



# **Grow Your Own Special Programs: Contributing More Than Diversity**

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**Equity by Design**

# Grow Your Own Special Educator Programs: Contributing More than Diversity

*Without question, when the majority of students in public schools are students of color and only 18 percent of our teachers are teachers of color, we have an urgent need to act. We've got to understand that all students benefit from teacher diversity. We have strong evidence that students of color benefit from having teachers and leaders who look like them as role models and also benefit from the classroom dynamics that diversity creates. But it is also important for our white students to see teachers of color in leadership roles in their classrooms and communities. The question for the nation is how do we address this quickly and thoughtfully? (Education Secretary King quoted in U.S. Department of Education, 2016, p. 1)*

The teaching profession faces an interesting equity paradox nestled in the midst of a teacher and student demographic divide. These demographic differences, while more commonly framed as a racial divide, are intersectional across race, ethnicity, language, gender identity, religion, dis/ability, gender identity, and socioeconomic level. Ample scholarly evidence points to the importance of having teachers that reflect the diversity of the social landscape for all students, including White students. (Brown, 2014; Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015; Grissom & Redding, 2015; Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). Special education has a longstanding history of unintended consequences that disproportionately impacts students of Color through identification practices that lead to over- and under-representation (Artiles, 2014; Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2004; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Gallini, Simmons, & Feggins-Azziz, 2006), harsher disciplinary practices, and more restrictive placements (Bal, Kozleski, Schrader, Rodriguez, & Pelton, 2014; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Sullivan, Van Norm, & Klingbeil, 2014). While diversifying the special education force may be a critical means to remedying some of these inequities for students of Color, the field simultaneously faces special education teacher shortages (Berry,

Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011; Sindelar, Brownell, & Billingsley, 2010; Satcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). In this brief, we highlight one promising means of diversifying the special education teacher workforce while advancing equity for communities of Color through alternative certification routes (ACRs) called Grow Your Own (GYO) teacher preparation programs.

We begin this brief by providing background on the teacher and student demographic gap that persists in the US educational system. We examine the special education teacher context that further exacerbates the issue. We then introduce GYOs as a promising contribution to diversifying the (special) education workforce along with some sample programs.

## **The Demographic Divide**

As of 2014, non-White students are now the racial majority in US classrooms (Snyder, de Brey, & Dillow, 2016). Meanwhile the number of teachers of Color has increased but not nearly at the rate of students of Color (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Further adding to the stable demographic chasm is the high attrition rate for teachers of Color who tend to be employed in hard-to-staff schools

(Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014) and leave for reasons rooted in organizational issues (Ingersoll, 2001). This leaves the demographic divide stable with approximately 82% of teachers self-identifying as White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This student and teacher demographic mismatch impacts every state in the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) and is further compounded by increasing school segregation (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Lack of diversity impacts the special education teacher workforce even more with a higher percentage of White teachers and a growing percentage of students of Color (Cooc & Yang, 2016). The lack of diversity is compounded with special education teachers being a high demand and low supply profession (Goff, Carl, & Yang, 2018).

Meeting the demands of diversifying the special education teaching force—a high demand and low supply area—is not simple. In the traditional certification conduit potential teachers of Color are lost along the way—enrollment in institutions of higher education, entry to education programs, program completion, entering the workforce, retention in the workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Alternative certification programs may be a means to both diversify the teacher force and to do so more rapidly than traditional certification programs. In the next section we look at the range of alternative certification programs and how GYOs fit into the landscape.

## **Alternative Routes to Teaching: What Makes GYOs Different?**

ACRs have gained great popularity nationally in the past two decades as a response to the shortage of teachers in hard-to-staff schools (e.g., urban schools) and hard-to-staff positions (e.g., special education), as well as a response to the acute need for culturally and linguistically diverse teachers (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). In the 2012/2013 school year, states reported a

total 8,075 ACR programs, accounting for a third of the 26,589 teacher education programs across the nation (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). ACR programs for special education, specifically, operate in at least 35 states (Rosenberg, Boyer, Sindelar, & Misra, 2007). There is no doubt that ACR programs have proliferated dramatically, and researchers and state and local education agencies are turning their attention to better understanding their characteristics and efficacy.

According to the National Center for Alternative Certification, alternative routes programs must meet six features:

1. Be specifically designed to recruit, prepare, and license talented individuals who already have at least a bachelor's degree.
2. Must include rigorous screening process.
3. Must be field-based.
4. Must include course work or equivalent experiences while teaching.
5. Requires that candidates work closely with mentor teachers.
6. Candidates must meet high performance standards for completion of the program (U.S. Department of Education, 2004).



However, how those requirements are interpreted and met varies from state to state and program to program. The Center categorized all alternative routes programs into 10 kinds, ranging from Class A to Class K (U.S. Department of Education, 2004; See Appendix for the complete classification system).

In regard to the efficacy of the alternative certification routes programs, of the research that is available, the findings are often inconsistent and inconclusive (Rosenberg & Sindelar, 2005). Rosenberg et al. (2007) collected a national database of ACR programs in special education to study program infrastructure, length and intensity, characteristics, and participant demographics. They drew five main conclusions:

1. Institutions of higher education, state education agencies, and local education agencies are the three primary program designers and funding sources. The partnerships among them can help planning and delivering successful ACR programs.
2. Although most programs require full-time teaching, the length and intensity of preparation and support vary greatly.
3. Many ACR programs resemble traditional teacher preparation programs in ways of employing nationally recognized teaching standards, requiring coursework and supervised fieldwork, providing mentors, and claiming to be selective in admission.
4. ACR programs tend to attract more older students and midcareer changers.
5. There are no conclusive findings on program efficacy, and there is little knowledge of teacher attrition, retention, teacher performance, and student outcomes.

Among all the various alternative certification routes programs, GYO programs stand out due to

their foundational community-based, collaborative nature. The mission of GYO is to “improve teaching and learning in high-needs schools by recruiting, supporting, and graduating community-based teachers and then returning them to their local schools to teach” (Schultz, Gillette, & Hill, 2008, p. 69). Rather than simply filling teacher vacancies, GYO programs prepare community insiders to challenge and question the existing social order of education system, and to improve schooling practice by including their own culture and that of the students (Schultz, Gillette, & Hill, 2008). Unlike traditional ACRs, GYO programs are often more comprehensive in the types of supports and services they provide their students (financial, academic, and emotional). In return, participants generally have a multi-year commitment that requires continuing to work in the area (“Programs-Grow Your Own Illinois,” 2017). The major feature distinguishing GYO from other alternative certification routes programs is their community-based orientation, which centers developing from and giving back to the historically marginalized communities.

## **GYO Models**

The *Nueva Generacion* (New Generation) project, in Chicago’s Logan Square neighborhood, is a leading GYO model (Schultz, Gillette, & Hill, 2008). GYO programs are taking root in other states across the country. GYO can function as community-based campaigns, collaborative models for training highly effective community teachers, channels for renovating the PK-12 and teacher education system, and/or a pipeline of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers (Hunt, Gardner, Hood, & Haller, 2011). Below is a brief overview of three GYO models, showing how they serve different functions.

Table 1

*Sample Grow Your Own Models*

Project Name	Program Infrastructure	Length and Intensity	Characteristics	Participant Demographics
Teach Tomorrow in Oakland (Bireda & Chait, 2011)	Partnership between Oakland Mayor's Office, Oakland Unified School District (OUSD), and three local universities  Funded by Transition to Teaching grant, state money, foundation grants, and the school district	Candidates get bachelor's degree first  Three months pre-service training in summer  Two weeks of intensive training before becoming a teacher of record  Continue to take classes in order to earn their credential while they are teaching	To reflect the ethnic and cultural diversity of Oakland  The program recruits OUSD alumni, community members, middle and high school students, paraprofessionals, out-of-industry professionals, and student teachers who value education, growth, and educating Oakland youth.  Five years commitment after graduation	44% African American 15 % Latino 4.3 %White, 4.3 %Asian 23% mixed race
Grow Your Own Illinois ("Programs-Grow Your Own Illinois," 2017)	Partnership between teacher preparation university or college, community-based organizations, and school districts  Founded by Chicago Teacher Union and Chicago Public Schools  GYO Illinois currently only has one program in Chicago due to the state budget impasse in 2015	Candidates complete a traditional four-year college bachelor's degree in education  For those candidates who already have a bachelor's degree, they complete a master's in education or take the additional courses required to earn their teaching certification	To reduce teacher turnover and increase the number of teachers of Color in low-income schools.  Recruits and supports parents, education paraprofessionals, and community members – who would love to teach in their neighborhood schools but cannot afford college  Five years commitment after graduation	51% African American 37% Latino 78% Female 78% Employed 68% Have dependents

Table 1 (continued)

<i>Sample Grow Your Own Models</i>				
Project Name	Program Infrastructure	Length and Intensity	Characteristics	Participant Demographics
Recruiting Washington Teachers (Geiger & Hougan, 2017)	Partnership between high schools, teacher preparation programs, institutions of higher education, parents/guardians, and community-based organizations.	Candidates are high school students	To diversify the educator workforce, by growing-our-own educators out of the current, diverse high school students.	68% ELLs
		An intensive academic year program (and in some cases summer academy)		10% African American
		Mentored, hands-on classroom field experiences		8% Asian American
		Exposure to higher education options, including campus visits/workshops		51% Latino
Funded by the state legislature, the Professional Educator Standards Board, and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction	An articulation agreement with a higher education partner formalizing the transfer of course credit			2% Native American
				20% White
				10% Multi-ethnic
				83% Female
				17% Male

*Note.* To learn more about other GYO programs see <https://www.pesb.wa.gov/innovation-policy/grow-your-own/gyoreport/>

## First-Person Accounts: Tensions Embedded in GYOs

GYOs hold promise in efforts toward diversifying the workforce and in improving outcomes for advancing equity, yet they are not without tensions that need further exploration.

Continuous attention to tensions undergirding GYO programs can help avoid what others have termed ‘equity traps’, or beliefs that “stop or hinder our ability to move toward equity in schooling” (McKenzie & Scheurich, 2004, p. 603). Equity traps generally refer to individual or collective beliefs that limit equity for students of Color, but when left unexamined these traps can also impact GYO students. This section highlights some of the tensions that GYOs across the nation have described, and affords space for two current GYO participants to share

some of the tensions they have experienced (authors three and four).

One central tension GYO programs are continuously grappling with is how to design and implement a program that recognizes their students’ needs. Many GYO students can be considered nontraditional students based on their age, their familial responsibilities, and where they are in their careers. Unlike traditional students that are able to focus on school as their main priority, GYO students may need programs that are attuned to the multi-faceted responsibilities that may carry equally pressing priority in their lives. For example, in the *Nueva Generación* (New Generation) program located in Chicago, many of the participants are mothers that work outside the home (Skinner, 2010).

Additionally, state requirements such as basic skills and/or professional knowledge exams can also act as barriers for students that have been out of formal education programs for extended periods of time, did not go through the US educational systems, or speak a language other than English as their dominant language (Skinner, 2010). In these situations, even with additional language or tutoring supports, some students find these standardized barriers insurmountable and are sometimes counseled out of GYO programs (Hunt, Gardner, & Hood, 2011; Skinner, 2010). High stakes exams are a historical remnant of using culturally biased exam mechanisms to exclude certain students in the name of evidence. In this case, historically underserved students are not seen as highly qualified based on biased exams. (Au, 2009; Rogers-Ard, Knaus, Epstein, & Mayfield, 2013). Due to many of these, GYO programs also have high attrition rates (e.g., the Illinois consortia of GYO report 43% attrition; Hunt, Gardner, & Hood, 2011).

We (authors three and four) would like to highlight a tension we have experienced in relation to the GYO program we are participating in locally. We are entering a teaching context that has this troubling issue of disproportionality for students of Color, a special education teacher shortage in our state, and lack of diversity in our professional roles. Consequently, our GYO has opened a path to licensure that leads directly to special education. This largely positions us a key players in equity work that will require unique types of emotional and professional labor that will impact how we experience the teaching profession. We are committed to our love for education and strive to provide students with culturally responsive practices in our teaching and look forward to addressing the current demographic mismatch between students and teachers, yet we also need supports to thrive as special education teachers of Color engaging in critical equity work.

The tensions we have laid out are occurring across GYO and in our (authors three and four) own GYO programs. We firmly believe that although GYO are a promising path for advancing equity in special education, completion rates cannot be the singular marker of success. GYO need to reframe success to include attention to the equity issues embedded in the programs. Equity traps could easily lead to explanations that point to individual shortcomings as reasons for high attrition rates from GYO programs or even the teaching profession, rather than examining the structural barriers shaping these issues. Attention to these tensions will allow GYO to further advance equity not only for youth but also for the students that commit to GYO programs.

## **GYOs Equity Value-Added Through a Community Cultural Wealth Lens**

The strengths of GYO are much broader and deeper than simply filling the high demand and high need teaching positions with diverse teachers. We know that (special education) teachers of Color are more likely to teach in low-income, high-needs schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Special education teachers of Color are going into contextually and professionally demanding teaching contexts, but what can they contribute through these roles? We know that simply adding teachers of Color to classrooms will not remedy equity issues for students of Color, since teachers of Color can also perpetuate hegemonic beliefs that negatively impacts students of Color (Brown, 2014; Kohli, 2013). Yet, on the flip side of the same coin, special education teachers of Color bring cultural knowledge from their local contexts that may serve as important equity tools for students of Color. In this final section, we propose Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (CCW; 2005) as a robust theory for rethinking value-added models that examine teacher contributions.

Yosso's CCW theory, rooted in Critical Race Theory, theorizes and resists the narrow forms of capital that are seen as valuable in dominant contexts. CCW counters historical descriptions of communities of Color being deprived and desolate, and instead recognizes rich cultural assets that people of Color accumulate in their communities. Yosso (2005) frames CCW as an "array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro-forms of oppression" (p. 77) around the following 6 forms of capital below.

<p><b>Aspirational Capital</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real or perceived barriers"</li> </ul>
<p><b>Linguistic Capital</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "includes the intellectual and social skills attained through communication experiences in more than one language and/or style"</li> </ul>
<p><b>Familial Capital</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "refers to those cultural knowledges nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory and cultural intuition."</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Capital</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "can be understood as networks of people and community resources... [that] can provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's institutions."</li> </ul>
<p><b>Navigational Capital</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions...not created with Communities of Color in mind."</li> </ul>
<p><b>Resistance Capital</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "those knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality"</li> </ul>

These types of capital are valuable in communities of Color and for students of Color. GYO teachers are typically from the communities in which they are being trained to teach, and tend to represent the demographic makeup of the area. These types of capital are rooted in the cultural practices and lived experiences of local actors, and have particularly important implications for students of Color in special education. These cultural ways of understanding local contexts allow GYO teachers to understand the equity dimensions surrounding youth of Color.

In conclusion, GYO programs are promising avenues for addressing the special education teacher shortages and lack of diversity, but more importantly they contribute important equity value added safeguards for youth of Color. Special education has served as an important inclusionary tool for youth with disabilities, but over-identification, more restrictive learning environments, and harsher disciplinary outcomes are some of the unintended consequences that have impacted youth of Color. Developing special educators by investing in local community members not only contributes to diversifying the teaching workforce and filling hard to staff positions, but also advances equity through the CCW they bring to their practice.

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## Appendix

**Class A:** This category is reserved for those programs that meet the following criteria: (1) the alternative teacher certification route has been designed for the explicit purpose of attracting talented individuals who already have at least a bachelor's degree in a field other than education into elementary and secondary school teaching; (2) the alternate route is not restricted to shortages, secondary grade levels or subject areas; and (3) these alternative teacher certification routes involve teaching with a trained mentor, and formal instruction that deals with the theory and practice of teaching during the school year – and sometimes in the summer before and/or after.

**Class B:** Teacher certification routes that have been designed specifically to bring talented individuals who already have at least a bachelor's degree into teaching. These routes involve specially designed mentoring and formal instruction. However, these states either restrict the program to shortages and/or secondary grade levels and/or subject areas.

**Class C:** These routes entail review of academic and professional background and transcript analysis. They involve individually designed in-service and course-taking necessary to reach competencies required for certification, if applicable. The state and/or local school district have major responsibility for program design.

**Class D:** These routes entail review of academic and professional background, and transcript analysis. They involve individually designed in-service and course-taking necessary to reach competencies required for certification, if applicable. An institution of higher education is majorly responsibility for program design.

**Class E:** These post-baccalaureate programs are based at an institution of higher education.

**Class F:** These programs are basically emergency routes. The prospective teacher is issued some type of emergency certificate or waiver that allows the individual to teach, usually without any on-site support or supervision, while taking the traditional teacher education courses requisite for full certification.

**Class G:** Programs in this class are for persons who have few requirements left to fulfill before becoming certified through the traditional approved college teacher education program route, e.g., persons certified in one state moving another; or persons certified in one endorsement seeking to become certified in another.

**Class H:** This class includes those routes that enable a person who has some “special” qualifications such as a well-known author or Nobel prize winner, to teach certain subjects.

**Class I:** These states reported that they were not implementing alternatives to the approved college teacher education program route for licensing teachers.

**Class J:** These programs are designed to eliminate emergency routes. They prepare individuals who do not meet basic requirements to become qualified to enter an alternate route or a traditional route for teacher licensing.

**Class K:** These avenues to certification accommodate specific populations for teaching, e.g. Teach for America, Troops to Teachers, and college professors who want to teach in K-12 schools.

## Meet the Authors

**Taucia González, Ph.D.**, is an assistant professor of special education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research addresses issues of equity and inclusion for emergent bilingual students with and without learning disabilities. Her current study, funded by the University of Wisconsin's Grand Challenges initiative, examines the work Hmong and Latinx parents and youth do to create more equitable and inclusive schools. The second strand of her research focuses on preparing teachers to work at the intersection of language and ability differences. Taucia currently serves as an advisory board member for the Wisconsin Education Research Advisory Council and as an Equity Fellow for the Midwest and Plains Equity Center.

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## **About the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center**

The mission of the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality, research-based education by expanding states' and school systems' capacity to provide robust, effective opportunities to learn for all students, regardless of and responsive to race, sex, and national origin, and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups. The Equity by Design briefs series is intended to provide vital background information and action steps to support educators and other equity advocates as they work to create positive educational environments for all children. For more information, visit <http://www.greatlakesequity.org>.

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Recommended Citation: Gonzalez, T., Li, L., Torres-Mercado, M., & Meza, J.P.T. (2018). Grow your own special programs: Contributing more than diversity. *Equity by Design*. Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC).

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Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center is committed to the sharing of information regarding issues of equity in education. The contents of this practitioner brief were developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (Grant S004D110021). However, these contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the federal government.

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