



Advancing Diversity in Teaching: Efficacy of Grow Your Own Programs for BIPOC Educators

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Abstract

This study examines the efficacy of Grow Your Own (GYO) programs in increasing the representation of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) educators in the teaching profession. Guided by Critical Race Theory (CRT (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Dixson et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Sleeter, 2017; Taylor et al., 2022)), the research explores two key questions: (1) How can Critical Race Theory guide successful GYO programs in targeting and engaging BIPOC individuals to increase their participation and representation in teaching? (2) How does CRT help identify and address the challenges BIPOC individuals face in GYO programs, and what strategies can improve program effectiveness? This study used a qualitative narrative descriptive approach, conducting interviews with school administrators and teacher candidates to evaluate the structural components and effectiveness of GYO programs. Findings reveal that thriving GYO programs center on culturally responsive mentorship, financial support, and community-based recruitment strategies. However, systemic barriers such as limited institutional support and racialized perceptions of teacher identity persist. The discussion highlights the need for policy changes prioritizing long-term investments in GYO initiatives, structural equity in teacher preparation, and integrating social justice leadership in program design. These findings underscore the role of CRT in critically examining and reshaping pathways to diversify the teacher workforce and address racial disparities in education.

Keywords: Grow Your Own (GYO) programs, Critical Race Theory (CRT), BIPOC educators, teacher diversity, systemic barriers in education

Introduction

A welcoming and inclusive school climate fosters student success, particularly among Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students who have been historically marginalized within educational systems (Allbright et al., 2019; Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019). Schools that cultivate a strong sense of belonging support students' ability to regulate emotions, build confidence, and develop meaningful relationships with teachers and peers—factors that contribute

to academic engagement, motivation, and a sense of purpose (Allbright et al., 2019; Buskirk-Cohen & Plants, 2019). This sense of belonging is also influential in shaping students' aspirations to become educators. When students feel seen, heard, and valued, they are more likely to envision themselves as future teachers capable of transforming the very systems in which they were educated (Canli, 2020; Fisher et al., 2020). For historically underrepresented students, exposure to culturally responsive and socially just leadership can serve as both inspiration and a catalyst for entering the teaching profession (Abawi et al., 2018; Akman, 2020; Kocak, 2021).

Despite these promising connections between belonging, representation, and educator aspirations, a critical gap remains in understanding how school systems intentionally translate these conditions into sustainable, equity-driven teacher pipelines. While Grow Your Own (GYO) programs have emerged as a widely adopted strategy to address teacher shortages and diversify the workforce, existing research has largely emphasized program outputs—such as certification rates and job placement—rather than critically examining the lived experiences of BIPOC participants or the systemic barriers embedded within these pathways (Hamman et al., 2023; Vilches & Cervantes, 2023). Furthermore, limited attention has been given to how issues of race, power, and institutional structures shape both access to and persistence within GYO programs. As a result, it remains unclear whether GYO initiatives meaningfully disrupt inequities or inadvertently reproduce the very systems they aim to transform.

In response to this gap, school districts have increasingly implemented GYO programs to recruit, prepare, and retain educators from local and historically underrepresented communities (Simieou et al., 2021). These programs are designed to strengthen workforce diversity by developing teachers who reflect the cultural and linguistic identities of their students and who are more likely to remain in their communities (Jackson & Wake, 2022). GYO initiatives also hold the potential to position BIPOC individuals as agents of change within education systems, challenging longstanding barriers to entry into the profession. However, programmatic inconsistencies and a lack of accountability for equity outcomes have led scholars to question the extent to which these initiatives fulfill their transformative promise (Hamman et al., 2023).

This study addresses these limitations by centering the efficacy of GYO programs in attracting, retaining, and cultivating BIPOC educators through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Unlike prior research that prioritizes quantitative outcomes or program design features, this study uniquely contributes to the literature by foregrounding the voices and lived experiences

of BIPOC teacher candidates and examining how systemic racism and institutionalized notions of whiteness shape their trajectories within GYO pathways. CRT provides a critical analytical framework to interrogate how power, race, and policy intersect to influence who is deemed “qualified” to teach and whose experiences are valued within educator preparation systems (Bagwell et al., 2022; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). By challenging colorblind ideologies and elevating counter-narratives, this study offers a more nuanced understanding of how GYO programs operate within, and potentially disrupt, inequitable systems (Dixson et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Taylor et al., 2022).

Using a qualitative, descriptive design, this study explores the perceptions of school administrators and student teachers participating in state-sponsored GYO programs. Grounded in the CRT tenets of the permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, and interest convergence (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), the study examines how systemic inequities shape participant experiences and identifies the structural conditions necessary for GYO programs to achieve their intended equity outcomes. By explicitly centering race, power, and lived experience, this study contributes to the field by offering actionable insights for designing GYO programs that are not only inclusive in intent but transformative in practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in CRT, a framework that centers on the role of race and racism in shaping educational inequities. Initially developed by legal scholars to examine how racism is embedded in law and policy, CRT has since been adapted for educational research to interrogate the structures that perpetuate racial disparities in schools (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). In education, CRT asserts that racism is not a deviation from the norm but a deeply ingrained, persistent feature of society that influences curricula, policies, and notions of teacher effectiveness. This study draws on three foundational tenets of CRT: the permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, and interest convergence. These principles serve as the analytical lens for understanding how GYO programs can be both a response to and a reflection of the systemic barriers faced by BIPOC individuals pursuing teaching careers (Dixson et al., 2017; Sleeter, 2017).

CRT is beneficial for exploring how racial hierarchies shape the perception of who is deemed fit to teach and for analyzing how school policies and institutional practices reinforce white norms in teacher preparation programs. Counter-storytelling elevates the lived experiences

of BIPOC educators, allowing their narratives to challenge dominant deficit-based discourses that marginalize them in the profession (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Taylor et al., 2022). Interest convergence, meanwhile, explains how institutional support for GYO programs often arises when racial equity aligns with broader workforce needs, such as teacher shortages (Milner, 2008). In this study, CRT serves as a theoretical foundation and a transformative tool to identify strategies within GYO programs that dismantle structural inequities and affirm the voices of aspiring BIPOC educators. By incorporating CRT into the evaluation of GYO initiatives, this research aims to reveal how educational systems can shift from performative diversity efforts to substantive equity and justice (Gist, 2018; Kohli & Pizarro, 2022).

Literature Review

CRT, rooted in legal scholarship, challenges dominant ideologies such as meritocracy, neutrality, and colorblindness by asserting that racism is a normalized and enduring feature of American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Ladson-Billings, 2021). Central tenets of CRT—including the permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, and interest convergence—provide a framework for examining how racial inequities are embedded within educational systems (Crenshaw et al., 1995). In the context of teacher preparation, CRT illuminates how whiteness continues to shape perceptions of who is deemed “fit” to teach, reinforcing persistent disparities in the educator workforce (Dixson et al., 2017). This framework is particularly relevant to GYO programs, as it enables a critical examination of the structural barriers BIPOC teacher candidates encounter and centers their lived experiences as essential sources of knowledge for program design and evaluation.

GYO programs have emerged as community-based strategies to diversify the educator pipeline by recruiting individuals from local and historically underrepresented populations (Jackson & Wake, 2022; Simieou et al., 2021). While these programs are designed to expand access to the profession, existing literature indicates that many fall short of their equity goals due to inconsistent implementation, limited accountability, and insufficient attention to the long-term experiences of BIPOC participants, including retention and advancement (Hamman et al., 2023; Vilches & Cervantes, 2023). Applying a CRT lens to GYO initiatives shifts the focus from program outputs to participant experiences, highlighting how systemic inequities influence candidates’ pathways into and through the profession. This perspective underscores the importance

of designing GYO programs that not only recruit BIPOC candidates but also sustain and affirm them throughout their development.

Research on school belonging and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) further contextualizes the conditions that support or hinder BIPOC teacher candidates within GYO pathways. A strong sense of belonging has been consistently linked to positive academic and social outcomes (Mosley et al., 2021; Uslu & Gizir, 2017), yet BIPOC students frequently report lower levels of belonging and representation in school environments (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020; Fisher et al., 2020). These experiences are not isolated to K–12 students; they often extend into educator preparation pathways, where BIPOC teacher candidates may encounter similar patterns of marginalization. Culturally responsive SEL practices, when effectively implemented, can foster relational trust, identity affirmation, and emotional support, all of which are critical for the persistence and success of BIPOC candidates in GYO programs (Gist, 2022; Harris et al., 2020). Thus, belonging and SEL are not peripheral concepts but foundational conditions that shape whether GYO programs can effectively retain and develop diverse educators.

Similarly, literature on discipline practices highlights how exclusionary systems contribute to broader patterns of disengagement that may influence students' long-term relationship with schooling, including their interest in becoming educators. Disproportionate discipline practices affecting BIPOC students (Jacobsen et al., 2019; Naser et al., 2021) reinforce deficit-based narratives and can diminish students' sense of connection to school communities. For BIPOC individuals who later enter GYO programs, these prior experiences may inform how they navigate educator pathways and perceive institutional support. Restorative Practices (RP), SEL, and School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS) offer alternatives that promote inclusion; however, their effectiveness depends on leaders' willingness to address systemic inequities and racial bias (Kervick et al., 2020; Wienen et al., 2019). This connection highlights how earlier schooling experiences and institutional practices shape the pipeline of future educators, reinforcing the need for GYO programs to operate within equity-centered systems.

School leadership plays a critical role in bridging these conditions and the success of GYO programs. Social justice leadership requires principals and district leaders to actively identify and dismantle inequitable policies and practices while fostering inclusive, culturally affirming environments (Canli, 2020; Theoharis, 2009). For BIPOC teacher candidates, leadership actions—such as mentorship, advocacy, and the prioritization of anti-racist practices—directly influence

their sense of belonging, professional identity development, and persistence in the field. GYO programs situated within systems that embrace social justice leadership are better positioned to move beyond recruitment and toward the sustained cultivation of BIPOC educators. Integrating CRT with leadership practices strengthens the capacity of these programs to challenge systemic inequities and prepare educators who are equipped to lead transformative change in their schools and communities (Gist, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2021; Theoharis, 2009).

Method

This qualitative, descriptive study examined the effectiveness of GYO programs in advancing teacher workforce diversity by focusing on the recruitment, retention, and cultivation of BIPOC educators. Grounded in a CRT framework, the study explored how CRT can inform GYO program design and implementation while identifying systemic barriers and strategies that shape program outcomes. Additionally, the study investigated how social justice leadership and CRT principles influence the development of GYO initiatives that position BIPOC educators as transformative agents within schools.

Participants and Recruitment Procedures

Participants were purposefully selected from institutions across Washington State that were actively engaged in Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB)-approved GYO alternative route programs. PESB serves as the state's educator licensure authority and supports workforce development through policy and program approval. A two-stage recruitment process was utilized. First, the researcher partnered with university-based teacher preparation programs that had received PESB grant funding to support GYO pathways. Program administrators were contacted via email using a recruitment script and invited to participate based on their direct involvement in recruiting and supporting BIPOC candidates. From this outreach, six (6) district and program administrators were selected.

Second, BIPOC teacher candidates were recruited through collaboration with district administrators affiliated with these university partners. Administrators distributed recruitment invitations to eligible candidates currently enrolled in alternative route programs and completing their practicum in partner school districts. Participation was voluntary, and four (4) BIPOC student teachers consented to participate. This purposeful sampling approach ensured that all participants had direct experience with GYO programming and could speak to both program design and lived experiences within these pathways.

Data Collection

Data were collected during the winter and spring of the 2024–2025 academic year. Primary data sources included semi-structured interviews and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with both administrators and BIPOC teacher candidates to elicit detailed perspectives on recruitment strategies, program supports, barriers, and experiences within GYO pathways. Interview protocols were designed to align with the study’s research questions and CRT framework, allowing flexibility to probe participants’ experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews.

Document analysis served as a secondary data source to contextualize and triangulate interview findings. Documents included recruitment materials, program descriptions, outreach communications, and partnership documents used by GYO programs to attract and support candidates. These artifacts provided insight into how programs represented their goals, articulated diversity commitments, and operationalized recruitment and support strategies. Document data were analyzed alongside interview transcripts to identify consistencies and discrepancies between program intent and participant experiences, strengthening the credibility of the findings.

Data Analysis and Theme Development

Data analysis followed a constant comparative method, allowing for iterative comparison across interviews and documents throughout the analytic process. All interviews were transcribed with verbatim and reviewed alongside collected documents. The coding process occurred in three phases. First, open coding was conducted using In Vivo and descriptive coding to capture participants’ language and initial patterns related to recruitment, barriers, and program experiences. This phase prioritized preserving participant voice, consistent with CRT’s emphasis on counter-storytelling.

Second, selective coding was used to group initial codes into broader categories by identifying recurring patterns across participants and data sources. Codes were compared across administrator and candidate responses, as well as across document artifacts, to refine categories and ensure alignment between program design and lived experience. Third, theoretical coding connected these categories to the guiding tenets of CRT—permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, and interest convergence. This phase enabled the researcher to interpret how systemic inequities shaped participant experiences and how GYO program structures either disrupted or reproduced these patterns.

Themes were developed through an iterative process of reviewing coded data, identifying convergence across data sources, and refining thematic statements to reflect both participant experiences and document evidence. The integration of interview and document data strengthened the analytic rigor by ensuring that themes were grounded in multiple forms of evidence rather than a single data source.

Positionality

The researcher's identity as a Black male who navigated the educational system without ever having a teacher of color profoundly shapes the lens through which he approaches this study. These experiences are not merely anecdotal; they offer critical insight into the racialized realities that frame BIPOC students' and educators' experiences in predominantly white institutions. The researcher's career path, from paraeducator to teacher to administrator, deepens his insight into how educational systems perpetuate systemic inequalities. This personal and professional background provides both a lens and a responsibility to examine educational structures through the tenets of CRT. The researcher recognizes that his positionality influences how he interprets participants' narratives. CRT asserts the legitimacy of experiential knowledge and positions it as central to understanding and dismantling systems of oppression. Thus, the researcher intentionally brought his background into this research—not to center himself, but to honor the importance of lived experience in educational research and policy analysis.

Findings

The narratives from district administrators and BIPOC student teachers offered a comprehensive understanding of how GYO programs can effectively recruit, support, and retain BIPOC educators. Utilizing CRT principles, specifically the permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, and interest convergence, this analysis reveals systemic obstacles, emphasizes the importance of culturally responsive recruitment and retention strategies, and examines the institutional factors impacting initiatives to enhance teacher workforce diversity. The permanence of racism was apparent in the systemic barriers that persist in limiting access to the teaching profession for BIPOC individuals. Administrators explained how traditional teacher preparation pathways were not designed with diverse candidates in mind, reinforcing structural inequities. These findings were substantiated by vignettes from the participants and were analyzed through a CRT lens.

Finding 1: The Permanence of Racism in Teacher Preparation and the GYO Experience

Participants' narratives revealed that barriers to entering and remaining in the teaching profession are not isolated challenges but enduring features of the educator preparation system. Through the lens of CRT, these findings reflect the permanence of racism—where policies and institutional structures consistently produce inequitable outcomes for BIPOC candidates despite reform efforts. Certification requirements, unpaid student teaching, and complex licensure processes were identified as primary barriers that disproportionately impact BIPOC candidates (Perez & Jacobs, 2023). Participants emphasized that these systems were not designed with non-traditional or historically marginalized candidates in mind. As one administrator noted, *“We have to ask, ‘Who was this process designed for?’ because it was not created for the individuals we are trying to bring into the profession.”* This critique highlights how ostensibly neutral policies function in ways that systematically exclude, reinforcing long-standing inequities in access to the profession.

Financial barriers further illustrate the permanence of these inequities. BIPOC teacher candidates described the cumulative burden of unpaid student teaching, tuition costs, and licensure-related expenses as significant deterrents. One participant shared, *“I had to decide between paying rent and paying for a class I needed to become a teacher.”* These experiences demonstrate how economic structures embedded within teacher preparation pathways continue to reproduce racial disparities, limiting who can realistically persist through certification. Standardized licensure exams and bureaucratic requirements were also perceived as mechanisms that sustain exclusion. As one candidate explained, *“It felt like the system was designed to weed people like me out.”* Rather than serving as objective measures of readiness, these requirements were experienced as gatekeeping tools that disproportionately filter out BIPOC candidates, reinforcing patterns of underrepresentation in the teaching workforce.

Beyond access, participants described how the permanence of racism extends into workplace experiences. Even after entering the profession, BIPOC educators reported navigating environments where they felt scrutinized, undervalued, or unsupported. One candidate reflected, *“There are assumptions made about us before we walk into the room. Sometimes I wonder if they already think we’re not going to make it.”* This sentiment was echoed by district leadership, with one administrator acknowledging, *“Traditional programs weren’t set up for people who look like most of our students now.”* These accounts underscore how racialized perceptions and institutional

norms persist across the pipeline—from entry into preparation programs to retention within schools.

Collectively, these findings illustrate that systemic barriers are not episodic but are embedded within the structures governing teacher preparation and employment. From certification policies to workplace climates, participants' experiences reflect the enduring nature of racism as conceptualized by CRT. Addressing these challenges requires more than programmatic adjustments; it necessitates structural transformation, including reexamining licensure requirements, expanding financial support, and intentionally redesigning systems to disrupt inequitable outcomes. By centering these experiences, GYO programs can move beyond access-oriented solutions toward sustained, equity-driven change in the educator workforce.

Finding 2: Counter-Storytelling as Resistance, Healing, and Validation

Feedback from both district administrators and student teachers underscored the importance of culturally responsive and affirming support systems in the recruitment, retention, and success of BIPOC educators (Gist et al., 2024). Within GYO programs, these supports function as counter-storytelling mechanisms that challenge dominant narratives of neutrality in teacher preparation and instead illuminate the racialized realities experienced by BIPOC educators in predominantly white institutions (Perez & Jacobs, 2023; Taylor et al., 2022). Affinity spaces emerged as a central structure through which counter-stories were shared, validated, and collectively understood. Participants described these spaces as essential, not supplemental, for fostering connection, reflection, and healing. Through storytelling and shared dialogue, BIPOC candidates were able to affirm their identities and challenge deficit-based narratives that often characterize their experiences in traditional preparation programs. As one participant, Carmen, reflected: *“I didn’t feel like I belonged until I started this program... This program is the first place where I didn’t feel like an outsider.”* These narratives demonstrate how counter-storytelling creates spaces where candidates can reframe their experiences and envision themselves within the profession.

Importantly, these stories disrupted dominant assumptions about the lack of teacher diversity. Rather than attributing underrepresentation to a shortage of qualified candidates, participants highlighted systemic barriers and racialized experiences as primary contributors. One administrator emphasized that affinity spaces are a necessity, not a luxury, while others described how educators of color often leave the profession due to racial isolation and unsupportive

environments. These counter-narratives shift the focus from individual deficit to institutional responsibility, reinforcing CRT's emphasis on elevating marginalized voices to expose structural inequities.

Participants also described how counter-storytelling revealed pressures to assimilate within predominantly white institutions. One candidate explained, *"They say they want diversity, but what they really mean is someone who looks like me but acts like them."* This tension highlights how inclusion efforts can remain superficial when institutional norms remain unchanged. By naming these experiences, participants challenged dominant narratives of inclusion and exposed cultural expectations that continue to marginalize BIPOC educators. In addition to disrupting deficit narratives, counter-storytelling informed programmatic and leadership shifts. District leaders acknowledged that listening to participant experiences prompted critical reflection on program design and support structures. As one administrator noted, *"We thought we were creating opportunities, but we weren't listening to the people we were trying to recruit."* These insights illustrate how counter-stories not only surface inequities but also serve as a catalyst for organizational learning and change.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate that counter-storytelling within GYO programs extends beyond individual expression; it functions as a transformative tool that challenges dominant ideologies, validates lived experiences, and informs more equitable program design. By centering these narratives, GYO programs can move beyond symbolic commitments to diversity and toward intentional, sustained efforts that support the success and persistence of BIPOC educators.

Finding 3: Interest Convergence—When Equity Aligns with Institutional Self-Interest

Responses from district administrators and student teachers highlighted the structural challenges of embedding diversity initiatives within broader institutional priorities. Consistent with CRT, these findings reflect how systemic racism persists through policies and practices that limit equitable access, including constrained hiring pathways, fragmented district–university partnerships, and insufficient long-term retention strategies (Gist, 2022b; Harris et al., 2020). Participants emphasized that without intentional and sustained policy commitments, diversity initiatives risk functioning as short-term or symbolic efforts rather than producing lasting systemic change.

A key concern emerging from the data was the disconnect between recruitment and retention. While institutions have increased efforts to recruit BIPOC educators through GYO programs, participants noted that these efforts are often not matched with sustained supports necessary for long-term success. High turnover among BIPOC educators was frequently attributed to workplace isolation, limited advancement opportunities, and racialized school climates. These insights point to the need for policy approaches that extend beyond recruitment metrics to include retention-focused strategies, such as longitudinal tracking of career pathways, climate assessments, and structured mentorship systems (Canli, 2020; Gist, 2022a). Without such systemic supports, recruitment gains are unlikely to translate into meaningful diversification of the educator workforce.

The principle of interest convergence provides a critical lens for understanding how and why GYO programs are implemented and sustained. Participants consistently described how institutional support for GYO initiatives increased when these programs aligned with broader organizational priorities, particularly staffing shortages. As one administrator, Carmen, noted, *“Districts are now focusing on alternative pathways not necessarily for equity reasons, but because they require more teachers.”* Similarly, another administrator explained, *“There was pressure to do something about the shortage, so we looked at GYO programs. Diversity is important, but solving staffing issues came first.”* These statements illustrate how diversity-focused initiatives gain traction when they serve immediate institutional needs, reinforcing CRT’s assertion that progress toward racial equity often occurs only when it converges with dominant interests (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Taylor et al., 2022).

While this alignment can generate initial momentum, participants raised concerns about the sustainability of such efforts. One administrator reflected, *“If we only support this work when we’re short on teachers, then what happens when the numbers stabilize? Will we still care about diversity?”* This question highlights a critical policy implication: when GYO programs are framed primarily as workforce solutions, their long-term viability becomes contingent on fluctuating labor demands rather than sustained equity commitments. As a result, diversity initiatives may be deprioritized once immediate staffing needs are met, limiting their capacity to produce enduring change.

Participants also pointed to the limitations of symbolic inclusion within these initiatives. One candidate noted, *“Sometimes it feels like they want us for the brochure, but not for the*

decision-making.” This statement underscores how institutional engagement with diversity can remain superficial if it does not extend to shared power, leadership opportunities, and systemic change. Without embedding equity into policy, governance, and decision-making structures, GYO programs risk reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than disrupting them.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that interest convergence not only shapes the adoption of GYO programs but also influences their depth and sustainability. For GYO initiatives to move beyond conditional support, districts and policymakers must institutionalize equity-focused commitments through stable funding structures, accountability measures tied to retention and advancement, and policies that prioritize long-term workforce diversification regardless of immediate staffing pressures. By shifting from reactive to sustained policy approaches, GYO programs can better fulfill their potential as mechanisms for systemic change rather than temporary responses to workforce demands.

Discussion

This study examined the efficacy of GYO teacher preparation programs through the lens of CRT, with particular attention to how these initiatives recruit, retain, and support BIPOC educators. The findings affirm that while GYO programs hold significant promise for addressing the teacher diversity gap, their impact is contingent upon the extent to which they disrupt, rather than operate within, existing inequitable systems. This discussion highlights the most significant contributions of the study by synthesizing key findings with existing literature and CRT principles, while also considering implications for policy, practice, and future research.

First, this study extends existing research on teacher workforce diversity by demonstrating that access alone is insufficient to produce meaningful change. While prior literature has documented persistent demographic disparities between students and educators (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Garcia et al., 2019), this study contributes a more nuanced understanding of how structural barriers continue to shape BIPOC candidates’ pathways into the profession. Specifically, the findings illustrate that GYO programs can mitigate exclusionary practices—such as unpaid student teaching, rigid certification requirements, and inequitable hiring processes—but only when these programs are intentionally designed to address systemic inequities. Without this intentionality, GYO initiatives risk functioning as symbolic responses to diversity concerns rather than mechanisms for sustained workforce transformation.

Second, the study reinforces CRT's assertion that racism is a permanent and embedded feature of educational systems (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Rather than viewing barriers as isolated challenges, participants' experiences reveal how financial constraints, bureaucratic certification processes, and institutional norms collectively reproduce inequitable outcomes. These findings shift the focus from individual persistence to systemic accountability, underscoring the need for structural reforms that reduce economic and procedural barriers to entry. In doing so, this study contributes to the literature by explicitly connecting teacher preparation policies to broader patterns of racialized access and opportunity.

Third, this study advances scholarship on counter-storytelling by illustrating its role not only as a methodological tool but also as a programmatic intervention within GYO initiatives. Participant narratives illuminated experiences of marginalization, belonging, and identity affirmation, challenging dominant, race-neutral narratives about teacher preparation. These counter-stories provide critical insight into how culturally responsive supports, such as affinity spaces and mentorship, function to sustain BIPOC educators within preparation pathways. By centering these lived experiences, the study demonstrates how counter-storytelling can inform more equitable program design and disrupt deficit-oriented assumptions about BIPOC candidates (Crenshaw et al., 1995; Gist et al., 2024).

Finally, the findings offer a critical application of CRT's principle of interest convergence, revealing how institutional support for GYO programs is often driven by workforce needs rather than sustained commitments to racial equity (Milner, 2008; Sleeter, 2017). While alignment with staffing shortages can generate initial investment in GYO initiatives, this conditional support raises concerns about long-term sustainability. This study contributes to the literature by highlighting the implications of this dynamic: when diversity efforts are framed primarily as solutions to labor shortages, they remain vulnerable to shifting institutional priorities. As such, the findings underscore the importance of embedding equity-focused goals into policy, funding structures, and accountability systems to ensure that GYO programs are sustained beyond immediate workforce demands.

Taken together, this study contributes to the field by reframing GYO programs not simply as recruitment strategies, but as potential sites of systemic transformation. The findings suggest that the effectiveness of these programs depends on their ability to integrate CRT-informed principles into their design and implementation—centering lived experiences, addressing

structural barriers, and institutionalizing commitments to equity. For policymakers and practitioners, this requires moving beyond short-term diversity initiatives toward sustained, systemic approaches that prioritize both access and long-term support for BIPOC educators.

Limitations

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the study's sample was limited to six district administrators and four student teachers, all within GYO programs in Washington State. This geographic and programmatic focus limits the generalizability of the findings to other regions or types of alternative certification programs. However, as is common in qualitative descriptive studies, the goal was not to generalize broadly but to provide a rich, contextually grounded understanding of participants' experiences (Creswell, 2019). Second, the research relied primarily on self-reported data through interviews.

While these narratives are critical to counter-storytelling and understanding lived experience, they may also be influenced by participants' perceptions or the dynamics of the interview setting. To mitigate this, the researcher triangulated interview data with document analysis and maintained reflexive awareness of personal bias, especially given the researcher's position as a BIPOC educator (Creswell, 2019). Another limitation involves the study's timing. The interviews captured a glimpse of participants' experiences during a distinct phase of their teaching careers—either as leaders of the GYO program or as teacher candidates during their student teaching phase. As such, the findings may not fully account for long-term program impacts or career trajectories. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to assess the lasting effects of CRT-informed GYO programs on teacher retention and leadership development.

Several findings emerged that were both novel and affirming. One surprising discovery was the degree to which institutional support for GYO programs was conditional. Although GYO programs were initially conceived as equity-based interventions, they tend to be sustained primarily when they align with dominant institutional needs. This revelation highlights the dual nature of interest convergence—both as a pathway to gain traction for equity initiatives and as a constraint that limits their full transformative potential (Ladson-Billings, 2021). Another unexpected theme was the emotional weight of counter-storytelling. Student teachers shared deeply personal accounts of racial isolation and academic trauma, often describing their own K–12 schooling as disempowering. One participant remarked, *“I’ve always loved learning, but I didn’t always feel seen,”* reinforcing how academic trauma can shape educational outcomes and

career decisions. These stories underscored the need for healing-centered approaches that address teacher preparation's emotional and cultural dimensions (Russell, 2025).

While the findings of this qualitative descriptive study are not intended to be broadly generalizable in a statistical sense, they do offer significant transferability to other contexts with similar demographic and structural conditions. GYO programs across the U.S. face common challenges, such as recruitment, retention, funding, and institutional support, and many operate within predominantly white school systems that marginalize BIPOC educators. Therefore, the study's insights on systemic barriers, culturally affirming supports, and institutional dynamics can inform similar initiatives nationally. The study's methodological rigor, including detailed participant descriptions, transparent coding processes, and the use of CRT as a guiding framework, enhances transferability. Other districts and teacher preparation programs may draw upon these findings to assess their own practices and consider how CRT principles could strengthen their commitment to racial equity in education.

Discussion

The racial and ethnic demographics of the United States are rapidly evolving, resulting in increasingly diverse student populations in schools across the nation (Carroll, 2022; Clark, 2020; Jones et al., 2019; Kim, 2023). However, a significant teacher diversity gap remains, as the difference between the proportion of students of color and teachers of color continues to be substantial (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021; Plachowski, 2019). Despite the racial diversity of students—where 54% of public school students identified as BIPOC—79% of teachers nationwide were white, highlighting a critical underrepresentation of educators of color (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). The increasing racial diversity of public school student populations underscores the urgent need to tackle educational inequities and enhance outcomes for historically marginalized students (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019; Davila, 2025; Shores et al., 2019). Research consistently indicates that BIPOC students experience significant disparities in academic achievement, sense of belonging, and disciplinary outcomes compared to their white peers (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Canli, 2020; Reynolds-Vassar et al., 2021). Given these systemic challenges, it is necessary to consider why a BIPOC student would aspire to become a teacher in a system that has historically marginalized, devalued, and silenced them, perpetuating barriers to their success (Akman, 2020; Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019; Reynolds-Vassar et al., 2021).

Increasing BIPOC representation in the teaching workforce is crucial for creating environments where students can see themselves reflected in their educators and for nurturing school cultures that emphasize culturally inclusive practices (Bradshaw et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2021). This facilitates equitable access to learning opportunities and responds to the growing gap between student and teacher demographics, which impacts both academic outcomes and the overall effectiveness of educators (Bradshaw et al., 2018 & Ladson-Billings, 2021a). Research shows that BIPOC students benefit significantly from having BIPOC educators, including higher academic success, more assertive pro-social behaviors, and the development of skills needed to navigate the socio-political complexities of U.S. schooling (Davila, 2025; Plachowski, 2019). Policymakers have introduced measures such as financial incentives to support Grow Your Own programs, recognizing that BIPOC educators play a crucial role in advancing social justice and driving community transformation by cultivating critical consciousness and advocating for systemic change (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019; Davila, 2025; Plachowski, 2019; Theoharis, 2009). Incorporating Critical Race Theory into the development of GYO programs, through principles such as the permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, and interest convergence, can equip BIPOC educators with the skills, resources, and support necessary to thrive in predominantly white school environments (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Perez & Jacobs, 2023; Sleeter, 2017).

Implications

This study's implications are far-reaching for educators, policymakers, and researchers committed to dismantling systemic inequities in teacher preparation. For practitioners, the study underscores the necessity of embedding culturally responsive support systems within GYO programs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). This encompasses affinity spaces, mentorship from BIPOC educators, trauma-informed practices, and a curriculum that promotes racial equity. Programs must acknowledge that recruitment alone is inadequate—retention necessitates ongoing cultural and emotional support (Davila, 2025). Schools and districts should assess how their environments affirm or alienate BIPOC educators and implement targeted strategies for belonging and well-being (Canli, 2020).

For policymakers, the findings highlight the urgent need for structural reforms in certification, financial aid, and program funding. States and districts should streamline alternative pathways, eliminate unpaid student teaching, and invest long-term financial support. Policymakers

should also monitor the sustainability of GYO programs beyond temporary grants by integrating them into state budgets and strategic plans for teacher workforce development. For researchers, this study identifies several future directions. Longitudinal studies could track the career trajectories of GYO program graduates to evaluate long-term impacts on retention and leadership development. Additional research could explore the interplay between academic trauma and the decision to enter teaching, as well as investigate how school climate and district culture affect the experiences of BIPOC educators over time. Finally, comparative studies could analyze how GYO programs operate in different geographic or political contexts, further refining best practices for CRT-informed educator preparation.

Conclusion

This study examined the efficacy of GYO programs in advancing teacher workforce diversity through a CRT lens. The findings affirm that while GYO programs offer a promising strategy for addressing persistent disparities in the educator workforce, their effectiveness is constrained by systemic inequities that continue to shape access, participation, and retention for BIPOC educators. Consistent with CRT, these inequities are not incidental but embedded within the structures of teacher preparation and educational systems (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Taylor et al., 2022).

The study contributes to the field by demonstrating that GYO programs function as both a reflection of existing systemic barriers and a potential mechanism for transformation. When grounded in CRT principles, these programs can disrupt exclusionary practices by centering the lived experiences of BIPOC participants and addressing barriers such as financial constraints, rigid certification pathways, and inequitable institutional policies (Gist et al., 2024; Perez & Jacobs, 2023). However, without intentional design and sustained commitment, GYO initiatives risk reinforcing the very inequities they seek to address.

From a practice perspective, the findings highlight the need for educational leaders to move beyond recruitment-focused approaches and prioritize comprehensive systems of support. This includes implementing mentorship structures, affinity spaces, and culturally responsive practices that foster belonging and professional growth for BIPOC educators (Gist, 2022a; Theoharis, 2009). Additionally, leaders must recognize the impact of school climate and racialized experiences on retention, ensuring that GYO participants are supported not only during preparation but throughout their careers.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of structural reform. States and districts should reevaluate certification requirements that disproportionately exclude BIPOC candidates, including high-stakes licensure exams and unpaid student teaching requirements (Perez & Jacobs, 2023). Sustainable funding models are also critical to ensure that GYO programs are not dependent on short-term initiatives tied to workforce shortages but are institutionalized as long-term strategies for diversifying the educator workforce (Gist et al., 2024). Furthermore, policymakers should establish accountability systems that track recruitment, retention, and advancement outcomes to ensure that diversity efforts result in meaningful and sustained change.

This study also emphasizes the importance of early pipeline development. A significant pool of future BIPOC educators currently exists within K–12 classrooms, yet their experiences are often shaped by racialized discipline practices and academic trauma that influence their perceptions of schooling and career possibilities (Russell, 2025). Educational leaders must therefore invest in culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices that affirm student identity and foster a sense of belonging, creating conditions where BIPOC students can envision themselves as future educators (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019; Kaerwer & Pritchett, 2023).

Ultimately, diversifying the teaching workforce through GYO programs requires sustained, systemic commitment rather than episodic or symbolic efforts. As this study demonstrates, meaningful progress depends on aligning program design, leadership practices, and policy structures with a clear focus on equity and justice. By centering BIPOC voices, addressing structural barriers, and institutionalizing long-term supports, GYO programs can move beyond recruitment initiatives to become transformative pathways that reshape the educator workforce and better serve an increasingly diverse student population (Davila, 2025; Gist et al., 2024).

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