

To Teach or not to Teach: A Qualitative Study of Pre-Collegiate Grow Your Own Teacher Programs and the Perceptions of Alumni, Current Staff, and Former Staff

Natasha T. Pitt, EdD
College Achieve Public Schools
North Plainfield, NJ

Abstract

The teaching profession is in peril. Teacher recruitment and teacher retention are issues that have compounded the teacher shortage crisis, particularly in Black and Latinx communities. This study focused on a vehicle by which to recruit people into the profession while in middle and/or high school, known as pre-collegiate Grow Your Own teacher programs. Given the push for a more racially diverse teaching force, this qualitative multiple case study explored the phenomena of pre-collegiate grow your own teacher programs through the perspectives of Black and/or Latinx alumni, program staff, and former staff. Results revealed that pre-collegiate Grow Your Own teacher programs have influenced the professional career decisions of alumni of the program.

Key Words

grow your own, teacher recruitment, pre-collegiate teacher programs, pathway programs, teacher diversity, teacher shortage

There is an achievement gap in this country, which has been promulgated by an education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006). The education debt is a result of historical, social, and economic disparities that have created inequity for people of color. Education has been considered an equalizer, which can create equitable opportunities for marginalized people of color (Shields, 2011). The ability to educate with an equity lens is crucial to the academic achievement of students of color; however, identity development is imperative.

Identity development is a cyclical process that interweaves a person's past, present, and future experiences (Tatum, 2017). People are inundated with archetypes of people of cultures with which they identify and of those with which they do not identify. Partelow et al. (2017) noted that in 2017, The National Center for Education Statistics reported that while the population of Black and Latinx students is increasing, the percentage of Black and Latinx teachers (particularly in urban areas) is decreasing. There are tangible academic and social benefits to students of color being exposed to teachers of color. The opportunity to see a person of color in a position of authority, which is how many students view their teachers, cannot be overestimated. Additionally, teachers of color can be more connected to culturally responsive pedagogy because of the relatability of those teachers. Lastly, the presence of teachers of color for non-students-of-color is essential relative to the dismantling of stereotypes and biases, which are inherent in our society. Tatum (2017) referred to bias as smog all around us

There is also a decline in enrollment in teacher education programs contributing to teacher shortages in the United States. Teacher shortages are more prevalent in urban and rural communities (Garcia & Weiss & Economic Policy Institute, 2019). Teacher shortages are

also more evident in school districts where most of the student population is Black and Latinx (Garcia & Weiss & Economic Policy Institute, 2019). One approach that has attempted to address the teacher shortage and the need for greater teacher diversity is the implementation of Grow Your Own teacher programs (GYO). Thirty-six states have created teacher pipeline programs to address the issue of teacher shortage (Sutcher et al., 2016).

There are four kinds of GYO program models: pre-collegiate (selective), pre-collegiate (non-selective), community-originated and community-focused, community-originated and university educator-initiated (Valenzuela, 2017). While there has been research done regarding the recruitment of teachers of color and various pathways, there is a gap in the literature relative to pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs and how these programs might be a suitable pathway for teacher recruitment.

Additionally, there is a lack of research about how pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs could foster an understanding of community cultural wealth (CCW) for participants of color; thereby, equipping the participants of color as practitioners with knowledge that can support the academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being of students of color.

This article highlights multiple case studies that explore the phenomenon of pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs through the lens of alumni and staff members. The following pseudonyms were used to refer to the programs: *The Future is Here* and *Here We Grow*. More specifically, the case studies focused on the experiences of alumni of color from the programs and whether their participation in the programs impacted their professional decisions. The sample population were alumni who graduated from a 4-year

institution and staff or former staff of the programs. The studies also focused on the aspects of the program that are tailored to meet the needs of people of color. For the purposes of these case studies, people of color were identified as Black and/or Latinx people.

Theoretical Framework: Community Cultural Wealth

The notion that teachers of color are desirable for students of color is rooted in a few claims. Arguments have been made that teachers of color can support higher student academic outcomes and a sense of belonging through high expectations, role modeling, and cultural connections (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Schools have been historically ingrained into the fabric of a hierarchical society where minoritized people have not always had equitable opportunities for success. As such, Yosso (2005) argued that one of the coping mechanisms marginalized people can employ to combat marginalization is an understanding of community cultural wealth (CCW). CCW purports that people of color share these connections through cultural synchronicity; thereby, making the presence of teachers of color crucial for students (Yosso, 2005). The cultural capital of people of color are viewed as assets in this framework, rather than deficits. These assets can then be used to amplify the voices and support the experiences of people of color (Acevedo & Solorzano, 2021).

Teacher Shortage and Teachers of Color

The term *teacher shortage* is a broad description to describe the teaching labor market. The term is misleading though, given that the teacher shortage is not universal in the United States. Teacher shortages are evident in specific disciplines such as special education, math, and science (Sutcher et al., 2016). Teacher shortages are also a concern for bilingual or English as a second language teachers (Sutcher et al., 2016). There is

variation amongst states in terms of teacher shortages. While states like California and Arizona have experienced widespread shortages, Massachusetts has experienced an abundance of supply relative to teachers entering the profession although there is less supply in more high-demand disciplines (Sutcher et al., 2016).

Yosso (2005) discussed the importance of honoring CCW to support the academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being of children of color. CCW is guided by the belief that students of color bring a plethora of special unique things to their educational experiences, which should have been seen as assets rather than deficits. Yosso noted that students of color have access to six forms of capital: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. Gist et al. (2018) noted that because of these assets relative to CCW, teachers of color are more capable of being able to relate to students of color and foster student achievement.

In fact, it has been a general assertion that teachers of color are better equipped to teach students of color. Villegas and Irvine (2010) did a study of major arguments and research to identify whether this claim was credible. Villegas and Irvine (2010) identified the following arguments to support the claim that teachers of color are better equipped to teach students of color. The arguments were as follows: teachers of color serve as role models, teachers of color improve student achievement outcomes and experiences for students of color, and teachers of color tend to be less likely to leave the profession. The researchers identified empirical data to support the last two claims. They were unable to find empirical data to support the notion that teachers of color serve as role models for students of color (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). The researchers asserted that the absence of evidence does not refute the claim entirely; however, more research is needed.

Grow Your Own Teacher Programs

Thirty-six states have created teacher pipeline programs to address the issue of teacher shortage (Sutcher et al., 2016). There are four kinds of GYO program models: pre-collegiate (selective), pre-collegiate (non-selective), community-originated and community-focused, community-originated and university educator-initiated (Valenzuela, 2017). The following GYO teacher programs are some of the most well-known in the United States.

While the focus of this study was on pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs, there would be a substantial gap in this literature review if the *Call Me Mister* program was excluded. The *Call Me Mister* program began in South Carolina with a collective of historically Black universities (Jones et al., 2019). Since its inception in 2000, the program has now grown to 23 participating higher education institutions in South Carolina and in other states (Jones et al., 2019). It is by far the most expansive GYO of its kind, at this juncture. One of the major program goals is to increase the representation of Black male teachers in elementary schools (Jones et al., 2019). Jones et al. (2019) noted that participants of the program are typically from underserved communities and are not necessarily high achievers. The program's approach is holistic, in the sense that its goals are centered around developing the personal growth, professional knowledge, and interpersonal skills of the participants. Participants receive financial support throughout their post-secondary education and mentorship (Jones et al., 2019). Participants are also expected to commit to teaching in a public elementary or middle school for a specified period, depending upon how long the participant received assistance from the program (Jones et al., 2019). The data have indicated that the program has achieved its goal of supporting the recruitment of Black males in education. It was reported that since 2004, over

90% of participants have pursued careers in education (Jones et al., 2019). Although this is not a pre-collegiate program, it is important to note the importance of a program that is structured to support the needs of Black male students.

The South Carolina *Cadet* program is an example of a selective pre-collegiate program. It is one of the oldest and most well-known GYO teacher programs. Students are selected to participate in the program based on their grades. The program was the mastermind of Bonner Guider who was interested in exposing students to the teaching profession (Lewis, 1992). The program is explicitly advertised as one that actively recruits students of color. In the course, students are also able to engage in discussions about racial and social issues. Valenzuela (2017) noted that 39.4% of surveyed participants pursued a career in teaching. An integral component of the program is its partnership with Winthrop University.

Another program, which is rooted in its partnership with a university, is the *Pathways2Teaching* program. Through the program's partnership with the University of Colorado (Denver), the program offers mentorship and support from university professors (Bianco et al., 2011). Selection criteria are not applied to admission into the program; however, the program intentionally recruits students of color to create more diversity in the teaching workforce (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019). The program's curricula focus on providing exposure to the teaching profession and engaging students from a social justice praxis (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019). The program presents teaching as an opportunity for students to contribute to their communities (Goings et al., 2018). The program's major tenets are as follows: (1) foster critical thinking with a social justice lens, (2) create a positive image of teaching, (3) offer

supports for college and career readiness, (4) allow access by ensuring that all students have the opportunity to participate in the program irrespective of grade point average, (5) connect students with role models and mentors from the University of Colorado, and (6) commit to selecting teachers who actively promote family engagement (Goings et al., 2018). Sleeter et al. (2014) noted that there are salient challenges with introducing this program to students in Grades 11 and 12 because at this point, it may be too late to spark interest for students. It was also noted that a lack of funding for the program could render it less than effective relative to following through with long-term support (Sleeter et al., 2014). Still, the program is representative of the manifestation of what many researchers have supported. It provides students with an opportunity to receive exposure to the teaching profession and culturally relevant pedagogy while receiving mentorship from university faculty. There are no grade requirements for entry into the program.

Today's Students, Tomorrow's Teachers is a program that has been in existence since 1994. It was created by Dr. Bettye Perkins. The program has collaborated with school districts across several states to provide a pre-collegiate high school teacher education experience. Additionally, the program has partnered with higher education institutions to provide financial support and incentives to the students from the program. The program boasts an 8-year pipeline and ongoing supports for students from high school through college. The organization touts its success in terms of the high school retention rate, college retention rate, and teacher retention rate for its participants and alumni in relation to their peers who did not participate in the program, according to data on the *Today's Teachers, Tomorrow's Students* website <https://tstt.org/>.

There is a range of GYO teacher programs in middle and high schools with various structures. Some are extra-curricular activities, while others are courses that yield college credit. Those programs, noted above, are some of the most well-known and most researched in the nation. There is no database to identify the pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs that exist across the country. Similarly, there is no comprehensive approach or means by which to identify programs throughout the country. Additionally well-known pre-collegiate programs do not provide ongoing support for students once they leave the program and enter the post-secondary world (Gist et al., 2018). Gist et al. (2018) noted that pre-collegiate teacher preparation programs offer promising possibilities; however, without additional funding, research, and coordination, it may remain an underutilized or ineffective approach to addressing the recruitment, and to a lesser degree, retention of teachers of color.

Summary

There is some qualitative research about pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs; however, there has been little research done to determine the long-term effects of these programs (Gist et al., 2018). A literature review and research has connoted that long-term funding has been a challenge for these programs; therefore, follow-up with program participants has not been commonplace (Gist et al., 2018). There is a lack of literature regarding which aspects of these programs, if any, may be most effective relative to increasing the pool of prospective teacher educators, particularly for teachers of color. This research attempted to provide insight from program participants about their experiences with a pre-collegiate GYO program, the program's influence on their post-secondary professional plans, and the program's capacity to foster knowledge and skills that support the participants' prospective work with Black and/or Latinx students.

Research Design

The study sought to uncover results regarding the following research questions: In what ways did a pre-collegiate GYO teacher education program influence people of color who participated in the program to pursue a career in education? Are there specific components of the program that encourage participants of color to pursue a teaching career more than others? How can a pre-collegiate GYO teacher education program foster an understanding of community cultural wealth (CCW) for participants of color?

The research methodology for this study was qualitative. Qualitative researchers are interested in how people make meaning of the world they are experiencing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Creswell & Creswell (2013) noted that people make multiple meanings of their experiences, which create opportunities for researchers to view the multi-dimension of their perspective. The qualitative methodology was chosen to elicit more detailed information about the pre-collegiate GYO teacher education program through document analysis and interviews of alumni, current staff, and former staff. The design of the study was as follows: multiple case studies of pre-collegiate GYO programs and a phenomenological study. Researchers use multiple case studies to augment the validity and minimize the bias in their studies (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To that end, the researcher sought to explore commonalities and differences amongst the programs, while determining possible generalizable implications for future practice.

The researcher conducted multiple case studies and explored specific pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs. A case study was suitable because it allowed for exploration of the GYO phenomena through multiple sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). According to Yin (2009), the researcher can gather the following sources of information for a case study:

documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts.

The researcher also employed phenomenological research to explore the influence of the respective pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs, relative to the experiences and subsequent decisions of some of the participants. During phenomenological research, the purpose is to describe a phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). In this case, the phenomenon is the pre-collegiate GYO teacher program for which there is limited research from the perspective of its participants. Although a narrative study was considered, Bogdan and Biklen (2011) posited that when considering research analysis, it is important to keep the purpose of the study in mind. It was essential to situate the participants' stories within the context of GYO programs for the purposes of this study.

The researcher elicited the assistance of the pre-collegiate GYO teacher program staff to identify the *Future is Here* and *Here We Grow* alumni who had graduated from a 4-year institution, current staff, and former staff. The researcher engaged in purposive sampling; therefore, being explicit with program staff about the sample size that was needed for interviews. The researcher interviewed alumni of color because the purpose of the research was to explore their experiences and whether race was a factor relative to their experiences in the program. The researcher also used maximum variation sampling to elicit the perspective of participants who had pursued careers in education and those who have not pursued careers in education; however, all alumni had pursued a career in education. Current staff or former staff were contacted, irrespective of race. The researcher utilized snowball sampling by asking participants to contact alumni who met the participation criteria, current staff, and/or former staff.

Snowball sampling is a means by which to increase the sample size through people who have connections with potential sample participants (Parker et al., 2019). The researcher provided a questionnaire to prospective participants requesting demographic information, career information, preferred contact information and their availability for the interview.

The researcher interviewed five alumni, four from the *Future is Here* program and one from the *Here We Grow* program. The researcher also interviewed two staff members of the *Future is Here* program and one former staff member/alumni of the *Here We Grow* program. Given the novelty of GYO teacher education programs, the researcher elected to select a sample size that would likely lead to saturation (Creswell & Creswell, 2013). Adler and Adler (2012) noted 6 to 10 participants is enough to glean valuable insight, particularly when the population is limited. It is important to note the associations of the participants for suitable context. They are as follows: P1, P2, P3, and P5 are alumni of the *Future is Here* program. P4 and P8 are staff members of the *Future is Here* program. P6 is an alum of the *Here We Grow* program. P7 is an alum and former staff member of the *Here We Grow* program. Most of the alumni were introduced to the program during high school. In some instances, program staff visited their high school and practiced recruiting. Alumni from both programs noted that their counselors were involved in acquainting the alumni with the program, despite several noting that they felt unseen by their respective counselors.

The collection of research for the literature review and study was housed in Zotero. Zotero was used to store documents and create citations, as well as the bibliography. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants. Semi-structured interviews serve to allow for

credibility and consistency, while allowing for flexibility of diverse perspectives. The interview questions had been field tested by two educators who have done research on pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs. The interview questions for the alumni differed from the interview questions for the staff members or previous staff members. The participants were provided with informed consent forms. The interviews were conducted virtually via the Google Meet platform. The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Otter. Ai with participant consent. All data were downloaded to a password protected USB device.

The researcher reviewed documents such as: program materials, research, interviews, and articles and analyzed to allow for triangulation relative to the interview data. The researcher also identified themes from the program materials and compared the themes to those that have emerged from the interview data, thereby employing a blended coding model. Document analysis has been determined to be a useful method to augment creditability and identify commonalities (Bowen, 2009). The documents helped to set the stage for the interviews, while also aiding in the corroboration of the interview data.

The researcher decided to utilize the blended coding approach, which is a combination of inductive and deductive coding (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Deductive coding allowed the researcher to have a list of a priori codes based on the document analysis and literature review. After conducting the interviews, the researcher employed an inductive approach. The researcher engaged in first-cycle coding, which is a process that occurs when initially coding data (Saldana, 2021). According to Saldana (2021), this process allows the researcher to reserve previous judgments and let the data guide the researcher to uncover themes and connections.

The process of explicitation, the process of making meaning of data and interpreting it, was developed in conjunction with the initial coding process (Groenewald, 2004). The explicitation process has the following five steps: “bracketing and phenomenological reduction, delineating units of meaning, clustering of units of meaning to form themes, summarizing each interview, validating it, and where necessary modifying it, and extracting general and unique themes from all interviews and making a composite summary” (Groenewald, 2004, p.17). The researcher elected to hand code the data to create a more intimate experience. Saldana (2021) noted that hand coding offers an experience, which fosters more ownership for the researcher.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of pre-collegiate *Grow Your Own* (GYO) teacher programs through the perspectives of alumni, staff, and former staff of the respective programs. The research design involved multiple case studies. Two pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs were the cases involved in this study. The study sought to elucidate the experiences of Black and Latinx alumni who had graduated from a 4-year institution, current program staff, and former program staff. The study sought to uncover the influence or lack thereof that the respective programs had, relative to the alumni’s professional decisions. The study also shed light on the participants’ thoughts about how each program grapples with issues of race, cultural assets, and community cultural wealth (CCW) with its students. The researcher provided questionnaires to a sample population, conducted interviews with participants who met the study criteria, and analyzed program documents. Data from alumni and program staff were instrumental in addressing the research questions of the study. The major themes of the study are opportunity,

commitment, gratification, community, representation, and leveraging.

The alumni expressed overall appreciation for their experiences in each GYO program. The alumni noted that the GYO program had an influence over their decision to pursue teaching. It should be noted that all alumni decided to pursue a career in teaching.

All alumni are currently serving in an administrative capacity in the field of education. Some alumni talked about the benefit of exposure to conferences and the influence of the career development workshops that they experienced. Some alumni credited the pre-collegiate GYO teacher programs with providing them with the tools and foundation that led to teacher careers that impacted student academic achievement. Alumni from both GYO programs talked extensively about the impact at exposure to the teaching profession had on their professional decisions.

Both alumni, staff, and former staff of both programs noted the influence of the supports and resources that the respective programs afforded to the participants. The supports ranged from tangible benefits such as financial aid, scholarships, and college credits to meaningful mentorship experiences. All participants noted the importance of commitment on behalf of the *Grow Your Own* program, school districts, and post-secondary institutions. They discussed the power of involvement of the *Grow Your Own* programs during their post K-12 lives, as well as the value of school districts and post-secondary institutions placing priority to maintain involvement with GYO programs.

Some alumni talked about the gratification they obtained from being a part of these programs. The importance of community and a network that could help to shape and support the careers of participants was

discussed. Several alumni shared that they either wanted to become teachers but did not know how to go about doing so or were interested in other professions altogether until their experience with the GYO program. Other alumni expressed feelings of contentment from the attention, recognition, and personal/professional gain they attributed to their respective GYO teacher program.

Both programs uplifted the notion of representation of Black and Latinx people in the field of education. The theme of representation was expressed throughout the participant interviews. The alumni and staff of the Future is Here program noted that the program fostered an understanding of the importance of representation; however, neither program focused on deep discussions about how to navigate professional spaces as Black and Latinx people. Some alumni delved deeper into the notion of representation and preparation to serve as a teacher or educator of color in potentially emotionally unsafe spaces. Still, representation was described as powerful as it relates to role models that the alumni experienced as well as the value of the alumni going into the profession as people of color. The alumni from the *Future is Here* program stated that the program could be enhanced by providing participants with the tools to leverage their assets and navigate their professional spaces as Black and Latinx people.

Implications for Practice

Start the children early! Early exposure for children to the teaching profession as a possible career path is necessary. Three of the alumni who participated in this study shared that they had no intention of becoming teachers prior to their participation in their GYO program. Students should be afforded the opportunity to create activities to teach their peers in elementary. GYO programs should be a collaborative effort between school districts, university partners, and possibly consultants.

Opportunities for students to “play teacher” should be embedded into the elementary school social studies curriculum.

District curriculum writers might benefit from the expertise of GYO consultants. GYO consultants should ideally be individuals who are able to provide curriculum or support the writing of curriculum for the program at the middle and high school levels. These consultants should be working the school district to leverage partnerships with local universities for the purposes of mentorship, guidance regarding current research and practice in the field, and financial arrangements to meet the financial needs of students.

Pre-collegiate GYO middle school programs should provide middle school students with an opportunity to learn about the profession, while working with elementary school students. High school GYO programs should be a natural progression of curriculum, supports, and educational opportunities. There should be a clear linkage between the district’s middle and high school programs. Teachers should be trained by curriculum writers of the GYO program regarding implementation of the curriculum. The program should prepare children to have a solid knowledge of pedagogy and best practices, while allowing students to apply what they are learning.

Care must be taken to select teachers who work in the GYO programs. The data have noted that the relationship between the teacher mentors, program staff, and the high school students is an important component of pre-collegiate GYO programs. All alumni and staff members discussed the importance of those connections and the mentorship that anchored the students’ experiences. Similarly, a literature review of GYO programs demonstrated the importance of these relationships as well (Oliva & Staudt, 2003). It should be noted that while many teacher education programs are

struggling to recruit and retain young people into their programs, pre-collegiate programs could offer a great deal of insight regarding how mentorship for, and long-term commitment to, support the careers of teacher education students could help to make teacher education programs more attractive.

Lastly, GYO teacher programs must tackle the matter of culturally relevant pedagogy and cultural community wealth to center the discussion about how to leverage representation in the classroom beyond the commonality of race. There must be a multi-layered approach to educating participants in the program about themselves, the historical structures in our nation, issues of race and equity, and the navigational tools to discern safe and unsafe spaces while making space for themselves. People of color must be encouraged to serve in roles that extend beyond tokenism or a generic perception of the benefits that people of color can bring to their respective workspaces. GYO teacher programs should help Black and Latinx participants with self-discovery so that they are better prepared to share their talents and gifts with their school

community. Black and Latinx educators can serve in many roles, not merely those that are generally reserved for them such as the disciplinarian. Additionally, GYO teacher programs must expose students to the instructional expertise needed to amplify the cultural assets of Black and Latinx students through culturally relevant pedagogy and teaching practices.

Conclusions

GYO programs are a viable tool to increase the recruitment of Black and Latinx teachers. The GYO programs must employ intentionality around supporting students through mentorship, exposure, and resources. The GYO programs in this study promoted representation as a critical element for the participants of color; however, deeper discussions of race, equity, and consciousness were lacking during the participants' experiences. Black and Latinx participants of GYO programs should be exposed to pedagogy and best instructional practices, along with cultural competency and community cultural wealth to aid in their professional practice as staff members and practitioners of the craft.

Author Biography

Natasha Pitt has served all K-12 grade levels. She has a bachelor's degree in political science from Hunter College (CUNY), a Master of Education degree from George Washington University and a Doctor of Education degree from Seton Hall University. E-mail: natasha.pitt928@gmail.com

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