
When Will We Listen and Heed?: Learning from Black Teachers to Understand the Urgent Need for Change

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Abstract

Counter-narratives of Black teachers reveal the various identities they embody and negotiate professionally and personally. The sociohistorical context of the lives of the teachers in this study and their experiences as learners is clearly a part of their pedagogy and their roles as Black educators. Examining life histories of African American teachers using Critical Race, and Identity theories as frameworks sets a solid foundation through which to better understand the roles and meanings that constitute the term African American or Black teacher. Building on a rich tradition in the study of Black teachers, this paper argues that we need to look again at this kind of work in a time when schools are asking what roles they can play in fighting racism, support the diversity of their institutions, and provide more equitable educational experiences for their students. We also need to look closely at the stories of Black teachers if we are to learn from the experiences, knowledge, and strength they bring to the profession and if we are to understand why our programs of teacher education continue to be glaringly not diverse. Toward that end, this paper juxtaposes the findings from the study of Black teachers with findings from a study of White preservice teachers in an effort to better understand issues faced in teacher education and how we can begin to change by addressing schools as systems of oppression and power as well as institutions of learning.

Introduction

Teachers of color represent only 18 percent of the teaching population in the U.S. while Black teachers make up seven percent and they are leaving the profession at an alarming rate. (Griffin & Tackie, 2016, p. 1)

A critical body of work has long suggested that African American students benefit when their teachers are African American (Gay & Howard, 2000; Milner, 2006; Perry, Steele & Hilliard, 2003). However, most of the teaching population across the United States continues to consist of White educators (Sleeter, 2016). Not only is the teaching profession glaringly *not* diverse, we lose Black teachers from the profession in growing

numbers (Griffin & Tackie, 2016). Consequently, while the field of teacher education works to recruit and retain more Black preservice teachers, it is imperative that we also educate White preservice teachers to better teach students of Color. This article builds on the notion that the effectiveness of all teachers can be promoted by learning from insights that Black teachers bring to successful teaching. Toward that end, the field of teacher education has much to learn by listening to and heeding the stories of Black teachers.

The study of Black teachers and the call to learn from them is certainly not new. Powerful insights from Black teachers are highlighted in decades of research from the period prior to desegregation (Siddle Walker, 1996) through today (Carothers, 2014; Foster, 1993;



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Goodwin, 2003; Milner, 2010). And yet we do not yet see these insights or this research as foundational in programs of teacher education. At the same time, we see Black students over-referred for special education and under-referred for gifted programs (Codrington & Fairchild, 2013; Ford, 2013), inequitably disciplined (Morris, 2016), held to lower expectations than their White peers (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016), and their histories marginalized, distorted, or omitted from dominant curricula (Baines, Tisdale, & Long, 2018; Boutte, 2016). Bettina Love (2016) writes about this as a kind of spirit-murdering of Black students in schools. Johnson and Bryan (2016) use the metaphor of bullets to describe the kind of annihilation experienced when Black students are silenced, their histories marginalized, and their behaviors criminalized (Alexander, 2012; Morris, 2016). Many Black teachers are more successful (than White teachers) in teaching Black students because they recognize these issues of degradation and work to counter them (Milner, 2006). Often having experienced the same kind of bias-based spirit-murdering in their own schooling, they understand the need to alter the status quo. Thus, Black teacher narratives about their own experiences can provide important insights for preservice teachers as they learn to identify the inequities of current educational norms and confront their own biases in the work to better support Black students.

To bring clarity to this issue, this paper presents insights from the experiences of four African American middle school teachers and, in the discussion section, juxtaposes those insights with findings from my study of White preservice teachers (Williams, 2018). The study of African American teachers highlights their negotiation of race and teacher identity through retellings of elements in their life histories, (Clandinin, & Connelly, 2000; Cole & Knowles, 2001). It highlights ways these Black teachers viewed and embodied teaching as more than just delivering instruction as they taught from their rich cultural perspectives and experiences, all pieces of their history and identity (Anderson 1988). The study of preservice teachers involves 17 White undergraduates who were doing their student teaching in a middle school setting. Data were collected as they engaged in critical conversations around race and began to define their individual teacher identities.

Recognition of both sets of experiences is critical to teacher education as we consider the need for change in our programs and practices. While the time for foregrounding this kind of work is long past due, it is my hope that overt signs of racism in schools and

society in this new era of Jim Crow (Alexander, 2012) will prompt programs of teacher education to use studies such as this to stand for change. Implications illuminate the need for programs of teacher education to utilize insights from the lives of Black teachers to examine and address the institutions (syllabi and readings, departmental and college mission statements, internship placements, course content, and hiring practices) that inform the learning of preservice teachers. In this way, this article offers contributions in the move to change the Eurocentric nature of schooling to better meet the needs of students of Color and of all students.

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race and Identity Theories

Both studies described in this paper are guided by theories that help me understand and articulate issues of race and racism as well as teacher identity. The ways in which we see ourselves, whether we are White preservice teachers or experienced Black teachers, are derivative of our histories, experiences, and even current conditions. The many identities that we carry are multifaceted with race and ethnicity playing critical roles in our identity development. Our identity is entangled with race and how racism is experienced and understood. This section provides an overview of the Critical Race Theory and identity frameworks that guided my understandings of identity throughout these studies.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) highlights hegemonic views (dominant ways of thinking) regarding race and racism. It evolved from a movement in legal studies and has since expanded across many disciplines including education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002;). CRT holds that the very existence of race as a concept is a social construction: “race and races are products of social thought and relations . . . categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7). CRT scholars contend that race was socially constructed in the interest of power when, with the earliest European colonizers, those desiring power began identifying, labeling, and treating Indigenous and enslaved populations as less civilized, barbarian, and less intelligent as a method of control and oppression. CRT is based on five tenets that examine

race, power and privilege:

1. Ordinariness/permanence of race,
2. Interest convergence,
3. Challenge to dominant ideology,
4. Counternarrative/voices of color, and
5. Commitment to social justice

(Carter, 2008; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Yosso, 2005).

Although each tenet has individual characteristics, they are closely intertwined and relate to one another. The tenet of permanence is perhaps the most misunderstood in its focus on how racism is implemented and maintained in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). There is an illusion of standard treatment across racial and ethnic groups making the permanence of racism ubiquitous and difficult to see. Using the term, *permanence*, CRT scholars explain that racism is so much a part of the everyday routine of society that it has become normalized and therefore rarely recognized by those not victimized by it (Milner, 2007) - permanent. We see this in schools, for example, when teachers claim colorblindness – claiming not to see color. This is often considered to be an anti-racist ideology when it is, in fact, racist and does more harm than good. By seeing all students as “the same,” teachers intentionally or unintentionally default to normalizing the dominant cultural and racial group (which is typically White, middle class, English-only students) and fail to acknowledge the plurality of cultural heritage and knowledge that students bring to the classroom as well as the histories of discrimination and oppression experienced by students of Color.

Interest convergence is another concept central to CRT and to this framework. It refers to the notion that White people typically focus on issues of racism when it is in their best interest, or when their interests converge with the goals of anti-racism. In this way, rather than eradicating racism, interest convergence more often advances the interest of the White elite and the working class (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Converging interests of Whites and people of Color may not always benefit those of Color as much as they do those in power. As a result, interest convergence is a means by which dominant groups maintain power and position.

The notion of colorblindness contributes to the permanence of racism as it is often conflated with the concept of meritocracy – we all can be successful if we just put in the effort and work hard. Both are ideas that

are often used to dismiss the existence of institutional oppressions (institutional racism) in the attempt to profess equal opportunity for all students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In fact, the concept of meritocracy is a smoke screen that keeps us from recognizing issues that need to be addressed (e.g. over-referral of Black students to special education, under-referral of African American students to gifted programs, uneven application of discipline policies, etc.). While colorblindness is the refusal to see race, meritocracy implies that the reward for hard work is success for everyone, not just the privileged; yet, it does not take into account inequality caused by systemic racism (DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Meritocracy works largely for those students who are already privileged in society, thus students of color are typically excluded (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). CRT scholars suggest that teachers must question liberal notions of meritocracy and colorblindness in order to address educational inequities as a means of social transformation. Black teachers in this study challenge these ideologies by sharing counterstories and experiences that say otherwise.

Challenging dominant Eurocentric ideologies, Critical Race Theory also draws from the conviction that everyone has a story to tell that is critical to understanding issues and constructing solutions to them. Thus, CRT recognizes story as an important in the focus on counternarrative, as DeCuir & Dixson (2004) note, “a means of exposing and critiquing normalized dialogues that perpetuate stereotypes” (p. 27). The counter-narrative gives the dominant society an opportunity to hear the struggle and journey of people of Color (in this case, African Americans). In this article, the counter-narratives of Black teachers are offered to help shape understandings of historical and cultural happenings that have impacted their pedagogical styles often counteracting those of the dominant group (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005) and informing ways of teaching beyond the current status quo.

Finally, CRT is committed to social justice and a transformative approach to end racism, sexism and poverty by empowering underrepresented groups through resistance (Solorzano and Bernal, 2001). Such a commitment requires providing an education for all students that is drawn from the experiences of more than just Eurocratic creators of curriculum so that multiple layers of oppression and discrimination can be critically examined. The narratives in this article are a part of that education, informing readers about issues faced by Black teachers as they work to affect change and sustain their work. These narratives further

this commitment by empowering and engaging readers to recognize and then confront issues of injustice and oppression in schools and society for the betterment of all students and educators.

Theorizing Identity

Identity models are complex however they all focus on defining oneself. Theories of identity reveal that the process of identity development is fluid, dynamic, and formed in relation to the individuals' sociocultural realities (Holland, Skinner, Lachiocotte & Cain, 1998) as identities are constantly produced, reproduced and modified depending upon their context. The notion of identity as fluid is foundational to this study as it allows us to consider the varied roles that Black teachers must play as they position themselves within the profession and establish relationships with students. These roles, revealed in the narratives in this study, often require what W.E.B. DuBois (1903) termed, double consciousness or the ability to read contexts and to describe the contradictions that are associated between dominant social values of a Eurocentric society and the daily realities of life for Black Americans.

Social identity is made up of several elements including relationships, subject matter, and interpersonal struggles in the classroom (Wortham, 2006). Wortham contended that social identification and academic learning are inclusive of one another. His study examined students and their social identification with regard to academic learning but it enhances this study in terms of the social identification and positioning of African American teachers and their relationships with students. Social identification and expertise of African American teachers in terms of building relationships, expressing feelings, demonstrating expectations - often learned from their communities - impacts how they teach and relate to African American students. It further shapes who they are as individual educators, what they believe and the ways in which they teach.

Thus, identity is a central means by which selves and the actions they organize form, and reform over personal lifetimes (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). This forming and reforming of identity is comprised of individual movements of conscious understanding and identification with one's own culture through the beliefs, attitudes and traditions (Chávez and Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Alsup, 2006) as well as with the beliefs, attitudes, and traditions of the dominant culture. Holland et al. (1998) contended that people figure who

they are based on context and the social relationships created. Identities for teaching are constructed and developed within these social relationships and the complexities faced by Black teachers' construction of identities need to be understood and acknowledged in teacher education and the profession as a whole.

Review of Related Literature: Black Teacher Identity

Empirically, this study builds on existing studies that look at how Black teachers' identities are informed by race and the role it plays in the context of their experiences as African American teachers and the future of teacher education. Constructs of race and ethnicity are complex and arduous to define and outline. Thus the idea can be particularly challenging for preservice teachers to grasp. Ethnic identity allows individuals to make sense of the world around them and find pride within themselves while identifying with their own cultural values, behaviors, beliefs and traditions (Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). Race, however, is a social construct anchored in the early days of colonization when a mechanism was required - and therefore created - by European colonizers to ensure a hierarchy between poor Whites and the Africans they sought to control (Kendi, 2016). Thus, the concept of race was born in actions of oppression.

Black teachers' professional identities are always intertwined with race and ethnic identity (Skerrett, 2008; Chavez & Guido-DiBrito, 1999; Tatum, 1997) as are the identities of White teachers who may not recognize the role of race in their lives because Whiteness is so normalized in the teaching profession (Delpit, 2006; Sleeter 2017). Research in the area of Black teacher identity is critical to this study because it is so under-researched and disseminated. In this study, four African American teachers shared ways that they mediated the identities imposed upon them daily by others. Their racial and ethnic identity had an impact on them professionally as they negotiated their roles as middle school teachers and colleagues.

The literature regarding African American educators and their experiences provides a much-needed perspective in the field of teacher education as we work to empower student teachers and advance the field by democratic and anti-racist actions. Perhaps the most well-known study of Black teachers on teaching is Foster's (1993) work demonstrating not only the challenges faced by African American teachers but also the strong racial, community, and historical insights they

bring to the profession. In addition, Foster's research illuminates characteristics that are common among successful African American teachers including their recognition that the most effective pedagogy for Black students creates opportunities for them to connect content to all aspects of their lives and principles of teaching based on the beliefs, values, and heritage of the African American community.

Also important to understanding Black teacher identity is Goodwin's (2004) research illuminating how the lived experiences of teachers of color and the socio-historical context they represent can provide insight rarely included in teacher education programs but that must be tapped if we are to engage in "open access to learning for all" (p. 23). Similarly, Gay (2010), explored how the cultural, racial and ethnic attitudes all teachers confront societally affected teacher beliefs and impact teacher education in terms of teachers' dispositions regarding race and education. Another study of Black teacher identity can be found in Milner's (2010) work which described the experiences, impact and success of Black teachers and how the field of teacher education can grow from understanding the ways in which Black teachers engage and empower Black students. Finally, a commonality Milner found in the collective body of work examining Black teacher identity (Agee, 2004; Anderson, 1988; Perry, Steel & Hillard, 2003; Foster, 1997) communicates that teachers of color have a "strong desire to engage in social action and redress inequities" (2010, p. 23) demonstrated by their actions and beliefs inside and outside of the classroom. For example, Black teachers often maintain their personas as role models and teachers while facing consistent scrutiny for being strong minded individuals. Understanding the complexities of race and identity is foundational if we are to examine what we can learn from Black teachers. Assigning expertise, knowledge, and wisdom to African American teachers is a first step in being able to use their insights to transform educational spaces.

Methods of Inquiry

I utilized life history and critical race methodologies to forefront race and capture glimpses into the living histories of four Black teachers within micro- and macro-historical contexts (Atkinson, 1998). In this case, those contexts included their families, schooling, and broader communities. To understand those contexts, this study asked two primary questions:

1. How do the life histories of Black teachers influence their professional identity?

2. What community experiences impact Black teachers identity?

The study centered on the intersectionality of identity and agency in order to understand the ways that four African American middle school teachers mediated their educational environment. In the following sections, I describe the methodology used to conduct this study.

Research Design

Critical race methodology, with a focus on life history, was foundational to this study as a way to access ideologies that value the telling of one's life within broader sociopolitical and historical contexts. Guided in this way, I was able to seek understandings about how individuals live and work within those contexts (Cole & Knowles, 2001; Foster, 1997) and ultimately provide implications for change in teacher education. Critical race methodology supported my development of a narrative design concerned not only with the experiences of individuals, but also with the meaning of those experiences in relation to the individual, educational institutions, and society (Reissman, 1993; Patton, 2002; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cole & Knowles, 2001). The use of life history as a methodological approach allowed me to focus on the complexities of the experiences of four Black educators and offer critical insights by connecting individual lives to larger social processes (Atkinson, 1998).

Critical race methodology (CRM). Using Critical Race Theory (CRT) also offered possibilities for my own reflection. Duncan (2002) underscores this sentiment as he posits that CRT can be a mediator for researcher reflexivity "in its contribution to making visible the invisible relationships that characterize racial oppression redirecting the focus on our own perspective and to fostering a consideration of the multiple viewpoints that may come to bear in the social construction of reality" (p. 96). Not only did CRM help me mediate my own reflexivity in the interpretation and organization of the data regarding the participant's daily realities around the social construction of race, but it also assisted in validating the narrative tradition of storytelling in the African American community (Banks-Wallace, 2002).

Furthermore, CRM enabled me to look for patterns in the interviews to better understand how participants (a) challenged the dominate ideology, (b) identified their commitment to social justice in teaching, and (c) centralized their historical and current experiences with the context of schooling, families, and communities (Yosso, Smith, Ceja & Solorzano, 2009).

In sum, CRM provided the foundation for giving voice to the life histories of these teachers in an educational system that minimizes race and racial identity through a practice of colorblindness and the myth of meritocracy. Creating space for those voices not only potentially benefits readers of this work, but also affirms CRT “as a method [that] demands that research must benefit the participants, and the communities they come from” (Kohli, 2009, p. 238).

Life history methodology. Using life history methodology to study African American teachers is particularly useful in the following ways:

Life history and the associated techniques of oral history and personal narratives are forms of analysis that can bring the experience of blacks, including teachers into view in ways that reveal the complexity of their experiences. Life history not only provides materials about individual lives but also offer the opportunity to explore how individuals’ lives are shaped by society. Thus life history research offers critical insights into larger social processes by connecting the lives of individuals to society. (Atkinson, 1998, p. 58)

In this study, a life history approach allowed me to focus on culturally relevant and contextually appropriate methods following a tradition of “first-person accounts [that] have long been employed by individuals to encode and record the experience of blacks . . . [serving] as valuable information for both scholars seeking to understand the black community and for the black community itself” (Foster, 1997, p. xxi). However, life history methodology was not enough to enable adequate engagement in this study because it does not consider the race or ethnicity with regard to individual life experiences and practices. This resulted in the need to also draw on Critical Race methodologies (described above) to provide a more comprehensive examination of the teachers’ experiences and their sociopolitical and historical contexts in and out of school. For example, although life history allowed me to capture the voices and experiences of African American middle school teachers, it did not explicitly include the observation of interactions between teachers and students. Another concern with life history was the degree to which participants would be willing to delve into their pasts and potentially deal with old wounds or as a result of the interview, discover new ones. However, embracing CRM meant that I was responsible for examining each tenet and how it impacted the teachers and their pedagogy along with the history of the events of their life. Hence, the interpretivistic paradigm offered by combining CRM and life history methodologies was a catalyst for

this investigation and representation of racial identities and teacher experiences as they can inform educational policy, practice and pedagogies within the narrative of teachers’ communities of origin and practice.

Participants and Participant Selection

Purposeful selection was used to select participants. According to Maxwell (2005), this is “a strategy in which particular settings, persons, or activities are selected deliberately in order to provide information that can’t be gotten as well from other choices” (p. 88). Purposeful qualitative sampling involves selecting people who will best help the researcher understand the research problem as well as answer the research questions (Creswell, 2005). One reason the teachers in this study were invited to be participants (pseudonyms used) was because of my familiarity with them and their classroom practices having worked with them in various roles (e.g. first-year teaching mentee and teaching teammate, student teaching supervisor/lead teacher). All four teachers in this study were highly regarded in their schools by colleagues and students. Specifically, the teachers were selected based on the following criteria: Each teacher: a) displayed a style of teaching that included culturally relevant critical teacher caring (Gay, 2010), b) was a seasoned educator [having taught for at least ten years], c) taught at a racially diverse school and d) was African American. Based on these criteria, Ginger, Sheila, Savoy, and Lauren became participants in this study.

Ginger. Ginger Hill was in her late thirties at the time of the study. She grew up in a small town in North Carolina. She wore a warm smile each time we met and spoke with affection as she chronicled her life. Ginger had been one of few African American students in her high school and attended a historically Black University (HBCU). At the time of the study, she had taught for sixteen years. Her Christian faith was important to her and she often talked about how it guided her from day to day. She taught language arts and social studies to eighth graders during this study.

Savoy. Teacher of the Year for 2008-2009, Savoy had been teaching for thirteen years and was in her mid-thirties at the time of this study. Savoy was congenial and uncompromising in her professional convictions and dedication to teaching. Her teaching career began at a private school, and during this study, she taught eighth grade science. She considered herself an astute role model for the Black students in her school, fair with all of her students and a compassionate teacher.

Sheila. Sheila Rich was a veteran social studies teacher of 26 years. She was a product of the struggle Black Americans had to endure in order to achieve equality in education. Sheila attended a segregated school from first until sixth grade. She described her African American teachers and community as instilling the value and importance of education. After the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954, she went to an integrated school from seventh grade through twelfth grade. She attended an HBCU for her undergraduate and graduate degrees.

Lauren. Lauren had been teaching sixth grade social studies and language arts for eleven years at the time of this study. In her early thirties, Lauren was a former Teacher of the Year. Her goal for teaching was to find out what her students needed and then to do her best to give it to them in the classroom. Unlike the other participants, Lauren grew up in a predominately white neighborhood. She attended a predominantly white Catholic school from kindergarten until fifth grade however she did attend an HBCU for college.

Data Collection

Data were collected for this study in the form of three semi-structured interviews with each teacher. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, was conducted in the teachers' classrooms, homes, and in local library conference/meeting rooms, recorded, and transcribed. As described by Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte (1999), the interview questions were "pre-formulated, but the answers to those questions [were] open-ended [so they could] be fully expanded at the discretion of the interviewer and the interviewee, and can be enhanced by probes" (p. 149). The semi-structured interviews allowed me to listen to the teachers as they chronicled their stories and ask for clarity or elaboration when needed. The first interview focused on the early schooling experiences of the participants as students and their interactions with teachers who lived in their communities. The guiding questions were:

1. What lead or influenced you to teach? (family, society)
2. In what ways did your journey directly impact your identity? (as a teacher, African American or female)
3. Who are you as a teacher?

Subsequent interviews grew out of my analysis of stories from the first interviews.

At each second and third interview, I invited participants to read over the first interview transcripts and

provide feedback and commentary. The advantage of this type of data collection is that it afforded me the opportunity to use the written words and language of the participants, (Creswell, 2003), valuing their experiential knowledge which is a focus of CRT. Conducting three semi-structured interviews and getting oral feedback also served as a form of member checking.

Data Analysis

As I talked with participants, I also began to mentally code the data, jotting down notes as I listened to their stories, guided by a commitment to understanding common experiences within a CRT lens. Then, as I transcribed data, I engaged in the next level of analysis embracing, as Riessman (1993) asserts, "taping and transcribing [as] absolutely essential to narrative analysis" (p. 56). Prior to transcribing, I listened to the interview tapes and made notes of potential relationships and/or patterns (Maxwell, 2005). Connecting themes from each category provided an understanding of the situations, the participants, and the ways in which they perceived their roles in the lives of students.

Analyzing data this way, I was able to gain insights from the histories participants brought to their present experiences, "an important aspect of which is usually an untidy compilation of perspectives, some developed into symbolized identities" (Holland, 1998, p. 46). In particular, I was able to honor ways that these four African American teachers' stories could be drawn together to understand their identities and how they impact their teaching as well as how they might impact others' teaching. In other words, life history and CRT methodologies allowed for sociohistorical contexts to emerge through the analysis (Solarzano & Yosso, 2002; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Howard & Navarro, 2016).

A second layer of analysis was conducted after completing my study of the 17 White preservice teachers. I worked with these students for two semesters as their instructor and internship supervisor and collected data during the second semester, the semester of their full time internships. Through a pattern analysis of students' written reflections and class discussions as well as my teaching plans and materials, I sought understandings about their views of issues of race, bias, and education. The second layer of analysis that impacts this paper involved looking at findings from the student study in conjunction with findings from the study of Black teacher to ascertain if and how one might inform the other.

Learning From Black Teachers: Results

Being American and Black suggests inconsistencies with various identities, which include living in a racist society and the powerful effects racism and stereotyping has on their identities. The participants in this study possess collective and individual identities as Black educators. They are an aggregate of self-definitions along with the definitions offered to them from others and are continuously undergoing adjustments. Their stories presented in the following pages set the stage for looking at the juxtaposition of their insights with the perceptions, fears, and misperceptions of preservice teachers discussed in the Discussion section of this paper. I argue that preservice teachers, teacher education programs, and public schools could benefit from understanding Black teachers' a) racialized identities, b) strength and knowledge derived from and given back to communities that care, and c) commitment to upholding a standard taught to them by their communities. Findings highlight ways that these African American teachers experienced and negotiated their cultural identities, as well as how *their own* communities contributed to their thoughts and beliefs as teachers.

Racial and Racialized Identities

The participants in this study had to contend with and challenge perpetual stereotypes of being Black women in America as they navigated the systems of power within teaching. For example, Savoy was aware of the positioning and identity that were negatively placed on her by colleagues, however she responded positively to the attitudes of her colleagues. Well acquainted with stereotypical views of Black women as loud and the assumptions that Black educators do not display the teaching expertise of their White colleagues (Muhs, Niemann, González, & Harris, 2012), she was anxious to establish herself as the antithesis of those inaccuracies without disavowing her own styles of interaction. Savoy explained:

I'm going to show them that I *can* be loud but on an average day and I *can* do my job very well. I won't say pressure, I'm going to say it is, it is a standard that I have to *I have to* keep my crap together. I have to show folk [laughs] that I'm competent, that I am not one of those hood rats, that I am not the ghetto girl, because everybody else that they meet in the hall is loud, I ain't like that. I have a brain and I have got to show them that dog gone it [chuckling] I can use it too [laughs].

Savoy saw and heard the perception of the "loud

girls" from her colleagues and did not want to be compared to the students. She saw the reactions of her White colleagues to Black students and felt that if she was seen in that way, they would perceive her to be a less capable teacher. Consequently, she distanced herself from the "loud Black girl" portrait:

This school is majority White and colleagues that I work with - maybe it's unconscious but because of what they see in the halls; the Black girls are *loud*, the young girls, they're rude, they're ghetto, they are. It's all they [colleagues] see. *It's all they see* in the halls so their thought process is that the majority of Black women are loud and rude and have no couth. I'm going to show them that I *can* be loud but on an average day, I'm just professional as the next, and I can do my job very well. [whispers] Do you think that's harsh?

This story provides just one example of the need felt by many Black teachers to suppress any characteristics that could be perceived as "too Black" in schools where they work with White colleagues (Kelly, 2007). The very need to separate yourself from characteristics that may define you in other spaces means not being your full self as a teacher. It is easy to see why we lose Black teachers from the profession in an era when diversity is supposedly a key issue.

For teachers in this study, identity was not just related to physical appearance but also through the way in which they spoke and carried themselves. The complexity of negotiating the identity as Other and as role model requires a strong sense of individual culture. Even though these teachers were confident about their content and teaching strategies, they also considered the racism they experienced as their identity as Black teachers scrutinized.

This was particularly so in Sheila's experiences as demonstrated through the convergence of her strong personality and her reputation in the school. She described her co-workers views of her as being "a strong Black woman with a strong personality which equates to having the persona of a bitch." She recalled a conversation with a colleague who was told her, "Sheila's going to be on your team, how's that going to work out because you know she's a STRONG personality." Discussing the comment in her interview, Sheila revealed her recognition of her colleagues' bias along with her convictions about maintaining her identity as a strong woman, "I thought that was interesting . . . how they (White colleagues) look (down) at that because I know that I'm a strong personality, I know who I am."

Feeling secure and assured in her identity as a Black female teacher, Sheila was grounded in that space:

I don't actually think teaching shaped me, I think I was who I was when I came to teaching and I think my teaching was shaped by who I was not by teaching shaping me . . . Well, the personality that you bring that helps shape your classroom, your influence on the kids from your background, from your morals, even though we're "not" supposed to teach those kinds of things but I guess that is character education, you know your belief in things that are greater than yourself and I think just the composite person that I am that I bring to the classroom helps to shape the decisions that I make within my classroom that are hopefully for the best.

Sheila recognized that her strong sense of self informs decisions she makes in the class, and she was concerned that her decisions were in the best interest of her students. This awareness is similar to the feeling that Ladson-Billings (2005) explains as that experienced by enslaved Africans known as house slaves because they worked in the *Big House*: "Unfortunately, many African American teacher educators feel a similar tension. They are *in* the academy but not *of* the academy. Their roles are circumscribed by race and the social conditions of African Americans in the broader society" (pp. 4-5). Although Ladson-Billings was addressing the experiences of teacher educators, it can easily be associated with professional teachers.

Black teachers can be lead to think that they are *in* the classroom, not *of* it within the environment of their schools. Ginger recounted her feelings:

I feel that the position I'm in, based on the climate that I'm in right now 'cause I'm truly am a minority within my school. It's not but so many of us based on the school itself so in a sense I feel that being in my position I feel like I'm constantly watched. I feel as if there are other [White] teachers who may have gone to like the big four schools [University of Chapel Hill, North Carolina State, etc.]. [They] feel that I may not *know* as much as they know because I graduated from a predominantly—or a historically Black university but then it's a catch twenty-two because they have this perception. Yet we making the same amount of money and sitting at the same table in the cafeteria, but other than that sometimes I feel like I have to prove myself that I'm just as smart as they are and I'm just as capable as they are and I can do the same job.

Although Ginger has primarily taught at suburban middle schools, she felt as though she was not always considered as good or prepared a teacher by colleagues because she graduated from a Historically Black College/University (HBCU). Ginger had complete confidence in her ability as an educator, which

she attributed to the preparation she received from the HBCU she attended. The institution promoted behaviors that supported and encouraged connections and relationships with teachers. These academic practices are characteristic of HBCU's, which have historically been dedicated to teaching academic achievement by commitment to hard work, and a desire to do one's best (Perry et al., 2003, Carothers, 2014).

Communities that Care and the Impact of Fictive Kin

In this study, the positive self-identification of the teachers within racialized contexts (bearing up under constant microaggressions and witnessing the profiling and uneven treatment of themselves and students and teachers of Color) and their ability to hold onto those identities were closely tied to their experiences with fictive kin and other role models within caring communities. The term, fictive kin refers to close friends and others who take on family roles and identities in our lives (Fordham, 1995). Each participant in this study learned from his or her fictive kin and role model relationships in ways that cultivated their positive identities as Black teachers. These interactions led to a consciousness of the dynamic impact of the cultural values, racial and racialized histories, and heritage learned from the community but rarely offered in school or teacher education spaces.

This type of fictive kin relationship was critical in the professional lives of the participants as they learned, built relationships, and experienced success in their caring communities. For example, Ginger recognized the importance of a Black teacher not only as fictive kin but as one of the only Black teachers in her own schooling:

When I was in middle school, it was only one Black teacher that I still remember to this day. She was my eighth-grade teacher, English. And she was, she was pretty, very poised, but that's the only Black teacher I ever remember, the *only one . . . the only one*. I remember she took a lot of time out with me. When she looked at me, or when she called my name, she looked me in the eye. She was a compassionate person.

Ginger found herself giving her students the same personal attention that she received from teachers in her community when she was a student. She knew that the values she acquired in her upbringing played a major role in how she interacted with her students. Having experienced the positive impact of a fictive kin in their own lives, the teachers in this study took on similar roles in nurturing some of their students. For example, Savoy described the mother role she embodied in her relationship with Black male students in particular:

I'm a momma figure to them, more than somebody trying to tell them what to do. I guess I'm like a momma, I'm a little sassy to them and I guess they need that . . . They relate to that.

In this way, Savoy was responsive to her Black male students, specifically by treating and speaking to them in ways to which they respond positively because she treated them much as she would treat sons of her own. These relationships, learned from family and fictive kin in their own lives, helped Savoy and Ginger support the same positive identities for their students.

Upholding the Standard as Keepers of the Dream

Perhaps most important finding from this study is that each of the elements of the teachers' identity – the impact of racial and racialized experiences and the support from fictive kin in caring communities – came together in their convictions about being keepers of the dream to end oppression, microaggressions, profiling and inequities. As a result, they expanded on the dream and passed it on to their students. They each felt strongly that they were given a standard to uphold and represent from Black role models in their own lives and to fulfill the responsibility they felt for all of their students. They used strategies learned from those role models to pass the dream on by: a) holding high standards for them inside and outside their classrooms, b) helping them negotiate misperceptions about their identities, and c) supporting them in sustaining a strong sense of their racial and cultural selves. In this manner the teachers were *dreamkeepers* (Ladson Billings, 1994) – role models, mentors and allies – for new generations of students.

For instance, an African American female student credited Lauren with positively impacting her life in much the same way that members of the Black community had influenced Lauren's life. Lauren explained their relationship saying, "I think that being a Black teacher shows or gives students, especially African American students, a role model, someone to look up to because of course you always encounter students who don't have role models." For Lauren, being the only Black teacher in her grade level meant she felt a strong responsibility for being a dreamkeeper. She also felt it essential that she encourage Black students to develop a critical consciousness about who they were as individuals, their values, and what they were capable of becoming (Gay, 2010; Irvine, 2003; Nieto, 2003). Lauren explained the urgency to push students to meet high expectations, a part of keeping the dream

and passing it on:

I set very high expectations and I don't back down from those and I've had a lot of parents in the past tell me that I pushed their child too hard toward the beginning of the year, but by the end of the year they really, really thanked me for it. I can definitely see a child's potential sometimes when they can't see it themselves or parents can't see it.

Savoy was also very aware of her role and responsibility as a dreamkeeper. She demonstrated this as she talked about her deep connection with students and her position as a role model at her school:

I'm pleased that I'm able to, to be a role model, a positive role model that. I'm not saying that they all have a negative home lives, they don't all have them but many of them do have you know where their only experience with adult African American women is you know, somebody fussing at them or you know it's not always the case but if I can be stern but also love on them in a positive way, I think that's a good thing. I think they [Black students] need that.

Savoy spoke in particular about her relationship with student, Tameka, and the importance of building and maintaining a trusting relationship:

Once I gained Tameka's trust, I had to keep it. Initially I didn't feel any obligation to her. And once she came to me and once she started to respond to my redirection and to my advice, then I felt a need. Wow, she's listening to me maybe I can keep her if I am just consistent with her. So then I felt responsible, I felt like I *had* to do it, I *had* to keep on. 'Cause if there was another person in her life that had went by the wayside that, for one or two months was in her face [paying attention to her] but then cut her loose, that's all she knew.

Savoy and Lauren demonstrated how taking on the role of dreamkeeper involved a kind of other-mothering (Siddle-Walker, 1996; Irvine, 2003; Carothers, 2014) that was critical to their support of students of color, inspired by those who were influential in their own lives. They recognized that, without a role model, there was a possibility that their Black students would not have a strong, positive sense of self or the ability to move beyond their potential (Ladson-Billings, 1994; McMillian, 2003; Milner, 2006). They understood that the absence of a dreamkeeper could have a negative effect on students, particularly African American students, academically and socially (Milner, 2006)

Discussion

My study of preservice teachers was also grounded

in critical race and identity theories. Over a period of semester, I collected data in the form of class assignments: students' tweeted reflections, text messages, and emails; weekly lesson plans, power points, and teaching outlines. My analysis of these data focused on insights I could gain about effective practices and teacher candidate responses to a course designed to teach culturally relevant pedagogy and a critical consciousness through a focus on integrated curriculum. Discussed in detail in another publication (Williams, 2018), findings indicated that these White university students had little insight about the value and expertise of the African American community and had rarely had experiences beyond their own Eurocentric worlds. Initially, they did not recognize that they held racial biases and had biased and stereotypical views of African American students (for example, that African American students are loud and undisciplined). There was a clear need for preservice teachers to be supported in:

- Accessing time, space, and leadership in talking, reflecting, and growing with regard to issues of race and equity;
- Accessing counterstories of dominant (White) views of marginalized students and engage in the critical conversations to examine, question, and challenge deficit and biased views;
- Becoming immersed in the school's community particularly when their students were from background different from their own;
- Opportunities to confront biases and find their voices while developing a critical habit of mind.

Considered in conjunction with findings from my study of Black teachers, I am led to conclude that insights from Black educators *still* need to be heard perhaps now more than ever and could greatly inform the institutions (syllabi and readings, departmental and college mission statements, internship placements, course content, and hiring practices) that impact preservice teacher education. When these two studies are considered side-by-side, it becomes clear that the stories of Black teachers can be instrumental in challenging structures that continue to "Whiteify" teacher education and middle level teaching in public schools, structures that do not support preservice teachers in learning counterstories to dominant deficit views of Black students and teachers. Consider the joining of major findings presented in this paper:

Black teachers understand racism and racialized identities imposed on their students because they have experienced it themselves; consequently, White preser-

vice teachers can learn from stories of racialization to understand the challenges faced by their students and their colleagues and learn how to take a stand against those challenges. In addition, preservice teacher education programs can pay heed to Black teachers stories by evaluating their programs to identify where and how they are perpetuating the racialization of Black teachers and preservice teachers and then take action for change.

Black teachers learn from and value communities that have traditionally and historically supported Black students when the White world did/does not; consequently, White teachers as well as teachers from any ethnic background can learn from the kind of support provided in those communities and come to value the wisdom of the many wise teachers in students lives.

Black teachers see themselves as keepers of a dream of equity and understand their responsibility to act on that dream and pass it on; White teachers and preservice teachers can learn from their narratives to understand reasons why the dream is not yet fulfilled as a foundation for dismantling systems that create barriers to the dream and replace them with more just practices, policies, and dispositions.

Implications for Teacher Education

The construct of reflective thinking and critical discussions around race in cultural contexts is critical to helping White educators when beginning to interact with students who are racially different from them. Paramount for teacher educators is providing educational experiences that help pre-service teachers understand the role of race and racialization in their ability to survive and to support students of Color. Ladson-Billings (1994) ascertains, "Because these teachers' own cultural backgrounds remain unexamined, they have no way to challenge their intrinsic assumptions" (pp. 131-132). Ladson-Billings' ideas, as do findings from the studies reported in this paper, have implications for teacher education programs because, to be effective teachers, teacher candidates must acknowledge the cultural and racial backgrounds and lived experiences of themselves and their students and learn to appreciate and learn from those different from their own.

Overwhelmingly Black students are taught by middle class White women who do not have similar cultural and racial knowledge and background to that of their Black students (Gay, 2010; Goodwin, 2004; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Milner, 2006). Often White teachers do not understand the challenges faced by their African American colleagues and students in the

racialized and often racist environments of teacher education programs and schools. Thus, acknowledging the strengths of Black communities in conjunction with the attitudes and lack of racial insight that many White pre-service teachers carry is a first step in helping them develop understandings about and appreciation for the students of Color in the classroom.

As Milner (2008a) explained, “teachers from any ethnic, cultural or racial background can be successful with any group of students when the teachers possess (or have the skills to acquire) the knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, and beliefs necessary to meet the needs of their students” (p. 336). Participants in my study of Black teachers spoke about teaching their students in ways similar to teaching during their own schooling. They understood that each of their students had various strengths. This aligns with scholars such as Joplin (2006) who maintained that “if educators plan to close the achievement gap between African American students and White students, academic instruction needs to focus on how to harness the many African American cultures of students and teach to their worlds” (p. 282). With this in mind, the following practices for programs of teacher education in support of teachers and students of color are suggested:

Change must occur systematically by rethinking the framework for teacher education programs which should include a) a commitment to upholding the standard of true equity by understanding how educational spaces are currently inequitable; b) informing White and Black preservice teachers about the realities of the racialization of Black teachers and students; and c) learning from the strategies and support found in caring Black communities including Black communities’ strategies for supporting students and teachers.

Engage university faculty and staff in active and ongoing professional development about cultural and racial diversity to include Critical Race Theory for the purpose of identifying and changing from a Eurocratic focus to one that understands inequities and learns from the experiences and expertise of Black teachers (Milner, 2012); engage in regular conversations with experienced, Black faculty to learn from their community, historical and personal insights.

Use insights from professional study to examine and transform practices and policies (for example, hiring and retention practices and the development and revision of courses and programs of study) by engaging in critical discussions in faculty meetings that lead to transformation.

Support Black preservice teachers’ potential to

develop clear cultural, racial and ethnic self-identities by opening up communication with faculty and school administrators of Color through mentoring. In addition, create opportunities for all preservice teachers to learn about the histories and backgrounds of students of Color and to understand how they may have been racialized by schools and society; give preservice teachers strategies to connect academic content to their students’ histories as well as to develop a critical eye so that they understand the process of racialization and its impact.

Listen and hear Black teachers when they share their histories, experiences, and strategies for supporting students. Form a network to encourage teachers to share their stories with preservice teachers and teacher education faculty, which could influence other Black teachers to contribute their narratives in an effort to produce counter-narratives.

Conclusion

Black teachers, from the time they are preservice teachers, are expected to adopt European codes of power, (Agee, 2004; Foster, 1993; Madsen & Mabokela, 2000; Howard, 2008). Much can be learned from Black teachers about why these codes are not effective in the teaching of all children and are, in fact, often racist and exclusionary in nature. Much can also be learned about alternatives to those codes as we work to decenter Eurocratic practices, broadening the scope of what counts in schools in the interest of the education of every child.

In the current era of teacher reform, accountability, assessment, and sociopolitical assaults on education, however, the voices of teachers, particularly the voices of Black teachers are often unheard, devalued and undervalued. Using critical race theory and life history methodology as a tool of advocacy and resistance, this paper highlights the voices of African American teachers who center race and racial identity at the core of their teacher identity and provide insights for public schools and teacher education programs. Critical race theory provides a lens to discuss, question and challenge issues of race and power.

Most preservice teachers are unaware of the multiple roles that Black teachers must *continue* to negotiate in order to succeed in the White-dominated world of public education *in addition to* the micro-aggressions - unconscious verbal, nonverbal subtle assaults directed to people of color (Soloranzo & Ceja, 2000) and encountered every day in the process of those negotiations. These realities mean that, in this day and age, many Black teachers *still* feel the need to

bury one or more of their identities in order to succeed alongside their colleagues who maintain the standards of the dominant culture. In spite of repeated deflections of talk about race (Howard, 2001; Perry, Steele & Hillard, 2003; Tatum, 2000; Woodson, 2005), the field of education must continue to seek deeper understandings in the work to prepare Black teachers to empower not only their students and themselves but also White preservice teachers so they will honor and respect the sociocultural, political histories of their colleagues of Color while using their voice to affect change that alters an unjust status quo. Prioritizing and legitimizing African American teachers' experiences can help us develop a framework from which to propose change in both policy and practice in teacher education.

Because life histories delve into the very meaning of the lives of individuals – multifaceted living histories that contribute to individual identities – they can

be useful in helping us better understand and thereby respond to inequities and injustices. This examination of the results of a life history study in conjunction with a study of preservice teachers suggest ways that teacher educators can better prepare pre-service teachers to enter the profession by seeking and listening to histories and valuing the expertise that Black teachers bring to the classroom.

In my study of Black middle level teachers, the participants' successful pedagogy emanated from their Black identities, which were interwoven within their historical, family, professional, and community lives. The personal and professional identity of the participants began with their neighborhoods and communities and extended to their students and pedagogy. If teacher education is to benefit all students, we must begin by looking back at how we learn about who we are and how we teach in order to move forward with our students.

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