

## BLACK FEMALE TEACHERS ON TEACHER PREPARATION AND RETENTION

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### Abstract:

Black teachers are disproportionately underrepresented in U.S. public schools. Over the past five decades, the percentage of Black teachers has not surpassed nine percent. Considering this trend, teacher education programs play a vital role in the retention of Black teachers. Hence, inadequate teacher preparation produces ineffective teachers, negatively influences teachers' efficacy and intentions to remain in classrooms, and subsequently hinders teaching and learning in classrooms. This qualitative study examines the teacher preparation experiences of twelve Black female teachers. Utilizing phenomenology as a theoretical lens, we identify four salient themes and engender recommendations for teacher preparation programs.

**Keywords:** Black female teachers, teacher preparation, teacher retention, urban schools

### Introduction

According to *A Quarter Century of Changes in the Elementary and Secondary Teaching Force: From 1987 to 2012*, despite a growing diversity in the teaching profession, Black teachers remain underrepresented (Ingersoll & Merrill, 2017). There remains a shortage of Black teachers within U.S. public schools, and Black teachers are disproportionately underrepresented in the U.S. teacher workforce when compared to their White counterparts (Farinde, Allen, & Lewis, 2016; Farinde-Wu, Allen, & Lewis, 2017; Shipp, 2000; Taie & Goldring, 2017). Furthermore, between the 1987-88 and 2011-12 school years, the percentage of Black teachers did not surpass nine percent and declined in comparison to other teachers of color (NCES, 2013) (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Percent of Teaching Demographics in Public Elementary and Secondary Schools by Race: Selected Years, 1987-88 through 2011-12*

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Race/ethnicity

Percentage distribution of teachers

	1987-88	1990-91	1993-94	1999-2000	2003-04	2007-08	2011-12
White	86.9	86.5	86.5	84.3	83.1	83.1	81.9
Black	8.2	8.3	7.4	7.6	7.0	7.0	6.8
Hispanic	3.0	3.4	4.2	5.6	7.1	7.1	7.8

<b>Asian</b>	0.9	1.0	1.1	1.6	1.2	1.2	1.8
<b>Pacific Islander</b>	--	--	--	--	0.2	0.2	0.1
<b>American Indian /Alaska Native</b>	1.0	0.8	0.8	0.9	0.5	0.5	0.5
<b>Two or more races</b>	--	--	--	--	0.7	0.9	1.0

*Source.* Adapted from U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics (2013).

Also, the latest edTPA administrative report indicates that Black preservice teachers were the least represented (5.93%) and the lowest performing subgroup on the edTPA assessment (Pecheone, Whittaker, Klesch, & Gutmann, 2018). These data are indicative of two challenges facing Black students in teacher preparation programs: (1) the absence of an ethnically representative critical mass, and (2) less effective teacher preparation for Black students. Teacher education programs remain overwhelmingly White and tend to mirror the K-12 teacher workforce (Snyder, de Brey & Dillow, 2019). The absence of a critical mass of Black people is pervasive throughout the teaching pipeline, which may contribute to the attrition of Black female teachers (Farinde-Wu, 2018). Likewise, inadequate teacher preparation may produce ineffective teachers, negatively influencing teachers' efficacy and intentions to remain in classrooms, and most importantly, engender adverse effects for teaching and learning in classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Contrarily, participation in a quality teacher education program is one of the most salient factors related to teacher retention (Bastian & Marks, 2017). Specifically, Black women benefit tremendously from entering a traditional (i.e. a four-year baccalaureate program, culminating in part with teacher certification exams) rather than alternative education program (i.e. any one of several configurations of abridged teacher preparation program, usually for college graduates who have majored in fields other than education) (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017a). Yet, Black women face numerous and enduring challenges related to entry and completion of these programs.

Teacher education programs play an instrumental role in the retention of Black female teachers. However, teacher education programs currently fail to prepare Black students at the same level as their peers (Jackson, 2015). This is most noticeable in first-time passing rates for teacher certification exams, as well as dismissal related teacher attrition rates (Petchauer, Bowe, & Wilson, 2018; Shuls, 2018). Black female teachers are dismissed at a higher rate than other female teachers, which one could argue is related to structural inequities, but is also related to preparation (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b). Black female preservice teachers face a myriad of challenges within traditional teacher education programs.

Black women indicate feelings of isolation, unresponsive professors, a lack of relevant coursework, limited course offerings, and exam requirements as significant structural challenges (Gist, 2018). Yet, Black women that complete traditional education programs are afforded experiential opportunities that they will not receive from alternative preparation or less rigorous preparation programs. For example, Black women in their first year of teaching are 3.5 times more likely to have no student teaching experience (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017b). It is important to note that some, but not all of this discrepancy is due to disproportionate entry into the profession through alternative certification. This trend suggests that some teacher education programs have less stringent or no student teaching requirements which, coupled with their disproportionate entry through alternative certification programs, indicates that some Black female teachers are currently underprepared.

The preparation of Black teachers warrants further consideration given the challenges facing underprepared teachers and the national preparation and retention trends for Black teachers. Acknowledging the importance of teacher preparation in the retention of Black teachers (Chen, 2017; Green & Jor'dan, 2018), this qualitative study examines the teacher preparation experiences of twelve Black female teachers teaching in urban school districts located in the southeastern region of the United States. While the preservice teacher experiences of all teachers of color are pertinent, this study specifically explores the experiences of Black female educators. Black female teachers, are well-positioned to assist in diversifying the teacher workforce and are well-suited to meet the learning needs of diverse students due to their historic lineage in and contributions to the field of education. For example, prior to the desegregation of public schools, Black female teachers were leaders in the teaching profession (Grant, 1984; Ward Randolph & Robinson, 2017). However, one unfortunate byproduct of the desegregation of public schools was the mass exodus of Black female teachers from K-12 classrooms (Fergus, 2017). As schools were desegregated, Black teachers were less likely to be rehired, thus initiating the decline of the Black teacher workforce (Madkins, 2011). Decades later, the negative effects of this lost generation of Black educational mentors is ever-present in the habitual underrepresentation of Black female teachers, despite an overrepresentation of female teachers in general (Brown, 2016; Thompson, 2017).

By examining Black female teachers' lived experiences prior to entering K-12 classrooms, this research informs and augments

the current literature on Black women educators, as well as diversifies the knowledge base on teacher education programs and teacher retention. Through Black female teachers' stories, teacher education programs can gain insight on how to best serve Black women and by doing so, potentially improving the field of education at large by retaining more Black women educators. To this end, the research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do Black female teachers describe their teacher preparation experiences?
2. How do these teacher preparation experiences influence Black female teachers' intentions to remain in K-12 classrooms?

To begin, we provide a brief overview of the literature on teacher education programs and factors influencing teacher attrition and retention. Next, through a phenomenological lens, we analyze interview data to frame the past experiences of in-service Black female teachers in their respective teacher preparation programs. Lastly, we offer findings from our analysis and conclude with recommendations for practice.

## **Literature Review**

Black teacher retention is a major challenge in the struggle to diversify U.S. classrooms (Griffen & Griffen, in press; Hancock & Scherff, 2010). Ingersoll and May (2011) argue in regard to the Black teacher shortage, the problem is not recruitment; rather, the problem is retention. They affirm that over the past two decades, teachers of color have entered the teaching profession at a higher rate than White teachers and are overwhelmingly employed in underserved urban schools (Ingersoll, May, & Collins, 2019). However, the attrition rates of teachers of color are higher than their White counterparts (Ingersoll, May, & Collins, 2017). In examining factors associated with teacher attrition and retention, scholars have argued that teacher preparation is impactful (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Sexton, 2010). However, studies that explicitly examine Black teacher perceptions of the influence of their preparation on their retention remain relatively absent in the literature.

An explication of teacher preparation programs suggests that the learned competencies and skillsets many preservice teachers gain from completing comprehensive and quality teacher education programs cannot be discounted (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Indeed, as Darling-Hammond (2000) asserts, "teachers who have more preparation for teaching are more confident and successful with students than those who have had little or none" (p. 166). Furthermore, Ingersoll, Merrill, and Stuckey (2014) reveal that teachers "with more training in teaching methods and pedagogy—especially practice teaching, observation of other classroom teaching and feedback on their own teaching—were far less likely to leave teaching after their first year on the job" (1). In addition, Darling-Hammond, Chung, and Freelow (2002) posit that "Teachers' sense of preparedness and sense of self-efficacy seem related to their feelings about teaching and their plans to stay in the profession" (p. 296), arguing that improved teacher quality and subsequent teacher retention begins with teacher preparation.

Yet, the unique challenges facing Black female preservice teachers remain underexamined and overlooked as considerations in their teacher preparation. Specifically, previous studies indicate that Black preservice teachers lack access to K-16 role models and aspirational mentors, social-justice focused curriculum that is aligned with their motivations as educators, as well as support to overcome certification examines and financial barriers that often prevent Black teachers from entering the teaching profession (Farinde, 2015; Dinkins & Thomas, 2016). The causes of these challenges are numerous, but a lack of teacher diversity in the field and a lack of K-12 opportunities remain import considerations. To develop effective educators of color, particularly Black female teachers, teacher preparation programs, whether traditional or alternative, must be comprehensive and enact as well as promote advanced pedagogy such as culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2015). These approaches to teacher preparation are necessary to address the aforementioned development and retention challenges facing Black female preservice teachers.

For instance, Sheet (2004) affirms that while one may argue that teachers of color possess valuable cultural and linguistic resources in educating students from diverse backgrounds, these teachers' "strengths need to be acknowledged, enhanced and developed as pedagogical tools in pre-service teacher preparation programs. Teachers of color must be provided opportunities to transfer their prior knowledge of culture to pedagogical content knowledge" (p. 164). This assertion does not suggest that there is a deficit; rather, this consideration speaks to the importance of racial identities in the construction of culturally responsive pedagogy (Durden, Dooley, & Truscott, 2016). Without this paradigm shift, Black female preservice teachers will continue to be neglected in teacher preparation programs and will enter classrooms lacking the necessary expertise to meaningfully impact student learning (Brown, 2016; Kohli, 2009).

## **Culturally Responsive Teaching as a Retention Tool**

Black female teachers comprise approximately five percent of the U.S. teacher workforce (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017a), while children of color make up 50 percent of the U.S. elementary and secondary public-school population (NCES, 2017). These demographic data affirm a racial-ethnic mismatch between teachers and students (Dee, 2004; Downer, Goble, Myers, & Pianta, 2016; Eddy, & Easton-Brooks, 2011). Considering the U.S. teacher workforce demographic, Gay (2010)

continues to call for culturally responsive teacher preparation programs that prepare all preservice teachers across all disciplines from a multicultural perspective and worldview. It is important to note that the experiences of Black female teachers will undoubtedly shape their culturally responsive pedagogy, but these cannot and should not replace formal instruction in culturally responsive pedagogy.

When examining the teacher preparation of future teachers, Flynn's (2015) research shows that early career teacher participants in a mixed-method case study mostly satisfied with their pre-service teacher preparation, however, the researcher noted that more coursework emphasizing diverse populations was needed. In addition, these educators expressed dissatisfaction with limited field experience opportunities to work with students from diverse backgrounds. Likewise, when asked to rate 25 topics on a five-point Likert-like scale, 164 undergraduate students (some specializing in general education and others in special education) found classroom management, culture and diversity in schools, and individualized education plans to be the most beneficial topics for pre-service teacher preparation professional development (Peterson-Ahmad, Hovey, & Peak, 2018). Unfortunately, teacher education programs struggle to fulfill the charge of preparing effective, culturally responsive educators generally and Black female teachers specifically. After completing teacher preparation programs, these educators are challenged with adequately addressing issues of culture, diversity, race, ethnicity, class, and social justice, while simultaneously meeting the complex learning needs of diverse student groups (Cochran-Smith & Villegas, 2016; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Cochran (2004), acknowledging dangerous times in teacher education, particularly for teachers of color, explains the significance of teacher quality but also the uncertainty and disagreement of how to properly evaluate teachers and teaching. She affirms:

Although we now appear to have consensus about the importance of teacher quality, there is no parallel consensus about how to define it, how to conceptualize teacher quality in ways that account for the complexities of teaching and learning; how to identify which characteristics of teacher quality are linked with desirable educational outcomes, how to decide which educational outcomes are desirable in the first place; and how to recruit, prepare, and retain teachers who provide rich academic learning opportunities.... (p. 3-4)

With Cochran's statements about the lack of uniformity when defining teacher quality, we (teacher educators) often grapple with which competencies matter most in teacher education. Nonetheless, one common indicator of teacher quality before and after teacher education coursework is preservice teacher performance on admission and certification exams.

The experiences of Black female teachers are complicated by admission and certification testing challenges that often deter or prevent many Black women from becoming teachers (McNeal & Lawrence, 2009). While teacher education is focused on identifying specific competencies, many potential Black female teachers suffer in silence, too ashamed to solicit help with these examinations as their white peers remain unphased, do to better K-12 preparation for the exams like the Praxis I, and more culturally congruent instruction in teacher preparation (Petchauer, 2015; Sleeter, 2017). Although one could argue that these examinations do not reflect the most salient competencies necessary to be a good teacher, it is impossible to neglect the psychological trauma and negative effect these examinations have on Black female teaching self-efficacy. So, how do we truly know whether our Black female preservice teachers are prepared for the classroom? This is a complex question that should underpin the curricula and practices of teacher preparation programs serving Black women. Yet, in the absence of direct accounts from Black women, the answer to this question will remain elusive. In this study we seek to offer insight on this matter from the perspectives of Black female teachers.

## **Alternative Teacher Education**

Although traditional teacher education programs have historically trained countless teachers of color, within the past two decades, alternative certification programs have enabled many teachers of color to enter the teaching profession (Chin & Young, 2007). In fact, research indicates that more than 40 percent of new teachers entered the teaching profession through an alternative route (Ingersoll, Merrill, & May, 2012), and higher proportions of teachers of color than White teachers obtain an alternative certification (Villegas & Geist, 2008). Alternative teacher education programs, when first introduced, were controversial as they opposed the traditional, comprehensive teacher preparation route (Dilworth, 2012). Facilitated through independent, non-profit organizations, school districts and universities, the number of alternative teacher education programs increased annually, and teachers with alternative certifications became more common within U.S. public schools.

While alternative teaching routes are beneficial in diversifying the teacher workforce, lack of sufficient preparation can create a revolving door dilemma. Expounding on this issue, Peter Shulman, Chief Executive Office of Urban Teachers, states, "We can't expect someone who has had a month or two of clinical experience to go into an urban environment and think they are going to understand the realities of that classroom; it doesn't seem to work." (Shulman, 2018). Darling-Hammond et al. (2002) also argue that novice "teachers who have experienced different teacher education programs versus those who had a relatively stable pathway feel differently about their programming" (p. 294). Those who were in a stable program had better experiences versus those who took alternative routes to teacher education via online courses or via an alternative certification program. In addition,

Zhang and Zeller (2016) find teachers who participated in a traditional teacher education program were more likely to remain in teaching than those alternatively trained.

These studies are not suggesting that traditional education programs are better than alternative routes or that all alternative teacher programs are wholly ineffective. Rather, what is implied is the amount of time devoted to teacher preparation varies from program to program and comprehensive training may be abbreviated in some programs (Humphrey, Wechsler, & Hough, 2008). Ingersoll, Merrill, and May (2012) explain the consequences of inadequate preparation through their analysis of the 2003-2004 Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and its supplement the 2004-2005 Teacher Follow-up Survey (TFS):

Pedagogy was strongly related to teacher attrition. Beginning teachers who had taken more courses in teaching methods and strategies, learning theory or child psychology, or materials selection were significantly less likely to depart. The amount of practice teaching they had undertaken, their opportunities to observe other teachers and the amount of feedback they had received on their teaching were also significantly related to whether new teachers remained in teaching. (p. 33)

As explained by Ingersoll et al.'s (2012) study, preparation is vital to teacher retention. Whether an individual chooses a traditional or an alternative teacher preparation route, adequately preparing teachers influences their intentions to remain in classrooms.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Phenomenology focuses on the essence of experiences, the fundamental meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Focusing on phenomenology's philosophical roots and ethos, offers a powerful framework for our analysis (Husserl, 1962). As a theoretical lens, it is appropriate for this study because it places value on individual experiences by exploring the essence of consciousness as experienced from the perspective of the first-person point of view (Smith, 2007). Husserl's (1975) belief in the consciousness and how experiences can act as teacher are exemplified in his statement:

For me the world is nothing other than what I am aware of and what appears valid in my cognition...I cannot live, experience, think, value, and act in any world which is not in some sense in me, and derives its meaning and truth from me. (p. 8)

Employing Husserl's analysis, phenomenology contends that through conscious awareness, we can only know what we experience (Husserl, 1913). In interpreting and making meaning of the world through subjective experiences, an objective reality is deconstructed. To this end, Van Manen (1990) asserts phenomenology does not focus on the details of a phenomenon: location, frequency, etc.; rather, the true or underlying meaning of experiences is given priority.

## **Methods**

Employing a qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), this study examined the teacher preparation experiences of twelve Black female teachers. This study was conducted in an urban city (Milner, 2012) in the southeastern region of the United States over the course of one academic school year. The goal of this investigation was to interpret and uncover meaning through the lived experiences of Black female educators to increase Black teacher retention by informing the improvement of teacher preparation programs.

## **Participants**

There were twelve participating Black female in-service teachers in this study. Participants were selected using purposive, snowball and criterion sampling (Patton, 1990). From an email solicitation, a few Black female teachers were initially recruited. Using the study participants' contacts and close association with other Black female educators in the district, additional Black female teachers were asked to participate in this study. The specific criteria for selection of participants in this study were: Black, female, and in-service classroom teacher. In addition, Black female teachers who went through alternative certification programs or matriculated through traditional teacher education programs at four-year universities during their graduate education were also recruited. The participating teachers taught different subjects in different grade levels and varied in terms of years of experience. The majority of participants were employed by the same major public school system, while two of the twelve participants worked at a high-performing charter school. All participants worked in the same metropolitan city. The selection of in-service teachers was purposeful, though an argument could be proffered for the inclusion of teachers that have recently retired or left teaching. Instead, our work offers insight from the perspective of in-service Black female teachers in order to improve the practices of teacher preparation programs for enhancing retention rates among Black female teachers.

Pseudonyms were used for all participating teachers. At the time of this study, all participants taught at urban, Title I schools with a high percentage of Black students. Also, teachers taught at either high performing or low performing urban schools. Table 2 provides information about each of the twelve Black female participants.

Table 2

*Black Female Teachers' Teaching Information*

Participants	Grade	Subject	Years of Experience	Certification	Retention
Ashley	9-12 <sup>th</sup>	Biology (Inclusion Class)	3 years	Traditional (Master-cert)	Yes
Tracy	9-12 <sup>th</sup>	Elective-career technical education (CTE*) business education	9 years	Alternative	No
Carson	12 <sup>th</sup>	English language arts	3 years	Traditional (Master-cert)	No
Ebony	11 <sup>th</sup> & 12 <sup>th</sup>	Elective-advancement via individual determination (AVID*)	14 years	Alternative	No
Shana	8 <sup>th</sup>	English language arts	2 years	Alternative	No
Grace	8 <sup>th</sup>	English language arts	2 years	Alternative	No
Tanya	7 <sup>th</sup> – Charter school	English language arts	8 years	Alternative	No
Jennifer	7 <sup>th</sup> – Charter school	English language arts	3 years	Alternative	No
Erica	Kindergarten		3 years	Traditional	Yes
Stephany	5 <sup>th</sup>		10 years	Traditional	No
Rachel	K-5	Special education	7 years	Alternative	No
Janice	3 <sup>rd</sup>		14 years (classroom) 36 years (education field)	Traditional	No

*Note.* Tanya and Jennifer taught at the same charter school. Shana and Grace were Teach for America<sup>[2]</sup> teachers who were only obligated to remain at their urban school for two years. Teach for America is a non-profit organization whose mission is to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting high-achieving recent college graduates and professionals to teach for at least two years in low-income communities throughout the United States.

\*AVID, Advancement via Individual Determination, is a college readiness system for elementary through higher education that is designed to increase school wide learning and performance

\* CTE, Career Technical Education is an elective course that offers a complete range of career options for students, helping them discover their interests and the educational pathway that can lead to success in high school, college and their chosen career/profession.

**Data Collection**

During data collection, one in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interview (Patton, 2015) was conducted with each of the Black female participants. In total, twelve interviews were conducted, and each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes.

Accommodating the schedules of study participants, interviews occurred over the course of one academic semester (August-December) because participating teachers possessed greater time flexibility during this time period as it did not yet contend with state standardized tests that occurred during the second semester of school. Interviews were also conducted in different spaces, ranging from school classrooms to school libraries. Before interviews were conducted, all participants read and signed a consent form. After data collection, the data were transcribed. Lastly, allowing participants' epistemologies to guide data findings, member checking was also conducted to ensure the validity of data findings.

## **Data Analysis**

In the initial exploratory stage of data analysis, we read the twelve transcripts in their entirety (Creswell, 2013) to immerse ourselves in the data. As we read, we engaged in jotting, writing reflections and commentary along the margin of the transcripts (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This technique encouraged deeper analysis and connections within the data. Drawing from phenomenology while applying hand-coding analysis, we used analytic induction and reasoning throughout the data analysis process. Separately, we first identified numerous codes through the use of both descriptive and In Vivo coding. Descriptive coding "assigns labels to data to summarize in a word or short phrase...the basic topic of the passage" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 74), while In Vivo coding "uses words or phrases from the participant's own language in the data recorded as codes" (p. 74). After identifying these codes, we discussed our codes and collectively searched for patterns and commonalities among our codes, clustering the respective codes into categories. At the final stage, interrelationships between categories were constructed to solidify salient themes. Investigator triangulation as well as consensus was utilized to ensure the validity of data findings (Denzin, 2012).

## **Findings**

The majority of participants in this study felt that their teacher education program (traditional and alternative) did not fully prepare them for their roles as classroom teachers. They discussed their certification process in their respective teacher education programs, and many of the unforeseen challenges they faced upon entering their classrooms. They also highlighted different weaknesses within their respective programs, which affected their teaching abilities and roles as classroom teachers. While the participants in this study did not complete the same teacher education programs, there were shared themes among their experiences. In addition, although the findings presented in this study could be true for all teachers, the particular issues identified in our findings are especially concerning for Black female teachers as their already depleted ranks continue to diminish.

Influencing their intentions to remain in K-12 classrooms, four salient themes emerged from the data and indicated that our participants, before becoming teachers, were not adequately prepared for their extensive roles and duties as classroom teachers. Participants conveyed concerns about 1) limited knowledge of special education requirements and documentation, 2) the absence of culturally responsive teaching techniques and strategies, 3) the lack of preparation for teaching underserved students of color, and 4) the inadequate length of teacher preparation programs. Faced with these challenges, many of the Black female teachers in this study honed their teaching abilities during the first few years of their teaching careers. Although our participants were practicing teachers at the time of this study, many expressed a previous intention to leave the profession and cited their teacher preparation as a factor. Nonetheless, much can be learned from the teacher education experiences of these participants who at the time of this study had remained in K-12 classrooms, but continually contemplated leaving the teaching profession. Essentially, participants expressed that their considerations of whether or not to leave the profession were on-going. Future attrition for these teachers remains a significant possibility.

### **Limited Knowledge of Special Education Requirements and Documentation**

The data showed that a majority of the teachers expressed challenges in the area of special education requirements and documentation, especially in their attempt to meet the needs of students of color in their Title I schools. Ashley expressed her frustrations regarding special education paperwork, feeling ill-prepared to service her students with special needs. She explained:

"My program never told me about if you are in an inclusion class there is a lot more that goes on then a general education class. I took a special education class in the summertime and it was just about the different disabilities, not the importance of the paperwork that is involved because it's legal, this paperwork."

Ashley's words show how she acknowledged her legal obligation to meet the pertinent learning needs of her students with individual education plans (IEP). She described how she was unaware about the necessary documentation that is required in an inclusive classroom.

Tanya conveyed a similar experience, highlighting what was missing in her teacher education experience. She explained how her lack of knowledge and awareness about special education requirements placed her at a disadvantage once she became a classroom teacher. Because of her lack of knowledge in this area she wanted to resign. Tanya conveyed her first-year experience with special education by stating:

“If you have students with special needs, making sure IEPs are being accommodated for, 504 plans, behavior plans, making sure you’re attending meetings and trainings and securing PD credit for those things. That piece of teaching is something you never see at institute (teacher preparation program). I struggled in areas like deadlines and meeting deadlines for paperwork because it was something not only was I completely unfamiliar with, I didn’t even know existed because it’s not something you see when you’re in school. Boy did I want to quit my first year because it was too much.”

Through her struggles, Tanya gained on-the-job training. However, as Rachel conveyed, “Unfortunately, many teachers do not learn the complexities of servicing students with special needs prior to being a teacher of record who engages students in a classroom setting.” Sadly, lack of extensive, prior training in special education impacted these teachers’ self-efficacy in the classroom.

### **Culturally Responsive Teaching Techniques and Strategies**

Many of the teachers expressed their frustrations about the absence of culturally responsive teaching in their respective programs. Some described how a one-size-fits all approach was taught and how they desired more training on how best to teach students from different cultural backgrounds. For instance, Stephany recounted the absence of these techniques and strategies in her teacher education program. She conveyed the narrowness and omission of pertinent skills and competencies needed to become an effective teacher of all students. For Stephany, not having these strategies in her toolkit produced a difficult first year. She explained,

“We’re doing a lot of theoretical things, but as far as really learning even really good strategies, I don’t think it (teacher education program) prepares us for managing instruction in a class at all. To me, a lot of it was just very much based in theory. It was based on Vygotsky’s theories, but it wasn’t very practical. Also, it would have been nice to see how culture affects teaching and learning. Not having these strategies, let’s just say my first year was rough.”

In addition, Erica lamented about her training by stating, “I only took one diversity class”; while Carson recalled how she was taught content and had to learn application of that content independently. She recalled:

“Yes, in the sense that of course they provided you with all of the knowledge, but as far as the application part, a lot of that was from either my prior experiences or other teachers working with me.”

Overall, our participants would have greatly benefitted from a curriculum infused with culturally responsive teaching. They all expressed that content alone was not enough, and that practical teaching strategies would have better prepared them for their future classrooms.

### **Lack of Preparation for Teaching Underserved Students of Color**

Another poignant issue addressed by the teachers was the complex and emotional dimension of teaching that is often omitted from teacher education programs. In addition to teaching content, teachers often faced emotional interactions and experiences and were confronted with issues of race and class and how these definers influenced the lives of their students of color. Jennifer described how she felt unprepared for the realities of teaching low-income, students of color in her underserved urban school:

“Absolutely not. [Teacher education program] doesn’t prepare you for the emotional experience. I feel like a lot of times when I’m here, I’m more of a mother to the kids, and [the teacher education program] doesn’t necessarily prepare you for the emotional levels that you’ll have to have in order to teach and interact with your kids because these kids, they’re not just your students; they become your children.”

Similar to Jennifer’s response, Grace provided a detailed explanation of specific experiences she had in her classroom when working with underserved students who battle sociological issues that were influenced by the conditions of poverty. Grace said,



“When I think about the biggest pieces of teaching and it goes beyond, beyond for me pedagogy, being in a high-needs, Title I school. For me some of the biggest pieces were not knowing what to say to my kids when somebody says in a story about themselves that their dad dropped out of school in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and beats on his wife every night because he is drunk and angry because he didn’t get the job that he wanted, or he didn’t get the life that he wanted. Or that one of my students, her best friend died by giving birth in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and now she has the daughter of her best friend because the young man wants nothing to do with the child. Overtime, these stories get to me.”

While Grace’s teaching antidotes are difficult to hear, often such experiences play out in the classroom and must be addressed by educators.

### **Inadequate Length of Teacher Preparation Programs**

An additional area of discontent was the length of teacher education programs. Many teachers who underwent a teacher education programs felt that the amount of time spent on preparation and developing their skills as a classroom teacher (e.g., student teaching or teacher residencies) was insufficient. Shana, who underwent an alternative teacher education program, explained the intense speed of her program, and how on-the-job-training was stressed in lieu of growth and development. She detailed her experience:

“[My teacher education program] was more like let’s get you through these courses, get you passed, and you can get certified. Then we will work on getting your skills. You will build that while you are at your job site and at school.”

Grace also agreed that the length of teacher preparation programs need to be expanded. Acknowledging that a master teacher cannot be developed during 5 weeks of teacher preparation, Grace stated:

“Honestly, no I do not think 5 weeks was enough.... teaching is a craft, right? And I feel like it’s a craft that you can consistently and constantly perfect, and I don’t think that 5 weeks is enough to be trained on how to be a great teacher.”

Janice, who has been in education for thirty-six years (longer than all the other participants), also stressed the importance of longer teacher preparation in order to combat retention. She reflected on her past training and how teacher requirements should reflect changes in society. She candidly unpacked her thoughts:

“At the time when I became certified, I was taught and trained and went out and did the semester student teaching. But now, I think teachers need more than six months. Times have changed, and we need to know more to be effective. Plus, these young teachers are leaving because they’re overwhelmed.”

Collectively, our participants agreed that five weeks (alternative teacher education) to six months (traditional teacher education) of teacher preparation is too short for novice educators. Their insights from first-hand experiences challenge existing structures in teacher education. It is our hope that the result of this analysis will inform teacher education programs in their implementation of curriculum and instruction, as well as the retention of Black female teachers in K-12 classrooms.

### **Discussion**

As mentioned, Black female teachers in this study conveyed that their teacher education program (traditional and alternative), to some extent, did not fully prepare them for their role as classroom teachers, negatively impacting their intentions to remain in K-12 classrooms. Although the participants expressed specific areas of weakness in their respective programs, each of their accounts underscores Darling-Hammond’s (2000) call for more teacher preparation to develop effective teachers who can teach diverse student groups and are more likely to remain in classrooms. Today, there are many pathways to become a classroom teacher. Some educators enter the teacher workforce after attending a four or five-year teacher education program at a university, while others pursue their teaching license or certificate through a master’s degree or an alternative certificate program. Whatever the pathway, the curriculum of teacher education programs can impact teacher preparedness for classroom teaching, and therefore, influence teacher retention (Darling-Hammond, Hammerness, Grossman, Rust, & Shulman, 2005). Indeed, teacher education programs’ expectations establish the foundation for teacher candidates’ level of expertise in K-12 classrooms.

Considering the study findings, our Black female teachers should not have to persevere in classrooms (Nieto, 2003) due to inadequate teacher preparation, especially since Black female teachers are at higher risk of stress than their White counterparts

(Fitchett, Hopper, McCarthy, & Lambert, 2017). Possessing limited knowledge of special education requirements and documentation, not learning culturally responsive teaching techniques and strategies, lacking preparation for teaching underserved students of color, and not experiencing length appropriate teacher preparation programs impacted our participants' teaching abilities. While these challenges are not unique to our participants, they do, however, suggest the need for more nuanced considerations for teacher education programs serving pre-service teachers of color (Barrio, Lindo, Combes, & Hovey, 2015; Zeichner, 2016). Our Black female teachers' experiences suggest that they are more likely to leave the profession due to the shortcomings in their preparation. Although they remained in classrooms at the time of this study, inadequate teacher preparation is a negative factor to their intentions to remain in classrooms. Especially for our novice educators (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014), poor preparation positions these Black female teachers at-risk of stress, burnout, and job dissatisfaction, which influences their professional commitment (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018).

Although there is no substitute for day-to-day, on-the-job, hands-on classroom training in both traditional or alternative education programs, teacher education programs, collectively, should heed the voices and experiences of their candidates and use this information to inform policy, practice, and curriculum development. If these programs do not implement changes attending to the concerns and needs of Black female teachers, previous data indicate that their teacher retention will be short-lived (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002). Based on this study's findings, we provide several recommendations to inform policy, practice, and curriculum development.

## **Recommendations**

Retention of Black educators in U.S. schools is paramount. Having one Black teacher in an elementary school increases Black students' likelihood of graduating and enrolling in college (Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, & Papageorge, 2017). With this in mind, teacher education programs and teacher educators must do more to expose Black female preservice teachers to the varying dimensions and roles of classroom teachers, thus rendering them more effective and, in turn, more likely to thrive rather than endure in the teacher workforce. These programs must provide intensive, realistic, and high-quality experiences in settings where preservice teachers can connect theory and practice. If the goal of these programs is to develop effective teachers, then these programs must master and go beyond content, pedagogy, and classroom management, educating their preservice teachers about the social, political, economic, and racial issues plaguing both the American public education system and the diverse student groups entrenched in American schools. Furthermore, considering the increasingly diverse U.S. student population (NCES, 2017), it is imperative that Black female teachers receive an education that equips them with skills and competencies necessary to meet the learning needs of students of color from diverse backgrounds. In order for teacher education programs to promote adequate preparation, four recommendations are suggested: 1) revising teacher education curriculum, 2) offering real-world examples and classroom applications, 3) expanding the length of teacher training programs, and 4) increasing dedication to the development of socioemotional learning practices.

**Curriculum revision to support Black female teachers.** Curriculum must address the current obstacles that are impeding the education of 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, because these obstacles often have an acute effect on Black female learners given their status as a dually marginalized population. Teacher education curriculum, beyond educational theory, must encompass multiple perspectives, expanding preservice teachers' cultural competency and responsiveness. Culturally responsive curriculum with a focus on race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, and special education training, just to name a few, should be infused in the curriculum because these topics, individually and collectively, are represented in urban K-12 classrooms (Anderson & Stillman, 2010), impacting both teacher instruction and student learning. Additionally, these topics must be directly related to the identities of preservice teachers because our identities shape how we navigate the world and the classroom.

**Contextualized experiences to support Black female preservice teachers** Real-world examples, classroom applications, and/or simulations of on-the-job training must be incorporated into teacher education programs, to assist preservice teachers' in meeting their students' diverse needs. According to Brownell, Ross, Colón, and McCallum (2005), "Carefully designed field experiences that allow prospective teachers to integrate information they are acquiring in coursework may enable better knowledge and skill development in beginning teachers than programs that do not have this integration" (p. 248). However, not all teacher education programs have access to a diverse array of school district partnerships. These interactive, hands-on clinical experiences and observations can be achieved through the development of preservice and practicing teacher mentorship programs, whether face-to-face or online (Petty, Heafner, Farinde, & Plaisance, 2014). Moreover, in the absence of diverse classrooms to develop teacher instructional skills, teacher education programs should consider digital simulations with adaptive avatars as a means to provide multiple opportunities for preservice teachers to practice and learn (Murphy & Kellinger, 2018).

**Opportunities for extended student teaching.** In conjunction with culturally responsive curriculum and opportunities for real-world examples and classroom application, duration of education and training does matter when developing competent and effective future teachers (Carey, Farinde-Wu, Milner, & Delale-O'Connor, 2018). Understanding this assertion, some teacher education programs have implemented a year-long student-teaching requirement. Extending student-teaching from one semester to a year-long experience or longer will provide pre-service teachers more opportunities to hone their craft, critically

examining the depths and intricacies of their future profession.

**Emphasis on socioemotional learning.** Lastly, teacher education programs must also confront the socioemotional dimensions of teaching in underserved, urban contexts. To balance both pedagogy and socioemotional issues in classrooms, teacher candidates must continually work through such scenarios while in training, developing skills that will benefit both them and their future students. If the emotional aspects of teaching are overlooked in teacher preparation programs, novice educators may be more compelled to leave the profession because they are not fully equipped to manage these pressing challenges.

## Conclusion

The findings in this study have clear implications for teacher education programs and teacher retention practices. In better understanding the experiences of Black women educators, pertinent changes can be made to teacher preparation programs, possibly increasing retention rates among Black female educators. Adding to the literature, our findings provide an understanding of what specific areas within teacher education influenced our participants' intentions to remain in K-12 classrooms and our recommendations reveal ways to support future Black female preservice teachers as they progress through their certification programs and into classrooms. Extended preparation and restructuring are needed in teacher education programs to adequately prepare Black women to teach in special education and culturally diverse classrooms in underserved, urban schools. Unless teacher education and retention practices are informed by the experiences of underrepresented educators of color, the teacher workforce will not reflect the diversity of the student population it serves.

<sup>[1]</sup>Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards.

<sup>[2]</sup>A non-profit organization whose mission is to eliminate educational inequity by enlisting high-achieving recent college graduates and professionals to teach for at least two years in low-income communities throughout the United States.

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