

Unheard Voices of Minority Teacher Candidates in a Teacher Education Program

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Introduction

Giving voice to those who are representative of the minority teachers of the future can and will provide an important response to the growing concerns over the disproportionate balance of cultures between students and teachers in schools across the country (Bennett et al., 2006). In reality, the number of students with diverse cultural backgrounds in the P-12 schools is rapidly growing, while the number of minority teachers is not.

Currently, for example, 8% of elementary teachers and 7% of secondary teachers are Hispanic (NCES, 2010). Yet between 1988 and 2008 the Hispanic public school student population increased from 11% to 22% and African-American students increased from 6.8% to 7.5% (NCES, 2010). According to a report by the National Center for Education Statistics (2007), by the year 2020 the minorities are predicted to represent 39 percent of the total U.S. population, which will constitute a 6% increase over 15 years.

Emerging concerns question not only the degree of underrepresentation of minority teachers, but also its cause. As we move toward a view of celebrating assets from *all* cultures, instead of lamenting deficits, it becomes clear that with increased numbers of minority teachers the schools will have a richer multicultural knowledge base (Dee & Henkin, 2002), stronger role models (Bennett et al. 2006; Zirkel, 2002), more shared experiences between teachers and students (Mayes & Cutri, 2004), and

greater numbers of insider experiences that help build bridges between cultures (Villegas & Davis, 2007).

The benefits of supporting minority teachers are abundant. Examination of the factors that may either hinder or support the transformation into teaching of this population is clearly warranted.

Historical Hinderances

Historically, assumptions regarding the low numbers of culturally diverse teachers include such factors as low pay (Gursky, 2002), difficulties with standardized tests (Bennett, et al. 2006), negative school experiences, lack of support in college, and lack of academic/emotional preparation (Gordon, 2005). These factors are hindrances that are presumed to play a significant role in one's choice to enter the teaching profession or not.

Efforts to recruit and retain minority teachers have proven more successful when they are begun early in the postsecondary school experience. Flores, Clark, Claeys, and Villarreal (2007) report that ethnic minority students often begin their studies in community colleges and transfer to four year institutions. Even with concentrated support programs focused on Latino students, graduation rates of the total student population are reported in one study to be only 8.8% (Flores et al. 2007). Teacher attrition and mobility rates when compared with ethnic indicators show that among White Non-Hispanic teachers, 8% left the profession in 2008-2009 while 9% of African-American teachers left and 5.6% of Hispanic teachers left the field (NCES, 2010).

Therefore, teacher education programs that encourage minorities to choose teaching as a career and promote a support system for recruitment, retention, and development of culturally diverse teachers are crucial. Although there are several research studies on recruiting, preparing, and retaining teachers of culturally diverse

backgrounds (Flores et al., 2007; Villegas & Davis, 2007), there have been a limited number that explore minority teacher candidates' perception about the practices and support systems in teacher education programs (Clark & Flores, 2007; Nieto, 2006).

Now is a critical juncture for looking deeply at issues of recruiting and retention. Schools need teachers who can relate to their students, understand their backgrounds and their cultures, and build bridges to relationships and curriculum. A culturally responsive environment is expected in all classrooms and from all teachers, but minority teachers who have shared experiences with the students, both positive and negative, can bring a higher level of relevance to the classroom.

The purpose of the study reported here was to gain an in-depth understanding of minority teacher candidates' perceptions about the process of becoming teachers with a special focus on factors that support or hinder their transformation into the teaching profession. Through in-depth interviews with and observations of three minority teacher candidates, this study offers insights into their motivation to become teachers, perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses as teachers, and the reviews support they received and challenges they faced in the teacher education program.

Methodology

Setting

This study was conducted in an undergraduate elementary education program at a predominantly White university located in the southern United States. The university serves five neighboring counties, some of which are rural. By race and ethnicity, the teacher candidates at the university are as follows: 3.3% are African American, 1.8% are Asian, 9.4% are Hispanic, 80% are White, and 5% are not identified. According to the university's mission and

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guiding principles, which emphasize social justice and diversity, the teacher education program has implemented a plan of action for recruiting and retaining teacher candidates from diverse backgrounds.

Participants

Teacher candidates who identified themselves with minority backgrounds were contacted with a request for participation in the study. To represent a variety of cultural backgrounds and diverse status (junior, senior), three female teacher candidates majoring in elementary education out of six volunteers were selected. No male students were identified.

Heidi (all names are pseudonyms), a 21-year-old Haitian-American junior involved in a part-time internship, was born in the U.S. However, she lived in Haiti for three years during her early adolescence. She had intermediate proficiencies in Haitian-Creole. She was a first generation college student, although her sisters and brothers-in-law had graduated from college. Her academic excellence qualified her for participation in the Honors program.

Esmeralda, a 22-year-old Dominican-American junior also in a part-time internship, was born in the U.S., but soon her family moved back to the Dominican Republic and lived there until she was eight. She is bilingual, fluent in Spanish both orally and in writing. She lived with her boyfriend and young child. Her parents had very limited education, while her sister was also a college student.

Aashia, a 22-year-old Asian-American senior in her final internship, was born in the Philippines but grew up in Guam and moved to the U.S. at 16. At that time she started to learn English, and also maintained her native language, Tagalog. Her parents are college graduates.

At the time of this study, all participants had successfully completed at least three semesters in the teacher education program. During the ten-month period of this study all participated in either part-time or full time internships and took college courses.

Data Collection and Analysis

After the participants signed a consent form, the researcher conducted an open-ended, structured interview of approximately 90 minutes with each of the three students. Subsequently, during the next ten months, the researcher completed participant observations in university and internship classrooms as well as in

extra-curriculum activities. Observation notes were taken. The total time of the observations with the three participants was approximately 20 hours. Finally, the researcher conducted a follow-up structured interview for 60 minutes with each participant. The researcher tape-recorded and transcribed all interviews, and analyzed all interview transcripts and observation notes in accordance with grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Coding was used to identify the distinguishing themes related to the teacher candidates' perceptions.

Results and Discussion

The analysis revealed that all participants experienced some hesitation about the teaching profession in discussions with their families. However, various life experiences had guided them into teaching, and during these years they received diverse support in their socio-cultural context. The challenges and occasional biases made them aware of needed support systems and of their role as teachers. In this section, the results are embedded in narratives about the factors that strengthened or moderated their journey of becoming a teacher.

Theme #1

Although the teaching profession was not their primary choice, various life experiences lead them into this profession.

No participants in this study selected teaching as their first career choice, mainly because their families considered other professions—physician, psychologist, and accountant—to be more prestigious and better paying. Heidi, who first considered pediatric medicine, recalled “my father discouraged it; he did not want me to go into teaching; he didn’t understand how I could go from wanting to become a doctor to becoming a teacher.” Although with reservation, her brother supported her; “he’s encouraged me, but he thinks that eventually I should go into becoming a principal or assistant principal and not just stick with teaching.” His viewpoint clearly implied the perceived low prestige of teachers versus administrators.

Aashia’s parents also held culturally determined expectations about her career; “my first choice was nursing, or anything in the medical field because my parents placed so much emphasis on math and science and said, ‘in our culture, the Asian culture, either a math major or a science major or somewhere in between.’”

Similarly a lack of acceptance surfaced from Esmeralda’s parents as she stated:

When I did say that I wanted to become a teacher, I didn’t get the best reaction; they were like “oh, ok, but why?” and I said “this is what I want to do.” They knew that I was going to go to college for four years and they kind of wanted me to make more than the “average Joe.”

In spite the families’ perception of teaching as a profession with low prestige, the three participants decided to become teachers. They had an encounter with an influential teacher and/or a positive educational experience that guided their decision to override their family’s reservation about teaching. For example, Heidi recalled former teachers as role models:

I had really good teachers, especially in elementary school, who really made me want to learn and made me enjoy school in itself so I want to do that for someone else. I want to motivate them; I think it would be nice for students to have a young teacher or a teacher of color to show them that you don’t have to go into the entertainment industry or ... into the professional world ... the athletic world in order to be successful.

Esmeralda’s decision was influenced by an outstanding college course and confirmed with other people’s experiences:

I took the Intro to Education and I loved it. At that time I was working at Ralph Lauren Polo and I was talking to my manager about my desire to be a teacher. I was thinking about the money and about what my parents had told me ... and I remember my manager was like “look there’s one thing I am going to tell you is never spend your life chasing money; I went to school to be a business man, I’m working here and that’s all I do is chase money.” I think the point is when I said “I am just going to be a teacher; I don’t care what anybody else says, I am just going to be a teacher.”

Although their career choices were first heavily challenged, ultimately all three families accepted the participants’ decisions and offered various forms of strong support during the years of teacher education studies.

These three minority teacher candidates recognized their options and discussed the impact of their parents’ advice on a career choice. Although they ultimately convinced themselves to go into teaching, a serious concern remains with the overall image of teachers that is perpetuated in many minority families, reflecting a lack of respect for the teach-

ing profession (Gordon, 2000). This lack of respect has evolved through the negative experiences of many minorities as students and is remembered by them when making career choices or when guiding their own children toward careers (Gordon, 2000). For many African-American students, making money and gaining occupational stability are important factors in career selection (Wilder, 1999).

When minorities choose teaching, they often do so as a way to “give back” to the community. Ramirez (2009) explored reasons for minorities choosing the teaching field and found that due to low pay, they considered the positions almost like volunteer jobs. Disturbing is the fact that many in Ramirez’s study equated good pay with high respect and felt that without respect, it was hard for one to make a desired impact. Even so, many of those interviewed planned to teach in their own communities when possible. Very similar to the three teacher candidates in our study, Ramirez found that family members directly told them not to teach for fear that they could not provide for their future families.

The interviews with the three teacher candidates suggest that teachers and co-workers were influential factors in the decision to become teachers. Having educators in the family, having a bond with a teacher, and having previous teaching experiences have also been found to play a role in deciding to become a teacher (Chamness & Hidehiro, 2005). It is apparent that intrinsic factors overshadowed the extrinsic factors in the decision making of these participants.

Theme #2

Although they want to be a role model for all children, they perceive themselves as a great fit with culturally diverse children due to shared experiences.

Without exception, the participants recollected incidents of prejudice and bias that they had experienced during their schooling. They believed these painful experiences made them more sensitive and compassionate toward children at-risk; however, they firmly stated that their goal was to be a role model for all children regardless of their backgrounds.

Describing her encounters with stereotypes, for example, Aashia recalled her very first days in this country when a teacher commented that Aashia “was supposed to wear a grass skirt and coconut bras” considering her arriving from Guam. At a parent meeting during her internship, some parents failed to hide their hesita-

tion about her, which she interpreted as a reaction to her being Asian and having an accent. Regardless of these aching incidents she felt that her cultural capital had strengthened the bond between her and the minority students. She noted:

During my internships, I have been the only Asian teacher. I feel like I gain more connection with my students who are minority because they understand what I am going through; saying certain words incorrect—it’s because of my accent, but I do serve as a role model to all of them.

In addition, the participants demonstrated awareness of their knowledge about culturally diverse parents’ expectations and experiences, and sought to utilize it to better serve their students. For example, Heidi discussed her unique skills for easing Haitian parents who feel intimidated to make contact with the teacher due to their lack of English proficiencies and familiarity with the school system. She expressed:

I really feel like I can help those parents; you know, make them feel more comfortable; show them that there is someone who is similar to them, teaching their students. You know we do have something in common. They can reach out to me and I will reach out to them. I am here for them.

Esmeralda also encountered biases. For example, in a store she was conversing in Spanish and another customer said “Speak English; we’re in America.” Often her college classmates too commented on her improper pronunciation, which made her uncomfortable and cautious about her language. Despite these humiliating incidents, she considered her Hispanic background an asset. To support this notion, she commented on her reaction to the cooperating teacher’s inappropriate interaction with a child from an Asian background:

I told the teacher “let me work with her” ...I know that she [the child] can be a little bit of concerning ... but I can help her and I [can] work with her,...because at one point I was her and I was labeled and I did get screamed at for not saying something the correct way... So I understand because I was her.

Ultimately, she visualized herself as a teacher in a diverse classroom in which she wanted to “let them [children] know that it’s okay to be themselves,” and in a school where the principal will recognize minority teachers as assets. She noted, “Hopefully they [principals] will value [mi-

nority teachers] and say ‘you know what; we need people like you because we have a lot of minority students.’” Although with high hopes in terms of being appreciated, she and Aashia felt that minority teacher candidates needed to work twice as hard as majority teacher candidates to prove their teacher competencies.

In spite of experiencing painful prejudices, these teacher candidates recognized the strengths that they bring to a classroom. Instead of harboring ill feelings, they were looking at the advantages of being a minority teacher. Gursky notes that “Many students will complete their K-12 school without having been taught by a single teacher of color” (2002, p. 11). How sad when children are deprived of role models from their own culture. It is through seeing adults who look like they do, who are in positions of leadership that plant the seed for what they can do in their lives.

Further, Bennett et al. (2006) suggests that the lack of teachers of color may have an impact on low high school completion rates among African-Americans, Native Americans, and Latinos. A goal is to have more role models with varied ethnic backgrounds, so students will be able to see appropriate teacher roles. The divide between teachers’ and students’ backgrounds leaves students without support for bridging cultures and curriculum (Souto-Manning & Dice, 2007).

These three teacher candidates expressed clear self-identities. They knew who they were and they recognized their potential value to all of their students, but especially to minority students. As they have each indicated, they are the face of their minority students and share the experiences of being a minority, including all of the unjust experiences such as prejudice and low expectations. These future teachers understand themselves and the role that culture has played in their own development; therefore, they will be more likely to recognize and honor cultural differences among the students they will teach (Nieto, 2006).

Theme #3

An extensive support system in the teacher candidates’ socio-cultural contexts facilitated their experiences in the teacher education program.

All three participants cherished the variety and quality of courses in the teacher preparation curriculum, and felt prepared for the profession due to the various forms of support available from their families, schools, and community. They all appreci-

ated the financial support that they had received due in part to their minority backgrounds and academic excellence. They believed that only with these funds were they able to pursue a college degree.

When describing their academic experiences in the program, they valued the mandatory courses on culture, language, and diversity-related issues. However Heidi also called attention to the gap between the theoretical and pragmatic approaches to diversity at this predominantly White university, and noted, "...look, we talk about diversity a lot in the teacher education program but then if there is no diversity among us, how much are we actually learning about it?"

Furthermore, they enjoyed and benefited from cooperative learning experiences in college courses, and acknowledged that they usually worked with other minority students in groups. Esmeralda and Aashia stated that working with other minority students was their comfort zone in the university classes:

In the beginning I was very intimidated because I did sit in a classroom and I was like the only Hispanic student. Then I met Maria and Isabel from the Dominican Republic and from that time on we would take every single class together, mostly because, I guess you could say, it was a comfort. Ummm, a little "blanky."

Furthermore, the participants found the internship experiences beneficial and well-supported. They all acknowledged that the internship experiences opened their eyes to the difference between their ideals about teaching and reality. For example, Heidi expressed disappointment about the scripted curriculum, ability grouping, and external rewards that she found commonly used.

Regarding support, Esmeralda and Aashia appreciated that their mentors were minority teachers; on the other hand Heidi did not indicate the need for a mentor who would share her cultural background. These interviews support the use of case studies; teacher educators must get to know their students because each one is different.

In terms of college life, Esmeralda highlighted the importance of student clubs, specifically Hispanic organizations that allowed her to make friends with other Hispanic students. However, not all of them found the minority student clubs supportive. Heidi, who is Haitian-American, was disappointed with a person in the African-American club who once commented about her "She's one of my students but she does not want to be." Heidi emotionally added,

I didn't say anything to her, I just walked away. But even right now that kind of ignorance just really upsets me that people still think that just because we're the same skin color I automatically have to do everything that you do; and if I don't do that then that means that I am not really African American or I am not really proud of my culture or I am not proud of my race.

In addition to the support from the university, the three participants had received support from their families and friends which facilitated their journey of becoming teachers. With no exceptions, they believed that their parents' high expectations in terms of hard work and success made them diligent and self-reliant students. As Aashia noted "I've always been taught that hard work really does come a long way, especially with my parents who grew up in a third world country." She also commented on how her family background engendered her strong self-reliance skills:

After 5th grade I couldn't depend on my parents because they didn't really understand the English language and certain content areas. So I was basically saying "Okay, gotta teach myself this" or "I can't get this wrong" or "I can't be confused" because if I asked my parents they would not know.

Furthermore, Heidi passionately discussed how the expectations of many people around her had intensified her determination which resulted in success:

I am deeply afraid of failure, and I don't want to fail when it comes to teaching. I am not fully paying for school by myself, but at the same time I don't want anyone's hard earned money to waste. Because of all those people who paved the way and look up to me I feel like I have no choice but to succeed. I can't let all those people down.

These three teacher candidates were candid in their discussion of their academic experiences, including the strong values received from family, financial support, and their own self determination. They noticed that there was not much diversity among their peers on campus and minority role models were sparse. Two of them, particularly, migrated toward the few minorities in their program for group work. All three of these teacher candidates are from cultures considered to value collectivism, which means that they prefer collaborative group work (Tileston & Darling, 2008).

Teacher education programs wisely will offer opportunities for collectivist experiences that may help alleviate feelings

of isolation and give support to stressful situations. It is not unusual for ethnic minority students to feel the stress of academic competition, along with additional pressures that could produce negative outcomes (Irizarry, 2007). Not only do they need role models and opportunities to work with others who share similar value systems, but they need to be recognized by and acknowledged for the way they "participate, see, and are in the world" (Dilliard, 1994, p. 9).

In addition, these teacher candidates were positive about their relationships with their mentors during internships. Their in-school experiences were pleasant, with the only conflicts revealing a disconnect between their philosophical stance on curriculum and pedagogy and what they actually found in the classrooms. This disconnect is not unique to minority teachers, but it is clear that such a mismatch between what teaching is about and what potential candidates perceive as the role of teachers is a hindrance to entering the profession (Hoodles, 2004).

Theme #4

Additional support is needed to meet all challenges; however no preferential treatment is expected.

Although the three participants were successful students in the teacher education program, they struggled with challenges for which additional support was needed. For example, in terms of course work, Esmeralda and Aashia found writing, grammar, and class presentations difficult, especially when occasionally they had received disturbing comments on their accent and their incorrect usage of the English language from other peers.

For these participants, the most challenging program requirements were the state required certification exams; however for different reasons. Aashia and Esmeralda commented on the lack of proper test preparation and remediation after failing the tests. They would expect more effective and extensive academic support specifically targeting the reading and writing competencies. Repeatedly they referred to their second language learner backgrounds as a possible barrier.

In addition, Aashia shared her frustration about her limited knowledge in certain subject areas which forced her to retake the subject area test numerous times. Though she suggested no significant role of her minority background in this issue, she pointed to the need for effective

preparation and guidance in subject areas in general. On the other hand, Heidi experienced difficulties with exam schedules. Her religion prohibited her from taking an exam on Saturdays, and a staff member's misleading information about the Saturday exam days made her panic: "What am I going to do with the conflict between my religion and what I want to pursue as my career?" Afterwards, she found an alternative date to take her exam, and she commented: "She [program secretary] just didn't know what was going on and she didn't try to help out."

When further discussing the possible support system at the university, Heidi also mentioned the need for social events:

The College of Education should have more social things so that the students could get together and learn from each other. My best friend who went to another school; they had a lot of round table discussions and picnics and Bar-B-Ques. If we wanted to do something on the weekend, there just isn't a lot of social stuff that the College of Education does.

Although they felt that extra support would enrich their experience of becoming a teacher, they made clear that no preferential treatment was needed or appreciated. Esmeralda elaborated on this from her perspective:

I don't want to be treated differently because I am Hispanic; I think that would bring more reasons for teachers and other students to be like "well she's Hispanic so we've got to be a little more careful; she's in this program." And I guess because there is such a low number of minority students, I just wouldn't want to stand out like that.

These teacher candidates were positive regarding their road toward completion of the teacher education program in spite of recognizing some problems along the way. They were also adamant that they wanted to be treated like everyone else with no special benefits, but they wanted to be able to access appropriate kinds of support. They felt that they had worked hard, had earned their status at this point in time, and did not want to be dependent on special treatment. They wanted to be supported for the strengths that they bring to the programs and, subsequently, to the schools where they will teach.

It is clear, however, that they did not escape the challenges of state licensure exams and other teacher certification tests. Even with the disadvantages of entering a different culture and coming from a different language background, they were

able to meet the expectations through much hard work and study to complete the requirements. That is not true for many prospective minority candidates as the Praxis exam, required in most states, shows great disparity in passing rates for White teachers at 82% versus 46% for African Americans (Gursky, 2002). Not only did these teachers navigate the exam hurdles, but they successfully met and conquered many issues of miscommunication along the way.

Implications and Conclusions

This study has explored minority teacher candidates' perceptions of becoming teachers. Their experiences align in many ways with those experiences reported in the research literature. We find that minority candidates are indeed making decisions to enter the teaching profession. This is welcome news, since this study also showed that the teaching profession is not viewed as attractive and prestigious to the minority students' families; therefore those families initially discouraged their children's interest in becoming teachers.

However, these participants had a special calling, an intrinsic motivation and/or a significant friend, coworker, or teacher who made them confident about pursuing their dream (Chamness et al. 2005; Gordon, 2005). Therefore, outreach programs and support provided early, often through mentors as role models in high school, plus special guidance during general education courses all appear to have had the potential to attract and retain these particular minority teacher candidates.

Both in college and internship classrooms, these participants appreciated and valued collaborative efforts with peers, professors, and mentors (Souto-Manning & Dice, 2004). Consequently, incorporating collaborative projects in university teacher education courses might support the collectivist value of many cultures and should therefore be encouraged. Special consideration should be given to creating support and learning groups; specifically, professors should give freedom and flexibility for teacher candidates in selecting group members to ensure smooth group interaction and optimal learning.

Three types of support—academic, financial, and social—were found to be important for these minority teacher candidates. Specifically, high quality assistance in academic endeavors appears to be needed, with a focus on individualized needs such as test preparation and comple-

tion of course assignments. Furthermore, much needed social support was not institutionalized in the teacher education program in this study.

However, we believe these assistance programs should not be organized as a result of affirmative action, but rather to accommodate individual needs. In addition, appropriate social support such as student groups and out-of-class social activities would be essential to create and maintain a feeling of belonging, especially in an institution which has a low percentage of minority students. However, no expectations regarding participation should be imposed on minority teacher candidates.

The teacher candidates in the study, to some extent, were already aware of their cultural capital, which they found beneficial when interacting with minority students and parents (Souto-Manning & Dice, 2004). It appears important to further reinforce minority teacher candidates' consciousness of the unique value of their competencies resulting from their bilingualism and biculturalism. Environments both at the university and in internship classrooms that appreciate multiculturalism and multilingualism should be nurtured and sustained.

These teacher candidates expect to be strong teachers for all students—not just for minorities. They have participated in a teacher preparation program that has promoted culturally relevant pedagogy for all classrooms (Edwards & Kuhlman, 2007; Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007) and for all teachers. They are the ones who though their own backgrounds carry the funds of knowledge from various cultures (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004) and can thus be the bridge to shared experiences, relationships, and relevant curriculum for their future students and for other teachers.

To further increase and retain such minority teachers more must be done to ensure that potential candidates are given every opportunity to choose teaching as a career and to be supported in ways that will allow them to grow and not feel patronized or expected to be dependent on special treatment. This is the challenge to be addressed by all teacher education programs.

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