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Experiences and perspectives of graduate teaching assistants at a large urban university

Justina Jackson

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Justina Rodriguez Jackson
Educational Policy Studies
College of Education and Human Development
Georgia State University

The director of this dissertation is:

Jennifer Esposito, PhD
Educational Policy Studies
College of Education and Human Development
Georgia State University
Atlanta, GA 30303

CURRICULUM VITAE

NAME: Justina Rodriguez Jackson

ADDRESS: 804 Chase Point
Woodstock, Georgia 30189

EDUCATION:

Doctor of Philosophy   2020   Georgia State University
College of Education &
Human Development
Educational Policy Studies

Master of Education   2013   Georgia State University
College of Education &
Human Development
Health & Physical Education

Bachelor of Science   2007   The University of Georgia
in Education   College of Education
Health & Physical Education

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

2013-2019   Graduate Research & Teaching
Assistant
Georgia State University

2007-2013   Physical Education Teacher
The Davis Academy

PRESENTATIONS AND PUBLICATIONS:

Esposito, J., Lee, T., Limes-Taylor Henderson, K., Mason, A., Outler, A., Rodriguez
Jackson, J., Washington, R., & Whitaker-Lea, L. (2017). Doctoral students' experiences
with pedagogies of the home, pedagogies of love, and mentoring in the academy. *Educational Studies*, 53(2), p. 155-177.

Hunt, K. A., Trent, M. N., Jackson, J. R., Marquis, J. M., Barrett-Williams, S., Gurvitch, R., & Metzler, M. W. (2016). The Effect of Content Delivery Media on Student Engagement and Learning Outcomes. *Journal of Effective Teaching*, 16(1), 5-18.

Esposito, J., Mason, A., Hale, J. & Jackson, J. (2018, November). Mothering and Academia in the Age of Trump. American Educational Studies Association National Conference. Greenville, South Carolina.

Jackson, J. R. (2018, May) *Poster Presentation: A Literature Review of Graduate Teaching Assistant Pedagogical Training.* Georgia State Conference of Scholarly Teaching. Atlanta, Georgia.

Jackson, J. R. (2017, April) *Paper: Critical Race Theory in Education*. Georgia State Conference of Scholarly Teaching. Atlanta, Georgia.

Esposito, J. & Washington, R., Mason, A., & Jackson, J. (2015, November). *Paper Presentation: Pedagogies of the home, pedagogies of love, and mentoring in the academy.* American Educational Studies Association National Conference. San Antonio, Texas.

Jackson, J. (2015, January*) Session Presentation: Graduate Students Conference Experience.* National Association for Kinesiology in Higher Education. Clearwater, Florida

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS

2019-2020	EPS Graduate Student Association/ Secretary
2014-2015	Kappa Delta Pi – Omicron Gamma Chapter/ Co-Vice President

TITLE: Dissertation

EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS AT A

LARGE URBAN UNIVERSITY

By

JUSTINA RODRIGUEZ JACKSON

Under the Direction of Jennifer Esposito, PhD

ABSTRACT

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) represent a major portion of the undergraduate teaching force for colleges and universities. Yet, some universities/colleges do not have enough support and training in place to assist GTAs in their pedagogical development. This dissertation used qualitative case study methods to examine perspectives of GTAs at an urban university located in a Southeastern city. The following were the research questions for the proposed study: 1. What are the teaching experiences of GTAs at a specific, large, public, predominantly minority serving institution? 2. What kinds of pedagogical training and support do graduate teaching assistants experience? 3. How do GTAs navigate their roles as students and GTAs? To answer these questions, 20 GTAs were interviewed for 45-60 minutes each. Member checking provided additional clarification on participant interviews. The results showed that informal and formal support mechanisms are necessary to support GTAs in their pedagogical development and academic lives. The results showed that GTAs at the institution have layered support mechanisms that undergird their development as teachers. GTAs felt capable in their abilities to teach and conduct scholarly activities, although this was difficult at times. Support from peers and trusted faculty mentors proved useful in supporting these GTAs. Additionally, GTAs navigated learning how to teach at the same time they negotiated their multiple identities as raced, classed, and gendered beings.

INDEX WORDS: Graduate Teaching Assistants, GTA pedagogy, GTA training

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Justina Rodriguez Jackson

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Sociocultural Contexts in Higher Education

Teaching in Higher Education

Since 1970, the number of faculty in postsecondary degree granting institutions has more than tripled to an estimated 1.5 million faculty members in 2017 (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Additionally, the National Center for Education Statistics (2019) estimates almost 20 million students were enrolled in college in 2019. College professors, lecturers, and instructors are involved in educating large masses of students seeking degrees that have the potential to impact their lives and careers. Being a teacher in college is no small venture.

The Association of College and University Educators and American Council on Education suggest that institutions of higher education make investments to provide pedagogical professional development to instructors in order to increase the quality of education for undergraduate students. While this seems like a good idea, it does not always fit with the reality of demands that exist for college professors. College professors, especially those that are tenure track are involved in a number of activities required for promotion and tenure, especially research and publication. This focus on research and publication has led to a culture across many institutions that does not adequately support pedagogical development for those that teach in college. Such programs that are available for college instructors require additional time and energy that can carry limited benefits of participation, considering the demands of academia.

Sometimes participation in pedagogical training is negatively viewed because of the vulnerability that one might experience as part of a pedagogical development training, workshop, or observation. Boyle and Boice (1998) suggest that some faculty do not participate in opportunities for evaluation because of fear that such evaluations may impact decisions in promotion and tenure. Boyle and Boice (1998) state, "Ironically, viewing teaching development

programs as remedial overlooks the fact that most new faculty obtained prestigious academic positions by focusing on their research and writing, at the expense of developing comfort as teachers" (p. 159-160). Prior to obtaining such academic positions, it is likely that college professors completed graduate school and that they have completed research in the discipline they represent. It cannot be assumed, however, that this research experience has prepared them to teach. In the United States today, in addition to the 1.5 million faculty members, there are about another 130,000 graduate students who are teaching as part of their graduate studies (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). As I have demonstrated in this study, graduate students who teach, largely do so, not only to support themselves financially, but also to prepare for possible opportunities where teaching may be required in the future.

   While the tenured track position was once the norm, these types of positions are becoming increasingly scarce due to a number of issues. In fact, some estimates suggest that about three quarters of college instructors are contingent faculty (Flaherty, 2018). There is an increase in the numbers and percentages of part-time, non-tenured faculty, adjunct faculty, and graduate assistants teaching in colleges and universities. Austin and McDaniels (2016) suggest that as the labor market has changed, so has the prevalence of tenure track positions. While there are fewer tenure track positions available, there is still a demand for college courses. The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) suggests that between 2006 and 2016, enrollment in degree granting institutions has increased by 18%. Additionally, a study by Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster (2016) suggests that while some estimates suggest that college and university faculty in the United States are becoming slightly more racially and ethnically diverse, most of this diversity has occurred in non-tenured, contingent faculty positions. Thus, the tenured

faculty labor force remains largely non-diverse in contrast to the increasingly diverse undergraduate population.

Impacts of Neoliberalism on Labor Structures in Higher Education

Neoliberalism is a term used to describe the application of capitalistic economic principles to education and an increasing threat to public education in the United States and globally (Apple, 2013). On the surface, neoliberalism assumes many seemingly altruistic coined rhetoric such as "choice", the "charter school" movement, and "vouchers" for private schooling. However, neoliberalist policies are damaging to schools, public education, and especially underserved communities. It is also active in a wave of public policy that targets public institutions and labels them as inferior to private ones (Apple, 2013). This movement built and funded by venture capitalists has convinced U.S. citizens (especially the middle class) that public services are inferior to private ones, and that the public education system should be the scapegoat for larger failings in educational policy and government policy. Within higher education, neoliberalism has impacted funding structures for higher education, as more and more institutions are looking to private donors and philanthropy to support institutional goals. Efforts by business to take over schools has led to an erasure of local school communities and the teachers within those communities (Buras, 2015). In higher education, funding structures have been impacted by neoliberal policies, leading to significant budget cuts.

Labor in higher education is structured in a hierarchal system that distinguishes levels of prestige among the professoriate. Within this hierarchy are tenured-track professors (assistant and associate), fully tenured professors, instructors, and teaching assistants. The labor force in education is becoming increasingly transient as money and public funds for education are taken away from education by government players (Apple, 2013). As federal and state money have

been funneled away from public education, the dependency on grants and private donors has become immense. On an individual level, faculty manage demands to achieve promotion and tenure, which is impacted by the pressure from institutions to procure grants, conduct research, and publish. Even with the mission of educating students, teaching does not always constitute a top priority within higher education.

Although college faculty become intimately aware of the demands required of them, it is likely they experienced elements of these pressures during their graduate preparation. As a graduate student, I have heard the saying, "publish or perish", and I am currently in a position funded solely on grant money. Although I am still a graduate student, I am highly familiar with the pressure to perform research and publication in order to maintain my status as an early academic. Graduate students are direct observers of this environment and impressionable to the perceived future pressures in academia. Graduate students involved in teaching (or GTAs) gain a unique understanding of teaching culture in their departments and institutionally, developing a deeper understanding of what it means to be a teacher, researcher, and scholar. If tenure/promotion and budgetary constraints are not concerning enough, there remain national scrutiny and murmurings as to the utility, value, and quality of college education (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). It could be argued that the increasingly neoliberal environment for education has contributed to the changes in teaching labor and the relegation of teaching as a secondary activity within the academy.

History of Exclusion in Higher Education

The tradition of schooling and the Academy in the United States is rooted in colonial imperialism, whereby the institutions themselves were designed to reproduce certain cultural norms that retained power for the powerful elite and divided labor accordingly (Madden, 2014).

After the American Revolution, the idea of education for all (not just the wealthy elite) became a popular idea (Tanner & Tanner, 1990). However, the United States carries a history of educational exclusion that extends from times of slavery and even today. "The West continues to view immigrants, people of color, and similar other members of the non-West though an imperial lens that was originally crafted during the colonial era" (Prasad, 2007, p. 287). During colonial times in America, only the social elite participated in a college education. As the country grew, the need and demand for higher education grew. Beneficiaries of such a system were defined mostly by class and race. Enslaved Black people were denied education, civil, and property rights, and even after slavery was abolished, the Jim Crow era continued to prevent Blacks from fully participating in higher education among virtually all sectors of American life. As Bracey (2017) states,

> If the United States were truly a land of equal opportunity, there would never have been a need to create colleges and universities specifically for African Americans. Yet, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) still exist today as a legacy of the past. (p. 671)

Historically Black Colleges and Universities were instrumental in providing a college education to Black students, especially in the South. Founded by former slaves within the context of the Black church, HBCUs were born out the struggle to have access to higher education. Today, HBCUs carry a strong legacy of academic excellence, and although many students of color have opted to attend public universities, they provide a place where descendants of enslaved Black people can see themselves reflected in higher education compared to primarily white institutions, or PWIs (Bracey, 2017). While higher education has become more accessible, there are still ways it reproduces hegemonic forces that aim to preserve power and access.

Women have also been historically excluded from certain aspects of higher education. Female instructors in college classrooms are also subject to stereotyping and bias from students, whereby attributes, such higher educational level is more likely to be associated with male instructors than female instructors (Miller & Chamberlin, 2000). From first experiences in education and continuing into higher education, women have experienced subtle and overt forms of discriminatory treatment that significantly impact how they interact and view themselves as scholars (Hall & Sadler, 1982). For female graduate students attempting to forge an identity as future scholars, these experiences can be detrimental as women attempt to thrive within a system that has historically denied women access. It can also lead to incidences where female instructors are treated unfairly or their credentials are questioned through implicit bias of students. It is also detrimental to men, as they observe and accept the systematic exclusion of women from academic discourse and scholarly activities.

Diversity in Higher Education

Educational statistics suggest that the undergraduate student body population is becoming more and more racially and ethnically diverse (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). In just the last twenty years, for instance, the number of Latinx students enrolled in colleges and universities has doubled (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). However, faculty representation of Latinx individuals in higher education is largely underrepresented. In terms of academic achievement, more minority students than ever are earning bachelor's degrees in college. Between the academic year 2004-05 and 2014-2015, there was a 38 percent increase for Asian/Pacific Islander students, 42 percent increase for Black students, and a 115 percent increase for Latinx students in the number of earned bachelor's degrees (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). Although participation among racial and ethnic minority groups is

increasing in higher education, the rates of completion of degrees for Black and Latinx students is disparate compared to white counterparts (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017).

Additionally, there is an increasing number of female students enrolled at colleges and universities across the U.S., and among Black students, female students make up about 60% of African American students enrolled in colleges and universities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Trends in higher education suggest that the student body will continue to become more racially and ethnically diverse. As there have been increases in the number of minority graduate students, higher education should expect to have more diverse faculty, but as Dill, Zambrana, and McLaughlin (2009) suggest, the diversity of most public colleges and universities does not reflect the increasingly diverse student population, and it is significantly worse at primarily white institutions (PWIs). For those minority faculty who enter into academia, there are significant obstacles. "Scholars of color, especially junior scholar, still confront many obstacles including: tenure and promotion; exploitation and self-sacrifice; multiple affiliations; and lack of family resources (Dill, Zambrana, and McLaughlin, 2009, p. 261). The next generation of faculty members will more than likely (although not sufficiently) reflect a change in the racial and ethnic representation of the professoriate. To reiterate a point I mentioned earlier, while there are more faculty of color in colleges and universities across the country, most of this increase has occurred in non-tenured, contingent faculty positions (Finkelstein, Conley, and Schuster, 2016). Thus, the majority of tenured positions remain non-representative of the undergraduate population across the United States.

Diverse faculty are needed to serve as role models for diverse students in order to support and understand the stressors that students may face in today's educational climate. Diverse in identity and perspective, faculty have an opportunity to be a bridge between students and the

mainstream cultural institution that is the university, also demonstrating that "competence and scholarly activity are not attributes exclusive to them" (Solomon, 1991, p.56). Also, diverse junior faculty who are mentored and supported early in their careers are more likely to mentor and support other faculty and students as they advance in their careers, creating networks of support for underrepresented groups in academia (Dill, Zambrana, & McLaughlin, 2009). Graduate students need mentors to whom they can relate. In coming years, as more graduate students earn advanced degrees, it is likely some of them will assume academic positions. Hopefully, more graduate students from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups will enter careers in academia. Otherwise, this trend is not likely to change.

Contexts for Gradaute Teaching Assistants in Higher Education

The Graduate Assistantship

Graduate assistantships are integral to the training of graduate students. Assistantships can be understood as an apprenticeship of sorts by which a novice learns a trade or craft from an expert. The most common graduate assistantships at large universities are teaching ones. Thus, the apprentice ideally should learn how to teach from the expert, in most instances a professor or a director of a program. As colleges and universities gained popularity in the United States, so did the need to train graduate students (Farris, 2005) to assist with teaching. This model, however, has increasingly become an *apprenticeship of observation* (Lortie, 1975), characterized by little interaction and support and mostly just teaching the way one was taught. For many graduate assistants, they are not fully trained by an expert teacher and are, instead, expected to replicate what they experienced as undergraduate students.

Typically, the assistantship operates to cover the costs of coursework in the form of a tuition waiver and is also accompanied by a monthly stipend. The costs of graduate school are significant, thus graduate assistantships (research and teaching) are a major source of financial

support for graduate students. Teaching assistantships provide financial support to graduate students and serve a greater purpose at the college level, whereby graduate students can be relied upon to teach large numbers of undergraduate courses, thus relieving faculty members to pursue other scholarly requirements such as research and publications (Boyer, 1990). Lovitts (2004) found that research and teaching assistantships dramatically increased a graduate student's chances of completing their doctoral degree, which is critical considering the high dropout rates in doctoral programs. Through graduate assistantships, graduate students may financially support their studies. At research-intensive institutions, research assistantships or fellowships are often considered more prestigious than teaching assistantships. Thus, some graduate students are rewarded by not having to teach when they receive prestigious scholarships, or research assistantships, thus perpetuating the notion that those who teach or want to teach are less scholarly or intellectual (Boyer, 1990).

Some of the brightest and best graduate students in their respective content disciplines receive research assistantships or externally-funded fellowships that are often viewed as more prestigious than teaching assistantships. Sullivan (1991) describes the "skimming effect" by which the cream of the crop is "skimmed" from the top of the group. In many cases, these positions do not hold a requirement to teach, which reinforces the notion of research as superior to other forms of scholarship. In some cases, the research requirements for the research assistantship or fellowship do not provide time for graduate students to dedicate to teaching, or the institution has restrictions on the number of hours graduate students are able to work. Down the road, these same individuals become scholars in the field (and some at very prestigious institutions) with missed opportunities to teach and little or no teaching experiences (Sullivan, 1991). This process suggests the ethical dilemma of placing TAs in teaching positions for which

they are not prepared or supported (Boyer, 1990). If they are to become part of the future professoriate, it is logical to believe that their experiences as TAs will greatly impact how they conceptualize their role as a teacher. Furthermore, restrictive policies dictate the amount of work hours allowed for GTAs can also restrict earning potential for graduate students. In theory, these policies aim to ensure that graduate students do not overcommit themselves, but as my study suggests, graduate students find other ways to supplement income in order to support themselves and their loved ones through outside employment or student loans.

Graduate students maintain many roles while they fulfill the role of GTA. Doctoral students in particular, are in the final stages of their professional preparation for a potential career in academia. Professional activities of doctoral students include coursework, research, and conferences. These activities coincide with the other activities of graduate students which include other jobs, responsibilities, and personal relationships. Esposito, Lee, Limes-Taylor Henderson, Mason, Outler, and Rodriguez-Jackson, (2017), explored the various role demands that doctoral students face while working toward the completion of a doctorate, including, but not limited to, student, scholar, teacher, provider, caregiver, parent, partner, or friend. The narratives told from the perspectives of graduate students convey the support that is needed in order to survive and thrive in a doctoral program and the importance of mentoring both from a caring advisor and among peers. Graduate students are typically older than the traditional aged college student. About 62% of graduate students at public universities are older than 25 years (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). The financial costs weigh heavy on graduate students, as the average loan balance after the completion of a research doctorate (not medical or law) is $92,200 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). These numbers increase substantially for graduate students who complete degrees at private-for-profit institutions.

Doctoral students might find themselves overwhelmed or isolated as they balance the demands of their professional and personal lives along with the costs and benefits of obtaining a terminal degree.

GTAs in Higher Education

Graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) comprise a major source of the teaching force in undergraduate education at research and doctoral granting institutions of higher education. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that colleges, universities, and professional schools in the United States employ over 130,000 GTAs (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). While the number of GTAs differ from institution to institution, the top ten institutions employing GTAs have between 18-26% of undergraduate courses taught by GTAs. It should be noted that these universities are large national research universities, each with high enrollment and a variety of advanced degree programs at the masters and doctorate levels (Friedman, 2017). GTAs may teach as assistants to faculty members in classrooms or laboratories, or they may be the instructor of record having larger autonomy over course teaching. GTAs teach in classrooms, laboratories, online, or hybrid formats with varying class sizes.

GTAs represent a form of human and financial capital within the university model (Sheridan, 1991). As forms of capital, GTAs are both a source of labor and a participant in higher education. For instance, GTA labor comes at a cost, but a significantly less cost than that of a tenured faculty member. Furthermore, the way that graduate teaching labor is used, it represents a form of commoditization (Marx 1977), of graduate labor, by which the institutions profit from this labor, sometimes with minimal investment in the growth and support of the GTAs. Graduate students who teach are providing a valuable service in the form of economic

input and also improving themselves in the process, a form of output that is valuable to the university in terms of rankings and ratings (Bettinger, Long, & Taylor, 2016).

GTAs are a valuable source of teaching labor in colleges and universities. As content experts in their respective fields, they are a prime teaching force (assuming they know how to teach) within the university teaching labor model. Additionally, graduate students are in the process of becoming scholars in their respective fields, and some of them will take on positions that carry the expectation or requirement that they will teach. As will be explained later in greater detail, graduate students develop expectations about their future professions based largely on experiences they have as graduate students (Austin & McDaniels, 2006).

The stereotype of GTAs as less knowledgeable or experienced than professors is problematic for GTAs in the classroom. When undergraduate students were presented with different instructor title names prior to instruction, the title of "graduate teaching assistant" compared to the use of the title of "laboratory instructor" was perceived as less experienced, more nervous, and lacking expertise (Kendall & Schussler, 2014). This is important because of the learning expectations undergraduate students have in the classroom related to their teacher, and more research might help illuminate these stereotypes and expectations based on title. However, research also suggests that GTAs are instrumental in their interactions with undergraduates. Bettinger et. al (2016) suggest that undergraduates taught by GTAs are more likely to major in that respective field compared to undergraduates taught by faculty members indicating GTAs are instrumental in their interactions with undergraduates. Despite some of the stereotypes of the GTA, there are some other benefits to hiring of GTAs. Many GTAs are positioned more closely to undergraduates, in a number of ways. It is possible that many GTAs are still taking coursework which could create a shared understanding of coursework demands

and dealing with professors, and it is also likely that because they are still in the knowledge development phase of their work, their proximity to the most recent research and methods has potential to see the learning side similarly to how an undergraduate might approach the problem (Sheridan, 1991).

Scholarship Reconsidered

Traditional scholarship in higher education is often synonymous with research or, as Boyer (1990) calls it, the scholarship of discovery. Boyer (1990) suggested that scholarship in higher education includes more than just original research, and that scholarship ought to be reframed to include the other forms of inquiry that teachers use to improve their pedagogical skills. By making the model for scholarship more inclusive, valuable contributions can and should be recognized within the educational community. Boyer's suggestion formed the basis for the concept of "scholarship of teaching". Because scholarship is considered part of academic duties, it is monetized as such. Thus, Boyer suggests that one's scholarship of teaching be incentivized similarly to how research is incentivized. The goal being to reward teachers at the college level who demonstrate effectiveness by researching their own teaching. Thus, by rewarding effective teachers in recognition and salary, more professors would be inclined to study their teaching and fully embrace their role as teachers. "Research universities must aggressively support teaching. After all, a significant percentage of their students are undergraduates and such institutions are clearly obligated to provide them a quality education. Is it ethical to enroll students and not give them the attention they deserve?" (Boyer, 1997, p. 103). In recent years, faculty have demonstrated interest in the scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), and it has become an international interest among professors in higher education (Beach, 2016).

GTA Perspectives

A major national survey of over 4,000 GTAs indicate that GTAs feel underprepared for their role as teachers (Golde, Dore, & Wisconsin University, 2001). They report difficulty navigating doctoral education. For the most part, they understand how to do research and the expectations of them as researchers in academia. Most respondents to a survey by Golde and Dore (2001) found that graduate students wanted careers as faculty members despite trends marking a decrease in the availability of tenure track positions. Men were more likely than women to desire tenure track faculty positions, and white doctoral candidates were more likely than their counterparts of color to desire faculty positions.

At the time of this survey, it was estimated that only about half of new PhDs would be hired as tenure track faculty. Eighty three percent of respondents reported enjoying teaching and listed it as a main reason for wanting to become a professor, but only half of the programs surveyed had requirements for students to teach as GTAs. The survey examined differences in the disciplines and found that GTAs in the sciences felt less prepared that GTAs in humanities to teach diverse groups of students. Across all respondents about a third of students felt prepared to teach lecture courses. About 64% of students understand their obligations as GTAs, but only 42% of those GTAs felt they were able to adequately and fairly grade student work according to the expectations of their home department. Despite perceptions of not being prepared to teach, most respondents reported an available teaching development center, workshops and discipline specific seminars as resources for professional development in teaching. While most of the students reported participating in such activities, they noted that these activities were not requirements of their home programs.

Why Study GTAs?

At this moment in early 2020, a number of GTAs in the state of California have gone on strike, demanding higher pay, with the backdrop of a major housing crisis, and increased costs of living. As a result of the strike, undergraduate students have had classes cancelled, and some undergraduate student grades have not been submitted for coursework, going back to 2019. In late February, a number of GTAs were fired from University of California Santa Cruz, after months of refusing to perform teaching duties. The stories of these GTAs are not unlike GTAs across the county, although the housing crisis in California creates an even more dire situation for graduate students. The stories of homelessness, financial struggle, and marginalization are relatable to other graduate students watching the situation unfold. The national attention has led to a number of responses and blaming, most of which do not adequately address the heart of the problem. The strikes taking place in California, reminds me of the importance of GTAs in academic institutions, and the importance of the sociocultural context of education. It also reminds me of the important impact that GTAs have. Thus, the perspectives and experiences of GTAs are worthy of inquiry.

Theoretical Framework

Intersectionality

While learning theories and teaching frameworks provide the conceptual framework for this study, the entire study is filtered through my own theoretical lens representing my worldview, as a person, researcher, woman, etc. While this study focuses on the teaching experiences of GTAs and their support mechanisms, it is done so with the understanding that these teaching and support experiences are nuanced, complex, and at times overlapping. In order to begin to examine another's point of view, I needed a theory that would address the complexities, inequities, and critical analyses necessary in order to promote worthwhile change. Intersectionality as a framework is powerful because it "draws attention to the policies, practices

outcomes of institutional racism and discrimination" (Collins, 2015, p. 8) and does so in a layered multifaceted way to acknowledge the complex interactions of race, class, gender, and other individual characteristics.

Academic institutions have largely been an active force in hegemony. Higginbotham's (2009) study of the oral history of Black women lawyers demonstrates the historical barriers that women had to overcome during the Jim Crow Era, but then after desegregation how these women fought to break barriers that were built in the law profession. Today, there are inequalities in the education system, including educational segregation of students in urban areas, and discriminatory behavior of teachers, counselors, and personnel in the k-12 system (Zambrana & Macdonald, 2009). Despite shifts in the changing academic populations, major inequalities still exist for women and racial/ethnic minorities (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Gendered and racialized experiences are salient for women and minorities in academia and fundamental in shaping ideas about self and one's place in the academy (Esposito et al, 2017). None of the concepts or issues examined in this study happen in isolation of the sociocultural forces at work. Thus, intersectionality as a theoretical framework acknowledges the entry of these forces and informs the research that takes place. Colleges and universities are the social institutions whereby GTAs participate in a variety of experiences with past shaped knowledge of the world that includes experienced classism, racism, and sexism. Thus, the addition of this critical framework strengthens the theoretical perspective of the study.

Problem Statement

GTAs enter into teaching with many roles and expectations, and sometimes, little or no teaching experience (YoonJung, Myoungsook, Svinicki, & Decker, 2011). This lack of preparation is exacerbated by the belief that content expertise translates into pedagogical knowledge, the incentivization of research over teaching, or the placement of graduate students

in teaching positions that do not intend to teach. Since there are not enough research assistantships for each graduate student, there are many graduate students who accept teaching assistantships out of necessity to support themselves (Nyquist et. Al, 1991).

Undergraduate students have preconceived notions about the graduate students teaching their courses. Kendall and Schussler (2014) found among undergraduates enrolled in science courses that they had different expectations based on the title of the instructor. For instance, students surveyed in the study expected a faculty member instructor to be more "confident, organized, relaxed, respected, and strict, while GTAs were expected to be more nervous, relatable, uncertain, and understanding" (p. 8). These expectations were presumed even before students had met any of the instructors, and the authors attribute these preconceptions to previous experiences, stereotypes, and the title "assistant" which possibly conveys less knowledge or experience. In another study, undergraduate students were gender biased toward instructors and often perceived male instructors as having higher rank and female instructors as having lower rank, even when female instructor was a tenured faculty member (Miller & Chamberlin, 2000). Miller and Chamberlin (2000) explain that these students held "misattribution" errors, and that they held views consistent with assigning role of "teacher" to female instructors and "professor" to male instructors (p. 283).

With this in mind, it is important to remember what is at stake not only for graduate students, but also for undergraduates. Institutions have the ethical responsibility to provide high quality learning experiences for undergraduate students that are becomingly increasingly diverse. Colleges and universities must demonstrate a commitment to providing equitable educational experiences that support students who have been neglected in the recent past. There are major disparities in completion of a college degree between four to six years, suggesting that serious

barriers toward completion exist for students of color. The National Center for Educational Statistics (2016) indicates that Black students complete college in four years at a rate of half of their white counterparts.

Additionally, data suggest that while a college education is more available to students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, this is at the cost of procuring large amounts of student loan debt, a reality for many college students. An undergraduate student graduating in 2016 owes, on average, over $37,000 (Friedman, 2018). Student loan debt disproportionately impacts students of color, especially Black students. At the time of graduation, Black students, on average owe $7,400 more than white counterparts, but four years following graduation, this number increases to $25,000 in difference, accounting for interest rate accrual and graduate school loans (Scott-Clayton & Li, 2016). Scott-Clayton and Li (2016) also identified that while graduate school presents a good "return on investment" this is riskier for Black students due to rates of completion that also disproportionally impact Black students. The for-profit sector of higher education has come under fire in recent years for being complicit in the student loan crisis, promising degrees to students unable to afford the costs of attending these for-profit institutions.

Colleges and universities provide students the opportunity to earn a degree that has potential to improve one's social mobility, thereby increasing their chances of building personal financial gains and wealth. Thus, it is a moral and ethical responsibility to make sure that college students are receiving the highest quality experiences they deserve. Without undergraduate students, many institutions would cease to exist. If a college degree is to maintain its social and economic value, the process of an academic degree should result in highly knowledgeable content learners. The highly knowledgeable learner is a direct product of high-quality teaching

and learning at the college and university level. Clearly, more is needed to promote effective teaching at the college level. Teachers in college need to be supported, incentivized, compensated, and recognized in their efforts to improve their pedagogical skills necessary to teach effectively.

Graduate school is a formative time by which graduate students develop firm beliefs and attitudes about a future in academia as part of the professoriate. As a whole, doctoral students don't receive the training they want in graduate school, and they do not feel prepared for the jobs they accept after completing their degree (Golde & Dore, 2001). Since teaching is perceived as a less important activity within the university setting, it may be that teaching support is less emphasized or available. Thus, those that struggle with their teaching may not seek out much needed support or view pedagogical training as an important activity within the context of graduate school. While research is highly valuable and a pillar of the academy, teaching is also an important activity that takes place on college campuses. It is my belief that GTA's would like to do a good job teaching, but that there are certain cultural and institutional factors that influence the attitudes and perceptions of faculty and graduate students and relegate the role of teacher as a secondary priority among the professoriate. Graduate students face a role conflict of sorts, as they must navigate not only their roles as teachers, but as students also, and a number of other possible roles that demand their time and energy. Graduate students are on a journey to becoming professionals in their respective fields, and the socialization of graduate students is highly impactful as they transition into their roles within academia.

Purpose

I have investigated the experiences and perspectives of GTAs involved in teaching at a predominately minority serving university (given the pseudonym SESU) in order to understand

how they make sense of their role as both student and teacher and to understand the critical relationships that function as a support in their role as GTAs. Using a qualitative case study method, I interviewed 20 GTAs across various disciplines to learn about their experiences. Assuming that teaching is a skill that requires development and that the role of graduate student is multifaceted, I studied how GTAs engage in professional learning, inquiring about their experiences thus far teaching in higher education, and understanding the satisfaction and support they feel in their roles. Since GTAs are a major source of teaching labor in universities, it is important to develop a better understanding of the satisfaction and support that GTAs experience at the institutions they serve. Additionally, there is a lack of research as to how GTAs are trained to develop culturally competent pedagogies to navigate race, socio-economic class, and gender within the context of the college classroom. The following research questions were used to guide the study.

Research Questions

The following are the research questions for the study:

1. What are the teaching experiences of GTAs at a specific large, public, and predominantly minority serving institution?

2. What kinds of pedagogical training and support do graduate teaching assistants experience?

3. How do GTAs navigate their roles as students and GTAs?

Significance

Graduate students (primarily doctoral students) are engaged in a variety of activities that contribute to their knowledge and skills as academics. Additionally, this socialization process informs their expectations about academia and envisioning a possible future in academia. A variety of approaches exist that focus on training GTAs, but little is known about how these approaches impact GTAs on a personal level. Very little is known about the way in which

graduate teaching assistants work to improve their pedagogical practices, informally through interactions with peers, for instance. To my knowledge, there is no research that studies GTA support systems from an intersectional approach, utilizing the knowledge of racialized and gendered experience as contributing factors to teaching identity development. In the next chapter, I will review a synthesized body of literature around the topic of existing research on pedagogical training for GTAs.

2   REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

The following chapter presents a review of literature on the pedagogical training of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs). In order to conduct a case study related to GTA pedagogical training, it is logical to start with examining what types of pedagogical training of GTAs have been studied in the past. In light of the changing demographics of education, along with the institutional need for diversity in education, it is necessary to consider how GTA training programs are addressing these changes through more inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogical training. There are many ways pedagogical training takes place on college campuses. Some of the activities are structured and some are not. For instance, mentoring (Boyle & Boice, 1998) takes place informally through the socialization of graduate students into academic life, but systematic mentoring was shown to make an impact on GTAs' beliefs, confidence, and willingness to interact with a supportive mentor. Boyle and Boice (1998) suggest that more research be done to identify how these mentoring interactions are beneficial to GTAs. Additionally, they suggest that in-depth analysis is needed to prescribe training based on individual needs of the GTAs.

This review begins with a broad approach to GTA training, followed by a comprehensive, systematic review of the literature on this topic. I utilized an electronic data base to search and identify relevant studies. Finally, I will detail the ways in which this review informs my current study of GTA pedagogical training from an intersectional perspective. By developing a better understanding of past methods, it is possible to learn and improve ways to train and support GTAs, thus improving the quality of higher education for historically underrepresented groups.

Process

   In the beginning stages of this review, I approached the literature with a very open mind. I attempted to be broad in my initial searches in order to include a large variety of articles, studies, and other written sources. With help from my university's research librarian, I developed search terms based on keywords that I deemed relevant to the goal of the literature review. The goal of this review was to systematically review research on pedagogical training for GTAs.

Electronic Database Search

   I utilized the library electronic database, ERIC, which specializes in educational related literature and research. I included three possible combinations of GTA, such as graduate teaching assistant, graduate instructor, or the abbreviated version GTA, which was the primary requirement. In another series of search terms, the words were used to include a maximum number of articles that utilized various combinations of words such as, train, training, develop, developing, development, mentor, mentoring, pedagogical, pedagogy, and so on. I used many combinations of search terms, and the search terms were instructed by the search engine to be searched everywhere but the main text. Thus abstracts, descriptions, titles, and references were searched electronically. Through multiple trials, a sequence was developed that cast a net wide enough to consider the review exhaustive and comprehensive. The final search terms yielded slightly over 400 results (412 exact with cuts in subsequent steps) with the Boolean phrasing combination is displayed below:

   ("graduate teaching assistant*" OR "graduate instructor*" OR "GTA*") AND ("train*" OR "develop*" OR "mentor*" OR "pedagog*" OR "communit* of practice*" OR "learning communit*")

Inclusion Critieria

After compiling a large set of over 400 results, the titles and abstracts were filtered to include only research on graduate teaching assistants, or GTAs. About 140 research studies and evaluations with GTAs as the primary topic were selected for further, more detailed review. Additional criteria were applied to the 140 articles. The first criterion was methodological relevance. In order for the article to be included, it needed to focus on the pedagogical training of GTAs. In order to be included, the article had to specifically mention GTAs and some form of a training program, as this was critical to my line of inquiry. Secondly, the articles had to be peer-reviewed and present empirical methods and findings in the form of a research study or program evaluation. Opinion articles, speeches, handbooks, and "how-to" papers were not included in the review. Perceptions' research measuring the psychological states of GTAs were only included if there was a specific training program or protocol associated with the study. Otherwise, research that focused solely on the psychological states of GTAs were not included. Theoretical papers not associated with a specific training program were also not included. Because context is a critical part of this study and review and because my study took place in the United States, studies that were conducted outside of the United States were not included. Also, since International Teaching Assistant (ITA) literature represents a different body of research, it was not included. While content specificity is a feature of many studies, some were not included due to the highly specific nature of their inquiry. Because this review aimed to focus across disciplines, studies that were very discipline specific may not have been included. However, if the study presented findings that could be applied across disciplines, this was included in the review. Annotated bibliographies and literature reviews were not included, but the references were scanned for potential articles that might be relevant. I am confident that I have done my due

diligence to include the most relevant research and studies to conduct this review. After these

criteria were applied, the resulting list included 35 articles.

Content Thematic Analysis

After reading and developing a literature matrix to organize each source and begin the

process of synthesis, I used qualitative content thematic analysis to identify themes across the

studies and to describe and synthesize the included studies. Through the use of a combination of

strategies, I developed codes based on words or phrases that I saw repeated again and again. I

also took notes within a matrix to identify the research questions, purposes, methodology, and

findings of each study. After a second and third time of reviewing the matrix and relevant

articles, I developed a series of categories to describe the reviewed literature. The findings of this

analysis are described in terms of methodological approach, theoretical underpinnings, categories

of the research, and pedagogical support practice.

Findings

Methodological Approaches

The literature presented various study designs and approaches to studying GTA training

at colleges and universities. Because of the context of college teaching for GTAs, no true

experimental studies were identified. I am assuming this is due to the application of research

design to college students in general. The use of intact groups, purposive samples, and existing

programs presents some less complicated research designs whereby the most feasible research

designs can be used. Thus, there is no randomization or experiments conducted, but other

research designs were identified in this review that suggest possible trends within the research on

teaching and learning as it relates to GTA pedagogical development. The ethics of research

suggest that it could be considered unethical to treat one group and not another, especially

considering populations of students in college. Additionally, the time and resources required for

research might be significantly lacking, underscoring the reason feasibility remains a primary consideration in this type of research.

Most of the samples of students were purposively sampled and represented populations of GTAs that were already teaching. However, Brauchle (1998) presented a study design that included 13 GTAs, 6 of which were designated to a control group, and the remaining 7 were designated to the intervention group. Although the researcher applied a quasi-experimental design, the small sample size of GTAs decreased the statistical power of the study. While statistical significance could not be established in that particular study, exit interviews from the participating GTAs indicated that they valued participating in the training program. Thus, Brauchle (1998) indicated that the program would be considered going forward for all GTAs at this particular institution.

Case study design was explicitly stated in a number of included studies (Andrews, 1983; Myers, 2010; Seung & Bryan, 2010). Because many of the studies occur in the dynamic context of university settings, it is useful to use a research design that does not impose on the context, rather allows the researcher to observe and study phenomenon in their natural occurrence (Yin, 2013). Sandi-Urena & Gatlin (2013) utilized an embedded multiple case study to examine the interactions of GTAs as well as their prior experiences and beliefs about training. The researchers suggested that a teaching self-image, shaped by one's teaching experiences, plays a strong role in how GTAs view themselves as teachers. Other studies such as Alexander & Davis (1970) included detailed a case study design but did not indicate specific research methodology.

Mixed methods designs were also evident throughout the review. Many studies utilized quantitative data (primarily in the form of survey data) and qualitative sources to triangulate findings for the studies (Bettinger, Long, & Taylor, 2016; Gilmore, Maher, Feldon, &

Timmerman, 2014; Kendall, Niemiller, Dittrich-Reed, & Schussler, 2014; Pentecost, Langdon,

Asirvatham, Robus, & Parson, 2012). The most frequently used qualitative methods were

interviews of GTAs that were used to gain insight on experience, perceptions, and attitudes

related to teaching and pedagogical training. Wheeler, Maeng & Whitworth (2017) studied the

perceptions of GTAs related to a specific training designed to improve their teaching of inquiry-

based learning in science. The results of survey and interview data suggest that the professional

development improved teaching knowledge within inquiry-based methods and impacted their

perceptions of themselves.

The studies varied significantly on the formats of training offered to GTAs. Some

trainings consisted of workshop formats (Chaichian et. al, 1986), and others included workshops

as part of a more integrated GTA experience (Gallardo-Williams & Petrovich, 2017; Lockwood,

Miller, & Cromie, 2014). In terms of integrating experiences, Buck, Frank, & Guilford Technical

Community College, (2000), present a strong case for developing training that provides not only

the teaching support, but operates to socialize GTAs into their potential roles as community

college faculty. In this study, not only did GTAs participate in teaching trainings, but they also

held office hours, attended faculty meetings, and served on college committees. Gallardo-

Williams and Petrovich (2017) presented a training that also integrated various aspects of

training, mentoring, and systematic observation to provide GTAs with an integrated experience

to develop their teaching. The described training program is implemented across the institution

with support at not only the departmental level, but also at the institutional level, providing a

foundation of support necessary for promoting a culture of teaching. Lockwood et al (2014) also

presented an integrated approach to developing GTAs. The two-semester long program promoted

teaching improvement through a series of observations and feedback and one-on-one access to a

faculty member for mentoring. Additionally, the program compensated GTAs for the time to participate in this additional program.

In terms of studying GTAs' pedagogical development, time and personnel are the two most valuable resources, and often lacking. As expected, researchers are limited in the research, partially explaining the fact that most of the studies are descriptive cases of programs already taking place at various institutions. Despite limited resources as a primary limitation, the research in GTA training has identified a number of ways to train GTAs. Various data sources were used, with survey data and interviews being the two most commonly identified data collection methods.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Constructivism as a theory of learning is used to describe the processes of how individuals understand and interpret the world around them, and as a theory for teaching reflects the idea of knowledge as socially situated and experience being one of the greatest source of this knowledge (Richardson, 2003). It is no surprise that constructivism provided a suitable theoretical framework for many of the review studies included here. Luft et al. (2004) utilized a constructivist framework to study the instructional environments of GTA training programs. Using a social constructivist framework, Wheeler et al. (2017) found that content knowledge of GTAs improve and beliefs shifted toward more inquiry-based instruction after GTAs had the opportunity to interact with and inquiry based GTA training program. Bond-Robinson and Rodrigues (2006) adopted a constructivist learning model in their study of GTAs in chemistry, and they measured how GTAs pedagogical chemistry knowledge increased as a result of the training.

Self-efficacy is a construct studied widely in teacher education literature. Self-efficacy describes the confidence a person has in their ability to perform a certain task (Bandura, 1977). In this literature, GTAs reported higher levels of self-efficacy and viewed themselves as more prepared as a result of participation in GTA pedagogical training (Prieto & Meyers, 1999; Young & Bippus, 2008). In Prieto & Meyers (1999), this effect was experienced beyond GTAs and impacted the students and faculty in a positive way, suggesting that training GTAs also promotes a shift in the culture of departments in academia. In another study, a semester-long program was suggested to improve the self-efficacy of doctoral students teaching in public health (Lederer, Sherwood-Laughlin, Kearns, & O'Loughlin, 2016).

Reflection or reflexivity were two concepts present throughout this research. As a means of training, reflection is a powerful way to provide GTAs the opportunity to consider interactions in the classroom, contributing to self-awareness, especially related to how teachers and students interact in the classroom (Gallego, 2014; Henry & Bruland, 2010). Although not specifically cited as theoretical frameworks in these studies, reflection was a part of the clinical observation cycles that took place within the respective studies (Andrews, 1983; Dalgaard & Dalgaard, 1977; Lockwood et al., 2014; Mutambuki, 2018).

Pedagogical content knowledge is also the understanding of teaching from the perspective of one's discipline, having a deep understanding of what it takes to learn the discipline's most complex concepts and material (Shulman, 1987). Bond-Robinson & Rodrigues (2006) adapted this definition and they argued the importance of not only being a content expert but understanding how to teach content effectively. Another study examined pedagogical content knowledge through lesson study, and although teachers felt limited in their abilities to change the

culture in their department, they increased their understanding of how to teach particular

concepts in undergraduate biology (Dotger et al., 2012).

Description of Themes

After reading, taking notes, and a process of coding, I was able to develop three major

themes to describe key characteristics and conceptions of GTA training and improvement. I

considered how the study presented the conception of teacher improvement through descriptions

of behavior modification (or actions) and changing attitudes (or thoughts). Teacher thoughts

describes conceptions of GTAs' mental states that include complex processes of identity

development, teaching personas or teaching philosophies. The second theme examines the

impact of mentoring within this literature as a major, necessary component of GTA training. The

final theme examines what is needed to continue to improve GTA pedagogical training that is

meaningful and sustainable.

Teacher Thoughts & Actions

Earlier studies represent a field of educational research that is largely based on the social

sciences and psychology, specifically behaviorism (Alexander & Davis, 1970; Dalgaard &

Dalgaard, 1977). Clinical and systematic observation within GTA training programs help make

GTAs more aware of their teaching in the classroom by providing a cycle of observation,

feedback, reflection, and goal setting. Based on principles of classical and operant conditioning,

Alexander and Davis (1970) utilize educational research focused on interventions that could

improve teaching behaviors and attitudes. In studies where clinical or systematic observation was

the primary method, the results were largely favorable in that some aims were accomplished,

according to the goals set forth in the studies (Brauchle, 1998; Dalgaard & Dalgaard, 1977;

Savage & Sharpe, 1998; Young & Bippus, 2008). Because this type of observation requires

cycles and prolonged contact, it is effective in shaping teacher behaviors and has potential to

impact teacher attitudes as well. Studies that utilized reflection as part of the process were able to document shifts in behaviors and attitudes that were significant in the aims of the studies (Gallego, 2014; Henry & Bruland, 2010; McDonough, 2006).

The Importance of Mentoring

In connection with one another, key relationships can be formed that support learning and provide professional and personal support to GTAs. Boyle and Boice (1998) differentiate from spontaneous mentoring to suggesting that GTAs who participate in specific mentoring programs feel an increased sense of involvement and benefit than in other types of training programs. Thus, mentoring relationships are shown to be powerful supportive mechanisms both formally and informally, for GTAs and faculty members (Boyle & Boyce, 1998). Studies that utilized a mentoring approach, not only provided much needed teaching support, but also supported GTAs in their departmental roles and professional socialization (Buck, Frank, & Guilford Technical Community Coll., 2000; Gaia, Corts, Tatum, & Allen, 2003; Gilmore et al., 2014; Henderson, 2010; Henry & Bruland, 2010; Lockwood et al., 2014). One reason mentoring works so well with GTAs is because of the level of personal connectedness that is part of mentoring process (Boyle & Boice, 1998). When this happens within one's department, the GTA is immersed in this supportive system, thereby experiencing a positive supportive environment. Mentoring, however, is a time intensive activity. It is evident that resources are needed to support GTAs in a way that mentoring can take place in a meaningful and sustainable way. As Shannon, Twale, and Moore (1998) state,

> One difficulty with mentorships, however, is the limited number of available faculty
> mentors who are willing to assist TAs, an endeavor that is very time consuming for both
> the TA and the faculty member. With additional time constraints imposed on faculty to

"publish or perish", research-oriented faculty are encouraged to exert less energy toward

the duty of teaching, much less the training of TAs. (p. 442)

Meaningful & Sustainable GTA Training

Although GTA training demonstrates a positive effect on attitudes toward teaching, many

teachers experience the "plague of nostalgia" often reverting back to the ways they were taught

(Recasner, 2010). In order for GTA training to make significant changes that impact attitudes

and actions, GTA trainings must be meaningful to participants. Once it is established that GTAs

are experiencing programs that are meaningful, the effort to continue these programs must be

established. Sustainability is a major issue facing any new program, and the same is true for

developing new pedagogical programs for GTAs. One study in this review described the

evolution of a training program that took place each year for 14 years (Chaichian et al, 1986).

This study examined a workshop-style training that took place each year with faculty,

coordinators, and GTAs in the sociology department at Michigan State. The workshop format

consists of a full day first session at the beginning of the semester, and then two additional mini

sessions during the semester. Both participating faculty members and GTAs viewed the training

as valuable to the department in helping to train GTAs how to teach sociology content. As

Chaichian et al (1986) describe the changes to the workshop over the years, they indicate that

changes in funding have impacted available resources to staff the workshops. In order to be

sustainable, it is important that faculty recognize their role in all of this. "Faculty and

administrators at research universities are the gatekeepers for successive generations of TAs,

providing them with their primary training for college faculty positions" (Shannon, Twale, &

Moore, 1998, p. 440).

Gaps in the Existing Literature

Lacking Criticality

There were only two included studies that examined aspects of race, gender, or culture as a major part of the study (Madden, 2014; Recasner, 2010). This lack of research to study issues related to race, multiculturalism, ethnocentrism reflect the need for research to examine this issue within the academy. Although not a primary focus of the research study, Chaichian et al (1986) indicated that sociology students found workshop content related to race, gender, and ethnocentrism as highly important. With populations of students as diverse as they have ever been, academia has been slow to catch up. In addition to lacking criticality, there has been little conversation in educational research about how GTAs understand structural concepts of power, patriarchy, oppression, and commitments to social justice (Madden, 2016).

Madden (2016) highlighted the experiences of 14 GTAs (10 male and 4 female), representing a number of races, ethnicities, and physical abilities) who described themselves as having strong commitments to decolonialist feminist pedagogy. Through the use of open-ended questionnaires, Madden (2016) qualitatively coded responses about GTA experiences with pedagogical development. Using decolonial feminism as the theoretical framework for the study, Madden (2016) makes a case for the importance of pedagogical support communities through which GTAs can develop their own personal emancipatory, feminist, and anti-racist pedagogies. Madden (2016) identified that GTAs "crave an experience where they have greater autonomy with teaching in alignment with their developing pedagogical philosophy" (p.64). Madden (2016) states:

> With the neoliberal shift across US higher education, greater strains have been placed on departments to fulfill instructional roles that produce an output of quality student learners with limited investments into the development of pedagogical philosophies and praxis of the GTA workforce. (p.55)

Madden (2017) suggests the use of peer-to-peer mentoring communities as a way for GTAs to develop deeper understanding of their commitments to decolonialist pedagogies and as a way to foster growth in their teaching. Esposito et al (2017) also supports this notion of peer-to-peer mentoring as a supportive mechanism for graduate students.

Recasner (2010) studied the experiences of three white female GTAs at a large urban midwestern institution, using Portraiture as a qualitative research methodology. Recasner (2010) found that although GTAs espoused positive attitudes toward culturally responsive teaching in a first-year composition course, they did not know what to do when they actually taught, or when issues arose in their classrooms. Using Shulman's (1994) *plague of nostalgia* as a possible explanation, Recasner (2010) explains the process by teachers revert to a familiar way of teaching when they encounter a difficult teaching situation. Recasner (2010) suggests that departments and institutions do more to train GTAs about how to utilize culturally relevant teaching since it is highly important for addressing the needs of all students in college.

Room to Improve

While Gallardo-Williams and Petrovich (2017) demonstrated the success of the institutional program available for GTAs called the Graduate School, this type of support is not available everywhere. In the early 1990s, a study by Crawley (1995) identified that 64% of research universities (identified by Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching) had personnel dedicated to the task of supporting instructional development for faculty instructors. Schroeder (2015) found that a majority of universities have a center for teaching and learning. These types vary widely, and although available, they are not required. Depending on the institution, there may or may not be a center for teaching and learning.

It is important to recognize that this support might look different depending on the institutional characteristics, but the support must be present nonetheless. It is in the interest of institutions to provide instructors that are knowledgeable and skilled in teaching. Perhaps some training is better than none. However, whereby the stakes are increasingly being raised, it makes sense to consider what constitutes training that is worthwhile and meaningful.

Considering the research in the area of pedagogical training for GTAs, it is important to address the lack of criticality in existing forms of pedagogical development. The study that I have conducted asked participants to consider aspects of their identity and prompted them to consider how their identity interacts with students and their role as teacher. In the study, GTAs were aware of their position within the classroom, and the ways in which they were gendered, racialized, and classed by those in the institution (faculty, students, and peers). At times, they expressed concern as they wrestled to reconcile their own privilege knowing that they were different than the students they taught. Many of the GTAs recognized that the pedagogy courses they had taken part in were important, but the effects of these courses were marginal. Additionally, many of them had teaching philosophies of teaching rooted in social justice, feminism, and egalitarian approaches. These identities were supported and reinforced through teaching experiences, relationships with faculty, and support of peer graduate students. My study is important because it demonstrates some shifts in pedagogical development of GTAs. The context is highly unique, and the undergraduate population is unique. My study is important because it seeks to understand what aspects GTAs deem valuable (or not) about ways they have been trained. GTAs are important to the institution that I have studied. The institution has an increasingly positive reputation for teaching undergraduates and success of African American

students. I argue that the GTAs are an important part of that success. The next chapter will describe the methodology of the study, and how I went initiating the inquiry for the study.

3 METHODOLOGY

Revisiting the Problem

Positioned between the completion of their advanced degrees and their liminal status as graduate students, GTAs comprise a portion of the teaching labor force in academic institutions. Because of their dual role as students and teachers, they experience events in academic institutions both as students and teachers. This position is exercised (or not) primarily in the power dynamics that exist in higher education. In their role as college instructors, they may perceive themselves to have more or less power, authority, knowledge, and autonomy than full-time faculty members because of this liminal status. Additionally, undergraduate students have perceptions based on stereotypes and experiences that shape how they view GTAs. This is consistent with student perceptions for, Kendall & Schussler (2012) found, professors who were viewed as more confident, structured and knowledgeable, while GTAs are often described as hesitant, uncertain, and nervous. However, the same study also identified that students found professors to be boring and out of touch, while GTAs were described as engaging, understanding, and relatable.

Depending on individual teaching proficiency, GTAs may or may not feel efficacious about their teaching in general (Golde, Dore, & Wisconsin Univ., 2001; Kendall & Schussler, 2014). Experiences in graduate school provide glimpses into future academic and professional careers (Austin & McDaniels, 2006). These socializing experiences need adjusting, given the changing landscape of higher education. Austin (2002) suggests, "the socialization process in graduate school must change substantially for new faculty members to work effectively in the ever-changing world of higher education" (p. 95). More robust forms of pedagogical development and teaching support are needed in higher education, especially for GTAs.

Pedagogical training for GTAs is a sampling of various types of activities that vary by institution, and even more by department.

Graduate students receive mixed messages about the role of teaching in academia from socializing forces within higher education. By interacting with faculty, peers, and administrators, graduate students gather information about what is expected to be a successful graduate student and necessary in order to join the academic ranks (Austin, 2002). Although some institutions tout effective teaching as a cornerstone of faculty development, institutional policies such as tenure and promotion are heavily influenced by research-based endeavors (Shannon, Twale, Moore, 1998). While teaching is one of the main activities of professors, research activities and publications are prioritized and rewarded within the academy (Boyer, 1990). Because of this phenomenon, many faculty members, especially at research-intensive institutions, may feel the pressure to focus more on research than their teaching, much less, supporting the teaching of graduate students. As O'Meara, (2016) describes,

> The privileged position of the scholarship of discovery (research) is maintained
> through graduate student socialization and also through market forces across
> higher education institution that maintain traditional forms of scholarship as the
> strongest, portable currency and form of transferrable social capital. (p. 42)

The literature review examined research starting in the 1970s that was primarily focused on observation of GTA teaching behavior through a behaviorist epistemology. Early studies on GTAs' teaching development (Alexander & Davis, 1970; Dalgaard & Dalgaard, 1977) utilized behaviorist approaches to understanding the teaching behaviors of GTAs through the use of clinical and systematic observation. Some studies used psychometrics to measure GTA attitudes and beliefs about teaching and used interventions such as workshops or trainings to measure

changes in attitudes and beliefs (Lederer et al., 2016; Prieto & Meyers, 1999) . Over time, the

studies reflect a shift in the change toward a more constructivist approach to learning reflected

by the theoretical underpinnings of a number of studies that recognize the importance of

scaffolding and knowledge development for GTAs. Constructivist frameworks were notable in

the frequency they were evoked to explain how GTAs learn and teach through a process of

pedagogical development (Bond-Robinson & Rodriques, 2006; Luft, Kurdziel, Roehrig, &

Turner, 2004; Pentecost, Langdon, Asirvatham, Robus, & Parson, 2012; Schweighardt, 2017;

Wheeler, Maeng, & Whitworth, 2017). Mentoring of GTAs seems to provide much needed

social, emotional, and professional support to GTAs (Boyle & Boice, 1998; Edwards, Powers,

Thompson, & Rutten-Turner, 2014; Gaia, Corts, Tatum, & Allen, 2003; Henderson, 2010;

Lockwood, Miller, & Cromie, 2014). Mentoring is a labor-intensive project which requires

collaborative commitment from faculty, GTAs, departments and institutions (Boyle & Boice,

1998).

While there are many different types of programs, very few seek to meet the specific

needs of GTAs working in ethnically and racially diverse settings. GTAs teaching in diverse

institutions need to be culturally competent, content experts, and strong communicators. After

reviewing the literature, it became clear that critical perspectives are significantly lacking. This

gap in the literature suggests there is room for more research that addresses the ways that GTAs

can be prepared to effect social change within academia. There is also room to demonstrate an

intersectional perspective to training GTAs, addressing the pressures, expectations, and

inequities within higher education. As Madden (2016) suggests, graduate students can also serve

as peer-to-peer mentors through "pedagogical communities of support" (p. 71) as they develop

critical pedagogy, philosophies, and praxis for teaching.

Methodological Purpose

According to Schwandt (2015), methodology is the "theory of how inquiry should proceed" (p. 201). More than a series of steps or tools for researching human activities, methodology also includes the researcher's assumptions about reality, knowledge, and the phenomenon being studied (deMarrais & Lapan, 2004). The present study is not an exception. After years as a graduate teaching assistant, previously as a K-12 teacher, I wondered what other graduate students were experiencing. Upon entering my program, I was provided the opportunity to teach as a way to earn a tuition waiver and receive a monthly stipend. I knew I wanted to teach, but it is safe to say that my role as a teacher was born out of necessity to work in order to support my family. After three years of teaching in college, I received a graduate research assistantship and named as a graduate fellow. Interestingly, at this point I was no longer required to teach, but I became interested in the teaching experiences of others. I have made a concerted effort to examine and reflect upon decisions within the research because of my familiarity with teaching. I also understand this familiarity as a way to relate to participants as having a shared experience that will be respected and held in high regard. These considerations have truly impacted and driven the way that the inquiry has proceeded to this point.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to examine the perspectives and experiences of GTAs to understand their pedagogical experience in their roles as teachers. In addition, the study examined how GTAs navigated their experiences through professional support and classroom interactions, while considering their own social locations and aspects of identity. The context of the study was vital as the study took place at a large, urban, predominately minority serving public institution. As a case study, this study is not meant to generalize, but rather to understand the theory and build toward a greater understanding.

The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the teaching experiences of GTAs at a specific large, public, and predominantly minority serving institution?

2. What kinds of pedagogical training and support do GTAs experience?

3. How do GTAs navigate their roles as students and GTAs?

Conceptual Framework for Research Design

Qualitative Inquiry

This qualitative study is situated within a postpositivist paradigm utilizing symbolic interactionism and drawing on epistemologies in feminist and intersectional thought. Like many of the studies I reviewed, I chose to approach the research using qualitative inquiry as my research design. My research questions sought to understand how participants experience certain events, interactions, and phenomena in their teaching, and qualitative inquiry provides the best research application for this line of inquiry.

Bogdan and Biklen (2007) describe five characteristics of qualitative research. Qualitative research is *naturalistic* or occurring in the actual spaces where phenomena is experienced and observed. Qualitative data is highly *descriptive* in order to paint a detailed picture of events, culture, and perspectives. Without descriptive data it would be unlikely that a researcher would be able to develop any worthwhile explanations observed in the field. *Process* is another key characteristic of qualitative research, not only in the methods of the researcher, but understanding how meaning is developed and the processes by which humans interact and develop meaning of the surrounding environments. Qualitative research is highly *inductive*. For the most part, researchers build meaning not based on hypotheses to be tested, but on questions that guide how they will approach data collection. Once data are collected, a process of building *meanings* occurs, and a more inclusive approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding

of what is happening. These *meanings* form the explanations and undergird the theory being used in the research process. Each of these characteristics accurately captures what I completed through qualitative inquiry. As a qualitative researcher, these tenets guided the steps and decisions I made during the research.

Symbolic Interactionism

This study will ask participants to describe their experiences, often asking them to consider how they view themselves. In this way, symbolic interactionism is useful to understand how individuals describe themselves through symbolic meanings as they consider themselves within the context of teaching. I included symbolic interactionism as a way to understand how individuals situate self and others within the context of this study. Prasad (2007) describes symbolic interaction using Cooley's (1902) metaphor of the "looking glass self" which refers to attempting to see ourselves as others see us. As we develop understanding of how others see us, we make decisions about roles we will take within social situations. This leads to a process of meaning making by which individuals act specifically according to the social situation or depending on the personal meaning of the interaction (Blumer, 1969). The concept of self is built upon from birth and uniquely constructed throughout our lives and shaped by social interactions. These negotiations, interactions, and processes provide the topic of study, and as a tradition, symbolic interactionism seeks to understand the overlooked aspects of how these roles develop (Prasad, 2007).

Self-definition and components determine action, but certain limits, such as social norms and rules, affect human behavior. GTAs may identify not only as graduate students, but they may also be scientists, teachers, parents, journalists, or students. Some of the questions that I asked

the participants were meant to evoke conversations that invited participants to explain their experiences in further detail to begin to understand how they view themselves. My hope was to gain perspective of how GTAs view themselves within the context of teaching in higher education through a process of meaning making that occurred during the interviews. I expected that participants would use cultural references, metaphors, and comparisons during the interviews. The ways participants defined the events of their graduate teaching lives helped me to better understand, and their characterizations also provided a process by which participants began to understand their own experiences more clearly. The articulation of these experiences carried significant meaning for the participants and reflected ways in which participants understand their own lived experiences. Thus, the use of symbolic interactionism is appropriate to frame how participants use symbolic meanings in order to describe and understand their experiences.

Case Study Design

The methodological choice to use case study reflects an intention to situate this research within the context of university teaching impacted by various factors such as sociocultural influences, political structures, and interpersonal interactions with students and faculty. Yin (2014) states, "Case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (p. 16). Case study method provides an opportunity to build cases that can explain "how" or "why" something happens without having to alter the environment in which the phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2014). Because case study research utilizes non-replicable cases and units, it is important to remember that the goal of this type of research is to advance the building of theory rather than attempt to generalize findings to the population.

The bounds for the case study included GTAs (each a unit of analysis) teaching and studying at the same institution (study site), within the context of the study. The context of the study is highly important in determining the bounds for the case study, because it includes the environment in which the institution is situated (Yin, 2014). The context and geographic situation are such that the study site exists within a large metropolitan city center, among various sectors of business. A large city in the southern United States, is diverse in its population with progressive/liberal leanings. Not only is it racially and ethnically diverse, but the study institution is among a number of higher education institutions within the same city area. The institution has satellite campuses outside of the city, but GTAs from those campuses were not included.

The unit of analysis for the study is a group of GTAs within the university setting. The collective case of GTAs is embedded within the larger case of the university of study, Southeastern State University. The GTAs, as a collective case, represent distinct differences in levels of access to resources, primarily at the departmental level, but have similar access to university level resources. Each GTA was a part of the SESU institution and had access to all university level resources, but they did not have the same departmental resources or mentors. Additionally, the structure of the peer groups varied. For instance, one GTA from a very large department with many graduate students did not indicate strong peer relations among graduate students. Conversely, a GTA from a very small department with few graduate students described strong cohesion among the graduate students in the department.

Since the context of the study was important as it relates to teaching experiences, I did not include the satellite campuses. Because of my own constraints on time and resources, I conducted the data collection two weeks prior to the start of classes to attempt to catch

participants before the semester started, and I continued collecting data into early October. While almost all GTAs who contacted me about participating in the study were able to participate, there were a couple who were not able to conduct an interview due to the bounds placed on the timing of my study.

Theoretical Framework for Research Design

Intersectionality

While learning theories and conceptual frameworks provide structure for the research methodology, the substance of the methodology is rooted in intersectionality. Of intersectionality Crenshaw (1989) states, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p. 140). While this study included other theories of how research ought to be conducted, the use of intersectionality is deeply personal to me. My worldview as an Afro-Latina scholar has been shaped by experiences that have been impacted by my race, class, and gender, none of which exist in isolation from one another. Crenshaw's critique of feminism and antiracism theory has been influential in developing intersectional theory, as she highlighted the ways in which Black women's experience was marginalized and erased even within theory that claimed to address sexism and racism (Crenshaw, 1989). Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) define intersectionality as:

> … a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experiences. The events and conditions of social and political life and the self can seldom be understood as shaped by one factor. They are generally shaped by many factors in diverse and mutually influencing ways. When it comes to social inequity, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, but by many

axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves (p.2).

Present throughout the interviews, GTAs considered their own social locations and aspects of identity, attempting, but not fully able to parse parts of themselves into neatly organized buckets. "Race, class, gender, sexuality, dis/ability, ethnicity, nation, religion, and age are categories of analysis, terms that reference important social divisions. But they are also categories that gain meaning from power relations of racism, sexism, heterosexisms, and class exploitation" (Collins and Bilge, 2016, p.8). With this in mind, intersectionality became a major driving force to consider not only what intersectionality is, but also what it does examining difference and sameness, in relation to power (Cho, Crenshaw, McCall, 2013). Intersectionality does not focus on mutually exclusive forms of oppression, rather it recognizes the way existing feminist theory erases the experience of Black women. While this study focuses on constructivist pedagogy and teaching development, it is done so with the understanding of the complexities, inequities, and critical analyses necessary in order to promote worthwhile change. I will explain more personal details later in my subjectivities statement, but as a theory, I employ intersectionality as a "critical analytic lens to interrogate racial, ethnic, class, physical ability, age, sexuality, and gender disparities and to contest existing ways of looking at these structures of inequity" (Dill & Zambrana, 2009, p.1).

Academic institutions have been an active force in hegemony. Past and present, there are inequalities in the education system, including educational segregation of students in urban areas, and discriminatory behavior of teachers, counselors, and personnel in the K-12 system (Zambrana & Macdonald, 2009). Despite shifts in the changing academic populations, major inequali-

ties still exist for women and racial/ethnic minorities (Dill & Zambrana, 2009). Gendered and ra-

cialized experiences are salient for women and minorities in academia and fundamental in shap-

ing ideas about self and one's place in the academy (Esposito et al, 2017). As Lorde (1982)

states, "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single issue lives"

(p. 138). This is true for the current study. None of the concepts or issues examined in this study

happen in isolation from the sociocultural forces at work. Thus, intersectionality as a theoretical

framework acknowledges the entry of these forces and informs the research that takes place. Col-

leges and universities are the social institutions whereby GTAs participate in a variety of experi-

ences with past knowledge of the world that includes experiences of classism, racism, and sex-

ism. The use of this critical framework informs the theoretical perspective of the study and in-

forms the analysis. "Intersectionality as an analytic tool examines how power relations are inter-

twined and mutually constructing" (Collins & Bilge, 2016, p.7). Explained in the analysis chap-

ter, intersectionality was used as an analytic tool to better understand the participant experiences.

Social Constructivist Pedagogy

Constructivist learning theories include a wide array of perspectives. Vygotsky (1978) is

credited with developing sociocultural theory to understand the sociocultural dimensions of

learning, including how humans interact with one another, develop language, and develop capac-

ity to learn and grow throughout their lifetimes. As with many theories of modern psychology,

these theories reflect the Eurocentric application of learning theories onto various people, ne-

glecting other forms of knowledge development within non-western peoples. Since the time of

Vygotsky, constructivist learning theory has evolved and grown, including a variety of perspec-

tives and applications not only to educational psychology but also to other applications within

education such as pedagogical development.

Richardson (2003) delineates two forms of constructivism as applied to teaching in the classroom and the other which refers to psychological processes. The major difference between social constructivist and psychological constructivism is that social constructivism emphasizes the process and interaction of the social environment. Constructivist pedagogy is often characterized as student centered, a development of shared understandings based on group interactions. The dialogue, direct instruction, and reference of the relevant content work to challenge existing beliefs and misconceptions leading to what Richardson (2003) describes as "meta-awareness" (p. 1626). Richardson (2003) defines constructivist pedagogy as,

> …the creation of classroom environments, activities, and methods that are
>
> grounded in a constructivist theory of learning, with goals that focus on
>
> individual students developing deep understandings in the subject matter
>
> of interest and habits of mind that aid in future learning. (p. 1627)

A constructivist theory of learning operates under the primary assumption that learning is socially and culturally situated and that individuals develop complex meanings through interactions in their environment with others. Distinguishing from other uses of constructivism, social constructivism includes the various forces outside of the individual that contribute to how human beings develop these understandings. Richardson states, "…social constructivism focuses on how the development of that formal knowledge has been created or determined within power, economic, social and political forces" (p. 1625). For this study, social constructivism provides a framework to understand teaching in the context of higher education. Colleges and universities are influenced by external forces within the sociocultural and political world. Additionally, as Steiner and Mahn (1996) state, "Because educational institutions are a part of and reflect the larger social system in which they are situated, a proposal for substantial reform would have to

consider economic, political, historical, social, and cultural factors" (p. 204). Although there are clearly limitations with this use of social constructivism and constructivist pedagogy, it reflects what I believe is the closest fit to how I understand teaching and learning to occur within the socio-cultural context. Thus, theory can be further developed to reflect more inclusive ideas about how learning occurs.

Study Context

The Research Setting

The study took place at a large, research-intensive institution in the Southeast United States. The pseudonym Southeastern State University (SESU) is used for the name of the institution. One of the key elements of case study is an exploration of the context in which the phenomenon occurs. In this case, the place and location of the study are key in defining the context for the study. The place is a large southern city, with a complex history. The is a large metropolis with a larger surrounding suburban area, which experienced huge growth in the past three decades. The state elected Donald Trump in the 2016 election, but the city remains liberal in comparison. The history of exclusion that I mentioned earlier exists within the context of this study, as SESU was one of many institutions of higher education that refused to desegregate after 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling. SESU refused to admit Black students. It wasn't until years later, after a long court battle, that the first Black students were admitted to SESU. In recent years, SESU has become one of the largest universities in the country, following a merger with a smaller regional college with multiple satellite sites in the metropolitan area. It is considered an urban university due to its location in the downtown area of a large city. At an institutional level, SESU presents an institution that boasts a reputation as a creator of opportunity for historically underrepresented groups. The setting for this research is important for a number of reasons, but two stand out. The university was recently recognized for having a

strong commitment to undergraduate teaching and for graduating a high number of African American undergraduate and graduate students. Nationally, the rates for African American and Latinx students are below those of white and Asian students (National Center for Education Data and Statistics, 2016). The context of this knowledge shapes the study because it represents a different trend for students at this particular institution. African American and Latinx students attain degree completion above the national average at the research site, and they attain degree completion at a slightly higher level than white peers. Because of these local trends, it makes sense to study teaching and teaching development as a way to build knowledge, so more students can be successful at other institutions. It also demonstrates how there are many forces at play within the institution and beyond that are not easily separated or delineated.

SESU has a number of resources at the institutional level that are available to GTAs. One of the primary pedagogical support resources is a center devoted to institutional teaching and learning. This center supports faculty and instructors at the university in pedagogical and technological support. Additionally, there is a newly created graduate school that supports graduate students across all disciplines at SESU. The graduate school supports graduate students primarily in their roles as students, but also assists with career development and institutional level support through policy and advocacy of student needs. Although access to institutional level support is available, time is a primary barrier to participating in resources provided at the institutional level. Additionally, the support provided by the university is voluntary in nature, and many of the GTAs interviewed knew about the resources, but their participation was limited by their time and schedules.

Recruiting and Timeframe

The case boundaries included a group of 20 GTAs from one institution in the South that has a reputation for commitment to undergraduate teaching and for higher than the national average of African American students completing bachelor's degrees. Purposeful sampling was used, and invited participants must have held a teaching assignment within the last year or three semesters. I began recruitment for the study in July of 2019 and started the data collection in August of 2019. The final interviews were completed in October.

Participants

Participants in this study were purposefully sampled in order to recruit potential knowledgeable participants (Patton, 1990). In this way purposeful sampling provide detailed sources of information when the bounds of the study are limited (Patton, 1990, 2002). This process of identifying criteria for participation in the study in order to gain a purposeful sample was important in order to conduct the line of inquiry I proposed. I recruited participants via an IRB approved email send to all active GTAs at the institution. All participants who responded to me were invited to participate in an interview. With the exception of only one or two individuals, each person who contacted me about the study ended up conducting an interview. The reason that prospective participants contacted me, but did not do an interview, was due to scheduling difficulties, and we postponed the interviews indefinitely. One did not respond after two emails, and another asked to postpone until after the data collection would be taking place. In all, 20 participants completed an interview lasting between 45-60 minutes.

The criteria for participation was established as follows:

1) Graduate students must hold a teaching position currently or within the last year (or three semesters).

2) Only GTAs teaching at the study site (downtown campus) were invited to participate. This is due to the geographic bounds of the study site, and the relevance of the location as key to the experience of teaching in an urban setting. Since the bounds of the case include the geographic center of the downtown campus, other satellite sites beyond the bounds of the case were not included.

GTAs that consented to participate in the study represented a number of disciplines such as business, mathematics, psychology, journalism, literature, and visual arts (Table 1). Most of the GTAs had teaching experience prior to GTA assignment at the university, and a few had 10+ years of teaching experience. There were four students from countries outside of the United States, including Great Britain, India, China, and Guyana. Five participants used he/him pronouns to describe themselves, and 15 used she/her pronouns. With the study being individuals who self-selected, I found it interesting that such a diverse pool of participants would be represented in the study, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Area of Study & Race Demographics

Total Participants = 20

Discipline	Female	Male
Economics	1	0
English	4	1
Communications	4	1
Business	0	1
Visual Arts	2	0
Psychology	1	1
Mathematics	0	1
Political Science	1	0
Linguistics	2	0
Race/Ethnicity	Female	Male
Black/Afro-Caribbean	4	0
Asian	1	1
White	10	4

[a] Total Participants = 20

It is important to note that the group of participants may not be representative of the GTA population at the institution or beyond. This is for a few reasons. The GTAs that consented to participate volunteered to share their thoughts and ideas about their personal teaching experiences. It is possible that the participants in this study were more confident about their teaching or that they have specific feelings about the topic they wanted to "get off their chests". I tried to be as inclusive as possible, so that anyone desiring to participate would be able. I also realize that some of the perspectives of GTAs that "do not care about teaching" were underrepresented in this study. As a graduate student, I am fully aware of the many commitments GTAs have, and I am extremely thankful to the ones who took the time to be interviewed as part of this study. The purposeful sampling process allowed for an enthusiastic group of participants with lots to share about their teaching experiences and knowledge.

Neoliberal Settings in Education

The university at the center of this study is representative of many other large institutions facing pressure to consolidate, attract large endowments, and produce measures of "student success". I place student success in quotation marks, because while this is presented publicly as the motivation to be the best, it also attracts attention from venture philanthropists. Universities and colleges are under increasing pressure to procure money to replace funding cut from government budgets. Institutions of higher education are under increasing pressure to involve the private sector in funding opportunities, leading to a shift in power within those institutions. Giroux (2002) cautions against the ideology of neoliberalism which threatens social justice in higher education by privileging corporate culture. The neoliberal educational movement falsely projects the notion of education as the "great equalizer," and the transformation of institutions of education into profiting centers (Apple, 2013). Meritocracy, another flawed notion within American education

rhetoric (Taylor, Gillborn, and Ladson-Billings, 2016), argues that opportunities are afforded to those who work hard, ignoring aspects of unearned privilege and discrimination within educational systems. With this context in mind, I asked for the experience of those who work for the institution as graduate students (input) and graduate teachers (output). As Bettinger, Long and Taylor (2014) describe:

> There are few cases in economics where inputs into the production function are also outputs in the production function. However, such is the case in the production of doctoral students. Doctoral students are essential inputs to significant outputs in higher education. They provide research support, generate peer effects on each other, and often teach undergraduate students. Doctoral students are also an important output in education. Graduate programs define and often rank themselves by the quality and quantity of doctoral students they produce. (p. 63)

For doctoral students that teach, it is likely that their teaching experience contributes to the overall quality of their experience, whether good or bad. Additionally, some of the GTAs I spoke with referenced their position as "cheap labor" recognizing that the university is profiting off of their teaching labor.

From a social justice perspective, as more and more students from previously underrepresented groups participate in higher education, there is a need to address the ways in which neoliberalism threatens notions of equity and inclusion in higher education. As Madden (2017) states, "The evidence points to a culture of higher education that values and accommodates the colonial legacies of power and privilege and exploits and oppresses the marginalized GTA subjects by the imperial agent that is US higher education in neoliberal times"

(pp. 69-70). Thus, therein lies a conflict for those who are working within the system and actively resisting forces of systemic injustice within the academy.

Researcher Role

In my experience as a doctoral student, I have been involved in numerous teaching assignments, research projects, and conference presentations. As a member of a mentoring group (Esposito et al, 2017) I have had a unique opportunity to work with peers and my advisor in a close relationship defined by scholarly growth, emotional support, and camaraderie. In this research, I have multiple roles. At my home institution, I received financial support in the form of a graduate research and teaching assistantships. I also worked at a teaching and learning center at my home institution. Through my work over the years, I have become familiar with the types of resources available to graduate students. Through interviews, I learned that I share many of the same concerns as the GTAs had. In the past, I have had great autonomy in my teaching and researcher roles. I have also developed content for use in pedagogical training and workshops. I have worked alongside other faculty members who have provided mentorship and guidance about academic life. This socialization into higher education has been monumental in shaping my experience as a graduate student, an experience that I do not take for granted.

Johnson-Bailey (2003) describes a study in which she, a Black woman, conducted interviews with other Black women to learn about their schooling experiences. At times, she held a status with the women of "insider" when discussing race and gender, but at other times during the interview, she became an "outsider" as her educational status differentiated her from the educational background of the women she was interviewing. This presents a complicated position for researchers working with participants. For me, I definitely felt more comfortable speaking with women during the interviews, but I felt most comfortable speaking with Black

women. During those interviews with Black women GTAs, I felt more at ease, but still recognizing that at times, I was still an outsider. On one hand, I was able to relate to some of my participants based on shared experiences we had, but at other times, I could not relate, making me somewhat of an outsider.

I had to clearly indicate my role to participants, that I am a graduate student completing dissertation research, with the intent to study GTAs' experiences. Through a process of gaining rapport or "a state of interaction achieved when participants come to share the same goals" (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011, p. 47), I believe I was able to collect rich accounts of experiences that reflect the participants' thoughts and ideas. It was important that I demonstrated my trustworthiness to participants so that they felt inclined to share their true feelings, recognizing the shared vision of this research. In addition to explaining the research and consent procedures, I also invited each participant to member check their data and review some of my initial interpretations of their data.

Methods

Interviews

Interviews were used as the method of data collection for the study. More specifically, reflective phenomenological interviews were conducted as the guiding method for the study to allow for an interpretive approach to understanding human interaction (Roulston, 2010). The use of phenomenological interviews with participants fostered greater insight into their lived experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of their teaching experience. As Roulston (2010) states, "To use phenomenological interviews effectively, it is essential that the interviewer has identified participants who have both experienced and are able to talk about the particular lived experience under examination" (p. 17). These criteria were addressed when GTAs were recruited for the

study. A bracketing interview was conducted in order to examine how I might improve the interview protocol and also to examine what assumptions I brought into the interview. I asked myself the questions, and I recorded myself responding to the questions from my own perspective, based on my real experiences. By performing this self-interview, I was able to identify some of my own experiences that impacted the protocol. I also took notes and revised the protocol multiple times to improve the way that questions could be approached in the interviews. One of the participants, a non-native English speaker, also made suggestions for how to conduct the interview in a way that would allow her to better understand the question. She took a copy of the questions and made her own notes, and we clarified meanings of the questions throughout.

Each participant completed one interview as part of the study. The reflective interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. I transcribed some of the interviews myself, and I utilized a transcriber, and dictation software for the remaining interviews. In addition to reviewing the transcriptions, I wrote analytic memos about the interviewing process, especially as related to the interview questions. I contacted each participant via email after the data collection to review the transcripts. At this point, I was able to ask for clarification, if needed. I also used member checking as a way to invite participants to review notable quotations and how they would be represented in the study.

All interviews were conducted on the campus of the study institution, and most were conducted in the campus library. In effort to stay as organized as possible, I utilized a system of reserving spaces in the library, forwarding the reservation to participants, and then creating an Outlook invitation to the participant including the location, date, and time of the interview. Each participant showed up for their interview, with minimal disruptions. Every transcript, memo, and notes were uploaded to an encrypted cloud database for storage. I saved my original files on my

password protected personal computer. I performed my own coding structures and utilized features within the Microsoft Excel to organize my data analysis process.

Data Analysis

I engaged in a comprehensive process of data analysis in order to organize the different qualitative interview data. Schwandt (2015) states, "Analysis begins with the processes of organizing, reducing, and describing the data and continues thru the activities of drawing conclusions or interpretations from the data, and warranting those interpretations" (p.57). I used materials such as paper, pencil, and computer software in order to organize the data into chunks for further analysis. Using elemental methods, open coding, and some grounded theory methods (Saldaña, 2013; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), I organized and categorized the data in such a way that reflects the importance of process within qualitative inquiry.

Following my data collection, I began to organize my data into codes. "To codify is to arrange things in a systematic order, to make something part of a system or classification, to categorize" (Saldaña, 2013, p. 9). I used codes to categorize data from the transcripts and kept analytic memos as a way to keep track of my thoughts throughout the study. These codes were distilled into categories and then themes (Saldaña, 2013). Using an iterative approach, I sought meaning while collecting data in the field. This process required me to adjust my approaches throughout the data collection in order to gain feedback on what is going on in the research field (Grbich, 2013).

Saldaña (2013) defines codes in the following way, "A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data" (p. 3). In this way, a code represents an idea that has been distilled that carries meaning based on the parameters I create. In this way, coding is an "interpretive act" (p.4). I started my coding process by reviewing

the transcripts and beginning to interpret what the participants were saying. These initial

interpretations, thoughts, and codes were shared with the participants during the member check

process. I employed a detailed and systematic coding strategy in order to examine the words of

participants and begin to develop deeper understanding and synthesis of their words. As Saldaña

(2013) explains, the assigning of codes is a process of encoding and the examination of the data

is the decoding process. The categories of the codes reflected some of the categories of questions

from the interview protocol, as these categories guided the topics of discussion during the

interview. I created the interview guides/protocols based on categories of information that I was

seeking. The analysis and coding process reflected what Charmaz (2006) describes as "line by

line" and "segment by segment" analysis of data. As I read through the data, I began by looking

at the lines of words, assigning codes to the words, and then as I read them a second time, I

assigned another round of codes that reflected the meaning of the segments, sometimes full

sentences or ideas. Then by comparing the codes, creating definitions, and sub codes, I was able

to create categories that reflected the major ideas expressed in the interviews. My analysis, while

employing grounded theory methods is more aligned with constructivist grounded theory method

as defined by Charmaz (2006). Constructivist grounded theory method provides researchers

flexibility in the analysis, while recognizing that the construction of the data analysis is an

interpretive process (Charmaz, 2006).

Elemental Coding Methods

As the coding process started, I performed a pre-coding stage that includes reading,

listening, and note taking. This pre-coding stage helped me become better acquainted with the

data. As the first stages of coding began, I utilized a detailed coding process below. I continued

with a process of initial coding or "open coding" (Charmaz, 2006). This approach to coding

incorporated aspects of grounded theory methods, as the theory developed comes from the data through the analysis process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I applied primarily descriptive coding to the data, using words that describe the meaning of the data, then assigned sub codes as they relate to the main codes. This generic approach was useful for managing the codes for the interview transcripts. This approach also allowed me to keep a detailed inventory of the contents of the data (Saldaña, 2013). "Just as a title represents and captures a book, film, or poem's primary content, so does a code represent and capture a datum's primary content and essence" (Saldaña, 2013, p.4). Charmaz (2001) describes coding as a "link between data collection and explanation" and as the "bones" that form the "skeleton" of what becomes the theoretical basis of the study (Charmaz, 2006, p.45). Although the analysis utilized grounded theory methods, the study itself does not reflect the purist form of grounded theory.

First Cycle (Manual)

After reading through the interview transcripts, I performed a manual, initial coding of each transcript. During the first cycle, a hybrid coding strategy was used, including structural, descriptive, and in vivo codes. Structural codes were assigned to describe the topic of inquiry, derived primarily from the line of inquiry established in the interview protocol. The descriptive codes identified the topics that participants discussed. In vivo codes were assigned to actual spoken words or phrases that capture specific meaning related to the study. Because I was selecting the codes, there was subjectivity in this process, even with the in vivo codes. Thus, I performed multiple coding sessions to attempt to process the meanings.

Similarly, to the manual first coding cycle, I utilized a structural and in vivo coding process to organize chunks of data and preserve participant words and phrases. I used a focused coding technique to develop finer codes and sub codes. Second level coding took the form of

axial coding (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), as I tuned the emergent categories and subsequent patterns in the data. I chose this method of coding because of its applicability to the data I had proposed. Although I was not doing a grounded theory study, I felt this method of second round coding allowed me the flexibility to categorize and prioritize codes based on how and why they relate. I used in vivo codes to present and preserve the language used by participants in this academic environment. My final coding strategy utilized axial coding as a way to develop the codes into categories, taking the coding process one step further. In essence, I attempted to break or digest the data into its molecular structure and then piece it back together to form something more recognizable that relates to the larger whole.

Codes, Categories, Themes, and Theory

From the codes and sub codes and the subsequent analytic memos, I developed a series of categories and themes that identify major patterns within the data (Table 2). Categories are created by defining a criterion in order for the code to be included in the category (Saldaña, 2013). Corbin and Strauss (2008) explain that themes and concepts interrelate to form theory. This process resulted in categories that formed themes related to the topic of GTAs' teaching experiences. As a researcher with leanings toward feminist intersectionality epistemology, I understand that my interpretation is filtered through this perspective. This subsequently impacts the processes of decoding, coding, and encoding. In other words, as I approached the project, the ways in which I asked questions, my interactions during the interviews and the types of information I solicited were impacted by my perspectives and experiences participating in teaching activities, professional workshops, and interacting with peers.

Table 2

Data "Chunks" Example

In Vivo/Initial Code	Definitions/Sub Codes	Category
Baptism by fire	Learning from mistakes, lacking support, getting burned	Support
Abrasive students	Students, familiarity and disrespect, racism, authority	Students
Unrealistic expectations	Departmental expectations, evaluations, annual review	Pressure
Horror stories	Working with the wrong advisor, finding the right one	Advisor/Mentor
Triple minority	Black, female, international	Intersectionality
American system	Teaching and working with students, expectations, student entitlement	Teaching in US
Illusions of Control	Interactions with students, classroom dynamics	Students
Like a mother	Nurturing, caring for students	Support

Researcher Considerations

Ethics

Covenantal ethics, situational ethics, and vulnerability are major parts of my research considerations because I interacted personally with participants. I had to consider confidentiality but also the representation of the fullness of participant stories in the research. As Tisdale (2003) describes, "One researcher may be sensitive to the harm that arises when confidentiality is compromised, but unmindful of the harm that comes from never publishing a report (p. 28). In this study, one participant expressed desire to meet with me, despite advice from peers to not share any stories with me. Hopefully, I demonstrated I can be trusted, and I hope the member checking process addressed some of the issues with maintaining their trust within the research representation.

Another ethical consideration was to conduct the interviews in a place that could be semi-private, but not within view of others. It was also important that the interviews take place on campus to not insert power dynamics of participants being in unfamiliar spaces. I used the library reservation system to choose and reserve rooms to conduct the interviews. With each interviewee, I tried to be respectful of time, remain attentive to their body language, and remind them that they could share solely what they were comfortable with. I shared some of my own experiences, usually towards the end, as to not interfere in the interview process with my own words.

I also tried to empathize with participants through interviewing that was relatable, attentive, and caring. As Tisdale (2003) describes, vulnerability can take many forms, so the process of ethical behavior in research should not consider only one theoretical frame or another. Although not considered vulnerable by IRB standards, GTAs can present some characteristics of a vulnerable population. Some of the participants in this study felt vulnerable because of concern

that their stories would be identifiable, and that perhaps another person would be able to identify them. This is another reason member checking becomes critical, especially when participants try to gauge how they will be represented in research. From a feminist perspective, I attempted to operate in a transparent way by sharing about myself, being honest in my attempts to gain access into the lives of participants and also learn to be present and a listener for the interviews.

As an Afro-Latina, I also sensed a mild trepidation of being perceived a certain way when asking participants about their racialized experiences. In some of the interviews, I was less comfortable approaching this topic, because of fear that I would be "making too much" of race, class, and gender in the interview. However, I was surprised how often these conversations would spontaneously arise with participants, especially those who described themselves as "white".

Trustworthiness

This research is a small-scale study at one institution. As a graduate student, a major limitation to the research is time. As I identified in the literature reviews, a major limitation of many of the studies was lack of sustained contact. My approach to this research falls within a post-positivist paradigm. I am attempting to present a realistic account of what is happening. Since this research represents a naturalistic approach, I also desire to maintain a certain authenticity within the research, and as Schwandt (2015) states, "Authenticity is regarded as a feature unique to naturalistic inquiry (and ethnographic naturalism), an approach to inquiry that aims to generate genuine or true understanding of people's experiences. I do care about the realistic account, but mainly because I want to retain trust of participants and the greater research audience. I also recognize that some of the elements that I have mentioned, such as member checking, and peer feedback are also attempts to create a true representation. Each participant

was sent a copy of the transcript for their review. I created notes for the participants for them to review my initial interpretations of the interviews for their review. Each participant was asked to choose a pseudonym/name to use in the study. Throughout the process, I made attempts to remain cognizant of participants' needs and concerns even after the data collection was completed.

Subjectivities Statement

Johnson-Bailey (2003) states, "The experience of the researcher as an insider or outsider cannot be a fixed one, because we are all at some point an insider and an outsider, given the setting (p. 129). As I consider this statement, I am reminded about how this study presented different opportunities to interact with other GTAs. I am deeply involved in my own research processes and believe deeply that GTAs are a population within the teaching base who need specific supports because of the unique challenges we face. Role conflict is highly relevant to my life, as the last seven years of my life, I have been pulled in many directions, torn between spending time with my partner, fulfilling my role as mother as best I can, trying to develop in my capacities as a teacher and researcher, and also completing my doctorate degree. Along the way, I've also patched my finances to support my education, and together with Gordon, my husband, we've tried to create a home for our children. I have considerable financial and student loan debt (although not as much as some), and I recognize the financial struggles that graduate students face. Because of the challenges that graduate students manage on a daily basis, I am arguing for support to help GTAs develop their teaching, a practice that they more than likely want to be able to do well. By helping GTAs to improve in this aspect, I think it can provide greater purpose during what is most likely a very difficult transitional time of growth.

Professionally, doctoral students are in the last stage of preparation to obtain a terminal degree, and they have a full academic life, that includes not only coursework and research, but involves fellowships, conferences, publishing, and participating in the activities of professional life. Personally, doctoral students navigate other situations. Older than the traditional college students, there may be outside responsibilities that graduate students must address. Also, as more women and minorities join the ranks of academia, the hopes of seeing more diversity in academia remains.

When I collected these data, I was not teaching, so I may have been an outsider, but then, having certain experiences as a graduate student, and woman of color, I may have been considered an insider depending on my interactions with other graduate students. Sometimes, I speak from the voice of a woman of color who has faced challenges within the educational system. I also speak from places of privilege in my traditional middle-class upbringing in which I did not lack the tools to seek new opportunities. Although my parents identify strongly with their Puerto Rican heritage, I am less inclined to do so. I am married to a Black man, and although my life reflects a somewhat traditional heteronormative situation, it is a far cry from the traditional marriage I witnessed as a child growing up. My unique life experiences have shaped how I view myself, and they have been the windows to understanding the world around me. These experiences have shaped how I view education, teaching, and research. My experiences may provide a relatability, but they may also distance me. I do not assume that a participant, especially a woman of color, would mirror my own values, beliefs, and ideas, and I tried remaining conscious of this. As a graduate student, I have dealt with "imposter syndrome", and I have often felt like a fraud in my interactions. Although I have had years of teaching experience in K-12 and college settings, I still felt at times as though participants would look at me and

question my knowledge on the topic of teaching. have also experienced depression and anxiety both throughout my life, and with the births of my two young children. I say this to express my own sensitivity to personal struggle that will make an appearance throughout this research. Because my own identity is so strongly tied to my commitments as an academic, I cannot help but channel those aspects of myself that are both motivating and sources of pain. I must reframe some of these thoughts as I embark on this study. The insecurities holding me down will become a place of solidarity with others in similar but not identical social and emotional locations. In order to move forward, I recognize that I must embrace my role as researcher, and that the incompleteness of my knowledge does not represent a detriment, but rather a place to continue to grow into the compassionate teacher and researcher that I am becoming.

4 RESULTS

Analytic Approaches for Data Analysis

Constructivist Grounded Theory

I analyzed the data using an analytic approach most closely aligned with Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory method. Although the study itself was not a grounded theory study, many of the aspects of grounded theory methods were present in the analysis. The use of constructivist grounded theory was useful in identifying an approach to analysis for a number of reasons. Classical grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was introduced to research during a time when qualitative research was under scrutiny, and there was a need to qualify forms of qualitative research to be more rigorous and empirical (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). Classical grounded theory is more prescriptive in approach, rigid in defining what qualifies as grounded theory. Constructivist grounded theory maintains certain aspects of grounded theory, especially when collecting the data and analyzing concurrently, but constructivist grounded theory method also considers the social interaction that occurs in research with human participants. There are critiques that Charmaz's method is less rigorous because of the interpretation that takes place on the part of the researcher. On the contrary, Charmaz method considers the construction of the social interaction, and is not relativism, but the consideration of the interactions taking place between individuals and nuanced social interactions worthy of study and examination.

First of all, this method for analysis provided a flexibility in my role as a researcher involved in the process directly with participants. I interacted with participants during the interviews, and this type of involvement created a space where we shared experiences. Although I was most interested in their experience, the level of social interaction was a major factor. Through the interviews, participants often reflected on their own words, asked me my thoughts, told funny stories or jokes, used metaphors, and asked me, "does that make sense?". I determined

that it was important how the participants articulated their experience, and this process helped them to establish deeper meaning of their experiences, which was relevant in analyzing the data. As Charmaz (2006) states, "We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" (p. 10). Her approach also considers the role in which social interactions and symbolic interactionism are at work within qualitative research. This was a significant factor in the way in which the data were collected and analyzed.

Thematic Narrative Analysis

Riessman's (2008) description of thematic narrative analysis was also relevant to my study of GTA pedagogical training and experiences. As Riessman (2008) states, "data are interpreted in light of thematic developed by the investigator (influenced by prior and emergent theory, the concrete purpose of an investigation, the data themselves, political commitments, and other factors)" (p. 54). The prior quote is indicative of the approach that I took to analyze the data. Fidelity to the narrative method of analysis preserves the full narrative theorizing the entirety of the case (Riessman, 2008). However, my approach differs in that I have analyzed across cases, to form arguments from the data. Again, I recognize that my study, while carrying certain aspects of thematic narrative analysis and grounded theory methods, is not an exact representation of either method of analysis because I have utilized the methods that suited the study context most feasibly.

My Analytic Process

My analytic approach began as I collected the data. The interviews were conducted in a way that reflects some of the patterns that I observed and documented throughout the study. The primary evidence of this is the way in which the interview protocols changed. Through the first

few interviews, I found it necessary to learn more about the participants' backgrounds. This eventually evolved into a question that asked them about their past educational experiences. This also provided context for their journey to becoming a GTA, as well as their prior experiences with teaching. With this context, it was easier to interview participants about their experiences with pedagogical training at the present institution. Using memos from interviews, I was able to identify early codes that informed the interviews going forward. For instance, peer pedagogical support was a code that I developed early on after realizing that it was coming up time after time. In later interviews, I asked more specific questions about the type of peer pedagogical support that GTAs experienced. Another code that was developed early on was related to student charac-teristics. For instance, I started to notice how student grade level and major status were related to experiences that the GTAs had in the classroom. Thus, it became important to know more about the characteristics of students in the classes GTAs were teaching. This also led to conversations of student diversity, which subsequently led many of the GTAs to consider their own privilege and position, another code from the data.

By listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcripts, I recognized certain times in the interviews when the questions I asked participants carried certain assumptions. For in-stance, I initially asked participants about their professional development, or assuming they might have certain attitudes towards teaching, I was challenged to revisit the ways in which the questions were asked. Another time, I was asked by a participant, who was a non-native English speaker, to have a copy of the protocol to review so she might be able to process the questions and form her responses with more time to reflect on the questions. With some of her feedback, I was able to identify questions that might be confusing or muddled and revise as needed. I also

made notes when I did not understand certain words from participants to circle back with additional probes within the interview. Sometimes, I used concept maps to draw relationships between people and structures within the academic setting. I referred to these notes when seeking to understand the structure of departments that were different from experiences that I had as a GTA.

Because the codes and categories developed as the data collection process was taking place, most of the analysis was deductive in that I sorted codes and sub-codes along the categories of data that were closest to the research questions. In addition to some of the deductive analysis process of approaching the codes, I also attempted to include additional codes that may or may not have been included in the codes and categories that were developed early in the study. I performed an analysis that was deductive, in that I developed categories over the course of the study that related to topics that were discussed in the interviews. However, I attempted to capture counter cases in order to provide a fuller picture of the views of the participants.

Limitation of Analytic Process

One area that could be improved would be the deeper formation of theoretical memos. Would this have been a grounded theory study; the theoretical memos would have been a major part of the study. However, using a blended approach that aimed to gain insight into the content of what participants were saying, the meaning of their narratives, and analytic process that was reflective, I aimed to present a trustworthy representation of participant voices.

Going forward in future research I would suggest a few steps that would strengthen the theoretical memo process. In this study, I took notes before and after in order to develop memos. Charmaz (2006) explains that there is not one way to do memo-writing, and she suggests a number of ways that have worked for qualitative researchers. In addition to writing thoughts about

the developing categories and codes, I would also include short written notes at the end of the interviews to examine more deeply some of my own assumptions at the end of each interview. When listening, transcribing, and reading the interviews, I also noted places where I needed to probe more, or gain more insight. This also occurred during the member checking process.

The Research Questions

In order to organize the results, I used the research questions as a guide. The research questions were as follows:

1. What are the teaching experiences of GTAs at a specific large, public, and predominantly minority serving institution?

2. What kinds of pedagogical training and support do GTAs experience?

3. How do GTAs navigate their roles as students and GTAs?

The Graduate Teaching Assistants in the Study

Twenty graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) participated in the study. I identified eight different areas of study of the participants, although specific programs are not included to protect the identity of the GTAs. Most of the participants were from the United States (some from the city of study and others from outside of the city). Four of the participants were from countries outside of the United States (Great Britain, India, China, and Guyana) although only one used the label "international" to describe her/his/their self. Five participants used he/him pronouns to describe themselves, and 15 used she/her pronouns, although I did not explicitly ask them to identify their gender. One of the participants centered her identity as queer, and this was important to how she explained her role as instructor through the course of our interview. Two of the participants mentioned their religion as part of their experience as instructors related to intersectionality and teaching students. Although this study is not meant to generalize in any

way, it does highlight the diversity of individuals teaching at the university. Table 3 shows some

of the demographics of the participants in the study.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Prior Teaching Experience	
Yes	13
No	7
Race/Ethnicity	
Black/Afro-Caribbean	4
Asian	2
White	14
Field of Study	
English	5
Communications	5
Linguistics	2
Psychology	2
Visual Arts	2
Economics	1
Business	1
Mathematics	1

[a] Total Participants = 20

Some of the participants moved to the city for graduate school in particular, and some are prior residents to the city in which the university of study, Southeastern State University (SESU) is situated [pseudonym]. Some came to the city solely because of the opportunity of graduate school, and others arrived at the institution as a result of living in the city prior, and then deciding to pursue graduate school. The GTAs interviewed have complex stories, and many described themselves as not planning their career quite the way it has happened. For all of the GTAs, teaching has been a major part of their experience thus far, and each of them expressed enjoyment of teaching. Some described the role of teaching as central, and others described it as part of their training for potential academic positions in the future that might include teaching. The GTAs are at various stages of life. Some have had vast experience in industry jobs or roles in the private sector. Some have had other types of jobs prior to graduate school. For a few, graduate school has been continuous, in that they finished high school and have been in college ever since. Most of the GTAs had prior teaching experience, with a handful having more than ten years of teaching experience. A majority of the GTAs were completing doctoral programs. Four were completing terminal degrees in their fields, but these are not doctoral programs.

Although the GTAs interviewed come from different backgrounds and circumstances, there were many commonalities across their experiences that are detailed below. One clear commonality was that they self-selected to be in the study, thus it can be assumed that they had something to say about being a GTA. Similar to other teachers, GTAs' experiences are shaped by early experiences in education, through high school, college education, and graduate school. When asked about their prior educational experiences, it became clear that these prior experiences had been influential in the paths they took. When it came to teach, many of these experiences also impacted how they understood their role as a college teacher and the types of

teachers they would like to become. Many of the things the GTAs mentioned about teaching at a diverse, urban, institution, echoed one another. Although the GTAs vary in their own personal characteristics, the frequency with which they mentioned similar experiences was interesting. Through a detailed qualitative analysis of the interview data, I organized a series of codes, categories, and themes. The themes represent common occurrences across the data that are representative of a phenomenon happening across the cases. In this study, each participant, or GTA, represents the unit of study, or case. Each theme is expanded to explain its meaning and each theme is supported by data from the interviews. Each theme has elements (subthemes) that build on the meaning of each theme.

Introduction of Themes

The analysis of interviews yielded four major themes across the data. These themes capture the major arguments that I make as a result of the study, and they are presented as follows:

Layered Support (Institutional, Departmental, and Peer)

GTAs require a layered pedagogical support system in order to execute their roles as GTAs effectively. Starting at the university level, certain institutional structures are necessary in order to support GTAs in their teaching role. This includes policies, practices, and spaces that support and reinforce effective teaching. These structures also support GTAs as individuals in their academic, financial, and well-being. Each GTA in the study mentioned a pedagogical course taught by a faculty member from the department. While this is an important part of the support system for GTAs, these pedagogy courses were not viewed as effective as the course instructor. Some of the courses were helpful in providing the pedagogical theory and practice needed to teach a course in college, but other courses were not helpful. The usefulness of the course was attributed to the course instructor and the level of engagement, enthusiasm, and

experience that those pedagogy course instructors exhibited during the course. The final aspect of the layered support, and perhaps most impactful was that of peers. Peers provide a non-judgmental and power-balanced relationship that was crucial to many of the GTAs in the study.

Diversity and Difference

GTAs in the study mentioned the diversity of the student population as a strength, but their individual experiences reflected an embodied racialized and gendered experience. Considering their own social location, they were largely aware of how power and privilege operate in their daily interactions with students and faculty. This embodied experience was most apparent in the ways in which GTAs present themselves to students, and their concerns about how they would be perceived by students. These concerns are not unfounded, and for Black female GTAs in the study, these concerns were deep. White GTAs often mentioned white privilege and trying to relate to students who are different from them. Many of the GTAs regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationality adopted pedagogical styles that reflected cultural competence. How participants understood their social location depended primarily based on gender and race.

"Baptism by Fire"

GTAs in the study are experts in their respective fields. Many of them had work and teaching experience prior to their assignment at the university, but challenges to learning the context were jarring in the early stages of teaching at SESU. While they expressed confidence in their ability to teach college students, one participant described the experience as a "baptism by fire". Although they felt they were developing the skills to become effective teachers, there were learning experiences that challenged them, and sometimes they "got burned". None of the participants had experiences that were detrimental to their teaching, but they did have significant

learning experiences that taught them lessons about how to navigate college teaching. For those that were new to the city, teaching in a large university was challenging primarily because of the cultural contexts of the city and university. For some, moving to large city was a major adjustment. For GTAs new to teaching in the United States, the American system was something that they had not experienced before, and this presented certain challenges for the GTAs. A couple of the GTAs mentioned challenges when dealing with student academic dishonesty, which was one of the problematic challenges the GTAs faced.

Commitment to Teaching

GTAs in the study were committed to their roles as teachers. In multiple cases, GTAs described how their research and teaching work together to make them a better scholar and teacher. They also expressed desire to teach in the future, as opportunities presented themselves. While life as a graduate student presents distinct challenges, GTAs work hard, sometimes with multiple jobs, to be able to support themselves. Even with the challenges of teaching, the GTAs felt a sense of purpose in their roles and teachers. Not only did they seek out opportunities to develop their teaching, when possible, but they also offered pedagogical support to other GTAs, relating to the peer support theme.

Layered Support

Institutional Support from the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC)

The university (and governing bodies) are responsible for setting forth policy to support graduate students in college. While I did not participate in a university-wide orientation as a new graduate student years ago, a few GTAs in the study mentioned attending an orientation where they were able to learn more about the university and many of the policies related to graduate studies. The university has recently added a unit dedicated to the support of graduate students. Outside of graduate assistantships (and tuition waivers), the Teaching and Learning Center

(TLC) was the most mentioned form of institutional support that the GTAs referenced in interviews. A majority of colleges and universities across the country have Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) to support faculty in professional, pedagogical, and curriculum development. (Kelly, Cruz, & Fire, 2017). They also serve to support the use of technology and implementation of online courses, as the demand for distance learning increase. In this study, multiple participants mentioned the Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) at SESU, because in one way or another, they had been involved in activities provided by the TLC. At SESU, the TLC provides programming to GTAs through a series of workshops, certificate programs, and award recognition.

One GTA, Wes, mentioned, "there are a number of reasons that I have found the TLC useful", and his primary reason for seeking out help from the TLC was to address the challenge of teaching a large class. Thia, another GTA, mentioned how she solicits the expertise of the TLC to help students learn about appropriate use of digital media for student projects. Thia states, "I've learned; throughout my time teaching here, everything from developing a new final assessment for my students for my [subject removed] class, which I still use to this day". Renee, discussed how she participated in a TLC workshop/seminar focused on social justice in the digital age. Renee, a GTA Teaching Award and Certificate of College Teaching recipient, explains how the TLC has supported her professional growth:

> *It was great, and it's so funny because it's very hard for me now not to turn to my fellow graduate students in my department and actually encourage them. I'm like, it's such a good experience; and one of the things that I love about the certificate-- My advisor told me from day one that the year you go on the job market, you have to have your own web-*

site. You have to have a website where people can go and research you… Doing the cer-

tificate forced me to do it, and like it forced me to do it and blow it out of the water be-

cause I have so much stuff and so much cool stuff. It helped me to be able to talk about

myself and be able to talk about my accomplishments; and I think that's something that

graduate students don't do well because of impostorism.

Renee references how the certificate prompted her to highlight her work as a teacher, and this could distinguish her as she begins to navigate a career in academia. She also mentioned "imposterism", which is also referred to as imposter syndrome, or as Clance and Imes (1978) define impostor phenomenon as "the internal experience of intellectual phoniness" (p. 241). In their study, Clance and Imes (1978) identified how high achieving women are particularly susceptible to this pernicious form self-doubt as they attain high levels of success and achievement in their lives. As demonstrated in the quote above, the TLC was able to support Renee in her pedagogical development, while also recognizing her teaching efforts as a GTA.

The TLC serves as a support system to the pedagogical development of instructors at SESU. It is likely that many GTAs do not access the services provided, but at an intuitional level, the TLC serves as an important support to the pedagogical development of GTAs at SESU.

Departmental Support from Advisors, Pedagogy Course, & Pedagogy Instructor

In each of the interviews, certain individuals or structures were mentioned as providing key aspects of support within the department. Each participant mentioned a pedagogy course that was a requirement for GTAs teaching in the department. This course varied in perceived effectiveness, described as generally useful, lacking, or only marginally applicable. In instances where the pedagogy course was described as useful, this was attributed primarily to the pedagogy instructor teaching the course. Through the analysis of the interviews, it is clear that

the success of the pedagogy course was largely dependent on the effectiveness of the pedagogy instructor. Of the pedagogy course instructor Mary stated:

> *One of the senior lecturers teaches that [pedagogy course] who is amazing. She's so, so good, and if you are serious about it; I mean her door is always open to answer questions. Every time I have a tough situation I never been in before, or just have some kind of random weird question that popped in my head, I'll go talk to her and she's always a wealth of information.*

In this way, the pedagogy course instructor became a part of the support system of the GTAs, especially in the onset of teaching. For those that viewed it as marginally effective, they seemed to appreciate and understand the importance of having a pedagogy course, especially for GTAs that have no prior teaching experience. Additionally, the departmentally provided pedagogy course was a touch point to reach all GTAs in a department. Jax described her experience with a pedagogy instructor that prepared GTAs by addressing some of the issues they might experience:

> *She's very up front about the challenges you're going to encounter in the classroom; about how to give people tough love; about the real nitty-gritty stuff. It definitely wasn't a downer, but she certainly didn't sugarcoat any of the problems that you might come across. She brought in other faculty members to sort of tell us their horror stories, their triumphs, so it would give us a chance to do a Q&A with them. We did role play where some of us posed as a sort of quote-unquote problem student who just wanted to have a bad attitude no matter what, and the other person was the teacher, and you had to sort of have this interaction in front of the whole class and get critique on how you handle the situation.*

Other GTAs described readings, reflections, mock teaching lessons, and observations that were part of the pedagogy course. In subsequent semesters, two of the GTAs were asked to present as part of the pedagogy courses to those taking the course for the first time. In some departments, the pedagogy course takes place prior to teaching (primarily when considering masters students), but in other departments GTAs may take the pedagogy course during the same semester they begin teaching.

During the onset of teaching courses, many GTAs described interacting with a course director or a director of undergraduate studies. These individuals are responsible for creating uniformity across the largely introductory courses with many sections taught in a department. Keisha described the help of a course director that assisted with a summer course that needed to be adjusted because of the compact summer schedule:

> *...she sat down with me; we worked through it, we talked about different things we could do with the time; like if we had to cut stuff from the syllabus, what should we cut? What should we keep? Then throughout the semester, she was helpful when I had different questions while trying to make sure the students were still engaged. Yeah, she was really helpful this semester where I felt really supported, or I could call her or come to her anytime.*

The availability of the course director and the willingness to help are key aspects of the relationship described by Keisha's perspective. Most of the GTAs interviewed described teaching a course with many sections (sometimes introductory, lower level, or for all undergraduates) that was "pre-regimented", "prescribed", or "structured". GTAs for these types of courses are typically provided text and syllabi with a prescribed curriculum, course assignments, scope, and sequence. As Kory described,

... it's very regimented. Like there is a course director who has everything planned out.

You have, either biweekly or monthly meetings where you discuss what's going on. You

have no control over the schedule. There is a textbook that was created by the basic

course director that, you know, you run through the textbook, all of your activities are up

to you, but all the exams are pre-made for you.

The reasons for this prescribed course are two-fold. On one hand many of these courses are

taught by GTAs, so there is a need to keep the courses consistent with little opportunity for

deviation by the instructor. This regimented approach also assumes that undergraduates will

learn nearly the same content in each course, providing consistency across multiple course

sections. This is an assumption that is somewhat flawed, depending largely on the notion that the

instructors will teach similarly. It is my understanding that the university carries a requirement

for departments to train GTAs, but the quality of this experience is not assessed.

Peer Support

The most mentioned form of informal support for GTAs was that of peers, or other

graduate students. Beyond the pedagogy course, support from fellow GTAs was crucial to doing

well. For Avi, the support of peers was vital to his role as a GTA, "I don't think I or any of us

could survive without that [support from peers] because at all points, and you can open up, and

let's say, I'm not getting this properly or I messed up here, what do I do? So, I think it's

important." Avi also explained the closeness that developed between two other graduate students

demonstrating that the lines between colleague and friend are fluid:

The two people that I was closely regularly in touch with; one was; he was my co-author,

friend, and colleague, so he's in the same year as I am, so we both was teaching the same

course first time. Then the other one; he's a year senior to me. Yeah, these two were the most-- and he's also teaching the same course.

GTAs in the study, described instances of helping others, especially new GTAs in their departments navigate the challenges of college teaching. Greg stated, "I keep using the term colleagues because it's professional, but these are my friends". In the interview, Greg explained how the GTAs in his department are more like friends, and that the support they provide one another is substantial. Additionally, Greg described being in an informal position as a more experienced GTA to help others who are less experienced with teaching:

I'm really enjoying the group of people I'm working with or enjoying their company, enjoying the group of people. Sounds weird, but they know that I have teaching experience, we talk about our experiences, we talk about strategies. There is nothing sacred and there is nothing hidden when it comes to this material, not just because they need to know it and they need to understand these things, but because this is who we are, we teach, this is our, you know, purpose if you will...When we're all encountering something new, we will still strategize and say, 'what are you doing for this?' 'Here's what I was thinking about doing' and we'll just have an informal chit chat about things we might approach.

These relationships were described to be highly impactful in the teaching lives of participants for a number of reasons. First, these relationships are formed as part of the socialization process of graduate school. Since there is an even power dynamic for the most part, graduate students approach one another as equals, and they can ask each other questions without fear of judgement or retribution. This is not always the case, because it seemed that participants, while willing to seek help from peers, often did from someone that they felt comfortable with,

more like a friend type of interaction. Michelle described working alongside of a fellow GTA who needed support in her communication skills:

> *We have a grad student who's from Iran and she doesn't feel very confident in her communication skills in English. We set up a meeting and I sat down and talked to her. We talked about how to talk about your work in front of a group and different sorts of organizational things, and I helped kind of explain some stuff in the field. She didn't know about residencies, internships, and things like that, so we sat down and talked about that.*

For Michelle, the support she received from faculty and peers was important especially as she was adjusting to life in a new city. Michelle explained:

> *It was just getting to know a new place. I feel that took a lot of my energy; but I will say I felt really supported by the faculty and the other students in the program; so, if I had any questions, I always knew I had somebody I could ask or go to.*

It became evident through the interviews, that the GTAs sought out help from peers when needed, but they were often sources of support for other GTAs or graduate students. GTAs provide layered support to each other that is often overlooked because of the informality of the support.

Diversity and Difference

Recognizing and Appreciating Diversity

Upon arriving to the campus, it is clear that the university is home to students from all over the world. This richness in diversity was one of the key themes of the interviews. As Keisha, stated, "I see the whole spectrum of the rainbow in my classrooms; it's everywhere. Just everyone is in there. There's a lot of different races and ethnicities, and religions are represented". Avi stated the importance of diversity in the corporate sector, "…you might get an

assignment in Tokyo. So, you should be very comfortable with different cultures, different languages, different religions and things like that". The university is well-known for the racially and ethnic diverse student population, and it is also known for having undergraduate degree attainment higher than the national average for Black and Latinx students. In addition to racial and ethnic diversity, the city is home to various industries and other academic institutions. As an urban center within a city in the South, it shares certain characteristics of other large urban centers, especially where politics are concerned. Anna expressed how she enjoyed hearing the students speak with authority and "outspokenness" especially when discussing feminism in the classroom. Another GTA was impressed by students that would speak their mind or share their own perspective as a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

Some of the GTAs came from rural or smaller cities, and the transition to a larger urban center was an adjustment. Despite some of the challenges of adjusting to city life (traffic, living expenses, and personal relationships) the GTAs shared an appreciation of the different perspectives students brought to the classroom. Keisha mentioned the progressive culture of the classroom, describing it as "liberal". Although she enjoys the "liberal" nature of the classroom, she is conscious to include various viewpoints in class discussion,

> It's definitely a very liberal classroom and so you try not to-- if there [are] any conservative people and after you try not to ostracize them-- but student speech is very much on the liberal side and so. I do enjoy that diversity.

Susanna stated, "When you have a lot of the same, and your network is a lot of the same, no new information gets disseminated. When you have a very diverse network, you're exposed to different ideas and stuff". In the class that Susanna taught, she explained how the student perspective helped her to understand how the course content related to students in their daily

lives. Her quote also reflects the importance of diversity from a social network theory perspective (Borgatti & Ofem, 2010), contributing to the flow of different perspectives across individuals to enhance innovation and ideas across groups of people. Additionally, the GTAs mentioned the work ethic of students at SESU as exemplary, evidenced by the fact that many undergraduate students at SESU work other jobs, are first generation college students, or earn scholarships. One GTA, Jax, highlighted her experience growing up poor as one way she might be able to relate to students that come from poor families with fewer resources. Jax stated:

> *I'm a lot happier teaching students that come through here than I have been teaching students in workshops at private schools, or just private workshops for individual students. I think it's because I connect with them more.*

The GTAs described the diversity of students as contributing to the "social fabric" of the university. The city has a diverse population with an array of professional opportunities for students and residents. The city itself was mentioned multiple times as a primary attractive factor in attending graduate school. For those GTAs that moved from rural areas or smaller towns, there were periods of adjustment, but the city was largely viewed positively as being a major asset to the university and vice versa. The traffic and increase in the cost of living were negative factors attributed to life in the city.

Pedagogical Approaches to Reinforce Diverse Student Perspectives

Diversity was framed not only in individual characteristics of race and ethnicity, but also a diversity of thought that is present at the university. The most common way that GTAs described diversity of thought, was in the classroom discussions that took place during class. GTAs who taught courses with class discussion explained the importance of classroom climate that supported diverse perspectives in class. Creating assignments that allow for student choice

and interest are some of the ways that GTAs reinforce students to engage creatively with the content. Especially for written assignments, GTAs used prompts to encourage students to draw on their experiences in order to engage with the content.

One GTA, Thia described how she uses examples and video clips to incorporate diverse representations of course content, highlighting historically underrepresented groups in media. Wes, another GTA, described how he uses a reflective short essay to connect concepts in the course to personal experiences of students. Although Wes teaches a large lecture course of more than 200 students, he explained how the short essay is one of his favorite ways to learn about how students are connecting the content to their own lives. Keisha also explained how she forefronts representation of individuals that reflect the student population in examples she uses during class lectures. These examples refer to a constructivist learning environment in which individuals' prior knowledge and experiences are centered in the classroom environment (Richardson, 2003). Mary stated, "I really enjoy teaching. I mean, I try to not just lecture, and have more active classroom environment for students and they usually respond to that well. Yeah, I love teaching".

Prejudice and Persona

While discussing the student population, the interviews often turned inward, and participants often discussed how their identity as related to their teaching experience. Black female participants in this study were keenly aware of systemic bias and prejudice within academia, not only because of their identify as Black women, but also because of their age and nationality. As Jamie explained:

> *Being a teacher in college as a black woman is not easy; and I don't look my age. I'm in*
> *my 40s, but a lot of people don't realize that. When I first started teaching, I had those*

problems, but the story was different. When I'd walk in, people would think I was a

student; not the teacher. [place] is super informal and I'd be the only one in a suit

because I had to change my teacher persona in order to get respect. Even with

colleagues, I think that is really kind of difficult. I think because I look the way I look;

like there's some stereotypes that people already have of me walking around like I look

young, so they think I don't have experience. I'm brown-skinned so they think I'm not as

educated, or something. You know what I mean; and all these things. So, I think I've

spent my whole career figuring out ways to change people's opinions of me; like dressing

up or being really firm at the beginning.

Jamie explained that she often dresses a certain way in order to demonstrate that she is the

teacher. She also describes what Steele and Aronson (1995) refer to as *stereotype threat*, when

an individual is aware of the stereotypes that others may place on them, making them

hyperaware of the racist stereotype they are perceived as. Jamie also mentioned how students

have commented on how "well she speaks the language". Jamie is from the United States and a

native speaker of English. Keisha also reflected a similar perspective and strategy for dressing a

certain way to convey her role as teacher:

Well I guess as a teacher it's been difficult being African American woman honestly

because first, I'm short as well, and I look young; and so, when I come into the classroom

most people don't know that I'm the teacher the first day. So, I try to dress very

professional just for the sake of them knowing that I'm the teacher; and where a white

male instructor can come in with a t-shirt and some jeans, but they know he's the teacher

because it's a white guy; and/or they just assume that all professors look like this, and

there's no question about it. That's always the first bridge that I have to cross is them not

even seeing me as an instructor, then feeling like having to get over the feeling of feeling

like I have to prove myself to these students, that I can teach this class when I already

know I know the information. But it's always feeling like, when I come in, they're not

thinking of me as a professor. They don't see me that way and that's why I always feel

like I have to do extra to prove that I know the information, especially my first year, but

I've had to kind of set aside some of that. I don't have to prove myself, just be myself

kind of thing. I think that's probably the hardest bridge to cross.

Keisha mentioned how a white male might be able to dress more casually, and this came up in a

subsequent interview with a white male GTA who described his dress as "casual". This notion of

dress was on her mind as Keisha explained further:

We are about to start classes again and it's going to be like, what do I wear this day, so I

can look like I'm the teacher and not the student. I don't know whether I should worry

about that, but it's going to be on my mind every time.

Roach (1997) suggested that the way a GTA dresses impacts the student perception of the

GTA and found that GTAs who dress unprofessionally were more likely to encounter student

misbehavior. The author also suggests that the way a GTA dresses has an impact on student

learning by impacting the student perception of the course content as important and deserving of

their attention and diligence. While I do not doubt the findings of the study, I do recognize that

there are additional factors that influence perceptions of instructors. As demonstrated by my

study, female GTAs felt more pressure to dress professionally, whereas male GTAs (although

there were only a handful) felt freer to dress casually in their classes. Only one male GTA

mentioned changing his appearance to appear older, but for the most part, male GTAs felt like

they could dress how they wanted, exercising control in their decisions about how they would be

perceived. GTA dress is also another example of how appearance intersects with gender, race, ethnicity, and language in such a way that it is not easily identified why students carry certain biases towards instructors. At SESU, while the undergraduate student population is highly racially and ethnically diverse, there still remain vestiges of race and gender bias that are embedded within the education system.

Sydney stated:

> *I do try to look a certain way for sure to, especially when I was younger to try to seem older. Yeah. Always have my hair up, always have glasses on, always wearing like very plain clothes. Not necessarily super dressy, but you know, dress, business casual or whatever. As I get older, I'm less worried about them seeing me as a peer.*

Multiple GTAs expressed aspects of their identity as impacting how they choose to present to students and also expressed ideas about how they imagine their students perceive them. For instance, most of the younger women in the study mentioned the need to be viewed by students as the teacher, and not a student. They discussed ways in which they dress in order to be viewed as professional, academic, and as the classroom authority. They also expressed how they needed to be firm in the beginning with students in order to establish their authority in the classroom. In contrast, the male GTAs in the study mentioned using their choices of clothing as a way to disarm themselves or seem more "casual" or unassuming in the classroom. One participant explained his use of bow ties and suspenders as a way to present a certain image. Another participant explained that he discusses casual dress with students when talking about the audience and how he is perceived by students. In terms of perception, it was clear that the male participants felt much more freedom in their choices in presentation than the female students.

One of the male GTAs did explain the importance of his facial hair as indicating he was the teacher and not the student:

> *I have to make sure that students don't necessarily look at me and see a white male from the deep south, but they look at me and just see a person who wants them to succeed because that really is it.*

The microaggressions were pervasive, from students commenting on the appearance or racial identity of the women, discussing how they "speak English", or slights from faculty members commenting on student work. Lizbet explained ways in which students and faculty members made comments or behaved in a way to convey that her work and teaching were subpar. Being from another country, she explained that students have made comments on her speech and accent. She expressed that these types of interactions were very subtle, and while not easily attributed to racism, Lizbet felt as though they were attacks on her because of the color of her skin. Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez & Willis (1997) describe these experiences of subtle racism as microaggressions, and the cumulation of these events over time can lead to significant distress. These microaggressions can create negative climates where marginalized individuals are subjected to ongoing racism. As Solórzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) state, "racial microaggressions in both academic and social spaces have real consequences, the most obvious of which are the resulting negative racial climate and African American students' struggles with feelings of self-doubt and frustration as well as isolation" (p. 69). Lizbet described her experiences with Black students approaching her with familiarity, and sometimes disrespect, based on her skin color, and she explained general instances where white male students subtly "pushing back" questioning her authority on the content. Lizbet states,

...it's like we see you as somebody of authority, you're of a certain class, but those are

my Black kids, of course some of them can be very rude, but when it comes to some white

male students, I get this pushback, like who does she think she is, it's really the authority

on this particular issue. Why do I have to sit in her class for all this time. So, you get this

occasional not answering questions, be quiet in the class, passive aggressive type of

aura.

Additionally, Lizbet described the tension within her department among faculty members, where only one tenured Black female faculty member existed. This faculty member was also Lizbet's doctoral advisor, someone that Lizbet intentionally sought out, to serve as her dissertation chair. As a Black female, Lizbet sought out the aforementioned faculty member who has been serving as her chair and supported Lizbet in her dissertation thus far, despite challenges from other faculty members. She stated, "I've learned to understand very early the nuances and even the very blatant acts in this department, because we are still in this space called the United States, where there is a lot of race and prejudice". Pierce (1995) states, "In both racism and sexism there is a never-ending struggle by a designated, demeaned group to obtain sufficient support, so that offenders can no longer abuse, exploit, injure, and humiliate solely because of an individual's skin color or gender" (p. 280). As a form of support, the relationship between Lizbet and her advisor is crucial to her success in the future.

Mary described an all too common scenario in academia. In her experience Mary discusses the departure of one of her committee members who recently left the university highlighting the *interlocking oppression* experienced by Black women in academia.

...our department's pretty white at a staff level, and it does seem as if the female staff and

faculty are kind of disproportionately charged with projects outside of their research and

teaching...We just had our only black female professor leave for another university.

Jane, a GTA from a country outside of the United States described her reluctance to discuss issues of race and ethnicity within the course she taught:

I'm pretty scared about talking something race and those things. Like sometimes in the

class they will ask me about my perspective about the [Ctry 1] president and the prob-

lems between [Ctry1] and [Ctry2]; also, what do I think about the American president or

this kind of thing? Normally I don't share any of my opinions on these kinds of questions.

It's just as a minority right here, I don't feel safe talking about this kind of stuff. I never

talk about race toward an African American. I never touch this type of topic. Especially

in class, we have the ABCs (American Born Chinese). They would definitely learn better

if they were in the environment to learn [Lang1] back home, but I will never say that they

have a better advantage to learn [Lang1].

Collins (2015) states of intersectional knowledge, "Individuals and groups differentially placed within intersecting systems of power have different points of view on their own and others' experiences with complex social inequalities, typically advancing knowledge projects that reflect their social locations within power relations" (p. 14). These points of view are like vantage points by which we view the world depending on experiences we have as individuals. The GTAs in this study expressed vantage points that reflect a synergy of effects stemming from racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism. A "guiding assumption" as Collins (2015) describes, refers to the way in which intersectional inquiry approaches social location, identity, and intersecting sys-

tems of power. In this study, multiple categories of intersecting systems are at work as partici-

pants describe race, ethnicity, nationality, language, gender, age, class, and academic rank.

"These mutually constructing categories underlie and shape intersecting systems of power; the

power relations of racism and sexism, for example, are interrelated" (Collins, 2015, p. 14). To

reiterate, the ways in which GTAs reflected on their experiences reflects the intersectional way

of knowing, on that is not defined by one aspect of self, but rather one that is built upon systems

of interlocking oppression (Combahee River Collective, 1977).

White Privilege

Each of the participants were aware of the diverse characteristics of students, such as

class, race, ethnicity, and gender. Most of the white GTAs mentioned their "whiteness" and how

this might impact how their students view them. Leonardo (2002) differentiates, " 'Whiteness' is

a racial discourse, whereas the category of 'white people' represents a socially constructed

identity, usually based on skin color" (p. 31). *Whiteness* as a perspective differs from *being white*

in that whiteness is associated with privilege and "supported by material practices and

institutions" (p. 32). In this study, when participants referred to being white, they often

referenced their whiteness and the notion that they were acknowledging white privilege at work

in their experiences. They often framed this as white privilege and not having their identity

questioned or under attack. For Anna, her experience coming to the university was the first time

she reflected on her own privilege as a white woman in the south. As Anna states:

> *I never really had to think about my own privilege before I came here. So very few of my*
>
> *students have a middle-class background like I did. So, I think I've really become aware*
>
> *of ways in which the world around me doesn't really challenge my identity, but supports*
>
> *and gives me the privilege to say that race doesn't matter, and class doesn't matter, and*

gender doesn't matter; because in a lot of ways, I'm unfolded into a system, you know

that supports me…

Michelle described her privilege and how she tries to be supportive to students in the courses she teaches. She also described the realization of the disparity between the students that are majors in the program versus students that are not in the major:

I have certain privileges to as like a white person whose family has supported them. Not

every artist has a supportive family; and my family, even though they have no idea what I

do, they're still like, "Go [Michelle]." So, I just try to be mindful of the fact that not eve-

rybody has that sort of support system, and to be as supportive as I can be as part of their

support system. I'm also very aware that our bachelor program is really white, and we're

teaching an undergraduate population that's not; and so, as much as I can, I try to en-

courage my students to talk about their experiences and to talk to each other, especially

too about their experiences because there are certain things that I may not be able to

identify with.

Bryant, a white male GTA, described his experiences working with students of color, acknowledging how he might be perceived:

Being a male; especially being a white male, I feel I have to be gentler. I don't know if

that is necessarily the right word, especially in the environment currently in this nation.

There are a lot of bad things happening to a lot of people of different races and, or

genders than myself. I don't understand what that is like. I'm very privileged in that way.

Grace described how it was important to disclose her privilege to students to create an openness in the classroom climate:

I have seen how my graduate program has its own systemic injustices and I also am

aware of how important it is for me to be aware of these things in my interactions with

my students and particularly when I'm talking about privilege and being able to be open

about the fact there are going to be times when I may say something that offends you.

GTAs in the study are aware of the ways in which race and gender play in their experiences as

graduate students and GTAs. The nature of the description of events suggest that they cannot

easily tease apart aspects of their identity, attributing their experience to only one facet of their

identity, reflecting the intersectionality at work in their academic lives.

"Baptism by Fire": The Challenges and Barriers of Learning to Teach

Learning from mistakes and "getting burned"

This theme surfaced through an interview with Lizbet, whereby she described her

transition to teaching as SESU. Lizbet has had a career in the private and public sector, prior to

returning to graduate school, and now she is in the final stages of completing her PhD. She has

adult children and describes her role among students as a caring and rigorous approach. Lizbet is

from another country, but a resident of the city where the university is located. She describes her

initial transition to teaching at the university as a "Baptism by Fire ", an analogy used to describe

the learning process (and getting burned) and beginning teaching at an institution. It is the

immersion and surrender to the process of learning how to survive. There isn't necessarily

someone to guide the process, and it can be difficult for GTAs. Lizbet stated:

…it's like you just learn and you get burned, as you go through the process, there's

nobody to say, 'hey watch out this is what is gonna happen to you'. So, you immerse

yourself in the process and you learn from your mistakes, you learn from the experiences

and there isn't anyone to say, 'well you know maybe this is how you navigate' it's

basically, you are being on your own in that particular path to teaching, to balancing…

Other GTAs described similar experiences of learning on-the-job or being assigned a course only a few days prior to the start of the semester. Gladys had taught at another college prior to coming to the university, and she described the panic when she arrived a day after classes had started, due to issues with attaining her visa. Gladys stated, "So I missed day one of orientation week, which I thought given previous experiences, was just like I was missing one day. Turns out that day was the entirety of teacher training, which was a bit of a shock." Although she had missed the orientation, Gladys relied on her prior teaching experience to pull it all together to be able to teach a solid course that fall. She stated, "That first semester, I just taught my materials from [prior institution] it was like, 'I don't have time, I can't read a textbook, absorb it in 3 weeks'. What I can do is I know I can teach a pretty solid [title] class, we're just going to do that". This type of "on-the-job-training" tests GTAs to practice what they have learned in their pedagogical training in order to implement in the dynamic classroom environment.

Renee described a months-long case involving academic dishonesty and criminal behavior. While she described having support from her department initially, the process of disciplinary action was emotionally taxing and intense, and she had never experienced the process before. Renee expressed feeling on her own, for the most part, during the process. Greg also discussed academic dishonesty and conflicting feelings about dealing with issues of plagiarism. Another GTA explained how she had assigned "zeroes" to students who plagiarized. In each of these cases, the GTAs were uncertain about how to navigate departmental and institutional level action, while remaining cognizant of the issues students face. They also seemed to convey a sense that students do not always understand the ramifications of academic dishonesty or even fully grasp the concept itself.

Mary, having taught for the first time in college described feeling anxious about teaching college students, and although she was comfortable with asking for help, she understood why someone would rather not seek help for fear of judgment. Mary stated:

I'm not shy about going and asking if I have a question, but I certainly can imagine a world in which somebody is having a problem; and is afraid to ask because they're afraid they'll be judged or whatever; and so, they don't ask. Then they end up in a not so great place.

Sydney shared a similar view:

My personal opinion, I feel like I'm, a lot of people don't want to admit that they're struggling because I feel like the attitude is when we're brought in, we should know how to do this. They hired us, so we should know how to do it. And I don't think anyone wants to admit that they don't know how to do this because they've never done it before and they're not told how to teach.

Accessing support can be difficult for GTAs who do not want to be viewed as incompetent. This could be problematic for GTAs with no teaching experience, who are reluctant to ask for help when they might need it.

Teaching undergraduates in introductory courses was also challenging for GTAs because many of the introductory courses included freshmen or students that were required to be in the course. Mary also explained the nature of the introductory course she had taught and some of the challenges teaching introductory courses:

They're there reluctantly. The other thing especially in the fall, is you get students coming right out of high school who have had bad experiences with teachers; they're not very trusting. Some of them are first generation college students in their families. There's

a lot of extra hurdles to get over with that basic course, especially during fall semester, in

my experience.

The Unintended "Skimming Effect"

Three GTAs described instances of having held prior fellowships that didn't require them, or prevented opportunities, to teach, which Sullivan (1991) refers to as the "skimming effect". As Grace states, "I was on a research fellowship for my first four years here, which was fantastic and really great, and at the same time it prevented me from being able to do much with teaching." In Grace's case, she had earned a prestigious research fellowship, and due to the restrictions on graduate workload and funding, she was not allowed to perform teaching duties. Toward the end of her fellowship, she decided to teach in order to gain experience she would need in an academic position in the future. Jane also described having a fellowship where she did not need to teach initially. Later on, in her studies, her enjoyment of teaching and research interests aligned, so she was still able to teach. In both Grace and Jane's cases, they could have chosen not to teach, but to the benefit of the department, these two skilled teachers (and highly sought-after doctoral students with many options), chose to teach.

Kory also described getting a fellowship that would increase his salary, but that the funding was pulled after only a year or two. In his case, he had to teach as part of the requirements set forth by the department, and to be able to earn the tuition waiver. Because of restrictions placed on graduate students, their workload, and funding, some are not able to teach. In this case, each of these GTAs ended up teaching, but it is clear that the fellowships are attractive not only because of the financial support, but because they can limit the duties associated with other forms of graduate work such as teaching. These limits as graduate students can be frustrating, especially as graduate students navigate additional work in order to support

themselves. Also, the role as graduate student can be frustrating for GTAs who are in between student and employee of the university, as Jamie explains:

> *I've never been in the situation where I was considered a student, but I was an employee.*
>
> *It's a very odd position to be in. I mean, I don't know what it's like at other places*
>
> *because I've never been in this position, but I think that creates a lot of problems. Like,*
>
> *the moment I say I'm a PhD student, I don't get treated the way that faculty gets treated;*
>
> *but I'm teaching classes.*

In her case, Jamie is a teacher with extensive teaching experience, but her classification as a student creates differences for her status within the department. It should be mentioned that she was a faculty member at a prior institution, so it is possible that this dynamic is quite different than her previous situation.

Experts in Knowledge and Practice

GTAs in general, represent those at the forefront of scholarship and research in their respective fields. In this study, it was clear that the GTAs in the study are contributing to scholarship through their commitments to academic excellence and work in their respective fields. This theme is derived from examples of how GTAs situate themselves among their diverse roles in academia. All of them expressed how teaching has been a valued part of their experience, and many of them plan on teaching in the future, if the opportunity is present.

Experts in Industry

Some of the GTAs in the study, especially those in communications, marketing, journalism, broadcasting, and the arts, had vast industry experience prior to starting graduate school. Some had worked for large corporations, traveling around the world, or had held positions in companies. Avi worked in a marketing position traveling all over the world, eventually coming to the United States for work for a large marketing firm. His interest and

aspirations to attain a PhD are directly related to his prior experiences in business and marketing. One GTA had her own company prior to starting graduate school and explains how this expertise gave her insight into what students need to be most successful in her field. As Jax states, "They [undergrads] need jobs now and she [new dept head] has been incredibly receptive to talking about these small improvements that can be internally exercised for the betterment of the undergrad." These internal changes include purchasing supplies and equipment that the students would need to practice skills in industry settings. However, without the insight of fresh perspectives exhibited by GTAs like Jax, coming from industry, it is not clear if these changes would have occurred. Lizbet came from the broadcast journalism industry and has experience working in television and as an administrator at another institution. She regularly draws on her experiences to share with students the possible options available to them after successful degree completion. Industry experience for these GTAs was a concrete way they could relate the course content to relevant industry expectations that they could share with students.

Integrating Commitment to Research and Teaching

Throughout the interviews, when I asked about their scholarship, I was surprised to learn about the role that teaching played in the lives of the GTAs. For Jane, her dissertation topic was directly related to her work in the classroom. Furthermore, her future goals after her PhD included working with teachers and classroom research. For Renee, she also expressed her teaching as being integrated to her research and has published multiple articles focused on pedagogical strategies to implement in college classrooms. She intends to make teaching a part of her career, while recognizing that her research is highly important to her future goals of working at a research-intensive institution. Grace expressed a deep sense of purpose in her work, stating:

Through teaching, through research, through things, I've been doing the things that are important to me. That gives that sense of purpose… I have a lot of criticisms about our department and how it's run and how various mentors treat their students and things like that, and at the same time, we personally, I've just been able to see a lot of growth in myself as a scientist, as a teacher. I use my science to inform how I teach.

Another GTA stated, "I feel like once I taught, I better understood my own research". This sentiment was expressed again and again with GTAs who experienced first-hand what they were learning in their research as they applied it to their teaching. Four of the GTAs interviewed had dissertation topics directly related to their teaching. Others described the use of research in teaching as informing their practice, providing a theory-to-practice connection. Bryant, a very experienced teacher both in college and K-12 settings described the intense work and planning that goes into his teaching. "Anybody who says teaching is easy is lying to themselves. Good teachers will make it look easy". Bryant also described the importance of teaching in his role as a GTA but connected this to a purpose beyond the role of GTA. When asked about how he understands his teaching and research in graduate school, Bryant stated:

Teaching is more important. The research is great because it will hopefully help us a better way of teaching a topic, but to the students that I'm working with now, it won't benefit them, and they deserve my focus. Even though it might not necessarily be; and I'm not going to speak for everybody; I have a feeling it's not what most graduate students would say. I feel most of them would put their research ahead of their teaching; maybe that same number split that I said, just on the opposite side because their research is what's going to benefit them personally. Yes, the research will benefit me. I'm happy that it will benefit me, but the teaching benefits the students and me. The research does not

benefit my current students. Benefit students that I've never seen. Students that I might

never see. Is that unimportant? No, it's very important. I want to be able to help them

too, but this is the more immediate concern. Yeah, the scholarship aspect of it is

important. I do not feel it is important as the teaching aspect of it.

With this quote, Bryant explains the impact of research, recognizing his most important job is to

impact students "in the now". This reflects a certain awareness of the capacity of research

informed teaching to impact students, but also the lagging effect that research has often times.

While Bryant values his research and scholarship, he maintains that teaching is his primary

focus.

Caring and Empathetic Teachers

Prior research on the perceptions of GTAs tells us that GTAs are viewed as relatable to

undergraduate students. This notion of relatability was present and pervasive through the

interviews. The GTAs in the study expressed concern and empathy toward students and their

circumstances that do not always mirror the ideal situations of privilege in academia. For

instance, Grace explained how rather than consider what her students lacked in the course, she

utilized a learning philosophy based on a strengths-based approach:

That cultural humility, being able to look at my students from a strengths-based

approach, that sort of thing. The level of understanding that I have for my students, it's so

easy to judge people and all humans engage in fundamental attribution error, so this idea

that if something, if you observe a behavior you blame the person and you don't take the

situation into consideration. Or the system into consideration, right? That's something

that I feel like personally, being able to be open to these new ideas, being willing to

accept these changes in myself and to be more open and to try to bring in a little more

> *humility into the way that I look at things has been really important in terms of being*
>
> *able to establish the rapport that I have with my students and to be able to maintain it.*

This "humility" as Grace describes informs her interactions with students in such a way that she seeks to understand them rather than judge them. Additionally, GTAs expressed the importance of being available to students, communicating via email, answering their questions, considering how their experience and circumstance might impact their understanding of what it means, as Gladys put it, "do college". Additionally, Gladys explained how in her teaching experience at SESU, she has had to consider better ways to address student absence. In one instance, she mentioned a student that was incarcerated, and the impact that incarceration has on students trying to make a better life for themselves. Anna teaches writing, and she explained how she talks to students and the mutual respect she demonstrates in her interactions with students:

> *Also, too; they say that I'm easy to talk to. They really feel like I treat them like peers, as*
>
> *opposed to kids. You know, life happens; so, whenever they're having struggles, we talk*
>
> *about it, and we work with it, and they feel I'm respectful of their own challenges;…I'm*
>
> *able to bring that into the classroom to help them; to show them how I look at the world*
>
> *around me now that I know these things and I know these research methods to encourage*
>
> *them too; but I also shared my journey as a writer with them too. I figure since I'm a*
>
> *writing teacher in a writing; if I'm struggling with a writing assignment, then you know,*
>
> *we're all in this together.*

Sydney explained the importance of learning student names in order to be able to address them by name. This practice has created a classroom where she is able to engage in positive communication with students, and even lighthearted communication at times. In her experience as a teacher, learning students' names is a way she is able to connect more personally,

acknowledging students and seeing them individually. About developing rapport Sydney explains:

> *So, I the best way in my opinion, to build rapport is to learn their names, to spend the first couple days walking around saying their names, talking to them, like give them things to do in groups or whatever, and walk around and talk to them and say their names and talk to them.*

Thia explained her role as facilitator in the classroom:

> *I am a facilitator more than anything else. I don't feel as if I have a lot of content in my head, right; and you could probably learn everything that's in my head out of a book or from documentaries and stuff. I don't have any unique knowledge that's not available elsewhere, but what I do have is the ability to connect my students with big sets of knowledge that they want, whether that is skills, opportunities, literatures, theory; whatever it is, and that's my job; is to connect the students to the thing that they need.*

Mary echoed this when she also described how she wanted to be "more like a guide than the dictator". Additionally, Mary explained her use of projects as a way to allow for student creativity while centering their own experiences:

> *I assume that probably some of them are more interested in videos. Some are probably interested in podcasting. Some of them are probably interested in photography. Obviously, I have to find a way to make it equitable, right; because somebody just can't go take 10 pictures and hold the same weight as a paper. I try and just make it a little more of a choose your own adventure for them, so it's not so standardized because everybody learns differently. Everybody's got different experiences.*

Michelle explained her journey toward becoming more socially aware in her teaching:

Then as I was becoming a teacher myself, I started to be very concerned about fairness and education; and I started to become much more aware of social justice issues and things like that. So, I really kind of threw myself into diversity and inclusion work, and schools; and through that I did a lot of anti-bias training and professional development in that sense; which forced me to really consider like where I am coming from and what's impacting my reactions and things like that.

Multiple times throughout the study, GTAs highlighted how they viewed their role as facilitator, engaging students in discussion, group work, utilizing instructional strategies that forefront student experience. They also discussed ways in which they actively sought to engage feminist, critical, and social justice themes into their teaching. Additionally, Thia mentioned a handful of students she has interacted with that have been homeless at one point or another. For Thia, also having dealt with homelessness, she described an experience that so few in academia have likely experienced:

When you don't have a permanent place to live, you crash in another place. This is where I've been homeless before. A crash pad is usually a place that is relatively safe that you can crash sleep. None of your stuff is there, but it's a safe place to sleep, maybe charge your phone; that's another thing and maybe take a shower. So, you don't get to leave all of your stuff in the dorm, but you do have a safe place to sleep and a safe place to shower, get internet to do your homework, and that kind of thing.

Thia described how she provides students with a Google phone number to text her via cell phone if needed. Since it is not her personal number, she can accept calls as she feels comfortable. Her primary reason for this method of communication was due to the fact that not all students have a laptop and that most if not all are able to communicate via text on a smart phone. These are some

of examples of how GTAs in the study considered the experiences of students to help them be successful, and their commitment was inspiring to say the least.

Aspirations for Teaching

Participants had varied reasons for pursuing advanced degrees in their fields, and most of the aspirations were varied as well. A commonality among the aspirations of the GTAs was to be best prepared for the job opportunity. Most of the GTAs described wanting to "go into the professoriate". As Keisha explains, "I want to do research and teach; not a full teaching position, but research and teaching. I love writing, but I think the teaching helps you put your work into practice. It helps you test your work and also give back in some way. It's just a good break from sitting there. Writing and research can be very lonely; a lonely support, so getting a chance to interact with humans is helpful when you're teaching, but I definitely want to do both." This quote from Keisha overlaps with another theme of "integrated research and teaching".

Sydney felt as though her dream job would be out of reach considering the competitive nature of tenured potions in her field and the reality of academia today. Sydney states:

> *That's absolutely always, always been my dream job. Unfortunately, in [subject], those jobs are almost impossible to come by. The competition is way too fierce. Best case scenario I would get a job in Idaho or something. So that doesn't even feel possible. So more realistically I will have to go a different path.*

For Susanna, the future was primarily dependent on the existing job opportunities in a competitive field. In addition to the hundreds of jobs she was applying for, she explained a realistic approach that meant she might not necessarily find the ideal tenured position. With a certain amount of desperation, similar to other participants, Susanna stated, "I just would like to have a job. I would like not to be a student, because I can't stand my family asking me when I'm going to graduate."

Summary

Park (2004) suggests that GTAs occupy a "niche" within the academic system in North America, a clearly defined role and source of teaching labor within academia. The name itself, GTA, is somewhat of a misnomer, because although they are labeled as "assistants" each of the GTAs in this study were the instructor of record for the course they taught, and some were teaching upper level courses in their respective departments. While Worthen (1992) described GTAs' teaching experiences as "frustrating" due to lacking experience in teaching, the GTAs in this study viewed their teaching experiences positively. Although none of the GTAs mentioned neoliberalism directly, there were undertones in the interviews to suggest the GTAs were very aware of the changes occurring in academia, recognizing limited resources, fewer tenured positions, and the focus on procuring grants to engage in noteworthy research projects.

The GTAs' experiences with pedagogical training largely reflect what Rushin, De Saix, Lumsden, Streubel, Summers, and Bernson (1997) stated, "Even when there is some formal structure in the GTA training program such as workshops, seminars, and courses, these experiences are often brief, and follow-up activities are loosely defined or non-existent" (p. 90). With the exception of a handful of individuals who have teaching mentors, most of the GTAs are learning to teach on their own, using past experience as their best learning tool. For those that have a teaching mentor, this is highly valuable and rare because of the time investment required for apprentice style training. Perhaps one of the big differences of GTAs today is the access to technology that is becoming more and more important in academia. The GTAs in the study described using technology for authentic assessment of student work, and they use technology and learning platforms regularly to grade work, organize courses, and present content.

Finally, GTAs in this study reflected on their teaching experiences in ways that suggest their competencies as teachers. Simpson and Smith (1993) worked with faculty from across the

country to create a catalogue of teaching competencies necessary for GTAs to be successful

teachers. Similar to the findings of Simpson and Smith (1993) the GTAs in this study reflect a

number of competencies, including embracing teaching as a form of scholarship, encouraging

active collaboration among students, the creative use of technology, and addressing aspects of

diversity within the courses they teach. They communicate the importance of the content in ways

that is relevant to student experience, and they do so in a way that respects individual difference.

Although the GTAs vary significantly from one another, they are navigating their teaching lives

with resourcefulness and openness. They are able to access support when needed (for the most

part), and they are learning how to deal with the politics of academia.

5 DISCUSSION

Limitations

The most significant limitation to this study was time. Qualitative interviews are time in-tensive. With more time in the field, I could have interviewed more participants and perhaps learned more about the experiences of GTAs at SESU. Another limitation is the self-select nature of the study. Because I did not have direct access to the names of individuals (protection of those that are students), I had to rely solely on those that volunteered to participate via an email sent from a listserv. It is likely that the experiences of those that reached out to me about participating in a study "about GTA experiences" felt very strongly about their experiences, and thus had something to say. Although there were GTAs from many departments and disciplines, the study lacked a minority male perspective, something that would have added a dimension of complex-ity, especially when discussing race and gender in higher education. Finally, as mentioned ear-lier, a possible limitation where the method is considered relates to the formation of better theo-retical memos. I used a memo process but could have done a better job creating more thoughtful theoretical and analytical memos that helped guide the data collection and analysis.

Conclusions

The qualitative case study presented here sought to examine the teaching experiences and pedagogical development of 20 GTAs at a large, predominately minority serving institution. The GTAs came from different places throughout the United States and worldwide. They shared their thoughts and experiences about teaching, indicating what has worked for them in their pedagogi-cal development. Although most of the GTAs had teaching experience prior to their GTA assign-ments at SESU, they explained the adjustments they made to teaching at SESU and some of the challenges they experienced along the way. Although the scope of the project changed over time,

it became clear that the GTAs engage in a variety of support mechanisms that impact their peda-

gogical development. In addition to pedagogical courses and trainings that the GTAs receive in

the department, GTAs also supplement their professional development by attending workshops,

conferences, and engaging in research projects related to teaching. Peers provided a significant

form of support for the GTAs, and they also provided support to peers. Especially for the more

experienced GTAs, they felt comfortable assisting fellow GTAs. A few of the GTAs mentioned

the crucial support of a mentor and/or advisor that supported them in their teaching or academic

role. I only identified one case where a doctoral advisor was also the teaching mentor. In this

case, the goals for teaching development, research, and scholarship were highly aligned, and cre-

ated a cohesiveness to the experience of the GTA. Although most of the cases indicated that the

teaching mentor was separate from the advising mentor, this was not detrimental. The distinction

helped GTAs to understand "who to go to, and for what reasons".

GTAs are aware of the diversity of the undergraduate population, and they generally em-

brace the difference in thought among the students in the courses. GTAs were also aware of sys-

temic racism and sexism within academia. For Black female GTAs, they were conscious of the

lack of diverse mentors in their respective departments, and they had experiences that were not

easily identifiable as racism, but they clearly impacted the GTAs perspective on being a Black

woman in academia. Hopefully, with additional support, more women and men from underrepre-

sented groups will continue to enter academia to serve as mentors to the increasingly diverse

pool of graduate students. It is noteworthy that I did not have any Black males participate in the

study. This requires additional examination as to why there were no Black male GTAs in the

study. I do not know the demographic make-up of all of the GTAs at SESU, but this might pro-

vide additional insight into understanding more about the GTA population at SESU.

GTAs in the study described learning experiences that were hard at times, but generally useful learning lessons that they were able to use going forward. In addition to learning "How to teach" GTAs navigate a host of other issues, including course management, grading, handling student conduct within the course, and course logistics. In the introductory courses, there seemed to be a safety net, by which GTAs could "do just enough" and be able to execute the goals for the course. These pre-regimented courses provided syllabi, texts, assignment descriptions, assessments, and other materials (power points and lectures) for the course. Even with the pre-regimented materials, teaching a course effectively still presented a challenge for the GTAs. Some of teaching is class management, dealing with student behavior, and addressing course policies such as absences and assignment deadlines. The GTAs also described communicating with students as a major part of their teaching. For students with lackluster experiences in high school, the feedback from a college teacher can have a positive or negative impact. Many of the GTAs described their role as facilitator, a role that likely some of the students at SESU have not experienced before.

The GTAs each had a level of commitment to becoming a better teacher. Some of the GTAs were not expecting to like teaching, but through teaching experiences they recognized the reward of working with students. Some of this reward was a feeling of "purpose" or "making a difference". Some of the GTAs described the hours of work they put into teaching and the ease with which they were able to focus on teaching at the expense of their academic work. For some the teaching role was prioritized because of the impact that it had on students. For other GTAs, they recognized the role of teaching in their experience, but felt that their primary role was that

of graduate student, and the priority was graduation. For others, they felt like their teaching informed their scholarship, and vice versa. They were able to engage in research that informed their teaching with supportive faculty who value teaching in college.

My Assumptions Challenged

This study challenged some of my preconceptions about the individuals that would participate in the study. For instance, I assumed that more GTAs would explain the challenges of teaching or lament about how inexperienced they were. Instead, while they did explain some challenges, they also talked about how much they had learned. They talked about how they were able to facilitate learning experiences that were relevant and interesting to students, and they helped students work through complex content. I expected to hear about the pedagogy training and its uselessness (to a certain extent), but I didn't expect to hear about the role of informal support and the important role of this structure within GTA experience. Peer support was the most mentioned form of teaching support that the GTAs mentioned, and this non-judgmental source of support seemed to be crucial in helping the GTAs to execute their teaching duties successfully. Finally, I thought that more training might be the answer, but it seems that this was a point of frustration for many participants that had little extra time to devote to their professional development. GTAs in this study are far from representative of GTAs across various institutions, but they affirm much of what we already know about pedagogical training. In fact, it doesn't seem necessarily that GTAs need more training (quantity), but rather what they need is better training (quality). They need advisors who understand, department chairs who listen, and peers to share concerns. They need pedagogy courses that are taught by seasoned teachers who are responsive and available to help when needed. They need social justice advocates to support and grow critical and emancipatory approaches to teaching. I saw glimmers of these elements

throughout the interviews, and I cannot help but feel excitement about where these GTAs will continue to work and teach.

Implications

There are many more students today pursuing graduate education. Many of these graduate students will serve in a teaching role throughout their studies. This research was meant to demonstrate the need for support systems that not only provide pedagogical training, but also contribute to the personal satisfaction of GTAs teaching in the university. The infrastructure, as it stands, does not support GTAs in a comprehensive manner, and I hope to provide a strong argument for why universities should make this type of support more available. I am seeing more and more examples of great supports at my own institution and I hope this study will only advance the argument further.

More pedagogical and academic support for GTAs will likely improve the quality of the experiences in a graduate program, thereby increasing rates of degree completion among graduate students. Pedagogical preparation and training in graduate school will also support GTAs to be more proficient teachers, if they go into academic positions. The implications of improving the quality of experiences for graduate students will likely impact undergraduate students.

Future Research

GTA experiences reflect needs that present opportunities for future research. While not all GTAs pursue careers in academia, many of them will. These GTAs expressed goals to obtain positions as scholars, researchers, and teachers, thus they are the future of academia. Additionally, these GTAs are a part of a larger success story, which are the undergraduates at SESU. SESU ranks among the highest for graduating Black undergraduates and has hugely impacted the disparity between racial and ethnic minorities for graduation. GTAs are an important part of the

success of undergraduate students, and their support and pedagogical development is an invest-

ment that colleges and universities should consider in order to improve the quality of education

for all students, especially those that have been marginalized in the past.

Future research should identify ways to support GTAs in effective ways, making best use

of resources, especially time. Most of the GTAs in the study knew about various programs of-

fered, and while some took advantage of programs, workshops, or conferences, the main barrier

to participation was time. It is easy to say that GTAs need more programs, but this doesn't ad-

dress the issue with what is currently taking place. Each GTA in the study completed a pedagogy

course as part of the requirements for the assistantship. Perhaps future research could examine

the pedagogy course and its scope to better understand how to make the pedagogy course more

useful. Since this is an existing structure in place, it would be a good place to start by improving

the pedagogy course.

Suggestions to Support GTAs

Despite some changes in budgetary allotments, most large universities have centers

dedicated to the work of providing support and training to those that teach at the university.

Some of these centers are able to provide financial incentives in the form of awards in order to

reward faculty who are involved in scholarly teaching, recognizing them at the institutional level.

The GTAs know about the support that exists, but time is the limiting factor. There are many

existing programs and opportunities that GTAs can partake in, and these programs should

continue to market their programming to graduate students, especially to recognize and reward

excellence in teaching. Teaching and Learning Center (TLC) should continue to provide

opportunities, recognizing that scheduling and time can be a major barrier, but for those that

need help, the center is a major resource.

Teaching assistantships can be very useful for GTAs when they are working with an effective teacher. Ideally, it would be valuable for each GTA to "shadow" or "assist" faculty members as they teach. For the few GTAs in the study that worked alongside faculty, this was a valuable experience. The time and resources are limiting factors. Also, it may not be possible to have each GTA matched with a faculty member. Departments should continue to coordinate pedagogy training courses for all graduate students who are teaching. The teaching activities can relate to research activities and should be integrated when possible. Departments should create realistic expectations for graduate students with clear guidelines and policies, so GTAs know what to do when issues arise. Regular training with a non-judgmental, faculty member who can support GTAs as part of their explicit work duties (with compensation for faculty mentors). This faculty member can also serve as a point person to support GTAs in the department. The university can provide detailed guidelines and accountability measures for these training sessions. The university should also continue to provide orientation to all graduate students and provide basic logistical and policy information for those that will be teaching. Once initiated, the university should provide additional opportunities for development through sustained contact.

Cohorts were mentioned as peer-groups that GTAs "came in with" or that they started in the same year. Also, the designation of a pedagogy mentor, someone outside of the GTA's research advisor, who is not a supervisor (non-judgmental) that is available to support GTAs in the department would be instrumental. The formalized training the university provided to GTAs was less important to GTA development than informal support. For most if not all GTAs, the pedagogy course was insufficient to address the challenges of teaching, and these training sessions often included heavy theoretical leanings, with less strategies for addressing classroom management, tackling challenging conversations, and addressing complex issues such as implicit

bias and social justice. The informal support for GTAs cannot be underestimated. In order to

support the development of GTAs, peer relationships should be strengthened. Spaces must be

available for graduate students to meet, write, work and congregate. For the GTAs that

mentioned strong peer networks, the cohort model could be an attributing factor, by which a

group of graduate students in similar positions begin a journey together and can rely on one

another for non-judgmental, professional and emotional support.

In addition to the TLC, there should be spaces dedicated to GTAs. This can be in the

form of an office or cubicle, which most of the GTAs mentioned, but there should also be access

to spaces for GTAs to meet together like a work room or lounge. A space that I have used in the

past was recently shut down after a round of budget cuts at the university. Although there were

other spaces to meet and do work, the closure of this space was impactful to me as a student. I

found other spaces to work, but I had to adjust to be able to find accessible space when other

tables, computers, or chairs were taken.

The biggest and perhaps most difficult change that is needed is the culture and climate of

teaching at large research-intensive institutions. Teaching duties are delegated to clinical faculty,

non-tenured faculty, or lecturers, with the tenured (more powerful) positions assigned to research

faculty. Teaching positions are also taught by adjunct faculty who are not tenured and teaching

courses to earn additional compensation. Students that want to teach should not be excluded

because of fellowships or funding status. GTAs are aware of the politics and power in academia,

but unless changes are made, they repeat behaviors that are observed as part of their graduate

experience.

The Ideal GTA Experience

Susanna had what I would describe as an ideal situation. In her interview she described

the support of an advisor/dissertation chair, that was also teaching a course in which she was

assisting. This case of mentorship was the most aligned in that the GTA was teaching a course, alongside an advisor, and the course was described as "intertwined" with the research. This reflects key elements that are crucial for GTAs to grow and develop in their roles as teachers.

She began her teaching experience with an expert faculty member and TA'ed with this faculty member, who was also her dissertation chair/advisor. After a semester or two of assisting with the course, the participant became the instructor of record for the course and has been teaching it for multiple semesters. The course consists of upper level students, most of which are in the major, and it is medium sized (between 40-60 students). When teaching the course, the participant explained her knowledge of the topic, which also is her area of research, and the teaching support of her advisor. This situation is unique, and impossible to replicate among the hundreds of GTAs at SESU. It is important to recognize the elements that make this an ideal situation. First is the gradual transition into teaching. This participant operated as an apprentice, learning the ins and outs of the course, asking questions, and learning from the faculty member how to manage the course. She graded homework assignments, discussed student expectations, and learned about course development. The second element of this case is that the course reflected the participants' research. When asked about how the research and teaching relate, this case was the most aligned in terms of research area and teaching content. Finally, the support experienced from the person also supporting research is unique and valuable because the teaching and research identity can co-exist without fear of judgement or reprisal. While I would typically argue that the support for teaching should come from an externally located faculty member, in this case it seemed to bolster the teaching identity of the participant, who had no prior teaching experience.

Closing Remarks

      This work is far from done. Hopefully, more research will continue to examine strategies and methods that can solve the most pressing problems facing our society. As I write this paragraph, we are in the midst of a global pandemic. I have witnessed first-hand the adaptability of teachers, researchers, and the like work tirelessly to create opportunities for students to learn. With this kind of ingenuity, I know that we will be better than okay.

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APPENDICES

Interview Protocol Example Questions

Interview questions included the following:

1) Describe your educational background. What do you teach?

2) Do you participate in pedagogical training or professional development?

3) Describe your support networks. Who do you go to when you need help?

4) How do you feel supported or not in your teaching?

5) Describe your role as GTA, student, researcher, etc.

6) Describe your experiences teaching at this university. What are students like?

7) In what ways does race, gender, class or other characteristics impact how you under-

stand your experiences in higher education?

8) What are your future plans?