Black Educators Fight Back: Facing and Navigating Vulnerability and Stress in Teacher Development

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Black Educators Fight Back: Facing and Navigating Vulnerability and Stress in Teacher Development

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Abstract   This article examines Black educators' experiences in Grow Your Own programs along a teacher development continuum at the intersection of social and human development constructs and frameworks, such as double binds and Phenomenological Variant Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST). More robust and nuanced interpretations of how Black educators grow and sustain their presence in the field of education are explored utilizing these analytical tools to determine how Black educators make their way along the teacher development continuum. Findings related to Black educators' development as they transition as students to teachers, using double bind constructs at each stage of PVEST, are described, and research and praxis questions are extended for implications.

Keywords   Black teachers · Grow your own · PVEST · Double binds · Human development

> *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith*
> *(II Timothy 4:7, The New King James Version)*

There are various ways to frame the contemporary experiences of Black Educators in the United States in the 21st century. Representing 6.7% of the teacher workforce, roughly 256,415 out of 3,827,100 teachers in public schools nationwide (Taie and Goldring 2017), their experiences are vast and cut across multiple familial and cultural backgrounds, early schooling experiences, geographic contexts, educator preparation pipelines, school placements, and disciplinary backgrounds. This research study narrows in scope the focus of this group by looking at the experiences of

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Black educators in Grow Your Own (GYO) programs. Given the steady decline of Black educator representation over the past 25 years (Ingersoll and Merrill 2017), and the resurgence of interest in GYO programs as one possible remedy to the teacher shortage issue, this is a timely area of investigation. In particular, understanding Black educators' experiences along a teacher development continuum at the intersection of social and human development frameworks allows for a more complex and robust interpretation of their professional journeys. Thus, this article begins with a brief overview of a conceptual framework that interweaves key understandings related to Black educators, double binds, and Phenomenological Variant Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST), before describing findings related to Black educators' experiences across the teacher development continuum. A compelling theme of this research study is these particular Black educators, both teacher candidates and inservice teachers, are fighters. They have not left their respective programs or schools, but remain. The findings tell the story of their fight across the scope of teacher development.

Conceptual Framework

Black Teachers

Toward the end of the 20th century the number of Black teachers was significantly reduced for various reasons such as, the emergence of new professional opportunities, devaluing and dismissal of Black teachers during integration, the perceived changing apolitical nature of teaching, and the shifting role of schools as a central cultural institution for pursuing social justice (Clark et al. 2013; Dilworth and Brown 2008). Unfortunately, the exiting of many Black teachers happened when our nation was undergoing massive changes and the security of equality for historically oppressed people was legalized, but still yet to be realized. The critical pedagogical work of Black teachers did not end in the 1970s and 1980s, however, and is illustrated in the biographies of well-known Black teachers (e.g., Marva Collins) and 1990 s' testimonies of their students and the research of teacher educators (Foster 1997). Recent research on Black teachers in the first part of the 21st century has continued to document the strengths and benefits they bring to the profession (Gershenson et al. 2017; Grissom and Redding 2016; Milner 2006); the challenges that they confront in their teaching and learning experiences in schools and programs (Matkins 2011; Mawhinney 2014); and the rich within-group diversity among the Black Teacher cadre (Griffin and Tackie 2017; Siddle-Walker 2005). This scholarship, while providing a sense of the current experiences of Black teachers, still leaves several important areas of research for exploration, in particular, how Black teachers negotiate double binds across the teacher development continuum.

Double Binds

For the purposes of this study I define the double bind, drawing from Achinstein and Ogawa (2011), as a teacher's need to reconcile oppositional tensions between personal ties (i.e., cultural, linguistic, familial affiliations and connections that play a critical role in shaping an individual's thinking, and thus choices) and systemic ties (i.e., written, spoken, hidden, and/or invisible institutional policies, features, and practices that have direct power and influence over individuals and groups) that they have difficulty escaping. Specifically, systemic ties in teacher education programs and schools can involve institutional structures and supports (i.e., concrete programs and policies that frame the program vision), organizational features (i.e., nature of social relations as it relates to faculty, students, and leadership), and program practices (i.e., teaching and learning opportunities, curriculum, and institutional approaches) (Gist 2017). Given the role programs and schools play in the professionalization of Black teachers, the ways in which Black teachers negotiate their preparation, induction, and tenure experiences to unravel the double binds they may experience is a particularly important area of research. I argue that investigating the teaching and learning experiences of Black teachers on a teacher development continuum, by closely examining the personal and systemic ties they navigate, can help us better understand the obstacles to academic and professional growth. If the experiences of Black teachers are closely examined along a continuum in light of the academic and professional challenges they may likely face, their experiences can be instructive for enabling teacher educators, educator preparation programs, and school leadership to better support their development through integrated systems of support.

Phenomenological Variant Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)

In an effort to explore a deeper analysis of the types of personal and systemic ties that confine and/or fortify Black educators across the teacher development continuum, Spencer's Phenomenological Variant Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) was identified as a useful analytical tool. In this case, the teacher development continuum involves exploring experiences prior to entry into GYO programs, their learning and teaching experiences while completing programs, and eventual transition to schools as teachers of record. Since teacher development reflects a dimension of human development, the PVEST framework offers a novel way of understanding how Black educators utilize personal and systemic ties to face and interpret challenges and vulnerabilities over time. In Spencer's PVEST model, the stages of PVEST are not isolated and linear, but rather bidirectional, reciprocal, and dynamic in a person's human development. Spencer (2006) outlines the following five stages of PVEST: (a) Net vulnerability, as the difference between protective factors and risks; (b) Net stress, as actualized risks encountered that require some level of response because they are experienced as a specific change; (c) Reactive coping, as problem solving strategies that are adaptive or maladaptive; (d) Emergent identities, as reactive coping responses that become stable and yield emergent identities

that involve how individuals view themselves in and between various contexts of development; and (e) Life-stage specific outcomes, as identity processes that provide behavioral stability over time which influences problem solving and decision making that yields productive or adverse outcomes.

The concept of net vulnerability is a useful analytical tool for this study because it provides more depth to the notion of personal ties, in that it allows for an identification of risks and protective factors related to personal ties, that Black educators bring to the field of teaching. Further, the concept of net stress is useful for expanding our understandings of systemic ties and the ways in which Black educators experience a balance between supports and stressors, which impacts their ability to face and overcome challenges. Situating personal ties, as evidence of net vulnerability, and systemic ties, as net stress, therefore, is a useful vantage point to examine and make sense of Black educators' coping, problem solving, and decision-making strategies along their professional trajectories.

Methodology

This study aims to explore more robust and nuanced interpretations of how Black educators grow and sustain their presence in the field of education by investigating the following research questions: (a) what personal ties shape Black educators along the teacher development continuum?; (b) what systemic ties shape Black educators along the teacher development continuum?; (c) what types of coping and problem solving strategies did Black educator apply along the teacher development continuum?; and (d) how do double blind and PVEST frameworks assist with understanding the experiences of Black educators within and across developmental stages?

Participant Selection and Data Sources

For the purposes of this study, Black educators were recruited from Grow Your Own (GYO) programs due to these program models' tendency to recruit future teachers who are from and likely to remain in the local community. GYO programs were operationalized as programs committed to the academic and professional development of local community based teachers via the establishment of three primary recruitment models: (1) a gender-race specific focus (e.g., recruiting Black males) for increasing male representation in the profession (Jones and Jenkins 2012); (2) a community-driven focus in collaboration with entities such as community based organizations, faith-based institutions, or educational advocacy groups, to recruit teachers from the local community (Skinner et al. 2011); or (3) a professional pipeline focus (e.g., career ladder programs) for a pool of educational support staff (e.g., paraprofessionals) with commitments to local schools (Clewell and Villegas 1999).

A thread that weaves together the three GYO recruitment frames explored is that they recruit teachers who do not have college degrees, thus initiating the "growing" teachers process at the beginning of their higher education pursuits. These programs also reflected an expressed commitment to recruiting and retaining Teachers

of Color, and/or had significant numbers of Teachers of Color enrolled. This was a requirement since the study specifically focused on the learning and teaching experiences of Black educators. Utilizing the three primary recruitment frames described for GYO program models, in addition to evidence of a commitment to recruit and retain Teachers of Color, I contacted GYO program directors across the nation for participation in the study. Three programs, one for each model, ultimately agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection

This article focuses on a subset of data from national case study investigations examining the teaching and learning experiences of Black educators within and across GYO programs. The primary data sources utilized are eight recorded focus groups that involved twenty-eight total participants (21 teacher candidates and 7 teachers; 17 men and 11 women). Black educator racial and gender identity was determined based on program director identification and participant self-identification. The focus groups reflected various combinations, in which some focus groups were all teacher candidates and all teachers, and others were a mixture of teachers and teacher candidates. The dynamic of group reflection allowed participants to contemplate their experiences from multiple perspectives, which potentially yielded data that may have been otherwise unknown (Stewart and Shandasni 1990). The focus groups lasted between 60 and 120 min, and the questions primarily focused on participants familial, personal, and education background, and experiences in their GYO programs and schools as they journeyed across the teacher development continuum.

Data Analysis

The four primary deductive codes utilized to analyze focus group data were personal ties, systemic ties, coping strategies, and problem-solving. Drawing from the Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) work on double binds, personal ties were operationalized as cultural, educational, and familial affiliations and connections that play a critical role in shaping an individual's thinking, and thus choices. These personal ties were further operationalized in sub-codes by applying Spencer (2006) PVEST Stage 1, net vulnerabilities (i.e., the tension between risk and protective factors), to categorize personal ties as protections or risks. Systemic ties, building on the Achinstein and Ogawa (2011) description, were defined as written, spoken, hidden, and/or invisible institutional policies, structures, and practices GYO programs and schools that have direct power and influence over individuals and groups. These systemic ties were further compartmentalized by applying Spencer (2006) PVEST Stage 2, net stress (i.e., the tension between actualized risks encountered and available supports), to categorize systemic ties experienced by Black educators in GYO programs and schools as either challenges or supports. Coping strategies, drawing from PVEST Stage 3 (Reactive Coping Methods) and Stage 4 (Emergent Identities), were defined as a type of decision making strategy that was either adaptive or maladaptive on the

part of aspiring and current Black educators that began to influence their emergent teaching identities. Problem solving, applying outcomes related to PVEST Stages 5 (Life-Stage Specific Coping Outcomes), was defined as consistent approaches aspiring and current Black educators took to resolve conflict over time that resulted in productive or adverse long-term outcomes.

Through a utilization of these four primary codes, the analytical process consisted of the following steps: (1) initial reading of focus group transcripts in their entirety; (2) a re-reading of transcripts at which point the data was coded utilizing the four constructs of personal ties, systemic ties, coping strategies, and problem-solving; (3) analytic memos were noted for each transcript and across transcripts to be begin identifying relevant themes related to the research questions; and (4) initial findings related to Black educators at each stage of PVEST were developed. The following section offers findings related to this analytic process. Black educators' development as they transition as students, teacher candidates, and teachers, using each stage of PVEST, is outlined to describe the core findings from this research study.

Findings

Stage 1—Black Educators' Protections and Risks: The Foundation for Educational Potential

Depending on the perspective and past experiences of Black educators, a protective factor for one person (e.g., strong family ties) was a risk factor for another person (e.g., strained/difficult family ties). This revealed not a monolithic, but rather a complex set of early experiences on the part of Black educators. Close examination of focus group transcripts coded for personal ties revealed protective factors and risks as they begin their educational journey. Protective factors are those that insolate and cover the lives of Black educators, and in contrast, risk factors present challenges that may potentially harm the lives of Black educators.

Protective Factors: Values of Family, Education and Social Change

Strong family and community ties were a type of protective covering for many of the participants in this study. These ties were protections that facilitated basic needs, such as a sense of self-worth, and connections to social supports. For example, one teacher candidate noted, the importance of his mother's affirmation, stating, she "always, you know, confirmed to me that I was worthy enough. I was always worthy enough. I'm suppose to be in there. I'm meant to have what I have, and, because of the work that I did." Another teacher described the significance of family by explaining, "what I have, which is a father who made sure that we knew how to dress, we knew how to talk to people, we knew how to act. And that's just something I take pride in. And even still to this day, I graduated high school a year ago and I could just remember that all through high school just being—I had people saying, 'Oh he is different.'" And for some teacher candidates these family bonds were also married with positive community connections. For example, the church, as a type of

protective community resource, was described as teaching early lessons about leadership and the importance of respecting elders.

Many participants also expressed commitments to Black education that were yoked with a desire to work for change. In this sense, a change consciousness functioned as a protective factor in that it provided a mission for personal and/or social and community transformation. One of the teacher candidates described wanting "to change what I was going through; you know, how inequality was and why most people in the projects were poor, you know, black, and that kind of stuck with me." Another teacher candidate explained, "Just showing—like, one day being able to show young black males that it's okay to be, you know what I'm saying, a good kid. It's okay to have manners and stuff like that."

Part of the value placed on education was connected to positive personal experiences with teachers and family members. One teacher candidate described an instance in which a teacher stated to him that "God smiled upon you" to affirm his giftedness and potential. Another teacher candidate described the importance of his great grandfather insisting he needed excel in school, explaining, "He was like, 'Even though I expect you to be in this field after school, I want you to go to school to get that lesson because he didn't finish high school… So, I guess that's just one of the things, like just hearing that all the time."

Collectively, these early educational, community and professional experiences with parents, teachers, elders, and leaders are sources of protection and strength for these Black educators.

Risks: Potential Obstacles for Educational Success

In terms of personal ties that can present potential challenges, weak family ties, being a first-generation college student, low social standing, financial barriers, and violence were all risk factors that emerged from focus groups dialogue. While many of the Black teacher candidates had strong family ties, others expressed the challenge, for example, of not having their fathers in their lives. One teacher candidate shared that early in his life a significant number of men from his family were incarcerated. There was also mention of having to juggle family responsibilities that restricted their time and availability, while others referred to challenges with the social services system. Some teacher candidates from the male-specific pipeline noted not having expectations for excelling in school. Others expressed the difficulty of being racially isolated in schools. There was also the weight of being the first in the family to graduate from college, explaining, "we never had anyone to go to school. The only person that—well, my aunt, she went to cosmetology school, and then one of my other aunts, she started at college, but she has sickle cell, so she had to leave her first semester. So, I'll be the first one to graduate a full year of college. "

Additionally, the issue of social class position also postured as a potential challenge. One black teacher described her journey starting off as a cafeteria worker in the school system in order to get her foot in the door, and working her way up through each rank of the service ladder before meeting the qualifications to become a paraprofessional. There were also frequent mentions of financial barriers, in which one teacher candidate described how being raised in poverty and on welfare limited

college aspirations in her youth. There was also an acknowledgement of the violence Black educators confronted in their geographic communities, with one asserting, "And we got all this shooting and gangs and all this crap in our communities" and "I grew up around a lot—it was like in my face, like, you know, violence and drugs." Taken as a whole, with respect to personal ties reflecting strengths, they outweighed, in occurrence and emphasis, the risk related to personal ties described by these Black educators. Not to negate the very real challenges facing Black education in America and the ever-present vulnerabilities they may face in the future, but the Black teacher candidates in the study expressed personal ties of potential that did not negate the possibility of educational success.

Stage 2—Black Educators' Supports and Challenges: Factors that Encourage or Restrict Program Completion

When these students, with the net vulnerability of strengths and risks, become Black preservice educators they encountered systemic ties, in terms of supports and challenges, as a function of being a member of their respective GYO programs. Close examination of the focus group transcripts spotlighted significant supports and challenges offered by programs that produced different levels of net stress.

A Diverse Portfolio of Supports

In terms of supports, community networks, mission/expectations from leadership and program, academic and mentorship resources, pedagogical relevance, and strong relationship with faculty were noted as essential. Many of the candidates expressed experiencing a sense of community. For example, one teacher candidate noted, "once I got into the program and I saw that there were people of color and people like me going through the same struggle that I was, it made me—it made me press even harder to get my—to work on my degree." Put differently, another teacher candidate explained, "…We have each other's encouragement. We have each other's, you know, power. You know, so it's like we always have somebody to go to help us or to show us." There were also concrete structures that facilitated these experiences of community, functioning as a protective systemic tie, such as summer institutes, weekly and monthly cohort meetings, and local school placements.

One teacher candidate reflected on his participation in a bridge program, stating, "I used to go there every summer for Emerging Scholars and there were days out of the week where the program would have an activity with us and it inspired me so much because I've never really had male teachers at that multitude and that setting." Another teacher candidate explained how program cohort meetings functioned as a social support to address racial and social issues taking place in society, asserting, "I think the program, you know, we're taught to be more observant. You know, be more observant of these types of issues, types of things going on. So we really—you know, every Monday meeting, you know, we have—we'll feel—it will probably be brought up [in weekly cohort meeting]. It will probably be something to talk about." Pointing out the community unity among the program members, another teacher

candidate stated it is "…like being around people who are arrogant enough to think that they can change the world." Intentional partnering of teacher candidates with peers that would support their development also functioned as a type of program support. For example, one teacher candidate explained the rationale for being placed in residential housing together, stating, "Our cohort leader tends to…he puts people together who he feels can grow from each other. I mean, and what that process is, it's different for each one, but generally that's how he places us."

Further, mission/leadership expectations from programs also appeared to function as a source of psychological support. For one program, the concept of being a leader for the next generation was particularly important, which was evident when one candidate explained, "I just want to do right by the next generation because I feel—I just feel as though that—in this generation nobody wants to be the change. They want to already come into the change but we have—my brothers–and I all have the same mindset that we have to sacrifice ourselves to be that change, so we all are willing and ready to, you know, be that change for the next generation, so that's the biggest thing for me."

Beyond a program and collective mindset as a type of protective factor, there was also an expectation related to academic achievement coupled with academic supports to cultivate educational success. One teacher candidate disclosed, "We always have academic resources available for us. You know, whatever is necessary for us, we always do." Mentorship also was a source of critical support for some teacher candidates, as one teacher candidate shared when reflecting on his mentor, "He never gives it to me the way I want to hear it. He always tells me the way I need to hear it, but at the same time he nurtures me. You know what I'm saying? Like, he's usually what I need." Another shared "…I teared up just thinking about it, just saying, like, how much they truly love you. You know, our cohort leader, he always says, he looks at us like, you know, we are his children. And that's like the biggest thing and I can't—I can't, you know, thank him enough for that." Another teacher candidate shared, "And that's when, like, I really started just to dream big, having our cohort leader be that role model for me. And so, like, just seeing him everyday working, hustling, you know, very hard is kind of like I need to do the same thing for the next man. You know? And just having like-minded friends around me. It's like we have, like, that go-getter mindset that we are going to change this world. Not, in this community, but this world and that's what the program is all about is not changing our state, but changing the nation."

In addition to mentorship and academic supports, pedagogical relevance was also systemic tie that functioned as a type of support. For example, on teacher candidate mentioned, "…One thing about joining [the program] is it teaches you things that you can't get in your normal education courses in college. So, it mainly focused on those tough subjects that most male educators face in the education world that they won't teach you in the college course." Another teacher candidate explained, "They understand, I guess you can say, our background and struggle and so they really—they love on us. They care on us. They nurture. And we have discussions on what it's like to be in the classroom and whatnot. They have an understanding of what it means to be a black teacher."

Others noted having strong relationships with faculty. One teacher candidate noted, "Every professor that I had here, even in the classes that were like electives, they've all been dedicated professionals who have been—yeah, they've been very accommodating because I am that student that always has something going on I feel like, especially with my health. And they have always been understanding." Another teacher candidate for shared, "When I first came to the program, I was a Music Education major and I changed because I didn't do well in that and my advisor—the advisor for middle level education she showed me love…You know, and that stuff that professors don't do—they don't get personal with you." Faculty were able to recognize and value the Black teacher candidates in the program, which served as a significant source of support.

Structural Challenges to Program Completion

The supports that gestured as positive systemic ties or supports for some participants, for others were noted as challenges. In particular, feelings of isolation, unresponsive professors, relevance of coursework, limited course offering, and exam requirements posed significant structural challenges to program completion. Although many teacher candidates experienced a sense of comradery among their peers, they also experienced challenges in educator preparation social settings. For example, one teacher candidate explained, "It's very little mingling and I don't feel like if I go into a classroom I'll have support from them so I always look for someone in GYO or someone who I know because I know I will have a resource there with me." Another teacher candidate explained, "I leave that class just lonely and having to deal with the thoughts and the stuff that we talked about by myself." A teacher candidate offering another perspective on this challenge expressed, "It's tough, because you are African-American male, and you know that any moment could be targeted towards you, or it could be targeted to one of your friends or to someone else, but we always, you know, I think really just be a unit."

This was also connected to experiences with faculty that made some teacher candidates feel uncomfortable. A teacher describing a challenge with one of her professors lamented, "I'm not scared to say I work—I'm a worker and the harder you work, the bigger D she gives you on a paper…Why are you…giving me a D? So that was a challenge. There was a young man in the classroom, a Caucasian guy, and he was—he said to me, we worked as partners. We did the work together. Wrote the paper. He got the A and I got the D. He said to me, '[Shirley], I'm sorry for you.' He said, 'I don't have to do—I don't have to work as hard as you work.' That's what he said to me." This concern about faculty was also connected to some participant beliefs that the program curriculum appeared irrelevant. This was apparent in one of the teacher candidate's commentary about her student teaching experiences, chiding "Yeah, it's like 3:30, give them back to their parents and that's it. There's no—and then the only resources you get is like stay after school and help them with homework or tutoring services, but it's never like connect to the community and see what is going on and how you are teaching can interplay outside of the classroom. It's just really—it's disconnected."

There were also challenges related to advisement and availability of classes, with one Black teacher candidate noting, "Right now I'm waiting to take Chemistry and I'm waiting to take some of the math courses and all of those classes are offered during the daytime when I'm at work…I had issue with the academic advisor on some level…Taking classes, that I really didn't need…really, I'm still here because I didn't know stuff like that." Part of the teacher's perception of the course availability appeared to be related to perceived slights about differential treatment in comparison to other teacher pipeline programs. One Black educator from the professional pipeline asserted, "There was one class and I said I need to have this class. I must have this class. And they said this class is for the fellows [the other teacher pipeline program]. I said why can't I have this and that class." In other words, the same privileges the other teacher pipeline program received to take classes that fit with their working schedules, were not extended to participants in the GYO program. The issue with differential treatment also arose in terms of connections to teaching opportunities post-graduation as one teacher candidate explained that she was one of the few students who received direct recommendations for teaching positions. There were also challenges related to the certification exams, with one teacher candidate sharing his struggle, "As of recently I haven't been able to graduate on time because of the practice test and there are program members before me that have—went through the same struggle and it was very discouraging at one point." This was a common systemic challenge across all programs that posed as a significant barrier to program completion.

Stage 3—Black Educators' Coping Strategies: Addressing Vulnerability and Stress

The net stress that Black educators experience as they work to complete their programs and successfully transition to schools, can yield adaptive or maladaptive coping strategies. In this study, adaptive coping strategies were understood as strategies that enabled them to stay in the program to become teachers, and maladaptive strategies are those that cause them to leave the school or program. Although maladaptive coping was not evident as a significant theme, I did not interpret this as evidence that they do not exist. Rather, because the study focuses on current program participants or graduates engaged and committed to teaching, identifying maladaptive strategies would have required conducting focus groups with participants who either quit the program or teaching. Thus, this section primarily focuses on adaptive coping strategies utilized by Black educators. Looking across the transcripts, aspiring and current Black teachers articulated coping with stress and vulnerability in programs and classrooms by viewing challenges with a fighter mindset, and drawing from social, familial, and cultural capital.

To Take up or Give up the Fight

The mindset of a fighter appeared to be one of the most dominant coping strategies taken by aspiring and current Black educators. It is connected to the idea of

persisting and/or persevering in the face of program and school stressors. The coping strategy is to take up the fight. This means not to run, but to engage. For some educators, this immediate coping strategy was connected to a historical legacy of oppression, as one teacher asserted, "Black people are used to fighting for what we believe in…a struggle, a slap in the face is normal for us—we are used to constantly being knocked down. But we climb up. We are used to that. So me, I'm not worried I'm going to lose my job because of new administration." Yet, this explanation should not necessarily be interpreted to mean the fight Black educators take up is easy because they are accustomed to fighting. Indeed, the fight was of such intensity that sometimes their children had to see their mothers crying at home because they "got to the point where my kids needed to see me cry so they understand there is a fight in your mom that you must have to get where you want to be." And they needed to see the fight because many of these teachers were on the battlefield for their children and students. They chose to fight for them. As one educator expressed, "My school is probably one of the schools that has the most teachers, middle-aged, black teachers, who are still fighting for our kids." And this notion of fight resonated with others, as one Black educator shared,

> If you don't have perseverance and a strong will, this is not the career for you. You are right. I like the word you used. You have to fight it because there are so many times I have to dig deep within myself to find the strength to press on from day to day because sometimes I feel like I'm so beaten by the behavior of the kids and the lack of discipline. And I have to find the drive and the will for myself to go on each day. I have to find something to hang onto…you have to find it within yourself. You have to. There is no other way.

The ability to discern the type of fight one is facing was also critical when deciding whether or not to take up the fight with one Black educator asserting. "Learn when it is a battle and when it is a war and every battle sometimes does not need to be fought but if it's a war be willing to stick it through regardless of what the consequences are because it may not turn out the way you've planned, but you've got to be willing to stick it out." These battles, in the school and classroom, appeared in the form of difficulty passing coursework, facing disadvantages on the job, and dealing with new challenges and a lack of support. One Black male educator shared a situation that resulted in him failing his student teaching course right before graduation. It appeared as though the mentor teacher blindsided him after giving positive feedback for most of the semester. At that point he could decide to give up the fight (quit the program), or take up the fight (take the course again) so he could graduate the program. With encouragement from another professor, he decided to take up the fight, explaining, "You know I went there and fought as hard as I needed to fight to make the process as easy as it could have been going forward once they told me I wasn't going to graduate." Whereas the colleague in the same situation decided to quit, the rationale of the teacher who chose to fight was, "Yeah, they weren't going to break me."

Another teacher expressed, "…you constantly have to fight to get something…all the time…When it comes to disadvantages, I have such a passion and I think that's why I'm teaching where I'm teaching." In these expressions, there was an intention

to fight, and not back down. Another teacher described the initial challenges of transitioning from a paraprofessional to teacher role in a school with little support, and also referenced a fighter mindset, sharing, "I mean, I'm hanging in there. I mean, I'd like to say, I'm up for a fight. I'm a fighter. You know?" Closely related to the coping strategy of having a mindset of a fighter, the idea of coping by being driven also emerged, with one teacher from the community driven pipeline rationalizing, "I think we are—we are just very driven…yeah, we all have that in common. We are just—we are just people who don't quit." In short, coping with vulnerability and stress required a fighter mindset.

Drawing from Social, Familial, and Cultural Capital

Another way Black educators were able to cope with challenges that arose was by drawing from community and family capital. Seeing their colleague reach his breaking point and quit was discouraging, but they drew support from each other, explaining, "And we all took it and we all dealt with it and we all encouraged each other. We supported one another. Going through with each other helped us be able to make it through." Another teacher candidate from the professional pipeline discussed an organic collective strategy of relying on community,

> We lean on each other. A lot of us are wives and mothers and go through divorces and going through other challenges. You know we just have so many personal things that are so similar. So, when we see each other here, we are saying did you get it done? But we kind of release on each other and I love that because we take the time to just talk it out and it's an outlet. So it does make it a little bit easier to be able to focus on your work when you can just, you know, unload a little bit where you might not be able to do it at home or at work, so the support system of the other students has helped me a lot.

She clarified further, "It was myself and then other students of color like me that were working. We would go to each other's homes on Sunday and work so hard together." In this sense, drawing from the community of teachers, as a type of social capital, enabled her to cope with the collective net stress she encountered while matriculating through the program. A different teacher candidate noted the importance of family explaining, "So for me, my husband and my parents are very supportive and so when I have things that I go through, I have someone to listen to me, give me good advice…especially when I'm working." Further, in instances where Black educators were placed in "sink or swim" contexts in their school classrooms, easy cultural connections with kids helped offset some of the systemic challenges, with one community pipeline teacher explaining,

> Now, what -- what helped me is that I'm from here. And so …we were thrown in and it was one of those sink or swim, but fortunately my kids that I encountered in my first year was at the high school, 10th grade, straight out of school. I could relate to a lot of the kids there because I was a lot of them. Broken home, background -- daddy alcoholic, strung out on drugs, kids, so it helped

me with just being from the same environment and I was able to swim and not drown.

In this sense, being from and having the community insider knowledge of the student and community enabled some of them to cope in ways that teachers not from the community were unable to do. The familial, social, and community capital created a type of relief that enabled the Black educators to continue taking up the fight. Ironically, it seemed the fight (i.e., the presence of challenges, slights, and systemic issues in their teaching and learning experiences) informed and confirmed their perceived reality that they do in fact matter in the classroom.

Stage 4—Black Educators' Identity Formation: I Matter in the Classroom

The development of their emergent identities as Black educators is understood in relation to how they viewed themselves in various professional and educational settings when faced with the question: Do I matter as an educator? There was a choice to be made. Armed with coping strategies to fight, their collective daily choices on how to answer that question over the course of an academic year, and subsequent years thereafter, laid the foundation for their identity formation as Black educators. As such, a dominant theme that emerged among participants is the value and impact they can have on the classroom. They determined that they do matter. And this decision (I matter as a Black educator versus I do not matter) was connected to beliefs, which ultimately inform behaviors. Two key perspectives anchored this sense of mattering: (1) recognizing their role and responsibility; and (2) recognizing their impact on students.

Recognizing Role and Responsibility

It was clear from the focus group transcripts that the role and responsibility of Black educators was weighty. They could not assume a view of their role as simply to teach content to students. They could not interpret their job responsibilities only by what was outlined in the teaching contract. As an aspiring teacher chided,

> This world is going to see us as black people and we are some of the most resilient, brilliant, giving, loving people and our kids need a chance, so that's why I feel that it's important for me to become a teacher. Those kids need me just as much as I need them…And that's not -- that's part of education. You can't push a paper and a book in front of them and say okay. Have at it. You have got to kind of look beyond. You know, sometimes you are going to be a parent and a doctor and a – Psychiatrist. And a cook or a -- or whatever you have to be to get these kids properly educated. I'm not saying that everybody, you know, that you go into this system doing that, but sometimes you are going to wind up doing that because you've got real people--those kids--those are not just kids. Those are people. They are real people.

In this sense, part of mattering in the classroom consisted of a willingness to assume a range of roles in classroom to ensure students have every chance to succeed. There was a responsibility to the community and the students who live there. This was conveyed by an aspiring educator professing, "We are from here. So I want to bring these kids up right so that people from outside of here don't look at them and say they can't do this or they won't do that." Being from the community meant having a responsibility to the community.

Further, another aspect of recognizing their role and responsibility was perceiving what happens in their absence. As one teacher from the career pipeline vividly posited, "For all the boys that I see hanging on the side of the street, I knew something was missing. If they had a teacher or a coach, just someone who believed in them…where I raised all of my kids, some boys got neglected and the result of that you can see on the streets." As a Black educator, especially one of the few or only in the building, the role and responsibility they carried made it clear they mattered. A refrain that resonated with this sentiment was "If we don't do it, who will?" Implied in the refrain is also an understanding that their presence makes a profound impact on students. And there was a true perception that the numbers are dwindling in representation in the profession, and they had to choose whether or not they contributed to this phenomenon.

Recognizing Impact on Students

A core component of Black teachers mattering with respect to impact on students, was related to the relationship they formed with their students. Through these teacher to student connections, students had access to care and positivity that may otherwise be unavailable. One Black educator from the community pipeline shared, "its worth it because kids need to see my faith. They need to see somebody they can identify with and see that there are other options." This was connected to the idea that "…Black kids need somebody who looks like them *and* experiences life like them." As one aspiring teacher noted when thinking about Black males he experienced as a student, "We used to call him Mr. C. Now, he was the first male black teacher that I ever encountered and—and just the way that he carried himself to show that he cared for us and stuff like that. And it was—it was like from a man—it's like being at home. Like, you know, your mom sugarcoats everything, but your dad, you know, he tells you the truth and he lets you know, like, this is why I'm hard on you." That sense of "being at home" potentially created safe spaces that fostered a sense of self-esteem and confidence. As another teacher confirmed, "it's very important for a young black boy to see a teacher [who looks like him] because it's such an influence as a role model to think that they know that they can make it." This perspective was affirmed by another aspiring teacher who rebuffed "why are we seen as overachievers" when her kids excelled in school. The notion of mattering and meaning for their students shaped these educators' perceptions of place in the field of education, which ultimately had implications for them remaining in the classroom.

Stage 5—Black Educator Professional Outcomes: Choosing to Stay

Once the identity formation process becomes stable over time it tends to yield productive or adverse outcomes. For the purpose of this study, productive outcomes are understood to be Black educators remaining in the profession, and adverse outcomes would be Black educators leaving the profession. Since the participants in this study were all active educators, the identity formation process for them ultimately yielded professional outcomes of remaining in the profession at the time of data collection. Based on evidence from the focus group transcripts, the decision to remain in the classroom appeared to be connected to the following problem-solving strategies: resistant ontologies for navigating the social world; asserting self as pedagogical authority; and commitment to constant growth.

Resistant Ontological Ways for Navigating the Education Field

Resistant ontologies were a way Black educators reconciled harsh realities and challenging times. As a state of being in the presence of stressors and vulnerabilities, they said, "Yet Still I Rise." For some Black educators, this way of being came from observing strong men and women being pressed, and seeing how they survived. As an alternative, culturally steeped and community slanted way of understanding, being, and navigating social spaces in education, resistant ontologies allowed them to remain in the profession. At times this meant they had to "pray through" and remind themselves "we may not have everything we want but we have everything we need." For many of these educators, reverence to a spiritual authority with gratitude put the challenges they faced as Black educators in perspective. They told themselves and their students, "Be grateful. Be humble… you've got love. You've got a village." These educators expressed ways of being to counter the nagging feeling that differential treatment in comparison to their white colleagues should cause despair, or not receiving higher monetary rewards because of the schools they choose to teach is a reason to leave.

   Maintaining this type of resistant ontological perspective took effort given the challenges they faced, but their belief that "Sacrifice is the only way. Hard work is the key to anything you want in life" framed their decision to stay and be committed to their students and school communities each day they walked in the classroom. In a teaching profession that has historically been slated toward the white female gaze, Black educators, men and women, had to be and know "I'm enough. I'm teaching my kids. They are enough and we are happy." Instead of being driven by the latest educational fade, demands of accountability, and cowering to the gaze of invisibility by people in positions of power, their way of being and moving in the school context was informed by a valuing of self and being that was not dependent on outside affirmation. As one educator noted, "I always say just think about your purpose, think about what you are here for, and then figure out different ways to reach different kids."

Asserting Self as Pedagogical Authority

A resistant ontological perspective also positioned and equipped Black educators to assert self as pedagogical authority. Since outside affirmation was not always a reliable and realistic source of professional identity development, Black educators had to assert their authority as pedagogues and knowledge producers to remain in the profession. For many of them, their internal matrix of confidence was not dictated by the educational environment. This required being confident and "knowing what you bring to the table." One of the female educators described the curriculum mandates by the district leaders that heavily scripted teaching moves in the classroom. She took issue with this because "my students get it how I give it so I don't want to be told how to teach." This required asserting her pedagogical authority when district leaders came in the classroom to view her lesson. Instead of working to align herself with the mandates, she kept with teaching moves she enacted on a daily basis with students. So far, this decision has been met with commendations and broad approval because her style is unique and different, but most importantly, effective with her students.

Yet, if her decision to assert pedagogical authority was met with disapproval, she was not fearful, but prepared to defend her pedagogical choices. "You have to take autonomy" was a clear problem solving strategy on the part of Black educators. Another Black educator described "telling the literacy department what she was going to do" opposed to waiting for their suggestions and ideas. This was also connected to asserting their voices with people in positions of power so their pedagogical prowess was heard and felt. This was true when engaging with school principals, for example, to voice concerns about micromanaging instruction, and taxing their pedagogical energy by placing the majority of challenging students in their classrooms. Because they knew their value, they asserted themselves, even when overlooked or taken for granted.

Commitment to Constant Growth

Possessing resistant ontological ways of being for moving through the education world, and asserting self as pedagogical authority, also included a commitment to constant growth, both in a personal and professional sense. This meant recognizing old ways of problem solving life's difficulties must be refined and adjusted to remain in the classroom. One Black educator from the community pipeline described beginning her teaching career in the teacher's longue with colleagues, and aligning herself with efforts to bring forth concerns to administration in an aggressive and fiery manner. However, she came to realize that was not the best approach because the people enticing her to make waves turned out to not really be there for her. Plus, the school leadership started perceiving her as antagonistic, which threatened her ability to remain in the classroom. She decided to switch up her strategy and begin to observe and listen more. It required that she grow in ways she had never been challenged to do, but ultimately, it ended up being a wise decision when her students continued to excel academically each year and school leaders began to recognize her as a leading educator in the school building.

Commitment to constant growth also included facing challenges with students and resolving to see it through to the end. When reflecting on a particular class, one Black educator shared telling her class, "Some of your parents are very entitled and I will not be disrespected. So either you learn to love this relationship we are building in our classroom and convey that to your parents, or its going to be a whole strained year, but at the end of the day, I'm going to come out standing." This commitment to remain despite challenges reflected a commitment to grow during struggle. Returning to school to pursue additional educational opportunities was another type of problem solving strategy Black educators used to encourage professional growth. One educator lamented that a challenge she sees among Black educators is a sense that once they receive their degree that is it. As she rationalized, "Be willing to say I'm going to go back and try something new. Whether it is a certificate or degree because you can't get any further without it and you will forever have a glass ceiling over your head." She clarified again later, "You can't advance in education without more education to be honest and I think Black teachers have to understand you are not done learning because you have that bachelors in your hands. A lot of times we quit. We quit. And I don't think it's the district, the school, anything. We just feel like I'm done and I'm not doing anything else…[but] understand if you chose education that is going to be your career for a lifetime and you are going to continue to learn."

Several Black educators reflected this commitment to pursue leadership opportunities. One Black educator, when reflecting on the problems she faced with an unresponsive administrator, noted, "Well, I think a lot of times the frustration comes from the teacher because administration just throws things down on them…I don't agree with some things that's going on…You do have to, you know, find where you are going to try to make a change in it…so that's why I'm going back to school for administration right now." This represents a commitment to growth as a problem solving strategy that requires constant reflection on circumstances you are confronting and making decisions about what to do next. As one male educator from the community pipeline noted, "I always ask, when people ask about changes and being effective, I ask what did you do? What changes have you made in your practices?" In sum, for many Black educators in this study, being committed to constant personal and professional growth was a problem solving strategy that enabled them to traverse the many challenges they face, and remain in the classroom.

Implications: Supporting Black Educators Along the Teacher Development Continuum

Perhaps what is most striking about the findings from this study regarding GYO Black educators' experiences as they journey along the developmental continuum is the need for a holistic view of teaching and learning. The intersectional double bind and PVEST analysis revealed that Black educators confront and navigate an array of stressors and vulnerabilities in educational systems. As such, it seems more attention and support should be infused in our models of teaching and learning at each stage of the developmental continuum over time. Based on the findings, possible research

and praxis questions associated with the work of teacher educators, programs, and schools are noted for each stage of development.

Stage 1: Black Educator Strengths and Risks (Net Vulnerability)

- How might we redefine what educational potential means, and in particular, our processes for identifying genius among Black students and educators?
- How might strength-based and responsive assessment protocols be developed and utilized in recruitment and selection models of GYO programs and/or educator prepration programs to assess and support Black educators at the beginning of their educational journey?
- What are the typical strengths and risks associated with Black educator development, and how might they be addressed in light of each subsequent stage of development?

Stage 2: Black Educator Supports and Challenges (Net Stress)

- In what ways can differentiated teaching and learning supports for Black educators be offered in GYO programs and/or educator preparation programs?
- What are the features and structures associated with effective Black educator mentorship in GYO programs and/or educator preparation programs?
- What might culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies look like for aspiring Black educators in GYO programs and/or educator preparation programs?
- What mechanisms in GYO programs and/or educator preparation facilitate Black educators' positive relationship development with faculty?
- How are community networks created by Black educators, and what can GYO programs and/or educator prepration programs do to foster their growth and sustainability?
- How does the mission and leadership of GYO programs and/or educator preparation act as a type of support or challenge for Black educators in their programs?

Stage 3: Black Educators' Problem Solving (Reactive Coping Process)

- How can the psycho-social-emotional development of Black educators be infused in GYO programs and/or educator preparation coursework and program structure to support adaptive problem solving development?
- How can case studies of successful Black educators across a range of educational contexts and backgrounds be employed as pedagogical tools for supporting problem solving development?

- How might counseling, mentorship, and social supports be offered to support Black educators' health, longevity and effectiveness in the profession?
- What are the psychological, social, emotional, and physical impacts of a fighter mindset on the professional lives of Black educators?
- What types of supports might be offered to diffuse and/or support the fight that Black educators take up?
- How can Black educators' cultural cultural wealth be tapped to cultive healthy coping strategies for academic, professional, and personal success?

Stage 4: Black Educator Identity Formation (Emergent Identities)

- How can frameworks of novice teacher development be reimagined in schools, GYO programs and/or educator preparation to support positive professional identity development among Black educators?
- What might be possible roles Black teacher mentors may play to support Black educator professional identity development?
- In what ways can human resource development officers strategically assess and responsively address the experiences of Black educators in school districts?
- What might be the role of African American and Black Studies programs in supporting positive emergent educational identities of Black educators?
- What are the intellectual, community, and/or school vehicles that can be utilized to explore ways the strengths of Black educators can be uplifted to affirm and solidify efficacious professional identities?

Stage 5: Black Educator Professional Outcomes (Life-Stage Specific Coping Outcomes)

- What types of supports can GYO programs and/or educator preparation and schools offer to support leadership development among Black educators? What types of pipelines and partnership structures between schools, districts and programs might support such efforts?
- In what ways can teacher educator, principal, and/or instructional coaching opportunities be created to support the ongoing professional development of Black educators?
- What might be the types of professional development, induction, and/or mentorship supports related to and tailored for defining personal educational mission and asserting pedagogical authority?
- How might educational organizing groups recognize and solicit Black educator intellectual prowess to develop education reform initiatives and academic knowledge projects?

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