



Policy Rhetoric vs. Practiced Reality: A Critical Case Study of Grow Your Own Teacher Programs

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Abstract: This study investigates the design and implementation of a Grow Your Own (GYO) school district-university partnership in a midwestern U.S. city. Drawing on a qualitative case study approach, I conducted interviews with 11 policy actors and analyzed key policy documents to examine the alignment between program goals and actual practices. While the program offers valuable supports such as mentorship and financial assistance, the findings reveal mismatches regarding partners' understanding of problem identification, policy intentions, implementation, and outcomes. Some of the challenges faced by the program include attention to district-level inequities, inconsistent preparation in culturally responsive teaching, and limited induction support. Political pressures and unstable funding further threaten program sustainability. The study recommends strengthening community-based partnerships, adopting transparent placement practices, and embedding ongoing reflection in curricula and support structures.

Keywords: teacher preparation; school-university partnership; Grow Your Own teacher program; critical policy analysis

Retórica de las políticas frente a la realidad en la práctica: Un estudio de caso crítico de los programas *Grow Your Own* para la formación docente

Resumen: Este estudio investiga el diseño y la implementación de una alianza entre un distrito escolar y una universidad en el marco de un programa *Grow Your Own* (GYO) en una ciudad del Medio Oeste de Estados Unidos. Basándome en un enfoque cualitativo de estudio de caso, realicé entrevistas con 11 actores de política educativa y analicé documentos clave de política para examinar la correspondencia entre los objetivos del programa y las prácticas efectivamente implementadas. Si bien el programa ofrece apoyos valiosos, como mentoría y asistencia financiera, los hallazgos revelan discrepancias en la comprensión que tienen los socios sobre la identificación del problema, las intenciones de la política, su implementación y sus resultados. Entre los desafíos que enfrenta el programa se encuentran la atención insuficiente a las desigualdades a nivel distrital, la preparación inconsistente en enseñanza culturalmente pertinente y un apoyo limitado durante la inserción profesional docente. Las presiones políticas y la inestabilidad del financiamiento amenazan además la sostenibilidad del programa. El estudio recomienda fortalecer las alianzas basadas en la comunidad, adoptar prácticas transparentes de asignación de plazas e incorporar procesos continuos de reflexión en los currículos y las estructuras de apoyo.

Palabras clave: formación docente; alianza escuela-universidad; programa docente *Grow Your Own*; análisis crítico de políticas

Retórica das políticas versus realidade na prática: Um estudo de caso crítico dos programas *Grow Your Own* para formação de professores

Resumo: Este estudo investiga o desenho e a implementação de uma parceria entre um distrito escolar e uma universidade no âmbito de um programa *Grow Your Own* (GYO) em uma cidade do Meio-Oeste dos Estados Unidos. Com base em uma abordagem qualitativa de estudo de caso, realizei entrevistas com 11 atores de políticas educacionais e analisei documentos-chave de política para examinar o alinhamento entre os objetivos do programa e as práticas efetivamente implementadas. Embora o programa ofereça apoios valiosos, como mentoria e assistência financeira, os resultados revelam divergências na compreensão dos parceiros sobre a identificação do problema, as intenções da política, sua implementação e seus resultados. Entre os desafios enfrentados pelo programa estão a atenção insuficiente às desigualdades em nível distrital, a preparação inconsistente para o ensino culturalmente responsivo e o apoio limitado à indução profissional docente. Pressões políticas e instabilidade no financiamento também ameaçam a sustentabilidade do programa. O estudo recomenda o fortalecimento de parcerias baseadas na comunidade, a adoção de práticas transparentes de alocação de vagas e a incorporação de processos contínuos de reflexão nos currículos e nas estruturas de apoio.

Palavras-chave: formação de professores; parceria escola-universidade; programa *Grow Your Own* para formação de professores; análise crítica de políticas

Policy Rhetoric vs. Practiced Reality: A Critical Case Study of Grow Your Own Teacher Programs

Grow Your Own (GYO) teacher programs have emerged as a promising policy strategy to address persistent teacher shortages and diversify the teaching workforce in recent years (Gist, 2019; Valenzuela, 2017). These programs aim to “recruit, prepare, and place community members to become teachers through partnerships between educator preparation programs, school districts or local educational agencies, and community-based organizations” (Gist, 2022a, p. 3). By drawing on local talent, GYO initiatives show positive impacts on teacher recruitment, retention, diversity, and

student outcomes (Blazar et al., 2024; Carl & Seelig, 2023; Garcia et al., 2019; Garcia & Muñiz, 2020; Swanson, 2011; Wan et al., 2022). Framed as grassroots efforts, many GYO programs are also grounded in a broader racial and social justice agenda (Gist, 2022a; Rogers-Ard et al., 2019). Given that, both federal and state investments in GYO programs have increased notably in recent years, such as the National Professional Development Grant (Garcia & Silva, 2022) and the 2021 American Families Plan (The White House, 2021).

Despite the growing popularity of GYO initiatives as a policy response to teacher shortages and to diversify educator workforce, limited attention has been given to their roots in community-based, justice-oriented movements. Historically, GYO efforts emerged from grassroots coalitions in which families, community organizations, and local activists collaborated to challenge inequitable schooling structures and build a teacher workforce anchored in local cultural knowledge, political commitment, and community empowerment (Skinner et al., 2011). For example, one of the earliest federally funded GYO initiatives—Project Nueva Generación—grew out of a partnership between the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and Chicago State University, grounded in a shared educational philosophy that parent mentors’ cultural knowledge, bilingual abilities, and lived experiences made them uniquely qualified to serve the students in their communities (Skinner, 2010). These origins position GYO not simply as a pipeline strategy, but as a community-driven intervention aimed at redistributing power within educational institutions, disrupting racialized hiring practices, and cultivating “community teachers” who are prepared to teach for justice (Gist, 2022b; Murrell, 2001). Attention to these foundational commitments is critical because, without them, GYO programs risk being reduced to conventional recruitment mechanisms that replicate, rather than challenge, the structural inequities they were designed to address.

As GYO programs have scaled and attracted increased policy attention, there is a pressing need to examine whether contemporary iterations align with—or have drifted from—these origins in grassroots racial and social justice movements (Gist, 2022a; Rogers-Ard et al., 2019). Edwards and Kraft (2025) caution that, in the absence of a clearly defined set of core characteristics, the term “Grow Your Own” has been increasingly applied to a wide range of teacher pipeline programs with varying purposes and practices. This vagueness risks weakening the movement’s core commitment to authentic community engagement and empowerment. Moreover, prevailing neoliberal logics depoliticize diversity and equity by oversimplifying their complexity and reconstructing their meaning in economic terms (Mikelatou & Arvanitis, 2023). Such reframing fails to address the oppressive structures and systems that perpetuate educational inequity, threatening to reduce the transformative goals of GYO programs to symbolic gestures or superficial commitments (Davila, 2024; Perkins, 2025). These tensions highlight the need to revisit the foundational values of GYO as central lenses for both policy design and program evaluation.

In this article, I employ Young and Diem’s (2017) critical policy analysis as the analytical lens to examine “the difference between policy rhetoric and practiced realities” of GYO programs. Recognizing the wide variation in GYO programs that limits the generalizability of impact evaluations (Edwards & Kraft, 2025), I use a qualitative case study design to investigate Apple State University-Lily School District Grow Your Own partnership (pseudonyms, hereafter the Apple-Lily GYO program), located in a state in the Midwest. In addition, I draw on Honig’s (2006) framework on policy implementation process (PIP) to explore how multi-level factors—including federal, state, and local contexts—and the diverse actors involved have shaped the evolution of the GYO program. I address the question: *what were the perceptions and experiences of policy actors (current GYO participants and alumni, university administrators and faculty, educators/mentors, school district partners, and state legislators) engaging in GYO programs?* More specifically, to what extent do stakeholders’ perceptions and experiences align or diverge from the stated intentions and rhetoric of the GYO program? And

in what ways have stakeholders' experiences informed or influenced the ongoing development and adaptation of the program? In doing so, this study seeks to illuminate how grassroots experiences can serve as critical feedback loops to inform more equitable and community-responsive teacher preparation pathways.

Overall, the study highlights key supports provided by the GYO program, such as mentorship and financial assistance. However, it also uncovers significant misalignments between problem identification, policy intentions, implementation processes, and actual outcomes—discrepancies further complicated by the evolving political and educational landscape. Through the narratives of GYO graduates, the study also brings to light an often-overlooked component of these programs: the lack of structured teacher induction. The following sections present the study's conceptual framework and relevant literature, followed by the case context and key findings. I conclude with the study's contributions to research and practice, offering recommendations for future researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

Conceptual Framework

In this study, the conceptual framework integrates critical policy analysis (CPA; Young & Diem, 2017) with the policy implementation process (PIP) framework (Honig, 2006). CPA is an approach that examines policies through a critical lens, emphasizing the importance of understanding “the complex connections between education and the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society—and the movements that are trying to interrupt these relations” (Apple, 2019, p. 276). From this perspective, policy is not neutral but rather a practice of power—the production of normative discourse for the reproduction of inequality, hegemony, and subordinated political subjects” (Levinson et al., 2009, p. 774). Young & Diem (2017) outline that CPA focuses on five areas of policy: (1) difference between policy rhetoric and practiced reality; (2) policy roots and processes; (3) distribution of power, resources, and knowledge as well as the creation of policy “winners” and “losers”; (4) social stratification and the broader effect a given policy has on relationships of inequality and privilege; and (5) the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of nondominant groups. Anchored in this critical worldview, GYO programs are framed as “an extremely complex, often contradictory process” that requires scrutinization of policy contexts, those involved, and the evolution of policy over time (Young & Diem, 2017, p. 5). I specifically grounded my research in this tradition to interrogate the policy rhetoric of GYO programs—often centered on community empowerment, diversity, and equity. In doing so, this study contributes to a growing body of scholarship that exposes the gaps between equity-oriented rhetoric and implementation realities in GYO programs (Edwards & Kraft, 2025; Hamman et al., 2023; Ingle et al., 2023; Marrun & Clark, 2020; Perkins, 2025).

Here, policy rhetoric refers to policymakers' stated vision of the new policies, while gaps between rhetoric and practice often emerge during implementation (Pak Tee, 2008). Given this, I draw on the policy implementation process (PIP) framework by Honig (2006) to situate my analysis and contextualize it within the larger sphere of CPA by providing a systematic structure through which to examine where and how rhetoric-reality gaps manifest. The PIP framework focuses on the interactions between three key dimensions—policy, people, and places—and how these dimensions shape the implementation process. Each dimension reflects a critical component of implementation and highlights the dynamic, context-sensitive nature of this process.

The “policy” dimension reveals how design influences implementation, including three sub-domains: goals, targets, and tools (Honig, 2006). *Goals* are the explicit and implicit objectives that the policy seeks to achieve. *Targets* refer to people and organizations named in policy designs as those slated for change. *Tools* encompass the instruments, resources, and strategies employed to achieve

the policy's goals and engage its targets. This dimension directly points to CPA's tenet concerning differences between policy rhetoric and practiced reality, pushing the analysis beyond a surface-level reading of stated goals, designated targets, and prescribed tools.

The "people" dimension focuses on the stakeholders involved in the policy process. This includes not only formally designated policy targets but also those who informally influence or participate in policy design, as previously discussed in the "policy" dimension. Broadly, this spectrum encompasses policymakers and implementers—individuals, organizations, communities, and associations—who collectively shape the trajectory of a policy. In this study, I used the term "policy actors" to capture this dimension as it recognizes the active roles these individuals and entities play in policy processes (McLaughlin, 2006). A CPA orientation further extends this dimension to center the voices and lived experiences of those from historically marginalized communities and to examine how power is distributed and negotiated among them during implementation.

Finally, the dimension of "places" points to both geographic locations and contextual conditions where the policy is implemented (Honig, 2006), spanning five interrelated policy levels—national, regional or multistate, state, substate, and local (McLaughlin, 2006). For GYO programs, attending to "place" is particularly important because these initiatives are fundamentally community-based, grounded in the local cultural, social, economic, and historical contexts (Gist, 2022a).

CPA draws attention not only to how these multi-level contexts shape the enactment, adaptation, and sustainability of GYO programs, but also to their broader effects on social inequity and stratification. For example, recent federal policy shifts, such as the removal of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives and rescinding of grants designed to support teacher preparation for marginalized communities, could negatively affect GYO programs' efforts to diversify the teacher workforce, reducing the resources available to sustain their equity-focused mission (Schwartz, 2025).

The CPA and PIP frameworks offer complementary strengths for analyzing GYO programs. CPA provides the critical orientation—interrogating foundational assumptions, power dynamics, and discrepancies between policy rhetoric and the lived realities of implementation. PIP, in turn, provides the analytical structure to systematically trace how these discrepancies manifest, organizing the analysis around three interacting dimensions. Through this integration, the policy dimension is examined not only for how design influences implementation but also for what is omitted, depoliticized, or contradicted in stated goals. The people dimension centers the voices of those most directly affected by policy, revealing how power operates through and upon different actors. The places dimension attends to how macro-level political forces interact with local realities to enable or constrain equity-oriented goals. Together, these complementary lenses reveal how GYO programs are co-constructed, mediated by local contexts, and continuously negotiated in practice, yielding actionable insights to guide more equitable and effective policy implementation.

Literature Review

The Blueprint: Murrell's Community Teacher Framework

Centered on the foundational concept of "community," GYO researchers (Chu & Weems, 2024; Gist, 2022b) often turn to Murrell's (2001) community teacher framework as a conceptual blueprint for designing and analyzing GYO programs. As Gist (2022a) argues, GYO programs must go beyond recruitment to include preparation practices grounded in community knowledge and a commitment to equity and justice. At the heart of this approach is the preparation of "community teachers"—educators who not only originate from the communities

they serve but who also draw on a deep understanding of local culture, context, and needs to inform their practice.

Murrell (2001) conceptualizes community teachers as accomplished practitioners in urban teaching and learning who draw on richly contextualized knowledge of culture, community, and identity in their professional work with children and families in diverse urban communities. Their practice is shaped by their own cultural, political, and racial identities, which influence how they engage with—and are situated within—their communities. He further emphasizes practice must occur *in context*—where historical, cultural, and political realities are integrated with a critical awareness of educators’ own positionality within the instructional environment. This calls for a practice-oriented, and community-dedicated framework for preparing urban educators—one that builds new collaborative systems among universities, schools, and communities.

Murrell’s (2001) community teacher framework marks a critical departure from approaches that depict communities in deficit-based or dehumanizing ways (Gist, 2022b). Central to this framework are two interrelated goals: first, recruiting future community teachers—especially Black and Hispanic students seeking purpose and agency through education—and second, supporting adults already engaged in youth-focused community work as they pursue formal teaching certification. These aims, alongside the broader vision of community-rooted teacher preparation, constitute the foundational assumptions that inform the design and implementation of GYO programs.

Contemporary GYO Programs in the 21st Century

Since 2000, GYO programs have largely reflected the two partnership goals articulated in Murrell’s (2001) community teacher framework: recruiting future community teachers and organizing adults currently working with young people in community-based program. In practice, GYO programs mainly tap two groups of potential candidates: (1) precollegiate students, including middle and high school students, and (2) adult community members, such as paraprofessionals, parents, and community activists (Gist et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2017).

The precollegiate pathway that targets middle and high school students represents a forward-looking strategy to expose them to knowledge and experiences about teaching early in their career trajectory, and thus possibly building a long-term pipeline of future educators (Chu & Weems, 2024; Coffey et al., 2019; Hamman et al., 2023; Ingle et al., 2023; Wan et al., 2022). These programs are often implemented through initiatives such as Educators Rising programs (Eckert, 2020) or teacher-focused career and technical education (CTE) tracks (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019; Margot et al., 2024), which provide structured opportunities for high school students to gain exposure to the teaching profession and develop an initial interest in becoming educators (Muñiz, 2020). They are also the most common type of GYO program nationwide (Garcia, 2020).

Adult community members represent a more immediate solution to teacher shortages. These candidates often include non-certified school staff (e.g., paraprofessionals) who are already working in schools, parents and community activists (Muñiz, 2020). Gist et al. (2019a) noted that paraprofessional pathways, typically identified for career ladder programs, differ from other community recruits such as parents, community activists and cafeteria workers. Programs targeting paraprofessionals often leverage the candidates’ existing roles within schools, emphasizing their prior experience working directly with students and familiarity with the school system (Myers et al., 2023). These programs are designed to provide paraprofessionals with the necessary credentials and training to transition into certified teaching roles, often offering flexible scheduling, financial support, and pathways that build on their established presence in schools (Fogle et al., 2024; Myers et al., 2023; Worthen et al., 2022). In contrast, programs like Project Nueva Generación focus on

recruiting parents and community activists, individuals who may not have formal ties to the school system but possess deep connections to the community and a strong understanding of its cultural and linguistic needs (Brown, 2011).

GYO programs pursue multiple goals shaped by local contexts and needs (Gist, 2022a). The most commonly stated one is to address persistent teacher shortages (Blazar et al., 2024; Carl & Seelig, 2023; Garcia et al., 2019; Garcia & Muñiz, 2020; Swanson, 2011; Wan et al., 2022) and to diversify teacher workforce by increasing the representation of typically nontraditional teacher candidates (i.e., not White, or male; Gist et al., 2019; Rogers-Ard et al., 2019). For example, Pennsylvania launched a GYO initiative called Aspiring to Educate Program (A2E) to specifically address the state's severe disparity between students and teachers of color (Norris et al., 2024). One of the sub-projects of A2E, Diversity and Equity, Within the Education Profession (DEEP IMPACT), focusing on increasing the representation of teacher candidates from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, with a specific focus on African American and Latinx teacher candidates, recruited a cohort of 22 Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) students. Another example is the Call me MiSTER program in Clemson University in South Carolina. This program was developed in collaboration with more than 20 private historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) and grow-your-own African American male elementary-level teachers (Jones et al., 2019).

In particular, GYO programs are advocated to increase the number of teachers from specific fields such as special education teachers (Brown & Riden, 2023; Brusnahan & Gatti, 2023; Fallona & Johnson, 2019; Fogle et al., 2024; Hedin et al., 2024; Sutton et al., 2014) and bilingual or teaching of English as a second language (ESL) teachers (Cramer & Ryan, 2023; Madda & Schultz, 2009; Worthen et al., 2022). The very first federally funded GYO partnership between the Logan Square Neighborhood Association and the Bilingual Education Program at Chicago State University—Project Nueva Generación—was to prepare community members to become bilingual teachers for the neighborhood schools (Skinner & Schultz, 2011).

However, researchers noted that while increasing diversity is one of the primary goals of GYO programs, some GYO initiatives lack a clear and explicit definition of what diversity entails, which can limit the effectiveness of these programs in achieving their stated goals (Hamman et al., 2023; Ingle et al., 2023). For example, Ingle et al. (2023) found that while the Teaching and Learning Career Pathway (TLCP) at the University of Louisville seeks to support the recruitment of a diverse and effective educator workforce, the majority of participants are white female students as the program fails to clearly define diversity and set recruiting targets and process in measurable ways. Also, guidance counselors and teachers in this program—who are perceived as gatekeepers received little trainings or guidance on recruiting a diverse pool of student participants. Similarly, Hamman et al. (2023) examined GYO funding application materials of local education agencies and reported that while most applicants acknowledge the needs of recruiting candidates from diverse demographic groups, few of them explicate race/ethnicity as a criterion for selection, which is likely to undermine the success of most programs from adequately diversifying the teacher talent pool.

Support

GYO programs often offer a comprehensive and diverse network of support designed to help participants thrive academically and professionally. One common support mechanism is financial assistance, frequently delivered in the form of scholarships, stipends, or tuition assistance (Muñiz, 2020). Financial incentives significantly reduce economic barriers for aspiring educators, enabling them to successfully complete teacher education programs (Myers et al., 2023; Simieou et al., 2021). Additionally, they effectively attract potential participants, broadening recruitment efforts

and strengthening overall program involvement (Chu & Weems, 2024). Such support can also relieve school districts from substantial financial commitments they would otherwise incur for professional development (Simieou et al., 2021).

GYO programs also provide academic support to further enhance participant success (Brown & Riden, 2023). For high school pathways such as Pathways2Teaching, the curriculum not only encourages teaching as a career choice but also equips students with vital “college knowledge.” Students receive academic support and mentorship from college students, which helps them understand academic expectations, college life, and the complex processes involved in college and scholarship applications (Bianco et al., 2011). At the university level, GYO initiatives typically offer structured tutoring, academic advising, cohort models, assistance with navigating credential requirements, and assessment support, thereby bolstering participants’ educational achievements (Muñiz, 2020; Valenzuela, 2017).

Mentorship constitutes another cornerstone of GYO program success, offering participants valuable guidance and direct insights from experienced educators (Brusnahan & Gatti, 2023; Chu & Weems, 2024; Cramer & Ryan, 2023; Hood, 2021; Norris et al., 2024; Worthen et al., 2022). Chu and Weems (2024) found that aspiring teachers view their GYO mentors as critical role models who substantially influence their professional trajectories, empowering them with confidence and practical knowledge for careers in education. These mentorship relationships often extend beyond academic settings, fostering deep emotional connections characterized by care and familial bonds, where mentors become akin to “second parents,” “family members,” or trusted “friends.” Furthermore, the active involvement of community organizations significantly bolsters the effectiveness and impact of school-university GYO initiatives. A notable example is Project Nueva Generación, which later evolved into GYO Illinois initiatives, integrating seven community organizations in its development (Skinner, 2011). These organizations collaborated closely with local school administrators, implementing innovative strategies for providing practical school-based experiences to GYO candidates and evaluating their teaching capabilities in focused, meaningful ways.

Challenges

A central challenge consistently highlighted in the literature on GYO programs is financial sustainability (Garcia, 2020). Many GYO programs depend heavily on temporary grant funding, creating uncertainty about long-term viability once funding cycles conclude. This reliance on short-term financing limits the capacity of programs to provide consistent and adequate financial support, consequently impacting participants’ ability to complete their training (Muñiz, 2020; Valenzuela, 2017). Moreover, the amount of available financial aid often falls short of meeting the economic needs of participants, particularly those from non-traditional or paraprofessional backgrounds who frequently manage work and family obligations alongside educational responsibilities (Edwards & Kraft, 2025; Irizarry, 2007; Simieou et al., 2021; Skinner et al., 2011).

Another significant challenge relates to participant retention. Gist et al. (2019a) highlighted a notable gap in the research concerning the long-term effectiveness and impact of high school pipeline programs compared to community-driven pipelines. Many pre-collegiate programs focus predominantly on generating initial interest in teaching among high school students, without necessarily fostering a long-term commitment to teaching within their own communities. Recruitment-centric approaches alone are insufficient in resolving broader issues related to teacher shortages and attrition (Jackson & Wake, 2022). For example, Quiñones (2018) reported that Puerto Rican teachers who entered the profession through a high school pipeline faced systemic barriers

within teacher education programs and schools that restricted their successful and sustained integration into teaching roles within their local communities.

Explicit efforts toward diversity, equity, and inclusion is another possible pitfall of GYO programs (Edwards, 2024; Gist, 2022a). Recent research has documented how GYO programs undermine their own equity goals through vague definitions of diversity that fail to set measurable recruitment targets and systemic barriers within teacher education programs and schools that restrict the sustained integration of teachers of color (Hamman et al., 2023; Ingle et al., 2023; Quinones, 2018). Addressing these deeply rooted inequities requires sustained organizational commitment and intentional strategies beyond recruitment, involving systematic support, inclusive program design, and responsive mentorship practices tailored to diverse participant needs.

The existing literature on GYO programs primarily consists of detailed program descriptions outlining operational practices (Burnett et al., 2019; Coffey et al., 2019; Fielder, 1996; Garcia et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2019) or comprehensive literature reviews categorizing multiple GYO initiatives based on varied criteria (Gist et al., 2019; Valenzuela, 2017), with more recent studies including interviews with GYO participants and alumni (Carl & Seelig, 2023; Chu & Weems, 2024; Escobedo, 2024; Quinones, 2018). However, a significant gap remains in capturing the perspectives of a broader range of policy actors—such as university administrators, school district partners, student mentors, and policymakers—to assess whether these programs are being implemented as intended and how they are perceived in practice. This is especially crucial in light of emerging concerns regarding the superficial or incomplete implementation of GYO programs (Edwards & Kraft, 2025; Marrun & Clark, 2020). Key questions remain unanswered: how are communities conceptualized and embedded within GYO program structures? How are problems like teacher shortages defined and addressed? And to what extent do these programs truly fulfill their stated goals of diversifying and stabilizing the teacher workforce? These questions underscore the need for a critical policy analysis that examines not only the design and outcomes of GYO programs, but also the power dynamics and ideological assumptions that influence their implementation.

Method

As the conceptual framework (Kivunja, 2018), critical policy analysis (CPA) not only serves as the theoretical lens but also an methodological approach to critically examine the policy processes within Grow Your Own (GYO) programs and to challenge taken-for-granted assumptions, situating the research within a qualitative paradigm (Young & Diem, 2017). To further ground the analysis, a qualitative case study design is adopted, focusing specifically on the Apple-Lily GYO program. Employing a case study design enables in-depth exploration of “how” and “why” questions, facilitating a deeper understanding of complex policy dynamics within the Apple-Lily partnership by integrating multiple stakeholder perspectives and diverse sources of evidence (Simons, 2009; Yin, 2017).

Study Context

The Apple-Lily GYO program was established in December 2021. Lily School District (“District”) is an urban public school district located in a midsize city in a midwestern state. As the largest public school district in its state, the District serves more than 20,000 students across over 50 schools spanning from early childhood centers to high schools.

The District’s student population has become increasingly diverse in recent years. Currently, the student body is predominantly White, with growing representation from Hispanic, Black, multiracial, and Asian students. More than half of the student body qualifies for free or reduced

lunch, signaling significant economic diversity within the district. In contrast, the District's teaching workforce remains overwhelmingly White.

Apple State University ("University") is a public institution located in the same city as Lily School District. As the second-largest university in the state by enrollment, the University served more than 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students, the majority of whom are from within the state. Notably, the University's College of Education is recognized as one of the leading producers of new teachers in the state.

The Apple-Lily GYO program is a district-wide initiative through two distinct pathways—the high school pathway aimed at high school juniors and seniors from the District interested in pursuing teaching careers and the college pathway which targets college students already accepted into education-related degree programs in the University. Participants in both pathways receive financial support, mentorship, and specialized programming, committing in return to teach in the District for four consecutive years upon program completion to have their full loan amounts forgiven. To date, the program has enrolled three cohorts totaling 16 students. The first cohort, consisting of four students, graduated in 2024 and has been actively teaching in the District for nearly one year. Among these initial graduates, three majored in elementary education and one specialized in secondary English.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study involved semi-structured interviews and policy-related documentation. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used to gather the experiences and insights of individuals representing a broad range of perspectives on the GYO program, allowing participants to define the situation based on their own experiences and focus on what they considered most relevant (Alexiadou, 2001; Merriam, 1998). A purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 2014) was employed to intentionally target policy actors—including individuals and organizations who were formally named in or informally participated in the design, development, and implementation of the GYO policy (Honig, 2006). Snowball sampling was also used to "identify cases of interest from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 159), enabling the researcher to reach a diverse range of stakeholders.

The researcher initially contacted the director of the Apple-Lily GYO program, who served as a key liaison throughout the recruitment process. The director disseminated recruitment materials to various stakeholders, including current GYO participants, university administrators, program alumni currently employed within the District, student mentors, and school district coordinators. After two rounds of recruitment, a total of 11 participants joined the study.

Interviews were scheduled at mutually convenient times and conducted via Zoom, lasting approximately 45–60 minutes each. Role-specific interview guides with open-ended questions and follow-up probes were developed for policy actors in different positions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. During transcription, the researcher maintained analytic memos to document additional thoughts, reflections, and impressions. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned and any mention of identifying personal traits or institutional affiliations was removed.

In addition, the researcher collected and examined policy texts related to the Apple-Lily GYO program across national, state and local levels. These documents included: state-level policy documentation; program descriptions (e.g., Saturday Summit curriculum); implementation plans (e.g., recruitment flyers, faculty recruitment communications); student performance reports; and strategic planning documents (e.g., annual workbook, partnership goals alignment). The author's

university Institutional Review Board, together with Apple State University and the Lily School District, reviewed and approved all recruitment and data collection methods.

Participants

Eventually, 11 policy actors were interviewed in the Apple -Lily GYO program, including four university personnel, two current GYO students, two alumni, two school district coordinators, and one district teacher serving as a GYO mentor. To ensure participant anonymity, pseudonyms are assigned to all participants (Table 1). It should be noted that demographic information was not systematically collected from participants, as program coordinators expressed caution around diversity-related discussions given the District's removal of DEI from its public agenda amid shifting federal policy. Additionally, given the small sample size and specificity of the program context, including demographic details could compromise participant anonymity.

Table 1

Research Participants and Their Roles

Participants (Pseudonym)	Role
Carol	University Program Coordinator/Faculty
Kelly	University Academic Advisor
River	University Access and Success Coach
Jane	University Director of Professional Education Services
Mary	District Program Coordinator/Administrator
Tom	District Program Coordinator/Administrator
Mia	Current Participant/University Student/Substitute Teacher
Nick	Current Participant/University Student/Teacher Candidate
Claire	Program Graduate/District Teacher
Anya	Program Graduate/District Teacher
Alice	District Teacher/Teacher Mentor

Data Analysis

I followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral, a recursive and iterative process in which the researcher moves through overlapping phase of data management, reading and memoing, describing, classifying and interpreting, and representing and visualizing. This approach is well suited for CPA as it allows for continuous refinement of emerging themes as multiple stakeholder perspectives and policy documents were examined in relation to one another. I began by transcribing semi-structured interviews and uploading documents and artifacts with NVivo 14 (Lumivero, 2023). I then reviewed all data to gain a general understanding and maintained analytic memos—brief narratives that capture reflections and connect data into thematic cluster (Miles et al., 2013). Memoing began prior to the first coding cycle and continued through the final write-up. Then, I took a sequential approach to code the data, by initially applying a deductive approach, followed by an inductive approach (Azungah, 2018). I created a provisional “start list” of codes, suggested by Saldaña (2021), that correspond to the dimensions of the conceptual framework: policy, people and place (Table 2). I further coded for goals, targets, and tools within the policy dimension, roles of policy actors within the people dimension, and various levels of policy contexts within the places dimension. Additionally, to integrate CPA into coding scheme, I used Versus coding to interrogate each dimension for discrepancies between policy rhetoric and practiced reality

(Saldaña, 2021). For example, codes under “policy” examined the commonly stated intentions of GYO programs against their implementation realities, codes under “people” attended to who benefited from and who was marginalized in the policy process, and codes under “places” identified the positive and negative context effects on GYO programs. This deductive coding structure was applied to both interviews and policy documents.

Following this deductive phase, I conducted an inductive analysis to identify themes grounded in participants’ narratives. Using values coding, in vivo coding, and evaluation coding (Saldaña, 2021), I captured participants’ perceptions, beliefs, and evaluations of the GYO program. Codes such as resistance and engagement were used to distinguish challenges and critiques from affirming experiences and supportive structures. To synthesize and visualize relationships among codes, I ran matrix coding queries in NVivo 14. Through this iterative process, patterns and categories emerged, revealing both consistencies and tensions in how the program was perceived and experienced.

Table 2

Provisional Deductive Code List – Examples

Conceptual Framework Tenets	Coding Techniques	Codes
Policy	Descriptive coding	Goals; targets; tools
	Versus coding	Policy rhetoric (e.g., equity, diversity, community empowerment); practiced reality
People	Attribute coding	Current program participants; graduated program participants; University program coordinators; District program coordinators; District student mentors, etc.
	Versus coding	Winners (people who benefited from the policy); losers (people who were marginalized in the policy process)
Places	Descriptive coding	Federal; state; District; University, etc.
	Attribute coding	Demographics, size, etc.
	Versus coding	Supportive; constraining (contexts that support vs. impede GYO program design and implementation)

Findings

This section presents two central themes that emerged from the analysis of interviews and program documents, highlighting the complex interplay between policy design and implementation and participants’ lived experiences in the Grow Your Own (GYO) program. First, while the program aimed to address local needs such as teacher shortages and workforce diversity, its design was shaped—and at times constrained—by broader political forces and overlooked disparities between schools within the same district. Second, although participants received mentorship, advising, and financial aid, they still faced unanticipated challenges that complicated their paths. These findings underscore the tension between policy rhetoric and lived experiences, as well as between intended outcomes and actual implementation.

Framing the GYO Program Intention by Local and Macro Contexts

Three codes emerged under this theme from program documents and participant interviews. Framed through Honig's (2006) PIP policy dimension, these codes corresponded to its three sub-domains: the pipeline program reflects the policy target—defining who the program aims to recruit and serve; addressing teacher shortages and diversifying the teacher workforce represents the policy goals—articulating what the program seeks to achieve; and cultivating culturally responsive teachers functions as the policy tool—specifying how the program intends to prepare its participants.

Policy Targets: A Pipeline Program

The Apple-Lily GYO program was described as “a pipeline program for students who are currently in the [District] school system to come back and teach in the same school district that they graduated from,” according to Mary, the District program coordinator. On its recruitment flyer, the Apple-Lily GYO program stated its aim “to attract, hire, and retain educators from underrepresented and under-resourced backgrounds,” including District high school and university students. The program further specified eligible groups such as students of color, LGBTQ+ students, students with disabilities, English language learners, those receiving free or reduced lunch, students eligible for homeless assistance, and students from diverse religious backgrounds.

Participants recruited through the high school pathway, like Anya and Mia, demonstrated particularly strong commitments to returning as educators within the District, driven significantly by their personal educational experiences. Anya reflected on her time as a student in the District, acknowledging a profound lack of representation:

I did not see a lot of teachers who look like me in the classroom or even in the content. And I found myself really struggling sometimes to connect with what we were doing in school.

This recognition motivates her to become a teacher and join the GYO program. She described her goal to become a role model who empowers students, stating “I wanted kids who look like me, or even don't look like me, to know that they can be whoever they want and achieve whatever they aspire to.”

However, the term “pipeline,” which implies a direct progression from local communities into local teaching roles, may not fully capture the college pathway. Unlike the high school pathway, which recruited students from within the District, the college pathway targeted university students who may have no prior connection to the local community. Narratives from college pathway participants—such as Claire, who is from a small farming town elsewhere in the state, and Nick, who is from a rural town in another state—highlight varying senses of belonging and commitment to the District. For example, Nick expressed his changes in wanting to stay in the District:

When I first started college, my expectation was, I was just going to go back to [my home state] and teach. That changed about in the middle of my sophomore year when I went to career fair, and I see the differences between teacher pay from the state to [my home state]. Then I was like, I just want to stay in the District or not in the District, but in the State and teach. And then towards the middle of my junior year...because I also coach basketball at the school I student teach, and so that made me want to stay in the District even longer, and then I also last year worked as a behavior paraprofessional at elementary school here in the District, and that connection with the kids and the teachers and administrators that work there made me want to stay in the District a little while

longer and serve the population of students that I'm going to be serving in August.

In contrast, Claire, after teaching for one year in the district, expressed feeling trapped:

I feel pretty trapped in this district. I've had trouble at my school because I don't really get along with my principal. And so for a while I was thinking like, I really want to move out of [the District]. And I felt trapped by this program because if I left, I'd owe all the money back that...I don't have that.

Nick and Claire's opposing feelings and attitudes expose a critical implementation gap in the pipeline rhetoric of the GYO program. While the pipeline metaphor emphasizes community connection, the program provided limited structured opportunities to help college pathway participants who lacked prior ties to the District meaningfully develop that connection.

Policy Goals: Addressing Teaching Shortage and Diversifying the Teacher Workforce. Additionally, the Apple-Lily GYO program intended to address teacher shortages and diversify the teacher workforce. Carol, the University program director, stated "[the program aims to not only] address the nationwide teacher shortage and specifically here in the District... to diversify the teacher workforce ... and prepare them to be culturally responsive teachers."

Tom, the district program coordinator, particularly emphasized the urgency of addressing the shortage, highlighting "a huge list of open jobs available in the District," and noted the critical need "for a lot of teachers and future educators to be present to fill these roles and provide the best experience and services for all of our students because we do have over 25,000 students in the District."

However, when asked for evidence, Tom only cited general district-wide vacancies, overlooking the fact that shortages are disproportionately concentrated in North-side schools serving low-income communities. This lack of contextual specificity undermined the program's effectiveness. Even nearly everyone acknowledged the severe staffing shortages in North-side schools during their interviews, the program did not have specific practice to tackle it. When asked whether the program leaned more toward the North side, Mary, another school district coordinator, noted that "no, not necessarily...it just so happens in our system, a lot of those vacancies are towards the North side of town where you do have some of those more challenging situations and circumstances."

The Apple-Lily GYO program also aimed to diversify the teacher workforce, addressing the discrepancy that, as observed by student demographic data and described by Carol, the University program coordinator, "student demographics are more diverse than the teachers who work with them." Unfortunately, despite widespread support among participants for the program's diversity objectives, Carol revealed a significant setback: explicit references to diversifying the teacher workforce had been removed from the district's GYO webpage due to policy changes and executive orders implemented during President Trump's administration. She explained, "this piece has already been taken off the webpage. So I think what the District has to say is that the program is for everyone."

Policy Tools: Cultivating Culturally Responsive Teachers. The third dimension of the Apple-Lily GYO program's rhetoric, as articulated in its recruitment materials, is to "hire and retain educators focused on culturally responsive teaching and fostering inclusive learning environments." This specific focus was further elaborated in the 2024 strategic plan, under the goal of "enhancing future educators' teaching self-efficacy to promote K-12 students' sense of belonging." Additionally,

this commitment to culturally responsive pedagogy serves as the foundational principle informing the program's core activity, the quarterly Saturday Summits where GYO participants engage with and learn to implement the "eight competencies of culturally responsive teaching," adapted from New America's *Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) Guide* (Muñiz, 2020).

GYO participants and mentors echoed this vision in their reflections on the program. For example, Mia, a sophomore GYO participant, believed the program help future educators to not only be able to lead a classroom and to have effective lessons that are good for a variety of learners, but also to better understand students and their backgrounds, and be able to converse with families well... in a way that would be respectful of their cultures, and where they come from in their background, instead of just focusing on the student's needs.

However, like the diversity intention, this vision was vulnerable to shifting political climates—especially at the federal level under administrations like Trump's that opposed diversity and equity initiatives—which pose significant threats to sustaining culturally responsive curricula. Without sustained commitment and strong institutional support, the program risks falling short of its goal to develop culturally responsive educators. Notably, the Apple-Lily GYO program has been somewhat insulated from these pressures because it is funded by district money rather than federal or state grants. This financial independence has allowed the program to maintain its culturally responsive curricula, particularly the Saturday Summits, which serve as the program's core professional development activity. Carol, the program director, emphasized that the Saturday Summits would continue, viewing them as essential to the program's identity and mission.

Participants' Engagement and Resistance

Although GYO participants in this study came from diverse backgrounds and entered the GYO program through different recruitment pathways, each conveyed a strong attraction to the program's offerings and described feeling significantly supported on their journeys toward becoming teachers. However, the two graduates also acknowledged notable discrepancies between their initial expectations and the practical realities they faced during their first year of teaching.

Financial Aid and Secured Jobs

Participants were strongly drawn to the GYO program by its practical benefits, particularly the scholarship support and guaranteed employment opportunities upon graduation. Claire, one of the graduates, noted her initial attraction to the program came from learning about its substantial financial support. She recalled her professor describing the program as one that "will pay for all of your school," which appealed to her because she wanted to avoid student debt. Claire explained that the program covered two full years of her tuition, leaving her debt-free upon graduation.

Additionally, the assurance of guaranteed employment within the District provided a major incentive, alleviating participants' concerns about job hunting and potentially relocating. Claire noted that knowing she would "for sure have a job" alleviated her concerns about "not being able to find a job and having to move all over the state." Anya, the other graduate, also reflected that "knowing that once I graduated, I would probably almost have a guaranteed job... made me feel better about getting that job when I got out of school."

However, Claire and Anya honestly acknowledged encountering unexpected challenges during their job search, primarily because school preferred experienced educators. Claire recounted,

Most schools were not looking for a first-year teacher because a lot of schools needed experienced teachers who knew what they were doing... So it was hard to find a school that was hiring and willing to take me on.

Although the program offered assistance such as mock interviews and resume guidance, Claire felt it was limited. Despite regularly consulting the program coordinators due to anxiety over the extended job search, their advice largely emphasized perseverance. Claire noted, "I went to them a lot because I was really scared because I was applying for four months. I started in January and I didn't get a job until July and they were like, you just got to stick with it." Similarly, Anya experienced a difficult hiring process, ultimately securing only her current position despite applying extensively across the District.

Support System

Another important factor contributing to participants' engagement in the GYO program is the mentoring and support network. Each participant was thoughtfully matched with a District teacher mentor, facilitating personalized guidance throughout their professional journey. Nick, a senior GYO participant, particularly appreciated the mentorship component, emphasizing its critical role due to his major in history education with limited direct engagement in the College of Education. Nick described his mentor as exceptionally experienced and approachable, stating, "I can ask him about almost anything, and he would have a solution." Despite differences in their student groups, Nick often sought his mentor's guidance for practical classroom challenges, such as classroom management issues or specific student interactions. Mia also underscored her mentor's role in bridging with the District. She explained how her mentor provided resources such as the District's latest math and English learning standards handbooks, allowing her to integrate updated standards into her lesson planning while still enrolled in college. She remarked that having access to these resources allowed her to "apply those standards to lesson plans I'm making now in college and see how standards are changing for math and English at the high school special education level."

In addition, University and District personnel formed a collaborative support team that provided consistent guidance to GYO students throughout their academic and professional journeys. As part of the program structure, each student maintained a performance worksheet documenting feedback from mentors and classroom instructors, as well as records of meetings with the support team. For example, classroom observations and feedback from instructors and mentors indicated that Zoey struggled to "consistently demonstrate responsibility and dependability" and to "demonstrate punctuality with submission of work, communication, and meeting attendance." The support team, including Carol and Tom, scheduled several meetings with Zoey and determined that her behaviors were connected to financial barriers, including demanding night-shift work that affected her ability to attend morning commitments. In response, the team developed an individualized plan with monthly goals and regular check-ins. University and district personnel coordinated across multiple fronts, such as replanning her academic schedule, organizing body-doubling work sessions, and helping her secure alternative employment.

Claire and Anya, who have independently taught for nearly a year, expressed particular gratitude toward Tom, Mary, and Carol for their ongoing assistance when encountering school-based challenges. For instance, Claire recalled experiencing difficulties during her first year at an under-resourced school, where she lacked sufficient copies of a book needed for her class's book club activity. Upon reaching out to Tom, he "came up to me during recess and he was like, Hey, I got you these books. And he like, played with my kids and he gave me the books."

Similarly, Anya faced administrative challenges when attempting to set up a co-teaching arrangement in her classroom, encountering resistance from her principal. Mary, the district program coordinator, intervened by facilitating communication between Anya and her principal, and Carol, the university program director, proactively offered herself as a co-teacher. For current participants like Mia, who are still navigating their university education, additional support from University personnel, including success and access coaches and academic advisors, has been essential in helping them successfully steer through college life and academic requirements. These varied forms of support collectively enhance participants' experiences and significantly contribute to their continued engagement and professional development within the program.

While mentorship was widely recognized as valuable, questions remained regarding the consistency, quality, and systematic integration of mentoring within GYO program structures. For the Apple-Lily GYO program, the mentorship requirement is minimal—participants meet with mentors only once per month—and largely relies on the initiative of both parties to sustain meaningful relationships. Claire, a program graduate, reported minimal interaction, meeting with her mentor only as required and experiencing no ongoing connection after graduation. Reflecting on this relationship, Claire explained:

I haven't spoken to her in, I think, two years. She was assigned to me, but she didn't particularly care. When I did go to speak with her, she would just kind of be like, "Oh, how's school?" There wasn't really a connection there. She didn't really try to build a relationship.

Feelings of Unpreparedness

Both Claire and Anya, who graduated last year and have been independently teaching for nearly a year, revealed feeling notably unprepared to manage the student populations in the current schools which are different from their student teaching schools. Claire described a challenging first year in a high-needs school, where she encountered situations far beyond her expectations. She candidly admitted,

I knew these kids would have problems, and I thought I should brush up on trauma-informed practices, but nothing really prepares you... It gets ugly sometimes. They are much more difficult to manage because they are traumatized and constantly in a survival state.

Anya echoed similar feelings, sharing that she "really struggled and am still struggling with managing behaviors" which she "never saw" during her teaching or in her practicum, adding that she "didn't feel prepared at all." She further suggested that "(teachers) have to in the back of your mind, be prepared for...because a teacher, you are going to experience all sorts of behaviors." Therefore, it could be beneficial if they could "jump around to different schools in the district because ... the same district, but each school is just so different."

In addition, they mentioned the additional challenge of adapting to the District's curriculum and evaluation system, which differed significantly from their University training. They suggested targeted training within the GYO program could have eased this transition. Claire shared:

when you learn like curriculum and teaching in college, they could be a little more loose because you could go anywhere once you graduate. But I think that for the specific learning in the Grow Your Own program... (you should learn) like how to read an IEP (Individual Education Plan), how to implement the IEP, how to use a teacher access center, how to record data, how to set up your email account, just stuff like that. So we could actually be more successful because

when I got like when I got hired, I had to learn all that on the fly. I had no idea how to use the, like the district websites and there's no training about it.

The lack of targeted training on District policies and operation systems posed particular challenges for college pathway participants like Claire, who entered without prior ties to the District. These gaps not only intensified their sense of unpreparedness but also further hindered their ability to build meaningful connections with the community, ultimately threatening their commitment to stay.

Challenges Retaining Teachers in Hard-to-Staff Schools

From a macro-level perspective, the GYO program has introduced their graduates to fill vacancies within the District, demonstrating clear initial success. Despite these encouraging numbers, a deeper analysis highlights potential risks arising from the District's inherent demographic diversity, uneven resource allocation, and the Program's lack of targeted interventions to address these "well-known" disparities.

Nearly all interviewees understand schools on the Northside, which predominantly serve students and families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, face significantly greater staffing challenges. Despite this awareness, the program lacks targeted interventions designed explicitly to address these disparities. According to Claire, a GYO graduate, their field experiences and mentorship placements rarely occurred in these high-need Northside schools. Instead, placements frequently occurred in model classrooms led by distinguished educators, often located outside high-need contexts. Claire explained:

They weren't always Title I schools. A lot of the time they were model classrooms. So they were classrooms that were led by like the best teachers they had there. These are like distinguished teachers who are the best in the district that they were selected as like places for student teachers to go and learn.

As previously discussed, Anya and Claire, GYO graduates, candidly expressed feeling unprepared for the realities they encountered during their first year of teaching, including unexpected student behaviors, unfamiliar curricula, and challenging interactions with school administrators. These difficult experiences have led both teachers to seriously consider leaving their current schools for positions within the District that offer more robust support and resources. With a year of experience now on their résumés, they are likely to be more competitive applicants at schools better positioned to provide favorable working conditions.

Anya specifically described her dilemma:

I genuinely love the school district. There's definitely some things I don't agree with, but I feel like with anything, you know, there's some things I like...But I do feel like it's not the district that's challenging me personally. I feel like it's just the school and the demographic and the people, the environment...that's giving me the biggest challenge.

On one hand, Anya felt a deep connection to the District, having been born and raised there, and is strongly committed to fulfilling her four-year teaching obligation. Yet, she also acknowledged feeling increasingly burnt out after her first year. She elaborated:

Our scholarship gave us four years. This is only year one out of the four I have to do as an educator. So I'm kind of stuck between this. I know I don't want to be at this school next year because I'm feeling very burnt out, But also I feel like if I

switch schools and find a school that I really love that I will feel completely different about it because I do know that a lot of it is like the environment you're in and the people you're around that can make such a huge difference.

However, if Claire and Anya leave their current placements, their departures will likely create vacancies to be filled again by inexperienced teachers. Consequently, staffing instability at high-needs schools may continue to persist, reinforcing an ongoing cycle in which less-experienced teachers continually rotate through these challenging environments. Without targeted interventions to improve conditions at these schools, the District risks perpetuating persistent inequities, even as overall vacancy rates may appear improved at a broader district level.

Discussion

This case study contributes to the growing body of literature on Grow Your Own (GYO) programs by offering a critical, empirical, multi-stakeholder perspective on how such initiatives are perceived and experienced across institutional levels. Drawing on Critical Policy Analysis and the Policy Implementation Process framework, this study analyzes policy documents and interviews with policy actors to interrogate the disconnect between policy rhetoric and lived experience, revealing key misalignments between program intentions, design, and implementation.

GYO programs are widely seen as promising strategies to address teacher shortages and diversify the teacher workforce by recruiting and preparing individuals from historically marginalized communities (Bianco & Marin-Paris, 2019; Edwards & Kraft, 2025; Gist, 2019). Grounded in Murrell' (2001) concept of the "community teacher," these programs aim to cultivate educators who possess deep cultural, linguistic, and experiential ties to the communities they serve. Two dominant models characterize these programs: high school-based pathways that introduce students to teaching careers through early exposure and mentorship, and certification support programs that assist paraprofessionals and local college students in obtaining licensure (Edwards & Kraft, 2025). While these models vary in structure and target population, they share a common goal of cultivating a teacher workforce that reflects and serves the needs of local communities.

Adopting and integrating the features and ideals of GYO programs, the Apple-Lily GYO program was designed as a pipeline (Bianco et al., 2011; Quiroz Ávila & Fernández, 2025; Torres et al., 2004) that recruits both high school students in the Lily School District and college students at Apple State University (policy targets), aiming to address teacher shortages and diversify the teacher workforce (policy goals) by cultivating culturally responsive teachers (policy tools). Importantly, the Apple-Lily program extends beyond recruitment—a concern frequently raised by GYO scholars (Gist, 2022a; Simieou et al., 2021)—and aligns with the four key features of Murrell' (2000) Community Teacher Framework. First, each participant is assigned a mentor currently working in the District, providing opportunities to *practice* what they learn at the University in authentic school settings. Second, working alongside these mentors constitutes a co-learning experience with more accomplished teachers, making it a *situated activity*. Third, consistent with the *cultural learning perspective*, participants are prepared not only of "the structure of the content-to-be-learned but also ... in the contexts and communities in which that content is put to productive use" (Murrell, 2000, p. 342). Finally, all participants attend quarterly Saturday Summits where they co-participate in a *community of practice* led by accomplished teachers.

The Apple-Lily GYO program also provided a comprehensive support network consistent with the GYO literature. Participants received financial assistance, academic support, and mentorship which are widely documented as critical pillars to GYO program success (Bianco et al., 2011; Brown & Riden, 2023; Brusnahan & Gatti, 2023; Chu & Weems, 2024; Muñiz, 2020;

Valenzuela, 2017; Worthen et al., 2022). The program covered full tuition and guaranteed employment upon graduation. Each participant was assigned an experienced District teacher as a mentor who worked alongside District and university personnel, such as academic success coaches, to support their learning and professional development.

Despite these promising ideals, findings from the Apple-Lily GYO program revealed several critical challenges in design and implementation, exposing deeper tensions between policy rhetoric and practiced reality, emerging across the policy, people and places dimensions. First, from the policy target aspect, while the program frames itself as a pipeline that cultivates educators from within the community, this rhetoric more accurately describes the high school pathway than the college pathway. High school participants were deeply rooted in the local community, whereas many college-pathway participants had no prior ties to the District. Without prior experience living, growing, and studying in the local community, college-pathway participants may lack the cultural knowledge needed to meaningfully connect their teaching practices to the lived realities of students and families, as well as the sense of belonging and commitment necessary to stay in the community long-term (Murrell, 2001; Simieou et al., 2021). Moreover, it becomes more challenging to retain GYO participants when the program had limited structured efforts to help participants familiarize themselves with district policies and regulations. These gaps raise concerns about whether college-pathway participants can authentically engage with the local community and sustain their commitment beyond the program's contractual requirements.

Second, the interplay between the policy and places dimensions of the PIP framework, viewed through CPA's emphasis on equity and power, illuminates how the program's original goal of diversifying the teacher workforce was deprioritized. In response to the Trump administration's rollback of DEI initiatives, explicit diversity language was removed from the program public-facing materials. While the full impact on the Apple-Lily program's next cohort remains unclear by the time of data collection, such policy shifts could significantly affect the sustainability and programming of GYO initiatives nationwide, particularly those reliant on federal funding. What is particularly concerning, however, is not simply the removal of language itself, but whether this signals a further deterioration of the equity commitments, justice-oriented values, and critical race movement foundations that have defined GYO programs since their inception. Gist (2022a) is wary that diversity commitments in GYO programs may function as rhetoric rather than structural realities. Through a content analysis of 94 GYO initiatives across the United States, Edwards and Kraft (2025) found that only half had a stated goal of increasing teacher diversity, and fewer than a quarter explicitly targeted recruitment efforts toward underrepresented populations. Similarly, recent research reveals that some GYO programs espouse diversity as a goal yet lack the structural mechanisms to achieve it (Hamman et al., 2023; Ingle et al., 2023). More troubling still is the possibility that, under prevailing neoliberal logics, GYO programs may be co-opted to further privatize public education, exploit communities of color, and entrench neoliberal reform agendas (Perkins, 2025).

Third, the implementation realities of GYO programs were also largely affected by the interaction between places and people, especially how policymakers interpreted, responded to, and navigated localized inequities and staffing conditions across schools. That is to say, while the program rhetoric purports to address teacher shortages, its approach was constrained by an insufficient attention to between-school variations and policy actors' responses to the situation. In the Apple-Lily case, significant disparities existed between Northside and Southside schools, with the Northside serving a larger population of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and facing more acute staffing challenges. Research suggests that school district leaders play a considerable role in making sense of teacher shortages, and their interpretations consequently shape

programmatic responses (McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). In this case, district coordinators acknowledged the concentration of vacancies in Northside schools yet framed them as an incidental phenomenon rather than a structural inequity requiring targeted intervention. This sensemaking resulted in the absence of intentional strategies to prioritize high-need schools, ultimately risking the reproduction of the very inequalities the program was designed to address (Young & Diem, 2017). The insufficient attention to between-school disparities further undermined the program's intentions by negatively shaping GYO participants' experiences. GYO graduates consistently reported that despite receiving mentorship and financial support, they were inadequately prepared for the realities of their teaching placements. Although they completed clinical experiences within the District, their preparation took place in model classrooms in better-resourced schools that bore little resemblance to the environments in which they would ultimately teach. Upon graduation, their "novice" status and limited professional experience meant they could only secure positions in under-resourced Northside schools facing the most acute staffing challenges. Consequently, graduates expressed feeling unprepared for classroom management, unfamiliar with district-specific policies, and uncertain about how to navigate school-based expectations. These findings echo the importance of situated learning and cultural learning perspectives in community teacher preparation (Murrell, 2000). Research further demonstrates that graduates are more instructionally effective when employed in settings that closely match their clinical placement environments (Randi, 2017; Ronfeldt, 2012, 2015). The mismatch in the Apple-Lily program not only compromised teacher readiness but also increased the likelihood that graduates would leave once they acquired sufficient experience, further destabilizing staffing in the District's most underserved schools and perpetuating inequitable teacher workforce (Goldhaber et al., 2021).

Ultimately, these findings suggest that while GYO programs like Apple-Lily offer valuable supports and operate from an equity-oriented vision, a failure to align recruitment, preparation, and placement strategies with on-the-ground realities can undermine their long-term impact. Without sustained attention to context-specific training, equitable placement, and retention in high-need schools, GYO programs risk reproducing rather than disrupting existing inequities in the teacher workforce.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings from this study suggest several actionable implications for practitioners involved in GYO programs. First, program goals must be clearly defined and grounded in local context. Rather than addressing broad or competing priorities, GYO initiatives should begin with a targeted self-analysis to identify areas of need and communicate with key stakeholders to develop strong and relevant goals before implementation (Herman, 2023): What forms of teacher shortages exist—by subject, grade, or school location? Which teacher characteristics are most critical—such as bilingualism, special education expertise, or deep community ties? Without this clarity, programs risk becoming overly ambitious and ineffective, as attempting to meet too many goals can dilute impact and hinder meaningful outcomes (Edwards & Kraft, 2025). Critically, this process of defining needs must not rest solely with institutional leaders. Following Murrell's (2001) call for *humility of practice* within school-community-university partnerships, policymakers from both districts and universities should collaborate with those who possess vital local knowledge—such as parents, community organizations, and school staff—to avoid the critical mistake of assuming comprehensive knowledge of the communities they serve (Perkins, 2025). That is to say, GYO initiatives should be designed around the most urgent and context-specific staffing challenges, ensuring that recruitment, preparation, and placement strategies are co-constructed with community partners and aligned with the actual needs of local schools.

In particular, GYO programs must navigate and adapt to shifting political climates. Declining support for DEI initiatives has weakened funding and legitimacy for equity-centered programs like GYO. In this context, policy leaders should diversify funding sources by pursuing state grants or philanthropic support to sustain their programs (Gist et al., 2019). More importantly, even when equity goals cannot be explicitly stated in policy documents, GYO program designers, practitioners, and partners must maintain a strong commitment to equity in practice (Carver-Thomas et al., 2024; Perkins, 2025). A key aspect of this commitment is implementing a culturally relevant and context-specific curriculum (Herman, 2023). Ladson-Billings (2011) argues that culturally relevant pedagogy should begin not with specific lessons or activities but with an understanding of underlying theories and philosophies. She proposes three essential elements: reflecting on and reconstructing curriculum to support student learning, fostering cultural competence, and cultivating sociopolitical consciousness. Building on this foundation, Hammerness and Craig (2016) suggest that context-specific teacher preparation should attend to multiple layers: the federal and state context, the school district context, the neighborhood and community context, and the school and classroom context. Together, these frameworks call back to the grassroots origins of GYO programs, which envisioned teachers as reformers prepared through school-community-university partnerships to learn and teach within the very contexts they serve (Rogers-Ard et al., 2019; Skinner et al., 2011).

Finally, it is essential to build a sustained and robust support network that extends beyond teacher preparation and into the early years of teaching. While GYO programs often focus on academic and financial assistance during training, this study underscores the need for structured induction support to help new teachers transition effectively into the profession (Keese et al., 2023; Reeves et al., 2022). Effective induction should include targeted workshops on local educational systems—such as the district’s curriculum, teacher evaluation policies, standardized testing procedures, and school governance structures—as well as ongoing mentorship that addresses both instructional and emotional needs. Equally important is maintaining regular communication channels between participants and their support teams to gather continuous feedback and identify emerging challenges before they escalate. Moreover, school leaders play a considerable role in shaping new teachers’ experiences (Carver-Thomas et al., 2024), yet they are often overlooked in GYO program design. Providing training to principals and administrators on how to support and retain GYO graduates—particularly in high-need schools—is a critical but underutilized strategy for strengthening the transition from preparation to practice.

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