



New Programmatic Possibilities (Re)Positioning Preservice Teachers of Color as Experts in Their Own Learning

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Abstract

Efforts to recruit and retain Teachers of Color are rarely accompanied by policy and programmatic changes that adequately address their unique learning needs. In this article, I propose a framework that draws on sociocultural learning theory and Critical Race Theory to examine how programmatic structures embedded in a racially structured society marginalize the learning needs of preservice Teachers of Color committed to social justice. Recognizing a need to challenge racially hierarchical learning models within teacher preparation programs, I utilize my proposed framework to consider new programmatic possibilities when preservice Teachers of Color are simultaneously positioned as experts and learners in one another's student teaching experiences. Through a qualitative analysis of the peer learning experiences between two preservice Teachers of Color, in this study, I offer conceptual tools to examine the complex intersections and tensions between learning structures, social processes, and the experiential knowledge of People of Color. I also offer implications for teacher preparation programs in an effort to (re)organize cultural practices that center the learning needs of preservice Teachers of Color.

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Introduction

The best thing [about student teaching] is having a co-teacher. The thing I've always loved about having a co-teacher and having two different classes is we get to see two different ways of teaching and how we approach certain things. (Delilah)

As demonstrated through their personal statements and prior experiences working in nonprofit and justice-oriented organizations, Delilah and Robin were the ideal candidates for teacher preparation programs committed to social justice: They came into their program having recognized the significant disparities in the distribution of educational opportunities and resources for low-income Communities of Color,¹ and they hoped to transform inequitable schooling contexts through teaching. What set these two apart from the general candidates in the overall national teaching force was their background as Women of Color and the ways in which their experiential knowledge informed their critical analyses of schooling and their approach to teaching practice. By chance, they were placed in the field with one another to jointly apply theoretical understanding of university coursework and develop practical classroom teaching experience. Considering that Teachers of Color make up only 18% of the national teaching force (Easton-Brooks, 2014; Ingersoll & May, 2011), this pairing provided an unlikely opportunity for them to further develop their critical analyses and pedagogical development with a peer from a minoritized background. As described in Delilah's statement in the opening of this article, peer learning between Robin and herself became one of the main highlights of their learning and student teaching experience.

It would be remiss to downplay that Delilah and Robin's pairing was an accidental rather than intentional act on the part of the program. The relationship between programmatic structures, participation, and the learner within a racially structured society continues to be inadequately investigated within the field of teacher education, particularly the unique learning needs of preservice Teachers of Color (Brown, 2014; Sleeter, Neal, & Kumashiro, 2014). Building on the traditions of scholars who bring together seemingly divergent theoretical and methodological approaches to examine issues of race, structural racism, and learning (Nasir & Hand, 2006; Philip, 2011), in this article, I draw on sociocultural learning theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to conceptualize and explore new programmatic possibilities for preparing preservice Teachers of Color committed to social justice, particularly through a lens of peer learning.

According to sociocultural theory, learning is a social and cultural process in which individuals engage in situated activities to co-construct knowledge (Greeno, 1997; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Drawing on artifacts, tools, and the expertise of social actors within the community of practice, as postulated by sociocultural learning theorists, individuals engage in cultural practices and develop expertise through shifting social relations within communities of practice over time. In the case of Delilah and Robin, their social interactions with one another enabled them

to meaningfully negotiate knowledge and strategies of teaching in socially just and culturally relevant ways, a phenomenon that is often overlooked as an important aspect of a teacher's identity and pedagogical development in the field of teacher education. In this article, I consider the possibilities of positioning preservice Teachers of Color as both learners and experts who have the capacity to co-construct new forms of knowledge with one another. This framing is premised on critical race theorists' assertions that building on the perspectives and realities of People of Color serves to disrupt dominant ideologies and discourse that function to reproduce institutional hierarchies (e.g. Matias & Liou, 2015). And while the field of teacher education has made significant strides in identifying what teacher preparation programs can do to better prepare and support the needs of preservice Teachers of Color learning to teach for social justice (Amos, 2010; Frank, 2003; Parker & Hood, 1995), many of these studies have tended to focus on preservice Teachers' of Color interactions with their White counterparts. Therefore peer learning between preservice Teachers of Color and how programmatic structures embedded in a racially structured society organize their learning opportunities continue to be insufficiently theorized and studied.

The research question guiding this study was, How and to what extent does peer learning between preservice Teachers of Color in the field shape their participation and pedagogical development as emerging social justice educators? By examining the peer learning experiences between Delilah and Robin through a lens of sociocultural learning theory and CRT, I am able to illuminate dynamics of teacher learning with a Peer of Color and how their interactions meaningfully contribute to their ideological and pedagogical development as self-proclaimed social justice educators. Designed as an ethnographic case study, I rely on data collected from in-depth classroom observations, audio recordings of teacher reflections, and interviews to investigate the intersections between their lived experiences, course work learning, and field experience. In turn, through this study, I offer important conceptual tools as a means to examine the complex intersections and tensions between learning structures, social processes, and the experiential knowledge of People of Color. Furthermore, I offer implications for teacher preparation programs to (re)organize cultural practices that would further facilitate learning experiences that center the unique learning needs of preservice Teachers of Color committed to social justice.

Background

A growing body of scholarship has suggested that Teachers of Color are uniquely positioned to enact instructional and institutional changes in classrooms and schools that expand learning opportunities for students, particularly for Students of Color (Easton-Brooks, 2014; Gomez, Rodriguez, & Agosto, 2008; Klopfenstein, 2005; Villegas & Davis, 2008; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Some of these studies argue that Teachers of Color who develop a deeper understanding of their racialization

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tend to develop a commitment to improve educational outcomes and possibilities for Students of Color. This argument is premised on the idea that there is a strong connection between the academic achievement of students and teachers who share similar racial, cultural, and/or linguistic backgrounds, which is in large part due to the recognition that Teachers of Color are “both individuals and members of historic groups that likely possess knowledge and experiences that are different from but complementary to those found in dominant society” (Brown, 2014, p. 340). Considering the strengths that they bring to the education of Students of Color, many teacher preparation programs and school districts have sought to recruit and retain Teachers of Color (Sleeter et al., 2014); however, an acknowledgment of the value of Teachers of Color is rarely accompanied by policy and programmatic changes that will effectively prepare preservice Teachers of Color to transform inequitable schooling. For instance, Knight’s (2002) study demonstrated how a multicultural social reconstructionist program, even with the best intentions, failed to include the perspectives of a working-class Black preservice teacher and prepare her to meaningfully develop teaching strategies grounded in the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students. Without ample opportunities to productively examine and apply critical theories and pedagogical practices, Teachers of Color may inadvertently (re)produce dominant practices that contradict their social justice goals and hinder the learning of Students of Color (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011; Nyachae, 2016; Philip, Rocha, & Olivares-Pasillas, 2017). More often than not, as these studies have suggested, Teachers of Color leave their programs ill prepared to work in urban schools with little growth in the social justice-oriented goals and critical consciousness they came in with and/or enter schools with a lack of tools to sustain their ability to teach in socially just and culturally responsive ways.

Some scholars have argued that part of the issues of preparation stems from the essentialization of Teachers of Color as effective educators based on cultural match alone; from the failure to recognize the diversity of goals for becoming a teacher and their perspectives on teaching and students; and from the learning needs that likely exist among and across preservice Teachers of Color (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008; Brown, 2014; Villegas & Davis, 2008). Knowing that many preservice Teachers of Color have been educated within the same oppressive schooling systems they are trying to change, scholars have advocated for a range of unique supports that can further cultivate their critical understandings of teaching and learning, including implementation of structured spaces to help them heal from and unpack their understandings of their K–12 experiences (Kohli, 2014), engagement in self-reflective practices to understand their racialized experiences in relation to their students’ experiences (Achinstein & Aguirre, 2008), and development and nurturing of their racialized and politicized identities (Philip, 2014; Pour-Khorshid, 2016). Other scholars have argued that to effectively restructure teacher learning, programs must first recognize that teacher learning is embedded in systems of power that normalize and reinscribe dominant structures and practices,

contributing to inequitable opportunities to learn. In particular, Ladson-Billings (2005) argued that a lack of diversity within a predominantly White teacher educator workforce limits the possibilities of “richer and more complex perspectives” that can inform teacher preparation and student learning. Underlying her argument is a question of who has power and what counts as “expertise” in teacher education to effectively serve students from racially, ethnically, linguistically, and culturally diverse backgrounds. This is not to say that White teacher educators do not have valuable expertise to offer in teacher learning, nor is it to say that Teacher Educators of Color have more valuable expertise, but it is to say that the failure to develop and sustain new possibilities for preparing preservice Teachers of Color is rooted in the organization of teacher learning occurring in racially hierarchical structures: White teacher educators are more likely to be positioned as “experts” in preparing a predominantly White teaching population to serve a rapidly changing demographic of students (Howard & Milner, 2014). Despite having unique insights that could potentially address the educational needs and interests of Students of Color, then, preservice Teachers of Color are ironically positioned as “newcomers” in a constraining learning structure in which they must primarily rely on the “expertise” of a predominantly White teaching and teacher educator profession to learn how to teach in socially just and culturally relevant ways. Clearly, as scholars like Cochran-Smith and Villegas (2015) and Zeichner (2010) have called for, this study on peer learning necessarily engages a new approach for teacher preparation and teacher preparation research.

Building on these bodies of scholarship, I argue that programs that truly value the assets of Teachers of Color must reorganize learning structures to challenge dominant and normalized forms of knowledge production as a means to offer new possibilities of and epistemologies for preparing them to teach in new and distinct ways. One possibility for reimagining structures for teacher learning—one that increases opportunities for meaningful participation, that acknowledges the experiential knowledge of preservice Teachers of Color, and that is culturally responsive to the communities they serve—is reorganizing cultural practices that shape preservice teachers’ field experience. While teacher preparation programs generally rely on fieldwork as a main site for teachers to develop pedagogical skills learned at the university (Anderson & Stillman, 2013; Ronfeldt & Reininger, 2012), the student teaching model has remained relatively the same over the past 50 years (as cited by Bullough et al., 2003). In a traditional student teaching model, where one preservice Teacher of Color would be placed with a mentor teacher, the preservice Teacher of Color has the opportunity to observe and collaborate with the mentor teacher and reflect on his or her own practice through interactions with the mentor teacher and university field supervisor. Generally speaking, the preservice Teacher of Color is positioned as the “newcomer,” and the university field supervisor and mentor teacher are positioned as the “experts.” Now consider how the peer teaching model, when two preservice Teachers of Color are placed with one mentor teacher, may

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present new opportunities for preservice Teacher of Color learning (Bullough et al., 2003). The preservice Teacher of Color is able to observe and collaborate with both the mentor teacher and peer and has additional opportunities to reflect on and shift his or her participation through interactions with the mentor teacher, university field supervisor, and peer. Through pairing with a Peer of Color, the preservice Teacher of Color is also able to learn from and with a source of knowledge from a nondominant background, one that could potentially complicate and further his or her own understandings of racialization. By examining the dynamics of learning within the peer teaching model through a sociocultural and critical race lens, particularly between Delilah and Robin, I am able to discuss new programmatic possibilities that challenge racially hierarchical learning models and dominant forms of knowledge production when preservice Teachers of Color committed to social justice are simultaneously positioned as both experts and learners in one another's learning.

Theoretical Framework

I draw on sociocultural learning theory to understand Delilah's and Robin's peer learning experiences in the field. According to this theory, learning occurs through social interactions in contextual, distributed, culturally organized activity systems (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Through ongoing engagement in culturally meaningful activities, the peer teaching model constitutes a community of practice, enabling learners to mediate tools and gain authority through changes in participation (Wenger, 1998). This change in participation also involves a change in identity, which is socially constructed and validated through recognition from members of the community. Using the concept of learning by doing and learning as becoming, this framework allows me to examine how structures for learning are organized within a peer teaching model, how such organization constrains and affords participation, and how opportunities to participate affect their identity and learning development as emerging social justice educators.

For the purposes of this study, I use two aspects of sociocultural learning theory to frame learning within the peer teaching model. First, learning to teach is a contextual and situational process. This learning process occurs through social interactions within communities of practice as the learner negotiates meaning in joint activities. Second, identity development as social justice educators is co-constructed by members in communities of practice as they engage in cultural activities, and these identities are negotiated and can shift in social practice and context. It is important to note that while other members within the community of practice contribute to Delilah's and Robin's learning in the field, such as the students, mentor teachers, and university field supervisor, in this study, I particularly focus on how their pedagogical and learning development is informed through interactions with one another.

While sociocultural theory is useful in its abilities to identify how teaching

and learning develop through a lens of structure, participation, and the learner, the theory in itself is limited in its inability to address how these factors are shaped by a racially stratified society (Nasir & Hand, 2006). Recognizing systems of power and how they shape unequal opportunities for learning is crucial to this study. Therefore I use CRT as a foreground to contextualize the role of preservice Teachers of Color teaching and learning in structures designed to reproduce racial and class inequities. A framework used to critically analyze race and racism, CRT draws attention to the ways that racial inequality is embedded in our institutions, highlighting the struggles of People of Color as a central concern (Ladson-Billings, 1998). A CRT tenet that is particularly salient for this study is the recognition that the experiential knowledge of preservice Teachers of Color serves as an integral factor to analyze, understand, and eliminate differential access to learning with regard to race and power (Solórzano, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Through this perspective, I am able to emphasize the unique ways in which Delilah and Robin can draw from their experiential knowledge to recognize and resist dominant ideologies and practices that reproduce inequitable learning opportunities for Students of Color. Given this dual focus on knowledge production as a cultural practice and knowledge production as power, I am able to investigate how Delilah and Robin learn together as a social process and how their learning draws on and foregrounds their experiences as People of Color in educational institutions, and how they negotiate or resist the ways those institutions organize and certify knowledge.

Methods

Site and Participants

I used convenient, purposeful sampling of two preservice Teachers of Color enrolled in a social justice-oriented teacher education program at a large public university in California. This unique sampling of two preservice Teachers of Color represents what Merriam (2009) regarded as “atypical” owing to “rare attributes or occurrences of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 78), which is appropriate for this study given the unlikely pairing of two preservice Teachers of Color within a predominantly White teaching population and teacher preparation programs. Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity of the schools, mentor teachers, preservice teachers, and students.

To contextualize their distinctive insights about race, culture, and schooling, I offer a brief narrative profile that describes how each participant’s experiential knowledge could potentially form the material of a rich exchange between two different yet connected approaches to teaching. Delilah identifies as a middle-class Filipina. Drawing on her K–12 schooling experiences within a predominantly White suburban community, and organizing experiences within a Filipinx² organization in college, Delilah entered the community of practice recognizing (a) the normalization

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of Eurocentric curriculum in K–12 schools, and how lack of opportunities to learn about her own history, culture, and reality contributed to internalized oppression and disengagement in schools, and (b) the possibilities of ethnic studies and culturally relevant curricula and how learning that centered her experiences enabled her to develop self-love and critical analyses of history, oppression, and achievement. Thus, in her role as a teacher, Delilah hoped to draw on the possibilities of creating ethnic studies curriculum and enacting culturally relevant pedagogy that could cultivate students' knowledge of race, racism, and cultural identity as a means to positively impact their academic achievement and critical thinking.

Robin identifies as a middle-class Black woman from a working-class family background. Drawing on her mother's experience as a single parent, positive K–12 schooling experiences in which she was granted access to college preparatory and Advanced Placement classes, and volunteer work with a broad range of youth in local and international organizations, Robin entered the learning context recognizing that Students of Color rarely have access to quality learning that promotes critical thinking. In her role as a teacher, she hoped to provide students, with emphasis on Black girls, with access to codes of power (Delpit, 1995) as a means to develop individual agentive resistance in a system that was not designed for them.

Delilah and Robin shared field placement with two mentor teachers at an urban middle school and high school in the 2014–2015 academic year, where they applied their university coursework learning about culturally relevant teaching in two English language arts classrooms. Their primary field placement, Parks High School, serves a predominantly Black and Latinx³ student population of more than 2,000 students in Grades 9–12. Within this context, after observing their mentor teacher and working with students in small groups during the fall quarter, Delilah and Robin shared responsibilities planning and co-teaching two classes during the winter quarter and eventually took over one class each to plan and teach during their independent student teaching in the spring quarter. Their secondary field placement, Williams Middle School, serves a predominantly Black and Latinx student population of more than 1,000 students in Grades 6–8. Within this context, Delilah and Robin tended to participate as the mentor teachers' assistants and occasionally shared responsibilities co-teaching based on lesson plans provided by their mentor teachers. Owing to logistics of scheduling and traveling between both school sites, rarely did Delilah and Robin have time to meet with their mentor teachers for more than 10–15 minutes. They also participated in bimonthly field supervision visits, in which they would engage in 30-minute pair reflections with the university field supervisor postobservation of their student teaching.

While this study considers their yearlong field experience in the first of their 2-year master's program, I particularly focus on the 10-week period in which they transition from observing their mentor teacher to co-teaching and independently student teaching in the winter quarter. This 10-week period occurred during their preparation for edTPA, a performance-based, subject-specific assessment that

determines approval for a preliminary teaching credential. Given their changes in participation as well as the high stakes involved at this stage in the program, the documentation of Delilah's and Robin's field experiences during this time frame serves as an appropriate measure of their learning development in the program.

Role of the Researcher

I have worked as field supervisor for the two participants at the site since the beginning of their field placement. Although my role as field support for preservice teachers may impact my role as a researcher and create concerns of researcher subjectivity, "comingling of roles is a common occurrence in anthropological work" (Ladson-Billings, 2001, p. 145). In fact, shared aspects of my positionality as a former classroom Teacher and Scholar of Color and my relational approach to field support resulted in a trusting relationship that likely influenced the richness and candidness of Delilah's and Robin's participation in this study. Thus, given my positionality and participation in their field experience, this study about learning within the peer teaching model is as much about me as it is about them.

Through this comingling of roles, I approached data collection the same way I approached field supervision. I shared all of my jottings with the participants before I revised them into ethnographic field notes, and I explicitly switched from my role as researcher, centering their sense-making processes, to my role as field supervisor postobservation, providing field support. I used member checks, which included taking data and interpretations to participants to ensure plausibility and reflexivity, and wrote critical analytic memos about my assumptions prior to data collection and reflected upon them during data analysis as strategies to address validity and reliability of the study (Merriam, 2009).

Data Sources and Analysis

Given my dual framework on peer learning as a social activity that is informed by systemic issues of race and inequality, field notes and individual interviews served as primary data sources that enabled me to stress social interactions, and the experiential knowledge of the social actors involved, as the main units of analysis to examine their learning processes. In particular, I conducted participant observation of preservice Teachers of Color both collaboratively co-teaching and independently student teaching to understand how the peer teaching model shaped their changing participation and pedagogical development. Specifically, I documented field notes of 5 out of 12 classroom observations and audio-recorded their reflections about their teaching postobservation. In addition, I used lesson plans and student work from these observations as supplementary data to understand their pedagogical development.

I also utilized Seidman's (2013) three-series interviews using open-ended questions to understand their individual learning experiences. I interviewed each participant in 2-week intervals to systematically document their learning develop-

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ment. Each of these interviews was guided by a theme using open-ended questions: the first interview about how their life experiences shaped their commitment to social justice, the second interview about their university coursework learning and field experiences, and the third interview about their reflections on their lived experiences and preservice teaching experiences. Each interview ran between 60 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed with the participants' consent.

The dynamics between the participants were also shaped by interactions outside fieldwork. These authentic, more informal interactions that shape their fieldwork are difficult to capture; thus I conducted a focus group interview at the end of study. This focus group interview required each participant to create a document as a visual interpretation of their shared experiences in the program. This method enabled me to elicit responses about the phenomenon of interest centered on the participants' own words and understandings (Merriam, 2009). By observing their interactions in a less formal setting, I was able to cross-reference their individual understandings of their experiences with their shared understandings of their experiences. The use of multiple data collection strategies, particularly emphasizing peer learning through peer interactions, served as a form of triangulation to confirm or reject discrepancy within data.

Because this was a single case study that involved two participants with a separate and shared phenomenon, I analyzed and completed two cycles of coding data for each individual participant as a comprehensive case of her individual experiences before completing a cross-case analysis to build abstraction across cases (Merriam, 2009). Using open coding followed by in vivo coding (Saldaña, 2013), I conducted two rounds of coding the interviews and reflections for each participant to determine how the peer teaching model shaped her pedagogical development. These codes were sorted into categories using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), reorganized by theme across cases and grouped into relational categories, with particular attention to commonalities and differences within both sets of data (Bazeley, 2013). The emerging themes included (a) shifting roles as learners and experts, (b) renegotiations of teaching and practices throughout changes in participation, and (c) identity development as social justice educators. This phase was followed by focused coding of the field notes and focus group interviews to triangulate my analysis of themes that emerged from the first phase. Together, these phases enabled me to describe the peer learning dynamics between Delilah and Robin and how relying on the expertise of a Peer of Color in particular shaped each preservice teacher's understandings of teaching and her teaching practices.

Findings

I begin this section by describing how situated contexts shaped Delilah's and Robin's dynamic roles as simultaneously learners and experts. Then I discuss how they (re)negotiated perspectives and practices of teaching in socially just and cul-

turally relevant ways throughout two different stages of participation: co-teaching and independent student teaching. Finally, I discuss how the learning dynamics within the peer teaching model shaped their identity development as aspiring social justice educators.

Dynamic Roles as Learners and Experts

Both Delilah and Robin first observed their mentor teachers in the field, eventually working more directly with students in small groups by December 2014. And while they were able to learn about methods for classroom management and the value of having mentor teachers who were from the same community as their students, they struggled with the disconnect between their mentor teachers' approaches to teaching and the approach they learned from the university (reflection, October 2014). While their mentor teachers tended to engage in more lecture-based teaching practices, their program tended to focus more on student-centered learning and discussion (field notes, October 2014). Through structured peer reflections between the three of us, we were able to jointly contextualize as well as problematize the limitations of their learning from the mentor teacher's practice and discuss alternative ways they could promote learning emphasized by the university, such as increasing student participation and discussion through small group instruction (reflection, November 2014). While their mentor teachers' practices limited their exposure to different ways of teaching in socially just ways, the peer teaching model presented more opportunities to co-construct knowledge of teaching. For example, drawing from Delilah's commitment to creating lessons that centered students' realities and Robin's commitment to providing students access to AP learning, they utilized university coursework learning to codesign a narrative writing unit in which students used rhetorical devices to share a counternarrative. Not only were they able to model theoretical and research-based practices for one another but they were able to complicate culturally relevant practices for their mentor teachers as well:

When we did the narrative project a lot of the students shared their feelings and talked about incarceration, their family members being shot. [Our mentor teacher] was surprised. She was like, "Oh my gosh, if you didn't do this assignment I would never know these things about these students." (Robin, focus group interview)

Such a phenomenon not only disrupts the concept of preservice Teachers of Color as solely "newcomers" to the community of practice but also disrupts the concept of mentor teacher as solely an "expert." Clearly Delilah and Robin benefited from the knowledge of the mentor teachers' deep understandings of the community and school context as well as enactment of classroom ecology practices, but they also served as experts for one another as well as the mentor teachers by jointly applying pedagogical skills learned at the university in the context of their field placement. Contrary to Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept that preservice Teachers of Color must first engage in legitimate peripheral participation by relying on the expertise

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of certain members within communities of practice (e.g., mentor teacher, university field supervisor) before they can develop expertise as social justice educators themselves, as CRT would purport, I demonstrate the importance of reframing preservice Teachers of Color as solely “newcomers” to members who are both learners and experts who have unique insights to share. Such an epistemological shift can serve as a starting point for problematizing and restructuring teacher learning to meaningfully engage with the experiential knowledge of preservice Teachers of Color.

At the same time, new challenges emerged as a result of engaging students with such personal writing assignments, and they felt unequipped to address student trauma. Nevertheless, structures for collaborative teaching and peer reflections enabled them to take curricular risks and grapple with critical questions that strengthened their complex understandings of oppression and reflective teaching, including “How do I approach content and how do I help them heal?” and “How do I do that being an English teacher because at the same time I need to teach them and get them prepared for certain stuff by the end of the school year?” (focus group interview). Through peer reflections and interactions, despite the limitations in the field, they were able further to develop the collaborative problem-solving and critical-thinking skills needed to complicate understandings of critical pedagogical practices (Gardiner & Robinson, 2010), a process that a traditional student teaching model cannot provide.

Renegotiating Perspectives and Practices of Teaching

By January 2015, Delilah and Robin began to take on a more active role in the classroom by co-planning and co-teaching lessons. Interestingly, the renegotiation of co-planning and co-teaching experiences mainly occurred through carpooling to and from their field placement. This activity supported their ability to more deeply connect and develop trust with one another:

While we’re carpooling, we’re able to talk about our personal lives, things that have happened to us, things that are bothering us, and I think that we confide in each other a lot, and we talk about things that bother us and we affirm each other and encourage each other. I think that we trust each other now because of the time that we spent together. And even now we still carpool so we’re able to talk, connect. (Robin, interview)

Developing a trusting relationship allowed them to create an informal space to share ideas they may not have otherwise shared in a more formal learning setting. This space supported their ability to identify and unpack their biases, racialized experiences, and experiential knowledge in an effort to strengthen and (re)negotiate teaching practices that promote equal educational opportunities in the field. This co-constructed space and relationship proved to be crucial for their learning process in the program:

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I think our positionality as Women of Color makes it easier. I don't think White people in our cohort mean to be oppressive, and I feel like People of Color who are male sometimes have privileges too because of their gender and that makes it hard to talk about intersectionality of oppression. But I can talk to Robin about this stuff! Robin knows what I'm going through during seminar because even I spoke up during class, I kind of got shut down, and I was like well that was my two cents and I'm not going to get angry so I'm going to step back. And Robin sat next to me after class and said, "Can you believe this?" And I'm like, "Yes!" (Delilah, focus group interview)

Drawing from CRT, I argue that institutional learning was not designed to meet their unique needs. Feeling silenced in their university courses, they were able to compensate for this lack of space through solidarity with one another—a sense of “sisterhood,” as Delilah calls it. Carpooling afforded them opportunities to renegotiate knowledge of inequities between coursework and the field through a racialized and gendered perspective. Aligned with CRT, such a dynamic sheds light on Delilah's and Robin's ability to recognize and resist dominant ideologies, by centering their experiential knowledge as a means to renegotiate meanings of teaching and practice through co-creation of an informal space, despite existing programmatic structures.

Peer-led negotiations of teaching and practice without systematically structured guidance also have their limitations. For instance, Delilah and Robin defined their roles during co-teaching based on self-defined strengths:

Last quarter Delilah and I would switch off in the period. She's really great with leading discussions and ending discussions, so she would start off with OK here's our Do Now for today. And she would lead the discussion right and I would come in with instruction, and I would say all right this is what we're doing today. . . . So there's four parts of the lesson, I would do two and she would do two. (Robin, interview)

This defined division of labor between Delilah and Robin was evident in multiple observations of their co-teaching (field notes, January and February 2015). Self-defining the role of each preservice teacher based on individual strengths, while seemingly accommodating and equal in division of labor, became a missed opportunity to strengthen their overall teaching practices and goals for teaching prior to engaging in independent student teaching. As a result, it reduced the possibilities of engaging in practices beyond their comfort zone. Without explicitly establishing norms on changes in participation, preservice teachers are left to define their own participation in the field by relying on their existing knowledge and interpersonal skills. Engagement in cultural practices without structured guidance can constrain possibilities for transformative learning. For example, while co-teaching presented opportunities for them to deepen their approaches and understandings of teaching, they renegotiated their approaches through cooperative teaching but did not necessarily shift or deepen their understandings of teaching practice. For instance, Delilah expressed the need to design learning experiences that would

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reflect students' lives, while Robin expressed the importance of preparing students for rigorous learning. When preparing their students to present their narratives at the end of the unit, Robin asked their students about the value of the assignment:

ROBIN: In your narrative you have to write about your personal experiences. . . . Why do you think we want you to connect your personal life to an academic assignment?

NEIL: For us to grow.

ROBIN: Neil said grow! Ms. Delilah and I want you to be able to see yourselves. . . . It's not just about you coming to school to learn. We want you to grow yourselves as a person. So try to see yourself in all the assignments you do. (field notes, February 2015)

In this segment of their lesson, Robin verbalized Delilah's goals to develop student learning that is relevant to their lives. This incident seemed to imply that Robin had taken on Delilah's visions for teaching. In their reflection after this learning segment, however, Delilah continued to emphasize the importance of students being able to learn from one another's experiences while Robin emphasized the importance of maintaining high expectations for student behavior and academic achievement (reflection, February 2015). While the participants seemed close to deepening their ideas and practices about the interconnectedness of culturally relevant and rigorous teaching, there was no formal structure for peer learning in the field, limiting the likelihood of authentic co-learning in which the initial visions for teaching shifted to deeper nuances and understandings of systemic inequities. Contradicting Lave and Wenger's (1991) suggestion that limited access to participation constrains learning development, I attribute their learning constraints to a lack of "systematic and explicit pedagogical mechanisms to encourage, guide, and sustain involvement" (Rose, 1995, p. 154). Rather than leaving these mutual engagements up to chance, structured guidance is necessary to further support peer learning.

By March 2015, they began to student teach independently. Considering that independent student teaching served as the site for their edTPA assessment, and peer teachers were discouraged from helping one another with the instruction period during this time frame, the role of the peer was largely undefined:

I just support Delilah, like she supported me today . . . like whatever she needs. Oh, you need copies? I got you. You need this? I got you. I'll take care of that stuff so she doesn't have to run around and take care of that stuff on her own. (Robin, interview)

Other than supporting with the logistics of classroom flow, such as passing out and collecting papers and answering student questions during group work, the peer used this time to grade for her primary classes, plan lessons, and complete course work homework. These findings raise further questions about and implications for reorganizing programmatic structures to maximize peer learning opportunities throughout changes in participation.

Identity Development as Social Justice Educators

Being paired with Robin forced Delilah to recognize how her racial identity as Filipina influenced her approach to teaching. For instance, given her initial visions about teaching texts that aligned with students' interests, Delilah was initially disappointed that she had to teach her students canonical literature while Robin got to teach a science fiction novel about slavery:

I was kind of sad . . . but now looking back and watching Robin teach it I feel like at least she can say this is her history, too, and share it with the student and what she knows and what she believes is relevant to it. (interview)

Witnessing how Robin was able to personally connect to the literature and to her students, Delilah began to question her own biases as an Asian American woman teaching in a predominantly Latinx and Black student population. Arguably, seeing Robin's approach prompted her to ask difficult questions about her own positionality and practice, a skill necessary for effective teaching practice. She recognized intersectionalities of oppression and privilege through her identity as an Asian American teacher working with a predominantly Black student population:

It's a good experience for me being Asian American in a predominantly African American community because I feel like it helped me learn and understand the different identities the students could have or have in my future classrooms and how to approach it and understand who they are and what they're going through, cause I feel like the more experience with different students the more helpful it will be for me as a teacher. 'Cause I shouldn't have just the same group of students or same culture. How is that going to help me grow? (interview)

At the same time, seeing Robin's teaching also discouraged her from taking pedagogical risks in her own practice. As a Filipina working in predominantly Black and Latinx student population, Delilah doubted her own ability to teach as "effectively" as Robin:

What if we switched books? How would that have been for me? How would that process be? I feel like it would have been a lot more different and I feel like I would have been more sensitive to how I approach things. 'Cause the thing is, I remember growing up or even learning like yeah people can say they understand but do they know what you've been through and they don't come from the same background. But I don't want to come off to my students preaching that I know stuff when or understand stuff when I fully haven't had that experience with them. (interview)

Questioning race and racialization is an important factor for educators hoping to support the needs of urban youth (Martin, 2007). Without having structured guidance to support her process, however, leaving Delilah's questioning of her own positionality up to chance limited the possibilities of understanding her role as a Filipina teacher working in solidarity with Black and Latinx student populations (Philip, 2014). Furthermore, her overemphasis on cultural match oversimplified

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Robin's potential effectiveness as a teacher (Achinstejn & Aguirre, 2008). As a result, Delilah felt that she was more equipped to teach students who were a cultural match to her. While she acknowledged the value of multicultural teaching, she felt more comfortable and inspired to teach a predominantly Asian American student population:

I want to work in a community that is predominantly Asian American, I admit it . . . I think is my calling is to work with Asian Americans and them being able to see someone from their culture as their teacher versus someone else, you know? I want to move where there's more Filipinos or somewhere where I feel like students can connect, we can all connect together with our identities. (interview)

While her field experience with a Peer of Color seemed to strengthen her reflective practices, it also inadvertently reinforced assumptions about effectiveness based on cultural match and narrowed her identity and impact as a social justice educator.

On the other hand, Robin's field experience positively supported her abilities to reclaim her identity as a Black woman:

The community I grew up in was not predominantly African American. It was definitely predominantly Hispanic. All of my neighbors are Hispanic but it was a school where I had Black friends. So I don't know a lot about the culture, I'm definitely not immersed in Black culture, but I think just because of my experiences as a Black woman, I have a lot to offer, especially Black girls. . . . I think I see that just because I live that so that's my life lens. (interview)

Learning and teaching in the field with a predominantly Black student population, and being affirmed by Delilah, Robin felt empowered in her ability to transfer her own racialized experiences into her work as a teacher (focus group interview). At the same time, she struggled to teach students whose experiences and cultural backgrounds were different from her own:

I find it hard, not to relate to my Hispanic students, but I find it harder to draw from them. We don't usually talk about Hispanic culture unless I bring it up. . . . It's usually Black culture. Black culture. And I mean majority of our students are Black but I feel like it's not fair like, if I were Hispanic and I went to Parks, or I was in that classroom. . . . I feel like they're OK with it because they're all engraved in one culture. (interview)

Interestingly, Delilah's cultural mismatch to all of the students made her more aware and intentional of teaching non-Black students, whose needs were often overlooked in their teaching:

It's predominantly African American at this school right? But I have some Latino students, so for example bringing the 1920s in I had to do a mini-lecture. . . . I brought in the Harlem Renaissance, and I had to research on my own like what were Latinos doing in the 1920s in America. That was a process, trying to dig through stuff on the Internet, but making sure they all see themselves in it in some way. (interview)

However, owing to undefined roles and lack of structure within the peer teaching model, this insight became a missed opportunity for the participants to collaborate and complicate their pedagogical understandings and possibilities as Teachers of Color committed to social justice. By leaving it up to chance, they did not have space to effectively build on one another's strengths and go beyond their comfort zones.

Discussion

Building on Cochran-Smith and Villegas's (2015) call for teacher preparation research that "deeply acknowledges the impact of social, cultural, and institutional factors, particularly the impact of poverty, on teaching, learning, and teacher education" (p. 391), through this study, I offer conceptual tools for studying questions of teacher preparation, power, and equity through an analytic lens of learning structure, participation, and the individual. By examining the dynamics of peer learning between two preservice Teachers of Color through sociocultural learning theory and CRT, I am able to highlight the affordances and constraints of peer learning within racially hierarchical structures to advocate for policy and programmatic changes that support the unique needs of Teachers of Color, ones that consider whose knowledge counts in teachers learning new ways to structure teacher learning.

Building on previous scholarship that calls for unique structures to support and sustain Teachers' of Color learning (Knight, 2002; Nyachae, 2016; Philip et al., 2017; Villegas & Davis, 2008), through this study, I consider how programmatic structures can offer new possibilities for learning when preservice Teachers of Color are positioned as experts within communities of practice. By drawing from and co-constructing knowledge and practices with a learner who brings unique insights about racialization and learning, they have more opportunities to develop their critical consciousness and foster cultural practices for teaching. While they may have field support to strengthen the development of their critical consciousness and pedagogical development, these observations tend to happen periodically and risk forgoing the ongoing reflective processes that may strengthen their abilities to adequately apply pedagogical skills learned at the university to their field placement. Through the peer teaching model, preservice teachers have more opportunities to consistently engage one another with self-reflection, as well as more deeply understand the implementation of pedagogical skills learned at the university in a contextualized setting.

The peer teaching model in itself is not sufficient for sustaining their learning to teach in socially just and culturally relevant ways. Given the limitations of their own expertise and unanticipated challenges that may emerge when teaching within and despite institutional hierarchies, as seen through Delilah's and Robin's developing perception and tools for teaching in multicultural communities, they need attention, time, and space to further complicate and extend their expertise and possibilities as social justice educators. Such a model requires a shift in how

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learning is organized, including a shift in the role of university field supervisors and mentor teachers solely focusing on pedagogical support to providing systematic support for peer learning, such as establishing norms for collaborative teaching and systematic structures for peer reflection. Other than the possibilities of institutionalized and informal spaces for learning, as evident in Delilah's and Robin's case, some scholars argue that professional development and teacher-led organizing can further cultivate the political identities and pedagogical skills needed to effectively challenge the racialized dimensions of inequities within schools (Martinez, Valdez, & Cariaga, 2016; Pour-Khorshid, 2016). Further teacher preparation research is needed to examine the dialectical relationship between institutionalized, organized, and informal spaces of learning intertwined with the unique assets of Teachers of Color and how these learning models serve to challenge and reimagine dominant knowledge and practices.

Social justice-oriented teachers with critical understandings of systemic racism serve important roles for educational change, and teacher preparation programs must equip them with tools and opportunities to transfer their justice-oriented goals and understandings into effective teaching practice. While a shift in programmatic structure presents new possibilities for disrupting racially hierarchical learning models within a local context, such an intentional shift to prepare teachers to challenge inequitable schooling must also be met with policy changes that challenge the broader neoliberal agenda of school accountability (Lipman, 2011). Through programmatic and policy changes that center the unique assets of Teachers of Color, they are more able to develop and enact the complex skills needed to reclaim democratic purpose of education.

Note

¹ Aligned with critical race scholars such as Yosso (2005), I purposely capitalize terms such as *Communities of Color*, *Woman of Color*, *People of Color*, *Students of Color*, and *Teachers of Color* to challenge the marginalization of racially minoritized groups.

² *Filipinx* is used as a political term in place of "Filipino," "Filipina," or "Filipina/o" to include gender non-conforming and trans identities.

³ *Latinx* is used as a political term in place of "Latino," "Latina," or "Latina/o" to include gender non-conforming and trans identities.

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