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Resilience Despite “Integration”: Black Men Educators' Perceptions About and Responsibility to Equitable Representation in K-12 Education

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Almost seven decades after the Supreme Court’s 1954 Brown v Board of Education decision, Black men are still vastly underrepresented in the K-12 public education profession. In this qualitative, phenomenological research study, a small sample of Black men educators who chose to enter and remain in the profession, shared their lived experiences. Two research questions informed this study: (1) What are Black men’s perceptions of their representation in the K-12 public education profession? (2) What are Black men’s perceptions regarding the responsibilities they have to and within the K-12 public education profession? Findings show that while Black men are still underrepresented in K-12 public education, they have been resilient in remaining in the field and defining their roles, commitments, and responsibilities despite feelings of isolation, tokenism, and stereotypes.

Keywords: equity | representation | underrepresentation | discipline practices | tokenism | Black educators | desegregation | elementary education | retention | recruitment | responsibilities | disparity | integration | identity development | nigrescence | desegregation

Historically in the United States of America, access to education, equity in education, and quality education have been either nonexistent or elusive for the Black American. The vast amount of exemplary teachers and mentors that Black students lost as a result of desegregation of schools in the US had lasting effects, such as a loss in appreciation and awareness of their own community and their cultural identity (Lutz, 2017). The purpose of this phenomenological, qualitative study was to understand the experiences and perceptions that Black men have regarding their current representation in the K-12 public education profession. In line with Atallah et al.’s (2019) assertion that “human resilience itself is born from a paradox that is embedded in our embodied experiences of social problems” (p. 18), the research purpose also revealed how the lived experiences of Black men affect this demographic’s entrance, retention, responsibilities, and resilience in the education profession.

Brief History of Access to Education for Black Americans

During slavery in America, the education of the enslaved African was forbidden (Williams, 2005). There was no access to formal education for the enslaved African, but learning to read English was symbolic of hope and freedom for the enslaved (Williams, 2005). African people had a rich history of valuing education on their own continent, and they hoped that attaining the education of their oppressors could offer even a finite degree of power that could possibly lead

them to freedom (Williams, 2005). Many slaveholders did not want enslaved Africans to be educated because they knew this form of enlightenment would (a) make them yearn for liberation and (b) humanize them (Woodson, 1919).

America’s Reconstruction era is noted as that time from 1865, after the Civil War ended, to 1877, when the country was charged with the task of fixing the social, political, and economic injustices and inequities that slavery caused for the African in America (Gates, 2019). During this period of reconstruction, in 1868 the United States passed the 14th Amendment, guaranteeing equal protection and due process under the law to all African Americans (Gates, 2019). In retaliation, Southern states, still loyal to the Confederacy, passed what was known as Black Codes, or laws to restrict the rights of Africans in America and legalized racial segregation (Gates, 2019). The Black Codes came to be known as Jim Crow laws, named after a blackface minstrel show character. The purpose of Jim Crow was partly to (a) redeem the Confederacy, (b) perpetuate the marginalization of African Americans, (c) deny African Americans the right to vote, (d) prevent African Americans from getting jobs, and (e) prevent African Americans from getting quality education. African Americans who broke Jim Crow laws suffered consequences such as persecution, public ridicule, arrest, fines, jail time, torture, and murder. These laws and treatment continued for more than 100 years, from the institution of the Black Codes in 1865 through 1968. Despite acts of terror, African Americans continued to train their own teachers and build schools across the North and even the Jim Crow South (Williams, 2005).

Brown v. Board and the Effects of Integration on Black Teachers

In 1954, the United States Supreme Court made a ruling on the *Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education* case. The Court ruled unanimously that segregation based on race was unconstitutional. Civil rights leaders celebrated the decision and many looked forward to even more improvement or advancement in the education of African Americans. However, Lutz (2017) asserts that even though the *Brown* ruling mandated that diverse races of students have access to equal education, the substandard, ineffective ways in which integration was implemented were not conducive to that effort. The pushback and hostile response to integration was pervasive (Lutz, 2017) and led to negative experiences for many Black students and teachers (Will, 2019). Will (2019) asserts that an “unintended consequence” of the monumental court ruling was that many highly qualified, effective Black educators at segregated schools for Black students lost their careers as a result of mandatory termination of positions. Black educators were forced out of positions by the tens of thousands (Will, 2019) resulting in very few Black teachers in the profession after the ruling (Lutz, 2017).

Forced to integrate schools, White administrators refused to put Black administrators and teachers in charge of White teachers and White students (Will, 2019). More than 38,000 Black teachers throughout the Southern states no longer had teaching positions as a result of the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court ruling (Lutz, 2017). Black men were a only fraction of the teachers that remained, as there was a propaganda-fueled historical distrust and fear of the Black man (Franklin, 1979). This elimination of valuable Black educators continues to impact the racial disparity among teachers today (Will, 2019). Nationwide, only 2% of the country’s more than 3 million teachers are Black men (Arcia, 2006). As a result, Black students all over the US are not given the opportunity to learn from Black teachers, even though the achievement gap is narrowed, engagement is heightened, and high

achievement is accomplished when students have teachers who are racially and culturally similar to them (Arcia, 2006; Casteel, 1998; Goldhaber et al., 2014; Perry et al., 2003).

Experiences of Black Male Educators

The experiences of Black men currently in the public education profession are varied, but many are negative (Bristol & Mentor, 2018). There was often no place for the Black man in the public education profession after the 1954 *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education* Supreme Court decision (Milner, 2006). Black men educators report their colleagues expect them to be disciplinarians primarily and that educating students should be secondary (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Brown & Butty, 1999; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). They claim their colleagues only reach out to them for help with discipline, and they never seek their assistance for curriculum-related questions (Brown, 2012; Bristol & Mentor, 2018). Bristol (2017) found that Black men who had other Black men colleagues in their building experienced a sense of belonging and had better overall experiences than those who had one or no Black men colleagues in their building. Bristol (2017) also found that the Black men teachers did not feel they had a voice in policymaking, in contrast to their White colleagues. These men also reported that they believed many of their White colleagues feared them and that their mere presence was a cause of concern for many stakeholders (Bristol, 2017). These findings draw a parallel between the way Black men have been viewed and valued historically in American society and the way they are viewed and valued in the education field--namely, as disciplinarians (Edmin, 2016), inherently criminal and dangerous (Johnson, 2018), traditionally marginalized (Johnson, 2018), and in need of fixing (Baldrige, 2017; Johnson, 2018).

Research Questions

This qualitative research study is about understanding how the lived experiences of Black men affect their representation in the education profession. This study was conducted with these guiding research questions:

1. What are Black men’s perceptions of their representation in the K-12 public education profession?
2. What are Black men’s perceptions regarding the responsibilities they have to and within the K-12 public education teacher profession?

Theoretical Framework

Black Racial Identity Development theory (BRID) informed the research questions and provided a means to understand the reasons the men may choose the education profession, remain in the profession, and feel responsibilities to the profession (Cross et al., 1991). The BRID approach helps explain the process through which people, who are the descendants of enslaved Africans in America, proceed through psychological stages where they begin to develop an acceptance of a Black identity as a result of oppressive societal conditions (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001). Like nigrance and Black Identity Development (BID), BRID is a theory that gives perspective to the acceptance of a racial identity in a country where race and other identities are generally formed to assign suggestive societal and political value to groups of people (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001). BRID has also been

used to support the connection between racial identity and professional identity, as the two are intertwined (Roberts, 2000).

BRID assumes that (a) society rewards and punishes individuals for being members of certain racial or cultural groups; (b) membership in a racial or cultural group is critical to an individual’s psychological and social identity as a result of the way society rewards and punishes his racial or cultural group; and (c) racial and cultural identity development show the maturity process of individuals who ultimately rid themselves of the negative, detrimental depictions of self that are inflicted by society and instead embraces positive, internal ideas of self (Constantine, Watt, Gainor, & Warren, 2005). The basic concepts of BRID are (1) the development of racial and cultural identity happens through progressing through stages, and (2) the way an individual feels about himself is tied to his personal identity and the group with which society associates him (Constantine et al., 2005). It is important to note that over the course of their lives, individuals may reenter the various stages of this identity development process, but they are not regressing; rather they are reassessing and maturing as a result of their lived experiences (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001).

BRID helps explain the connection between racial identity and professional identity (Roberts, 2000) and the extent to which racism affects Black people (Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001). As a result, BRID can be applied to the understanding of why Black men do or do not choose K-12 public education as a profession. BRID can be used to understand how the historical and lived experiences Black men have had with marginalization, vilification, and racism may affect their choice to become an educator. In this study, Black men were invited to share their lived experiences and personal commentary, which provided insight in helping understand their representation in the K-12 public education profession. Racial identity development is essentially connected to one’s professional identity (Roberts, 2000), and Black people must reflect on their racial background in order to see themselves as educators (Roberts, 2000). Essentially, BRID helps make sense of the ways Black men view themselves and their place in society and can be used to understand why they do or do not choose to become educators within the American K-12 public school system (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010).

Method

Data-collection for this qualitative, phenomenological study was conducted with the intent to hear the lived experiences of the men through their own voices. The purpose of phenomenology is for individuals to describe their experiences and ultimately to understand the significance they place on those experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological approach was appropriate for this qualitative study because the study explored the lived experiences of African American men participants (Creswell, 2018) and how their experiences informed their feelings about and decisions to enter the teaching profession.

The researcher collected data from open-ended interview questions and a focus group with 10 Black men educators. The interview was the main source of data collection for this study. Qualitative interviews use open-ended questions to prompt responses from the participants that reveal their beliefs and understandings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The qualitative interviews conducted for this study used 12 open-ended questions to prompt responses from the participants that revealed their beliefs, experiences, and understandings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). One-

on-one interviews were conducted with all participants in this study via Zoom, an online video-conferencing application. The one-hour interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

After individual interviews were completed, all 10 participants met simultaneously on Zoom for a one-hour focus group. The focus group was used as a supplemental method for data collection for this study because focus groups have proven to be effective in highlighting diverse views and giving historically marginalized groups a forum in which to use their voices (Patton, 2015). In this qualitative study, the focus group sought to learn more about the participants’ personal experiences (Patton, 2015) that led them to the education profession. Twelve focus group questions were created based on common themes from the men’s individual interview responses. The focus group was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Context, Participants, and Sampling

Ten Black male teachers in the state of Arkansas participated in this study (see Table 1). Goldhaber, Krie, and Theobald (2014) found that 20% of Arkansas students are Black, but Black teachers make up only 7% of the teaching profession. Only 62% of Arkansas students are European Americans, yet over 91% of Arkansas teachers are of European descent (Goldhaber et al., 2018). The 10 participants in this study were recruited and selected using convenience and snowball sampling (Patton, 2015). All of the men were accessible through school districts in Arkansas by virtue of the researchers’ professional partnerships or they were recommended by other participants during the interview phase of the data-collection process. Participants in this study make up a small group of Black men educators in the state of Arkansas. Thus, findings may be specific to this demographic region and common characteristics of the participants. However, the findings may be transferable to Black men in other regions, locations, and circumstances.

Table 1
Participant Information

Participant	Job Title	Major	Degree-granting Institution Type	Years of Service	Highest Degree	District Type	Teaching Level
1	District Admin	Elementary	PWI	23	M.S.E.	Suburban	Elementary
2	Principal (retired)	Mathematics	HBCU	41	Ed.S.	Rural	Secondary
3	Asst. Principal	Social Studies	PWI	21	Ed.S.	Urban	Secondary
4	Teacher	English	PWI	24	Ph.D.	Suburban	Secondary
5	Teacher	Mathematics	PWI	27	M.S.E.	Suburban	Secondary
6	Teacher	Middle Level	PWI	3	M.A.T.	Suburban	Secondary
7	Principal	Mathematics	HBCU	15	Ed.S.	Urban	Secondary

8	Principal	Elementary	HBCU	23	Ed.S.	Urban	Elementary
9	Teacher	Urban Planning	HBCU	3	B.S.	Urban	Secondary
10	Teacher	Finance	PWI	5	B.S.	Urban	Secondary

Credibility

Credibility is described as the trust that can be held in the veracity of the research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility is important because it verifies whether the research findings show accurate information from participants as well as an accurate interpretation of the views of the participants (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). For this qualitative study, the researchers helped establish credibility using triangulation (collecting data in more than one way), member checking (giving the participants the transcripts of their individual interviews as well as transcripts of the focus group so they have the opportunity to give constructive feedback), and reflexivity (practicing introspection and consider how such factors as their own culture, race, gender, political views, and economic status may impact the way the researchers interpret the perspectives of participants) (Patton, 2015).

Analysis

Data for this study was analyzed using the constant comparative technique. The constant comparative method is defined as a technique for analyzing the collected data to find the emergent themes that lie within (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001). First, small pieces of the data from each of the data collection methods were coded (Saldana, 2016) to help organize the material into chunks or segments of text (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researchers reviewed the data line by line and assigned a word or phrase (a code) to pieces of data (phrases, sentences, or paragraphs) in order to develop a general sense of what was being said. During the coding process, common phrases used by the participants were identified in order to identify common themes that those phrases elicited (Saldana, 2016). Consistent with the constant-comparative analytic technique, after the researchers coded the data the first time, they repeatedly reevaluated the codes and themes until both researchers agreed no new themes were apparent (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001). This comparative analysis approach is effective for both small and large social groups of research participants (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Findings

Findings for this study were organized by themes relating to each of the study’s three research questions. The principal themes are illustrated through the perspectives of the Black men educators who participated in this phenomenological study. Table 2 illustrates the themes that emerged from the data surrounding each research question.

Table 2
Research Questions and Overarching Themes

Research Question	Themes and Subthemes
RQ1- What are Black men’s perceptions of their representation in the K-12 public education profession?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reasons for underrepresentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Perpetuating the cycle ○ Failure to recruit ○ Systemic racism ○ Discouragement ● Disservice of underrepresentation and the value of representation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ “Just the image” is important ○ Cultural understanding
RQ2- What are Black men’s perceptions regarding the responsibilities they have to and within the K-12 public education profession?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Advocacy and affecting change ● Proving himself and having self-worth ● Being perceived as a disciplinarian (the “muscle”) or coach ● “Playing the game” of race, identity, and feeling included

RQ1: Feelings About Representation

The first research question in this study involved how Black men educators feel about the current representation of Black men in the education profession: “What are Black men’s perceptions of their representation in the K-12 public education profession?” Two common themes regarding the current representation of Black men in the education profession were: (a) reasons for underrepresentation and (b) the disservice of underrepresentation and the value of representation.

Reasons for Underrepresentation

According to participants, underrepresentation means that teachers, administrators, and other licensed educators in the schools disparately reflect the student populations they serve. One hundred percent (10/10) of the participants in this study indicated there is an underrepresentation of Black men in the education profession. Half of the participants (5/10) shared that they have worked in schools or currently work in a school where the faculty is predominantly made up of White women. Almost half of the participants (4/10) shared that during their careers, they have often been the sole Black man or one of two among his licensed colleagues. The reasons they gave for this underrepresentation included perpetuating the cycle, failure to recruit, systemic racism, and discouragement.

Perpetuating the cycle. When asked what they think contributes to this underrepresentation, almost all participants (8/10) gave similar responses, revealing their belief that low representation of Black men teachers when *they* were students perpetuates the cycle of fewer Black men teachers. For example, during the focus group, Participant 3, a middle school assistant principal, commented that when, “Black boys don’t ever have Black men when they are in school,” they grow up “never considering education” as an option. Participant 8 agreed with this sentiment, stating, “...there has to be a model.”

Failure to recruit. In response to the exchange about “the cycle,” Participant 6 thoughtfully suggested that there was more to this issue. He shared his belief that Black men are underrepresented because the matter is not taken seriously by those in power who can affect immediate and pervasive change. He used the following illustration to support his thoughts:

They can get more of us in [education] if they want to. [Districts] know that the need is there. There was a statement one time, made in one of our faculty meetings. One of the administrators threw it out there, said, “Hey, the superintendent talked about getting more minority teachers, specifically Black males.” That was all that was said. We went on to another item on the agenda.

Saying he wanted “to piggyback off what [Participant 6] said about recruitment,” Participant 8 added,

...All other companies recruit and tell what they can offer a potential employer, like a signing bonus, but in education, they really only focus on...want you to sell yourself and tell them what you have to offer. [They] always ask what I can offer the school instead of what the school can offer me. If schools really wanted more Black men as teachers, they would recruit them.

Participant 3, a middle school assistant principal, agreed with this statement and added,

...Recruitment is not happening. Well, *Black* men are not being recruited. This should be happening at teacher fairs and on college campuses, too. And there needs to be representation at these recruitment events. Black administrators and teachers like us should be invited to these kinds of events so that the presence is there. There are things that could be done if they really want to have more of us in the schools.

Systemic Racism. Some of the participants (4/10) discussed the idea that the American school system has been historically, fundamentally racist and Black men are underrepresented for systemic and deep-seated reasons. Participant 2 lived the experience of integration as a high schooler in the 1970s. He offered this memory in agreement with the previous point about school districts failing to hire a representative number of Black educators:

That’s part of the issue. It’s been happening from the beginning. I don’t think they really want as many Black teachers as it takes to represent all the Black students they have in those buildings. That hasn’t changed since ...my Black school had to start going to the White school when I was in the 11th grade. ... only two teachers that came to the White school with us. It seems like I remember my old principal...trying to get the position as principal, but...everybody was saying he should have been the one who got it. He didn’t get it...

Participant 10 offered the following illustration to support the explanation that systemic racism was at play:

My school district is one of the largest districts in the state. To this date, it is one of the largest high schools in the state that has never had an African American head principal, and it is located in a city that is predominantly Black. In our district since 1999, every African American main principal—with the exception of the high school 'cause there's never been an African American head principal at the high school—in this district, every last one of those African American principals has been demoted [except for two]. When they were demoted, they kept them with their salary, but they stripped their title.... [Desegregation] lasted in [this city] for 60 years, 60 years before that funding finally

dried up. [In 2016], then they wanted to go back and renegotiate with those African American principals that they've demoted over the years... well, those that were still with the district.

Discouragement. Other participants (3/10) shared Black men are underrepresented in education because they are discouraged to be in the field. To illustrate this discouragement, especially at the elementary level, Participant 6 interjected the following lived experience during the focus group:

Case in point right quick, I had an administrator tell me, when I first started trying to reach out and teach. I was going to teach elementary. She told me, she said, "No, I advise you not to." I said, "Why?" She said, "Well, you're a Black male. The younger a child is, the more influence you're going to have over... kids and the more parents I will have contacting me. That's why I teach middle school."

Participant 9 had a different opinion about the reason for underrepresentation that no one had previously mentioned. He stated:

I wanted to tap in and address the elephant in the room when it comes to Black males in education. That elephant is income. Tell me one career that starts pay under \$40K that anyone is eager about going into... when you do find Black males in education, the majority of them do additional things related to the field to boost their income. I know we all love education and children but the need for income is a real burden for most educators. Being a male in education makes that burden that much more difficult as we are supposed to be the provider and protectors of the home.

Participant 3 respectfully said, "I agree and disagree...we're not going to be millionaires. If you want to be rich, education is not the way to do it. You're not going to be rich, but you can impact lives and brothers who don't want to be teachers may just want to choose something else that they have a passion for."

Disservice of Underrepresentation and the Value of Representation

The majority (7/10) of the participants in this study indicated that the underrepresentation of Black men in the education profession does a disservice to all students. The two major subthemes in this area were the idea that "just the image" is important and the value of cultural understanding.

"Just the image" is important. During his interview, Participant 10 shared his concern that there are often very few Black men educators in school districts that are predominantly filled with Black students. Participant 10 went on to say this image does a disservice to the community and all the students it serves. He pointed out that the large urban school district where he teaches is 65% Black, yet the high school has "never had a Black man as the head administrator." Participant 10 professed, "Just the image of that. Just that image of knowing, 'This is as far as you're going to get...'" Many participants (6/10) pointed out that the lack of appropriate representation hinders Black boys from imagining themselves as educators. Participant 3 offered, "...we need African-American males to give [Black male students] someone who looks like them, who's successful, who cares about them and instills something on the inside of them that says, 'Hey, I can be the next Mr., or I can be greater than Mr.'" That starts with quality representation.

During his interview, Participant 6 expressed that he also believes he is a positive influence on his White students as well, and he maintained,

Then...for my White students, you think about this right here. Most of the time, we have a lifelong effect on their minds. I can go back to teachers right now and think about it. You think about those same students. They're going to be CEOs.

They're going to be supervisors. They can be all this right here. They're going to think back and say, "Oh, I had Mr.... He was alright." ... Black folks aren't the way society paints. Even though they may be around some racist people, they can speak their mind and say, "Black folks ain't like that. I know they're not like that, because I had Mr.... and he had influence over me."

Participant 7, an educator with 15 years of experience, had a lot to say about having only two Black teachers in his own K-12 schooling, his transition to an HBCU for college, and the impact his leadership has had on the school where he is the principal. He also declared that the school he leads is working at "beating the trend" of underrepresentation and that representation matters in schools no matter what the position is. He said,

I think in any kind of school setting the more diverse you are, the better you're going to actually be because that's what's happening to our schools. Our schools are becoming more diverse, so we have to really embrace that. And I just think when it comes to a child, a Black child, African American child, that the more they see of us and the more they see of us in those kinds of positions as a teacher, as a mentor, as an administrator. I mean, even as a custodian, in all of those different facets of the school, they get a better sense of the identity of themselves or what they could possibly be compared to seeing—just being honest with you, others that don't look like them--on a regular basis, constant basis...So, I'm going to double down, triple down on that. There can never be enough.

Cultural understanding. Participant 6 continued to point out the disservice that inadequate representation also causes to Black girls specifically when they have been reprimanded because they were misunderstood by their teachers. He believed that having the representation of a Black man or a Black woman as a teacher would impact Black girls in a positive way since Black people have a shared cultural experience. During his interview, Participant 6 gave the following illustration to support his thoughts about how the lack of Black men in the classroom affects students:

...You take a Black male...raised by a single mother. He's taught by females all day. He really doesn't see a male. He gets frustrated and doesn't know why. It's not that he's mad at the females. It's just, he has no male. There's not a male there. There's nobody that looks like him...so to speak...That's very frustrating.

Participant 6 also said during his interview that he feels he has the responsibility as a teacher to be a mentor and that sometimes this mentorship especially benefits his Black students because they have similar cultural experiences:

...I do talk to them about social issues and things of that nature right there. The conversation [doesn't] stop at, "Where is your work?" It doesn't stop there. I'm trying to find out why you're not doing your work. When I start talking to them, I'd say I do get more of them...because they relate to me because they see somebody that looks like them. They can't really discuss an issue that I haven't experienced.

During his individual interview, Participant 4 imparted a thought-provoking idea that students of diverse backgrounds, who have only had teachers of European descent, are subjected

to “a lot of tone deafness.” He said, “I’ll put it that way....Many of these teachers, my colleagues are tone deaf. They don’t hear or see the things that representation affects or [they don’t see] that representation matters. As a result, [all students] suffer.” Participant 1 concurred, explaining that the underrepresentation of “Black men and Black teachers in general” leads to overrepresented teachers who “have little background, little training to kind of understand and know where all of their students are coming from and how they’re living....” His comment indicated that teachers do not always know or value the backgrounds of the students they teach; rather, they tend to hold students to mainstream, middle class social norms.

Participant 5 further explained how the lack of adequate and quality representation of teachers affects students:

...when you don’t live or engage with a culture outside of the job that you teach, you have no clue. You have no point of reference in dealing with him, except what you see on the news, or what you hear on the TV, or what your friends post or the way you hear them walking and talking up and down the hallway. It is easy to see African American kids being late to class. It’s easy to see African American kids being loud up and down the hallway. Whereas, if what the white kids are doing is something that’s a custom in your culture, they don’t see it as an issue.

RQ2: Responsibilities to and in Education

The second research question in this study involved what Black men educators believe their responsibilities are in the education profession: “What are Black men’s perceptions regarding the responsibilities they have to and within the K-12 public education teaching profession?” Four themes were derived from the participants’ responses during the interviews and focus group: (1) advocacy and affecting change, (2) proving himself and having self-worth, (3) being perceived as a disciplinarian (“the muscle”) or coach, and (4) “playing the game” of race, identity, and feeling included.

Advocacy and Affecting Change

The majority of participants (6/10) stated they have a responsibility to advocate for their students and to affect change in education where change needs to occur. During his interview Participant 4, a middle school English teacher who is also seeking a Ph.D. in leadership, conveyed that he has a responsibility to be an advocate. He said... “not just an advocate, but I’m learning that we have to be ‘agitant’ sometimes we have to agitate situations to get change to occur.” Similarly, Participant 4 shared how he responds to injustices:

...When I see injustice, it pricked something in my being. And not that I’m that flag-burning or that person who goes out and breaks windows, but I have my voice, I have to speak up...and I don’t really have a what-do-I-have-to-lose kind of mentality. It’s not that kind of bravado. But it’s that I’ve got to be the voice for the voiceless. When I see a kid, well my area that I’m researching is discipline practices. And so, when I see a kid who was being disciplined unjustly, or to a degree not experienced by their white counterparts, then I have to be that person, not just to do the research, but do the work that follows the research that will help make things better.

Participant 7, a middle school principal, shared his feelings about affecting change in the education system to be more impactful and inclusive. He said school systems are becoming more

diverse and he is working to make sure that his school reflects that change. He continued to speak about the societal issues and the overall political climate of today that affect students, teachers, and education. His words show how he advocates for change by affecting the teachers and students in his building. He rationalized,

I'll say it like this...“Are we equal or we're not equal?” Or, even in the terms of not necessarily equal, “What's equitable and what's not equitable? You know what I'm saying? The Capitol building ... like a great example: ...I know my students paid attention to it. ...I mean, I'll be honest with you, our whole school almost went on pause when they stormed the Capitol....Literally I'm sitting there, I'm meeting with a teacher, and I was just dismissing it, and my media [specialist] comes in and says, "...I think you really probably need to turn on Channel 11...” And as I'm just looking there, there's nothing I can say. My mouth is just wide open. And to hear them say that it's just wrong and that if it was African Americans there that would have been a blood bath beyond and everything would have been justified... So, I would be naive to say that things like that do not affect my kids, do not affect my staff, do not affect anybody because I would be totally been ignorant to that fact. It does. The goal in mind is that we have to maximize our influence... *Every* kid is important. *Every* child. ...I tell the staff, I said, "Y'all have to realize that innate thought to start seeing people different. That's a trained reaction." ...when we start looking at the differences, that's trained; that's taught, so we got to make sure in the building we're not teaching that. ... That teacher is giving the best to *every* student in that building. For education, that has to be the case. That just has to be. ...I tell my Black teachers, too because they want to give special emphasis to it, and I say, "Hey, that's great." I said, "But where we really make the difference and the change is when we are giving our *all* to *everybody*."

Proving Himself and Having Self-Worth

Most of the participants (6/10) disclosed that as educators, they have to prove themselves. In his interview, Participant 4, a middle school English teacher, expressed his self-worth and that he does not want to be a victim of tokenism. He said, “Don't just invite me to be a quota filler. I want to matter in the lives of those kids. Include me. Don't just say I'm there on your staff or in that department, and I'm your... token.” Participant 5, a junior high school math teacher with 27 years of experience, shared an experience where he had to speak up for himself about his qualifications for a new position. He recalled telling his principal how he has always made sure that his students have the highest scores on standardized exams:

The one time I did speak on my behalf, I told admin, I said, “Go back and pull my test scores for the last 20 years. Find someone that's outscored me in the last 20 years. Go pull my test scores in math, on the ACT, whatever you want to go, go pull it. I can tell you right here, look at me. I have never had a class that scored below the 60th percentile as a whole. I've never had that.”

Participant 5 shared that he has to prove himself to his students in his suburban school district that is about 30% Black students and where he is often the first Black teacher his students have ever had:

I'm African American. I'm larger than most in the classroom. When people look at [me], kids look at [me] the first few weeks of school, they're afraid. You have to prove

yourself to them within the first two weeks of school...They're like “Do you actually know what you're doing? Can you actually teach...? Can they actually learn something?” Similarly, during the focus group, Participant 8 also shared a lived experience about when he got his first position, teaching 1st and 2nd grades at a predominantly White suburban elementary school. In this story, he shares how he had to prove himself:

When my 1st grade students saw me and realized I was their teacher, they cried. I think they had seen a Black man before, but for some reason, they were scared to have me as their teacher. And these were first graders, man. I couldn't believe it, but those little kids just cried and cried. Parents were called and started requesting for their children to be moved to another teacher. I had to convince all of them to let their kids stay in my class. I begged them to give me four weeks, and I promised that they would all feel more comfortable if they just got to know me. We are tender. We care. We love kids...I ended moving to 5th grade, and all the parents of the kids I had in that first grade class requested me for 5th grade. The little girl who cried the most and whose parents were the hardest to convince sent me an email apology and a graduation invitation. This was back in '98-99. Finally, during his interview, Participant 6 shared an experience from his first teaching position. He was the only Black man teacher in the building, and there was only one Black woman teacher. Participant 6 described being introduced at a meeting by a colleague when he felt that she was trying to justify his presence. He said:

What's going on is that we always have to be justified. We have to be justified. Even now, I have to be justified. I was in a meeting one time. Somebody introduced me, and they know a little bit about my background. They introduced me, and they start telling them about my military experience and different things to build me up. It was my first year teaching. I wasn't mad at them, but they were justifying me to the group of why I'm the only Black male in there, of why I'm in here.

Being Perceived a Disciplinarian (“The Muscle”) or Coach

Almost half of the participants (4/10) expressed that they are often given the responsibility to discipline students or be “the muscle” during physical altercations between students even if it takes him away from his instructional duties. The phrase, “the muscle” was used a few times by the men to describe how they believe their colleagues, administrators, and students consider them the ones to handle physical altercations between students. During his interview, Participant 3, a middle school assistant principal, said even when he was a history teacher, he was expected to be “the muscle.” Participant 5, a math teacher, said:

Every day when something goes wrong, I'm the first one they call. [Administrators] call out even if I'm teaching, “We got ...down the hallway, Mr. [name redacted]. Then, they'll come and find me. Even the kids will come, “Mr. [name redacted],” I have kids that have come and found me in the men's room. I'm like, “What?” The female teachers, too; they expect it of me, “Can you go talk to him?” Especially the African American kids.

During his interview, Participant 4 gave a similar account, saying,

We as African American teachers are sometimes relegated to the position of disciplinarian. That's... another little caveat because it's like, “Yes, I'm passionate about what I do, but I don't need you to pull me out of my class three times to come and help you with ‘Raequan.’ Yes, I'm ‘Raequan’s’ advocate, but don't relegate me to just that.”

Participant 6, a middle school math teacher, also explained how he is expected to help with discipline, “in a round-about way.” He shared a story that happened during his first year of teaching. He was the only Black man teacher in the building, so they relied on him to talk to Black students from time to time. However, this time was different. A young Black girl was having some discipline issues in her classes,

She was a behavior issue, a bad, bad issue, bad, real bad. I’m serious. She was out there, but she was in my class. We connected and we had a great rapport...But one day, she came in the classroom and she wouldn’t stop...She went at me in front of everybody. She just went at it. What I hated at this point was that they moved her to my class, by the way, for that reason, for me to try to help her...she made a scene, and I had to write her up. That caused her to get kicked off the basketball team. It caused her to go to ATL. The problem with that is that, I felt like I was being used as the last stop... “I feel like y’all used me as the last stop like if she can’t make it with Mr. ..., she can’t make it with anybody. I felt bad. They were like if Mr... can’t get through to her, no one can. But, they made me the last stop, but to me I was the first stop. That was the first stop.

A few of the participants (3/10) indicated that at some point in their career, they were employed as an athletic coach. During his interview, Participant 2, a retired principal with 41 years of experience in education, shared an interesting story about how he came to be a coach right after being hired for his first math teaching position. He recalled,

My first job, when I first came out of the military...was teaching 7th grade algebra and advanced algebra. ... and I was also the soccer coach, assistant coach in all the other sports, basketball, football, although I knew nothing about them.

The researcher conducting the interview then followed-up, “So, you were not endorsed in those sports, but you ended up being the coach of all of them?” Participant 2 continued, telling how because he looked athletic, he was given coaching assignments in addition to his duties as a math teacher,

Yes, I guess I have an athletic look. The man who hired me was an assertive man, just had that air about him...He called me, and he told me that they were starting soccer. He said he needed a coach. I tell him I don't know anything about soccer. He said, "Well, I'll get back with you." And so, I go about my business. Next time I saw him, he told me, "You're the soccer coach." And so, I had to learn soccer, learn to play soccer, learn the rules, and that's how I got into soccer. Soccer had just been instituted in that school system. In fact, our game started before any other game, so I actually coached the first soccer game ever played in the school district.

Participant 5, a junior high math teacher, recalls times that people have assumed he was a coach and never would have guessed that he was an algebra and geometry teacher. He shared what those frustrating encounters are like,

When you are in the classroom, and you’re a teacher, you’re teaching kids. When you go hang out with your boys, “Yeah, I teach kids.” “Oh, you’re a teacher? You deal with other people’s kids?”...when you’re in education, I can’t tell you the number of times when people find out I’m a teacher, white people find out you’re a teacher, “What do you teach?” I teach math.” “You teach math? Wow.” It’s a shock. “What math do you teach? “Algebra, geometry.” “You teach that?” “Oh, I didn’t do good in that.” “You teach that?” It’s a shock. Or they’ll say, “Do you coach?” No, no I don’t coach. I teach. I teach.” It’s not expected.

“Playing the Game” of Race, Identity, and Feeling Included

Almost all participants (7/10) shared that at some point in their careers, they have felt awkward, a sense of heaviness, or that they felt like an outsider among their colleagues. As a result, Participant 6 said, “I just kind of play the game and try to fit where I’m supposed to fit so to speak.” Participant 5 said that most of his students are White; he averages about two Black students out of 28 each class period. He shared that, as a Black teacher, he feels a responsibility “to dance back and forth between races.” He described what he meant by saying,

I want to connect with and kids and not just being cool with Black kids, but all [kids]. Now, this is just how I feel, but, if a Black kid sees that you are in connection with everybody, they always try to figure you out, “Okay, he’s Black, but he ain’t all the way Black, but he’s not all the way White either. What is it? I even have had this conversation with my White friends. I tell them, “The position I’m in is one you will never understand.” I have to dance between the races. That’s it. When I’m around African Americans, their attitudes and mindsets are different. When I’m around White people, their attitudes and mindsets are different so me having to dance back and forth between those two different races, it has shaped how I deal with people.

In regards to feeling included among his colleagues, Participant 5 shared,

Your value is not respected in the meeting. When you speak, and you try to tell them something different, it’s not respected. It’s not received. It’s frustrating. I can sit in a meeting. It’s very frustrating when you know that you know material and you throw something out there, and it gets glossed over. But the one thing I can say is when you do your job, you don’t worry about that.

During the focus group, Participant 3 had a different experience, saying he felt he was regularly relied on for his expertise and that he was always chosen “to help problem-solve,” but as the conversation progressed, he added, “Now, that was not the case early in my career, but I’ve been doing this for over 20 years now.”

Discussion

This phenomenological research study took a glimpse into the lived experiences of a small group of Black men who are educators in the state of Arkansas. The study offers conclusions that can give insight into this particular demographic, who share identities and similar experiences within the education profession. As evidenced by the perspectives and the lived experiences of the men in this study, this phenomenon has affected educators and *all* students in many ways.

The findings of this study suggest that the effects of the ideals surrounding segregation and the impact of desegregation are present today. As indicated in the literature review, thousands of Black teachers and administrators were ousted from their education careers or demoted when ‘integration’ occurred (Will, 2019). The Black men educators in this study reveal that the way desegregation was implemented throughout the past 67 years continues to impact the underrepresentation and disparities among teachers. The discussion section below covers the following topics as understood from the participants’ interviews and focus group: still vastly underrepresented, tokenism, and teacher isolation.

Black Educators Are Still Vastly Underrepresented

According to Black Racial Identity Development (BRID) theory, Black people may prefer situations including professions where they are associating with other predominantly Black people (Cross et al., 1991). The biased and racist way that desegregation was implemented in this country does not help Black men move away from this BRID theory characteristic to being comfortable in professional settings regardless of the race of their colleagues. School districts’ failure to provide adequate representation has affected the way students perform, the way teachers interact with their students, and the way Black men interact with their White colleagues. Madeline Will’s (2019) article entitled, “65 Years after *Brown v. Board*: Where are all the Black Educators?” discusses the way integration eliminated 38,000 Black educators from the profession. This elimination of valuable Black educators continues to impact the racial disparity among teachers today (Will, 2019).

This research study indicates that there remains an underrepresentation of Black men in Arkansas schools. As revealed in the literature review, 91% of all Arkansas teachers are of European (White) descent; 20% of students are Black, but Black *teachers* make up only 7% of the teaching profession (Goldhaber et al., 2014). The participants’ experiences and perceptions show that their Black students do not have sufficient access to Black men as teachers even though they believe students will perform better as a result of adequate representation of quality teachers. Black students are not given the opportunity to experience learning from Black teachers even though the achievement gap is narrowed, engagement is heightened, and high achievement is accomplished when students have teachers who are racially and culturally similar to them (Arcia, 2006; Casteel, 1998; Goldhaber et al., 2014; Perry et al., 2003).

Some of the participants shared that they were encouraged or felt pressured to choose a career path that would earn them more money; however, almost all of them said things like it is more important to “make a difference” or “impact lives.” They did not believe a more lucrative career path would make them happy, nor would it give them the opportunity to be able to do what they are passionate about. The men were resolved to become teachers. Many of them discussed that they wanted to be positive role models for their students. They shared that underrepresentation of Black men in education led to fewer Black men coming into the profession, which continues the cycle and lack of role models and collegial support in the profession. Most of the men agreed that when Black boys do not see Black men as teachers, principals, and counselors, they don’t grow up to become teachers, principals, and counselors. The men agreed that education is not considered as a viable career choice by Black men because of this underrepresentation. The men who were educators in schools that had several Black educators discussed feeling like they belonged and that they were a part of a group they could rely on to share experiences and meaningful advice. This adheres to Cross et al.’s (1991) BRID theory, aligning with the assumption that membership in a racial or cultural group is critical to an individual’s psychological and social identity as a result of the way society rewards and punishes his racial or cultural group (Cross et al., 1991). Further, the findings in this study provide evidence to the resilience high-achieving Black men consistently show in the American education system that historically undervalues them (Howard, 2013).

Tokenism Occurs in K-12 Education

Tokenism is the practice of making a symbolic effort to desegregate (Niemann, 2016). It is characteristic of hiring people from an underrepresented group to give the appearance of representation (Niemann, 2016). Some of the men in this study indicated that underrepresentation leads to tokenism. Participant 4 was one of only a few other Black men educators in his school. He shared that he wanted to be treated like a contributing member of the faculty. He described it as wanting his voice to matter and to be a representative for those students who do not have consistent representation. Instead of being relegated to disciplinarian, he wanted to be part of decision-making, curriculum development, and other meaningful contributions that affect the education of students. He felt that without a seat at the table, where he felt invited and embraced for what he can offer, he is just a token Black educator. Participant 5 was also a member of a predominantly White faculty. He expressed that when his opinions and ideas at faculty meetings were disregarded, he felt that they only wanted him to be a silent, a dutiful token member of the faculty.

Tokenism also lends itself to stereotypes, which are clear in the assigned roles of disciplinarian and coach reported by many participants in this study. As indicated in the literature review, this study shares that Black men are expected to be disciplinarians in schools. They are often expected to be “the muscle” during student physical altercations. Black men educators are often given this task in addition to their teaching responsibilities, even if they are not in an administrative role (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Brown & Butty, 1999; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). They are called by students, colleagues, and administrators to help with physical altercations (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Brown & Butty, 1999; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). One teacher even shared that not only will he be called out of his classroom to help with discipline situations, but he has even been called from the restroom. This view of Black men as “the muscle” is supported by BRID theory, which relates that society sees Black men as intimidating (Cross et al., 1991).

Despite the perception of needing to be the disciplinarian, intensely masculine, or “the muscle,” the Black men in this study revealed they are sentimental. Much like many teachers who express reasons for being educators, several of the Black men in this study indicated altruistic, unselfish reasons for being in education. Black men educators are not in education “to be millionaires,” rather, the men in this study cited reasons such as “caring for kids” and wanting to “making a difference.” The literature review supports the finding that Black men make themselves mentors to their students instead of disciplinarians (Bristol & Mentor, 2018) or coaches.

Black Male Educators Suffer Feelings of Isolation

The literature review for this research study indicated that some Black teachers feel isolated from the rest of the faculty (Frankenberg, 2006). This study’s participants shared that having someone to identify with culturally boosts morale and their sense of belonging. This is supported by the BRID theory because it aligns with one of its basic concepts: the way an individual feels about himself is tied to his personal identity and the group with which society associates him (Constantine et al., 2005). It is also important to note that research showed that Black men, who were educators in schools where there were one or zero other Black teachers in the building, feel uncomfortable or isolated from their White colleagues, especially with White women, who predominantly make up the teaching force (Bristol, 2017). The Black men in this study, who

teach or have taught at predominantly White schools, expressed that they tend to feel like their presence has to be justified or explained, that they often feel excluded, and that their opinions don't matter. These feelings align with the literature review where the research shows that the Black men teachers did not feel as if they had a voice in policy making, in contrast to their White colleagues (Bristol, 2017). While the men in this study, who worked in predominantly White school districts, did not indicate that their White women colleagues feared them (Bristol, 2017), they did report repeatedly that their White colleagues sought justification for why the men were given their positions at the school (Bristol, 2017). It is during the *immersion-emersion* status of BRID that the men do not feel welcome to immerse themselves with their White colleagues. These men may feel that they are not welcome or possibly not even worthy enough to engage and remain in a conversation with a group of White colleagues (Cross et al., 1991).

Implications

The findings of this research study indicated implications for practice in these areas: (a) professional development for teachers in understanding how to interact with Black students and colleagues; (b) developing recruitment programs for K-12 administrators with the purpose of getting more Black men in the education profession; (c) valuing Black men as educators and not disciplinarians; and (d) include courses regarding equity, representation, the history of Black Education, and cultural awareness in teacher preparation programs.

Professional Development for Teachers

This study found that common mannerisms of Black boys and Black girls are sometimes considered disrespectful by their White teachers. Also, the Black men educators who are principals discussed that some White teachers overcompensate, enable, or ignore their Black students' behavior. They also shared that other White teachers have an extreme intolerance for their Black students, finding behavior issues where they do not exist. Professional development regarding interactions with Black students will be beneficial in alleviating such instances. Understanding cultural aspects will lessen the likelihood of falsely identifying cultural differences for behavioral issues and end disparate discipline practices between races.

Purposefully and Intentionally Recruit More Black Men in the Education Profession

This study found that Black men are underrepresented in schools. The participants expressed that when Black students *and* White students have Black men as teachers, their educational needs are met. As a result, school districts must become involved in recruitment efforts in areas where Black men are underrepresented. This recruitment must target Black men for the purpose of affording them positions as elementary school teachers and classroom teachers across the various content areas.

Valuing Black Men as Educators and Not Disciplinarians and Coaches

This study found that Black men educators are assumed to be disciplinarians and athletic coaches. As a result, recruitment and professional development programs should not

explicitly focus on having more Black men take discipline-focused positions or become athletic coaches (if that is not their desired career path). In addition, school districts should hold panel discussions and other opportunities to hear from Black men educators. At such forums, Black men should share their experiences for the purpose of bringing awareness and affecting change. Further, this shift to valuing Black men as educators and giving them an opportunity to share can highlight their experiences as students and professionals. This ties to Howard’s (2013) acknowledgment that “...what is notably absent in the analysis of Black males’ school realities is the unforgiving resilience that many seem to display on an ongoing basis in pursuit of academic excellence” (p. 78).

Include Courses Regarding Equity, Representation, the History of Black Education, and Cultural Awareness in Teacher Preparation Programs

The findings of this study highlight the historical factors leading to underrepresentation and the effects on students and Black teachers. As a result, teacher preparation programs at colleges and universities should offer courses regarding equity, representation, the history of Black education, and cultural awareness. Such courses will prepare future teachers to serve students of diverse backgrounds. Future teachers will have a knowledge of the history of Black education and can use it to become better colleagues and teachers for all students. These courses will also provide opportunities for future Black and White teachers to finally integrate within the schools where their students are integrated. These courses will also provide an opportunity to make future teachers aware of the inequities built into the American education system, the way Black people (and Black men in particular) are viewed and valued historically in American society and the education field; this will also help highlight Black students and teachers “resilience, determination, and discipline to not succumb to the culture of failure created in the schools that they attend” (Howard, 2013, p. 73).

Conclusion

A multidisciplinary approach is needed to further examine resiliency, especially where it is necessary to approach resilience through social justice perspectives and with a critical lens on how resilience processes are marked by inequities and consequences of power, oppression, and privilege (Atallah et al., 2019). This study focused on how Black men educators felt about the way their demographic was pushed out of education as a result of the way integration was implemented in America. These men bounce forward (Atallah et al., 2019) by continuing to be advocates who have sentimental and altruistic connections to education and their students. Despite the challenges Black men face during their experiences as students and professionals, the findings of this study underscore that they are resilient in their efforts to persist as educators, impact the profession, and influence the students they serve.

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