

Non-Traditional Black Women Teacher Candidates' Experiences at a Traditional HBCU Teacher Education Program

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Abstract

The experiences of Black women who are nontraditional students and enrolled in a traditional teacher education program have not been adequately examined in the field of teacher education. Using phenomenology as a methodology, this study explores the experiences of four Black women who are non-traditional teacher candidates at a Historically Black College and Universities (HBCU) teacher education program. Framed in Schlossberg transition theory and Black Feminist Theory, the purpose of this study is to understand non-traditional Black women teacher candidates' perspectives for selecting an HBCU teacher education program and how their academic and professional experiences influenced their conceptions of teaching and being a teacher. The findings of this study show the ways the participants were intrinsically motivated to successfully complete the teacher education program to meet their professional goal. Support provided from college professors, peers, family, and coworkers contributed to the participants' motivation and success. The data of this study suggest implications for redesigning the structure of the teacher education program with the goal of recruiting and providing immediate and continual support to non-traditional Black students.

Keywords: Historically Black College and University, nontraditional teacher candidates, Black women, teacher education

Introduction

The teaching workforce in the United States remains dominated by white women (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2020), only 6.3% of teachers in the United States are Black. Black women comprise only 5% of the U.S. teacher workforce (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). In addition, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development report (2023) found that 15.9% of elementary education teachers in the United States are under the age 30 and 27.2% of teachers are between

the ages 30-39. There are several factors that contribute to the racial and gender disparity of teachers, all of which directly limit diversity in traditional teacher education programs. First, most students at traditional teacher education programs are white students between the ages of 18-24 (Chavis, 2014; Gold, 2020). Next, the systemic and structural disparities that students of color, particularly Black girls, experience from elementary to high school, affect their ability to both envision themselves at post-secondary institutions and aspire to pursue teaching (Gist et al., 2018; Morris, 2016).

University-based teacher education programs typically require a four- or five-year completion. The completion of the program includes courses on teaching and learning theories, engagement for diverse learners, subject content for desired certification, completion of field placement requirements as defined by the state department of education and meeting the requirements for teacher certification exams (Varadharajan et al., 2018). However, teacher education research has studied how both changes in the modality of courses and frequency of course offerings in traditional teacher education programs, community colleges, and alternative teacher preparation programs have attracted diverse prospective teachers in terms of race, gender, and age (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Byrd, 2017). Furthermore, scholars have found that university-based grow your own (GYO) teacher preparation programs have been effective in diversifying the teaching profession through partnerships between the university and local school districts to recruit paraprofessionals or community members are employed or serve as volunteers for the local school districts (Blazar et al., 2024; Gist, 2021).

Alternative teacher preparation programs have generally been accessible to non-traditional prospective teachers. The quality assurance of alternative teacher preparation programs has been questioned by scholars on its effectiveness for adequately preparing prospective teachers for the teaching force (Sleeter, 2008; Farinade-Wu & Griffen, 2019). Because alternative teacher education programs have been politicized, there have been cases that these types of programs are not subjected to compliance standards for accreditation governed by national accredited organizations and the state government policies for accreditation (Au, 2017; Sleeter, 2008). Therefore, to retain diverse students and ensure they successfully complete the requirements for teacher preparation, the structure of the program must be conducive and responsive to the needs and challenges that non-traditional prospective teachers frequently experience.

The purpose of this study is to shed light on the perspectives and experiences of Black women non-traditional teacher candidates who choose to enroll in and complete a traditional teacher education program at a historically Black college or university (HBCU). Although the scholarship on Black pre-service teachers and teacher candidates has emerged, the experiences of Black pre-service teachers and teacher candidates remain to be presented as a monolith (Bristol & Goings, 2019). The experiences of Black teacher candidates in both traditional and alternative teacher preparation programs remain underrepresented in teacher education research (Farinade-Wu & Griffen, 2019). The demand of Black teachers in the teaching force have not considered the impact or contributions of HBCU teacher education or preparation programs (Dilworth, 2012). Although Black women pre-service teachers and teacher candidates are largely represented in alternative teacher preparation programs, few studies have explored the experiences of non-traditional Black women students who are enrolled in traditional teacher education programs (Blazar et al., 2024; Marsman, 2014).

Examining Black teachers' and teacher candidates' experiences at HBCU teacher education or preparation programs plays an instrumental role in diversifying the rhetoric and representation of the teaching force (Mawhinney et al., 2012). Since the late 19th century, HBCUs have traditionally been instrumental as it has served as a vehicle of social and economic advancement for the Black community. For this study, following research questions were explored:

1. What led non-traditional Black women teacher candidates to pursue a traditional HBCU teacher education program?
 - a. How do non-traditional Black women teacher candidates describe their experiences of support and challenges while enrolled in a traditional HBCU teacher education program?
2. How do non-traditional Black women teacher candidates perceive their current or past experiences of working in P-12 schools prepared them for the teaching profession?

The research questions are intended to understand the factors the participants in this study used to make decisions to plan and manage circumstances that contributed or potentially hindered their academic and professional advancement. The participants in this study addressed how considering attending a traditional four-year teacher education program was a major transition

for them and their families. This study contributes to the scholarship on the experiences of Black women teacher candidates with a direct focus on recruitment and matriculation to the U.S. teacher pipeline (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Farinade-Wu & Griffen, 2019; Hill-Jackson, 2020; Samuels et al., 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Schlossberg's (1981) transition theory and Black feminist thought were the ideal theoretical frameworks for understanding non-traditional Black women teacher candidates' experiences at a traditional teacher education program at an HBCU. Black feminist thought is also conducive to analyzing this work as it centers and legitimizes the lived experiences of the participants. Systemic and institutional social and economic paradigms have discriminated against and marginalized Black women since the seventeenth century (Collins, 2022). Black women in the U.S. have experienced a specific set of challenges that warrant their stories to be heard and considered to illicit sociopolitical changes.

Schlossberg Transition Theory

According to Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006), transition is defined as an, "event or non-event that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles," (p. 33). Schlossberg (1981) therefore suggests that exploring an individual's experiences, engagements, transition processes, and adaptation to various circumstances is essential to defining the end point of their transition. An individual's experience with transitions can be examined in any of the following areas: personal, academic, professional, and developing and maintaining interpersonal relationships. In terms of highlighting the ways in which personal, work, and academic environments influenced non-traditional Black women teacher candidates' experiences, Goodman, Schlossberg, and Anderson (2006) offer four factors that influence a person's behavior as they cope with a transition: situation, self, support, and strategies. This notion typically involves defining what initiated the transition, the duration of the transition, the individual's previous experiences with transitioning, and change of role or position. The notion of self considers how the individual's characteristics, personal, and moral values can be used as resources for navigating a transition while support considers the influence of networks, family, friends, organizations, or institutions. Finally, strategies examine the coping mechanisms that an individual considers when experiencing challenges during the transition. Schlossberg transition theory can be helpful for administrators, staff, and educators in teacher education programs as

they lead both non-traditional and traditional teacher candidates toward completing teacher education programs.

Black Feminist Theory

The essence of Black feminist work is centering Black women's epistemologies and lived experiences. Legitimizing the knowledge and experiences of Black women, allows them to be self-aware about the interactions and experiences with various people, create supportive spaces among other Black women, and actively rejecting the notion of the stereotypical and controlling images of Black women (Smith & Moore, 2019). Collins (2022) argued that knowledge is produced through a collection of experiences that consider each person's social identities and how they have been situated in contemporary and historical contexts. Furthermore, validating Black women's knowledge and experiences creates the opportunity for Black women to name, challenge, and act on resisting hegemonic ideologies and practices (Collins, 2022). Black feminist theory (BFT) promotes a shift in understanding the dynamics of oppression as a singular effect. As Collins (2000; 2022) noted, the social identities of race, class, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, age, and religion are interlocking systems of oppression. These collective forces are intersectional and inform the views, behaviors, and actions of Black women. On a global spectrum, Black women have historically experienced interdependent forms of oppression which have initiated violence against them, "othered" them, and impacted their economic, political, and social mobility. From economic exploitation to the extraction of citizenship, rights, and privileges that are immediately afforded to white male citizens, these oppressive structures have historically reduced Black women's access to rights and minimized their beings to stereotypes such as mammies, Jezebels, Sapphires, and welfare queens (Collins, 2022).

The centering of Black girls and women's knowledge and experiences allows them to define their own realities and truths. This practice challenges both traditional epistemology and scholarship and the assumed expertise of those who have historically interpreted Black girls and women's issues with little to no context or understanding. BFT is predicated upon social change, liberation, and new consciousness for Black girls and Black women; Black women define who they are and enact pedagogies that are empowering and responsive to Black and Brown communities (Smith & Moore, 2019).

Intersectionality is a critical component of this study. We examine how the social location of the identities of the participants, all Black women, influenced interactions with parents, P-12 educators and administrators, and the faculty of their teacher education programs. Theorizing how social identities have been historically positioned and pointing out its contemporary structural and systemic inequities impact their professional identity and opportunities of mobility for Black women to enter into and advance in the teaching profession. Analyzing power through an intersectional lens is essential for identifying how multiple forms of oppression can be experienced through the overlapping of social identities.

Researcher's Positionality

The nexus of my identity as an African-American woman, my memories of being a pre-service teacher at teacher education programs at both an HBCU and a predominately White institution (PWI), and my professional experiences, specifically as a paraprofessional and early childhood teacher in public and private schools in the United States and American accredited schools overseas and an educator at post-secondary teacher education programs set the foundation of this research. As West et al. (2022) states, “no study is disconnected from the experiences, dispositions, and positions of the researcher” (p. 505). The location of my identities within both society and academia and my professional experiences enabled me to connect with the participants by sharing my success and challenges I experienced when I was an undergraduate and graduate student in teacher education programs. Historically, several research methods and methodological practices have been harmful to Black people. Although my academic and financial challenges as a pre-service teacher may have placed me in a vulnerable position, as a researcher I felt it was imperative to share some of my experiences with students in my courses, specifically my experiences on seeking financial support during student teaching, working while enrolled in a traditional teacher education program, and passing the teacher certification tests, as these remain obstacles for student teachers today. I was my participants’ professor during their teacher education; as such, I talked to them about the research project a year after they completed my courses.

Methodology

For this study, phenomenology was used as a methodology to understand factors that encouraged Black women’s decision on enrolling into and completing a teacher education program at a HBCU and perspectives of their experiences. The interview questions allowed

participants to describe and reflect on both their past and current lived experiences (Bevan, 2014; Patton, 2015). According to Vagle (2018), phenomenological research allows participants to describe what it is like to experience a specific phenomenon.

Phenomenology also acknowledges that the research inquiry begins with the researchers' familiarity with the phenomenon that is being studied (Van Manen, 2014). This methodological approach allows the researcher to also engage in a reflective experience by making sense of their experiences as it connects to the research. As a researcher, this study allowed me to reflect on my mother's testimonies on completing a teacher education program at a HBCU in the late 1970s and the support she received from her immediate family and my father.

Phenomenology is congruent with the tenets outlined in the study's theoretical frameworks. Both theories aim to validate Black women's testimonies and lived experiences by acknowledging the preparation and changes in their livelihood while completing a traditional teacher preparation program at a HBCU. Phenomenological research has been used extensively in the teacher education discourse to document affective, emotional, and intense human experiences (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016; p. 28).

I protected the participants' identity by providing pseudonyms for their names and names of people and places they resided, worked, and attended for educational advancement. Pseudonyms were provided for childcare centers, P-12 schools, and post-secondary institutions that were mentioned during the interview. All data related to the study, such as audio-recording, transcription of interviews, and participants' personal identification information were stored and sustained electronically through a password protection system. The flash drive was also used as an external approach for storing data. The flash drive was stored in a locked safe at the researcher's residence and was only used by the researcher. The data storage practices for this study met the IRB requirements.

The context of this study was a public HBCU traditional teacher education program located in Balstic City, a city in one of the states of the mid-Atlantic region. The HBCU all participants attended was Thurgood Marshall State University. Due to the unique circumstances non-traditional students face, graduating from undergraduate programs can be between five and six years (Goings & Bristol, 2019).

The findings reported in this study come from a larger research project that focuses on the experiences of Black teacher candidates who were enrolled in a teacher education program at

Thurgood Marshall State University. For this study, purposive sampling was used to select additional participants. In addition, because the researcher taught teacher education courses at Thurgood Marshall State University, network sampling was utilized; participants recommended other prospective participants for this study. Participants were required to meet the following criteria:

- Identify as Black, or African American; **and**
- Have completed courses at a community college for at least 1 year; **or**
- Obtained an Associate's or Bachelor's degree in a field other than education; **or**
- Have worked at least 35 hours a week for most of the program; **or**
- Delayed enrollment in a four year university for at least 3 years after graduating from high school; **or**
- Terminated a career after at least 2 years to pursue teaching as a career.

Participants

Four Black women teacher candidates participated in this study. The participants met the criteria for this study. The author of this manuscript developed a relationship with the participants at least a year prior to them consenting to the study. The author provided formal or informal advice and experienced teaching them in professional education and methods courses. The layout in Table 1. presents a detailed description of each participant.

Table 1.

Portrait of Participants

Names	Jessica Boyd	Quindella Smith	Celeste Patton	Sabrina Hill
Major	Elementary Education	Elementary Education	Early Childhood Education	Early Childhood Education
Marital Status	Single	Single	Married	Married
Primary Role in Family	Daughter and Sister	Mother	Mother	Mother and Grandmother

Profession While Enrolled in the Teacher Education Program	Conditional Licensed Middle School Teacher	Substitute Teacher	Substitute Teacher; Valet Parking Attendant on the Weekends	Initially Para-Professional Teacher and then Conditional Licensed Teacher
Work Experience Prior to Entering the Program	Substitute Teacher	Receptionist for a Local Hospital	Substitute Teacher; Paraprofessional (Teacher's Aide); Lead Teacher at Various Childcare Centers	Long-term Substitute Teacher, Paraprofessional (Teacher's Aide)
Previous Education Experience	Completed four-year program at HBCU in Nursing	Completed medical assistance certification program at a public state university's satellite school	Completed four years at local community college	Completed education courses at local community college; Enrolled in an HBCU paraprofessional teacher education program for paraprofessionals that was discontinued due to lack of funds.

Jessica Boyd

The author met Jessica during her last semester and supervised Jessica during her student teaching. A few weeks later, she found out that she would be teaching Jessica in the student teaching seminar. Jessica specialized in elementary education during her time being taught by the author; she had previously obtained her bachelor's degree in nursing. While Jessica was enrolled in the undergraduate nursing program, she worked as a substitute teacher at a private, self-contained special education school that served adolescents. Once she enrolled in the elementary education program, she served as a full-time conditional teacher for Balstic City Public School System. Her aspiration to teach was inspired by her mother working at her school when she was young. While attending the graduate program, Jessica served as a conditional licensed teacher at a middle school. Jessica is currently a certified teacher and enrolled in a graduate program in educational leadership.

Quindella Smith

The author became acquainted with Quindella when she was her instructor for methods courses. Quindella transferred into the program at Thurgood State Marshall University after obtaining her medical assistant certification from a local satellite university. After she completed the program, she served as a medical assistant at a local hospital. Five years later, she decided to enroll in an undergraduate teacher education program. Although Quindella adjusted her work schedule at the hospital, she continued to work as a medical assistant until the semester during which she had to teach. She completed several courses at a local community college and worked full time as a hospital receptionist prior to enrolling into the undergraduate teacher education program. When she enrolled in the undergraduate teacher education program full time, she knew she needed to work in an industry that granted her flexibility so that she could complete courses during the daytime and early evening. She decided to work as a substitute teacher at a local public school district from the time she took early core education professional courses until she enrolled into student teaching. After completing the program, Quindella is an elementary school teacher in Maryland.

Celeste Patton

The author knew Celeste for three years prior to asking her to participate in the study. She taught Celeste in two core professional education courses and three methods courses before she started her internship. Celeste is married and the mother of eight children. During the

interview, she credited her youngest son and two professors at a local community college with her decision to pursue early childhood education. While her youngest son was in kindergarten, Celeste was a stay-at-home mother. She served as a parent volunteer, chaperone for several school field trips, aided in her son's classroom, and became the treasurer of the school's parent committee. Once he entered fourth grade, she decided to take classes at a local community college and specialize in early childhood education. While attending community college, Celeste worked as a lead teacher at various childcare centers, including the community college childcare center. She chose Thurgood Marshall State University because of its historic reputation for being known as a teacher's college. While attending this university, she decided to serve as a substitute teacher for both Balstic City Public Schools and another local school district, Celtic County Public Schools. She also worked additional temporary part-time jobs such as a valet parking attendant during the weekends. After completing the program, Celeste served as an elementary school teacher for Balstic City Public Schools.

Sabrina Hill

Sabrina is a mother of two sons as well as a grandmother. The semester Sabrina completed the program, her son graduated from a neighboring HBCU as well. Prior to Sabrina's enrollment in the author's classes, the author served as Sabrina's advisor. Sabrina's experiences with teaching and her knowledge of school dynamics were from one school in Balstic City. She started out as a parent volunteer, advanced to serving as a tutor, then a paraprofessional, and now she is a licensed teacher. She credits the parents at the school and her principal, Dr. Shaw with her decision to pursue teaching. While working at the school, Sabrina completed some early childhood education courses at a local community college in Balstic City. She initially enrolled in a teacher education program at Thurgood Marshall State University that was targeted to paraprofessionals who worked in Balstic City Public Schools. But the program was terminated due to lack of funds. This process led her to continue to change her major to Early Childhood Education and complete part-time classes, specifically at a rate of one or two classes per semester. The author consulted with her colleagues to create an opportunity for Sabrina to complete her methods courses and practicum. After completing the program, Sabrina was hired as a third-grade teacher at the school she completed her practicum and worked prior to enrolling at Thurgood Marshall State University.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each participant engaged in two interview sessions because this study occurred during the early period of the pandemic. The first interview session was 60 minutes either in person or via Zoom. The second interview session served as a follow-up interview to clarify any misunderstandings from the researcher and allow the participant to provide additional details. Each participant selected a date and time that was convenient for them and provided details about their experiences. The interviews were completed within a period of one year and five months. At the time of the interviews, the participants were still in the process of completing the program. Each interview was audio-recorded, transcribed for multiple analyses, and distributed to participants for both member-checking purposes and to maintain trust between the researcher and the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The author practiced an inductive approach to analyzing data. While the coding process can occur before, during, and after collecting data, the author generated codes after reviewing the transcription of each interview. During the interview, the author made notes that responded to the question, “How is the participant describing and naming their experiences? Additional initial analysis involved constructing descriptive notations of locations, schools, and school districts, participants’ previous and current occupations, their years of experience working in schools, and their marital and household status. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), engaging in this process allows the researcher to review interviews based on a particular category. This involved documenting repeated patterns and defining the results on the margins of the transcripts. Axial coding was utilized to organize the data.

Findings

Although data has been collected, the researcher continues to engage in the process of analyzing it. In addition, the theories that ground this study continue to inform its themes by describing participants’ rationale for selecting Thurgood Marshall State University, identifying specific academic and social experiences that motivated the participants to pursue a HBCU teacher education program, their experiences of support and challenges while enrolled in the teacher education program, perception of preparation from being in PK-12 schools, and managing sacrifices.

Choosing an HBCU Teacher Education Program

This theme addresses the first research question: What led non-traditional Black women teacher candidates to pursue a traditional HBCU teacher education program? The testimonies presented in this theme describe the various reasons the participants selected Thurgood Marshall State University. It is important to note that the participants resided and worked at either public schools or a job in Balstic City, which was close to the university. Therefore, commuting to Thurgood Marshall State University, work, and home was manageable for the participants. This theme echoes the work of Mawhinney et al. (2012), Goings et al. (2018), and Goings (2016) on Black pre-service and teacher candidates' decision for choosing a HBCU. The themes presented centers on teacher candidates' internal motivation, recommendation from their previous post-secondary institution, and confidence on being taught and mentored by a Black professor.

Sabrina described experiencing internal and external motivation for considering a teacher education program at Thurgood Marshall State University.

I felt like I was encouraged to go a little higher than where my status was as far as my title of being a teacher assistant. I wanted the opportunity to teach. That's where all my experience came from, they put me in the classroom, and they allowed me to teach. Now to become a certified teacher of course I knew I had to do the coursework and things that I had to complete. That's why I applied to Thurgood Marshall State University. And yes, I had my coworkers cheering me on to go a little further. They saw what I offered the students.

Sabrina's claims acknowledge her desire to grow professionally. To achieve her goal, Sabrina acknowledged fulfilling the requirements to become a certified teacher would mean applying to Thurgood Marshall State University. Sabrina's experience of receiving support from her colleagues to pursue professional growth by returning to school aligns with Goings et al.'s (2018) findings. Their work highlights how the motivation and pursuit of academic and professional advancement among non-traditional Black teacher candidates are influenced not only by personal interests but also by the aspirations and encouragement of friends, colleagues, and family members.

Comparable to Sabrina's experience, Celeste was internally motivated to apply to Thurgood Marshall State University. She considered information she learned about the history of

the institution, the programs offered in teacher education, and her intuition to apply to Thurgood Marshall State University. She stated,

Okay so I chose Thurgood State University because of its historical background and education. I went against my advisor's recommendation. She wanted me to go to Gasper University (private predominately white institution). Thurgood Marshall State University was the best fit for me, so I chose it basically because of the historical background in education. I chose early childhood education because that's the baseline, that's where it all starts in early childhood education. I think that for a child to have a quality education we need to start at the beginning. So, from the very first day that the child goes to school they need a quality education.

It is important to note that Thurgood Marshall State University was founded in 1900 by a Black woman and initially known as a college for teachers. Because Celeste was interested in majoring in education, the historical context of the university contributes to students' purpose of pursuing a teacher education program and teaching profession. Celeste's process on not considering her advisor's recommendation reflects a Black feminist theory approach as it challenges academic hierarchical structures, which traditionally acknowledges the faculty or staff as the advisor (Collins, 2022).

Quindella's reason for pursuing a HBCU was also based on her personal knowledge and experience. Quindella stated that a HBCU was her only option for continuing her education. She stated,

I wouldn't go anywhere else like no. I need to be with my people so no I wouldn't, no. I knew I would be able to reach out, like have more access to professors at HBCUs. Cause at my community college, I feel the African American teachers were more responsive.

Quindella discussed her experiences of being taught by and interacting with the Black professors at a community college to influence her decision on applying to a HBCU. In her claim, she also highlights the comfort of being part of a community at a post-secondary institution with individuals who share her racial and ethnic background. She concluded having similar interactions and experiences from the community college would lead to her success at a HBCU. Quindella's claims point to the importance of Black and students of color experiencing connections, trust, and sense of belonging with faculty and students (Kholi, 2019).

The claims presented in this theme show how the non-traditional Black women teacher candidates validated and shared their knowledge to people in their community to make decisions on their academic and professional advancement. This approach aligns with the work of Black feminist theory as it positions Black women as agents of knowledge due to reference of a particular material, interactions, historical and current lived experiences, and epistemologies (Collins, 2022).

“Y’all Choosing Me?”

This theme responds to the initial sub-question: How do non-traditional Black women teacher candidates perceive their current or past experiences of working in P-12 schools prepared them for the teaching profession? This theme reflects the “lifting as we climb” metaphor to show the ways non-traditional Black women teacher candidates were being supported, specifically from the P-12 school community either prior to enrolling at Thurgood Marshall State University or while they were enrolled in the teacher education program and completing their student teaching. This theme also illustrates participants’ experiences of how other people in the school context, such as parents, administrators, and teacher educators in both educational and professional spaces, determined the qualifications and skills the participants had to be an effective teacher. Although the criteria used by each person in the school community was different and subjective, it was based on their knowledge, observations, and the participants’ positive interactions with Black and brown teachers, faculty, students, and parents. Considering Black parents, teachers, and students’ perspectives on what constitutes a “good teacher” reflects Michelle Foster’s work on community nomination (Foster, 1996). According to Royston (2020), this relationship, and the intergenerational process that the participants developed with people at their schools, defined the participants as “sources of knowledge and inspiration” (p. 382).

Prior to being a student at Thurgood Marshall State University, Sabrina describes her experience of being a parent volunteer and serving as the attendance monitor at the school and how those experiences led to being a paraprofessional, as well as other opportunities to work with other educators at her current school:

So, I had to keep track of all the homeless students in Balstic City Schools so we could provide them with the supplies and means they need for families in shelters and things of that sort. I mean, I did everything. And then I started volunteering in the classroom and I loved it so much. And then, when an opportunity came for me to be an employee

as a tutor, my supervisor, she said, “Miss Hales, you’ve been here long enough. I can always count on you and you really connect with the students when you are working with them.” And she was like, “Go and take it to the next level.” And I applied for the reading tutor position. I got hired. And that was when I started working with the principal, Dr. Shaw. She hired me and I transitioned from a reading tutor, to a paraeducator, and now I’m a teacher. So all of them supported me...It’s not like I don’t have confidence. It’s just like, “I’m okay. I know I can do it. I’d love to do it but, ‘y’all choosing me?’ I think that’s just a level of humility and I just like people seeing me...And see, this is what I’m talking about, they’re choosing me because of my experience and my exposure.

Here, Sabrina explains how she was inspired to advance in the school context, particularly into teaching, and how that involved the knowledge of both her immediate supervisor and the school principal. It is important to note that the researcher has met and interacted with Sabrina’s principal, who is a Black woman. Sabrina also described her interactions and experiences with the students and parents, which led the parents to identify her as a teacher. She stated,

So, I guess they (parents) saw that passion and that drive in me and they knew that, I guess, this is one person that’s really taking teaching and learning seriously when she interacts with children...They entrusted me to go into that classroom and give the children what they needed. Parents thought I was a teacher already. They had no idea that I was a paraeducator. They thought I was a teacher. The parents definitely loved the way I teach, and I had some even say to me, ‘Wow, I love your techniques’.

The parents’ knowledge of Sabrina’s teaching experiences while she was a paraprofessional and their interactions with her encouraged her to pursue teaching as a full-time career.

Celeste recounted her experience of being observed by three different teachers during the second rotation of her student teaching. According to Celeste, this observation was unexpected. Celeste’s testimony mirrors Sabrina’s as she describes how the vice principal, her mentor, and the gym teacher found her as a potential candidate to teach at their school. She states,

So, during my second rotation, one of the kindergarten teachers was absent and they could not find a substitute teacher for her in Hershey County. So they said, “Well, Miss Willis is a substitute teacher for Balstic City. Can she stay here?” They didn’t have any coverage. The only coverage was either the vice principal or Miss Payton, the teacher’s aide. So, Miss Payton ended up coming to be with me. I was reading a book, and when I

looked up, I had three adults in the classroom. And they were just sitting down. They were looking at me reading the book, asking questions, and making inferences with my students. And I heard one of them say, "I like her." My mentor teacher was there, the vice-principal, and the gym teacher. And I was trying to figure out why was the gym teacher in the classroom. But they were observing me, and when I asked them, I said, "So why was the gym teacher there?" She [mentor] said, "Oh, he's on the hiring board." So they were there and they were observing me.

Celeste's description of her experience identifies the ways in which schools recruit both student teachers and teacher candidates prior to them completing their programs. The administrator and educators at her school acknowledged her experience being a substitute teacher for Balstic City, which is adjacent to Hershey County. Considering Celeste's prior professional experience, she was identified as a "teacher on record" at the school and allowed to teach the class to which she had been assigned. Celeste's experience also speaks to the importance of the opinions of administrators and educators at local partnership schools in terms of evaluating the teacher candidate's readiness for the teaching profession. In this case, the vice principal, mentor teacher, and gym teacher acknowledged Celeste's classroom and teaching experiences and recognized that they exceeded the parameters required for clinical field experiences in a teacher education program. These factors marked Celeste as qualified to be a teacher for Hershey County Public Schools.

Sabrina's and Celeste's testimonies show how establishing and maintaining trust with various parties, mentorship, and encouragement were primary factors in their envisioning of themselves as teachers. Although their experiences with mentorship and encouragement came from people of a range of cultural backgrounds, the participants also learned from the communities in which they taught, which contributed to their understanding of how they were being valued in the schools and communities they were serving (Faison & McArthur, 2020; Villagómez, Easton-Brooks, Gomez, Lubbes & Johnson 2016). Social capital is also prominent in this theme; the relationships built and trust maintained among these people led to opportunities for economic advancement (Yosso, 2002). The experiences also influenced the participants' intrinsic and altruistic motivation to pursue teaching as a career.

Challenges in the Program

The teacher certification tests were a common challenge the non-traditional Black teacher candidates raised during the interview. This theme addresses the sub-question posed for the research study: How do non-traditional Black women teacher candidates describe their experiences of support and challenges while enrolled in the program? While the candidates were enrolled in the program, the Praxis Core and Praxis II exams (a series of tests in their certification area) were required as part of the program. Before 2020, teacher candidates were required to pass the Praxis Core subject tests, which assessed subject knowledge in the areas of mathematics, reading, and writing. The Praxis II tests assessed skills and knowledge in the certification area. At Thurgood Marshall University, students enrolled in a teacher education program to pass the Praxis Core tests to be interviewed for teacher candidacy, which grants permission for teacher candidates to take methods courses and internship. Passing the Praxis II tests were a program requirement as well for the teacher candidate to be marked as a program completer. These testimonies are supported by scholars' work that found teacher certification tests as common barriers for Black pre-service and teacher candidates completing teacher education programs (Farinade-Wu & Griffen, 2019; Petchauer, 2018). Sabrina conveyed her desire for the program to inform teacher candidates in advance about taking the Praxis tests early and providing a space for teacher candidates to access resources and study to prepare for the Praxis tests.

I think if they know ahead of time what to prepare for, how to prepare and had the support because I really believe if we had time to meet and practice the Praxis tests together, we share resources, but it would have been real nice if we could come together and have the cohort practice or study like in a study hall. That would really help.

Jessica discussed the emotional stress and barrier she experienced not enrolling into additional classes until she passed all the Praxis Core subject tests. She mentioned,

My challenge with the Praxis test was the Praxis Core. I did very well on the reading, the writing, but the math, was a struggle for me. And I would buy all these Praxis prep books and take the practice tests at home and do well. I did well because I'm home in my own safety. And then on the actual day of the test, I'd freeze up. It took me eight times before I passed the test. And I had taken it so many times that I had to stop taking my

classes. I couldn't take any more classes until I passed that (Praxis Core)...I was so very stressed out trying to pass that Praxis. I was losing hair and having panic attacks.

These testimonies reinforce the challenge traditional and alternative teacher education programs continue to experience on retaining Black teacher candidates by not providing sufficient and timely support to prepare for their required teacher certification exams (Dinkus & Thomas, 2016; Farinade-Wu & Griffen; Petchaeur, 2018). The testimonies also speak to the importance of programs providing community-oriented and financial support to teacher candidates to minimize emotional distress and financial burden.

“It's What Got Me Through”

This theme addresses the sub-question posed for the research study: How do non-traditional Black women teacher candidates describe their experiences of support and challenges while enrolled in a traditional HBCU teacher education program? These forms of support were received from family members, friends, mentors, peers, or professors. They provided aspirational, informational, financial, or emotional support to help the candidates navigate through the program. Some participants discussed the sacrifices they made while in the program as well as the ways in which they tapped into a specific network to overcome barriers involved in receiving financial support, professional development that reflected their interests, and flexibility in field placements and during student teaching. Jessica discussed her approach of being motivated and persistent to complete the program. She also discussed invoking her mother's advice to persevere through challenges. She stated:

I always want to finish what I started. Although I had all those challenges, I just, I kind of got into the mindset of okay, once you get over this barrier, there is going to be something else. So you just have to push through. There are times I can feel like I'm hearing my mom say, “No, you have to finish what you started. If you still want to do it, you have to finish.

Jessica's mother's advice served as both an affirmation and the origin of her determination to handle and navigate challenges. Jessica's testimony explains how she evokes her mother's advice for motivation to complete the tasks that she started.

When Celeste was asked about her approach in balancing her academic and personal life, she discussed her faith and dependence on technology for scheduling:

God, he got me through it - and my cell phone. So honestly, I did not use a personal planner. Those things, I hated to use a personal planner because that means I had to go back, find it, look through it, and then most of the time I forgot to write things in it. So, the one thing that I did use was my cell phone. So as soon as someone gave me an appointment with the kids' doctors' appointments, homework assignments, work schedules, all of that would go into my cell phone. So, I would set alarms, I would put in my calendars and set alerts. So, attending school and working two full-time jobs with a family of ten; it was a juggle. So, my cell phone was on me most of the time, when I didn't forget it or leave it. It would sound an alert and I would look at the message on the alert. And it would tell me, okay, you have an hour before you have to get to work, or you have this assignment due.

Celeste's initial reference to God getting her through signals that her dependency on spirituality was not targeted to a specific challenge (Shadid, 2014). Rather, her acknowledgment of God illustrates her dependence on spirituality throughout her entire journey. As a wife and mother of 10 children, Celeste learned to depend on her cell phone and its features in order to manage her schedule; she included her children's needs, her work schedule, and her homework assignments. Celeste's claims also bring attention to her approach of organizing her schedule on her cell phone and how the alarm system on the cell phone offered her a grace period, providing advance notice of her appointments or activities for the day. Celeste's approach to managing her schedule is an example of practicality that protected her from exhausting her schedule. When asked about the type of support she used to get through the program, Quindella referred to her family and friends and acknowledged how she prepared herself financially:

My family, my friends just supported me through by encouraging me to not give up. There were many days I wanted to give up. And then I had a little savings. So, I was good to go on that part. I was preparing myself because I knew that internship was coming. So I tried to prepare myself. Put a little bit of money away here and there.

Quindella credits her family and friends for aspirational support for staying in the program. Although it was not explicitly mentioned in the interview, Quindella referred to a common challenge that teacher candidates experience, namely being unable to work during their internships. In response to this circumstance, Quindella intentionally saved her money to prepare herself.

Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study is to explore non-traditional Black women teacher candidates' rationale for attending a non-traditional HBCU teacher education program and understand their experiences of support and challenges while completing the teacher education program and pursuing teaching as a profession. My intention is not to generalize the experiences of either non-traditional Black women pre-service teachers or teacher candidates who are enrolled in traditional teacher education programs. Instead, this work is intended to aid traditional teacher education programs in considering financial and social practices to better support non-traditional Black pre-service teachers and teacher candidates. This study shows that the experiences of Black women teacher candidates in teacher education programs are not universal. The participants' various identities as either a grandmother or a mother, their ages, and their classification as non-traditional students were all essential to understanding their experiences with a traditional teacher education program at a HBCU. The participants' testimonies are consistent with previous literature that documents the various methods that non-traditional students employ to adapt to and navigate post-secondary institutions (Varadharajan, et. al, 2018) and Black students who are career changers or transfer students and pursued teaching as a profession by enrolling in traditional undergraduate teacher education and preparation programs (Goings, 2018). The goal of this study was to explore the experiences of these participants and better define the factors that lead nontraditional Black women students to pursue teaching as a profession and enroll in a traditional teacher education program at an HBCU. The teacher candidates in this study described their ways of navigating challenges, adapting to learning alongside traditional teacher candidates, and financial hardships. It is important to note that the participants in this study were committed to teaching in the area they resided and adjacent to Thurgood Marshall University. The participants' experiences of completing a local teacher education program also adds to the limited research on how Black and pre-service teachers and teacher candidates of color tend to enroll in teacher education programs pursue teaching careers in P-12, or choose to remain in the teaching profession in their residential communities or communities they were raised (Gist, 2021).

Collectively, the findings highlight how relationships between people in the P-12 school community, families, and professors played a critical role in inspiring the participants to pursue teaching; they were recognized as notable educators in P-12 school spaces and were better able

to navigate institutional barriers. It is important to note how familial and social capital supported these Black women professionally, emotionally, and academically while they were enrolled in a traditional teacher education program (Yosso, 2002; Hancock et al., 2020). The participants proved that support beyond the academia landscape were indicators that contributed to the teacher candidates' success in completing the program. The familial, professional, and academic support the participants received influenced their ability to achieve specific milestones while in the program and their self-efficacy in pursuit to be a teacher. For each theme, the four participants experienced a sense of belonging at their assigned internships, P-12 school spaces, and post-secondary institutions, which encouraged them to contribute their knowledge to the P-12 and academic communities (Grooms et al., 2021).

Similarly, the theme "Y'all Choosing Me" shows how the participants' apprenticeship experience and the professional rapport established between various educators and administrators at either the school or childcare center allowed them access to insider knowledge about the school culture and the teaching profession as a whole, validating their interest in pursuing teaching. The experiences of Black women are typically excluded from analysis of recruitment and high quality-oriented retention practices in the workforce because they are uniquely based on race, gender, and other multiple social intersecting identities (Gist et. al, 2018; Farinade-Wu & Griffen, 2019; Farinade et al., 2016). When Sabrina served as an attendance monitor, her supervisor's input and observation of her work ethic and interactions with students led her to pursue teaching. In addition, the relationship Sabrina developed with parents signaled how her knowledge and pedagogy was valued by parents and families. This action points to the recognition of her knowledge by the people in her community. This experience also signaled the strength of the rapport Sabrina had with parents at the school. For Celeste, the director of the childcare center was a Black woman a few years older than her while Jessica's mother was her primary source of knowledge on the teaching profession. In both of these cases, the passing of intergenerational, communal knowledge of the teaching profession was practiced. This knowledge was contextualized and sanctioned as it reflected the perspectives of other Black women in the community to define what makes them successful in the teaching force. Royston (2020) suggests that intergenerational and communal knowledge are not simply a means to support other learning, but are themselves sources of knowledge and inspiration (p. 382). Collectively, Sabrina's, Celeste's, and Jessica's experiences of considering the intergenerational

knowledge and knowledge from the community members granted them access to early apprenticeship of the teaching profession, professionalization, and practices that are valued for Black and brown communities at the school.

Sabrina, Quindella, and Jessica discussed the financial challenges they experienced while enrolled in the program. Although they continue to persist to push through their challenges to meet their goals in the program, this approach to continue was done individually, with family members, or spiritually. These experiences were conveyed in, “Challenges in the Program” and “It’s What’s Got Me Through”. Both themes are consistent with studies that describe the common challenges non-traditional students who attend traditional college or university-based programs face, which includes managing finances, family, works, and school responsibilities (Goings et al, 2018; Dinkus & Thomas, 2016). To diversify teacher education, traditional teacher education programs must work with local school districts and state to provide incentives that cover tuition, institutional fees, and teacher certification tests. In addition, it is important for the content of teacher certification tests to be integrated into courses and training is provided for faculty or staff to host workshops to prepare candidates on-campus and remote for the teacher licensure exams (Dinkus & Thomas, 2016; Petchaeur, 2018).

The theme “It’s What’s Got Me Through” revealed that participants credited their networks and spirituality with their achievements and motivation to pursue their aspirations to teach. Research has shown that Black women have traditionally relied on their network and spirituality for validation and to navigate institutions (Nganga et al., 2021). When they need to cope with and thrive in academic spaces that are steeped in whiteness, hegemony, and individuality, the participants’ networks and spirituality serve as a source of support and clarity. Participants who described their experience of a higher spiritual or religious being--God, while navigating the program, discussed how this process played a role in a person’s personal and academic development (Nganga et. al, 2021). Nganga et al. (2021) found that there is a dearth of research that examines how spirituality and mentorship play a role in Black women’s personal and professional development.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of teacher education programs that consider the input of either the faculty and staff of P-12 schools or professionally accredited childcare centers’ input for admissions into teacher education programs; this could include administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, after school educators, and parents. Although the

traditional approach for entry into teacher education programs relies on pre-service teachers' grade point average and the passing of state-certified teacher certification tests, this study sheds light on the importance of considering administrators', teachers', staff, and parents' voices from P-12 schools or childcare centers to weigh in on the process of prospective teacher candidates being admitted in teacher education programs. Gist et al (2019) notes that this type of community-driven approach helps increase the number Black and Brown people who enter the teaching profession; the opportunity to connect with parents, educators, and people in the local community helps break down barriers that non-traditional candidates face. Course assignments that allow teacher candidates to recall and acknowledge their own experiences and achievements can be used to directly inform university administrators and faculty the kind of support that pre-service teachers and teacher candidates need to successfully complete the program. Because the enrollment of non-traditional pre-service teachers are increasing in traditional teacher education programs, college/university-based teacher education programs must consider creating affinity-based networks for non-traditional pre-service teachers (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Goings, 2018). Social identities affinity groups are critical and serve as safe spaces for traditional and non-traditional pre-service teachers to openly share their needs for support, discover mutual concerns and experiences, and generate plans to navigate barriers in the program. It is administrators' and faculty's responsibility to advocate for all pre-service teachers and teacher candidates. Varadharajan et. al's work (2018) supports this notion by suggesting that when the experiences and skills of non-traditional teacher candidates who have changed careers are acknowledged, they perform successfully.

Limitations

This study examined the phenomenon of Black women who were identified as non-traditional teacher candidates and enrolled in a HBCU traditional teacher education program. While this study sheds light on the diverse experiences of Black women aspiring to become teachers, the findings of this study should not be used to generalize the experiences of Black women who are identified as non-traditional students in teacher education programs. This study remains to be it is constrained by several limitations, including its sample size, location, and research design. This study was limited to four participants who attended and completed the same post-secondary teacher education program the researcher served as faculty and program coordinator. Due to the small sample size and the close relationship established by the researcher

with the participants, the study may be prone to biases (Creswell & Poth, 2016). This dynamic can influence participants to respond in a way that aligns with perceived expectations or to provide answers they believe the researcher wants to hear, thereby introducing subjectivity into the data. In addition, because this study was only limited to one site, a comparative approach could be used to study the same demographic of participants at another HBCU teacher education program. Expanding the research to include multiple HBCU contexts would provide a broader understanding on the shared and unique experiences of Black women aspiring to become teachers. The comparative approach could help uncover how institutional culture, program structure, and regional differences influence their journeys and aspirations. Additionally, identifying and comparing similarities and differences of non-traditional Black women teacher candidates across various HBCUs could yield insights into best practices and challenges within these programs, further contributing to the development of strategies to support and empower Black women in their pursuit of teaching careers.

Conclusion

This study builds on the notion that both informal and formal mentorship serve as motivation for teacher candidates and can contribute to the career satisfaction and retention of novice teachers. Stanley (2021) indicated that when school administrators engage in meaningful relationship practices to build rapport with Black women educators, they feel supported and validated in P-12 school spaces. Although the participants were teacher candidates, the strong relationships established with administrators and educators influenced their conceptions of teaching and professional identity. Retaining Black women in teacher education programs and the teaching force requires faculty, staff, and administrators of teacher education programs and P-12 schools to develop authentic, culturally sensitive relationships with Black women teachers (Stanley, 2021; Farinade-Wu & Griffen, 2019).

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