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Read, approved, and signed by:

Thesis adviser(s) Dr. Ashley Hutson 5/3/2021
Date

Ashley C. F. Hutson 5/3/2021
Date

Reader(s) Dr. Cathy Hartman 5/1/2021
Date

Cathy L. Hartman 5/1/2021
Date

Certified by
Director, Honors Program Date

A Changing Landscape: Teachers' Perceptions of the Urban Public High School Student Experience

A Thesis

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Colleen Morrison

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ABSTRACT

Through qualitative interviews, this study examines the perceived role of teachers on the educational experiences and outcomes of students at majority-minority urban public high schools This research is situated in the historical context of unequal resources in education, applies the theories of Bourdieu's social and cultural capital, and examines teachers' positionality. Using the life stories narrative approach, teachers discuss how their life experiences and teaching practices are central in developing positive relationships with students. These teacher's narratives affirm the importance of cultivating positive relationships with students and creating educational environments that foster academic growth and cultural awareness. Furthermore, the narratives emphasize the intersections of teachers' and students' social, racial, and gender identities on their pedagogy.

Keywords: race-ethnicity, education, pedagogy, cultural capital, social capital, positionality

A Changing Landscape:

Teachers' Perceptions of the Urban Public High School Student Experience

INTRODUCTION

Students may receive dramatically different learning experiences based on their social statuses and neighborhood of residence. Racial segregation and inequality continue to plague public schools and affect students' educational experiences, despite court-ordered desegregation efforts. Such desegregation efforts such as redlining and busing birthed a new era of resegregation of school districts and the undoing of the gains made in racial equity during the desegregation years (Reardon & Owens, 2012). Despite the many efforts of school reform, researchers have identified a direct relationship between the organization of schools and the economic organization of a capitalist society (Bowles & Gintis, 2002).

School reform occurs in a broader social context, which includes structural inequalities like racism and xenophobia. For this reason, race-ethnicity is important to understand when examining teacher-student relationships. Teacher identity and their perceived effectiveness are critical in the schooling experience of students. Historically, white women have been overrepresented as teachers, which has sometimes caused strain in urban schools that primarily enroll students of non-white backgrounds. Given that an individual's positionality—defined by Misawa (2000) as "the power inherent in [a person's] immediate respective social positions [that] greatly influences the differences in what individuals have access to in society" (p. 26)—tends to influence one's lived experiences, teachers' values and experiences may influence their perceptions and expectations of students.

Positive teacher support and mentoring has a direct relationship with student achievement. Classroom management styles can also impact students' educational experiences.

The schooling experience of students of color within educational institutions in urban areas is affected by many factors, including their relationship with teachers. The legacy of racialized education policies and corresponding segregation in schools and civic life continue to impact the way that urban schools exist today. The impact of teacher relationships is highlighted as one of the most influential factors that impacts student achievement and success, especially in urban public high schools.

In this current research, teachers' influence on the outcomes of students is examined through the use of a life story narrative approach. In the section that follows, I discuss the existing literature on the social and historical factors which influence unequal educational experiences for students and the role of teachers in student achievement. Then, I outline the methodological approach to this research, which includes background information on life story narrative approach, as well as qualitative data analysis and sampling procedure. I then present vignettes of each of the four teachers who participated in this study and conclude with a discussion of the importance of these findings and implications for future research.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In 2017, about 31 percent of all enrolled public-school students were racial minorities[1] (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020). Black students were reported to be more than twice as likely as white students to attend schools with high concentrations of poverty (Economic Policy Institute, 2017). High-poverty schools are defined as those where more than a 75.0 percent of students enrolled at the school may be eligible to receive lunches that are free or

[1] Minority students include students who were Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaska Native, and of two or more races (NCES, 2020).

reduced in price (NCES, 2020). Many majority-minority schools are concentrated in communities that are at risk of high-poverty.[2]

One of the theoretical frameworks used to understand the relationship between social ecology and micro-level crime in economically-disadvantaged communities is known as social disorganization theory. According to social disorganization theory, students' low achievement and higher drop-out rates can be partially explained by characteristics of local communities. If local communities are characterized by low levels of engagement and a lack of connectedness among community members, students tend to do more poorly in school when compared to communities with high levels of engagement and community connectedness (Shaw & McKay, 1942). In their study on juvenile delinquency and urban areas, Shaw and McKay (1942) found that weak community institutions contributed to a sense of little community cohesion.

More recently, researchers have examined the impact of students' perceptions of community on educational attainment because schools located in urban cities continue to reflect racial and class-based stratification and segregation. In Mello and Swanson's (2007) study, Black students who held a negative perception of their neighborhood were less likely to attempt to obtain a high-school or college degree. Neighborhood and environmental factors are one of many social barriers that impact the desire to succeed, further stressing the importance of the role of the institution of education.

The Suburban Dream and Educational Inequality

Between 1910 and 1970, it is estimated that over 6 million Black or African Americans moved away from rural southern areas of the United States in search of physical safety and

[2] The term "majority-minority" is used to describe schools where white students are the numeric minority and students of color are the numeric majority (Pew Research).

improved economic opportunities (Price-Spratlen, 1999). This massive relocation from the rural South to northern and western American cities is referred to as the Great Migration. The Great Migration continues to be one of the most significant demographic events in the United States because of its "social, economic, political and cultural importance" (Tolnay, 2003:210). Northern cities seemingly offered better educational, occupational and political opportunities (Price-Spratlen, 1999).

In response to the Great Migration in these major cities in the American North and West, white families relocated to the developing suburban areas of many cities--this phenomenon is known as "white flight." White flight occurs when white households leave cities to avoid living near, or in close proximity to, people of color. White flight occurs as a result of micro-level circumstances, such as the individual racism of whites, and it is mutually reinforced by the macro-level conditions of structural racism. Beginning in 1956 for example, the federal government funded the building of interstate highways that razed neighborhoods "for the explicit purpose of relocating Black populations to more distant ghettos or of creating barriers between white and Black neighborhoods" (Rothstein, 2014, p. 2). Additionally, restrictive covenants prevented the purchase of homes in white neighborhoods by Black or African American households as a result of the Housing Act of 1934 (Gotham, 2000). Bonilla-Silva, Goar and Embrick (2006) find that whites' racialized attitudes and prejudice towards Blacks are recycled and legitimated, often unconsciously, through the creation of a white habitus. The white habitus "creates a sense of racial solidarity...which in turn adds to whites' perceptions that their white lifestyle is the correct and 'normal' way of doing things" (Bonilla-Silva et al., 2006, p. 247). In the context of this current study, this is significant because the segregation of neighborhoods by

class and race creates disparities in educational experiences and outcomes of students attending urban public schools. Such disparities have been exacerbated by school choice programs.

School choice programs “allow parents to decide what schools their children attend using the public funds dedicated to their children’s education” (Forster, 2016, p. 3). The school choice movement of the 1990s contributed to a mass exodus of students from public schools into other types of schools such as private, charter and magnet. In 1988, Black students attended schools where 43 percent of their fellow students were low-income, yet by 2006, it had risen to 59 percent (Orfield, 2009). White families freely exercise school choice through residential mobility, something rarely accessible for minority families. Renzulli and Evans (2016) found that charter schools provide a public-school option for white flight “without the drawbacks of residential mobility” (p. 413). Although families are no longer barred from attending schools on the basis of their race because of the ruling in *Brown*, school choice and quality of education remain limited by race and socioeconomic status (Chingos & Monarrez, 2020). In his study on the disparities between predominantly white and Black school districts, Fitzgerald (2015) finds that “public school funding allotments are both historical and contemporary examples of systematic racial subjugation” (p. 1). School funding is often determined by local property taxes and state or federal funds. Families living in neighborhoods with a high concentration poverty experience a much different system of education than those neighborhoods characterized as middle- or high-classes.

In a perceived effort to address disparities in educational funding, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was passed in 2001. This Act required schools to reach a certain skill and achievement level to continue receiving federal funding. The Act was passed with the hopes of raising standards and student achievement across the board. The passage and implementation of

NCLB has increasingly grown divisive and controversial. Supporters of the Act claim that it has remedied failing reading and math scores across the nation, while critics suggest that it has narrowed the curriculum and allowed for states to manipulate the test and results reported to the federal government in efforts to retain funding (Simpson, Lacava & Graner, 2004). Although a thorough evaluation of NCLB is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to recognize that disparities in public education among wealthy and impoverished school districts remain, and that such disparities can have a lasting impact in low-income communities, particularly when social reproduction is considered.

In Sharkey's (2013) *Stuck in Place* (2013), he found that 48 percent of Black families have lived in poor neighborhoods over at least two generations, compared to 7 percent of white families. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) assert that the institution of education enables the reproduction of inequality through achievement disparities and social exclusion that are replicated across generations. Social reproduction theory focuses on the relationship between opportunity structures and social mobility—it "identifies the barriers to social mobility, barriers that constrain without completely blocking lower- and working-class individuals' efforts to break into the upper reaches of the class structure" (MacLeod, 2009, p. 8). One type of barrier to social mobility is the transmission of social and cultural "capital" through socialization practices.[3] Agents of socialization, especially one's family, can pass valuable traits onto future generations. However, not every family has access to the types of highly valued capital that allows for upward social mobility.

[3] In this study's context, cultural capital is the amount of exposure one has to elite opportunities and knowledge that are often valued within education. For example, a valuable form of cultural capital may be the knowledge one's parents have concerning college admissions. If one's parents attended college, they may be better able to guide their children through the college application process.

Obtaining the types of cultural capital associated with higher classes is often understood as an advantage to children because the education system historically values and works to benefit those who have that type of acquired capital. Social capital allows for enriching opportunities such as after-school programming, such as foreign-language classes and sports, that allow for the development of knowledge and organizational skills valuable in college admissions as well as middle-class occupations (Neuman & Celano, 2001)[4]. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), the maintenance of capital serves as forms of power: the educational system is run and defined by those with the highest concentrations of capital. Those students who face social and economic disadvantages—students without these highly-valued forms of capital—tend to face additional challenges compared to their advantaged peers, which tends to result in lower student performance and achievement (Rothstein, 2014). While there are individual exceptions to these trends, of course, social reproduction theory, as well as cultural and social capital, provide valuable context for the disparities in education and barriers to social mobility often witnessed in the experiences of low-income students at urban public schools.

The Role of Teachers in Student Achievement

Literature on the educational outcomes in K-12 education tends to explore student perspectives of their relationship with teachers. Fewer studies explore this topic from the perspective of teachers. Pringle, Lyons & Booker (2010) found that a majority of the students believed that race and ethnicity played a factor in the way they were treated by teachers. Brooms (2016) identified two critical components that shaped the achievement and success of students

[4] Social capital consists of the networks of social influence readily accessible because of one's place in society. For example, if a student's parent attended college, they may be designated as a "legacy" student and given preferential treatment in college admissions.

attending an all-boys public school: school culture and relationships. These two components fostered strong positive academic identities within the students in an environment that provided them with the support to succeed. One participant stated, "what helped him succeed was the belief that various school personnel poured into him accomplishing his own goals" (Brooms, 2016, p. 823). These remarks about the teacher-student relationships exemplify the importance of school personnel, especially teachers, emotionally investing in their students.

Social support is critical for adolescents in high school and heavily contributes to positive educational attitudes and behaviors. In their study of a large urban high school in the Midwest, Somers, Owens and Piliawsky (2008) found that teacher support was the second largest contributor to better grades and achievement for students. Their study also found parental and peer support as important contributors to high levels of achievement for Black or African American students (Somers, Owens & Piliawsky, 2008). High-achieving Black male students emphasized the importance of having teachers that were "interested in them as a person, encouraged them to be engaged, and provided them with positive feedback when they performed well" (Toldson, 2008, p. 817). Shaughnessy and McHatton (2009) found that teacher support and interest in student lives is not just necessary confined to the classroom, but also influential if it extended to their lives beyond the classroom. Brooms (2016) found that participants related their success in school to various actors that invested in their potential. This fostered a positive school culture which was critical to "harboring strong, positive academic identities and goals for young Black men" (Brooms, 2016, p. 827).

Teacher expectations of students affect students' perceptions of themselves and their potential to achieve. Interactions with students and the success of helping them achieve lies in a teacher's sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is a teacher's belief in their ability to successfully

teach students, regardless of previous knowledge or particular context (Eggen & Kauchak, 2010). Self-efficacy influences the degree to which teachers promote student growth and persevere with confidence in the face of challenges. High levels of self-efficacy are more likely to have a positive impact on students, while lower levels of self-efficacy are associated with teacher burnout (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Stipek (2012) examined the factors that affect teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and concluded a set of potential predictors for teachers' self-efficacy belief: "student characteristics and the support teachers believed they had from parents and administrators" (p. 600). Self-efficacy is critical for the execution of successful teaching and the building of meaningful student-teacher interactions.

Ingersoll and May (2012) noted that the teaching profession has often seen high attrition rates among new teachers. Self-efficacy is critical in retaining teachers as it also helps them adjust to the reality of teaching, the management of students and the adjustment to the school environment. Role strain is "the felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations" in which individuals often seek to reduce it through a "continuing process of selection among alternative role behaviors" (Goode, 1960, p. 483). Teachers may feel role strain because of the many underlying decision processes that are involved in their day-to-day life in this profession.

While role strain focuses on the various roles associated with a single status, role conflict is applied to the roles attached to multiple statuses. Race is an important characteristic to take into consideration when examining the many statuses and accompanying roles that play out in educational institutions, among both students and teachers. The demographic divide between teachers and students is evident. The teaching profession is predominantly composed of white teachers. During the 2015-16 school year, "racial and ethnic minorities accounted for 20% of all public elementary and secondary school teachers in the United States" (Pew Research Center,

2018). In classroom observations, Cherng and Halpin (2015) found that teachers of color were better able to develop a rapport with students that they do not share the same race-ethnicity with due to the fact that on average, all student groups reported positive ratings of teachers of color, including white and Asian American students. Teachers of color "who likely possess tools to form strong ties with students, can help empower youth of all racial/ethnic identities" (Cherng & Halpin, 2016, 417). Furthermore, Ladson-Billings (1995) argued that minority teachers are able to relate more easily with minority youth. Social identity theory seeks to explain the way in which humans naturally associate themselves with groups that share similar social identities as themselves (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identities function as ways to distinguish ingroup from outgroup members. Within the profession of teaching, it is important to recognize the subconscious ways that identities may interfere with fostering meaningful relationships.

Finally, relationships between students and teachers are a key factor in classroom management. Caton's (2012) interviews with students that dropped-out of school upheld the importance of teachers actively assisting students to achieve their highest potential. One participant noted that "some teachers focused more on misbehavior rather than on reaffirming their strengths, which placed them at a disadvantage" (Caton, 2012, p. 1067). Negative perceptions and interactions of students held by teachers can define and determine the type of schooling experience and willingness to participate for students.

Punitive Social Control in Education

The consistent portrayal of Black men and boys as criminals in media can elicit antagonism towards Black men and boys in broader society. Dong and Murillo (2007) found that the greater number of negative images shown on television, the more likely viewers were to develop stereotypes that mirrored those presented in media. In the collective media, there is less

emphasis or representation of Black men in roles that emphasize their intellectuality or other positive characteristics (Kinnick, White & Washington, 2001). This underrepresentation creates and maintains dominant culture's perception of Black boys and men as potentially dangerous and violent, and therefore in need of coercive punishment. These stereotypes perpetuated in media can find their role in many social institutions, including education. The widespread acceptance of these stereotypes by the general public surfaces in the everyday interactions with youth of color. In a study of 19 Midwestern middle schools, researchers found that Black men in 8th, 9th, 10th and 11th grades were sent to the principal's office for subjective reasons such as "disrespect" or a "perceived threat" (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace & Bachmann, 2008). In a similar study, Watkins and Kurtz (2001) asked teachers to select students for a psychological evaluation who were unruly. Teachers selected more Black students than white students for the hypothetical psychological evaluation (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). Given that media tends to offer a negative portrayal of Black boys and men as in need of coercive punishment, this stereotype may well have an impact on teacher evaluations of student behavior.

Hing (2016) observed that Black children are overrepresented in special education programs as a partial result of educator's implicit or explicit bias. It is important to note that one of the subjective factors Hing (2016) described is "a child's inability to build positive relationships with teachers and students" (p. 299). Hing (2016) continued, "Students designated as having disabilities are two times as likely as their peers to be punished with suspension and expulsion…. [A] disability classification heightens the risk that a student will drop out [of school] eventually" (p. 299). Ford, Grantham and Whiting (2008) find that African-American, Hispanic/Latino and American Indian students are less likely than white students to be identified as gifted, even when satisfying the criteria for such services. This is even more likely for Black students who are in

classrooms with non-Black teachers (Grissom & Redding, 2016). After surveying teachers, Watkins and Kurtz (2001) found a higher tendency of teachers to select Black students over white students as unruly children or in need of psychological evaluation.

METHODS

Qualitative research allows for the development of concepts that facilitate new understandings of social phenomena in natural settings. In other words, qualitative research emphasizes the idea of multiple realities with the intent of studying individuals who can present new subjective meanings, experiences and views of the world (Creswell, 2013). This type of research introduces new understandings of dimensions while focusing on specific contexts of interest. Qualitative research enables the ability to see the social world from the eyes of participants. In accordance with Weber's use of *verstehen,* I shared in the worldview of my participants and sought to understand their point of view and interpret the meaning of their actions. Given that this study focused on the subjective interpretations of teacher-student interactions from the perspective of the teacher, a qualitative methodological approach was both appropriate and necessary.

For this study, two high schools located in a mid-size Midwestern city were selected as sites to analyze the influence of teacher perceptions on their relationship with students. The schools included in this sample were selected because of the racial-ethnic composition of their student body and their classification as majority-minority public schools. In an effort to protect confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for schools and participants in this study. The sites selected for this study are called Thurgood Marshall and James Baldwin high schools.

Thurgood Marshall High School was a high school (grades 9-12) located in an urban, low-income community. According to the U.S. Department of Education, a low-income individual is one whose "family's taxable income for the preceding year did not exceed 150

percent of the poverty level amount” (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). These sites were selected because of their relative importance to the landscape of public and urban education in a metropolitan area. In recent years, the total student body population included about 1,000 students. Over 50% of the school identified as Black or African American. Over 50% of the students were eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program. The graduation rate at Thurgood Marshall HS was above 80% for the past few years. James Baldwin High School was also located in an urban, low-income community. In recent years, the total number of student enrollment was over 2,000 students. Of this total, over 50% of the student body identified as Black or African American. Almost 70% of these students were eligible for the federal free and reduced lunch program. Students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch fall below the federal poverty threshold (The Condition of Education. 2020).

Qualitative Data and Analysis

The sociological theory of symbolic interaction suggests that all human behavior is social, therefore emphasizing how social interactions, such as interviews, allow for the development of shared meaning. Life-story interviews are helpful as they usually work in chronological order to identify the way that people are socialized into specific occupations or social classes or adapt to changes in circumstances (Gilbert, 2008). Social researchers are better able to map personal and social change through the use of this method.

Interviews provide the researcher the opportunity to note observations, reactions and understandings of others (Weiss, 2013). In this study, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to develop deeper understandings of participant thoughts, ideas and comments. Interviews have been a common form of data collection in qualitative sociological research with the emergence of the symbolic interactionist perspective (Becker, 1967) and grounded theory

(Glaser & Strauss, 1998). Grounded theory stresses the importance of theory rooted in data rather than developing a theory before analyzing data. Semi-structured interviews are ideal when you will not have more than one chance to interview someone. In this study, each participant was asked the same set of questions while also taking the liberty to probe relevant points of significance if they came up in the interview. I used probing questions to clarify and contextualize what they were saying in response to my questions.

In contrast to quantitative data, Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined the nature of qualitative data as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or others means of quantification" (p. 17). Qualitative data collection occurs in the form of words or illustrations rather than numbers. It is an "inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting" (Cresswell, 1994, p. 300). The primary focus is therefore placed on the meaning participants ascribe to the world.

A semi-structured interview protocol was used for a total of four interviews with teachers from James Baldwin and Thurgood Marshall high school. Semi-structured interviews collect in-depth information from respondents who answer open-ended questions from an interview guide which was used "to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed" (Patton, 2002, p. 343). The interview incorporated a series of 20 questions that guided discussions. The use of a semi-structured interview guide allowed participants to respond to specific questions and expand on their opinions and express their feelings without the constraint of a structured interview (Cresswell, 2013, p. 403). Interview data was collected in a single session that lasted between 30 minutes and one hour over Zoom. The interviews were then

recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. The researcher coded interview transcripts using open and axial coding. Open coding is often used as the first step in this process as it breaks textual data into specific parts, while axial coding allows the researcher to draw connections within the codes and identify core variables that incorporate all of the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Although the intention of the study was to interview a wide range of teachers at each institution, the nature of the global pandemic and COVID-19 proved to be an insurmountable obstacle. Each of the interviews provided ample information to shift the analysis of the study to one of a life history narrative. Through the type of conversation enabled by interviews, the teachers' events and situations were naturally constructed into narratives. With a shifted focus towards storytelling, "a central tenet of the narrative turn is that speakers construct events through narration rather than simply refer to events" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007, p. 64). By using this approach, it becomes clear that participants choose stories because they are significant moments in their own lives. Moreover, the narrative approach "makes the self [the narrator and] the protagonist, either as an actor or as an interested observer of others' actions" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007, p. 65). This approach incorporates a range of narrative strategies used by the participant to incorporate many different perspectives one may have constructed in relation to their discursive environment. The following section presents data from these interviews which demonstrate the range of narrative strategies that participants employ while in a discursive environment.

RESULTS

Four teachers from two urban public schools in the Midwest, James Baldwin High School and Thurgood Marshall High School, participated in this research. Shelly was an African American woman who taught computer science. At the time of our interview, Shelly had been teaching at her school for approximately 15 years, the longest of any other teacher interviewed. Matthew

was a white man and Sally was a white woman. Both Sally and Matthew taught in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program at their schools. While Matthew had been teaching at his school for between five and 10 years, Sally had been teaching at her school for less than five years. Queen was an African American woman who taught social studies. Queen had taught at her school for approximately five years at the time of our interview. All participants identified as Midwesterners, yet Queen referenced her upbringing in the American Southwest as a formative part of her upbringing and critical part of her identity. In the section that follows, I describe and interpret the ways teachers conceptualized their social identities, life experiences and classroom practices in order to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of positionality in teacher-student relationships and pedagogy.

"The most important part is being there" - Shelly

Shelly identified as African American woman who grew up in a predominantly white town. She admitted: "As a kid, I didn't see color, it was more if we were in class together, we have these common interests, and so that brings us together and you happen to be Asian or white or whatever." She commented that her admiration for diversity and cultural awareness surged from her love of reading, traveling and her general tendency to always learn something new. She speculated that her welcomeness "comes across just as my personality. I meet a stranger and I try to welcome them into my class and feel like they have a voice."

Shelly's strong sense of responsibility and commitment to improving the profession of teaching matched her good-natured and cheerful demeanor. Shelly entered the field of teaching in a rather untraditional way since her background and college degree pointed her towards the insurance industry. Through what she calls "divine intervention," she found herself constantly

drawn towards opportunities in her local schooling system and administration. Shelly admitted that her experience with children was solely based on her experience of raising two daughters and being “that mom” who volunteered for every school event. She never considered the profession of teaching due to her perception of the negative treatment of teachers. Shelly reflected that her ability to overcome her initial denial came from her boss. As she explained, “sometimes your supervisors can see your strengths…I was in denial, but she kept coming back…she hounded me for two months…and that was the beginning.”

To Shelly, “if I can impart knowledge in something that’s my own personal life experience, or even like content area, then that’s, that’s what my goal is for sure.” Shelly hoped that through sharing her own life experiences with students, they could benefit from the life and lessons she has lived.

Shelly revealed that her first-year experience as a teacher made her question her role and impact. Shelly acknowledged that because of that, she has been mentoring and advising beginner teachers ever since the conclusion of her first year. To her, the first year is “like a catch-22.” She laughed as she said: “if you think you’re getting into teaching and you just gonna learn your content. No. No.”

Shelly has borne witness to many transitions in the school and worn “many different hats.” Last year she taught personal finance, while this year she teaches computer science. Although her time as a teacher has been in many different content areas, her goal has remained steady and to always be there for her students. Shelly agreed that the knowledge a teacher shares with students does not come from the curriculum but rather from their own life experiences that they have to offer.

Shelly recognized the importance of being a constant in the lives of students and watching them grow. Although not confident in her knowledge of the number of students that graduate per year at her school, she is "always so proud at graduation because I can say, 'Oh, I had him as a ninth grader!' and you literally see them go through the process and mature and graduate."

When asked to describe the school culture, she felt that a snapshot of the fifty buses from different corners of the city would answer the question perfectly. She noted that the majority of her student body identified as Hispanic and/or Black. Extracurricular activities such as sports, dance and music lend well to the cultivation of a strong culture by bringing students from different grades and backgrounds together. Ultimately, though, Shelly said that the school's identity as an all-city school greatly impacts the school culture: "you still have what side of town [they are from], that will, that trumps everything."

Shelly emphasized how critical the first few weeks of teaching are to the success that one will have as a teacher. Shelly warned that "after the newness wears off and you start having classroom management problems, it is going to fall back on the relationship." As she stated, "they [students] can see somebody [a teacher] that's fake...you know, they won't want to have anything to do with you." This extended to many issues she has heard being voiced from first year teachers who believed that the differing treatment, respect and types of conversation they have with students comes from their identity and/or race. She recognized that the connection she made with some of her students may be in part due to her age and race, as "for some I am of their grandmother's age." She also commented that those connections and relationships may be developed based on her performance during those first critical weeks.

She expressed that she works well with the current staff at her school. One year, however, she taught in a hallway with two white men "which was always interesting to me to see how they interacted with the students." In the classroom next to hers, she highlighted the teacher's teaching style and success because he "was no nonsense and [the students] knew what he expected of them and had a relationship with them." Shelly commended this, especially taking into consideration the racial power dynamic and rhetoric that exists in the greater sphere. In her view, the students "right off the bat, they're gonna already be combative...like, that's just the way it's going to be, right? And so, I'll give them credit for figuring it out, you know, that way to definitely work with them." On the other hand, she has witnessed situations where students or teachers have provoked each other. She found herself reflecting upon those situations and how she may see things differently based on the fact that their perspective and interaction is different than the one she has with her students.

Based on her observations and her tendency to notice those types of interactions, Shelly often posed questions such as, "How would that be if? Or maybe it might be the outcome of something? Or was that what you said because of race?" Relationship-building with students in those first weeks allowed for her to be comfortable about the classroom environment a safe space where every student felt accepted and respected. Shelly believed that if one truly took the time to know their student, one "can already identify [an issue] right off the bat and diffuse it before it ever becomes an issue."

Shelly found that the practice of standing in the doorway of her classroom as students arrive for class has been vital to her ability to observe and understand her students' lives outside of the confines of her classroom. Shelly identified that oftentimes the adverse home-life situations of her students are noticed right when they walk into her classroom. Time must be

invested to recognize and understand the signs and signals that students unconsciously or consciously send the teacher.

For Shelly, it came down to showing care for students in a way beyond just rewarding good behavior. She noted that, “unfortunately, our kids, that demographic they need that. I’ve heard that so many times and so they have to see that you care about them. I do rewards, but not silly stuff that I think is already expected. I don’t like to sugarcoat stuff.” She claimed that many novice teachers get trapped into the practice of rewarding students which in her opinion, encouraged students to find ways around actually doing tasks and assignments at hand. Shelly acknowledged that this tendency existed in her school specifically, because “sometimes the teacher will use that just to, to try and get along…but I also think that the Black students, particularly the Black male students, use that.”

Shelly has encountered many different types of power struggles resulting from diverse racial-ethnic, sexual or gender identities, which she noted that she is still learning about. Romantic and sexual relationship issues have also played out in Shelly’s classroom, as she cited a specific incidence of an abusive relationship that she had to handle between two of her students. The increasing role of technology and cell phone usage has created another obstacle in her classroom and in her ability to observe and protect her students.

Shelly explained that she holds an organized classroom because of the benefit that it lends to her students. Shelly recognized that a lack of structure and organization negatively affect her students, so she “works to make the environment, a learning environment.” Shelly disclosed that she struggled when students pushed boundaries as a result of her racial-ethnic identity and age. She alleged that it is inevitable: “you are going to have those power struggles, you are because sometimes they want to push back.” These situations, however, reinforced how critical

the first two weeks are in the fact that they set the expectation of structure and routine for students. When adverse situations arose that challenged these expectations, Shelly noted that students grappled with the burden of disobeying the community built through the norms of the classroom. She noticed that these power struggles often served as a disguise for other things going on in students' lives.

Shelly rarely found that her race or ethnicity inhibited her interactions with students. Shelly explained experiences with previous students whose cultural backgrounds she could not automatically connect to, such as being Muslim or emigrating from Nigeria or Korea. Shelly reinforced how it served as an important reminder that there are always things to learn. She said this with confidence because of the feedback she received from student evaluations at the end of the year. She referenced one specific instance where she received feedback from a student who wrote that "Shelly is always yelling at us," which she recognized could come from "maybe a cultural tendency" to speak louder. Learning about these cultural differences and developing a new level of cultural awareness allowed her to challenge what she encountered growing up.

Those standards set in the first few weeks include an enforced anti-bullying police duty that rotates between students. She explained how this instills a sense of accountability in the students to maintain the standards and structure. Shelly admitted that the students themselves end up demonstrating a tendency of "self-policing" that holds the classroom community accountable to each other.

"We need to educate. We need teachers." - Matthew

Matthew was a white man that taught in the English as a Second Language (ESL) program at his school. Through conversation it became clear that Matthew was passionate and excited about the work that allowed him to interact with students and cultures. He appreciated that he always

continued learning. He had been teaching at this school for between five and ten years at the time of our interview.

Matthew did not want to be a teacher. Growing up, teaching was his family's business as his mother, uncle and cousins were all teachers. Matthew described the 12-week vacation as the pull factor into the profession nearly a decade ago. However, Matthew saw the profession differently after he began teaching. He recounted how a priest once told him how joining the profession of teaching was similar to joining the brotherhood—you have to do it for yourself, not for the benefit of the community. Matthew believed that "you have to find your own reason why you believe in education... I believe in public education...especially with everything that's been happening lately… I believe in an educated public." Matthew believed that education was important, but stipulated that educating a just society was even more important.

Matthew taught in his college-town and then went on to spend a year abroad in a Spanish-speaking country in South America. In addition to his fluency in Spanish, he felt pulled toward an ESL degree because of his fondness for the English language. Matthew felt as though he found his place in his current school and in his role. Specifically, the demographics of the school gave him freedom: "[it] allows me to be more involved in the school in a way that a traditional classroom doesn't." He felt that going to work in a suburban school was not a fit for him: "I just feel like I am actually needed here. And I feel like I'm respected." In addition to the school being a short bus ride from his house, he found that the relationship he built with students was arguably the best part of his job.

Matthew was extremely fond of his school. Specifically, he highlighted the music program and the student-led newspaper as testimonies to the unique character of the school, the culture and the students. When he explained his school, Matthew described the history of the

school—this school was one of the first Black schools in the country. Because of the school's rich history, "within the community, within the Black community especially, there's such a high respect for [our school]." Outside of the community, Matthew said people have a different, more negative view of the school. Once he was asked. "is it like dangerous there?" Matthew saw that the nationwide shift to emphasizing standardized testing as a means of school funding severely impacted his school and the community involvement. He believed that if resources were allocated based on the value of education within the community "we would be, we will be able to put a lot more resources in developing our communities" and his school would excel on the state and national level.

When Matthew first started at his school, it was still a designated magnet school for a specific career path. It worked alongside three other career path schools in addition to three neighborhood schools. With the closing of multiple schools under a new superintendent, the graduation rate severely dropped because of the merging of the schools. Matthew believed that with the students in his classroom, which includes 9th to 12th graders, about 30 percent of his students go on to college or vocational training. From what he saw, "mostly females go on to college."

He found that the most important quality for him as a teacher was to be flexible. Because of his knowledge of his students' lives outside of school, he designed lesson plans that were "easier for the kids to be able to do by themselves, but that they also teach them from doing my assignments while not necessarily being in front of my face." By accommodating to the fact that many of his students were self-taught and not regularly attending his class because of other commitments, he made sure that the assignments were worthy of the time that students dedicated to them. Matthew mentioned that "we get a lot of support" from Latino parents specifically, who

he believed continually emphasized the importance of education to their children. The parental involvement and participation cannot be generalizable. According to Matthew, some parents were involved with the PTA and "then we have kids that you know, are starving and getting sold into sex trafficking." As he referenced his tenure at the school, "you see a lot of different experiences and have to call CPS [Child Protective Services]." Matthew showed some trepidation on the subject, as he recognized that many of his students would be successful no matter what, yet "you have other people, that you're just like, I don't know."

Matthew felt that in general, students at his school got along well and made it a positive school culture. He referenced just one situation of bullying. Matthew believed that such a positive culture existed because in the minds of students, they were all in a tough situation together. He noted that students created their own groups, but "you're able to develop your own group as well...it's nothing like us versus them." Matthew hallmarked this as an important factor of his school. Although he reiterated that students generally all got along, "colleagues is a different story." Matthew recognized that teachers typically complained because of the nature and demand of the job. Yet, the lack of adequate preparation proved difficult for some teachers: "if you don't know what to worry about, then you worry about everything…and it weighs on you." As one of the longest lasting teachers at his school, Matthew simplified the nature of teacher turnover in that "a majority of our senior students have been [at our school] longer than their teachers." He maintained that the lack of consistency and retention in teaching contributed heavily to the culture at the school. As the union representative, he tried in this role "to be a cheerleader for the team and to be a support staff and just ask how people are doing, because sometimes, that just goes a long way."

To Matthew, options were key in his classroom management style. Matthew recognized that some of his practices as a middle school teacher remained with him as a high school teacher. In middle school, he designated classroom jobs so that students felt a sense of responsibility and accountability. With his high schoolers, he used options. By giving students options, it instilled a sense of autonomy. He concluded, “they don’t want to be told what to do, they just want to be.” Matthew admitted and felt guilty that sometimes he accidentally slipped into more of a parenting role. By giving options, “you have more respect from the kids...and you can design engaging lessons and have engaging units that are actually applicable to their lives...so, yeah, it becomes less of a behavior problem.”

When he first started as a teacher at the school, the ESL program existed on the mindset of “teach whatever” and had no accompanying program or structure. Since then, it reformed into a structured and successful program. In reverence of his district and team: “the ESL team has to be the best in the state, even if the scores don’t reflect that.” Matthew noted that the greatest roadblock for the ESL team have been the implemented project-based curriculum, as it “brings teachers down because we have these students that don’t know how to read...they just don’t know the language and so how do you expect them to write a persuasive essay when they can’t even write their names?” Matthew has found that using alternative learning opportunities, such as podcasts, helped students.

With regards to power structures in his classroom, he saw that the most tension occurred between the African and Black communities. Matthew noticed a high tendency of African students picked on. Matthew referenced the navigation between cultural identity and social expectation, yet: “the thing is, you have these African students who see that their concept of culture is to be very proud of it, where you’re from, but then you come in here and you want to

fit in with everybody else." He questioned if sometimes the students brought it upon themselves as they often assimilated to mainstream culture which diminished their touch with their culture of origin. Matthew explained that "some Black people want to be disconnected from the African community or don't want to be tied to the African style."

From his perspective, the Latino and Black students got along with each other and referenced how the Latino students frequently use the "N-word." In terms of white students, which he admitted as very few, "they are minorities here, so it's not like they have anything...they are not picked on or anything, but you know, they'll get white jokes." He believed that colorism sometimes surfaced, though. Matthew elaborated on how the "darker-skinned girls do feel self-conscious sometimes...I've seen a situation where some dark-skinned girls get made fun of and we have had a conversation about it." Matthew used these rare instances and emphasized the importance of recognizing and celebrating cultural differences.

Matthew accepted that he, as a white man, served as the image of privilege, but advocated his firm belief in his ability to be a good and qualified teacher. Matthew admitted that he may not be nearly as good as other teachers in the building, but recognized that it may be his privilege that made him confident. Matthew talked in veneration about another white masculine teacher who has worked to prepare students not only for college, but also for life: "he's just a great teacher and kids rise to the challenge in his class." Matthew has a heightened sense of awareness about how his racial identity may impact his relationships with students of color. Matthew echoed the importance of having a body of teachers that reflected the demographics of the student population in the school system. To Matthew, they related much better and easier to students and "that's what the school needs more of, they need to be able to have these

relationships and connections that I can't give...we do not have enough [teachers of color] in the building, but the ones that we do have are out of this world talented..."

Matthew has shown his committed responsibility as a teacher. Additionally, he saw his role as dependent to his ability to be a constant in the lives of his students. He stated how many students across the district, outside of schools like his, have shared the same teacher that their parents had, which he noted as a marker of success in a school. To Matthew, people too often entered the teaching profession in an urban school for the wrong reasons. He stated: "people come into education saying, 'I want to change the world,' and they just get smacked." He knows that his school has great students, stating, "I think they deserve the consistency, and they deserve that high school experience, they deserve to know me." He hesitated to call himself a mentor. Matthew emphasized: "I'm a mentor, but I also have to grade [papers] and provide feedback and also write lesson plans." He expressed a deep desire and demand for a coach-like figure in addition to teachers in the lives of his students, "but unfortunately, there's not enough funding, so that falls on the teacher to be a mentor, but it is, it's like a second job."

Matthew revealed that the greatest obstacles he encountered as a teacher was the lack of parental support and financing. Additionally, he remarked how much of his students struggled with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). Matthew stated: "undocumented students have a lot harder time...especially when they start applying for colleges and stuff, unfortunately...it's [students' documentation status] kept a secret." Matthew mentioned a hidden challenge that his students faced: "my students tend to compare themselves to each other, where some of them should be comparing themselves to everybody who is like them in the whole country." Matthew attested to the importance of instilling confidence in his students. Most recently, he had a conversation with his students after the events surrounding George Floyd's

murder, and found that “through this discussion in conversation, one of the things was developing confidence in them.” He observed that many of his students go through life hearing that they are destined to fail. For him, “it’s huge” to make them feel supported and counter the idea that they will fail.

Matthew felt that he makes a difference in the lives of his students but recognized that “most kids, most of all my kids, were going to be good no matter what.” He admitted, though, the sense of satisfaction when a student of his goes on to college with a scholarship he advocated for them to apply for and supported throughout the process.

Matthew argued that education is public for a reason, and stressed that “we all have a duty as the public to make sure they are held to the highest standard and to make sure that they are a good place, a good and safe place for people to learn.” He claimed that the existence of his school and the work they do for the community speak to a larger national dialogue, and argued that it reflects the advocacy seen on a nation-wide level in regards to the Black Lives Matter movement. Matthew stressed: “this is the spot...if we don’t get [this] right then holding up a Black Lives Matter sign doesn’t really matter.” In addition, Matthew noted that “I don’t leave because there’s not anybody behind me.”

In his concluding thoughts, Matthew made it clear how important the role of a teacher and the institution of education is in the world: “We need people in the building. I love my school so much. And I think my kids are better. I think we got the best school in the [district] and I eventually want to help make this one of the best schools in the state...but we need help.”

“My students are my inspiration for what I do” - Sally

Sally identified as a white woman and an ESL teacher. She built her identity as a teacher on her desire to establish relationships and a classroom community that valued all different cultures.

Sally noted that she works primarily with students recently immigrated to the United States: "I work with newcomers...often from Central America, down to South America and then Africa." Sally celebrated this meeting of many different cultures. Sally labeled herself as a native Midwesterner.

Originally, Sally had no intention of becoming a teacher. Her mind changed when she went abroad her junior year of high school: "I was the only one that spoke English of the exchange students...and I really enjoyed my time there, and so I just felt kind of called into education." She admitted that her experience in college did not adequately prepare her for the hard truths of being a teacher. She noted that her small Christian college relied on teaching the traditional role of a teacher which left her "unprepared for all the extra parts of teaching, like, mainly trying to understand my students' experiences and relating to them, really just the emotional wear of listening to really hard stories." She believed that in some part no one can adequately feel prepared for that role.

Sally claimed that the uniqueness of the ESL program allows her to teach in a small classroom which benefited her ability to get to know her students and their lives on a deeper level. She also stated that this allows her to interact with students from different grade levels in one classroom. She identified the best part of her job as her students: "a lot of my students have really been through a lot, but they are so strong and they really are my inspiration for what I do."

Sally has focused her classroom management style to be one that is committed to "building a strong classroom community and a strong community culture." She provided examples of creating an inclusive community such as listening to cultural music while doing work or "just talking to them about things that matter to them." Through the ESL program, she added that they aim to construct a relatable curriculum for her students, "whether that be a focus

on gender and gender identity...a focus on immigration, amendments and their student rights." Sally noted some drawbacks of this latitude. Specifically, she commented that the curriculum tends to be a uniform fit: "a lot of [her students] are coming from refugee camps, or like the mountains and villages and don't have previous educational experience...so focusing [the curriculum] more on their level, kind of meeting people where they are instead of assuming they know." Sally expressed that these students bring important life experiences to the classroom which should be cherished and incorporated to the curriculum and classroom practices.

Sally was originally placed at an elementary school and did not feel as though she fit. As an active member of her church and volunteer leader of their youth group, she found her calling to work with high school aged students. Sally reflected on this awakening: "I just really enjoyed that age, because it's more of like a relationship...and those relationships can carry on throughout their whole life." Sally has been invited to many different out of school celebrations by her students, including "eating iftar." Celebrated during Ramadan, eating iftar brings Muslim people together to break their fast as a community. Sally recognized that many of her students spend their time outside school handling other responsibilities. Sally spoke generally about her students, but stated that many of them "take care of their younger siblings, or they work to provide for their families on the weekends or after school." She found that with her Latino students, the boys have a higher tendency of working in construction or factories, while the girls work in restaurants. On the other hand, "my African population primarily takes care of their siblings." These differences in home life sometimes surfaced as power struggles in her classroom. She cited one specific example that occurred between African students who were seen as more privileged than the refugee students: "there was definitely a class struggle intersecting with that."

Virtual school, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, has made the demands and inequalities of their home lives more apparent. She commented that the nature of doing school from home has left many of her students preoccupied with care-giving or other economic responsibilities, such as taking care of a sibling or finding a job. Another disparity she noted was the fact that many of her students have never been exposed to the technology readily used today as a means of engaging in school work. Sally explained that "a lot of them have never had experience with a computer. They know how to work their phones, but that is so much more different than a computer and finding accessible Internet access." The greatest obstacle she expressed was rooted in the lack of attendance and having to work with students who are disengaged. Although there are many factors that could be used to explain low attendance rates, Sally believed that it stemmed from the fact that "some of them [have] not ever [been] in school before."

Sally celebrated that her school generally welcomes people from all different cultures. She used the diverse teaching staff as her rationale for why she believes they value different perspectives yet recognized the room for improvement. Sally explained that in her school, there is a "big emphasis on racial equity and making sure that all students are receiving what they need." She also noted the growing gap of knowledge in regards to her African student population. Sally explained that she is rather well-versed in knowledge of the African culture, especially Zimbabwean culture. She noted that her husband emigrated from Zimbabwe and has visited the country multiple times. In reference to these trips, she said she was exposed to Zimbabwean culture: "I feel like because I've had experiences, like outside of my own culture, students can relate to me more." Sally added that she never felt that her race or ethnicity was an advantage or a barrier to interacting with students. In regards to her African students, she

commented that a lot of them refer to her as mom or aunt. She elaborated, "not that I am the mom figure...but in that culture, if you build a strong enough relationship, that is what they view you as."

"I try my best to pour as much love into them so they know that they are special" - Queen

Queen has been teaching at her school for approximately five years. She identified as an African-American woman. She took a nontraditional route to teaching and entered into the classroom through a fellowship program after graduation. As a child, she never wanted to be a teacher, especially after watching the way students at her high school treated teachers. When Queen graduated college, she never had her eye on one specific career: "I wanted to be a psychologist...an astronaut...I wanted to do anything but teach." Growing up, her mother taught, but as Queen put it, "it wasn't what she [her mother] was meant to do." She finds that children and students naturally gravitate to her, and her admittance into the teaching fellowship allowed her to capitalize on that. Queen found confidence in the fact that teaching came naturally to her and knows that she can teach anything. She believed that one has to be meant for teaching: "I've seen all types of teachers...some that's been teaching for 20 or 30 years and they're just really upset about life...I'm like, quit your job...teaching isn't gonna fix your issue."

Queen believed that her school accepts and welcomes people of all cultures. Yet, when she first started, she saw how the racial composition of the staff and teachers did not reflect the racial composition of the student body. She saw this as an issue because "students were not getting representation in front of them." She commented that a much more balanced teacher-student demographic benefits the school culture and experience. She cited specifically how it benefitted the growing Hispanic and Latino student population: "it's a lot more Latino teachers, which is helpful because a majority of the population are from Latino background, Spanish-

speaking students...so we need that." She commended her school in how it does a good job in embracing diversity and differences. With a staff of over 200 teachers, her school "has so many various cultures and people working there...teachers from different countries…with disabilities...some teachers whose first language is not English," which she claimed as important because it allowed for them to better reach out and relate to the equally diverse student body.

When she first started teaching, Queen had a challenging time adjusting. Moreover, she was surprised to learn about all the work teachers do at all hours of the day because "no teacher ever tells you that and I really think that they should be up front." She began as a special education teacher, which was not what she intended to do. Yet, she came to terms with the fact that "every teacher is a special education teacher...because every student has special needs." As a result of this belief, she teaches every class as if it is a special education class. Queen identified the best part of her job: "being able to see students grow from their starting points...seeing that they're able to accomplish anything and believe in themselves."

Queen cautioned that "you can't just be stuck in your ways where you can't change because times are changing every single year, every single semester." Queen has changed classrooms and curricula many times. She has taught world history, special education and self-contained classes. She defines self-contained classes as "a class environment where there are strictly students with Individualized Educational Programs (IEPs) [an IEP is a legally-binding document that spells out exactly what special education services a student must receive and why, which is written by a special educator by established and planned by multiple parties, including the general education teacher(s)]...not general education students" that had to "accommodate everybody in the room that could have whatever disability from behavior to brain injury."

Queen emphasized the importance to develop a relationship with students as a teacher. Queen commented that she makes her "classroom as welcoming as possible to all students." She is able to learn about her students' outside of school lives through conversations and assignments that allow them to reflect and speak freely about their lives. Queen rejected the notion of having favorites, and cautioned against any teacher to do that because of the negative impact it has on the other students in the class. Instead, Queen explained that she aims to prevent any potential conflicts. She commented that "I've had incidents...where [students] just try to annoy me," to which she responded by ignoring them, which actually ended up annoying them. Queen characterized herself as very tolerant and noted that it takes a lot for her to get upset: "they know how we got to that point...it's not like it's all suspicious...they know dang on well." Queen found that being transparent is critical for a positive classroom environment and culture.

Queen has a heightened awareness that being a young woman teaching high school students can sometimes be a challenge. She admitted that many of her students see her more as a friend and someone they can relate to, "like a big sister." She assured that due to her positionality, she stays adamant about staying professional and setting boundaries quickly. She commented that many students try to test her, to which she explained to them: "I am here to the end. You're not gonna make me quit." She described how the first few years of teaching are based on experimenting and establishing your role. In her opinion, she "was a little bit too nice" her first year of teaching. Due to that, she cautioned that "you [a teacher] really can't even laugh...which is hilarious to me...they do say some of the darndest things." She noted that one time she lost her sense of smell from trying to hold in her laughter. Queen has now found that she may be seemingly stricter with her students in setting boundaries and maintaining her power as the teacher. She added that she genuinely cares about her students and their success, and her

students cannot “do whatever [they] want in my class.” Queen affirmed that staying organized is also important because “if the student knows you’re organized and knows what you’re doing, they’re more likely to respect you in general.” Because of her commitment to expectations and rules, she noted how she sees that students begin to internalize it and “police” the room themselves. She laughed as she remembered hearing students correct each other and hold each other accountable in her class.

Like all high school teachers, Queen has to follow certain state guidelines. Queen also doubted that some of these assignments are beneficial for her students, such as writing a five-page paper every week. She commented she approached her curriculum and standards differently. For example, she often utilized a project-based style of teaching.

Queen recognized that power structures are always at play in any high school environment. The gravest issue she ever faced was dealing with a transgender Mexican student being harassed and bullied in Spanish by other Mexican students. She commented that the boy harassing in this situation explained to her that in his opinion: “Mexican guys don’t dress like that, you know, they’re not supposed to do that...we’re supposed to be men...men take care of the woman.” She also has had issues where Black students freely admit that they do not like white students. Queen revealed she often played the role of the devil advocate: “I do that as a teacher because I don’t want people to be uncomfortable.” She felt strongly about this due to her own experience: “I was the only Black girl in my classroom and they would make jokes with each other about me...as the only Black girl I didn’t know how to stand up for myself.” She vividly recounted the inaction on behalf of the teacher, and is committed to making sure her students never have to experience that. Queen stated that today, “I know how to stand up for children in

the classroom...some of them really don't know how to stand up for themselves...so I try to be that person and make them feel better."

As a Muslim, Queen found that she connects in a different way with her students who are also Muslim. Additionally, she stated that her students who are young Black women naturally gravitate towards her. She has a harder time connecting with young Latina students, and recognized that "they may not see anything we have in common, so I have to kind of reach deep down." She explained how she actively seeks to take any opportunity to show how cultures work together, such as educating students about Afro-Latino culture and how some Mexicans helped free African slaves, to mention just a few. Queen expressed how she always reaches out to the few white students that she has "because I don't want them to feel outside...but most of them have been in the school with these peers for a long time so they already know kind of the ropes."

In general, the students she has the hardest time establishing relationships with often "come from a home life where it may not feel safe...or a home life where they could have been abused, and they may push that on me or project on me." In one situation, a young man kept disrespecting her in front of the class and not respecting the guidelines and boundaries of her classroom. After repeated attempts to address it, Queen recognizes that sometimes this is something she cannot fix. Queen sees that students typically direct anger "towards somebody who cares for them, because they don't know what else to do." Rarely has Queen ever encountered serious disciplinary or behavioral issues but when she did, she confronted it right away and relied on the methods set in place by the school. She found that she has to protect herself with "young men specifically." She disclosed that in her first year of teaching, a young man rubbed her back and invaded her personal space. Queen immediately pulled him outside and said "listen, I don't know who you think I am...but you don't touch me…If you do it one more

time, I will report you to the police and you will go to jail." She found that she has to speak sternly in order to expose the harsh reality, because they "thought it was okay" and she felt that she needed to instill that it was wrong. After that specific incident, she saw that she was treated with more respect and "would just do things for them because they was becoming more and more respectful."

Queen appreciated how observers and visitors came into her classroom and said "they can feel the love in here." She hoped that she has made a difference in her students' lives, but warns that oftentimes you only see it much later on in their life. She affirmed that she constantly works to instill confidence in her students: "I try my best to pour as much love into them so they know that they are special."

She wished that the general public understood that teachers work non-stop. Queen elaborated that if it were not for the hard work and dedication of teachers, "some students wouldn't even be able to read, they wouldn't be able to graduate." To Queen, being a teacher meant "that you have to be the most encouraging person ever...because you don't realize what you're worth, you're planting seeds for growing plants every day."

DISCUSSION

Sally, Shelly, Matthew and Queen demonstrate the importance of making meaning out of teaching and individually and collectively they highlight the influence of education in students' lives. A critical part of the pedagogical approach of all four participants includes, building and maintaining relationships with students. Each narrative in this study shows the diversity of the teaching experience. Approaches in the classroom may differ, but true to each philosophy and experience are positive student-teacher relationships and the fostering of a safe, welcoming community where students will feel accepted and supported.

Cities served as locations of great importance during the Great Migration. The legacy of the Great Migration manifests itself in urban public schools as they still serve as sites of incredible cultural, social and economic importance. The schools in this study are rich in history and serve as important institutions in their city. Due to the demographic characteristics and locations of the schools, Sally and Matthew recognize that there is a tendency for people outside of the immediate community to form negative perceptions about their schools and students. They contribute this to the role that the media plays in portraying these schools with negative rhetoric. This extends to Kinnick, White and Washington's (2001) findings that the collective media underrepresents the positive aspects of being a Black man, such as highlighting their intellectuality. The media's tendency to attach negative stereotypes to students of color in urban schools impacts the general student population who may internalize these negative generalizations. In her interview, Sally explains how important it is to challenge the narrative that too often homogenizes and stigmatizes students in urban high schools. All participants referenced the importance of not relying on negative media portrayals associated with schools like theirs, and said that they would rather emphasize the good happening within those walls. Connecting with what Mello and Swanson (2007) concluded from their study: "the more negative African American male adolescents perceived their neighborhoods, the less likely they thought that they would graduate from high school, go to college, be happy, be proud, or be alive" (Mello & Swanson, 2007, pg. 162). Shelly, Matthew, Sally and Queen shared similar insights about the harm that outside perceptions may cause to the nature and schooling experience of students.

The teachers' experiences substantiate many of the conclusions drawn in existing research, especially with regard to the power of teacher influence and support for students

(Brooms, 2016; Somers, Owens & Piliawsky, 2008; Toldson, 2008). Brooms' (2016) work recognized the importance of teachers investing in their students and creating a positive learning environment while Toldson (2008) highlighted how teachers must be interested in the student as a person while engaging and encouraging them to succeed. All four participants recognized the importance of relationship-building. Queen and Matthew actively use this practice in their classrooms, making sure that the students build confidence in themselves. To them, the most important impact they can have on their students is making sure that they believe in themselves. Teachers being interested in students as people is a large contributor to their success (Toldson, 2008). Sally, in addition to the others, extends this practice of supporting and encouraging students by supporting them in extracurricular activities and cultural celebrations.

The teachers reflect on the ways that they recognize and learn from their cultural differences with students, no matter their race. They seek to always recognize and value their students' home environments and communities. As seen in the study, these teachers believe that understanding and celebrating diversity fosters better student-teacher relationships and a better classroom culture. Teachers are able to incorporate the diverse cultures of the classroom into relevant lessons and curricula to help enhance opportunities for learning and confidence building. From conversations with these four teachers, racial-ethnic segregation and isolation are not readily apparent within their classrooms, at least as a general rule. At face value, this may suggest that in these few cases, social identity theory, which emphasizes the importance of in-group and out-group membership,[5] would not be particularly relevant. However, some participants note that positionality is a critical part of understanding the student experience and

[5] Social identity theory was not a theory previously identified as relevant to the study of teacher-student relationships. However, through these interviews, it became clear that social identity theory should be examined in this context.

school culture. In addition, Queen, Sally and Shelly all feel as though they can automatically relate to specific groups of students because of their race, religion or age, but actively work against this theory. These teachers compensate by working harder to connect with students who do not share their identities.

This study also recognizes the many roles of a teacher. All four participants felt unprepared for the demands of the job. Some of the participants revealed that they felt that they needed more opportunities to learn about supporting students socially and emotionally, while they also felt it would benefit to learn from other teachers who may be able to connect with students in different ways than others. Shelly dedicates much of her time outside of teaching to mentor first year teachers about the things that she wishes she knew before. Diversity in the educational system is highly beneficial for students, teachers and the community. Ladson-Billing (1995) found that minority teachers relate more easily to minority youth, and Cherng and Halpin (2016) observed that students perceived minority teachers more favorably than white teachers. The educational system seems to have begun to recognize the importance of diversity and representation, although there is always room for improvement. For teachers who identify as white, such as Sally and Matthew, they must emphasize that they make concerted efforts to learn more about the various backgrounds and life experiences of their students. Culturally-responsive teachers who are willing and able to teach in majority-minority schools, such as those interviewed in this study, are in high demand. The high rate of teacher attrition plagues urban schools at higher rates than suburban schools, something that Matthew and Shelly note as problematic for the consistency that so many students need. Evidently, there is a high demand for preservice teachers to have the "critical consciousness necessary to decipher the cultural logic that reinforces the systems of inequity that exist in [our] public schools" (Castro, 2010, p. 207).

These high rates of attrition are theoretically significant if they play a role in social reproduction of inequality. If teachers and students cannot develop strong relationships as a result of attrition, students may feel less attachment to their teachers, and ultimately their education.

Sociologists have long examined social and cultural capital in the context of schools, often arguing that educational institutions reproduce certain forms of capital rooted in elite class status. If one of the barriers to students' upward mobility is the attrition rate of their teachers, teachers' positionality and cultural-responsiveness may in fact be important factors in reducing inequality more broadly.

CONCLUSION

Queen's experience reveals the sense of purpose a teacher can feel through advocating for students and meeting each individual need. Matthew's experience demonstrates the value of imparting wisdom through life lessons, and the importance of education in the lives of young people. Sally's life experience demonstrates that some teachers value cultural awareness and learning about the stories that each student brings to the classroom. Shelly emphasizes the power of mentorship and learning from observing others. Taken together, these teachers' life lessons and pedagogical approaches may have implications for teachers in similar circumstances.

As a primary agent of socialization, education serves many important purposes for society. Therefore, there are many policy implications that should be considered based on the findings of this study. Educational policies must focus on the social and economic disadvantages of attending schools that are under-resourced in particular geographic areas, such as high schools located in urban areas. Additional funding, for example, would allow schools like Matthew's to hire coaches that could serve as mentors to students. This would also lessen the emotional labor

required of urban educators who are currently compensating for reduced staffing, allowing them more time to focus on their academic responsibilities.

This study's findings suggest that teachers feel most effective when they have a sense of personal connection with their students. Educational policies must seek to outline specific strategies to improve teachers' personal relationships with students. This may include continuing professional education (CPE) programs, such as culturally-responsive training that supports efforts to improve diversity, equity and inclusion within schools, which empower and support teachers in fostering supportive classroom environments (Toldson, 2008). However, as Queen reminds us, "no teacher ever tells you [how much time is devoted to teaching] and I really think that they should be up front." Such professional training should be flexible, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, in order to respond to the increased workload of teachers and avoid teacher burnout.

This research supports the idea that teachers should be well-versed in approaches to diversity and inclusion and they should maintain a high level of cultural awareness. Programs should be implemented to help equip educators with tools that can influence and challenge existing educational and social policies that negatively affect the schooling experience of their students. In addition to increased opportunities for CPEs relevant to the experiences of urban educators in majority-minority schools, teachers should be better compensated for their time to avoid teacher turnover, as noted by Matthew, and schools must focus on both recruiting and sustaining talented teachers, as discussed by Shelly, Sally, and Queen.

While this study brings to the forefront the importance of supporting teachers, certain limitations exist. The study focused specifically on narratives from teachers' perspectives, which limits the scope of what can be examined. Future research should focus on both teacher and

student perspectives in order to develop a comprehensive framework of the relationships between teachers and students in majority-minority schools in urban areas. Additionally, the research was conducted in a condensed time period because of the COVID-19 pandemic—a time when many teachers are feeling strain as a result of new time-consuming work and family responsibilities. For this reason, it was only possible to interview a small sample (n=4) of teachers. Without speaking to all the teachers who did not participate in this study, it is not possible to ascertain why so many chose not to participate. However, it is likely that an interview would be one more thing to add to their already overwhelming to-do lists. Because participation in this study was dependent on teachers taking time out of their own day to interview, I suspect this would have been an added burden to many. However, the four teachers who participated in this study offered valuable insights for future researchers.

Education is most effective when it promotes positive growth experiences, with a particular emphasis on teacher-student relationships (Brooms, 2016; Somers, Owens & Piliawsky, 2008; Shaughnessy & McHatton, 2007; Caton, 2012). The life experiences and recognition of teachers' positionality are critical in fostering the academic and social growth of students. Positive teacher-student relationships include, but are not limited to, creating an educational environment which allows students to engage with new material and also express themselves. Most importantly and consistently reflected throughout this research is the importance of teachers creating learning environments that encourage students' high performance by creating an environment which emphasizes structure, consistency, and safety.

Further research is needed to identify effective strategies and practices that develop positive relationships between students and teachers, specifically interracial teacher-student relationships and support for teachers and students of color embedded within the broader

institution of education. More research is needed to better understand the unique barriers that students of color and teachers face in urban settings and how these barriers affect one's experience in education. Future research might include examining teacher support and training programs that seek to address the unique social and cultural characteristics of culturally diverse teachers and student bodies should be studied to determine how our communities can support both students and teachers.

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