

# EXAMINING THE EXPERIENCES OF PARAPROFESSIONAL OF COLOR IN AN ONLINE GROW YOUR OWN TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

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## Abstract

A major shift over the past twenty years has been how teachers are prepared and credentialed given the teacher shortage. This qualitative study provides a detailed analysis of how five paraprofessionals of Color perceptions evolved during their first year in an online Grow Your Own (GYO) teacher education program. By examining the experiences, victories, and challenges of these non-traditional students we hoped to gain insights into the realities of participating in a GYO program and can then better support future students in this program. Findings suggest that given the need for teachers, particularly teachers of Color, teacher education programs must be in tune with the needs of these non-traditional students to support them best. This work may be a partial answer to addressing teacher shortage.

*Keywords: Paraprofessionals, online learning, grow your own programs.*

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## 1. Introduction

Grow Your Own (GYO) initiatives provide school divisions with quality teachers who are familiar with the demographics of the communities and the specific needs of their students. By utilizing local talent, these programs can lead to an increased positive school climate and build meaningful relationships with families resulting in higher student achievement (Espinoza et al., 2018). However, becoming a teacher is not cheap. A price tag of \$25,000, or more, for a degree and licensure is extremely prohibitive for paraprofessionals who are paid very little. Also, many potential teachers are unaware of the various pathways and resources available to adults interested in becoming teachers.

At a large public research university in the Southeast, where this study took place, we believe in the concept of "growth" specific to teacher candidates (TCs), rather than "producing" or "training." In that spirit, and with the help of 4.2 million dollars in state funding, we were able to offset the tuition cost of traditional students, on campus, and paraprofessionals, who took courses online, to complete their degree and become an early childhood, inclusive early childhood, elementary, or special education teacher. In return, the participants agreed to teach in their school division for two years once they graduated. In this paper, we focus on the experiences of the paraprofessionals in a GYO program, specifically Paraprofessionals of Color (PoCs).

Examining the experiences of PoCs is essential; Gist et al. (2019) advocate that GYO programs should be committed to increasing racial, ethnic, and linguistic congruence between teachers and student populations as well as dismantling structural barriers related to the recruitment, preparation, and retention of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. The purpose of this study was to answer the following question: What are the experiences of Paraprofessionals of Color (PoCs) in an online GYO teacher degree and licensure program?

## 2. Literature review

Teachers of Color, regardless of teaching area, are sorely underrepresented in today's schools despite the evidence of the benefits of having a teacher of the same race and ethnicity as the student (Egalite et al., 2015; Gershenson et al., 2016). Dee (2004) noted that teachers who are the same race as their minority students were more likely to improve reading and math scores. Therefore, these teachers are essential to closing the longstanding achievement gap between students of racial/ethnic groups and their counterparts, particularly the disparity between Black and White students (James et al., 2020). However, the benefits are not just academic. According to Lindsay and Hart (2017), Black students taught exclusively by Black teachers were 2 to 3 percentage points less likely to be removed from their typical learning environment,

due to suspension or expulsion, than if they encountered only non-Black teachers. One particularly promising approach to creating a more diverse teaching workforce is to create new pathways for paraprofessionals to become licensed teachers (Delgado et al., 2021).

Teacher candidates, and particularly candidates of Color, need access to more financial resources and guaranteed job placement upon degree completion (James et al., 2020). Passage of licensure exams has also been identified as a barrier to entering the teacher workforce for non-traditional students (Madkins, 2011). Standardized testing requirements are racially, culturally, and linguistically biased (Suzuki & Valencia, 1997). Furthermore, some future teachers of Color report feelings of isolation from a majority of White professors who instruct them on teaching diverse student populations (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Picower, 2009). Others have shared that the academic climate of EPPs is not always hospitable to future teachers of Color (Bristol & Goings, 2019). These barriers are why many minority candidates are more likely to not pursue teacher licensure (James et al., 2020).

### **3. Methods**

We chose a case study approach to gain an understanding of the paraprofessionals of Color (PoCs) perceptions related to their participation in an online GYO program. Before engaging in the study, it was approved by the university's Office of Research Integrity (Legacy-24-4314). A case study approach allowed us to take into consideration the lived realities and nuances experienced by the PoCs in a way that would not be possible through a quantitative approach (Glesne, 2006). Through data triangulation, we identified themes that helped explain factors that affected the PoCs during their time in the GYO program.

A diverse cohort of 15 paraprofessionals joined the first funded online GYO cohort in the fall of 2022. Our goal was to support these future early childhood, inclusive early childhood, elementary, and special education educators financially so that they would (a) successfully obtain their degree and (b) return to their home district to teach. We held online information sessions to provide the paraprofessionals with information about the GYO program. After the sessions, school division leaders were essential in identifying which paraprofessionals should participate in the GYO program since they know their student populations, as well as their employees, and were best able to target individuals who would make excellent future teachers.

### **4. Participants**

The five participants were selected for the study through a criterion-based nomination process. The criteria were (a) being a paraprofessional in the GYO program; (b) pursuing a degree to become an elementary education, special education, early childhood, or inclusive early childhood education teacher; and (c) being a future teacher of Color. All agreed on two one-on-one semi-structured Zoom interviews which were conducted by a university researcher. The university researcher assured participants that all identifiable information from the interview transcripts would be removed. For this paper, a pseudonym has been assigned to each PoC.

### **5. Data sources and analysis**

Creswell and Plano Clark (2011) describe the interview process as effective in providing the best source of gathering information when a researcher does not have direct access to participants and when the need exists to engage an individual in sharing their ideas. Interviews can allow the researcher to control the line of questioning and explore deeper issues that arise. Like Gist (2022), our interviews consisted of semi-structured open-response questions to capture the perceptions of the participants' experiences within the GYO program.

Interviews were conducted using Zoom and each researcher interviewed at least one participant. Among the questions asked were: "Why did you decide to participate in the GYO program?" and "What types of support do you think will help you be the most successful this year?" Additional questions explored advice and insights the PoCs might offer to future POCs as well as advice for colleges and universities hoping to recruit PoCs into the teaching profession.

Zoom technology generated automated transcripts of the interview questions and responses. Instead of relying solely on the transcription of responses, analyzing the recorded video allowed for observation of body language, voice tone, and emotion as the participants responded to questions. To analyze the data, the researchers met as a team to discuss the data using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Each participant was labeled as a case. Combined with the interpretation of the emotional responses from each participant and the transcription of data, the research team identified specific themes for each case.

After establishing themes for each case, the researchers compared the themes across the cases to determine overlap and outliers.

## 6. Results

Each case presents the individual context of the paraprofessional interviewed; it is critical to understand the background, beliefs, and experiences of each paraprofessional who was interviewed. Following the presentation of each case is a synthesis of the findings that demonstrate unique and overlapping themes across the cases.

### **Kathy**

Kathy, a paraprofessional, works in the school library at an elementary school in a large urban school district. She identifies as Hispanic and has vast experience helping students conduct and complete research for projects. In her role, she also assists students using multiple resources and technologies to complete the projects. When asked what the program could do better to support her, Kathy expressed that the online format of the program was manageable; however, it was often a heavy lift in terms of all of the content that was loaded into a condensed semester. Since she works in the library, she does not know as much about the instructional aspects of supporting students with disabilities as perhaps a paraprofessional who works in a special education classroom. Kathy expressed strong feelings about the acceleration of the first core course in the GYO program, Foundations in Exceptional Education which contained an enormous load of terminology related to special education and legal aspects for students with disabilities.

### **Kelly**

Kelly is a paraprofessional who works in an elementary school and is pursuing a degree in Elementary Education. She already earned an associate's degree, is a working mother, and identifies as African American. Kelly is very enthusiastic about the GYO program because it helps her meet her future goal, which is to be an elementary school teacher in the school district where she lives.

During the interview, Kelly was asked what was working well for her in the online education program. She noted that she benefits from learning about child development and behavior management, as the coursework helps her not only in the classroom setting but also as a mother of young children. The courses she took during her associate's degree made her feel more than adequately prepared to handle the demands of the online program in Elementary Education to complete her bachelor's degree. Kelly feels the workload of the program is manageable, for the most part, as a working mother. She is extremely appreciative of the financial support the program offers her, so she does not have to worry about the money for tuition. She said, "Obviously, not only financially, but also just being able to have the opportunity to go back to my home district and teach there [is a plus of this program]." Kelly described the financial support as a "life changer" for her.

### **Joan**

Joan is a paraprofessional who works in a special education classroom within an early childhood setting. She supports students using one-on-one instruction. Joan is pursuing a degree and licensure in Special Education. She has many years of experience working in childcare settings, feels very comfortable working with young children, and has a passion for special education advocacy which is what motivates her pursuit of the teaching license. Joan identifies as Black and at the time of the interview she was working to fulfill the General Education requirements for the degree, including science and mathematics courses. When Joan was asked what works well for her in the GYO program, she focused on the benefits from the friendships she has made in her education classes. She has built a bond with her classmates, especially those who work in the same school district where she works. Joan appreciates the flexibility and accessibility of the online classes. She is very comfortable with Zoom meetings and likes that she can attend them from home or work. Joan feels that the condensed semesters of seven-week courses are very demanding and that she often does not have the opportunity to delve deeply into what she is learning. The demands of work-life balance continue to worry her.

### **April**

April is a first-generation college student and a current paraprofessional in the Early Childhood licensure area of the GYO program. April has fond memories of teachers since childhood and always dreamed of becoming a teacher. Limited financial and personal support prevented her from becoming a teacher. April has an associate's degree, and substitute teaching experience, and has worked in an after-school program. What is working well for April about the GYO program is the financial support that comes from being a participant. April receives academic accommodations within university courses because she presents with temporary mental health concerns. Her first fall semester she described as "a little rough," but she felt supported. April felt she needed better communication from the GYO program

staff specifically to answering her questions. April also commented on how, with her mental health concerns, she would like for program faculty to better understand her personal needs. She felt that her success so far was a result of the support she received from her family. She stated,

#### **Sue**

Sue, a current paraprofessional, recently moved back home to Virginia after having a baby, knowing that she needed family support to help care for the newborn. Sue identifies as Black, and she is thankful that her family helps with the baby while she is at work and when taking classes online. As a single parent, Sue is grateful to have the support of her family. Sue has had 10 years of experience as a paraprofessional and shared she has great time management skills. When asked what is working well for her in the GYO program, Sue directly noted the excellent advice from program staff and the faculty who teach the courses. She considers herself to be resilient and feels very comfortable managing stress and the demands of work and school. Sue is in the Special Education degree and licensure track of the GYO program and especially enjoys the connections she has made with others.

### **7. Cross Case Analysis**

Examining the data across cases for the PoCs in this study, one noteworthy theme is that all participants felt they had made growth as future teachers specifically due to the networking opportunities. The paraprofessionals valued that they had courses together and communicated with each other within and outside of their online classes. The importance of relationships with GYO program staff was also particularly salient across the cases. Another common pattern was an appreciation of the flexibility of the program in terms of delivery mode. Online classes provided the participants with access to college coursework without the demands of driving to a campus and sitting in a classroom for in-person learning. Furthermore, the online environment provided them with the flexibility to juggle work and home life.

### **8. Discussion and implications**

The findings of this study contribute to the field by providing insights for colleges and universities seeking to diversify their student body while at the same time positively impacting the teaching force by inducting more teachers of Color. However, the findings should be interpreted with some caution, as the study included a limited number of participants over one year. Despite the limitations of this study, the insights gained provide perspective into the experiences of Paraprofessionals of Color in an online GYO program. We believe that these lessons are relevant to EPPs across the country. The themes explored in the cross-case analysis revealed that the support we put in place (i.e., cohort model, success coaches, etc.) helped build a collegial professional community that the PoCs could turn to while in the program and hopefully will continue to rely on as they begin their new career.

There has been a growing understanding of the importance and magnitude of teacher turnover and retention. Like Van Overschelde and Wiggins (2020), we want the high-quality diverse teachers we are recruiting and supporting, to remain teaching. However, to do this, we must acknowledge that the transition from a paraprofessional to a lead teacher can be complicated. Chopra et al., (2004) argue that it can be particularly challenging for Paraprofessionals of Color who are entering a predominantly White teacher workforce. Since the GYO program was created in 2022, we continue to gain insights into how to best support paraprofessionals in the program specifically PoCs. This has led to changes and refinements in the academic, financial, and logistical support we provide students to complete the education program, gain licensure, and transition to lead teacher roles. Some changes include regional networking opportunities and one-on-one non-evaluative mentoring. However, the impact of our work extends beyond the walls of our university and has potential implications for schools, colleges/universities, and public policy.

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