Ethics of Exemplary Black Educators:
Implications for Teacher Education and the Preparation of Prospective Black Teachers

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Recent reports on teacher demographics indicate that there has been an insufficient number of African American teachers prepared to enter and remain in the teaching force for a significant period of time.

It is a well-documented fact that African American teachers have a positive and meaningful impact on the educational success of African American students' learning (Clewell, Puma, & McKay, 2005; Evans 1992), rates of school attendance (England & Meier, 1986; Farkas, Grobe, Sheehan, & Shuan, 1990), and participation in advanced classes (Klopfenstein, 2005). Indeed, research has highlighted the beliefs and practices of exemplary African American teachers (Foster, 1997; Milner, 2006; Siddle-Walker, 1996; Ware, 2006), yet there are far fewer African American teachers in classrooms today than ever before (Dilworth & Coleman, 2014). Recent reports on teacher demographics indicate that there has been an insufficient number of African American teachers prepared to enter and remain in the teaching force for a significant period of time. For example, the US Department of Education reported that in 2012 African Americans comprised 8.6 percent of the teaching force while European Americans made up 68%. It was also reported that in the 2009 – 2010 academic year, nine percent of undergraduates in teacher education programs identified as African American, while 68% identified as European American.

Unsurprisingly, the dramatically shrinking pipeline of African American educators in public schools coincides with the marginalization of prospective African American teaching professionals (Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Delpit, 2005; Dilworth & Coleman, 2014; Scott & Rodriguez, 2014). That is, far less attention is focused on meeting the professional and pedagogical needs of prospective African American teachers and overwhelmingly emphasizes the need to help European American, English-speaking, young females "deal" with an increasingly diverse public school population (Cook, 2013; Delpit, 2005; Villegas & Davis, 2007). As a result, many African American teachers are intellectually marginalized from the learning environment in teacher education and subsequently have difficulty leveraging their cultural knowledge and ways of thinking in the

(Cook, 2013; Knight, 2004; Meacham, 2000; Scott & Rodriguez, 2014). Working with practicing Black educators who consistently promote achievement for African American students may provide a productive way to help teacher educators understand the pedagogical needs of prospective African American teachers, and think carefully about how best to meet these professional needs (Irvine, 2002; Perry, 2003). Black educators enact a sophisticated and complex pedagogy linked to the social realities of African Americans as a cultural group and founded on culturally specific ethics, or ways of thinking about teaching (Foster, 1994; Irvine, 2002). It is these underlying culturally-influenced ethics that powers their pedagogy (Howard, 2002; Ware, 2002). Examining the ways exemplary Black educators make sense of the critical elements that define their practice can help teacher educators rethink what it means to teach African American children well from a culture-centered perspective and restructure their own instructional approaches in ways that support prospective African American teachers in learning how to draw on their cultural resources in support of student learning and achievement. Given both the pervasive educational underachievement of African American children in US schools, as well as the need to increase the number of African American teachers, finding ways to successfully prepare African American teachers stands as a serious responsibility of teacher educators and a promising approach towards helping African American students demonstrate educational excellence. This article will share findings from a qualitative study with community-nominated successful Black educators about the nature of their cultural insights, which can inform the preparation of African American teachers. The study's guiding question was *what culture-systemic ethics do exemplary Black educators employ in their teaching of African American children?*

Literature Review: Preparing African American Teachers

Research focused on African Americans educator preparation has included individual, qualitative case studies that report on student experiences during and after program participation (Knight, 2002; Meacham, 2000; Scott & Rodriguez, 2014). Overwhelmingly, findings indicate that African American students in teacher credentialing programs experience a range of psychological turmoil that alienates them from the learning environment. Knight's (2002) case study of an African American female in an educator preparation program reported that this prospective teacher expressed feelings of invisibility among her predominantly White peers and instructors. The researcher described how this potential African American teacher struggled to find and project her individual voice and reconcile the dominant theoretical perspectives that often worked against her own notions of social justice and education. Furthermore, the researcher reported that the participant rarely participated in coursework or field experiences that enabled her to capitalize on her insights. Similarly, Meacham (2000) revealed the cultural limbo experienced by two African American preservice teacher participants in a yearlong ethnographic study. According to the researcher, the African American preservice teachers experienced deleterious conundrums, which pressured them to "repudiate cultural experiences and perspectives" and "conform to dominant linguistic norms and expectations" (p. 572). The author argued that both

in educator preparation programs have to psychologically navigate an often racially hostile learning environment at the expense of their own cultural integrity. More recently, Scott and Rodriguez (2014) examined the experiences of African American male preservice teachers as part of a larger phenomenological study of African American academic persistence and career aspirations in education. Findings reinforced earlier studies in which participants described grappling with physical and intellectual marginalization within their programs. Interestingly, the researcher also reported that participants experienced a lack of significant role models to emulate in their programs and stereotype threat.   Though limited, the research on the experiences of aspiring African American teachers in traditional educator credentialing programs suggests that programs may not be designed in ways that are responsive to the interests, needs, and experiences of prospective African American teachers. Such a pronouncement may be complicit in the declining presence of African American teachers and warrants further research into the nature of educator preparation for African Americans. The current study explored the cultural ethics of community-nominated, successful Black educators in an attempt to highlight the kinds of cultural insights teacher educators should seek to build on and refine in their preparation of African American student teachers. This approach positions teacher education programs as viable avenues for African American educator preparation and situates the perspectives and practices of Black educators as an exemplary model of pedagogical excellence.

Theoretical Framework: African American Epistemology

This study imported African American epistemology as the theoretical lens (Gordon, 1990). African American epistemology is critical to educational theory, policy, and practice because it produces a mode of social theorizing about education representative of the interests of the African American community at large. Gordon's (1990) theoretical model provides a comprehensive account of the origins of African American epistemology by examining the writings and activities of early Black intellectuals. Her work connects the influence of this culture-centered perspective to education given the tremendous emphasis on educational attainment noted in the cultural artifacts produced by African American people. According to Gordon (1990) the themes embedded in African American epistemological positionality include: *self-help, self-determination, service, nationalism, economic autonomy, and political power*; and coalesce into a powerful frame of reference upon which many African American people interpret their existence, decipher dominant ideology, and organize for change (Gordon, 1990). These themes acted as the ideological foundation upon which many Black educators

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envisioned, designed, and organized the kind of teaching they perceived to serve the interest of students and the community. Therefore, as Gordon concludes, "African American epistemology goes hand in hand with African American educational theory" (Gordon, 1990, p. 94). Fully understanding the schooling experiences of African American children necessitates an examination of how these experiences unfold in relation to African American thought. In the present study, African American epistemology provided this powerful analytical tool as heuristic for analyzing and interpreting the culture-systemic ethics that guide the work of exemplary Black educators in ways that can help teacher educators better meet the pedagogical needs of African American student teachers.

> **Researcher and participants function as *co-researchers and* as *co-subjects.***

Methodology

Collaborative inquiry was the methodological organizer for this qualitative study (Bridges & McGee, 2011; Heron & Reason, 1997). As part of a larger continuum of participatory research approaches, collaborative inquiry methodology emphasizes a view of inquiry which "allows us as human persons to know that we are part of the whole, rather than separated as mind over and against matter" (Heron & Reason, 1997, p.2). The principles embedded in collaborative inquiry emphasize inclusive participation, mutuality, and the co-construction of knowledge through deep interpretive processes (Bridges & McGee, 2011). In

practice, collaborative inquiry operates as a process of cycling between four overlapping elements: (1) reflection, (2) the collective construction of knowledge fostered through dialogue with peers, (3) action, and (4) further group-decision-making (Heron & Reason, 1997). These individual components overlap and are well integrated into a sophisticated iterative process. The process involves reciprocity in the construction of the research agenda, interpersonal relationships between group members, systematic individual and group feedback, and continuous dialogue and reflection. Therefore, researcher and participants function as *co-researchers and* as *co-subjects*. Studying issues in African American education demanded this approach as a way to eliminate the existence of *empty perceptual space* between the researcher and participants wherein participants are objectified in the research process (Dixon, 1976). As objectified "others", participants, particularly those of African descent, are researched in ways that reduce them to a set of pathological conditions. Such treatment perpetuates pernicious misconceptions of African American inferiority and intellectual ability, and has produced marginal improvements for African American children (King, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2005; Tuck, 2009). Instead, as King (2008) states, "Researchers need methods of inquiry that can capture the beneficial effects of [community] knowledge that provide support for community members' roles in contributing to and assessing the social utility of teachers' knowledge and pedagogical skills in the context of community change and survival needs" (p. 708). A collaborative inquiry methodology enabled the intellectuals involved to collectively *theorize back* and construct a vision of pedagogical excellence for African American children that builds on the cultural orientations of people of African descent.

Participant Selection

To create the collaborative inquiry group, community nomination was used as a purposive sampling technique. According to Foster (1993), community nomination is a process by which research participants are selected through "direct contact" with local African American-communities, and is designed to capture an emic, or insider perspective. To carry out this process, I visited a predominantly African American church, afterschool program, and community organization on separate occasions. At each site, I invited parents and guardians of school-aged African American children to participate in a structured conversation about good teaching and good teachers for their children. At the end of this hour-long conversation, each parent recommended teachers that met the collectively generated descriptions. Teachers from these lists were contacted and a total of four educators plus myself composed the research collective. Table 1 displays information about each participant.

Data Collection & Analysis

Data were collected through five partially structured research meetings that followed a similar format, which included time for reflection, debriefing, textual and visual elicitation, new theorizing, and group decision-making. My role throughout each research meeting was one of lead researcher; however, leadership in this respect meant coordinating and

Name	Ethnicity	Edu. Level	Teaching Exp (No. of years)	Grade level	School size	% of African American students	% of students free or reduced lunch
Antionette	AA	M	9	Elem.	365	88%	95%
Jalonda	AA	S	13	Elem.	692	55%	82%
Harriett	AA	M	36	Elem.	692	55%	82%
Geneva	AA	M	22	Elem.	353	98%	96%
Monica	AA	M	7	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 1. Participant information.

facilitating the meeting. It also demanded that I demystify the research process and share my knowledge of educational research in order to support group decision-making and action. Group members used facial expressions, verbal and non-verbal cues, gestures and reenactments to negotiate, probe, challenge, and refine ideas. As the lead researcher, I was careful not to let my comments assume sole authority or dictate the discussions. That is, I used voice similar to that of a portraitist in which, "voice never overshadows the actor's voice, though it is sometimes heard in duet, in harmony, and in counterpoint" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 85). Conversations of this nature enabled the group to gather thick descriptions and detailed analysis from our collective cultural standpoint.

Additionally, I implemented a process to strengthen authenticity and one to strengthen reciprocity as we worked together. Theses two processes were noted as essential features of collaborative inquiry, and work to help individuals and groups to, " become empowered to understand, produce knowledge and bring about active positive

Reciprocity

- **Negotiation:** Welcoming discussion about data collection tools. Questioning ideas and knowledge claims. Situating conflict as part of the inquiry process (i.e. it's okay to disagree with others).
- **Enabling voice:** Allowing testimonies. Blending personal and professional experiences. Using African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Ignoring coventional question/answer conversation protocols.
- **Shared decision-making:** Group developed working principles for research. Group developed objectives for the project. Explaining procedures then allowing group to make descisions (mutuality & inclusivity).

Authenticity

- **Time & Space:** Structuring meeting to allow for reflection and engagement. Conducting meetings in a comfortable, unrestricted space. Working with group to develop a convenient meeting schedule. Prolonged engagement.
- **Collective validation:** Encouraging collaboration in constructing knowledge. Seeking help in explaining and building ideas. Asking for group confirmation regarding ideas. Member-checking and spiral discourse.
- **Expressivism:** Allowing group to determine mode of communication. Encouraging members to "reenact" or "recreate" experiences using voice, facial expressions, and gestures.
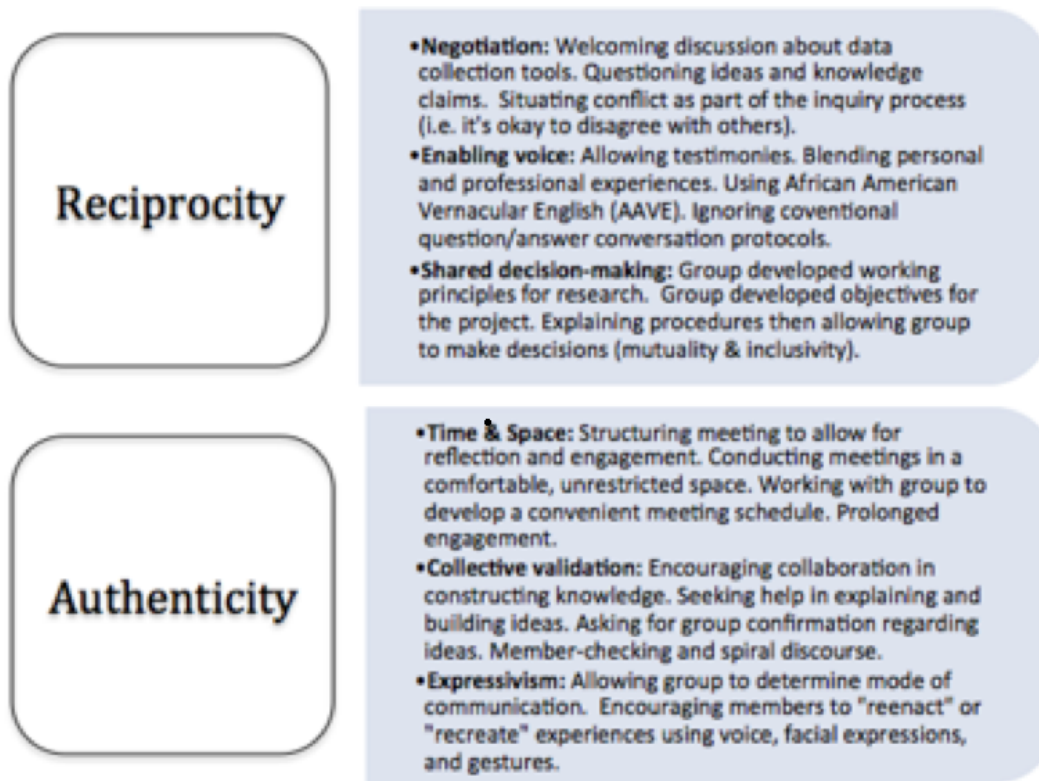
Figure 1. Data collection processes and actions.

cultivate an ethos of authenticity and reciprocity in the inquiry process.

Implementing processes to create a reciprocal, authentic research space created the conditions necessary for the group to function in ways that genuinely built on the collective knowledge, experience, and perspectives of African American educators. Additionally it structured an environment that enabled the collective to move fluidly between the different elements of collaborative inquiry. Figure 2 presents a research collective ecology. Or rather displays the context within which the research meetings were carried out. Understanding more about how ecological factors related to the collection of data influence the production of data was beyond the scope of this study. However, it is an area of study important to research focused on African American educational improvement.

Each research meeting was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim in preparation for data analysis. Data were analyzed both collectively (with participants) and independently utilizing a systematic, inductive approach (Hatch, 2002). First, I independently organized the data into large, overarching categories, or themes that represented
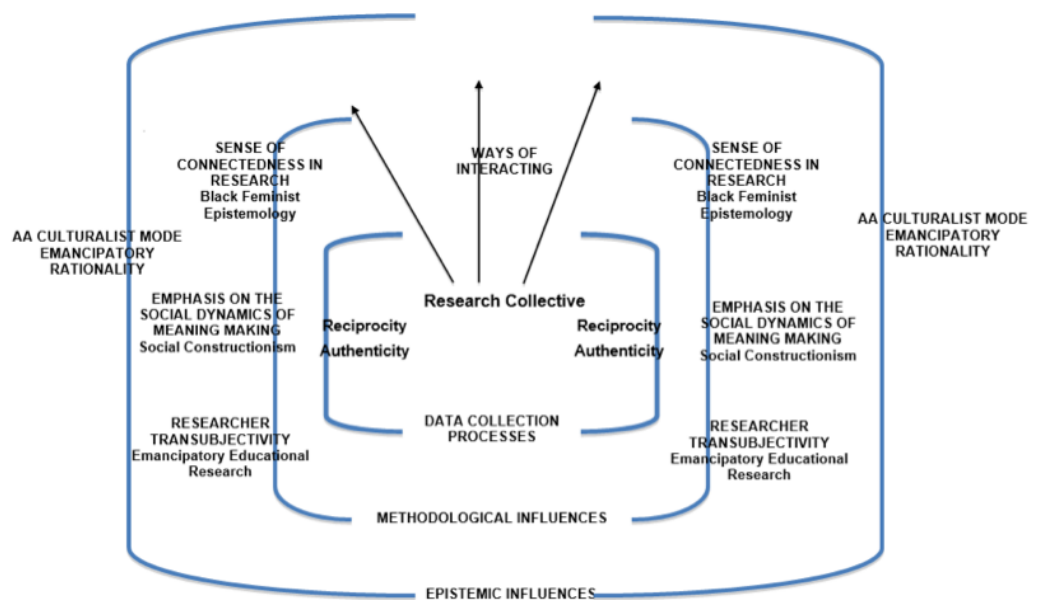
Figure 2. Research collective ecology.

the group's initial perspectives. This began after the first research meeting and categories were added or modified after subsequent meetings. This step was necessary to organize the data in a way that could later be used for collective analysis. Next, data were presented in these categories to the group for our collective theorizing and analysis. This process consisted of reading the categorized transcripts, interrogating the thinking reflected in the transcripts by posing questions and seeking clarification, reflecting on the ideas presented in the transcripts, and refining the ideas presented to reflect group consensus. We then created an initial list of possible domains to describe group perspectives on the ways that culture influenced pedagogy. According to Hatch (2002), domains help researchers discover how individuals and groups "organize their understandings and operate in their worlds" (p. 165). In the next step, we read the domain sheets in order to identify and refine salient codes. Through this we developed interpretations and found examples from the data to support our thinking. In the final step, we looked across the codes, which resulted in broad codes. The collective analysis was a significant analytical step because it enabled us to make sense of our teaching within a "racialized discourse" that fully acknowledged the complexities of culture in teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Additionally, it was important because it provided a culturally specific proxy for the subsequent independent analysis of data. As a final analytical step, I applied African American epistemology (Gordon, 1990) as a theoretical framework to better understand how the domains were connected to dominant cultural themes encapsulated in African American epistemology. I read the emergent themes from the collective analysis. I searched for similarities, differences, and relevant distinctions between the educators' explanations and descriptions of each cultural theme. This merging of theory with data produced overarching themes that represented both the thinking of the group and some of the dominant perspectives embedded in African American cultural knowledge. This layer of analysis was used to provide theoretical language as a complement to the research team's theorizing and analysis. Figure 3 captures the analytical process and highlights the construction and co-construction of knowledge in each phase.

Findings

Three themes emerged that are relevant to the discussion of preparing African American teachers. These themes highlight the ethics the group of accomplished Black educators in this study theorized formed the powerful foundation of their pedagogy. The first theme, *ethic of service*, highlights cultural solidarity as an important component of teaching African American children well. The second theme, *ethic of adaptive expertise*, highlights the centrality of a student-centered approach to teaching African American children well. The last theme, *ethic of critical studyin'*, implicates the necessity of critical race perspectives in teacher thinking that promotes African American educational excellence. Together, these themes offer insights into the culture-specific ethics of a group of effective Black educators, which can help teacher educators develop learning experiences that explicitly draw on these features in their articulation of successful teaching of African American children. Making these features and their connections to good teaching explicit in educator preparation can help beginning African American
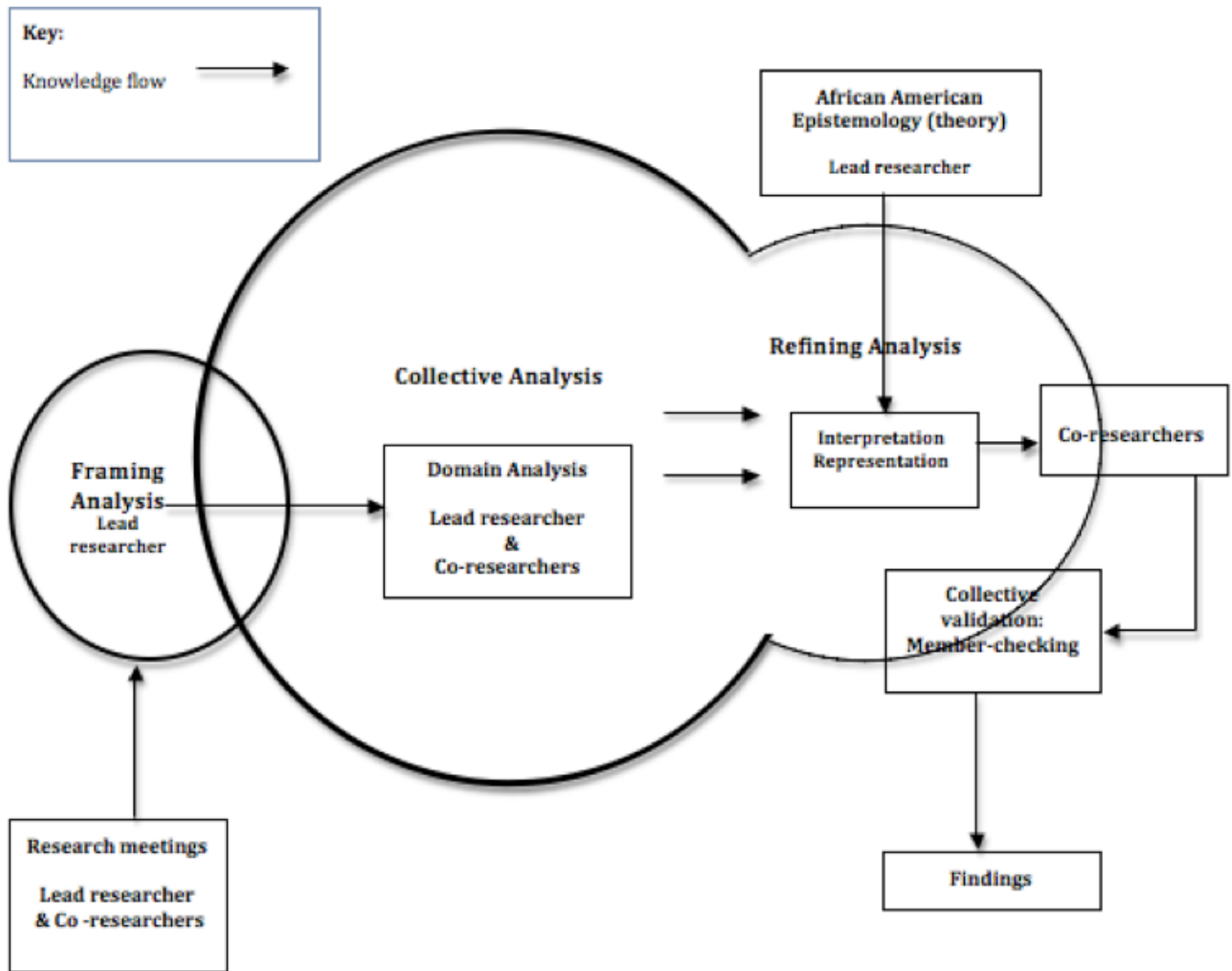
Figure 3. Construction of knowledge during research process.

American student achievement beyond that of a role model (Irvine, 1989). More importantly, it can help novice African American teachers learn how to use the cultural knowledge they may already possess in powerful pedagogical ways.

Ethic of Service

Historically, many Black educators saw it as their duty to teach the masses of illiterate Blacks within the community as a form of collective survival, resistance, and liberation (Franklin, 1984; Perry, 2003). Many believed as noted by Black educator Mary Church Terrell that, "Those of us fortunate enough to have an education must share it…we must go into our communities and improve it". The educators expressed similar commitments, which helped them make sense of their purpose and mission as teachers. They shared,

> Antionette: The work we're doing is part of giving back to the community, and it's not about the paycheck…
> Jalonda: It's about that passion to give back… It's about working with our youth and just trying to make a

difference and make an impact in the community.

Harriett: My reason for coming into teaching was I saw what needed to be done and I wanted to help …

Monica: So you said you saw what needed to be done---what did you see?

Harriett: Our children…they were not competitive… and I'm thinking, it shouldn't matter what side of town you come from. What matters is the kind of support you're getting….

Jalonda: I think we serve a better purpose when we're with these kids [African American] cause these kids need someone who is going to advocate for them [Session 5].

This service-oriented perspective contributed to the educators' expansive view of teaching because it demanded their active participation in building a new, more just social order. The following comment from Geneva is reflective of the action, or praxis component inherent in their ethic of service. She recounted:

Geneva: All I gotta say is those other folks [other teachers at her school] are fightin' it but we're fightin' it too. [referencing the school carnival] They wanna have the school carnival during school hours.   But this carnival is a community thing. Girl you know I showed up and showed out! [laughter] [I said to my colleagues] "I know y'all don't think they work, but some parents

do work and also want to spend the time with their children"

Monica: So you're working with the PTO?

Geneva: Yeah, we haven't had a PTO in I don't know how long… and when I got to the school I was like, "No, we need to do this, we need to do something" [Session 2]

Geneva's commitment to community improvement drove her to challenge the pervasive disregard for African Americans families, which possibly changed an inequitable practice at her school. Her actions demonstrate agency, or her belief that she possessed the power to challenge and change unfair practices. Thus this abiding ethic of service functioned catalytically and helped the educators convert their social justice perspectives into educational praxis. This suggests that designing course work and field experiences that explicitly connect this ethic of service to frameworks of effective pedagogy may help aspiring African American teachers move from theory to practice in ways consistent with their culture-specific perspectives.

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Ethic of Adaptive Expertise

The educators' self-described teaching approach reflected an emphasis on creating the psychological conditions necessary to bolster African American student achievement. Indeed, these educators were warm demanders, and revealed that warm demanding takes direction from an African American sense of self-determination. The educators' sense of self-determination was most profoundly expressed in their willingness to adapt to students in order to meet their needs. The conversation below is illustrative.

Jalonda: If teachers are trying to say that they can't teach African American children because it isn't how they were raised, then they probably should get another job. Because you have to understand that Black children are not the same as you or how you were raised. They need something different…

Geneva: Right! And not because they aren't good enough or smart enough. But because we all learn best when learning is tailored to us, the way we are.

Jalonda: The bottom line is we [good Black educators] allow ourselves to adapt to our children and the situation… That's what its about.

Antionette: So that means I can go into any school and teach…

Harriett: And it doesn't matter white, Black, Hispanic—it doesn't not matter because I am a person who is always reflecting on what do I need to do differently, what do I need to do different—so I know how to adapt to the situation I'm in and I allow myself to. If I have to change the way I do something to help my students, then that's what I'm gonna do.

Jalonda: Teachers have to be willing to get out of their comfort zone. They can't be the same person as they were. They have to be the person the kids need at that moment…

Antionette: And of course that will change from day to day.

Jalonda: So if teachers are saying they cant teach our kids [Black children] it's because they are not allowing themselves to change.

As the findings demonstrated, the educators theorized that adaptive expertise, or the ability to modify their perspectives and practices in ways that promote student success, was a critical part of the work of good teachers. Notice how they resolved that all teachers were capable of teaching African American children well if they were determined to enact a flexible, student-centered pedagogy. This may indicate a need to restructure teacher education curriculum in ways that recognize the value of adaptive teaching expertise and experiences that help African American student teachers translate this ethic into instructional practices.

Ethic of Critical Studyin'

The idea the educators expressed is that obtaining an education has culturally specific meanings for African American people. This perspective is representative of the group's ethic of critical studyin' on the cultural politics inherent in

educators' theorizing about US racial realities and the implications for teaching African American first evidenced this ethic. They shared,

> Antionette: I think the perception is that with all the civil rights, we have come a long way. Most folks will say, "We got a Black president so what's the problem?" But we know we haven't made it.
>
> Jalonda: Racism is so deeply embedded in our culture in America, it's in our way of life, in our roots—its embedded in us and we haven't learned how to get rid of it.
>
> Monica: They don't call it hidden racism for nothing. I mean it's not overt like it used to be. But it is alive and well.
>
> Harriett: I think that's why I try to protect Black kids because they don't know or understand that racism still exists and if I don't educate them about it they will grow up thinking this world is great but we have not gotten there yet. Martin's dream is still unfulfilled [Session 1].

Note that for the group, an ethic of critical studyin' began with racial realism, or a critical race conception of the status of race relations as explicated by those who live these racialized experiences on a daily basis. Moreover, as Harriett's comment revealed, this level of realism and theorizing about race moved the educators to pedagogical praxis. As the educators continued their conversation below, this ethic of critical studyin' resounded as they

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highlighted its importance on their ability teach African American children well.

> Monica: If you don't believe racism and inequality still exists, how can you teach our kids and encourage our kids to do better?
>
> Jalonda: When you have no understanding of racism, how can you reach our kids on that level? If you don't think there is a problem—how can you be a part of fixing the problem?
>
> Harriett: Exactly! The only people who don't think racism stills exists are people who don't live it everyday, and they are the ones that do the most damage because they perpetuate racism and don't even know it.
>
> Geneva: Right! Cause it's not in their world. They think everything is great; everything's okay when there is still inequality and struggle out there. You can't teach Black kids and be that unrealistic [Session 1].

The findings above suggest that rather than attempt to depoliticize education by ignoring the political aspect of effective pedagogy, teacher educators should embrace the political implications of teaching and learning on ethical grounds as a way to

Discussion

The findings from this study provide a scaffold to support our thinking on how to best meet the professional development needs of novice African American teachers. Through five partially structured research meetings with a group of community-nominated exemplary Black educators, this study contributes to the literature on the role of Black educators in African American student achievement by expanding our knowledge on the cultural insights documented as a value that Black educators bring to the classroom (Irvine, 2003). That is, many scholars agree that Black educators have perceptual giftedness that enables them to interact and instruct African American children well (Dixson, 2003; Foster, 1993; Howard, 2001; Irvine, 2003; King, 1991; Milner, 2006; Morris, 2004; Siddle-Walker, 2000; Stanford, 1997; Ware, 2002). The present study supports this argument and offers descriptions related to the nature of good Black educators' cultural perspectives that can move the conversation about recruitment and retention of African American teachers to a more pointed discussion of the value African American teachers add to the profession (Villegas & Irvine; 2010). This study also adds to the limited discussion on how best to support the professional needs of new African American teachers. Researchers have documented that while some teacher education programs are approaching issues of diversity and equity in progressive ways, most of these efforts cater

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to young, White females at the expense of teachers of color (Cochran-Smith, 2004; Cook, 2013; Sleeter, 2008). To be sure, the rapidly changing demographics of American public schools, in which most urban schools teachers are White females while students are African American, Hispanic, or Asian Pacific Islander, creates a need to ensure that young White women in teacher education are prepared to teach for excellence. However, as Cook (2013) argues, the tendency to situate Whiteness at the center of teaching implies that Black teachers intrinsically know how to teach Black students, which ignores their pedagogical needs as education professionals. As an example close to home, my experience as a mentor teacher is relevant to the present discussion because it reveals some of the potential consequences of the "overwhelming presence of Whiteness in teacher education" (Sleeter, 2000). As a mentor teacher to predominantly young, White women I was unable to clearly articulate my perspectives and rationalize my practice in ways that were productive for them and accurate for me. We all needed to be able to connect pedagogy to larger cultural, social, and political tenets in order for me to fully explicate my driving theories and in order for them to understand the scope of the critical elements needed to successfully teach African American students. I needed a framework to explain and rationalize what I now can articulate as features of pedagogical excellence. Yet, my own studies in education did not prepare me to understand and interpret the very practice I was recognized for. My own experience highlights some significant pedagogical needs of African American teachers that might be nurtured through their exposure and understanding of the work of exemplary African American educators. First, as my experience highlights, African American teachers need a language

the ways they may be thinking and teaching. Second, African American teachers, prospective and practicing, need ways to make sense of how some of their own perspectives and experiences with education, which often contradict Western theories based on psychological models (Gordon, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 2007), may be connected to exemplary models of excellent teaching. Or rather, they need ways to help them associate, rather than disassociate, their culturally influenced views of education with good teaching.   Third, African American teachers need ways to help them enact pedagogical strategies that build on their views.

Through this qualitative exploration with a group of exemplary Black educators, teacher educators can begin to reconstruct their pedagogy in ways that emphasize Black educator ethics as essential elements of effective teaching. Presenting a framework of effective pedagogy from the purview of Black educator ethics can support new African American teachers in making sense of their own educational insights and philosophies while matriculating through their degree programs in ways that are non-alienating and non-exploitative (Knight, 2002).   In essence, prospective African American teachers may no longer be in a psychological bind as they reconcile the contradictions between their own culture-specific ethics and the values that dictate teaching today (Meacham, 2000). Such learning experiences carry a plethora of benefits. Most notable among them are the reengagement of prospective African American teachers to their leaning environment and the production of African American teachers poised to enact culturally relevant pedagogy in theory and practice.

Implications

The African American educators involved in this research project constantly connected their knowledge and values, which were situated in the larger political, economic, and social milieu, to descriptions and rationales of instructional decision-making. It seemed that without making an explicit connection to an emancipatory framework, the educators perceived that their characterizations of good teaching would be superficially understood at best and misinterpreted or denigrated at worst. Therefore, it is possible that African American epistemology as an educational theory may offer a context for the kind of pedagogical interpretation necessary to help prospective African American teachers identify consistencies between some of their own values and perspectives and those endemic to teaching Black students well. Moreover, studying the professional lives of exemplary Black educators within the scope of African American epistemology can be liberating for prospective African American teachers because it could eliminate the psychological turmoil, or cultural limbo experienced as African American teachers try to develop as professionals with two competing ideologies in their heads. Inside the teacher education classroom this culture-centered approach may help African American teachers better describe and explain their perspectives about teaching and learning in ways that do not situate them as class outcasts and help them maintain their sense of professionalism and sovereignty. Additionally, this can be an empowering experience for African American teachers because they might begin to view themselves as competent educators on their own terms. Thus, as with the exceptional educators in the present study, future African American teachers may

social activist pedagogy. Both results can have a positive impact on the development and retention of African American teachers. To be sure, I am not suggesting that African American teacher candidates need a separate preparation curriculum; because the work of good Black educators and African American educational theory can be a promising approach for all prospective and practicing teachers. What I am attempting to address is a critical need to attend to the pedagogical needs of African American educators given that research continues to document their significant impact on the achievement of African American learners.

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