefully enough to ask well-placed and thoughtful follow-up questions, and allowing the interviewers to briefly enter into the conversation as a “friend” or a “colleague” rather than as a researcher, thus further building comfort and rapport (I. E. Seidman, 1991). Participants were verbally notified of their Internal Review Board afforded rights, following which they were asked to sign a consent-to-interview form. Most interviews were conducted in the primary investigator’s office with the door closed. One interview was conducted over the phone and one was conducted in the privacy of the participant’s home. Interviews typically lasted about fifty minutes, but many lasted longer, one for an hour and twenty-two minutes. Two researchers conducted the interviews. One interviewer was a white male and the other was a Hmong woman. When an interviewer and interviewee are of different races, there is the possibility of inherent mistrust and discomfort that can alter the responses given (Krysan & Couper, 2006). This reality can be exacerbated by the fact that racial inequity and racism were central components of the interview (Zuniga, Mildred, Varghese, DeJong, & Keehn, 2012).

²Linguistically, there are two major dialects spoken in Mong society, the blue Mong, or Mong Leng, and white Hmong. The spelling of *Hmong* is a preferred term for the white Hmong, while the blue Mong, or Mong Leng, prefer to be called *Mong*, hence the usage in this paper of Hmong.

Both interviewers were conscious of this reality and worked to build and maintain safe and open climates for the honest expression of ideas. A careful review of the transcripts did not reveal differences in length, candor, depth, or content between the two interviewers.

Analyzing the Interview Data

At the onset of this study, the investigators had general notions about what the interviews might reveal. As a result, a constant comparative analysis approach to data analysis was adopted (Creswell, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). As the analysis progressed, categories that described interviewees' perceptions about the hurdles or springboards to program completion were created, tested, and revised. Initial categorizations were developed, then reviewed and compared to the transcript data. This process was repeated throughout the study. The ongoing analysis provided a means to monitor the quality of the interviews and to adjust the interviewing when needed. Overall, the process ensured that subjects were probed, in depth, and in areas relevant to this study (deKoven & Trumbull, 2004). All identifying information in the findings section, such as names, locations, and racial descriptors, have been changed to protect participant identities.

Findings

A careful analysis of the transcripts revealed two clear hurdles that impeded participants' ability to gain entrance and/or to complete their teacher education program.

1. Lack of Programmatic Support for Academics

Participants felt their programs did not support their academic needs. Many expressed concerns about not knowing enough about program or assignment expectations. Two specific concerns were often highlighted: 1) the fear of not being prepared to take and pass the state mandated tests that are required for licensure, Praxis, and not knowing what would be asked of them on these tests, and 2) concerns surrounding the writing requirements for the portfolios. The portfolio is a requirement for admission into a teacher education program track. The first quote listed below typifies the concerns and anxieties surrounding a required standardized state test. Well I struggle with tests. I didn't know what the test was about, even though they said this and that was gonna be on there, I didn't know how it was gonna look, I would like a sample copy, one you can take and score it yourself...it turns out I failed it and now I have to take it again. A different set of concerns emerged specifically from participants who described themselves as English learners (ELs). Nine of the twenty participants identified themselves as a nonnative speaker of English. The next quote captures these students' thoughts on their academic preparation for the required high-stake exams. I would say as far as equity goes it really isn't equitable...Other peers of non color also had difficulty with the test but the majority of them did not. They put in minimal efforts and they pass right along...[The exam was biased because of] the reading part of it. A lot of vocabulary. I grew up in a family that didn't have a lot of resources, we didn't have a lot of books for example. When I was asked to read a passage and then was supposed to recall certain details of it, I would be kind of out of luck.

Another programmatic area where participants indicated a need for more academic support from faculty and staff revolved around their training to write, as "experts," about their knowledge surrounding teaching standards. These essays are a required part of students' portfolios. The portfolio becomes the application for a specific teacher education program and enables access to required upper level courses. The following quote captures students' apprehensions about this writing requirement. Taking that one class didn't prepare me to write those essays. Once I handed it in [and did not pass] I didn't even get a copy of it saying here is where you went wrong, I mean that would have been helpful...I think feedback is crucial for me...I don't know maybe I could have done a mock essay and have them [my professors] look at it and say, "you are on the right track! Of unique importance to teacher education programs is the reality that fears about the creation of the portfolio are exacerbated for students who are also nonnative English speakers. The professors have different ways of telling us what they wanted for certain parts of the [assignment]...it made it difficult for us to write according to what was expected of us, it was especially hard for me because I am [Hmong] and I am learning standard English vocabulary and concepts. It's hard to write to meet all their needs and to express the way I want to teach. Students who participated in this study expressed anxiety and doubt about their intellectual ability. Much of their academic self-doubt centered on fears about taking standardized high-stakes tests, writing assignments, and completing required general education classes in math and science.

A major one [fear] was those tests, the PPST. It took me, oh my goodness, I don't know, like a year or two just to pass that one. I needed to pass that test just so I can enter the program, you know that is a really big thing. Not surprisingly, other forms of self-doubt surfaced for nonnative English speakers, in particular around language ability. For me as an English language learner sometimes you have to either listen and not write, or write and not listen. I can't do them both and that is just me because I am a slow learner. The following two quotes offer explanations as to why some students might not advocate on their own behalf when they need extra support or guidance with their academics.

If students of color are having trouble already, then they are likely to be having trouble being assertive and it is not likely that they will seek help from their professors. So where does that put Hmong students when they are a really passive culture? I don't know how many Native American students you have spoken with or how many you will talk with but, we tend to be more of a soft spoken kind...well not soft spoken (sighs) but more laid back and keep to ourselves, I mean culturally. I don't know if that would factor into that feeling to go ask for help from the [multicultural affairs office] or from their advisor. While speaking with participants about their academic struggles, one unanticipated discovery surfaced. When asked, "Who would you turn to for help with your school work?" eleven out of eighteen participants asked this question indicated that they would rather seek out the help of a peer and not a professor. Most students believed that faculty and advisors are knowledgeable and able to help them with their questions about program completion requirements, but they would choose not to speak with them for reasons of ease and comfort. If I had questions I'd probably turn to a friend in the program. I would say it's just a matter of comfort. I guess. I'm not saying that the professor seems distant or anything, it's just, it's just an understanding that they have very recent experiences that pertain to what I am asking about. That's why I would choose them [a friend].

2. Lack of Support for Cultural Heritage.

Participants indicated a perceived lack of support for their cultural heritage in their education programs. Examples of this lack of appreciation for cultural heritage are expressed below. We always had class on the weekends and one time class fell on [a Christian] holiday and the class was like, well let's move class to next weekend. Well if you live in Osseo, the next weekend was a traditional holiday that my culture celebrates. I would have preferred that we just automatically move the class to another weekend, but it ended up the majority wanted to have it then...Out of twenty four students, I was the only American Indian student. As a result, I had to miss [this traditional holiday]...and because of this, I almost didn't come back [to college]. I go to a class a lot of times and I have people looking at me like I have five heads! You know, I'm thinking it is more of the area itself, there is not a lot of diversity here. I don't know if it's the excitement of having an African American in class, or if it's just something different for them. The following excerpt provides one example of how participants' perceptions about how the college didn't embrace their cultural heritage, which in turn led to their feeling undervalued and not supported. I don't know if this is ever going to happen but... I'd be proud of myself if I [ever was able to make a difference on this issue.] So, you know those paintings in the basement, the ones of our great African American heroes? Great people to have paintings of... but in the basement...next to the storerooms? Can we move the Black people out of the basement?

Several students perceived a lack of support for their cultural heritage in their observation that there are no (or few) academic and/or faculty advisors of color at the SMU. I think one [thing that might be important] is having a minority advisor, whether they are Hispanic, Hmong, or African American, that would make a difference especially for minorities. At times, students in general are afraid to talk to their advisors, mainly because advisors are busy. They know that you're not going to make it, so they don't make that extra effort to really want to help you out. They kind of turn you away from what you really want to pursue. Maybe having a person of a different color that can kind of relate it to you would make a difference. I know within the school of education, I believe it's Dr. [Chandler Wolf], but from what I understand, he's not an advisor he's a [Dean]. That's wonderful, but having people of different colors and different genders, whether it be a male or a female, I don't believe there a lot of male advisors in the teaching program as well. Maybe that would make a difference as well.

Discussion

To better meet the needs of SOC who wish to become teachers, college and university education programs need to take action on several fronts to create environments that promote and sustain climates that embrace racially, culturally, and ethnically diverse groups of students.

Teacher education programs should review programmatic and personnel-based hurdles to ensure that more SOC and English learners satisfy the requirements needed to apply and complete one of the required educational program tracks. The suggestions listed in this discussion section originated from interviews with participants.

Moreover, these suggestions – to hire more faculty/staff persons of color (Brayboy, 2003; Nasir, 2004; Umbach, 2006), to create opportunities for meeting same-race student mentors (Rhoads, Buenavista, & Maldonado, 2004; Roach, 2008; A. Seidman, 2005), to create intersections for meeting caring faculty and staff (Cotton & Wilson, 2006; Komarraju, Musulkin, & Bhattacharya, 2010), and to review program requirements for imbedded discriminatory policies or practices (G. Ladson-Billings, 2005; Root et al., 2003; Torres et al., 2004; Um, 2003) – have been supported in the literature. The findings of the present study point to three core areas where colleges and universities can make improvements that will increase acceptance, retention, and graduation of SOC and English learners: more academic support for students, increased awareness and support of cultural heritage, and enhanced support for English learners.

Academic Support

Schools of education should embrace a more comprehensive approach to supporting students, in particular SOC and English learner's academic needs. These efforts should include intentional supports to help students pass the required core classes in math and science, help them develop the writing competency needed for the successful creation of a portfolio, and help reducing the impact of internalized self-doubt about academic strengths. In view of the finding that many participants would prefer to seek out a fellow student rather than a faculty member for program support and guidance, it is suggested that colleges and universities work to create programs that facilitate more intersections where past and present students can meet and form meaningful bonds with each other. These mentoring relationships could provide both academic and social support to students. This would be beneficial for students in the teacher education program so that the students could have readily accessible networks of other students with similar experiences navigating the programmatic hurdles that may be visible only to other SOC. Many participants indicated that they would take advantage of the opportunity to work with another program graduate whom they perceived to be like themselves, and they would choose this option before deciding to work with a fellow student from a different racial group. A key role these mentors could play would be to point students in the direction of culturally sensitive supports for their math and reading needs, locating math and reading-support labs on campus, and for identifying culturally supportive and racially conscious faculty and staff. The interviewees revealed that knowing the names of safe, reliable, and thoughtful faculty and staff is a crucial step for helping them gain valuable program information and for building the needed faculty/student relationships that support the likelihood that students will complete the program.

Many students in this study expressed internalized fear about their academic ability. This observation is reinforced by the nearly two decades of work done by Dr. Claude Steele. Dr. Steele introduced the notion of *identity contingency*, or stereotype threat (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Steele concludes that persons of color, who have experienced decades of oppression and marginalization in schools and in society, have subconsciously internalized gross underestimations of their intellectual, interpersonal, or social potential, and this translates into poor performance. The cumulative effect of receiving years of negative micro-type aggressions leaves many SOC with a reduced sense of agency. The roots of this internalized doubt are firmly set long before college as this one participant very adeptly noted in this quote. Well, I think a lot of students of color have a lot of road blocks even before they get to the college point. Like elementary, middle and high school depending on if there are language barriers, lower income families, they already have all of these barriers in place so just getting to where you can actually apply to college is a barrier. There is also the fact that students of color are over represented in special education. There are a lot of things getting in the way not just one thing that we could change. Though participants never used this phrase, one way students indicated that the effects of "stereotype threat" could be managed, was to look for ways to attract, hire, and retain more academic advisors and student support personnel who are persons of color. Participants in this study indicated that having more faculty and academic support people who are persons of color would increase the likelihood of students' seeking out their help, advice, and support. Based on the transcripts, students perceive that faculty and advisors who "look like them" are more likely to have shared experiences, goals, and understandings.

This perception of a common thread between student and instructor based on visible similarities will increase comfort levels and in turn increase the probability that the student will seek out their support. Also, the presence of these professionals sends the implicit message that persons of color are successful, valuable, and have an essential voice in education, and SOC can more easily superimpose their own likenesses onto these professionals.

Support for Cultural Heritage and English learners

Colleges and universities should evaluate their programs' entrance requirements to see if they inadvertently discriminate against people whose first language is not English. The interviews pointed specifically at the rubrics used to score the essays and writing requirements for the portfolios, which are the basis for program admission. Students who struggle with the English language worry that they will be unable to express their content knowledge in traditionally acceptable ways, which in turn, will be counted against them in the scoring process. In addition, nearly all who were interviewed believed that the minimum grade point averages for admission to programs were a source of concern given the large number of math and science classes that are a part of the program pre-requisites. These classes often are the reason for low grade point averages for SOC and for English learners. A few participants overtly expressed an awareness of the reality that standardized tests favor white test takers over test takers of color, and that the program's reliance on high stakes standardized tests would serve to exclude them from program participation. Still others felt excluded based not on their intellect, but rather on their inability to express their knowledge using English. Participants also expressed the need for more faculty and staff to receive diversity sensitivity training. While the efforts of some faculty to be culturally sensitive and supportive are discerned and appreciated by participants, other faculty members remain a source of discomfort and anxiety for SOC. A few participants mentioned that the education curriculum used by their institution rarely reflects the lived experiences of SOC and English learners and this makes it hard for some students to connect with the material being studied and it serves to marginalize students in nearly-all white classrooms. One participant noted that the physical environment at the SMU failed to support a multicultural ethos. She pointed to the placement of four portraits of key civil rights heroes in the basement of the education building.

Concluding Remarks

Evaluation of interviews with students reveals that hurdles to program acceptance and completion occurred most often during students' pre-program coursework and testing. However, some of these barriers to program completion persisted after a student was admitted to a particular education program. The objectives of this research are to help teacher educators and teacher education program administrators as they seek to craft comprehensive open admissions and advancement policies, ones that do not inadvertently discriminate based on racial or language differences. Any critical assessment of a teacher education program *must* include an honest evaluation of how the details of the program's operation act to limit student participation and success. Evidence of discriminatory practice and procedures should be assessed by looking at programmatic outcomes, and not by whether or not a program "intends" to be discriminatory or not. If the program disproportionately impacts students across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines, the program is discriminatory by default. The present investigation also hopes to spread insight into what may be blocking the development of teachers of color nation-wide. It is hoped that by implementing comprehensive multifaceted culturally responsive selection policies and practices in teacher education, the pool of highly qualified teachers of color will increase significantly. These teachers can then venture out into the schools and work effectively with ethnically diverse learners. In doing so teacher preparatory programs can respond more effectively to the multicultural and multi-linguistic needs of local school districts. Schools that need to adjust to rapid enrollment increases of, for example, Hmong, Mexican, or Somali students, can turn to their local teacher preparatory program and not only hire teacher candidates with pedagogical and professional expertise but, also, hire from a growing pool of high-caliber diverse teachers. In turn, these educators can work effectively to support a wider range of students in schools. Research on same-race teacher/student classrooms concluded that students do benefit from having a teacher who is a member of the same racial group. The benefits to students go beyond academic success. These race-based relationships also translate into gains for students personally and socially (Darkenwald, 1975; Dee, 2001; Villegas & Davis, 2008). These same-race teacher/student relationships help offer more opportunities for youth to be able to identify personally with the person they call "teacher." Seeing a person of the same race in front of the classroom enables students to feel more comfortable in the classroom, be better able to see themselves in positions of authority and control, have the perception that they share a common set of understandings and experiences, and ultimately derive more from their educational programs.

Paying attention to the racial composition of the teacher work force can serve as one of the many facets in a comprehensive program aimed at closing achievement gaps for students.

In addition to student benefits from having a multicultural and multiracial teaching staff, fellow educators can more readily access colleagues who may be willing to act as cultural brokers to help inform good culturally congruent practice in more classrooms. In order to provide these teachers of color, a larger pool of highly qualified teachers need to be graduated and licensed. The post-secondary institutions that prepare and certify teachers need to ensure that the portal to teaching credentials is truly open to all students.

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