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There are very few Black male educators who work in the elementary setting. In fact, most Americans will never experience having a Black male as a teacher during those formative years. Existing research around Black male educators heavily revolves around why Black men do not become educators, but there is little research on the motivations for why they do. If the desire is to grow the number of Black male teachers in the early years of schooling, it is important to understand ways in which Black males may be encouraged to join the profession. Through this study I aim to develop this understanding by presenting the lived experiences of three Black male elementary school educators.

Using the methodology of portraiture, I show that Black men not only have the capacity and desire to teach, but possess the ability to positively impact children across demographics and school settings. While there is no single-defining feature that describes the type of Black man who teaches elementary school, there are common experiences and stereotypes that yield tropes of the Black male elementary educator. This study reveals Black males are often viewed as disciplinarians or role models, particularly for Black boys, but also sometimes accept these roles, affirming the labels. The research also shows that Black males excel in spaces where they are provided support and freedom to leverage their passion and talents. I conclude with recommendations for colleges and universities, school districts, and policy makers to aid in the changes that need to occur to help better recruit and retain Black male elementary teachers.

EXAMINING MOTIVATIONS OF BLACK MALES TO BECOME ELEMENTARY SCHOOL EDUCATORS

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

A kindergarten teacher is standing in front of the classroom. Close your eyes and picture the person. What do they look like? Are they male or female? White or a person of color? If statistics, personal experience, and stereotypes factored into your imagery, you likely pictured a white female in front of her students. What if you were to find out that the teacher is, in fact, a Black male? Would you question his masculinity? Be curious about why he is there? Wonder if he is educated? Expect that he acts a certain way?

Black men in education, particularly at the elementary level, are rare. Further, because of systemic racism and hegemonic forces, Black males' stories about their lives and educational experiences are often omitted, misinterpreted, or trivialized in research, practice, and policy discussions. Because of this, we need more research that centers the voices of Black male educators reflecting on their experiences, challenges, and successes, especially if we want to disrupt their significant underrepresentation in elementary education. My goal with this dissertation is to center the voices of several Black educators as part of working toward recruiting more of them to the profession. I believe that through an in-depth study of Black men's teaching experiences in elementary school, their insights and knowledge can be applied to future discourse around education reform and equity.

Learning about the motivations of Black men who choose elementary education is important for school and district leaders given the recurrent call for more Black men in the classroom. In my study, I invited three Black male teachers to share their experiences and knowledge, which ideally can be leveraged to make informed decisions for teacher recruitment, training, retention, and leadership pipelines. The work will also be an important contribution in the continued efforts from antiracist scholars to create a space to learn from the stories of Black

educators. Understanding these stories is important to opposing white supremacy and reproductive power that keeps white power in place, as well as to challenging these structures and reimagining societal norms to support equity.

Research Problem

Consistent data show that up to twenty percent of the students in the United States are Black, while Black men make up approximately two percent of the over 3 million United States educators (Brockenbrough, 2012b; Goings & Bianco, 2016; Lewis, 2006; Sandles, 2020). More alarming is that the percentage of Black male teachers in the elementary setting is under one percent (Bryan & Browder, 2013). The percentage of students of color is expected to rise in years to come, but the educator workforce remains disproportionately white, resulting in a growing racial gap between students and teachers (Sleeter, 2017; "The State of Racial Diversity," 2016). With these data in mind, the stories and experiences from Black male teachers as to why they are underrepresented are rarely researched or discussed. This is problematic because the default perspective on this topic continues to be white.

My own experiences as a white teacher help shed light on my interest in this topic and the problem that I am exploring. I knew I wanted to be an elementary school teacher from a young age. Much of the inspiration and confirmation was from my fifth-grade teacher, a white male. Upon starting my career as an elementary school teacher, I was surprised to find that I was one of six classroom teachers who were also male; however, all of us were white. After that initial experience, my subsequent schools of employment fit the stereotypical makeups of elementary school teaching—almost all white, female teachers. And as I have traveled around the country conducting professional development and delivering speeches related to education and educational leadership for over a decade, my audiences are seas of mostly white, female faces.

The absence of Black males in the teaching workforce has always been clear to me, but the reality was nothing I initially questioned. It never impacted my ability, as a white male, to see myself as a teacher. To me, elementary school teaching equated to mostly white females, with a few females of color and white males sprinkled into the upper grades or physical education. While limited, I had enough people who looked like me growing up to affirm that I fit into the profession. My experience is not unique; most students will never experience having a Black man as a teacher (Sandles, 2020). Considering our student population of color will continue to rise in coming years, the absence of teachers who look like our students is problematic for improving our representation within the profession and closing the student-teacher racial gap.

It was not until I worked at a school in an urban southeastern city that specifically aims to employ Black males that I began to both question the absence of Black male educators and realize how significant their impact was on all students. I had almost a dozen Black male colleagues during my time there and the impact that these men had on our students, almost all of whom were students of color, was extraordinary. I saw Black boys connect in ways I had never seen before with a teacher. There were open and free cultural discussions, jokes about discipline and old school grandmas, and shared experiences of facing racism and being Black in America. While the conversation around the need for Black male educators typically centers around their impact on Black boys, it is important to remember that "all children can benefit from the presence of effective Black male figures" (Hicks Tafari, 2018, p. 797). Upon witnessing the interactions that the Black male educators had with students, staff, and families, and seeing the influence they possessed, I became inspired to learn their stories and pathways toward becoming educators.

While I do not include any of my former colleagues in this study, their stories resonate with me as I explore the motivations of Black men to become elementary school teachers and the possible hurdles or boosters that existed in their journey. The common belief that elementary teaching is "women's work" and the subsequent problematic outcomes associated with that, including low pay and prestige, often convinces educated Black males with college degrees to shy away from becoming teachers (Montecinos & Nielson, 1997; Sandles, 2020). Further, unrealistic expectations and assumptions surrounding the Black male elementary teacher role to serve as a role model or "otherfather" may challenge Black males who can look beyond the financial side of teaching (Pabon, 2016).

In our modern world, where "influencers" dominate student discourse and decision making, young Black students, particularly boys, continue to look towards music, sports, and social media to find adults to admire who look like them. Media also impacts perceptions of Black males, as "audiences still tend to believe what they watch is a true representation of their culture and the people within it" (Tyree, 2011, p. 399). In their study on cultural care pedagogy from a Black male educator's perspective and the impact on students' identity, Johnson and Sdunzik (2022) share how mass media presents "dueling images of Black men" by portraying the ability for Black men to "win against all odds in a racist environment" against "imagery that exaggerates the deviancy and self-destructive power of Black machismo" (pp. 675-676). However, Merritt and Stroman (1993) argue that positive imagery of Black families can emerge from television without polarizing representations. The classroom should be a place where students can see an adult who looks like them, and few Black males in America will ever come across a teacher in elementary school where this happens. If our schools are serious about closing achievement gaps and leading conversations on justice reform and equity, they need to be

resolute in addressing the underrepresentation of Black male elementary teachers and how their absence impacts the achievement and career pathways of our Black students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to understand the motivation for why Black males become elementary teachers. Existing research shows that the public desires to have Black males in the classroom, but these public calls to action typically do not consider the voices or accounts of Black men (Brockenbrough, 2015; Crisp & King, 2016; Goings, 2015; Lewis, 2006; Pabon, 2016). If equity is at the center of educational reform, historically suppressed voices must be heard. While I have often reflected on what it is like to be a male in an elementary school, my participants' narratives on being a Black male in elementary school not only differ than mine but provide a valuable counternarrative to the privileged perspective I maintain as a white male.

There are dedicated, talented Black men teaching in elementary schools across the country. Their stories are important, and they hold powerful insight that could lead to change in schools, university teacher preparation programs, and public perception for what it means to be a Black male in a traditionally white, female dominated profession. In this study, I share these stories, so policy and decision-makers have evidence of lived experiences from those most impacted by a history of racist and inequitable practices against them. My hope is that this research on motivations will be used by those in power to create antiracist, equitable pathways and programs for Black men to become elementary school teachers more easily.

Research Questions

The focal question in this research is as follows: What motivates Black men to become elementary school teachers? Two sub-questions that I derived from this main question are: What hurdles or boosters (supports), if any, do Black men encounter in the pursuit of becoming an

elementary teacher? What policy or practice recommendations do Black male elementary school teachers have to positively support the pathways of other Black men wishing to become elementary educators? In exploring these broad questions, I interviewed three Black male elementary teachers several times each to give them the opportunity to share personal insight, lived experiences, and perspectives that may contribute to research and offer a reflective look at their personal journey in their professional career.

Background Context

To understand the context for the statistical shortage of Black males in elementary classrooms, one must step back and first examine the United States' history of racist and oppressive laws and practices that have negatively impacted Black educators since the 1950s. What was once a thriving profession for Black Americans, the teacher landscape drastically changed in 1954 with the passing of the often-lauded *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, when Black teachers were displaced and passed over for positions at newly integrated schools (Sandles, 2020). Since that time, there has been little effort to mend the harm that caused tens of thousands of Black teachers to lose their jobs or be demoted to support roles in schools (Fultz, 2004). The result is clear: now almost 70 years later, Black teachers, particularly Black men, remain largely absent from the teaching profession. For those who remain, their experiences vary, sometimes widely. To better frame this situation for Black male educators in the modern day, I share four composite portraits I created to show a range of ways in which Black men are treated in the elementary school setting. These narratives were inspired by personal experiences of being a male elementary teacher, conversations and previous interviews with Black male elementary teachers, and a review of research on the lived experiences of Black male teachers.

Teacher 1: The Savior

Third grade teacher Mr. Jones is excitedly greeted each day by students and parents alike. Many students give him a fist bump or a customized handshake before entering the classroom. Parents plead for their child, especially the boys, to be in his class. He is firm, yet fun, and is not afraid to have difficult conversations with kids. Sometimes he will help a child who he sees is being disciplined by a teacher for something that he believes would be better served with restorative practices. He is often seen playing sports with his students at recess and going to their games on the weekend. As the only Black male on campus, other teachers often request his assistance dealing with discipline, which he does not mind doing, but he also gets frustrated that many of the complaints are for "disrespect," which he believes are just white female colleagues not understanding Black culture. The school administration believes that Mr. Jones is exactly what the school needs and is often heard saying "we need more of him."

This type of teacher is often viewed by the community as a "savior," particularly for children of color, and is positioned as someone who can rescue them from complex issues like poverty, discipline, and academic failure. Pabon (2016) deems this the "Black Superman" assumption, and while the acceptance of this role varies by individual, stakeholders often pigeonhole Black males in this scenario as role models or what Hicks Tafari (2018) calls "otherfathers." Ultimately, a Black male teacher like Mr. Jones must decide if he embraces this role or fights against it. He also risks becoming burned out due to excessive pressure from colleagues, parents, and the community.

Teacher 2: The Privileged

Today's reading lesson was scheduled to be a deep dive into the theme of *Esperanza Rising*. Fifth grade teacher Mr. Wilson, along with his three teammates (all white females), have

common lesson plans each week that they turn in and are expected to follow. Instead of following the lesson plan, Mr. Wilson decides to go in a different direction and use a completely different text that day. When the principal walks into his room, she sees the students are engaged and well-behaved, so she lets it slide. Meanwhile, other teachers have continually gotten reprimanded for not teaching what the lesson plans state. In addition, colleagues have noticed that Mr. Wilson is allowed to regularly show up to school as the students are walking in, even though the rule is that teachers must be present to greet students before the bell rings. Mr. Wilson is often applauded by administrators for discussing Black culture with his students, even if it is in place of the lesson that was supposed to be taught. He has also gained the reputation for being "the sexy teacher" amongst parents, which has meant that several moms regularly come into his classroom to volunteer and bring him things like coffee and lunches.

Male privilege ensures that male interests are protected. In the case of male elementary school teachers, while in the minority, they are regularly promoted over female colleagues, able to veer from curriculum without consequence, and not follow mandates that female counterparts are held to (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010). Many administrators tolerate these behaviors because they believe that these men are building relationships with students, using culturally responsive teaching, and executing engaging lessons, which in their minds trump violating school practices. In addition, when these men have students with behavior concerns in their class, particularly Black boys, other teachers and school leaders view them as someone these boys can relate to (Hicks Tafari, 2018). Teachers like Mr. Wilson accept and take advantage of, though may not acknowledge or fully be aware of, their privilege in schools. From the outsider's perspective, their behavior simultaneously helps and harms school culture. Like "The Savior" teacher, they are seen as someone who students of color can connect with, but they are also

viewed as someone who circumvents the rules, which can disrupt staff morale. From a motivation standpoint for becoming an elementary teacher, Black males could find this privilege attractive since it benefits them in many ways.

Teacher 3: The Feminine Male

Walking down the hall, you can hear kindergarten teacher Mr. Aaron enthusiastically singing along to one of Jack Hartman's counting songs, as his class follows in stride. To his students, Mr. Aaron is their hero. He is kind, not afraid to be silly, and his clothes are bright and colorful. To his colleagues, he is polarizing. The younger female teachers find him fun and "like one of the girls." But there are a handful of veteran female teachers who give him looks as he dances around with his kids and question if he is even a good teacher. Parents are also split on Mr. Aaron. Many appreciate that their child loves him, but there are some who are hesitant to have a flamboyant Black man as their five-year-old's teacher.

Male elementary teachers, in general, are often presumed to be gay, regardless of sexual orientation (Crisp & King, 2016; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010). This stems from societally gendered roles, and "the hetero-normative assumption that gender deviance equals homosexuality" (Crisp & King, 2016, p. 46). In other words, when a man engages in what is considered a feminine profession, those around him often suppose that he must be homosexual. Researchers have determined that some Black males avoid elementary teaching because they have "concerns about being viewed as effeminate or homosexual" (Graham & Erwin, 2011, p. 400). Being gay in society still carries the burden and stigmas of bullying, inferiority, and an undesirable state of being (Crisp & King, 2016), so those with homophobic views remain a threat to the safety and well-being of male elementary teachers, regardless of sexual orientation, and serve as a deterrent for some Black men to consider teaching.

Teacher 4: The Offender

A child is crying in the middle of the hallway, right outside fourth grade teacher Mr. Brady's classroom. He steps outside the door and walks over to the little girl to ask her what is wrong. She responds, "My doggie died this morning." Mr. Brady gives the girl a hug and asks if she wants to talk about it. She says she does, so they go inside his classroom to chat for a few minutes. Later that day, Mr. Brady is called to the principal's office. The principal says, "Look, you are a phenomenal teacher and people really respect you around here. I want to make sure you are protecting yourself in every way possible." Mr. Brady had a confused look on his face. The principal continued, "This morning a parent who was walking down the hall to volunteer saw you giving a child a hug and then bringing her into your classroom. I already know that you were simply consoling the child because of what happened to her, but I do not want you to get caught in a situation where parents or the community start rumors about you."

While all male elementary teachers face a significant level of scrutiny due to what Crisp and King (2016) call cultural pedophilia, or the idea that in popular culture "men who desire to teach young children are axiomatically pedophilic" (p. 52), Black male elementary teachers are subjected to added layers of discrimination due to microaggressions for being Black and male in America (Hicks Tafari, 2018; Scott & Rodriguez, 2014). This stereotype threat carries centuries of "societal misperceptions of Black male predisposition toward criminality and sexual aggression" (Sandles, 2020, p. 69). Consequentially, Black males in the elementary setting face constant risk of being subjected to unjustified and unsubstantiated accusations, which can damage or terminate a career.

Reading Across Profiles

Being a Black male elementary teacher can carry tremendous risk, reward, and/or responsibility. There is no single experience of what it means to be a Black male elementary teacher in America, but there are certainly societal-expectations and stereotypes that can boost or destroy an individual's motivation to enter the profession or remain in it. What is clear is that there are many prevailing social stereotypes about what it means to be an elementary school teacher and what demographic checkboxes are expected. Anyone outside of that mold, be it by race, gender, or sexuality, is likely to be subject to excessive scrutiny or tokenistic admiration. Yet these prevailing images may not actually match the experiences of Black male teachers, thus we need more research that centers their voices.

Research Methodology

Given my goal to have Black male voices as the focal point of this study, I conducted a qualitative, interview-based study using elements of portraiture methodology. Emphasizing its "ability to embrace contradictions, its ability to document the beautiful / ugly experiences that are so much a part of the texture of human development and social relationship" (p. 9), Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) popularized this methodology that is used to capture and create a narrative description of people's experiences that blends "aesthetic sensibilities and empirical rigor, and its humanistic and literary metaphors" (p. 6). Since there is little existing research on Black male motivations in the pursuit of becoming an elementary teacher, I draw on this qualitative arts-based approach of interview and storytelling to provide a rich and in-depth alternative look at what is commonly accepted as "women's work." In support of this approach, Monk (2020) notes that portraiture allowed him to "codify similarities among the lived experiences of my subjects while at the same time, allowing my data sources to provide

information to me in their own voice" (p. 91). While it can be tempting to dive into the problematic landscape of education while conducting interviews that focus on the question of how to respond to teacher shortages, portraiture presents an opportunistic approach to have an "explicit focus on 'goodness,'" which pushes the researcher to aspire to write "beautifully and evocatively written, deep and compelling stories" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 20). Dixon, Chapman, and Hill (2005) further this explanation by urging portraitists in their pursuit of goodness to "examine ways in which subjects meet, negotiate, and overcome challenges" (p. 18). Through this methodological mix of art and science (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005 & 2016), I invite the reader to examine their own schooling experiences and preconceived notions about Black male elementary educators to open their mind to future shifts in policy, practice, and acceptance to positively impact the experiences of Black males seeking to become elementary educators.

Population

Because I wished to speak with a specific subsection of teachers, I utilized unique broad sampling, or quota sampling, a technique where "participants are chosen on the basis of predetermined characteristics," for my research (Taherdoost, 2016, p. 22). My interest was in participants who met the following criteria: a) Black male, b) currently employed elementary teacher (pre-kindergarten through sixth grade), and c) completed a traditional licensure program (not lateral entry or alternative certification). I sought participants using both social media and personal connections. I use the term Black versus African American throughout this dissertation (aside from direct quotations where the author uses an alternative terminology) because some participants and references to this population in the literature include men who come from countries or regions outside of the United States. Since I sought men who represent only one percent of the teaching population, and I had a strict criterion that excluded some of the available

men, it was necessary to widen the search field beyond local boundaries. Over the years, I have built a network of fellow educators that spans the nation, so I employed my network reach by posting a call for participants on platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram using a social media script (Appendix A).

I found three men who met the criteria of the study, all through personal connections and social media outreach. Each agreed to the conditions of the study and were easy and flexible to work with for scheduling interviews and soliciting feedback. Below is a brief introduction of the participants. I have used pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Mr. Jamaal Goff is a 27-year-old kindergarten teacher from Michigan in his fifth year of teaching, though tenth year in education as he previously served as a paraprofessional. He has worked at both charter and private elementary schools.

Mr. David Fields is a 33-year-old second grade teacher from Chicago in his ninth year of teaching in public schools.

Mr. D'Onta Walker is a 31-year-old fourth grade teacher from North Carolina in his eighth year of teaching in public schools. He has also taught kindergarten and second grade.

Data Collection Methods

In this study, I developed portraits of three Black male elementary school teachers. After selecting the three participants, I ensured that they understood the scope of the research by sharing the informed consent form (Appendix B). I interviewed each of the three participants on multiple occasions. Each interview lasted around 60-minutes and there were three sessions for each participant, using my interview question guide to steer conversation (Appendix C). I also occasionally reached out via text or social media messages to clarify information they shared with me. I worked to accommodate my participant's busy schedules and respected their time by

providing a thank you gift card at the conclusion of the series of interviews. All of my participants preferred evening interviews, and at the conclusion of each interview, I scheduled my next session with them so it was on their calendar. This allowed for an organized schedule of two-week intervals to transcribe and receive feedback. I dove deeply into each person's story so that I could ensure that participants felt that their voice was genuinely heard. In portraiture, it is essential to create "relationships with the people who you are interviewing and whose lives you're trying to capture," therefore, spending time with each participant is imperative (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 22). Due to the participant group residing in various regions of the country, I used the video platform of Zoom to conduct the interviews and for preliminary transcription. Zoom's automated transcript feature provided relatively accurate transcription along with timestamps that allowed for easy cross-reference when reviewing the interview for accuracy.

During the first interview, I listened to the participant's story of their life experiences, prompted by a few main questions prepared in advance. This approach, known as in-depth open-ended interviews, uses "key questions as probes to peel away a superficial understanding of one's experiences to a deeper understanding of one's experiences" (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 127). We also examined their upbringing and K-12 schooling years in the initial discussion. From there, I listened to the interview again and identified areas that warranted a deeper dive. In the subsequent interviews, I explored specific subjects stemming from the previous interview, capturing these topics in richer depth. In the second and third interviews, in addition to the follow up discussion pieces, we focused on their teacher preparation and college experience and then their teaching experience, respectively. This approach aligns with the goal of portraiture, which is to "explore and understand" and to "capture more universal themes" (Lawrence-

Lightfoot, 2016, p. 22). Further, the combination of portraiture with the theoretical framework of Critical Race Theory (CRT), which I describe later in this chapter, enabled me to explore the intersection of understanding individual, social, and structural expectations and constraints. In her examination of success and failure in urban schools, Chapman (2007) finds that utilizing portraiture and CRT together can "allow the researcher to evoke the personal, the professional, and the political to illuminate issues of race, class, and gender in education research" (p. 157). I experienced similar opportunities in the examination of my research topic.

My design for this study was influenced by a pilot study I conducted with two Black male elementary school teachers. As a part of this study, I was able to practice using Zoom and its transcription features, as well as test out my initial interview protocol. Conducting these interviews allowed me to test the transcription accuracy of Zoom and learn if it would be a valuable tool for actual interviews. In addition, I refined my research questions through these two practice interviews. While the questions I originally designed served me well during the pilot, after the interviews I changed the order in a way that made more chronological sense in the participant's discussion on their life and career. I also added several questions that I used as prearranged follow up inquiries, when needed.

Data Analysis Strategies

Researchers who use the method of portraiture generally collect significant amounts of data from participants, typically in the form of narrative. To make meaning of these narratives, portraitists start by coding participants' stories for key ideas, topics, experiences, and insights. They then develop categories from these codes, which later they turn into themes in the data (Bhattacharya, 2017). Marshall, Rossman, and Blanco (2022) encourage the "chunking" of mass data to construct logical categories, which can "help organize various data points into

manageable units" (p. 228). In my data analysis work, I created categories from my codes that drove the exploration of patterns in the data, which later helped me to create themes (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Once I identified themes, I built bridges across participants' stories, answering my research question for what motivations exist for Black males to become elementary educators. Portraiture is an effective means for accomplishing this, as it "captures the voices, relationships, and meaning making of participants, as individuals and community members, in one fluid vision that is constructed by researchers and participants" (Chapman, 2007, p. 157). And by taking an inductive analysis approach towards my work, I built upon the guidelines identified by Bhattacharya (2017) to make meaning of the life stories shared by my participants to convey their "authority, wisdom, and perspective" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 6).

Trustworthiness

Given that qualitative research is an interpretative process, researchers must take steps to ensure results that are accurate and trustworthy for readers (Creswell, 2016). In portraiture, the portraitist takes a constructivist approach and "brings her own life story, her familial culture, ideological, and educational experiences, to the research project," thereby necessitating that the portraitist discern other voices and create and mold a story instead of searching for one (English, 2000, p. 22). To accomplish this, I utilized member checking, which entailed me inviting the participants in my study to review the themes I identified and portraits I created to certify they are "an accurate representation of what they said" (Creswell, 2016, p. 192). Each participant received a transcript after each interview, along with my notes, and then received their portrait to provide feedback.

Describing portraiture, Lawrence-Lightfoot (2005) writes that "there is never a single story; many could be told. So the portraitist is active in selecting the themes that will be used to tell the story, strategic in deciding on points of focus and emphasis, and creative in defining the sequence and rhythm of the narrative" (p. 10). To develop a portrait that resonates with the experiences of my participants, I gave the interview transcript to participants after each session and asked them to pull out quotes or themes that emerged. This allowed them to review the transcript for accuracy and drive topics for future interviews. One participant provided an excellent suggestion between interview one and two after reading the transcript. He proposed "a discussion about layering in the creative arts into the classroom and its impact as a Black male educator making a connection with Black male students." Through this approach, there was a direct objective for the review, which increased the chances that they would complete the work and provide meaningful feedback. I also provided participants a copy of their portrait and asked them to read it, which allowed for additional data collection through any feedback they provided. As an example of the response I received, one of my participants shared the following message with me on an Instagram direct message after reading his portrait, "Adam, I cried reading your draft of my life! Thank you!"

To further support the trustworthiness of my research, I employed an outside review of my work using peer debriefing (Creswell, 2016). This strategy involved asking peers to "provide support, play devil's advocate, play challenger; and refine the study" (Creswell, 2016, p. 194). I invited a peer, or what Marshall, Rossman, and Blanco (2022) call critical friends, to ask me critical questions that helped to refine my analysis, uncover any bias, and flesh out explanations. I found a scholar friend who studies and teaches Critical Race Theory to help me improve my analysis and ensure it is trustworthy. She was also able to provide feedback on my portraits,

particularly in places where I unconsciously inserted a white male privileged perspective. She wanted to ensure that my portraits reflected my participants' authentic voice without the insertion of my positionality as a white male researcher.

Limitations

While the stories of my participants are rich in content, there is no way that three portraits can represent the entirety of the experiences of Black males as elementary educators. Thus, the biggest limitation of my study is scope. The three portraits that I present are not representative of the entire population, though we can nonetheless learn much from these men's experiences. The inclusion of more participants in future research will provide more representation for motivations of Black males to become elementary educators. It may also provide alternative explanations than I am able to offer in my study.

Being a white male may have limited certain learning components of this study. While I aimed to create a welcoming environment in our interviews, it is possible that participants did not feel as comfortable sharing openly and honestly about their experiences as a Black male elementary teacher with a white male researcher as they would if I were a fellow Black male. As a result, participants who may have felt restrained to tell their complete stories would not have the opportunity to explain the full truth of their experiences, a noted limitation of portraiture.

My participants shared experiences from various parts of the country, representing different school districts, types of schools, and geographic locations. While their stories may illuminate how different districts, states, or school types operate, I did not get multiple perspectives from just one region, making it difficult to draw substantive comparisons or to show how regional demographics and context may shape participants' experiences.

Finally, my study involved Black male elementary teachers who were licensed in traditional certification programs and are currently employed at an elementary school. This study did not include the experiences of Black males who were alternatively certified, still enrolled in a teacher certification program, or have moved from elementary teaching to other grade levels or to leadership position outside the classroom. Future researchers may consider including these perspectives to deepen the narrative on the motivations that these men identify to both becoming elementary educators and staying in the field.

Reporting the Data

I report my data using separate chapters for each of my three portraits of Black male elementary educators. In each of the following three chapters, I offer one portrait in rich detail that centers the voice of each participant. While this approach does lengthen the dissertation, portraiture calls for "the authority, wisdom, and perspective of the 'subjects'," which demands space (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p. 6). I used pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants, however, because of the rich detail that each portrait demands, there cannot be a complete guarantee of anonymity even outside the use of false names (Hampsten, 2015). While my initial idea was to order the chapters starting with the teacher with the least number of years of teaching experience to most, which "celebrates progressive success in their careers without having to leave the classroom," since my participants have relatively the same number of years teaching, I opted to order them in ascending order of their current grade level (Monk, 2020, p. 111). After readers learn the story of each teacher, I conclude by discussing cross-cutting themes from the portraits in the final chapter and used these portraits to answer my research questions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework most useful for my study is Critical Race Theory (CRT). Critical race theorists study the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). When viewed as more than simply an academic theory, CRT can be applied as an "analytical tool used in examining circumstances that historically brought about subjugation, debasement, and disenfranchisement" (Sandles, 2020, p. 71). Looking at the intersection of race and racism in society, along with dominant ideology, aids in analyzing motivations of Black males to become elementary school educators and can help explain the shortage of Black male elementary school teachers. Key elements of this theory involve exploring color evasiveness, microaggressions, and meritocracy (Diem & Welton, 2021; Sandles, 2020). Delgado and Stefancic (2017) explain several important tenets of CRT that influenced my study, specifically that "racism is ordinary," the existence of "interest convergence," and counter storytelling. I elaborate on these below.

Racism is Ordinary

The emergence and survival of white privilege in education can be defined by what Delgado and Stefancic (2017) classify as racism as a "normal science" in society (p. 8). Similarly, Sandles (2020) claims "racism is a social fixture" (p. 72). Starting from the premise that racism is a texture in the fabric of our society, I explored aspects of the Black male experience in becoming an educator through the lens of CRT. Critical Race Theory can also be used as a vehicle for action, as it contains an "activist dimension" that pushes us to change the social situation that has been constructed (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 8). Traditional acts of discrimination and hatred must be identified, named, and contested in order to enhance the conditions for the inclusivity of Black men teachers (Sandles, 2020).

Looking back at my own experience, I realize I participated in the ordinariness of racism, especially early in my career. I now realize that I was previously quicker to question a Black male's presence in an elementary classroom than to wonder why there were not more Black men present. The omission of their stories contributed to my ignorance and an inability to build capacity to help disrupt inequitable policies or practices that impacted these men. Further, the stereotypical roles that I presented earlier in this chapter of a Black male elementary teacher present challenges for those Black men who do not desire to fit into the disciplinarian or "otherfather" role, and potentially an objectification of even those who do (Brockenbrough, 2012b; Pabon, 2016). Drawing on Critical Race Theory helped me identify these "everyday practices" that are not necessarily blatant but are nonetheless harmful. It also offers tools for countering and changing what is commonly accepted.

Interest Convergence

Life experiences among people from different groups can greatly contrast based on race and ongoing racial disparities. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) describe the idea of interest convergence, or the notion that racism remains at least in part because it advances and preserves the interest and power of white people. Beliefs on race are frequently passed down or acquired over time, often molded by what people believe benefits them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). This idea of interest convergence exacerbates gender discrimination as the issue of Black male elementary teachers is discussed by Crisp and King (2016), who argue that the elementary school setting has been feminized to the point where a male entering this environment risks being a victim of policing "by sexist and pedophilic bullying" (p. 41).

Interest convergence intersects with gender discrimination as white people regularly call for Black males in schools to deal with what is viewed as problematic behavior from Black

children, but this is often coupled with a prejudiced assumption that Black males are hired in schools for that sole purpose (Crisp & King, 2016; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010; Pabon, 2016). Crisp and King (2016) suggest that "the wish is for the *idea* of men in educational contexts, but not to see them in the classroom next door" (p. 44). I have sat in meetings before with school and district leaders (mostly all white people) who specifically advocate for the recruitment of Black men to the elementary setting. The conversations typically revolve around the achievement gap and discipline concerns of Black boys, and rarely, if ever, include the perspective of Black men. Black males are simply used as a resource, arguably often as a pawn, in the grander conversation about better "controlling" Black students and helping them to conform to current structures of schooling.

Counter Storytelling

Within the tenets of CRT lies opportunity for action. The act of storytelling, Delgado and Stefancic (2017) believe, possesses a "destructive function" for dismantling racism by "describing the reality of black and brown lives" that can help with people "understand what life is like for others" (p. 49). They refer to this as "the voice of color" in their list of tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, p. 9). Counter storytelling is important because traditional storytelling is dominated by white males and people who are affluent; concurrently, stories from people of color are silenced or distorted (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hicks Tafari, 2018). The stories of Black male teachers deserve to be told and "need to be told to disrupt and challenge dominant narratives and perspectives of Black men, especially those who teach" (Hicks Tafari, 2018, p. 795). The narrative approach can illuminate untold stories and, in this study, can broaden our knowledge about the motivations for Black males to become elementary educators. In turn, we can learn from these stories about how to build capacity to improve teacher education programs and

recruitment, teaching, and teacher retention (Pabon, 2016). I consider counter storytelling to be a weapon against a tendency to focus on the flaws of educators and the harmful stereotypes of Black men. Instead, it puts a spotlight on voices that contradict those sentiments and constructs a narrative of optimism. This approach is consistent with one of the key elements of portraiture, which is to search for the good.

Key Contributions of CRT

There is a glaring lack of available research on the firsthand experiences of Black male elementary teachers, particularly their motivations for becoming teachers. In analyzing the experiences of my participants, I used the lens of CRT to understand Black males' experiences in school and their perceptions of power, race, and racism as they play out in educational settings. CRT enables us to do this as it "requires that we pay close attention to how these interlocking and intersecting systems of oppression influence the human experience" (Hicks Tafari, 2018, p. 801). Specifically, I was interested in seeing how laws and circumstances over time may have suppressed and marginalized motivated Black males who wish to become elementary school teachers (Sandles, 2020). Goings (2015) does this as he applies CRT to his autoethnographic account of being discriminated against as a Black male educator because it provided him "the space to draw on [his] personal experiences dealing with injustice and racism" (p. 94). Likewise, Scott and Rodriguez (2015) illuminate Delgado and Stefancic's (2017) "voice of color thesis" in their counternarrative of Black male preservice teachers, which supports the idea that CRT allows "people of color to have the ability to communicate life circumstances that their White counterparts are unlikely to know or experience" (p. 696). Using the perspectives of CRT, I took the stories of my participants and viewed their motivations and hurdles in becoming a teacher through a lens that acknowledges racism and microaggressions in their journey. Knowing more

about these experiences can help educational leaders to "challenge structural and normative assumptions" (Graham & Erwin, 2011, p. 402). Critical race theorists acknowledge the centrality of race and racism, but also offer methods for understanding and critiquing society and the educational system (Sandles, 2020). Given my interest in the stories of Black educators, the focus among critical race theorists on counternarratives made portraiture a logical method for this study. I also used the tenets of CRT to analyze my findings.

Researcher Experience

Alongside my personal interest in this topic of study is an important challenge to maintain an awareness and perspective, as well as acknowledge my own biases. Researchers discuss the importance of identifying positionality. For example, Marshall, Rossman, and Blanco (2022) explain that a researcher's positionality "will not preordain the findings or bias the study" (p. 87), but that it can influence how they analyze and make meaning of the findings. As a career white male educator, primarily spent in the elementary setting, I worked throughout my analysis to not filter the Black men's experiences through my own, especially since race no doubt factors into our individual journeys.

Early in my career, I taught alongside several Black men, mostly at one particular school. Aside from that experience, my male colleagues have been primarily white. Throughout my career, being a white man in an elementary school has afforded me many privileges, though these are sometimes only afforded after my colleagues find out I am also heterosexual. Openly homosexual male teachers have been at times treated with contempt in my experience and are not afforded the same privileges that I am by parents, administration, and the community. Several male teachers who I have worked alongside or know, and who are also homosexual,

have often chosen to keep their sexuality a secret in the school setting due to fear of pushback or ridicule.

Upon leaving the classroom and entering school administration at a predominantly Black elementary school, I viewed the shortage of Black male teachers at my school primarily through the lens of school leadership, and asking myself "What was I doing (or not doing) to support the hiring and retention of Black male teachers at my school?" I began to look at the brochures and materials we put out in print and social media. It did not take much to realize that photos and videos reflected our primarily white female staff. As a former male elementary school teacher, I understand how that can be a deterrent to applying for a job at a school. For Black males, that literature may be even more off-putting and harmful in ways that I cannot personally grasp.

Going into this study, I knew I needed to reflect on the reality that I am a white male, interviewing Black male teachers, and to stay ever vigilant about how this might shape the information they shared with me and how I interpreted it. Similar to Pabon's (2016) experiences studying the lived experiences of Black males working in urban schools, where she acknowledges hesitations her participants may have felt in being open to share stories with her, a Black woman. I also worked to be reflexive throughout my study. In the design of her study, she "considered the challenges of collecting from participants who may (a) have been silenced, (b) had experiences that departed from my own, and (c) had stories that proved difficult to tell" (Pabon, 2016, p. 922). To combat this, she carefully selected a methodology that encouraged sharing and listening. While she chose to use a life history interview methodology, my use of portraiture is similar in that I worked to "create opportunities for dialogue," "pursue the silence," and listen "for a story" in the creation of my portrait (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, pp. 11-12).

My decision to conduct a qualitative study using portraiture and CRT as a theoretical framework reflects my commitment to "capture the voices, relationships, and meaning making of participants" (Chapman, 2007, p. 157). In turn, I recognize my personal experiences as a white male elementary educator are not representative of what all males experience in the elementary setting. Of course, in the process of making meaning of the stories of my participants, I also cannot assume that each man's story is "generalizable across all Black male teachers" (Pabon, 2016, p. 921). I believe that each unique story is that individual's truth, and my job as a portraitist is to listen for the stories that paint the most accurate picture of motivations for becoming an elementary school educator.

Research Significance

Modern-day educational discourse about Black men has positioned them to acquire titles such as role model, disciplinarian, and fatherlike figure (Brockenbrough, 2015; Brown, 2009; Brown, 2012; Hicks Tafari, 2018; Pabon. 2016). These designations come alongside of increasing numbers of Black and Brown students in our classroom and few teachers who look like them, particularly when it comes to Black males. School district leaders, teacher preparation programs, and politicians call upon Black men (often implicitly) to become the liberator of the troubled Black boy, citing stories that they briefly witness, exaggerate, or simply fantasize. Omitted from these tales are the voices of Black males themselves.

This research study is significant because it centers the voice of Black men as they share their motivations and stories in becoming an elementary educator. While I am only working with three teachers, even a small-sized study about this infrequently studied group has a lot to offer (Hicks Tafari, 2018). Black men deserve to share their personal experiences—the good and bad—that led them into the classroom, without these experiences being filtered through the

interpretation of a selfishly motivated politician or narrator. These men should become the storytellers instead of the topic of discussion. Their voices and experiences can help us to deconstruct centuries of whiteness and racism in schools that contradictorily depict Black men "as both sinners and saviors" throughout history (Brown, 2012, p. 302).

While interview-based research on Black male motivations to become educators is limited, there is almost no research on this population in elementary school. This study fills a void in the educational research community and adds to existing research on Black male educators. The utilization of portraiture is important in this effort because it directly combats stereotypes and gendered racism with participants' lived experiences, and highlights the counternarratives of Black men. These stories are significant on several fronts. First, they can provide first-hand experiences and insight for policy makers, teacher preparation program administrators, and district leaders as they discuss the topics of Black male recruitment, training, and retention. Second, members of the Black male community can read this and demystify negative perceptions and hegemonic ideologies associated with being a Black male in an elementary school. Finally, fellow Black male elementary educators can draw upon this study to compare, affirm, or simply empathize with the narrative of the participants in connection to their own.

Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I introduced my dissertation, describing the problem, purpose, research questions, and background context. I presented my positionality and personal experiences as a white male elementary teacher to enhance transparency and trustworthiness for my research study. I also described the methodology of portraiture and discussed how this methodology is a nice complement to Critical Race Theory as I captured the voices of my participants. I also

discussed sample selection, data collection methods and analysis strategies, and limitations of the study.

In the next chapter, I familiarize readers with existing literature on my topic, including historical contexts around Black men as educators, the experiences of Black male educators, and the believed correlation between Black educators and student achievement. Within these sections, I discuss other relevant topics, such as motivations for Black males to become educators; gender roles and privilege; and recruitment, hiring, and retention practices within schools and districts.

In Chapters 3, 4, and 5 I present the findings of my research in the form of three portraits. I give each portrait its own chapter, which I think is important to provide the space that each story needs to be told in its fullest form.

In Chapter 6, I analyze my study's findings through identifying cross-cutting themes and putting my findings back in conversation with the literature. I also discuss implications of my study and offer recommendations to address practice and future research for Black males, colleges and universities, school districts, and policy makers.

CHAPTER II: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Black male teacher shortage is commonly depicted via well-documented numbers such as the two percent of United States educators, or one-in-fifty teachers, who are Black men (Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019; Pabon, 2016; Sandles, 2020). Given these numbers, it is clear that many students will matriculate through schooling without ever encountering a Black male teacher (Sandles, 2020). Numbers alone, however, do not adequately detail this deficit. There are deeper, systemic roots that have cemented this issue in schooling and society. And so, the shortage can be examined through a historical lens by assessing landmark events like *Brown v. Board of Education* and the desegregation of schools, which led to the removal of Black educators from newly integrated schools (Jones, et al., 2019; Pabon, 2016; Sandles, 2020). The issue can also be scrutinized through modern concerns such as unreasonable expectations of Black men within schools, low salaries, public perception and stereotyping of male educators through feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, and biased teacher certification tests (Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010; Sandles, 2020). Finally, the shortage can be examined through the lens of Critical Race Theory, or the intersection of race and racism in society and the "circumstances that historically brought about subjugation, debasement, and disenfranchisement" (Sandles, 2020, p. 71). Narratives and reports on the Black male teacher shortage bring to life this phenomenon beyond solely statistics, in turn, exposing the crisis as a racial and societal problem that deserves more attention and research.

In this review, I examine the motivation of Black males to become elementary educators by first providing a brief overview of the historical context of Black male educators. From there, I look at multiple points of view for the experiences of Black male educators, including existing literature on the motivation of Black males to become elementary educators; gender roles,

power, and privilege of being a Black male educator; and the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Black male educators. Finally, I share existing research on the impact of Black male teachers on student achievement and sense of belonging, with a focus on students of color. While most reports on the Black male teacher shortage examine the issue from a K-12 lens, I narrow my focus to elementary teachers, when possible, to further examine the stories and challenges of these men who represent less than two percent of educators.

The Black Male Teacher Shortage: A Historical Perspective

Historical inquiry reveals specific eras and acts in American history that drastically impacted the Black teacher population. In his exploration of the Black male teacher shortage using Critical Race Theory, Sandles (2020) shares that prior to *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), almost one-half of all Black professionals were employed as teachers. In fact, Black communities developed teachers and educator pipelines that carved pathways to historically Black colleges and universities, allowing for clear mentorship and community-centered schools, despite under resourced buildings (Pabon, 2016; Sandles, 2020). From the late 18th century to the mid-20th century, Black educators formed the "largest group of professionals to provide leadership within the African American community" (Franklin, 2009, p. 35). In fact, "one of the earliest discussions to emerge about the performance of the African American teacher occurred in the early 1800s" as "manumission societies" in Northern states aimed to set up educational opportunities for free Black and runaway slaves (Brown, 2009, p. 419). While many of these efforts grew and found success into the 20th century, after the *Brown* court decision was laid down and desegregation began, Black teachers were rejected from now integrated schools in favor of white teachers. Most frequently, the word "displacement" was used as an encompassing term by southern school boards, superintendents, and politicians to "undermine the employment

and authority of African American school staff" (Fultz, 2004, p. 14). In action, this undermining included underhanded maneuvers such as demotions, forced resignations, reduced salaries, diminished responsibilities, and so on. In one vexing example from a 1970 report by Robert Hooker under the Race Relations Information Center (RRIC), a 23-year veteran home economics teacher in a segregated Black school was assigned to teach second grade at an integrated white school and was fired five days later for incompetence (Fultz, 2004).

These acts naturally impacted Black men, many of whom were forced to find employment in different professions or in educational roles that were demotions from their previous jobs as teachers (Fultz, 2004; Todd-Breland, 2022; Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019; Sandles, 2020). Historical data show that "more than 38,000 Black teachers across 17 states were dismissed from their positions between 1954 and 1965," with much of this attributable to the *Brown* decision (Lutz, 2017, as cited in Sandles, 2020, p. 68). In one report, it was found that Black male teachers were being dismissed due to the fear of Black men being in personal contact with white females (Fultz, 2004). Allegations such as this gave clear displacement opportunities to school and district administrators. The impact of suppression and maintenance of whiteness is still felt today, as the Black male teacher population has not recovered from the rippling impact of school integration.

The demise of Black teachers after the *Brown* decision, however, was predicted by several intellectuals in the early 1950's, prior to the law being passed down. Stemming from a choice by the University of Louisville to close the doors to the all-Black Louisville Municipal College in 1950 and leading to the dismissal of the Black professors, sociologist scholar Oliver C. Cox explained that he viewed "fundamental issues in the drive to banish Jim Crow education" (Fultz, 2004, p. 12). Further, Cox stated that "integration should not be considered as either

complete or satisfactory until every effort has also been made to integrate Negro faculty" (Cox, 1951, as cited in Fultz, 2004, p. 12). Effectively, Cox and other scholars of his time anticipated the loss of Black educators once integration was enacted and verbalized the concern surrounding it, though it fell to mostly deaf ears.

Generations of systemic racism carry into modern day suppression of Black educators, particularly men. Stereotypes of Black men cast them as "indolent, unintelligent, and violent" (Sandles, 2020, p. 67). This is exceptionally problematic when these labels carry into the classroom and impact the treatment of Black boys, starting at a young age. Viewing the Black male teacher shortage through Critical Race Theory (CRT) opens pathways to discuss how race and racism have impacted the ability of Black males to engage in the process of becoming educators. Sandles (2020) argues that viewing this problem through CRT is a "chance to evaluate normal, everyday overt acts of racism, and subtle microaggressions against a clear rubric" (p. 71). Jones, Holton, and Joseph (2019) recognize this in their examination of the South Carolina-based Call Me MiSTER program, which seeks to address effects of racism that negatively impact Black men "by offering partial tuition assistance scholarships, loan forgiveness options, book allowances, and other student support services" (p. 56). The program also addresses other overtly racist hurdles for Black men, including biased certification tests and whitewashed teacher preparation curriculum found in many university programs (Jones, et al., 2019; Sandles, 2020). The dearth of Black men in elementary classrooms cannot be solved unless the roots of the racist fabric of the country are addressed with concrete actions from across community, university, district, and government agencies.

Experiences of Black Male Elementary Educators

The experiences of Black male elementary educators are diverse and complex, particularly when considering the history of racism and gender stereotyping that has dominated schooling into modern day. In this section I provide insight into multiple perspectives of Black male educator's experiences by drawing on literature and research. First, I examine existing literature to consider why some Black men are motivated to become elementary educators. From there, I look at privilege and power within schools, with a keen focus on traditional gender roles in the workplace. Finally, I review research on the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Black males to lay groundwork for conversation around increasing the number of Black male teachers and improving the conditions in which Black men navigate their way through the process of becoming a teacher.

Motivations for Black Males to Become Elementary Educators

Extensive qualitative research has been done documenting the reasons why Black boys *do not* aspire to become teachers. Interviewing high-achieving Black high school students, Graham and Erwin (2011) found three overarching themes as to why Black boys did not view teaching as a career option: a) negative perceptions of teachers and teaching, b) schools were viewed as oppressive institutions, and c) African American males are nonconformists. In a similar study, Scott and Rodriguez (2015) found high-achieving Black boys identify "oppressive and dehumanizing conditions throughout their schooling" as a contribution to their hesitancy towards becoming an educator (p. 707). Both studies pinpoint microaggressions and stereotype threats as causative factors in Black males' decisions not to be educators, further demonstrating embedded racism in our education system that negatively impacts the ability to have better representation in our schools.

We do know, however, that there are Black males who do decide to become educators, and it is important to shine a light on their stories so that their voices can be heard. Research on the motivations of Black males to become educators is scarce, with Black male elementary teachers even rarer (Goings, 2015). Much of the existing research on this topic relies on the tales of high school and educator-preparation program students to share their motivations in the pursuit of becoming an educator. While those voices are important, it is also vital to hear the narratives of those already in the field to better understand their experiences throughout the complex journey of becoming a current educator.

The notion of role modeling by Black males as a motivation for becoming a teacher, while criticized by some scholars (Brockenbrough, 2015; Brown, 2009; Brown, 2012; Pabon, 2016), is discussed as a driving force by others. Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2010) tell the story of Elton, a grade 3 teacher in Canada, who talks about representation of Black teachers in elementary schools. He shares, "there is such a shortage of people like me" and recognizes that the opportunity to influence Black boys is not lost on him (p. 256). Likewise, Hicks Tafari (2018) shares the composite counterstory of a teacher named Kamau, who also saw teaching as involving a calling to be a role model for his students.

> Kamau found it important to connect with his students—especially the Black boys because he felt that they needed role models. They needed to see positive images of Black men in positions of authority and power—not just rappers or athletes. He wanted his students to believe that school was a safe and empowering place for them. (p. 806)

While shown as an undesirable responsibility in some literature, for educators like Kamau and Elton, the prospect of being viewed as a role model for students is a driving force in pursuing the profession.

Like many educators of all races and gender, making a positive impact on the lives of children is a motivator for many Black males to become teachers. In their case study of a Black male kindergarten teacher, Bryan and Browder (2013) share the lived experience of Henry, as he overcomes racial and gender microaggressions and what the authors call hyper-visibility in a predominately white institution (PWI) to enter the teaching profession. When asked about how he views his role as an educator, he explains, "I am not only a mentor and a coach, but I am also a successful teacher who is able to teach my students how to read and write so they are prepared for the rest of their lives" (Bryan & Browder, 2013, p. 152). Henry views his role beyond "*the classical presence for the classroom*" (e.g. mentors, coaches, father figures, etc.) and shows that he has a desire and drive to be an effective teacher (Bryan & Browder, 2013, p. 150). For Black male elementary teachers like Henry, the drive to become an educator is magnified in comparison to white counterparts because of systemic racism and gender stereotyping that they face along each step of their journey.

Gender Roles, Privilege, and Power as a Black Male Elementary Educator

What kind of man wants to teach elementary school? This is a critical question when considering the stereotypes that surround the profession and those who teach in it. Hicks Tafari (2018) examines this in her composite counterstorytelling examination of nine Black male elementary teachers born in the Hip Hop generation (born between 1965 and 1984) and their encounters experiencing the intersection of gender, racial, and class as educators. Black men who teach elementary school find themselves in a space that penalizes and ostracizes them on various levels. "Black male teachers face a cacophony of discrimination, not only because they are Black and male in America, but also because their career of choice is dominated by White middle-class women" (Hicks Tafari, 2018, p. 797). At the same time, however, there remains a desperate call

for Black men to work in our schools to engage, serve, and discipline our young Black boys (Brockenbrough, 2015; Crisp & King, 2016; Lewis, 2006). This sets up a dichotomy, where oppression and discrimination provide a counternarrative to the desire for more Black men. "Ultimately, then, it seems that wishing for men is better than actually getting them" (Crisp & King, 2016, p. 44).

In modern times, Black males report society-induced quandaries that make the decision to become an educator difficult. In the elementary setting, Black males encounter issues pertaining to race, sexuality, social class, and gender that intersect to create distressing experiences. Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2010) examine these intersections by collecting Black male teacher perspectives in elementary school through feminist, queer, and postcolonial frameworks, which allows us to tie historical perspective in to view this through the lens of teaching traditionally seen as "women's work" (p. 247). They argue that Black males face not only the racialized pressures of being seen as "role models" or surrogate fathers (also coined "otherfathering") to Black boys, but risk community ostracization or abuse for being perceived as homosexual or a sexual predator (Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019; Martino & Rezai-Rashti; Pabon, 2016; Sandles, 2020). In a frequently cited speech, then Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (2010) stated that "I used to go into elementary schools that did not have a single black male teacher, though most of the students were black and grew up in single-parent families." Sandles (2020) echoes Duncan's concern and concurs that "the problem requires specific attention" (p. 68). Meanwhile, Pabon (2016), who examines the problematic perception of Black men as saviors in his interview-based research study, finds issue with the Secretary asserting that Black male teachers are "a panacea to improving urban schools" and believes Duncan's assumption fits into problematic modern contexts surrounding community and public perceptions

of the role of Black male teachers, primarily as disciplinarians and role models (p. 916). Black male elementary teachers ultimately face polarizing community calls; first by serving as a desired presence to fix urban schools, but second by doing so while aligning with preferred gender identity and sexuality.

The type of man who wants to be an elementary teacher is a complex conversation among researchers. In a critical response essay, Crisp and King (2016) describe the types of males who teach elementary school, including the "soft man," who enters the classroom with the nurturing, comforting approach typically associated with female teachers or queer males, the "masculine, sub-in-for-father" male teacher who strives to be the disciplinarian and savior, and the "lone wolf" who claims to be individualistic and have far superior teaching skills to female colleagues. When these desires are forecasted by society, they create a one-dimensional objectification of Black men and perpetuate troubling stereotypes. Brockenbrough (2015) touches on the objectification of Black men as he assesses Martino and Rezai-Rashti's (2010) case study of a Black male teacher being pigeonholed as role models and disciplinarian for Black boys. Brockenbrough's research "offered accounts of Black student resistance to Black male teachers as father figures and Black students' antagonistic encounters with Black queer male teachers" (p. 502). This critique should not invalidate the authentic desires for some Black males to play the role of "otherfather" and role model to Black boys, as many use this opportunity of power and privilege to positively influence the lives of their students (Lewis, 2006; Hicks Tafari, 2018).

It turns out that one of the defining features of the type of man who teaches elementary school is one who is supported and encouraged by his family. For example, Lewis (2006) surveyed Black male teachers to determine who was the most influential person in their decision

to become an educator, with results showing family members were the primary stimulus. For these men, notions of what is expected from a Black male elementary educator were placed into their head early on by family. The echo of "role model" and "positive influence" are common phrases used by family to tell Black men what their role should be as educators. Hicks Tafari (2018) established similar results in her composite counterstories, where she found that Black male teachers saw being "male mentors" as something they were expected to be for their Black students. The intersection of race, gender, and family influence in this conversation can serve later as a conversation piece for the recruitment and retention of Black male educators.

Despite the authentic desire from Black males who wish to be "the mentor" or "otherfather," exploring the issue from the perspective of Black masculinity studies allows the examination of "the unique amalgam of fears and fascinations that fuels the social construction of Black male subjectivity" (Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 503). There has been little discussion around the "implications of positioning the Black male teacher as the ideal pedagogue and role model for the Black male student," even though the notion for the potential of the Black male teacher has been long transcribed in historical discussion (Brown, 2012, p. 297). Original writing on the belief dates to the early 1900's and can be seen in the scripts of E.L. Blackshear: "The colored teacher has been a herald of civilization to the youth of his people" (Brown, 2012, p. 298). The message is arguably preserved (though in more positive terminology) through programs like *Call Me MiSTER* (CMM), as their vision for a graduate of the program is "conceptualized according to the following tenets: *ambassadorship, brother's keeper, personal growth, teacher efficacy,* and *servant leadership*" (Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019, p. 59).

Naturally, the mission of a program like CMM is fueled by good intentions, but a deeper dive into specific pieces, particularly brother's keeper, allows discussion around the potential

harm that may spread when assigning this as a corporeal expectation. Like Brockenbrough (2015), Brown (2012) explores this concerning evaluation in his qualitative analysis of Black male teachers and the concept of Black manhood in societal imagination. Black men in both studies expressed concerns about how they were "constructed within the context of working with Black male students" through pressures to conform to what others expected of them as Black male teachers (Brockenbrough, 2012b; Brown, 2009; Brown, 2012, p. 307). These findings illuminate that while many Black male teachers do express a desire to serve in a role model-type position, the origins of that aspiration may not be self-derived, but rather propagated by an expectation that they have succumbed to or perhaps reluctantly embraced.

While the feminization of the teaching profession has been widely noted (Brockenbrough, 2012b; Crisp & King, 2016; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010), it is important to consider that despite over 80% of the teaching workforce consisting of females, there is significant support to indicate that Black males (only representing 2% of the teaching population) still maintain power and privilege at school. First, it is undeniable that the presence of sexism in our society contributes to the denigration of the teaching profession. "Sexist devaluing of women's work is a timeless strategy" (Crisp & King, 2016, p. 47). Even addressing the issue of the shortage of Black male teachers and their recruitment "require some interrogation of the very system or culture of masculinity that leads to a denigration of women's work in the first place" (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010, p. 250).

Researchers over the years have written on the perceived harmful impact that an almost exclusively female environment can have on boys (Crisp & King, 2016), but despite the lack of research-based support for this theory, the sentiments invariably arise in the school environment, setting up male privilege that is exhibited in various ways. Hicks Tafari (2018) writes about

Kamau, a research-derived composite Black male teacher, who explains his convictions to fellow Black men in the barbershop:

> A lot of the things that boys do I can catch, and I say 'Oh, he's just being a boy.' And female teachers get on me all the time because they want to jump down a boy's throat for things that they are doing or saying or commenting on … He's just being a boy. He just told you he thought the girl was pretty: just saying it in his own way … He was like, 'Man look at her; she's pretty, and she got a nice butt,' and the teachers were jumping all down him like he offended her, and I was saying, 'Calm down.' I mean, he is allowed to be a boy. I mean what you want him to say? Ya know … this is elementary. He's a fifth grader. (p. 807)

Kamau perceives power and privilege that give him permissions (and arguably a responsibility) to override and invalidate his female colleagues' concerns about the boy's behavior.

Likewise, Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2010) share an interview with Clarissa, an African Caribbean teacher, who discusses the contrast of her experiences as a Black woman versus those of her Black male colleagues:

> They don't maintain routines; they don't have the same regard for formalities, for curriculum, for expectations than a female teacher … I think the male/female issue is huge in schools and the last school we were at, we used to call it 'the penis factor' – that the male teachers were allowed to do and say things and conduct themselves differently than female teachers. (p. 253)

Clarissa continues by sharing her concerns about the hypocrisy she views between being a Black female and Black male teacher from even within the Black community:

> [Black families] don't see me as being part of their community. I'm part of the education community. I'm just black on the outside. I'm an Oreo cookie. On the inside, I'm like other white teachers here … I don't think black male teachers have the same problem, especially if the child is a black male. Then the parents prefer them to be with a black male teacher. (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010, pp. 254-255)

From these illustrations of Black male teachers emerges a power and privilege dynamic related to their part as a role model based on gender and race. Clarissa understands this is not an opportunity extended to her as a Black female teacher. When these insights are fused with previous conversations around roles Black male teachers are charged with in the classroom, it is unsurprising how designations like "disciplinarian," "otherfathering," and "role model" are thrusted upon Black men, whether those designations are desired or not.

Recruitment, Hiring, and Retention of Black Male Educators

The relationship between Black male students and Black male teachers is what Brown and Butty (1999) call a symbiotic one— "the number of African American males who go into teaching is influenced by the number of African American males who go to college, which is in turn influenced by the number of African American high school graduates and so on" (p. 282). In previous sections, I have documented the dichotomous views related to the societal desire for Black male educators on the one hand, and the pervasive belief that men are not suited to work with young children on the other. Ultimately, racism, sexism, and stereotyping do deter many Black men from becoming elementary educators (Bryan & Milton Williams, 2017; Bianco, Leech, & Mitchell, 2011; Goings & Bianco, 2016; Graham & Erwin, 2011; Scott & Rodriguez, 2014). As I discuss in the final section, the presence of Black men in classrooms positively impacts the achievement and well-being of students, particularly Black boys. Hence, it is

important to counter the harmful actions against Black men to provide more equitable opportunities for them to become educators. In their article regarding efforts to recruit more Black men as educators, Cunningham and Watson (2002) explain that in order to accomplish such a feat, "a comprehensive and systemic effort" will be necessary from administrators, educator preparation programs, career counselors, and teachers of young children (p. 10). In this section, I analyze the existing literature on the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Black males into teaching, with a focus, when possible, on elementary education.

Recruitment

The recruitment of Black male educators begins as early as childhood by way of the individual's own experience in school. For many Black males, negative experiences in school such as suspension, microaggressions, ineffective teachers, racism, classism, overidentification for special education, low expectations, and poor school conditions can lead to "poor self-esteem, low academic and social self-concepts, and poor academic motivation and educational engagement" (Brown & Butty, 1999, p. 282; Bryan & Browder, 2013; Bryan & Williams, 2017). These incidents result in the perception that school is not for them and later serve as a deterrent in becoming an educator. To counter these narratives, Bryan and Williams (2017) argue that it is not enough to simply have a Black male as the teacher for these students, but rather they need a culturally relevant Black male in early childhood education who can challenge white curricula and practices that prevail in American schooling and empower Black boys with "academic success, cultural competence, and sociopolitical awareness" (p. 218). This viewpoint, while aspirational, is also presented without much design for execution. The authors do point to programs like *Call Me MiSTER* as locations where Black males can receive such training on culturally relevant practices, but do not provide much guidance on what that may look like.

Johnson and Sdunzik (2022) provide more specificity to this topic in their discussion around Black care pedagogy, as identified through expressive individualism. They share that culturally relevant Black teachers who manifest expressive individualism in their instruction do this through their appreciation of "how one portrays oneself according to name choice, dress, and hairstyles" (p. 676). Ultimately, Bryan and Williams' theory is supported by Lynn's (2006) portraiture case study of a Black male teacher in Los Angeles who was influenced by several Black male teachers who challenged whiteness and inspired him to become a culturally relevant teacher for his students.

Considerable potential for strengthening the student-to-teacher pipeline exists in high schools, where teacher preparation or encouragement programs can be established to provide opportunities for high school students to sample what it is like working with young children. Additionally, many high schools require volunteer or service hours for graduation, which opens doors for Black young men to fulfill these hours at an elementary school and consider teaching as a career (Cunningham & Watson, 2002). Efforts to recruit secondary students into teaching date back several decades, though Lac (2022) explains that challenges with these programs include not having a clear process to keep track of whether these students enter the teaching profession and not focusing on recruiting minoritized youth.

In their study on an urban high school pre-collegiate course designed to recruit students of color to teaching, Bianco, Leech, and Mitchell (2011) report that Black male students noted that high school teachers had the greatest influence on their decision to become a teacher, with teachers who shared a racial background also being a positive or somewhat positive effect. Representation recruitment is reinforced at the collegiate level, where faculty members of color can influence and encourage of Black males to become teachers. Unfortunately, less than 1% of

Black males are professors, and these numbers are even more miniscule in early childhood courses, identifying a gaping hole in higher education and in the recruitment of Black males (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Williams & Bryan, 2016). But even when Black professors may not be present, university courses must include "critical pedagogy that recognizes that voice of color and the social context of lived experiences to foster and achieve social justice" (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015, p. 712). Ensuring that Black men enrolled in teacher preparation courses are represented in pedagogical discussions, curriculum, and course planning is vital to ensuring that they continue their pathway towards becoming an educator.

While representation in schooling experiences plays a pivotal role in making the teaching field attractive for Black males, additional factors may also surface for school districts to leverage. In his survey of 147 Black male teachers in urban school districts, Lewis (2006) found that 60% of the respondents noted that a family member was the most influential person in their decision to join the teaching profession. Jones, Holton, and Joseph (2019) explain that *Call Me MiSTER* utilizes "community based, culturally oriented, informal or nontraditional network referral sources" such as barber shops, church moms, sorority sisters, fraternity brothers, pastor, community organizers, etc. to aid in recruiting Black men to the program (p. 62). Relying on this knowledge, districts should not only be targeting discussions with the potential teacher himself, but the individuals who are most respected by the men they are trying to recruit.

Ultimately, creating a warm and welcoming environment for Black males in elementary schools is paramount for the success of recruiting more Black men. Ensuring that school district literature, advertisements for teachers, and social media channels reflect inclusiveness is an important component for Black men to feel like they may belong in an elementary school (Cunningham & Watson, 2002). For example, having only females or only white teachers

featured on school websites or pamphlets sends a direct message to Black males that this may not be a place where they would be welcomed. To combat this, Lewis (2006) recommends that school districts utilize job fairs and targeted advertisements that feature Black men both in person, in print, and in multimedia forums.

In addition to the human and cultural elements of Black male teacher recruitment, Sandles (2020) points to other powerful motivations including financial incentives and loan forgiveness that can serve as encouragement to join the profession. Student debt is an issue that plagues teachers of color, and "efforts to increase the number of teachers of color in education should include increased financial aid for teacher preparation" (Ahmad & Boser, 2014, p. 15). The potential of these approaches is heavily supported by the work of *Call Me MiSTER*, which offers many of those desired perks to accepted participants of the program (Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019). While the national average of Black male elementary teachers rests around the 1% mark, South Carolina has boasted a 2.7% of Black male elementary and middle school teachers, heavily populated by *Call Me MiSTER* graduates (Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019). As low compensation has been shown to be a substantial reason why many Black males do not become teachers (Bianco, Leech, & Mitchell, 2011; Goings & Bianco, 2016; Graham & Erwin, 2011; Lewis, 2006; Sandles, 2020), other states and school districts should consider similar programs or incentives to recruit more Black male teachers.

Hiring

The hiring process for a Black male educator can be unpredictable and even traumatic. Stereotypes, microaggressions, and negative narratives built over time precede many Black men before they ever enter a room for an interview (Goings, 2015). Historically, the displacement of Black teachers from schools was most forcibly executed through the non-hiring process, where

white principals at newly integrated schools found trivial reasons for selecting white teachers to fill vacancies or for why Black candidates were not acceptable (Fultz, 2004). These practices are still evident in many hiring pools today (though executed more discretely) and eliminate Black educators from getting jobs over white candidates. Furthermore, the hiring processes and requirements of many states and districts promote practices that make opportunities for Black candidates even more difficult.

In his autoethnographic counterstory, Goings (2015) shares his narrative of interviewing at a private school for a teaching position. After spending several years as a music teacher at an urban school, earning a master's degree, and enrolling as a doctoral candidate in urban educational leadership, Goings explained that the principal interviewing him sarcastically questioned how a degree in urban education woud be useful at his school. These notions from the school leader reveal what Goings labels as "microinvalidations," or the exclusion of the "thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color" (Sue et al., 2007, as cited in Goings, 2015, p. 97). In another narrative research study by Pabon (2016), a teacher named Justin explains that he was "initially excited by the school administration's eagerness to meet with him. However, the panel was most concerned about how he would contribute to the basketball team even though he was interviewing for a seventh-grade math position" (p. 930). Pabon argues that this example of stereotyping furthers a myth of "Black Superman" whose "main contribution to education is perhaps his physical prowess" (p. 930). These negative experiences are countered in other research, where participants deem that being a Black male is an advantage in the interview process. Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2010) share an interview with Clarissa, where she contends that the chances of a Black male being "appointed to a position are much higher 'just for the simple fact that it would be great to have another male influence here in

the building'" (p. 255). While Black males may enter the hiring process with assumed privilege on their side, they also bear the weight and can at any moment feel the wrath of stereotyping, discrimination, and oppression in their journey into becoming an educator.

Research has shown that Black male educators are disproportionately hired for and/or placed at urban schools that serve mostly students of color (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Sandles, 2020). Ironically, the tests that most states require to obtain teacher certification ignore the history of the very students who these Black men are being hired to teach. Milner and Howard (2013) found that state certification tests focus on Eurocentric knowledge and are filled with cultural bias. In other words, the tests that aim to show what a teacher knows about content is testing knowledge that furthers whiteness and whitewashed history, and Black men (and other teachers of color) are expected to impart this knowledge unto students of color in the classroom. And while school districts may promote their desire for more Black male educators, and recognize the test is a barrier that equally provides barriers to any candidate outside of race, the results are clear: Black and Latino candidates do not pass teacher certification tests at the same rate as White counterparts (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Sleeter, 2016). In his portraits of Black male elementary school teachers, Monk (2020) describes how multiple participants struggled to pass the Praxis exam. To respond to hiring issues because of failed teacher certification testing requirements, it is recommended that Black males can be hired as entry level positions such as teacher assistants or paraprofessionals; from these positions, the men can work toward alternative certification or receive test preparation assistance through a diversity district or state initiative (Cunningham & Watson, 2002; Stroud, Smith, Ealy, & Hurst, 2000). For something like this to work, however, proper supports such as funding, mentorship, and clear pipelines must be constructed.

Retention

While much effort and attention has been fixed on the recruitment of Black males into teaching, equally important is retention. The pipeline for underrepresented teachers most often focuses on the obstacles and hurdles to recruitment, but "relatively little attention has been paid to the exit of the pipeline, and the role of teacher departures and turnover" (Ingersoll, May, Collins, & Fletcher, 2022, p. 825). Similarly, Ahmad and Boser (2014) argue that the lack of Black educators has "less to do with the pipeline into the profession than with the working conditions of teachers upon arrival" (p. 14). Teacher turnover is highest among teachers of color, and while the percentage of students of color continues to rise in schools, the percentage and available pool for teachers of color decreases (Brown & Butty, 1999; Sandles, 2020). In addition, while women are most likely to leave the teaching professional overall, among teachers of color, men are more likely to leave (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010). Researchers have provided a number of recommendations for school and districts leaders to consider when creating retention strategies for Black male elementary teachers.

For Black males to feel supported and improve in their craft, providing a qualified, experienced Black male mentor has been shown to yield tremendous results, particularly in the earliest years of teaching (Brown & Butty, 1999; Bryan & Williams, 2017; Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019; Lewis, 2006; Sandles, 2020). The mentors can be current or retired educators, or not necessarily even in the field of education, but Black male teachers need the opportunity to "discuss microaggressions, personal struggles, challenges with colleagues, gender discrimination and general non-pedagogical ideas" along with promoting "self-efficacy and collective responsibility" (Sandles, 2020, pp. 75-76). Effective mentors are also vital to new Black male teachers as they seek to improve their educational practices and instruction in a manner that fits

their personal style, culture, and strengths (Brown & Butty, 1999; Bryan & Williams, 2017). Mentorship, of course, can be challenging for districts as they struggle with recruitment of Black males, particularly in the elementary setting, so mentors outside the profession may serve as the most viable option.

Professional growth and career advancement opportunities are cited as other important retention mechanisms for keeping Black male educators in the profession. Established in their studies on Black high school students' perceptions of teaching as a career option, both Graham and Erwin (2011) and Bianco, Leech, and Mitchell (2011) identify low pay and social status as two leading causes of participants to not show interest in teaching. Further, studies show that Black male teachers who leave teaching are "usually more talented and qualified—based on teaching evaluations and college grade point average—than those who choose to remain in teaching" (Lewis, 2006, p. 227). By districts establishing clear support systems for Black male teachers to professionally grow and enter a leadership pipeline (if they so desire), Black boys could see that adults who look like them can be in leadership positions and current, highly talented Black male teachers are more likely to be retained. It is important to consider, however, that the expected promotion of Black males, viewed from feminist theory, positions them in a state of privilege that women do not receive. Society pushes males to positions of upward mobility; consequently, male teachers are questioned as to why they might "remain as a teacher in the early years of schooling, as opposed to embracing a career trajectory that would take him to the top of the institutional hierarchy" (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010, p. 252). This viewpoint would challenge the opinion that Black men are victims of racialized sexism in a white, female-dominated profession (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010), and provide further evidence of gendered privilege even when males are in the minority. Nonetheless, establishing channels of professional

growth for Black male teachers is a necessary topic of discussion for school and district leaders when analyzing retention efforts.

Finally, expectations of Black male elementary teachers must be assessed by school stakeholders in order to ensure that Black men are not objectified by societal expectations once inside a classroom. As previously discussed, many Black male elementary educators are presumed to play roles such as "otherfather," mentor, or disciplinarian, particularly to Black boys. This has occurred, in part, due to "how they have been positioned within education and the larger society, especially, media and social media" (Bryan & Browder, 2013, p. 145). And while some Black men do embrace these roles as seen in the work of Hicks Tafari (2018), others show reluctance and struggle with their position and purpose in urban schools (Brockenbrough, 2015; Brown, 2012). Black male elementary teachers can possess many traits typically denoted as feminine or motherly, including teaching how to "develop nurturing, caring, non-violent and respectful relationships with others" (Crisp & King, 2016; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010, p. 250). Brown (2012) argues that Black male teachers should not be limited in roles based on gender and race, and that school administrators must recognize that Black male teachers have intellectual contributions and the ability to serve in many roles in the school. This argument is supported by Bryan and Browder (2013), who refute the idea that there are the "right kind of men" who teach argument for those Black men who do not "live up to the majoritarian, distorted, and one-dimensional expectations" that society has put on them (p. 145). If we are to retain Black male educators, a conversation must begin around their expected roles in schools, as well as how they can best be supported without relying on stereotypes that can pigeonhole or constrain them in the classroom. And as "Black male teachers do not determine their position and purpose in urban schools on their own," it is necessary to bring in various voices and

perspectives “to clarify, question, and possibly re-envision the role of Black male teachers” (Brockenbrough, 2015, p. 516).

Black Male Educator Impact on Student Achievement

The push for more Black male teachers is often rooted in the assumed correlation between Black teachers and their positive impact on students of color, particularly Black boys. While Black boys are disproportionately disciplined for minor infractions and are consistently held to lower academic expectations (Bryan & Browder, 2013), Bryan (2016) found in his research on Black male kindergarten teachers that they “fostered collaboration and built solidarity with the Black community to academically and socially support Black male kindergarteners” (p. vii). Further, culturally relevant Black male elementary teachers consistently find alternative means for empowering Black students that allow them to remain in the classroom instead of being sent out for discipline issues, which improves student perceptions of the school experience (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Bryan, 2016; Bryan & Williams, 2017; Hicks Tafari, 2018). Pabon (2016) found similar results in her narrative study on life experiences of Black male teachers who bring culturally relevant practices into the classroom. She reports that her participants taught lessons centering on Black history, shared hip hop music in class, played basketball with students, and encouraged students to self-actualize as they worked through challenging material (Pabon, 2016). These approaches helped the Black male teachers to build positive relationships with students and increase achievement, though at the same time they did bring the men additional attention and pressure from colleagues for failing to adapt to standardized curriculum (Pabon, 2016).

In their analysis of data on the long-term impact of same-race teachers and students, Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, and Papageorge (2018) indicate that Black primary students in

classes with Black teachers performed better on standardized tests, had better attendance, and incurred fewer suspensions. Aligning with the work of Bryan & Browder (2013), Bryan (2016), Bryan and Williams (2017), and Hicks Tafari (2018), Gershenson, et al. (2018) add that "black students who are as good as randomly assigned to a black teacher at least once in the third, fourth, or fifth grades are more likely to aspire to college and less likely to drop out of high school" (p. 2). These results are amplified for Black children coming from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Gershenson, et al., 2018). Further disaggregation of data from this quantitative study separating the individual effects among Black male and Black female teachers would help further support an argument for or against the impact of Black male teachers on student achievement.

While studies on Black teachers often point to the increased outcomes for Black boys (Gershenson, Hart, Lindsay, & Papageorge, 2018; Hicks Tafari, 2018), it is also important to note that Black male teachers can have a tremendous impact on Black girls as well, as for some of them, it may be their first positive relationship with a male (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Goings, 2015). The presence of Black male elementary teachers can deconstruct the idea that teaching elementary is a gender-specific occupation (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010). In this sense, both boys and girls benefit from having a male teacher in the room, though these men sometimes face increased scrutiny by outsiders when they play traditional motherly roles for children, particularly for girls (Crisp & King, 2016).

Conclusion

A quick scan of the teacher workforce illuminates a significant lack of Black male elementary educators. Simply discussing this deficit has yielded little change over the past half century to the number of Black male educators in schools. A dive into the research shows that

historical events, society-driven expectations, gender and sexuality stereotyping, and embedded racism have all contributed to the Black male teacher shortage that we are faced with. For change to occur, stakeholders from all sectors and positionalities must come together to discuss and make changes to pathways for Black males to safely enter and remain in the profession, void of microaggressions, sexism, and predetermined roles. Stakeholders can also learn much from the experiences of Black men who are currently teachers in schools. I share some of these experiences in the next three portrait chapters.

CHAPTER III: PORTRAIT OF MR. GOFF

What I really want you to get is this: Go out and be a good person.

Introduction

When most children were going to bed to get a good night's rest for the next day of school, Mr. Jamaal Goff was being driven to a neighboring town to his grandmother's house. His parents did this so he could attend a school located in what they considered a better district; one that offered more diversity and a stronger education. Raised in Flint, Michigan, Mr. Goff's family struggled financially for the bulk of his childhood, however, his parents made sure that he was always supported in whatever he wanted to do. In just a short time talking to Mr. Goff, his optimism for life is evident; for even hurdles he has come up against he views through a positive lens as he discusses them.

Teaching was always in the career periphery for Mr. Goff, but it was a love for music and the arts that initially informed him that music education would be his pathway. Eventually, it was recalling job experiences while growing up and wanting to have an impact across core subject areas that drove him towards the elementary education route and becoming a regular education classroom teacher. In each of our interviews, Mr. Goff shared his love for his students and how his experiences growing up influenced his understanding of, and compassion for what can go on in a student's life outside of the school doors.

Most apparent in each chapter of Mr. Goff's life is his determination and work ethic. While many parts of his life were considerably more challenging for him compared to others around him, his optimism and faith kept him pushing towards his goals. Nonetheless, the realities of being a fifth-year classroom teacher still in loan debt weigh on the mind of Mr. Goff as he contemplates his future. "All I do is work, and I'm barely still making ends meet … I would like

to be debt free … one day, but that's just not even really in the cards." As someone who is looking to start a family soon, Mr. Goff frequently reflects on ways to navigate his passion and love for teaching and maintain a healthy and stable future.

K-12 Experience as a Student: "Making the Most of What We Had, Which was Very Little Most of the Time."

Having him at eighteen years old, Mr. Goff's parents navigated challenging waters to ensure that he was provided with a formidable education and exposure to people of differing backgrounds and beliefs. While the hurdles of getting to school each day from his grandmother's house were challenging for him as a young student, a constant in Mr. Goff's life was his faith and the church. The church provided him an outlet to grow confidence and most importantly, the love of music that he still carries with him today.

> I know, music initially began, for me … singing in like the church choir, at like [the] age of five, and standing next to my aunt, who was, you know an adult at the time, but she would take me to choir rehearsal with her, and I would sing, and you know, on Sunday morning you probably wouldn't even be able to see me I was so short, but I was up there singing. I kind of stuck with it throughout the years, and then that pushed me into the direction of band and different things involved with music in school.

It was band that led Mr. Goff to meet his most memorable teacher, his band director, Mr. Anderson. It was also in band where Mr. Goff developed character and confidence. In addition to being the drum major in high school, Mr. Goff had opportunities to lead in other ways thanks to Mr. Anderson.

> And I did a teacher apprenticeship, with Mr. Anderson, the band Director. He gave me all these cool opportunities. I got to direct, or conduct, a song in a concert with an audience.

> I would write pieces, and he would allow me to bring in those compositions and the band would play through it, to hear what it would actually sound it like. And it was just a really cool opportunity, and he kind of helped me to be able to stand up on a podium, especially in front of peers … and command their attention.

These opportunities stuck with Mr. Goff and provided him the chance to shine in ways that served him well for his future career as a teacher. He connects many of the skills and lessons learned in band to his successes and strengths as a teacher today.

Moments of light were sometimes darkened by Mr. Goff's teachers as well. He recalls one particular teacher who frequently harped on Mr. Goff for being dropped off or picked up late from school. As a child, he had no control over this, and he keeps this in mind as he comes across similar situations with his current students.

> My parents were frequently late, sometimes their fault, sometimes not their fault, but I'm just a child, so when they drop me off at school, that's the time. But I had a teacher who would nitpick that you need to be here on time consistently. It's like you need to be here on time. It's like man, I don't know what you want me to do. I don't drive the car when I want to be here. So much to the point where I remember crying at least once. Like, why does she keep bothering me about this. Like, it is out of my control. And now as a teacher, I never blame the kid. You know most teachers know this. Whenever your students arrive, you welcome them. Then you make them want to be in the classroom. That's something that I really take seriously because I know firsthand what it feels like to be reprimanded for being late.

Mr. Goff explains that these experiences were difficult because adults can sometimes view children's emotions as insignificant or trivial, but in a closer analysis, they mirror those of an

adult. And again, Mr. Goff has leveraged those childhood events to make himself more aware and empathetic of what his students may also go through.

> I feel like sometimes we negate the emotions of children because we're like "it's a kid problem." That's not big, a big deal. That's just your feelings or whatever, you'll get over it. But it's like, yeah, they are kid problems, but to them those emotions are real significant. And you know, while … she might be "I lost my book." For us, that might be, "I can't pay my bills." This same feeling. They're the same emotion that we're feeling. So I try to respect that and give them all of the love and care and nurture that they need to navigate those emotions.

While memorable teachers and mentors, aside from Mr. Anderson, were scarce for Mr. Goff growing up, there were still many lessons and moments as a child that remain in his memory to this day that impact who he is as an adult. Several of those instances that Mr. Goff discussed in our interviews were notably with his grandmother.

After school, Mr. Goff would occasionally be at his grandmother's house. In addition to himself, he was joined his two younger brothers and several cousins. Mr. Goff was the oldest of them all. The atmosphere was typically noisy, which to some may have been a distraction, but to Mr. Goff, he was able to maintain his focus. He recalls,

> I remember one day sitting at the table, and my aunt was at the table, and all my cousins were making so much noise, and I was like doing homework. She was like, "How are you doing homework?" What do you mean? She's like, "You don't hear all that noise?" I was like, "No," I didn't hear it at all. It didn't bother me, so I'm sure that kinda transferred to the classroom. It takes a whole lot to stress me out to, you know, to bother me.

His grandmother also sparked internal deliberation when she and Mr. Goff had conversations, particularly around Mr. Goff's vernacular. Her compliment to the way he spoke caused Mr. Goff to ponder over the significance of language and perception in society.

> My grandmother, on the phone. She would always be like, "You speak so well. Don't lose that skill. You speak so well." And I'm torn with that also. It's like, well, someone who doesn't, it doesn't mean that they're less knowledgeable … And I think it's benefited me a lot. If I didn't necessarily have the skill of like code switching, you know, if I spoke in maybe more of a relaxed way, would I be as successful in such a professional capacity?

Mr. Goff feels like the way he speaks was cultivated "as a result of my upbringing," which in part, would be attributed to his parents' decision to send him to the school district in which his grandmother lived. This choice offered several opportunities for Mr. Goff that he notes would likely not have been feasible if he had only remained in his home neighborhood.

> I would not change the experience of having to go to school from my grandmother's house. I think that was really an integral part of my upbringing because I was able to do things like walk down to the creek, play outside, and that wouldn't have always been an option in the neighborhood, so I think it molded me, you know, in the school district. I got communication skills that I probably wouldn't otherwise.

His childhood experiences, while challenging at times due to limited family finances and late-night travel to his grandmother's house, still cemented a strong foundation for Mr. Goff's future because of the high quality education that he received in K-12. Unfortunately, after graduating high school, Mr. Goff's next chapter, college, proved to be a much more stressful time in his life.

Experience in College and Teacher Preparation Program: "I Really Want to do a Good Job For Me, For My Family … It's First Generation.

Finances were difficult for Mr. Goff during his college career at Eastern Michigan University. His family's financial support was limited, so he supplemented by working multiple jobs in between balancing a full course load. Even so, he was forced to take a semester off at some point. Oftentimes, he would be driving to and from jobs before and after classes, finding any free moments to do his coursework.

> I was going back and forth, so I would do before school care, at a school, which started at like six am. And I would do that six to seven thirty, and I would drive to the neighboring city to go to class every day, and I would take classes all day. I would drive back to the school and be back for afterschool care from like … three thirty to six o'clock, or something like that. And then I would go to another job. I worked at Kroger for some point of time, working in the deli, so I was just going back and forth and working and studying pretty much nonstop.

With work and studying taking up the bulk of his day, there was not much time for personal enjoyment. When many classmates and friends would go out to parties or participate in extracurricular activities, Mr. Goff found himself occupied making money or with his head buried in a book.

Inside of his college courses, Mr. Goff did not see many faces that looked like his. A quick Google search provided the following demographics for the university he attended: White – 63%, Black – 16%, Hispanic – 6%; Male – 39%, Female – 61%. As a Black male taking primarily traditionally female-dominated courses such as education or gender and sexuality studies, he was often looked upon as a token male and/or Black male. When he was called upon

as a tokenized voice, Mr. Goff did not feel comfortable representing an entire group and feels he "can't answer every question from the perspective … of the Black community."

Mr. Goff described how his experiences outside the college classrooms provided more training and learning than inside to "support my goals of becoming a teacher." In addition to his before and after school care jobs, he would find additional opportunities to build skills in working with children, including a summer camp counselor, camp director, and special education paraprofessional. He states, "[I was] doing a lot of things to gain experience that definitely set me off to a good start when I went into the classroom." His focus remained steadfast throughout his college career, even when hurdles presented themselves.

While he cannot change the past, Mr. Goff did ponder what it may have been like had he attended a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) versus a predominately white institution (PWI), since his college experience was largely filled with classmates who did not look like him.

> I didn't always see myself reflected in my professors, or even in my peers in college classes. So, I wonder if I had gone to another college, and maybe had a different set of professors and peers, would my experience be enriched in a way? Like what if I had gone to like a HBCU to get my degree? Would that have informed me as a teacher in another way?

Mr. Goff wondered if the connections he could have made or the network he could have formed would have pushed him in different ways. In one of our follow-up interviews, we dug deeper into this topic since the initial conversation ended with mostly ponderings. In the subsequent discussion, Mr. Goff shared that if he had gone to a HBCU, he may have taken on "something else a bit more challenging" in terms of a career. He continued by noting that HBCUs have

produced tremendous alumni, including doctors and lawyers, and he feels that in an environment where he could have been surrounded by other students of color, his competitive side may have come out more.

> I [have] always been one not to like follow others, but to kind of strive to be one of the best around … Not in a conflated way or an arrogant way … I just strive to be the best. So, as I see other people doing better, it motivates me to want to do better also. So, I think that having been in that environment with other people of color doing amazing things would have helped.

While this conversation was purely in hindsight, it allowed Mr. Goff to reflect on moments in his life where identity may have or did play a role in his opportunities and choices.

One of those key moments that shaped his life course occurred at a job during his college years. Before he began student teaching, he started substitute teaching at a local school. There he met a teacher of color, a Korean woman, who he subbed for and helped with beginning of the year data collection. She told Mr. Goff, "Well, you're a great substitute." After inviting him back over the next several weeks to continue to help, Mr. Goff completed his student teaching at this school, and she ended up helping him get a job there. Years later, this teacher once again reached out to Mr. Goff and helped him get a job at the independent school where he currently works. While getting his current job was a full-circle moment, Mr. Goff reflects that "this is a teacher of color that saw something in me and has taken upon herself to open up doors for me." In reflecting on his time in college and what may have been had he gone to a HBCU, this teacher of color showed that connections and networking can play a valuable role in your life and career trajectory.

Mr. Goff's Teaching Experience: "When It Comes to Directly Helping Students … I Will Help in Any Way I Can"

Finding a job right out of college proved to be a straightforward task for Mr. Goff. He recognizes that being a man of color looking to teach in the primary setting does have its advantages, particularly as "a goal of a lot of schools, especially now, it's like diversity, and they are looking to hire a diverse array of candidates." As he walked around a job fair just a day after graduating from college, he was primarily concerned with how he would fit into a place of employment. He approached different booths at this fair and pondered, "Am I going to be the only Black person here? So, if there was a person of color at that booth, whether it was everyone or just one person … It made it feel a little safer." While personal safety and comfort ran through his head, he also faced stereotypes and microaggressions originating from school leaders he spoke to. His desire to teach in the primary grades shocked people he spoke to. Many would respond, "Wow! You're interested in elementary? We would have expected you to be maybe middle school." He also shared an experience from a charter school that offered him a dean position without ever interviewing him. While Mr. Goff saw that as a red flag due to not actually interviewing him, I explained to him (from an administrator perspective) that these types of positions (particularly at charter schools) often entail assuming a disciplinary role primarily. It is likely that they saw a Black man and assumed that he would automatically fit this role.

Mr. Goff accepted a kindergarten position at a school outside of Ann Arbor, Michigan. He noted that he was able to interview with the head of school, a male who had started his career in Head Start, so he was familiar with the primary grades. Mr. Goff felt "that we did kind of have a little bit of a bond or a relationship with knowing like, we are somewhat of a rarity in elementary because … it's a female dominated profession." This school was primarily comprised

of students from a low-income bracket who had "challenging behavior problems." While Mr. Goff noted that he had several students on behavior plans, he honed his classroom management skills and studied underlying factors that can cause behavioral challenges in students.

> Rather than scaring me away, it really kind of drew me in because at some point in school you realized … my most struggling students were young Black boys. And it just grabbed my heart, like what is going on that these [white] students are able to come in and be successful in kindergarten pretty much from day one and then all of my students of color, particularly the boys have such a difficult time.

As Mr. Goff worked with his students and made visible improvements, he "ended up being kind of a go to person for students who are having difficulties. I really got good at deescalating, being able to bring them back into the classroom rather than having them be sent home." He shares a story about an eighth grader who had made serious threats against the school, was suspended, and as a part of his reentrance into the school, the principal asked Mr. Goff if he could be with his kindergarten class to "practice mentorship and building relationships, grow empathy by working with young students." While Mr. Goff happily agreed to the request, he recognizes that it was a Black boy who had gotten in trouble, and these types of "challenges fall on the very few teachers of color."

Coupled with his de-escalation and relationship building strategies, Mr. Goff also leveraged his love of music in the classroom to create a welcoming and exciting learning atmosphere.

> [Music] is a huge part of my classroom, and I think it's one of the things that makes me stand out as an educator in a sense … I use music really the entire day. My students,

they're just kind of welcomed into a warm atmosphere. And I started that my very first year right from the start.

This reputation earned Mr. Goff positive recognition among parents, and he learned that his name would be frequently requested as their child's teacher.

While he was "flattered" by the parent requests, he also acknowledged that this trend could cause strife amongst colleagues who did not have the same skillsets or style as him. While Mr. Goff and his kindergarten teammates "worked pretty well together," there were times where differences in upbringing, perspective, and identity would cause discomfort for Mr. Goff. He shares specific instances where this occurred.

> I can recall it was around the time of George Floyd's murder. There were a lot of protests, and there was a protest in a neighboring city, and it was the city that one of my colleagues in kindergarten lived. And she was saying, "Well, I just wish it wouldn't be going on so close to my house or in my city." I was just like I wish Black people would stop being murdered. Like I don't really care about, you know, your city being in an inconvenience, because it wasn't anything destructive … Another example would have been … when Dr. Seuss … became a whole conversation of his racist history. I was like let me learn a little bit more about this, and you know, I loved Dr. Seuss as a child also, but when I realize there's more to this story. There're so many great books out there. We don't necessarily need to rely on Dr. Seuss more. Every year they would do … a whole week committed to it. I was like, I'm not going to do Dr. Seuss this year, and I got a lot of push back. "It's not a big deal." I'm like, "Well, it is kind of a big deal to me. I'm sorry if you don't understand, but I'm just not going to teach about Dr. Seuss for five days when he has done so many hurtful things."

Mr. Goff noted that he could “sense a little bit of frustration from the other two kindergarten teachers.” They had been used to doing things a certain way for many years, and so for him to come in as a young teacher and say “we're not doing, or I'm not doing that. I can see how that would be upsetting. But that was a thing that was important to me.”

These encounters with his teammates led to a conversation in our interviews around privilege. His teammates recognized Mr. Goff’s usefulness as a de-escalator or mentor figure, but when it came to things that did not convenience them, they did not support Mr. Goff’s viewpoints.

> Yes, that's privilege. That's what it is, right? It’s my needs are more important, whatever I want, you know I'm going to do it. Whatever needs to be done to meet my goals, but when it comes to your goals, they're less important. I'm not going to worry about it. So, you know, if it's going to benefit me with what Mr. Goff has to bring … I'll use that. But his needs, what he needs. I'm not really going to worry about it too much. So, it's just privilege, at its finest.

This frustrated Mr. Goff because he was looking at a broader picture—equity, inclusion—when he brought up these topics. He understands that student well-being and safety are at risk when teachers bring these harmful conversations to the classroom, and it is hurtful as a Black man to hear colleagues not supporting him, even if unintentionally.

> And that was the one of the hardest parts about that, too, because such a large percentage of [our] students are students of color. You don't really hear me and appreciate the perspective I bring, being as a person, a teacher of color, a person of color. It's hard for me to fully buy into the idea that you are supporting all of your students and all of their needs.

Mr. Goff saw that he was still able to bring the elements he desired to his students inside of his own classroom. He expressed the importance of representation and inclusivity in his instruction and ensured that his students felt welcomed. He recalls a student from his first year of teaching who fell in love with a book because the main character looked like her.

> I had a book called Princess Truly, and the main character was a little girl, and she had dark brown skin, and I had a student that looked a lot like her actually. And she found the book in my library, and she read that book every single day during the day during independent reading.

Stemming from our conversation around interviews at the job fair, Mr. Goff believes for people of color, it is important to have others who look like you in a space. "Yeah, like those bits of representation, just make it so much easier for people of color or minority groups to have somewhere to go to and feel comfortable and feel safe." Mr. Goff makes sure that his classroom allows his students to feel that same safety that he looks for himself.

Mr. Goff felt like he was making a difference in the lives of the students at his first school. In addition to the academic successes, he saw that his presence as a male served in multifaceted roles for his students, as "some of them did not have fathers or were not around one way or another." Mr. Goff takes pride in being a role model, or fatherlike figure in certain situations, and imparting good values and citizenship. Describing his success, he offered,

> And the vast majority of them, if not all of them, left each school year better off than they had come into my classroom; more well-rounded, better regulated to be able to control their emotions better. I sort of felt like I was sending them off to be successful in first grade.

Despite the positive feedback and achievements that Mr. Goff earned, the charter system that he was working for had scripted curriculum guidelines that greatly restricted creativity. Mr. Goff notes,

> After my first year, you want to start to be creative and write my own lessons, and it was actually going the other way. More scripted for the team. The kindergarten teacher on day fifty-two of the school year in Michigan is supposed to be teaching the same exact lesson in kindergarten in California. That is not even possible, and there are ninety-six schools for the charter company around. How are they supposed to keep you all on track?

It was this limiting instructional environment, along with an opportune phone call from the teacher who he had subbed for many years prior, that landed him an opportunity to switch to an independent school, which is where he teaches today.

At the independent school, Mr. Goff explains that it is a very different experience than what he had in his previous school. For one, he is now teaching students of wealthy parents, and he sometimes questions himself, “Why am I even here?” He recognizes that these students have access to resources that his previous students did not and “it's like half the time I feel like I'm wasting some gift, and I want to go back working with kids who need me most.” While he grapples with this inside his mind, he appreciates that “I do make a little bit more money, and there are more resources in this classroom.” He has also realized that while these students do have more financial means, “they're struggling in a lot of ways, too. They might not have the same struggles of like, ‘Maybe dad’s in prison for the students over here; but now dad works in New York. He’s in New York every week. I still don't get to see him, but just for another reason.’” Rationalizing his own decision to work at this school weighs on the mind of Mr. Goff and he admits, “it’s still tough sometimes” because the population is predominantly white, and

he feels that his greatest gift is working with students of color. Despite the internal struggles he faces, his gift of building relationships still blossoms in the independent school. In his time there, he has noticed that the small population of students of color, even those he does not teach, feel a bond with him, as he creates a sense of belonging through his presence.

> You could just kind of see it in their eyes. It's never a conversation of like. "Hey, we're both Black." It's just like they'll … come greet me in the morning as they walk by. They might walk past other teachers. They'll stop and say, "Morning, Mr. Goff," give me a fist bump, and I make that time for them also, even if these are kids I've never had. The students, they want to have an interaction.

Across schools, Mr. Goff has found consistent ways to build relationships and academic success with students. He is fully aware that being a Black male elementary educator places a certain degree of spotlight and pressure on him, but also provides opportunity. There are moments where students who may be underrepresented need a voice, and Mr. Goff is not afraid to step into that role. "I feel like I have the skill set and the ability to reach that student and make a difference."

Policy and Practice Recommendations: "If We Could Land in the Right Place from the Get-Go, That'd Be So Powerful"

Is it all really worth it? This is a question that Mr. Goff struggles with daily as he drives "40 minutes to work to teach kids whose … parents are doctors and lawyers and business owners … and they pay $20,000 a year to send their kids to this school. I drive all the way over there. I do the hard work for these families, kids, and I drive back 40 minutes to my humble little house." Teacher salary weighs on his mind as he and his fiancé, also a teacher, look to start a family in the future.

> I make ends meet just barely. I don't necessarily have the funds to go out and buy nice clothes … be teed up all the time, so it's hard to put on the display to someone like "Teaching is so worth it. Look at me. Like I'm doing the thing. I can live the lifestyle that I want to live" because that's not 100% true. So, I hate to keep going back to money, but it's a huge part of it. We're just not valued in the way that we should be. So, people don't see the profession as viable or something. We have to be compensated. We have to be viewed as professionals.

Mr. Goff sees teacher pay as a primary issue in the recruitment and retention of teachers. For him personally, he had visions after graduating, he would be "set" in his career after working so hard throughout high school and college. However, he still puts in "the grind" just as much as he did before and is still struggling financially. He notes that while most teachers are in the profession for the love of what they do, the "benefits are not outweighing the cost." To address this, Mr. Goff believes that it is important "to be transparent from the start. And if we can again learn how to leverage teaching and turn it into business and more profit or change policy in some way … The compensation would be a game changer for teachers everywhere."

For more Black men to see teaching as a viable profession, Mr. Goff maintains that we need to change stereotypes around being a Black male who is teaching young students. He notes there are "stereotypes around people of color being aggressive or we're dangerous." As a kindergarten teacher, Mr. Goff is hyperaware of how parents may view their five-year-old walking into a classroom with a Black male teacher. Mr. Goff has had experiences where "parents are like, we don't really want our daughter to be in his class. We're uncomfortable with that, for whatever reason." While he has been able to meet with these parents to show his

abilities as a teacher and ease their hesitations, many hypocritical viewpoints on female versus male teachers are pervasive in society.

> Yeah, I think you could see a five-year-old sit on a female teacher's lap in a kindergarten classroom, and not think too much about it. If I have a kid sitting on my lap, it's question marks. One might go and say, I saw this, and I don't think it's appropriate, and so I just don't ever put myself in a situation where I can be questioned, or any of those things. It is a little bit of a double standard that I definitely have to be extra conscious, not just as a Black male, just as a male teacher in general on how you interact with students.

While practices born of stereotypes are difficult to change, Mr. Goff hopes he shows that his "desire to work with children comes from a good place, wanting to be a role model and wanting to help them be successful and happy individuals in their life. Some people just don't see that when a male is working with children."

To change perception of Black males as teachers, it will help if more are present in classrooms, since Mr. Goff believes Black boys will be more likely to consider the profession if they see others who look like them in their own schooling. However, as Mr. Goff notes, when working on increasing Black male teacher representation, "It's like the chicken or the egg thing." To help with this, Mr. Goff believes there should be "recruitment programs going into high schools, maybe in middle schools, talking about the experience of teaching, and maybe just building knowledge around the profession in an interesting way." While students do interact with teachers each day, hearing about the profession from an outside voice can show students "behind-the-scenes work" that Mr. Goff believes may help teaching to be seen as an exciting option. He also sees social media as a channel for more Black male recruitment. With a following of over ten thousand on Instagram and thirty thousand on TikTok, he understands that

his presence on these apps, showing him as an educator, can serve as a positive influence on other Black men. “The reason I do the whole Instagram thing is to like show it's being done. I'm out here doing it.”

As the teaching landscape evolves, more people are seeing teaching as a viable second career option. Mr. Goff has seen some of these teachers at his school as well, particularly as an independent school, where teachers do not have to be teacher certified to work there. He explains, though, that many of these new teachers are coming from fields in which they are experts, so they are knowledgeable in their content area. “They were actual scientists, or actual engineers, so they’re experts. They're doing these things in their classroom, and they're trusted because again, the leadership views them as a professional that they are.” Looking for second career teachers could be one means for recruitment of Black males moving forward. At the end of the day, however, Mr. Goff remarks that leaders still need to be at the forefront of building a diverse staff. At his current school, there is a new head of school, and Mr. Goff explains that recruiting and hiring teachers of color was important to him during the interview process.

> We were kind of drilling him on this. So, like what are your ideas for recruiting teachers of color? He kept saying … “Let's go to U of M.” I'm like that's great, but U of M is still very elitist, and we have Eastern Michigan University right here, which is in a much different area, and in a much higher demographic of Black students. But he was overlooking that. So that was kind of a red flag in my mind. It's like, yeah, U of M is great, but we have this over here also … So again, we're falling into these habits of going with the most elitist as the best.

The low representation of Black teachers weighs on the mind of Mr. Goff, as he remains one of the few teachers of color at his school. He hopes to continue to push for more diversity awareness from his school as future hiring arises.

Finding the right school for a Black male educator is an important factor for long-term success, Mr. Goff believes. He advocates for "a program of some sort to help us find the school that will be the best fit for us." He understands that many Black males "end up in schools because we just need a job. We just need to be in a particular location, and it's like whatever comes my way, I'll accept the position because I need to pay bills." The result of this reality for many teachers is that they end up at schools where they "probably were never supposed to be really a good fit for. We're not compatible with the schools that we ended up in, and then we get frustrated. And we end up leaving." In Mr. Goff's vision for recruitment and retention, a program or system would be available for new teachers to ask questions like "What are your values? What school would align with those values?" He recognizes that as a "new teacher you might not even know what to look for." So having a system or someone who can help new teachers understand the different types of schools out there can provide support for recruitment and retention of Black males. Mr. Goff admits that he "wasn't even familiar with … independent schools when I first started. There's independent schools, charter schools, public schools, parochial schools, Montessori schools. I didn't know these things coming out of college."

Once a Black male elementary educator is hired, Mr. Goff notes that there are strategies to help ensure that they are supported and retained. While he has not personally had a consistent mentor in his career, he believes that a mentor or support system can be a great benefit in a Black male teacher's life. The benefits of having this encouragement and support are numerous.

> You gotta have these conversations to uplift each other. Learn how to set boundaries from the beginning, so that you are not getting into this savior complex. Having a network of people that are doing this specific work, and this space could be a really cool thing just to make this more accessible and more just enjoyable for us, because I think a lot of people that are maybe considering teaching, or would, are running away.

The reality is, though, that there are not many fellow Black males in education to serve as mentors, so Mr. Goff explains that having mentors outside of the education field could not only still provide support for Black males, but possibly introduce other opportunities for career development.

> [Teachers] have so many skills that roll over into a lot of different professions, so I feel like those professions could also maybe offer us training … how to collaborate better with colleagues, how to leverage our role as teachers … into business, to leverage that to make more money. I mean, I think that would be a great benefit to everyone. Teachers making more money.

Retention of Black male teachers can also be addressed through schools supporting their professional growth. Mr. Goff appreciates that his school gives each teacher a few thousand dollars a year to attend any professional development they want. Through this, he can learn new instructional strategies and network, while not having to stress over funding these opportunities. Mr. Goff explains, "little things like that can make a big difference" for retention.

Summary

Parents sometimes must make difficult decisions to provide their children with opportunities that they may not have had. Mr. Goff's parents decided to send him to a neighboring school district, using his grandmother's address to get him into what they considered

a better educational experience. While Mr. Goff's educational experience was largely highlighted by his love of music and band, his K-12 experience also taught him many life lessons that he would carry with him into the classroom as a teacher.

Mr. Goff found the financial stress that existed in his childhood would continue into his college career, forcing Mr. Goff to maintain a demanding schedule that involved working multiple jobs and balancing schoolwork. After graduating, he found a charter school to teach in, where he honed many strategies and skills that he executed without much guidance or mentorship. He most recently switched to an independent school, where he internally struggles teaching students who have financial means and not as many needs as students who he was accustomed to teaching. Mr. Goff maintains that increasing teacher pay will positively impact the recruitment and retention of Black males becoming teachers.

When asked what type of Black man teaches elementary school, Mr. Goff says that he is "compassionate, empathetic, tough skinned, cares for themselves, able to kind of sift through negativity, and dedicated to the future." Likewise, the type of Black male who could not be an "elementary teacher might not exist. I think they're all capable of it. It's a decision; it's a mindset." He has encouraging words for men of color who are considering teaching, "You're going to change lives. You're going to have an impact on kids, on adults, on yourself, your college … people are going to see you." While Mr. Goff is passionate and dedicated to his students and teaching, he acknowledges that the pace and stress of teaching combined with the low salary he earns, means that this career choice may not be viable forever. He hopes to "find a place in the future where I am able to be happy, and to be sustainable and comfortable and free financially, but primarily enjoying my life."

CHAPTER IV: PORTRAIT OF MR. FIELDS

A huge part of why I am really passionate about school was my elementary experience.

Introduction

Raised in a rural suburb outside the Dallas-Fort Worth area, Mr. David Fields brought his southern accent and unique life experiences to the suburbs of Chicago, where he now teaches his second-grade students. Adopted at birth to a white family, Mr. Fields cannot help but smile each time he reflects on his time and experiences growing up and attending Lock Elementary as a child. The teachers, students, and culture at Lock Elementary made a lasting impact on him, so much so that he attributes much of his desire to be a teacher to his time there.

Mr. Fields and I were connected for this interview by mutual friends in our social media professional learning networks, and each had told me about his warmth and passion for students and education. As we hopped on our Zoom call, we first showed appreciation for an amazing network of people with whom we are connected by sharing stories about how social media, even with its flaws, bolsters great learning opportunities. From there, I asked Mr. Fields to tell me about himself, which was a free and open opportunity to explain anything he felt was important in his life to share and kick off our conversation. In addition to his basic demographic information, he also shared his pronouns (he/him), which was a prelude to the discussions we would have about identity, culture, and equity over the course of our conversations.

A career focused on working with kids had always been in the back of Mr. Fields's mind, but a lack of teachers who looked like him growing up sent subliminal messaging that Black males do not teach. After considering psychology as a career route, he turned to his parents to have a conversation about how he could best reach and build a foundation for youth. Both supported the idea of becoming a teacher after reminding him how he had talked about it

growing up. From there, his focus area varied from English education (his eventual major) to fine arts education (a passion) to early childhood education (his skillset). His mother, who owned a small daycare facility, reminded him, “You are really good with the little ones. I always thought that you'd be a great elementary teacher.” With that he dug his feet into elementary education and worked toward his career as an educator.

K-12 Experience as a Student: “That's How I Conceptualized as a Kid Who Were Teachers, and Who Did What.”

Mr. Fields remembers being just one of a few Black students in his grade level at Lock Elementary. It was never much of a thought for him, though, as they were only occasionally in his class. What Mr. Fields learned from his family early on is that what is common is not always someone’s truth or norm; he expanded upon this by describing his family dynamics. Mr. Fields is the youngest of five children, with a fifteen-year gap between him and the next youngest. His parents were versed in navigating issues of diversity and inclusion from his older four siblings (two of whom are also adopted), which allowed them to apply previous experiences to his upbringing.

> I think that they were very aware of the need for windows and mirrors, as well as … being about developing commonalities and not ignoring differences, but also being really strong and understanding who you are as a person. And I know that they were very intentional with making sure that even though I didn't have necessarily a bunch of friends who looked exactly like me in my classroom, they were always trying to make sure that I did connect with my friends, who were also Black males.

Being an adopted Black child raised by a white family may not be considered a common experience, but to Mr. Fields, it was his norm. He thrived and enjoyed his time at Lock

Elementary. “As a student, I just really felt like the teachers were all extremely invested in the community, and it was so exciting to go to school … I loved that they knew my family, they knew me.”

Middle and high school offered opportunities for Mr. Fields to develop not only a stronger sense of who he was, but to begin building an understanding of those who may not have had the same experiences as him in early years. “My middle school and high school actually pulled more from the central part of Arlington, Texas, and so the demographics were a lot more diverse. And so, I didn't ever have … an issue with … any identity.” For the first time, Mr. Fields was seeing more students who looked like him in his classrooms and school. However, sharing a similar racial identity does not necessarily equate to having similar life experiences. Mr. Fields learned that other Black children may not have a consistent “community, or it was more transitional in certain areas, and so their experiences were more like, we just went to school, we went home.” A love for school and teachers was something that Mr. Fields realized was a sentiment that not everyone shared, especially other Black boys.

In his middle school years, Mr. Fields would “see and meet other students, who, identity-wise, would look like me, but then not have the same experiences.” He refers here to fellow Black students who shared a racial identity, but grew up in a different socioeconomic environment and spoke differently than he did. He noticed other Black students shared more in common with each other than he did with them. It became a challenge to figure out where he fit in. He wondered,

> How do I connect with someone? I notice that this is a lot more common, and so I'm like wait, so I'm the odd one out, and as a middle schooler or junior high kid trying to figure out and navigate. Well, what does that mean? Does that mean that I stay with … my lived

> experience? Or do I try to mimic or replicate someone else's? And so that was … a big part of the journey for me in junior high.

Navigating those complexities led to Mr. Fields learning how to fit in and acclimate with many types of people or groups. Looking back, he sees this skill as foreshadowing to who he still is today. “It was a lot of setting that … foundation where, even like how I am today … I connect with so many different groups. I would hang out with this group, and then I would go hang out with this group.” To be able to move between people of different social groups and identities, he found that he needed to find things that brought him together with others. “I don't have like a group that's mirroring directly back to my experience, so I've learned how to like see commonalities and just build bridges that way.”

To create bridges, Mr. Fields found that being observant of those around him benefitted his understanding of others. His social intelligence grew even deeper as he began taking high school courses that allowed him to learn insight into human behaviors.

> I just watch, and I still am very observant of others, and I think that's where the psychology piece of it came in, because when I started taking psychology classes in high school and I was like, “Oh, this makes a lot of sense, body language, communication, things that happen beyond just how we speak, and then even thinking about [those issues] with like choir and the vocal piece of it with inflection and communication, and just thinking about how many different ways that we communicate.

Internalizing his understanding of people and communication dynamics and then connecting them to his own surroundings gave Mr. Fields the roadway to acclimate into many groups growing up.

Naturally, this time frame in Mr. Fields's life did not come without hurdles and learning curves. As Mr. Fields met other students who looked like him but may not have shared similar life experiences as him, he also found that many of these same students did not share similar ways of speaking, or a particular vernacular. Wanting to make connections with other Black students, Mr. Fields would try to code switch around fellow Black students. He found that his efforts to speak in different dialects, such as Ebonics or African American English (AAE) were often met with hesitation from listeners. He recalls,

> But for me, with the code switching it was really interesting because I would immediately sound inauthentic, and they're like "David, just talk normal." I was like, "Okay." Like, I remember … after Hurricane Katrina and a lot of kids moved from New Orleans, and I was still trying to fit in with some of them, like just adapt to different groups. And so, I would jump in, and I would … use like Ebonics or slang or like AAE. They're like "No, your parents are white. Just talk like a general middle class white person. That's okay, it's who you are." And I just remember even how affirming that was, like I don't know, just to be who you are. And I was like, I won't forget that guy. He was just like so cool and chill. He really made an impact with being like, "Oh, I don't have to … pretend or be inauthentic."

Mr. Fields recalls his father having a similar response when he tried speaking other dialects at home. His father reminded him, "You need to be David. You don't need to be anyone else to get people to like you." Mr. Fields heard different perspectives and lessons, however, when he spent time at the houses of other Black boys. In one instance, he remembers his friend's mother correcting him for not saying "yes, ma'am" in front of her. This confused him because a white friend, who was also present, was allowed to simply say "yes." Mr. Fields explained he faced

moments of imposter syndrome in these moments, where he wondered if his experiences were authentic. Navigating elements of self in middle school helped shape Mr. Fields; he was able to figure out who he was and how his experiences shaped who he would become.

While Mr. Fields's parents worked to ensure that he was able to have friends who both looked like him and had similar life experiences, throughout his entire K-12 experience he only had one teacher of color, a Korean woman named Ms. Tabb. This "sweet and kind" fourth-grade teacher still stands out as a favorite for Mr. Fields and served as an important symbol in Mr. Fields's perceptions of who could be a teacher.

> It's like right around the 2000 election, and in my head, I'm just like … "Well, would there be a Black President?" And it's like "No, no, it's like, it's always white people." I do remember sitting with that, and I feel like that's how I conceptualized as a kid who were teachers, and who did what, and it was just … noticing these patterns, and to have a teacher who was a person of color, even though it wasn't another Black person it was really like, "Oh, this is different," and like, "Okay, I can make a connection with this."

Representation was an opportunity for Mr. Fields to feel like he could invest himself in a profession that he found interesting. Working with youth remained alive in his head as he entered high school, and it was a passion and love for the arts that would eventually push Mr. Fields to discover his true self and direction. "I ended up gravitating towards the fine arts because I felt like there's more expression with navigating identity." By the end of his senior year in high school, he found himself frequently spending time with choir and orchestra groups. Art became an outlet; a form of expression for "what it meant to be creative." His connection with the arts would eventually carry over to his teaching:

> Even as like a newer teacher … it was really about taking that same mindset from everything I learned from the arts … and making sure that I'm not only doing something because I personally believe it's the right thing, but being able to then take that, fine tune it, and be able to deliver it to someone else. Because it can all make sense for me, but now I have to think about does the observer, the receiver, the audience experience what I'm trying to relay or articulate through education?

Growing up, Mr. Fields consistently put himself in other people's mindsets. From navigating identity to building a self-confidence for who he is, Mr. Fields learned that his experiences were what truly made him unique, and "you still can speak about things and how it impacts you, and it's like you speak from the 'I statement' … that's my experience."

Experience in College and Teacher Preparation Program: "She was so Just the Person I Want to Be"

Moving three hours north of home for college to the University of Oklahoma was an easy choice for Mr. Fields, especially when a scholarship came along with the offer. His decision to double-major in English and French came about as a route to teach secondary education, but it was his move to Chicago after graduation and to attend DePaul University's graduate school that led him to switch directions towards elementary education.

> I'm not gonna stay in Oklahoma … I was going to move up towards Chicago, so I thought that I needed to get a masters, and that way I get an English degree, and at the time I was still thinking about … teaching secondary school, and then I was going to use my English degree. And then I was going to have access to all this really great literature. And I could take this high-level college literature. And then I transfer it down to high school and then that way they're getting the exposure to some really high-level text, and

> they're ready in high school, and then I switch my game plan to eventually elementary ed when I moved up to Chicago.

Mr. Fields saw that he would be able to use the learning and inspiration for higher level thinking that he envisioned for high school students in the elementary setting as well. Much of his inspiration and learning that enabled him to make cognitive connections and navigate conversations around important topics in the classroom came from his professors at Oklahoma.

The University of Oklahoma had a number of Indigenous professors, including a memorable woman named Dr. Cunningham, and they offered the opportunity to explore "all these different spaces, and … as just someone who is trying to make these connections and really understand everything that is the world … their insight and thinking outside of how I was linearly trained" has stuck with Mr. Fields years later as important work in the formation of his teaching pedagogy and identity. As Mr. Fields continued to reflect on his time in undergrad, he shared more about Dr. Cunningham, who he now channels when he is in the elementary school classroom.

> She was so just the person I want to be when I am at that level, and it's kind of like I'm replicating her at the elementary level, where she has such dexterity to navigate so many different conversations, and make those hooks and like she thinks about who's right in front of her, and she can turn and take this media that's like really obscure, and make a connection for just any of the demographics that are in there.

In reflecting on his growth as an educator, he also draws upon another one of his inspirations, Dr. Zaretta Hammond, who he credits for his passion and understanding around culturally responsive teaching. Both women's work cultivated a deep mark in Mr. Fields's pedagogy in the elementary setting and can be felt as he shares his anecdotes and thoughts on any number of topics.

Mr. Fields's time at DePaul was fruitful in his growth and development as an educator, particularly when it came to experiencing the many types of schools and settings that one can work in as an educator.

> DePaul was really great for giving me access to different grade level bands … and they were very great with setting us up with field sites to where we were working with private schools, charter schools, as well as public schools. And I had a range of experience in different parts of Chicago. And Chicago is really great for just the different types of neighborhoods and the diversity there.

Having the opportunity to spend time in different types of schools allowed Mr. Fields to apply the learning that was taking place in his graduate program to actual experiences. He recalls, "I think DePaul did a really great job with like social justice and multicultural education … and how to really be able to connect with everyone." Building bridges across students in different demographic groups and from diverse backgrounds is something that Mr. Fields carried with him from his K-12 experience and into his graduate program. These skills would eventually be equally as valuable in the classroom as a teacher.

Unfortunately, Mr. Fields also felt isolated during his time at DePaul, as he was the only Black male in his program after another Black male who started with him took a pause in his studies. This presented challenges, at times, when professors would look to Mr. Fields to speak about the Black experience in class, leading him to feel tokenized as times. As Mr. Fields explains, "I shouldn't be speaking on everything for everyone. I should only be speaking about my experience." But even being transparent about his experiences as an adoptee with white parents would sometimes prove to be too complex when speaking about his life in class discussions.

> And I do remember there was one time I had like a professor was like, “Oh, this is not a talking point that I think everyone can understand.” So we're gonna have to like shift it to something that's more, I guess a common Black experience versus what I experienced. And so, I do think it was a little bit of like, “Oh, this is not what we expected, or we plan for, so we're gonna try to navigate around it.” I don't think it's like nefarious … or malicious. I think it was really like, “We can't conceptualize this right now in this setting, because we have to also teach all these other folks who are coming from these different backgrounds,” so that wasn't necessarily like accounted for. And then for folks who might not be as like social justice aware, or multicultural aware of even just the more common experiences of Black folks … And so, you have now someone who has this multicultural experience, and is coming from all these different identities, and I don't know if they were like, layered up and leveled up enough … as random folks who are coming in from society trying to do the right thing in education.

Mr. Fields learned to navigate being the only Black male in a class where he was sometimes positioned to speak upon topics in which he did not necessarily have a more typical or common Black experience. His perspectives are complex and include layers that do not fit into societal stereotypes. He reflected on this dynamic in relation to former President Barack Obama, who was raised by white family members, and First Lady Michelle Obama, who grew up in a Black community.

> I felt like, because I hadn't had like the common experience for Black men, and that's not to like sensationalize, or “other” myself intentionally like that … I was thinking … a lot about Obama, Barack and Michelle, because I think there is a really interesting conversation about Barack's experience growing up in Hawaii, raised by his

> grandparents, his white grandparents, versus Michelle, who grew up on the Southside of Chicago and in the Black community. And so, I kind of feel like it's like that, where we do have that experience because we still are Black men, but it's not necessarily that we speak to the same exact experience … Barack spent time like teaching on the Southside, and really being there in the community. But then I'm thinking to myself, well, I haven't had that experience just yet.

Mr. Fields appreciated opportunities to learn more about diverse experiences in the Chicago schools as he matriculated through his graduate program. He recalls several of his instructors who had been teachers in the school system and shared stories about their time there.

> I remember the anecdotes from some of their stories … a lot of them were like teachers who worked really in some very tough neighborhoods, and just the moments of light that stuck with them, and even them having to try to hold folks to high expectations while owning the biases that come with just being a person in those spaces.

A reflective eye and an appreciation for learning opportunities provided Mr. Fields with a strong foundation to begin his teaching career. During these formative years, he took time to better understand himself as a learner and member of a classroom community. This allowed him to calmly navigate sometimes tricky situations in class, where he was asked to speak upon what others believed were common Black male experiences. These occurrences would become footing for future encounters around identity and relationships with colleagues and students.

Mr. Fields's Teaching Experience: "Growing Up, All the Things that Made You Different and Unique End Up Being What Your Strength is in This One Space"

Mr. Fields takes much of his life experiences and carries them into his classroom to ensure that his students are provided a safe and welcoming environment. He states, "I really

think that teachers should hold that space for kids and be ready to have that dexterity to help them navigate who they are." For him, much of his approach to education is viewed through the lens of the arts, where Mr. Fields finds great success. Through the arts and the lessons he learns from them, Mr. Fields finds that he can support and grow his students.

> It's taking the curriculum and not just following it. It's more being creative with how I get all these different experiences and learning styles and interests and get them to the same goal and same outcome, but also providing different products for them to showcase that they can master the skill.

Over his teaching career, Mr. Fields has found that to be most successful in this philosophy and pedagogy, a strong school culture and inclusive environment are critical.

He sees the importance of a positive and welcoming school culture because of a negative experience at his initial school of employment, where he worked for the first couple years of his career. While he loved his students, he found that his pedagogy and urge to create a more inclusive environment was not appreciated by all stakeholders. There were early signs of concern after the hiring process, when he realized that everything he did would be scrutinized. Mr. Fields felt that when he was hired at this school for the gifted, school leaders hinted "We'll try this out, but you have to be this much better than your peers, and if not, then one of you all has to go." This cutthroat atmosphere made for a difficult environment to work in. He states, "You had to be on your A game to get your foot in the door, and then, after that there was … a checklist, and you're being watched, and anything you do is magnified." And for Mr. Fields, his style and presence were not always understood by administrators, "If you're not in a space where folks can conceptualize or understand you, it can be kind of like, we don't know you. We don't know how it's gonna go, so that makes it a little bit more challenging when you're trying to deliver." After

being “pushed out” at this school, students and families that he grew close to kept in touch, and he even continued working with many of them as a tutor outside school hours. He believes that the school “became more woke” after he left, but that there is still equity work to be done and “that it's still not as in-depth of a conversation as [it] needs to be.”

He contrasts this experience with his current school, where he has been for the past six years. Mr. Fields feels welcomed and comfortable: “I have to give it to my current space, that community. There's a lot of conventions and decorum that are really suited for supporting folks of different identities, and it's a very multicultural, socioeconomically diverse space.” As someone who proudly encompasses many identities, Mr. Fields feels welcomed and supported at his current school.

> I do very well at my specific school, and I don't think there could have been a more like “me school” then this current one … in which I work because my school pulls from all these different wards and it's like right … in the middle of the city. And so, I have kids who have multimillion dollar homes, and I have kids who live in Section 8 housing, and across all different races. A lot of adoptees. A lot of students who speak multiple languages. And so … this is such a unique space … I feel like it's a really good match, because then those kids can have someone who is all these different unicorn things, and then they can have that connection as well.

Mr. Fields attributes this welcoming school culture to the principal, Kim Barnes. He states that she “made sure that we had the right folks in front of the students, and I think it was really just a really good testament to her vision and cultivating.” Throughout our interviews, Mr. Fields referenced Ms. Barnes and her ability to recruit and hire teachers who reflect the students who they teach, which at this school is a diverse population. Because Mr. Fields’s current school has

a diverse teacher community, he feels that he does not have to represent an entire population or identity, as some Black male elementary school teachers feel pressure to do. He explains, “I feel I don't have to hyper-be anything for what the kids need. I can just be authentic and be myself, and I think that it's been a benefit for the community at large.” Additionally, the creative and arts-infused approach that Mr. Fields brings to his classroom and teaching is more appreciated under the leadership of Ms. Barnes and his colleagues than at his previous school. Naturally, “it's fun because I can organically and authentically connect with others who like to create.” This has led to Mr. Fields sharing more of his work and passion on his social media account, which has almost twenty thousand followers.

Inside his classroom, Mr. Fields recognizes the influence he has as a Black male elementary educator. He acknowledges that representation matters to student engagement and learning, and he sees this played out in scenarios across the school day. He shares,

> It was really cool, like a week ago I was in the room, and I was getting everything set up, and first thing in the morning everyone who came in and was already starting on their morning work before the bell even began—it was all my boys. Then I noticed that a lot of … the [male] students are always coming to my table. Their identity’s there as well. And so, it's great to have someone with whom you can connect an identity.

Mr. Fields understands that he has Black boys in his class who see themselves in him, and he leverages this connection to create relationships with them in ways that perhaps they will not have in other classrooms. He also draws on his identity to break stereotypes for his students by modeling behaviors that benefit both his girls and boys.

> I think about how do I center my Black girls in a lot of my work, because if I'm doing right by them, it also supports everyone else. And I do think about centering and

> supporting them because they have the double edge of misogyny, as well as racism. And I find as a Black male being able to show a more softened side for my Black boys, instead of having to like go with some of the stereotypes, like being more hardened as a male … I think that's just good for the boys in general.

Being able to address difficult topics head on and teaching with a culturally responsive lens in mind, something he attributes to his studies on Dr. Zaretta Hammond's work, is why Mr. Fields regularly brought up why he enjoyed and appreciated his current school.

Mr. Fields recognizes that the call for more Black male teachers is often centered around "disciplinary type things … an authority figure." Discussing this topic, he mentions, "That's the negative … the shadow side of the conversation." Instead of playing a stereotypical role that society casts upon Black males as teachers, Mr. Fields chooses to focus on cultivating his students and forming connections to improve behaviors. He shared a story from a recent parent encounter where they discussed a change in their son: "I even heard it this year, where a family was like, 'He's becoming really nice, and we think that he quotes things that you say, and he's really starting to shift his behavior.' And so, I think there is a benefit."

The effort to recruit and retain teachers of color in his district, along with ensuring that they are comfortable in their environment, is in large part due to Mr. Fields's superintendent, who is a Black male. Mr. Fields explains, "He is very cognizant of how the race dynamics play out, and he wants to check in to make sure that educators are supported—Black educators are supported." Additionally, the district and his school supports Mr. Fields's professional goals and learning through professional development opportunities and coaching.

> So, being able to go to some of the professional development, having instructional coaches on hand who will come in and beyond observation times help you set up and go

> through a cycle, and really having administrators and leaders who are listening into what my interests were, and then, making sure that they followed up to support those in it. So, it wasn't just lip service. There was actual action behind developing me as an instructor and as a teacher leader, and then holding space to really give me opportunities to speak more.

The feeling of support and safety to take risks "as a learner, as a student learner" himself is what has shown Mr. Fields that his current school values him as a teacher and individual. He counters this with his experience at his initial school, where he felt "like I was temporarily there."

Moving forward, Mr. Fields hopes to one day impact the next generation of elementary teachers in a positive way. He teeters between seeking opportunity in higher education or venturing into the realm of classroom design. He offered,

> When I see myself eventually down the road … teaching university and teaching future teachers and becoming a professor … I still think education is going to be a passion of mine. But at some point, I do want to support other teachers who are going into the profession. I'm thinking about how tough it was for me. Do I help set up with classroom design for students who can't, or student teachers who can't fund everything right away, and how that can set them up for success for combating like biases where it's like, "Oh, I'm walking to this room. Oh, it doesn't look as set up or as nice as this teacher who's been here for 10 years."

As I am sure any of those who know Mr. Fields would agree, his thoughtful mind and heart would be an asset to new teachers in any capacity.

Policy and Practice Recommendations: "If They Can't See It Themselves, It's Hard for Them to Conceptualize It"

Mr. Fields believes that if more Black boys are to be motivated to become elementary teachers, they need to see more Black men as teachers in their early years. "Seeing more successful Black male teachers and seeing that Black male teachers are beyond just the coach or the upper elementary teachers, or just the high school teachers. … then you start to conceptualize." For this to happen, though, naturally there must be more Black male teachers in elementary schools, which is not the current reality in most schools. Mr. Fields says that media and social media can play a helpful role in the recruitment of Black male teachers. He references the sitcom *Abbott Elementary* as a good start by presenting a diverse cast, including a Black male teacher. In addition, Mr. Fields often wonders about his own social media page and how it can impact other Black men who may see him as an example of what can be a career for them. He asks, "Do I need to be out there more for our other Black male educators?" He also recommends that more high schools build in a pipeline program that encourages and introduces Black male students to the "behind the scenes" of teaching, which can provide an alternative perspective to the field of teaching that they may not have been privy to as a student.

In the hiring process, Mr. Fields suggests ways that Black males be given fair and equitable opportunities to interview for a job, where they are not "a diversity hire, just for the sake of tokenizing someone." To accomplish this, he suggests having a diverse and trained team of interviewers. "I think having committees during an interview; and so, you have multiple perspectives and multiple voices and folks who have gone through implicit bias training who are leading it." Mr. Fields believes professional development around a topic like implicit bias is important because it helps individuals become more "aware of how interactions can come across,

because there's always a ‘It’s not that I'm racist, but I didn't like x y,’ and then, you know, they can spin it.” And while Mr. Fields is “not envious” of administrators who are put on hot seats to do hiring, he maintains that an interview team should reflect on how the school will invest into a Black male teacher. The team should consider “mentorship as well … how are you truly going to in the future develop them?”

Once a Black male teacher is hired, Mr. Fields believes that retention involves building trusting relationships and a culture of transparency. He recognizes that difficult conversations around racism or microaggressions are easy to avoid when things are going well, but when frustrations surface, a toxic school culture makes it difficult to share how harmful words impact an individual.

> And so, it's not when folks are in comfort and privilege, and everything is going well. When things are not going someone's way, and we have to be in an uncomfortable setting. Then the internalized stuff comes up… but when someone's not happy you find out a lot of the like deep root stuff.

Mr. Fields has been in the middle of these difficult scenarios. He has experienced internal deliberation speaking up against harmful words or actions and balancing that with understanding that his experiences may not represent those of others who may look like him.

> I found that at that time I would have conversations with some of my fellow teacher peers, and I almost gaslit myself into imposter syndrome, I think, like, “Do I really have the range to talk about this situation or this conversation?” Because I am someone who's experienced over here, and not necessarily the common experience. So, should I be someone who talks about this, or do I just need to make sure that I'm like staying in my lane?

Retaining Black men requires school leaders who support them, much like Mr. Fields's current superintendent. It also helps when Black male teachers are provided opportunities to grow and develop, much like Mr. Fields's principal offers him through professional development and meaningful coaching.

Summary

In conclusion, Mr. Fields's life is significantly shaped by his identity. Starting at a young age, he recognized that his life was not common given that he was one of the few Black students in school and he was being raised by white parents, but he appreciated all that his family upbringing brought with it. His unique experiences as an adoptee in a white family brought immense opportunity to connect and fit in with many different types of people. Throughout middle and high school, he navigated his way through coming to an understanding who he was, and ultimately found a fruitful educational and life path through the arts. While his initial plan of teaching high school English transformed into elementary school teaching, he was able to bring many of the ideas he learned in college and through professional development into the primary setting.

As a teacher, Mr. Fields feels at home in his current school, where he has been for six years, because of the multicultural and socioeconomically diverse population. His identity is mirrored in many sectors at the school, and he feels accepted for who he is as a result. Mr. Fields appreciates the support of his principal and the superintendent, who have created a space for him to be successful. He recognizes that being a Black male elementary teacher can carry stigmas and stereotypes, and he aims to break these for both his male and female students through modeling and teaching. Moving forward, he hopes to support young teachers in some capacity, whether it's through working as a professor, or as a classroom designer.

CHAPTER V: PORTRAIT OF MR. WALKER

I do establish discipline, but the foundation of my discipline is relationships.

Introduction

A passion for helping kids had always been in Mr. D'Onta Walker's heart, but an opportunity to follow in his father's footsteps almost took him into another profession. A mid-collegiate career switch, however, allowed him to rekindle a desire to teach and work towards a career in education. Born in Massachusetts, but raised in suburbs of Greensboro, North Carolina, Mr. Walker grew up with his dad and stepmother, an educator. School was generally unmemorable for Mr. Walker, as there were few teachers who connected with him over the years. It was ironically a movie, *Lean on Me*, that struck a chord with Mr. Walker and helped inform his purpose and drive for education.

Mr. Walker and I were connected for this interview by a mutual friend who teaches in his building. While we live and work in the same district, we had not met each other before. For convenience and scheduling purposes, we met on Zoom for our interviews. His relaxed demeanor and willingness to share made our interviews much more like conversations, as we discussed numerous experiences from our district and even considered ways to address internal issues. We also discovered a surprising connection along the way surrounding the Ron Clark Academy in Atlanta, where I previously worked and his niece attends.

A balance of love and sternness, an ode to Mr. Joe Clark from *Lean on Me*, sticks with Mr. Walker as he enters his classroom each day. This reputation has offered him success as a classroom teacher and respect amongst peers, but also presents challenges in the form of weary parents or pigeonholed stereotypes for being a Black male elementary teacher. In his career, he has had experience teaching at two schools, opposite in socioeconomic income levels, and has

been able to leverage his blended teaching approach to grow and build relationships with students of all backgrounds. He desires to bring these experiences to the next level as he earns his administrative license and hopefully move into a leadership position.

K-12 Experience as a Student: "If I Had More Teachers That Looked Like Me Growing Up, I Probably Would Have Went to A&T as an Education Major"

In many ways, a desire to teach started early for Mr. Walker. A speech impediment in kindergarten, causing reading challenges, pushed Mr. Walker to want to help others. He told his father in first or second grade that he wanted to start a tutoring program to help others who had challenges like him. He quickly learned that he was good at helping others learn and enjoyed the process. In addition, his elementary school provided an outlet for him to be creative through the arts, which he connected with an opportunity to teach. "So [my elementary school] was big on chorus and drama with things of that nature, and that's what kind of gravitated me to education. I like to sing. I like to dance, so I was able to kind of express myself in that way." While he possessed several traits that would lead many towards teaching, his surroundings did not always send the same message. This was especially apparent in elementary school, where he did not see himself in his teachers or classmates during those years. "I didn't have like no teacher of color in elementary school. It kind of set that expectation that maybe we just don't teach at that level." Additionally, the lack of diversity in his own classroom caused Mr. Walker to feel like he did not belong, even as a student. "I was like the only Black person in my class, and so I do remember telling my dad that I wanted to paint my skin white so I could blend in with my environment."

Middle school proved to be a turning point for Mr. Walker in several ways developmentally and emotionally. For the first time, he was meeting and encountering inner-city kids. He equated the behavior and attitudes of many of these students to the "kids that I wanted

to teach based off of *Lean on Me*." Mr. Walker would often observe these students from afar during these years and study their dispositions.

> So, I learned, like they have a very tough outward demeanor about themselves. But if you could crack through that outward demeanor, it is really just a small insecure kid behind that. And so, a lot of them, you know, they just come from … some rough situations. Dad may not be in the house … parents is just barely getting by. And so, when you grow up in that environment you develop … a defense mechanism, in a sense. And so, even though your home life maybe kind of fractured up and down, when you go to school, you kind of have a sense to … reinvent who you are. And so, I kind of feel that when they do go to school … they kind of overcompensate. And so, you have a lot of toughness.

Not only did Mr. Walker begin to better understand the disposition of classmates, but he found that he was maturing as well. "Middle school for me was my turning point. It was where I kind of went from being a very emotional male to one who got control over his emotions by the time I left middle school in eighth grade." This self-growth allowed him to begin exploring opportunities that involved working with younger children. "I was naturally good with kids, you know. So, once I got to middle school, I was helping out with my church group. I did summer camp, and it was just a kind of natural progression from there." These experiences provided Mr. Walker with learning that would inform him how his natural skills mesh well with how children respond best. "I'm energetic, I'm fun. Naturally, I'm a good listener, you know. Kids like to talk, so you give them a place where somebody's gonna give them attention … they eat it right up. So, for me, I think that was like my foundation of just getting experience with learning how kids are." Middle school was also the first time that Mr. Walker had a teacher of color in his life,

which was something he sorely missed in his elementary years. Her presence alone has stuck with him all these years later.

> So [in] middle school I had a teacher in seventh grade named Ms. Hewitt. She's my language arts teacher. First time I've had a Black teacher, you know, at all. Male or female. And Ms. Hewitt, she made a difference. She made me feel comfortable. She knew our culture because there is a cultural difference, you know. So, she kind of knew the culture, she knew how to engage, interact with … African American students. I say Ms. Hewitt was a … change of pace for me, you know, as far as having a teacher to actually … look like me.

While far from a perfect experience, middle school provided Mr. Walker with several things that elementary did not, including a chance to mature and finally see a teacher of color.

According to Mr. Walker, high school "for me was just me trying to get by." He was admittedly "not a big fan" of these years and saw them as "just kind of biding my time, you know, until I got out of there." He describes himself as "kind of more of a loner in a sense in high school, you know. I just got to stay by myself … I was cool with pretty much everybody by then, but didn't build like deep connections or relationships in high school." Mr. Walker looks back on his K-12 experience without much fanfare or nostalgia. "So, you know my story of K-12 isn't fireworks and a parade. And I didn't have all these five-star fantastic teachers in my schooling experience. I wasn't popular, stuff like that. That's not my story, you know. Um, I feel like I have a very normal story." He does appreciate that his teachers were consistently present for him in the classroom, but he does wish they had acknowledged him more and helped build his confidence. Looking back at that time, he reflects,

> I probably would have wanted teachers to speak more to me, you know. So, I never had a teacher like beat me down. But I never really had a lot of teachers that built me up neither. You know I never heard a teacher say "D'Onta, you could do whatever you want to do in life," "I see all of this in you," and things like that. I didn't see that. I didn't hear that often. And so, for me, I feel if I would have heard that more from my teachers, you know, who knows … I just wish I would just kind of have more words of affirmation out of my teachers.

Mr. Walker's experiences started to change when he went off to college and experienced a school culture that uplifted and celebrated all students.

Experience in College and Teacher Preparation Program: "I Can Tackle Anything That I Face Out in the Real World."

Upon entering North Carolina A&T State University, Mr. Walker planned to continue in his father's footsteps as a construction management major, which he worked towards for three years. Midway through his junior year, though, he decided that he needed to make a switch to something he was more passionate about. He felt construction management "just wasn't giving me what I was looking for. And so, it was a time where … I kind of lost my way. I lost my passion. I didn't figure like I had a purpose of living, and so, when I told my dad that he was like, 'Son, what do you want to do?'" With his father's blessing, he switched to a dual major in child development and family studies. He is grateful that his father "responded outside of himself … and kind of considered me in that moment." He also appreciates that he chose to take on both areas of study because it provided a well-rounded approach for how children learn.

> And so, for me, you know, as I look back on it, I think I was blessed to learn both worlds. I think when you think about public education, one thing that I feel is not considered

much is the child development theory of how children grow, and what's appropriate for the ages and things like that. Then when we get to public education everything is so big on test scores … And so, I had that piece. I also had the piece of the nurturing side.

To help Mr. Walker ease into this mid-collegiate career change, he credits two professors for having a tremendous impact on him, Dr. Simpson and Dr. Freeman. Dr. Simpson, his advisor, had a particularly memorable message for Mr. Walker when they first met.

> Dr. Simpson, you know, very nurturing, gentle lady … So, I remember coming in, you know. I talked to her about switching, and like the first day she told me in our meeting, she said, "Mr. Walker, I just want you to know that you will be one of the only males in this class, and so my advice to you would be leave the females alone."

Mr. Walker took this advice to heart, but also explained what he felt she meant by it. "When you're the only male in this female environment, you know it can get you kind of distracted and things of that nature. But I'm glad that she had the foresight to tell me like 'No, don't do that, because I've seen what had happened.'" As a result, Mr. Walker feels that he was "able to just kind of focus on my work and everything." He appreciates Dr. Simpson because he feels that throughout his journey she was "one of the biggest fans in my corner." He adds that when he goes back to his alma mater now for various occasions, he shares similar advice with fellow men in the program.

When pressed on if he felt Dr. Simpson would have said similar words to a Black man that appeared less masculine than him, "I don't know if she would have said that to me if I was more feminine or appeared in a certain way. So, I think, because you know my appearance and my statute and everything … I think she was kind of inclined to share that." Masculinity and perceptions of male teachers continued in our conversation, particularly around the type of man

who is “wanted” versus the one who is more commonly accepted in the elementary setting. “Even though like this strong, masculine man is sort of what's promoted as far as what's needed, I think feminine men are more acceptable in the school environment because I think they're similar just to the feminine culture,” which is the dominant perception of elementary schools. Mr. Walker brought up this dichotomy again in later conversations around his lived experiences in the school setting.

As far as Dr. Freeman goes, Mr. Walker noted he was “most influential in just developing my philosophy of education and classroom behavior.” He also credited Dr. Freeman for being tough on him and helping him grow as a learner. “Dr. Freeman rode me; like he was stern, had high expectations. I mean I was one of the only males in there. Just through that toughness he just cultivated and developed … to just give me tough skin and just being able to critically think.” Mr. Walker also recalls a memorable statement from Dr. Freeman that stuck with him, “Your key to success is knowing the unknown.” Mr. Walker believes Dr. Freeman was telling him, “What you don't know impacts you and how you’re able to relate and be effective. So, you always want to seek knowledge. You always want to seek learning.” Strong messages and advice from both professors made a tremendous impact on Mr. Walker’s development and experience in his educational programs.

While being one of the only males in his program was at times isolating, outside of the classroom Mr. Walker enjoyed a family atmosphere at his Historically Black College. “I think the main thing it gave was community, you know, I think that's like one of the big seller points for HBCU. To a Black person it’s just the community and the culture being around people … that look like you.” He elaborated on what an HBCU provides for its students:

> It was just a family vibe, you know. Homecoming, cook outs, family reunions, you know. This is a real family-oriented vibe out there, and I think one thing A&T taught all students was to be proud of … your culture, you know, and to not view yourself as less. But to know, "You know you are just as talented and gifted … as your other counterparts and everything." So it just kind of built my confidence, and, like I said, it was just a very community-oriented feel that was out there.

It was clear that Mr. Walker was not only proud of his time at A&T, but it provided him with confidence and spirit that he could now bring out into his life and career.

Mr. Walker's Teaching Experience: "No Nonsense Nurturer"

Finding a job out of college proved to be a more difficult venture for Mr. Walker than he had anticipated. He had been told in his journey, "'Oh, there's a male shortage, you're a Black male! You get all these … job offers,' but that wasn't my experience." Because he had majored in child development, his license only allowed him to teach birth through kindergarten. So, at recruiting fairs, "When administrators saw that, they were asking, 'So your license only goes to BK?' It's not K-5 or K-6, and they will ask, 'So how familiar are you with Common Core?'" While Mr. Walker had extensive training in child development and social emotional learning, principals were possibly looking for a teacher with more flexibility in grade levels in which they could teach. Mr. Walker is proud of his pathway and explains, "I think there is a stigma that the only way to grow kids is through academics. I don't think people consider the emotional side of the kid also has an impact on how they perform as well." Without any offers stemming from the recruitment fairs, it was a chance conversation with a childhood friend that helped Mr. Walker get his foot in the door and land his first job. The friend was the curriculum facilitator at Wakeview Elementary and she introduced him to the school's outgoing principal, a Black male.

While the principal could not formally hire Mr. Walker, he gave a recommendation to the new principal, and she officially hired him as a kindergarten teacher.

As a first-year kindergarten teacher, Mr. Walker was accompanied by a first-year teacher assistant, a white female, to help lead the class. Mr. Walker describes this first class as "probably the roughest students I've had." He said there were "kids flipping over desks, chairs. I had one girl—whenever you told her 'No' she started crying, like … spit bubbles in her hand. It made like a puddle." With little support from administration, Mr. Walker needed to think back to his undergraduate coursework to assess his approach and adjust to regain control of the classroom. "I started using those skills I learned in childhood development. So, I started … building relationships … I started applying procedures and routines and having that rewards slash consequence system, and that sternness in teaching those kids accountability." Mr. Walker looks back now on his first year of teaching realizing it was an opportunity to cultivate who he is today. His intentional work on meshing social emotional learning with routines and procedures helped him fix the behaviors that were causing disruptions in the classroom. "Even though those [were] like my roughest students up to this point, they developed me to sharpen those skills that I learned in undergrad." While he was able to employ many of the strategies that he learned in his courses in his classroom, he believes that "you kind of got to learn as you go" and "you just got trust the process, you know. Do what you know to do."

Over his career, Mr. Walker has built a system that gives his students and himself an opportunity to adjust to each other over the first thirty days of school. "The same way that students are learning their teachers, on the flip end, teachers are learning their students as well." This effective practice has offered Mr. Walker praise from colleagues and attention from administrators. At the center of his approach is relationship building and establishing a positive

classroom culture. One strategy he has found effective is the use of music to build community in his classroom, particularly amongst his Black students.

> I play … music like throughout the day and everything … and so a lot of kids, when they hear that tune, and they hear that beat. You know the head is nodding, and they're feeling and working … I think culturally like it's a common effect on us. It's something that makes us feel comfortable. And it just connects us from where we come from just as a group of people.

Mixed with the energy and nurturing that Mr. Walker brings to his classroom is strict discipline, something he sees as sometimes different than how his some of his female colleagues approach classroom management. "My discipline's a lot more stern … for the most part than my female counterparts. And just how I respond. It's you know more straightforward." Mr. Walker has seen how his presence in a situation between another teacher and a misbehaving student can help alleviate escalated behaviors.

> I've had numerous situations … when I was walking down the hallway, and I saw, like an interaction. I would just step in with my presence. I wouldn't say nothing, because one thing that I did not want to have was to overrule what the main teacher said, you know. So, I just sit down. Listen. You know, kind of be on the side for support.

While Mr. Walker noted that he would never overstep boundaries while a colleague was disciplining a student, he has noticed on occasion how a teacher may misinterpret how a student, typically a Black boy with a white teacher, is acting. If he feels like there may have been a misinterpretation, he will wait until the child has left and "then I would talk to the teacher in private." He shares a particular time when a new teacher to the school, a white female, had a tense interaction with two of her Black boys.

She came from a suburb in Denver, Colorado. You know, so, of course, coming to Greensboro, Wakeview, it was like a culture shock to her, you know it was a, it was a learning curve. And so, I want to say her first year she had a majority of boys in her class, African American boys. And so, the community that we was in, like I said, Wakeview is close to projects of Orange. And so just culturally, they could be aggressive, you know. But it may not necessarily be for like a fight, but it's just a territorial thing, or a respect factor. And so, I know there was a moment where she was getting on these two African American boys. It was kind of picking on each other, you know they was jawin', what they call it today. And so, in her mind they were very serious. But for them, you know, they was just joking and playing along and things like that. And so, you know I sat there and kind of heard her, let her share her concerns and things of that nature, and I also saw the looks of the boys' faces. They was like, it ain't that serious, you know. And so, after they left, you know, I kind of pulled her to the side and said, "You know I'm not disagreeing with your response." But you know there's something to be aware of just culturally. One thing that African American boys do do if they're friends, they do jawin' on each other. And it's not a thing where they going to get angry or fight, but it's just a closeness thing as well, and so I was kind of, you know, I just shared that with her and she was like, "It was just kind of … different than I understand," you know. But I also did talk to the boys and let them be aware of like, "Look, you know, y'all could do that outside [in the] community, but in school, you know the rules also kind of different as well." So, you know, I don't take sides, but I just try to get clarity on both sides. You know, do what I can.

Mr. Walker acknowledges that this approach has worked well for him, but it may not be a suitable or reasonable expectation for every Black male teaching in an elementary school. “We're different in our personalities as well. They may have one male who's just kind of more laid back and stoic in their approach, versus me who's kind of more young and upbeat and fresh and new.” Here he affirms the importance of eliminating stereotypes of Black male elementary educators, and for Mr. Walker, he wishes to be valued and judged for “my passion and my work and my care.”

After years teaching at a predominately Black elementary school, Mr. Walker put his name on the transfer list. The principal at Berkley Elementary, a predominately white school (approximately 75% according to a state report), reached out to him for an interview. The principal, Dr. Woods, is a Black man and Mr. Walker felt “an instant connection” when they spoke. The decision to go to a predominately white school was not easy. Mr. Walker felt there is “a stigma with that, you know. It's because you may grow kids at title one. It doesn't mean that you could grow kids [in] the more affluent population.” His insecurities were put at ease, though, by seeing Dr. Woods. “And so, Dr. Woods kind of gave me the confidence to make that jump. If it wasn't for him being there, I probably would have never moved … to Berkley, but because I saw him there, and I felt like he could be a mentor, and just that support.” With that found confidence, Mr. Walker made the switch to his new school, and he became one of the only Black male classroom teachers the school has ever had.

Over his few years at Berkley Elementary now, Mr. Walker has “seen support from my families and my parents.” His presence at this school, he believes, has reach beyond just the instruction that he provides to his students. Perceptions of Black men in America are formed by

the media and news, and Mr. Walker believes that negative stereotypes can be changed, and he can help with that work.

> And so, for my kids at Berkley, it's important for them to see African Americans in a positive light, because our media … portrays the negative side. You know, all we see is [Black people] doing something crazy on the news or Blacks killing Blacks or something like that, so if that's all you're seeing, that's going to form your perception. Okay, this is how that group of people is. But now that I'm in a position where I could show them like, "No, there's also a lot of us who are educated or respectful. We're doing well." So, I also have opportunity to mold the minds of … Caucasian kids as well, being in this position.

While his presence alone has tremendous impact on perceptions and breaking stereotypes, Mr. Walker wants to ensure that he is recognized for his instruction and work he does with his students, not just the color of his skin.

> I just don't want to be patted on my back for just being a Black male … I pride myself with being an impactful teacher. Okay … you want your child to experience a Black male. But my mindset is more so that I'm not just that; outside of my color, I'm also an impactful and good teacher as well.

Even as the desire to be recognized for his instruction and impact is at the forefront of his goals, it is not lost on him that there are families of color who see him as a rare entity in elementary school, and they do not want to miss that opportunity for their child. "I was requested by quite a few Black families for their Black males to be put into my classroom, because again … they don't know when the next time this opportunity will come around." Mr. Walker notes that he has observed intentional placement of students by administration in his class, especially when he

began to teach second grade and had over half of the Black boys in that grade level in his classroom.

Mr. Walker moved up to fourth grade this year, but he notes that his approach remains the same. From using the first thirty days to build classroom community and relationships to using a mix of love and sternness, his system has proven to be effective for him. This has carried over to his relationship with students' parents as well, who recognize that his approach is what their children appreciate most.

> Most of the parents say, "Well, yeah, that's what they like about you." Mr. Walker don't play, and yet, that still doesn't minimize the impact and the fun they havin' in my class. And so, I think how I portray it, they understand that my sternness does come from a place of that I care. Like I said before, I also mix that sternness with we have fun. Not only am I the sternest, but my class is probably the loudest … I don't mind the kids socializing and having fun. So, I think it is a balance that they recognize clearly.

Mr. Walker aims to make an impact in students' lives that will last with them. He finds teachable moments throughout the day to have his students "be aware of life, you know, as much as I can make them aware of in those moments. I just think that just kind of helps cultivate this family and this respect, you know that I have with my students."

Across the schools where he has worked, Mr. Walker has consistently been the only Black male classroom teacher. While statistically this is not surprising, the impact of this has developed over the years. Dating back to his college days in early childhood development courses, he has been spotlighted for being a Black male in a female dominated field. He has not always felt as comfortable with the attention this draws as he is now.

> I think it's been a process for me. So, in undergrad, you know I didn't like a lot of attention on myself, because I wasn't confident. I'm still trying to figure myself out; what's my philosophy about who I am in this realm. And so, I didn't want to be like the voice of the people. You know the voice of men. And so, I probably wasn't as vocal in undergrad as I could … because of those different things I was dealing with.

Even in his first years as a teacher, Mr. Walker was still not completely comfortable with the attention he received as the only Black male classroom teacher and the expectations that were put on him to be a leader. After time, though, he began to find his voice and become more comfortable speaking up.

> As a guy, I didn't want to be the representative of everybody in elementary, but because I was a male, I was kinda … pushed to the forefront … I was just kind of put in positions that kind of require me … to be a little more vocal. And so, I got comfortable with it the more I did it. And so, in that process, you know, I realized, "No, it is important for me to speak up. It is important for me to share my perspective." Even though the profession is female dominated … That's why it's that much more important for me to bring another perspective and to be that voice.

Over time, Mr. Walker learned to navigate what it means to be one of the few Black and male teachers in all the settings where he has worked.

Policy and Practice Recommendations: "If You Don't See People Doing Things That Look Like You, You're Not Gonna Believe That's For You"

For there to be an increase in Black male elementary teachers, there must be shifts to policies and practices that negatively impact Black men joining and remaining in the profession.

Mr. Walker believes that school and district leaders recognize the importance of this issue but are not necessarily acting quickly enough – or with any serious determination – to make the changes.

> It's urgent with the awareness of how important it is, but there is no urgency to adjust practices to get that desired outcome that you want. So, they desire for more Black males—for them to come in. But I don't see them adjusting the system to be more desirable for Black males to come.

In our final conversation, Mr. Walker laid out four specific areas of policy and practice that he believes would improve the recruitment and retention of Black male elementary teachers. To describe his ideas, I have provided each with a subheading.

More Black Leaders

Mr. Walker was open to teaching at a predominately white school because of a Black male principal leading the building, and he believes other Black males may be inclined to join the profession if they see Black males in "leadership and positions of influence." Mr. Walker believes Black boys and men "believe what you see," and so for Black men who desire to be leaders one day, they must see fellow Black men in positions in which they also aspire to hold. To accomplish this, districts "should have an interest in developing leaders in house. So, you never have a shortage, you know, of leaders or highly qualified individuals." He believes this can be accomplished through pipelines and district created principal programs.

Early Outreach

Having students see themselves in their teachers is an important piece of students believing they can be in the education field. Much like Ms. Hewitt making a connection with Mr. Walker in seventh grade, he believes that having teachers of color in front of kids earlier on will help with recruitment. While a strong presence in elementary or middle school would be ideal, at

a minimum, having “a partnership with the … high schools” could help show Black boys that teaching can be a career option.

On a personal note, our conversation on this issue sparked a possible future partnership between Mr. Walker and me, as we are in the same district. I have a direct connection to the teacher in charge of the high school teacher cadet program (which places high school students at local elementary schools), and Mr. Walker is invested in the future recruitment of more Black men. We discussed working together to go into the local high schools and doing face-to-face conversations with Black boys to motivate them to join the district’s teacher cadet program.

Beginning Teacher Support

Aside from his current principal, Mr. Walker succinctly responded to a question about mentors in his career with “I haven’t had any.” He explains, “You know I've had people who … gave me like good advice, or who was supportive, but as far as like somebody who like just took me under their wing and say, ‘Hey, you know these [are] some things that you should be aware of.’ I didn't have it.” He attributes much of the success in his career onto “natural skill” and “what I got from my undergrad.”

To better support beginning teachers, Mr. Walker believes shifts in practice should include strategic mentors being provided. He reflects on what an effective mentor would look like to him.

> [A] mentor is somebody who teaches you how to get where they're at in a quick amount of time. So, they able to talk to you about the pitfalls. Or the things to be aware of. Or they able to teach you about different programs that you sign up for to get you in those positions. Or just be that support for you to go to about your struggles, and that listening ear. That's a mentor, being there every step of the way, being the listening ear, being that

> guiding voice directing me on things [and] on positions or areas I could go in. That's mentorship to me. I haven't had that until, you know, this past year with [his current principal].

If the desire is to provide Black male elementary teachers with men who look like them as mentors, Mr. Walker understands that more must be done to get Black men into teaching first.

Teacher Pay

Even those men who find themselves skilled or interested in teaching children may hesitate to join the field because of low pay. Mr. Walker explains, "You know, culturally for us … we were always taught and raised that, you know, you got to be the bread winner … regardless of if your dad was in the house or not, that's the expectation." The cultural expectation of the male making a salary to support their family may push them towards a higher paying career.

> And so, there's a lot of careers that pay better … engineering, business, construction pays a lot, you know, better. So, I just think that pay piece will be on the back of guys' minds a lot, so they want to be to provide for their family. And so, if you don't have a plan to kind of help supplement what you feel like you'll miss being the teacher, more guys will probably follow the money than their passion.

To address this issue, Mr. Walker analyzes his school district's step pay scale (determined by number of years of service) and where the pitfalls lie. "Like the first one to ten years, you get adequate steps, but after that … it's a plateau. Then you take away master's pay. It's just like, you know, you're not really encouraging people to develop their craft, because you're not willing to compensate them for it."

While Mr. Walker's four policy and practice recommendations address commonly discussed topics within the profession, he also brought to light a less examined matter that plagues Black teachers and teacher candidates. Systemic oppression surfaces in many areas in the journey for a person of color to become a teacher. Mr. Walker specifically names the Praxis, a teacher exam that assesses a wide range of curricular knowledge, as something that subjugates many Black males.

> I remember when I was coming up in undergrad, you know the Praxis was like big, and I look at the Praxis as a gatekeeper, because to me the Praxis doesn't let you know somebody's gonna be a good teacher or not … I remember taking some Praxis courses, you know. Kind of help us get ready for it. And the same way that our young Black students kind of deal with the verbiage of the test. If you ain't grown up in certain cultures, you may not know what a saucer is, you know. Or certain words like that. And so, it's the same way with the Praxis. It's just certain words, how sentences are formatted, and structure. Just culturally, we just don't know. And so, I think, just making something more of an equal footing or change the requirements of being a teacher.

To address inequities with testing, Mr. Walker believes that a teacher candidate who has "enough hours of internship and shown in the practicum that you have the practical ability of being a teacher" should be given the consideration for being a qualified teacher, regardless of test scores.

In closing, shifting policy and practice comes down to setting Black men up for success from the start. Mr. Walker believes those teachers who make it in their first few years "get congratulated," but for those who do not make it, they are labeled as "you're not ready for this." He sees this as unfair because "we put people in positions that we necessarily didn't make sure that they're ready to tackle or give them that support along the way." He believes that with the

implementation of the recommendations above, positive changes can occur for the recruitment and retention of Black male elementary teachers.

Summary

Mr. Walker is a Black male elementary teacher who desired from a young age to help others due to his own early learning difficulties. While his initial career pathway led him towards continuing in his father's footsteps, a decision midway through college to switch to early childhood education allowed him to pursue his true passion, teaching. His motivation to make this switch was to "be an example for the future generation." His teaching style is heavily influenced by the movie *Lean on Me,* featuring principal Joe Clark. He describes himself as "a no-nonsense nurturer," an approach that he believes is powerful for Black males who wants to teach. Demonstrating this blend of "structure, discipline, focus … relationships, community, and fun" allows for a teacher to be most successful in the classroom.

Looking forward, Mr. Walker hopes to soon be an assistant principal, as he is currently completing his school administration license. He also hopes to contribute to the next generation of teachers by teaching at the university level one day. Supporting and uplifting teachers is important to Mr. Walker because he recognizes the importance of being an educator and the tremendous impact teachers have on the future. "I don't want teachers to lose sight of it's an honor to be a teacher … I tell people every day … I feel honored. I feel like a superstar. Just being able to impact and build those relationships with … the future leaders of this world."

CHAPTER VI: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

I was privileged to interview three Black male elementary teachers who revealed aspects of their educational and life stories so that I could share their experiences through portraits. Through a series of three interviews, each participant answered questions and reflected on their upbringing, schooling experience, professional life, and thoughts on the educational system. Drawing from these portraits, I am able to provide answers to my three primary research questions. First, various influences motivate Black men to become elementary teachers. In my study, supportive family members, influential teachers, and passion for helping others were important factors that lead my participants to teaching. Second, the barriers in this pursuit include stigma around being a male elementary teacher, being isolated or tokenized in teacher preparation courses, and financial hardships, while supports include mentors, practical experiences working with kids before teaching, and encouragement from family members. Third, the men in this study offered many policy and practice recommendations to help open a wider-path for others to enter the field. I ended each portrait with some of these recommendations and describe them in more detail later in this chapter. In addition, in my interviews with participants, we also reflected on other important topics for Black male elementary teachers, including gender and identity in a female dominated profession, the influences of music and the arts on Black culture, code-switching and its impact on Black identity, and societal perception of Black male teachers.

I presented my portraits in Chapters III, IV, and V. The first was of Mr. Goff, a kindergarten teacher from Michigan in his fifth year as a classroom teacher but tenth year working in schools. The next portrait was of Mr. Fields, a second-grade teacher in his ninth year of teaching, born in Texas but living in Chicago. The final portrait was of Mr. Walker, a current

fourth grade teacher in his eighth year of teaching, who has also taught kindergarten and second grade, from North Carolina. I wrote each portrait so that it could represent their story and words of the participants without interpretation or too much of my analysis.

Interviews with participants took place over a six-week period on Zoom, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. After each interview, I edited Zoom-created transcriptions for errors and sent the transcripts to the participants for review and feedback. I encouraged each to share topics, quotes, or themes that stood out to them from the previous interview that we could discuss more in depth in the subsequent discussions. One fortuitous outcome of these interviews was that I developed new relationships and planted seeds for future projects or partnerships. Since each participant had approximately the same number of years of experience, I ordered the portraits in ascending current grade level order (kindergarten, second, fourth). I also used the same broad sequence of headings for the portraits: introduction, K-12 experience growing up, experience in college and teacher preparation program, teaching experience, policy and practice recommendations, and a summary.

In this final chapter, I share four cross-cutting themes that capture what I learned in my interviews and put this information back in conversation with the literature. These themes help readers to understand the experiences of why some Black men chose to become elementary school teachers and can help contribute to efforts to recruit and retain Black men in the profession. These themes are a) Music and the arts, b) Salary impacts recruitment, c) The go-to disciplinarian, and d) You believe what you see. I designed my study so it could have a practical impact on school and district leaders, policy makers, college and university programs, and community members and so that the pathways for Black men to become elementary educators might become more transparent and equitable. I offer implications from my research in the

following section for how to do that, along with suggestions for practice and future research. Finally, I share my personal reflection on the study findings and my participants' experiences, especially in the light of my identity as a male elementary teacher and administrator.

Central Themes

Music and the Arts

In each of the initial interviews with my three participants, I offered the men a chance to tell their life story, an uninterrupted opportunity to share whatever they wanted about their upbringing, professional career, personal life, and interests. To my surprise, each of the three men, unprompted, discussed the presence and importance of music and the arts in their lives. The role of music and the arts varied for the men growing up, as they described it as a means for self-expression, an extracurricular activity in school, a faith based in the way of church choir, a space for performing in musicals or plays, and a way to feel included amongst peers. While purpose varied, music and the arts were a clear part in each of their life stories.

Naturally, the draw to music and the arts carried over into each of their future classrooms. Each of the men discussed the importance of these forms of expression in their instruction and classroom culture, and again, it took different forms, including playing music for the students upon arrival, singing songs to help students connect to content, and creating projects or representations in which students used music and the arts to demonstrate knowledge. Pabon (2016) recognizes these types of practices as part of a commitment to culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly in relation to Black students. The importance of music and the arts is mirrored in the work of Milner (2016), where he creates a portrait on Mr. Jackson, a Black male mathematics and science teacher, and shows that he also includes music in his classes. Mr. Jackson's personal love and appreciation of music allowed him to make stronger connections to

his students, who shared a similar love. “The fact that students were able to see themselves in him could serve as an important validation aspect for students,” a key component of culturally relevant pedagogy (Milner, 2016, p. 427). Mr. Walker echoed this same sentiment in his interviews when discussing the cultural importance of music in Black history and culture. “I do believe it is cultural. I think when it when it comes to music, it kind of connects to like our spirituality, and so, even when you kind of connect back to like slavery days. A lot of those people kept moving through songs through music through rhythm to dancing.”

Music was such a large part in the life of Mr. Goff that he initially considered becoming a music teacher. Eventually, he decided that he would rather go into teaching as a general education teacher so that he would be able to teach a broader spectrum of content. Nonetheless, music remains an integral part of his instruction.

> So, when I do things with involving music, that's coming from a really genuine place. I just love music, I love singing, love playing instruments. So, anytime that I can do that in the classroom, my students feed off of that energy, which just makes them, you know, enjoy the lesson more. I enjoy learning more. And it's also just another way to help the information stick.

Likewise, Mr. Fields notes music and the arts in his classroom “is a really great way to support some of my students.” He continues, “what I'm finding from my current group is that I'm specifically connecting with my Black students … by layering a lot of like the higher-level work into some more creative avenues for them, so they do get to create.”

It was also interesting to hear both Mr. Fields and Mr. Goff share that their participation in high school band and orchestra helped them to build their leadership skills, which, in turn, contributed to their later success as a teacher. Mr. Fields explains,

> For me as a participant in the secondary school space with having fine arts as an entry point was really great for seeing myself as a leader … I remember I got really involved with orchestra my freshman and sophomore year, and then I started really trying to excel in other areas … I started investing all around, and I think that that led me toward being more invested in my academics, which in turn helped me out as a professional.

Mr. Goff noted that his commitment to band in high school led to becoming the drum major, which "being a drum major, a lot of leadership comes with that." While Mr. Walker did not participate in an organized music or arts program in high school like the other two men, he discussed his experience in elementary school going to an arts magnet school, and the positive impact it had on him, which he appreciated even more when he moved to a school that did not have the arts magnet. "I didn't enjoy school as much when I switched schools, because it kind of took me away from the arts. I wasn't in chorus. I wasn't in dance. I wasn't in drama."

A love and passion for the arts during childhood can translate into innovative and culturally responsive classroom instruction, as evidenced by my participants. Unfortunately, these are not necessarily elements considered on teacher certification assessments or evaluations. Putnam and Walsh (2019) report in their examination of hurdles towards becoming a licensed teacher, "Though neither art nor music is included on most licensing tests, there is no shortage of support behind the idea that elementary teachers should have some understanding and appreciation of both" (p.16). If it is agreed upon that elementary teachers should have an "understanding and appreciation" of music and the arts, and we recognize from these portraits that experience and passion for music and the arts benefit Black men and their students in the classroom, future recruitment of Black male elementary teachers may exist in school bands, orchestras, theaters, and art rooms across the country.

Salary Impacts Recruitment

While only two of my three participants extensively discussed teacher pay as a barrier for Black men becoming educators, it was salient enough in their conversations, and in the literature on this topic, that it must be brought to the forefront as a cross-cutting theme for how we can motivate and recruit more Black men to teach. As Sandles (2020) notes, the "comparably low pay of becoming a teacher makes little sense to many Black men" (p. 69). Low salaries are consistently correlated to teaching being viewed as women's work, which society undervalues it in comparison to work viewed as the domain of men (Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Crisp & King, 2016; Hicks Tafari, 2018; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010; Montecinos & Nielson, 1997; Sandles, 2020). In their report examining the pipeline for teachers of color, Ahmad and Boser (2014) interviewed college students of color considering becoming teachers. They explain, "The students also thought teachers' salaries were commensurate with the value our society places on the profession. That is to say, very low" (Ahmad & Boser, 2014, p. 14). Even teenagers recognize this issue, as demonstrated in Bianco, Leech, and Mitchell's (2011) study on pathways for Black teen males to become teachers. One of their participants states, "The pay isn't good. They want to go somewhere they can make money, be a rapper, football player, basketball player—want to do stuff that doesn't involve kids talking back to you.

Stereotypes of celebrated and financially lucrative Black male professions are perpetuated by mass media, including television, movies, and social media. Tyree (2011) argues that audiences "tend to believe what they watch is a true representation of their culture and the people within it" (p. 399). Most often, the elite in these stereotypical professions such as rappers or professional athletes make large sums of money, but the number who make it that far is

miniscule. Mr. Walker understands these realities and aims to educate his students by speaking authentically to them.

> I understand what they're going to face as they get older. And so … I was very intentional with speaking life to them, you know, and just kind of letting them know that. "Hey, you don't have to be a basketball player, or you don't have to be a rapper, or you don't have to run the streets as you see in your community."

As a Black male, Mr. Walker's words carry weight for his students, and he hopes to show that teaching is a viable profession for his Black boys, even if the pay is not what is to be desired.

Mr. Walker and Mr. Goff want teaching to be better respected so that salaries are commensurate to other highly regarded professions. They both described challenges that exist when trying to find a partner or provide for their family on a teacher salary. It may be worth noting that the two participants who discussed teacher pay have either a fiancé or spouse, while the participant who did not discuss salary does not have a partner at this time. Describing the challenges of a low salary, Mr. Walker explains that "teaching doesn't compare to a lawyer, or the engineer, or something like that. So, we want to be desirable as far as like a mate. You gonna put yourself in a profession that allows you to make that money to be able to, you know, pursue the quality of woman that you desire." Mr. Goff, who struggled financially growing up, desires to be compensated enough so he does not have to continue to stress over money. His hope is that he can be "in a place of not trying to constantly keep up with the others." He sees his current situation as "running this rat race of just trying to pay bills and work, work, work, work, and go so hard," but strives to "be in a place of … [having] time to rest … with my family and have time to just kind of move at my own pace."

In his portraits of Black male elementary teachers, Monk (2020) also writes about the concerns Black males have about teacher salary and their ability to financially support their families. One of his participants "has had to consider whether he would have to leave the career he fought so hard to be a part of if he starts a family (p. 277). Mr. Goff struggles with this same concern, as he and his fiancé frequently discuss what it will look like to start a family in the future. He is currently pursuing his real estate license, which he hopes will bring in extra money. Mr. Goff and Mr. Fields both discussed "side hustles" within education as ways to make additional income, including writing books, presenting at educational conferences, and being an educational influencer on social media. The ability to make a respectable supplement to teaching through education-related side ventures may entice other Black men to consider the prospect of teaching.

While the consensus from my participants, and from pretty much everyone who works in education, is that teachers should be paid more and that higher salaries may contribute to a more diverse range of people entering the profession, including Black males, it remains difficult to convince someone that there is satisfaction in teaching outside of salary. Mr. Goff comments, "So much of the reward of it is just working with students, being with kids, and it's like, how do you put a value that on that, or make that tangible for someone to understand?" Montecinos and Nielson (1997) believe that some of this can be accomplished in teacher preparation programs. "Teacher educators can do little to change the low pay of beginning teachers, but they can help men and women feel more efficacious as they construct their identities as teachers" (p. 4). A strong sense of value as a Black male teacher can contribute towards that individual's willingness to enter and remain in the profession.

The Go-To Disciplinarian

Being a Black male in an elementary classroom carries with it socially constructed images that reverberate across society. One of the most pervasive is that of the disciplinarian. Brockenbrough (2015) writes extensively on this topic, sharing a picture of the "Black male patriarch who exercises disciplinary authority over Black children" (p. 500). Like the conversation around teacher salary, the media perpetuates stereotypes about Black men and discipline (Brockenbrough, 2015). Ironically, Mr. Walker's inspiration for becoming a teacher, Mr. Joe Clark from *Lean on Me*, is a noted cinematic example of a stern Black male disciplinarian. While sentiments around the notion of Black male elementary teacher as disciplinarian varied for my participants, this stereotype did come up in all of my interviews.

From day one of teaching, Mr. Walker realized that his presence as a Black male in an elementary school led to his colleagues leaning on him as a disciplinarian.

> So, what I learned was that because I am a Black male, I get lumped in like this disciplinary position. So, now every kid that misbehaves, it's like "Go to Mr. Walker's class, go to Mr. Walker's class." And so, I was like, that was just my role, and I was the enforcer, for … the school, and I understood it, but I also didn't like it as well. I feel like it put me in a box, and it was like, "Yes, I can reinforce," and "Yes, I do establish discipline," but the foundation of my discipline is relationships. And so, despite me being stern, I am nurturing as well, but I felt like because I was more stern than my colleagues, whenever a kid was acting out a lot, even older kids—I had a lot of third to fifth grade kids get sent to my classroom, too. It's like that was just my role, was to enforce. I'm like, "No, I'm more than that. I'm more than the enforcer. I build and cultivate relationships

and everything." So, I understood those dynamics early on. You know, as far as … what my perceived role should be.

Mr. Walker's mixed feelings about being dubbed the disciplinarian aligns with Martin's (2008) work around "stereotype threat," which is a fear of living up to stereotypes. Mr. Walker felt that he had a duty to uphold the expectations laid out by the school community, even if he did not desire to be known primarily as a disciplinarian. Likewise, Mr. Fields's research studying the work of Zaretta Hammond positions him to be a resource for colleagues when it comes to culturally responsive interventions for behavior, but he does not simply want to be considered an expert on topics where he is still learning, and which are stereotypically the purview of Black teachers. "I have to take a year to make sure that I really am an expert at talking about this, and I have results to really prove that I can do this, and I'm not just reciting." He also does not want to be viewed as a trope of the stereotypical Black male disciplinarian.

Viewed through Critical Race Theory, Mr. Fields is building his own learning in opposition to what Sleeter (2017) deems "interest convergence" in teacher preparation programs, where white interests are maintained through the curriculum and training. When it comes to discipline, white teachers are turning to Black teachers to "fix" their children of color when there is identified misbehavior. Few white teachers are willing to take on the learning that Mr. Fields has done to better equip themselves on culturally responsive practices. Black children, particularly boys, are viewed by many white teachers (however unconsciously) as simply not acting white. Delgado and Stefancic (2017) maintain that this racist perspective is because "[White people] do not believe that they think and reason from a white viewpoint but from a universally valid one—'the truth'—what everyone knows" (p. 92).

Mr. Goff's experience with discipline is strikingly analogous to Mr. Walker's. Even as a kindergarten teacher, Mr. Goff was dubbed the disciplinarian for teachers who could not handle misbehaving students in their classroom, particularly for Black boys. Teachers would walk a student to his classroom and ask "Can I stick my kid in your classroom for a half an hour? I just can't handle it anymore." While Mr. Goff does not feel like he has an obligation to attend to children brought to his room for disciplinary reasons, he nonetheless usually does, offering "I feel more like, I just want to help, because I feel very capable of reaching those students." Mr. Goff's approach towards students sent to his room is to build relationships with them versus scolding, which is what stakeholders sometimes expect from Black male teachers. Brown (2012) explains,

> Because Black male students are constructed as aggressive or unruly, Black male teachers are expected to play the role of disciplinarian and aggressor when interacting with their Black male students. In addition, the teachers noted that school officials, parents, and community members assume that the teachers' ability to work with Black male students comes from their being Black and male, and not from their pedagogical efforts and skills. (p. 311)

Mr. Fields believes that the call for more Black male teachers is derived from the desire to have access to more disciplinarians in the school. "I think, because [of] disciplinary type things, situations, that there is a bit of a, 'Oh, we need to get males to be in there,' but it's more like an authority figure, and not like actually cultivating relationships." He maintains that student discipline is founded in "having someone with whom [students] can connect." Crisp and King (2016) echo Mr. Fields's sentiment in their discussion on having a male available when it is convenient (e.g., discipline), but question the male's presence when their actions do not align to

stereotypes. For example, “while we may be comfortable with having a male next door who can do the heavy lifting for us, is such a person a suitable colleague, or someone who can spend endless days with young children?” (Crisp & King, 2016, p. 44).

My participants acknowledged how Black men are positioned in schools as disciplinarians. They also understood assumptions made by colleagues who believe that they are better positioned to handle discipline matters, particularly with Black boys. At the same time, they also recognized that being a male holds privilege, and certain stereotypes can benefit them. Mr. Goff recalls working as a paraprofessional before becoming a classroom teacher and working with a white male teacher. He notes that this other male teacher had excellent classroom management and virtually no behavior problems. He sees this in his teaching now and recognizes that “I do have less behavioral challenges. I don't know if that's because I'm a male, or it's just because of my management style or some combination. I think [being a male] does play a role.” Mr. Walker offered a similar sentiment, “There's not a lot of males who teach elementary in general, and so, when you do have a male, you know. I do think there is a prize factor that comes with it.”

Beliefs on the role of Black male elementary teachers as disciplinarian vary from individual to individual. My participants, in general, accept the opportunity to aid colleagues with discipline, mostly because they believe they have the skills to do it and they want to help students. They do not appreciate the role as a disciplinarian as an expectation from fellow teachers, though. Rather, they want to be recognized for their impact on instruction and building relationships, which gets overshadowed, at times, because of how stakeholders view their worth. Brown (2012) summarizes,

> The Black male teacher is fashioned in a way that subtly reifies problematic raced and gendered stereotypes that privilege the physical capacities of African American men, rather than their mental and pedagogical capacities to work with Black male students. In addition, the practice of Black male teachers is constructed as useless if they are not capable of governing Black boys. (pp. 310-311)

Retention of Black male elementary teachers rest on the unwritten expectations that fall on them to handle issues that are not directly their responsibility. School administration can build a culture around collective behavior management support instead of solely on the shoulders of Black males.

You Believe What You See

Most Black boys will not see a teacher who looks like them in elementary school. Likewise, Black boys are also most at risk for dropping out of school, being subject to negative perceptions of their abilities, and suffering from poor academic motivation and engagement (Brown, 2000). These risks are intensified by attitudes and behaviors of teachers who may not be culturally versed in Black culture or the development of Black boys (Brown, 2000; Brown 2012; Bryan & Williams, 2017; Hucks, 2008; Milner, 2016). One response to this would be the presence of culturally responsive Black male teachers leading instruction in elementary classrooms.

Black boys need to see more Black men as elementary teachers so that they believe teaching is a viable profession for them growing up. Mr. Fields explains, “That's how I conceptualized as a kid who were teachers, and who did what.” For him, a lack of teachers who looked like him subliminally told him that teaching was not for him. Personally, as a white male I had three white male teachers in my elementary school, one of whom I credit for wanting to

become a teacher. There was never a question in my mind as to whether I could be a teacher, even knowing that I would be in the minority. For many Black boys, they do not have that opportunity to believe they can be elementary teachers by what they experience. There is no doubt that early educational experiences shaped my participants' orientation as educators themselves. All three of my participants discussed never having a Black male teacher in their elementary experience. At the same time, each could identify a teacher of color who positively stood out to them in their life, which is a very significant finding. Mr. Fields recalls Ms. Tabb, his fourth-grade teacher, a Korean woman. Mr. Walker remembers Ms. Hewitt, his middle school English teacher, a Black woman. And Mr. Goff thinks of Ms. Kim, the teacher who took him under her wing when he was a substitute teacher, a Korean woman. My participants credit each of these educators for showing them that people of color do teach and can have a powerful impact on young students.

While my participants were able to evoke positive memories about the teacher of color they noted, we also discussed the type of influence a Black male elementary teacher could have had in their life. Mr. Walker stated, "If I had more teachers that looked like me growing up, I probably would have went to A&T as an education major, because I would have saw that people like me actually doing it, you know, but because I didn't see a lot of teachers of color, especially elementary," this career did not appear as viable. Mr. Walker also emphasized that he wished he had more teachers who built him up as a child. Literature shows that Black boys consistently encounter low expectations, indifference compared to white peers, and microaggressions from teachers (Goings & Bianco, 2016). While Mr. Walker states that he was never "beaten down" by a teacher, he was certainly never uplifted, which can also be detrimental to a student's future.

Mr. Fields shared his hesitation on whether he believed teaching was meant for him, “I had my moment when I was fifteen, and I thought about becoming a teacher” He wondered, “I mean, I don't know if there are teachers who look like me.” He also recalled a specific event in second grade that stood out to him, where a Black former Major League Baseball player was a substitute teacher in his classroom and how the behavior of Black boys in his class would alter when this man was in there. He speculates how much influence a Black male teacher could have had if one had been there all the time.

> It was just really interesting to watch, because I remember a couple of boys who generally cut up for the teachers. They wouldn't do anything … but they were like super engaged, and I remember thinking like, “Oh, it's cause they look like each other,” and I think back on it and I wonder like how powerful that would have been. I find even some of that my in college and my adult education … a lot of my mentors are folks who have similar identities.

While my participants’ passion for teaching and serving children was a primary force in convincing them to become elementary teachers, questions remain whether it would have been easier to picture themselves as teachers growing up if they had teachers who looked like them.

My research points to evidence that people of color look out for one another and aim to support fellow people of color when possible. In the case of Mr. Goff, the woman he substituted for ended up getting him opportunities for a teaching job at two different schools. “This is a teacher of color that saw something in me and has taken upon herself to open up doors for me.” For Mr. Walker, he experienced two Black male principals who brought him in to interview for positions, including at his current school, which is predominately white. He notes that he would have never considered interviewing there without that Black principal inviting him. Mr. Walker

also shared about a woman named Ms. Kelly, an older Black female teacher, who embraced him as soon as he started at his current school.

> One of the things about Black culture, we always have, like older Black women that embrace younger Black boys. So, you got your grandma with your auntie … and they give you like this very nurturing feeling. But like for me … Ms. Kelly was that nurturing older woman that I'm used to my community.

Mentorship and a support network for teachers of color are vital towards retention and protection against isolation, microaggressions, and burnout (Brockenbrough, 2012a; Brown & Butty, 1999; Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019; Robinson & Gonzalez, 2022; Smith, Hung, & Franklin, 2011). Even though my participants did not have official mentors, the mentoring they did receive from other Black teachers was significant in their professional trajectory.

As teachers now, the importance of representation and identity is not lost on my participants as they enter their classroom each day. They recognize that their presence can positively impact their students, particularly Black boys. Johnson and Sdunzik (2022) present a case study on this, as they "seek to place Blackness as pivotal in fostering the civic perspectives and racialized identity of African American learners" (p. 675). Similarly, Mr. Walker states, "I realized the impact that I made just by me being a male and by me embracing that and teaching out of that and cultivating my classroom environment out of that." Mr. Fields alludes to identity being an important piece in a child feeling comfortable in a space. "I do think there is something to be said with representation when a child's conceptualizing their space in the classroom." Not only does the presence of a Black teacher in the classroom allow children to feel like it is a space that they belong, but it can also provide a sense of safety. Mr. Goff shares, "If there are any other people of color in the space … it's an indication of how safe or unsafe you might be." When it

comes to representation, Mr. Goff believes parents of color have a similar feeling and expectation, “People just want their child to have a someone that they look like; they want their teacher to reflect their child.”

Black men are uniquely positioned to be an influential individual in the lives of Black boys, and to also have an important impact on all students, especially in disrupting stereotypes about nurturing, intelligence, and leadership. While this sometimes plays out as the desire for Black boys to become athletes or rappers, Black male elementary teachers can also hold similar influence to show Black boys that teaching is a profession for them. This can serve as a motivation for Black males to become elementary teachers. My research shows that while my participants did not experience Black males in their elementary experiences, they each had a teacher of color who helped them understand the importance of representation in the classroom.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

There is much that educators, educational leaders, policy makers, and community members can learn from the portraits I share in this dissertation. In this section, I describe some of these lessons, alongside recommendations for research and practice. I offer these for various stakeholder groups: Black males, colleges and universities, school districts, and policy makers.

For Black Males

In Chapter 2, I asked the question “What kind of man wants to teach elementary school?” To come full circle with this inquiry, I had each of my participants at the conclusion of our time together respond to the same open-ended statement: “The type of Black man who teaches elementary school is …” Here are their responses:

Mr. Fields: “All of us.”

Mr. Goff: “Compassionate, empathetic, tough skinned, cares for themselves, able to kind of sift through negativity, and dedicated to the future.”

Mr. Walker: “A no nonsense nurturer.”

While in each portrait I illuminate some of the hurdles that can come with becoming and being a Black male teacher, they also reflect a strong sense of optimism and show the impact that each participant had in the field, which outweighed the challenges. Each man discussed the joy that they find teaching their students, the pride in their abilities to impact children of all backgrounds, and the confidence they have gained in being seen as a leader in their schools. The study affirmed the realities of low teacher pay and the impact it can have on living as comfortably as one may desire, but each participant showed that they are able to support themselves and, in some cases, have found opportunities to earn additional income through “educational side hustles.” Future research could consider examining if the percentage of Black male teachers is higher in states with higher salaries. I believe Black men considering becoming an elementary educator would be moved and motivated to take on the career by hearing the words and learning the work of my participants. One recommendation for teacher education and high school teacher cadet programs is to share portraits of Black male teachers, as well as teachers from other dominant groups, as a way of illustrating both how their presence matters, and all that they potentially bring to their school communities.

For Colleges and Universities

My study shows that there is opportunity for colleges and universities to recruit more Black males to their programs by developing strategic pipelines that extend to high schools, and potentially even middle schools. Partnerships between school districts and colleges could provide financial assistance, mentorship, and other incentives that appeal to Black males in pursuit of a

teaching license. The presence of current Black male teachers and administrators at recruitment events or in teacher cadet programs could allow Black male students the chance to see that people who look like them are indeed working, and thriving, in the elementary classroom. Future research may examine how incentive programs like the ones listed above, coupled with college to school district pipelines, impact recruitment and hiring of Black male teachers.

Leveraging the cross-cutting theme of music and the arts from my study, colleges and universities may consider looking into the halls of music and arts classes to find Black men who may consider teaching as a future career. My participants show that music and the arts appear to be significant pedagogical assets in the elementary classroom, so Black men who have these talents could benefit from having a meeting or observation of a Black male elementary teacher who is utilizing these practices in his classroom, so they can conceptualize the use of musical or artistic talents to engage and educate students. One recommendation for future research may be studying ways in which Black male teachers who use music in the classroom were impacted by music growing up. Studying this may produce a stronger understanding for a link between music and teaching in the elementary classroom.

Efforts to ensure that Black men are not singled out or tokenized are important for the retention of Black males in teacher preparation programs. Due to the small number of Black men traditionally in these programs, it can be ostracizing when instructors or classmates call upon them to speak on behalf of a race or gender, or when they are pigeonholed as teachers into the role of disciplinarians. In her study around CRT and the whiteness of teacher education, Sleeter (2017) shares interview data from several studies with students of color who were enrolled in predominately white teacher preparation programs and how they “learned not to speak out; they learned to keep a low profile” to not be singled out (p. 162). This mirrors the experience Mr.

Goff had in his program. Instead, institutions should continue to build a welcoming culture that allows these men to contribute as willing by having appropriate training for faculty members, while simultaneously building efforts to recruit more Black men to teacher preparation programs so there is stronger representation. It would be helpful for future research to study how comfortable Black men feel in teacher preparation courses in relation to the content and discussions that take place around pedagogy, instruction, gender, sexuality, and race.

While my participants did not mention specific personal difficulties with meeting teacher requirements, they alluded to the difficulties that some other Black teachers face when taking licensure exams. Sandles (2020) also found this in his study using Critical Race Theory to explore the Black male teacher shortage. Colleges and universities can aim to better prepare their teacher candidates on these exams by ensuring that they are knowledgeable on the tested content, and by providing tutoring and test taking support sessions. Also examining the financial burdens that come with taking these exams would benefit those from traditionally marginalized communities. Perhaps most importantly, they can advocate for better ways to access the qualifications of teacher education candidates, as the Praxis exams are notoriously problematic for many potential Black teachers, posing a barrier for them bringing their skills and talents to the classroom. Ingersoll, May, Collins, and Fletcher (2022) point out that with the growth of "occupational entry tests" in teaching, "coupled with lower pass rates for on these tests" by candidates of color, "the underrepresentation in the teaching force has continued" (p. 824). Milner and Howard (2013) echo this by sharing that in many states, fewer than 50% of Black candidates pass certification tests, and urge that "consideration should be given to revising policy in order to ensure that measures clearly spell out diversity as a critical element of a 'highly

qualified' teacher workforce," hence "identifying and eliminating the obstacles faced by racial minority teachers in passing entry tests" (p. 548).

For School Districts

All three of my participants had a deep desire to become teachers because of a love for children and helping others. While one of them initially had a different college pathway, he decided midway through to change to education, which is where his passion had always been. This was in large part thanks to the support of his father, which is consistent with Lewis' (2006) research showing family support as important to the encouragement of Black males becoming teachers. Not all Black males enter the professional world knowing that they want to be teachers. One of my participants noted how his school has experienced a tremendous influx of second career teachers over the past couple of years. This is important information for school districts as it could help them to expand their recruitment efforts in non-traditional directions. While a stronger high school to college teacher pipeline would certainly help Black males have the full training that is helpful for entering the profession, the opportunity to recruit Black men looking to start a second career could be an additional focus for school districts. School districts should also consider ways to create pipelines and support systems for Black males who desire to become administrators. One of my participants will be earning his administrative license but noted that he does not know how to get into the assistant principal hiring pool. Further research in the form of portraits on motivations of second career elementary educators may provide valuable insight into future recruitment of more Black males.

My portraits presented evidence that Black men do not always find the right school upon initial hiring. Even at predominately Black schools, where many Black men are sought because of the desire for them to mentor Black boys, the overall culture may not support them. Each of

my participants found that while their initial schools were not a good fit, they were able to find a new school where they are happier. Ironically, two of the participants are currently at predominately white schools (one private, one public). School districts should be aware of pigeonholing Black male teachers at minority majority schools simply because of similar identities. Additionally, districts should create mentor and support groups for the retention of Black male teachers. These may involve holding outside of school meetings, encouraging peer observations, and creating a pool of Black male mentors that might include non-educator community members who are experienced professionals. The presence of these groups helps protect the interests and support the efforts of Black males in the schools.

For Policy Makers

To a large extent, educational policy and teacher certification are deliberated by governing bodies and elected officials across states, counties, and towns. Teaching standards, curriculum, salary, and testing are examples of decisions that are passed down to the school level, where teachers face frustrations over lack of input and discretion. Teacher qualifications are also policy-bound and include a series of hurdles that have class elements to them (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The participants in my study indicate that salary is at least one area that impacts Black male teachers and their willingness to either join or remain in the profession. While salary can be supplemented through additional jobs or ventures, my participants struggled with the fact that this professional career does not pay more and does not always financially reward teachers on furthering their expertise through post-graduate degrees.

A frustration related to limited curricular and instructional freedom also impacts Black males, which is evidenced by one of my participants moving from a public charter school to a private school. Another participant moved from a Title 1 school to a high-achieving, non-Title 1

school, where historically curriculum fidelity is not as closely monitored because of exemplary test scores. Policy makers should consider ways in which to empower creative Black male elementary teachers to have the ability to utilize their gifts for the benefit of their students, particularly in public schools when they are teaching students of color. Researchers would also benefit from examining this topic. Discussions by focus groups of Black male educators may surface suggestions for policy recommendations that remove racial or gender barriers that limit them in the classroom.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to engage in deep conversation with three Black male elementary teachers to learn their stories, but also gather evidence and thoughts on their motivations, hurdles, and successes in becoming an educator. Through portraiture methodology, I was able to "demonstrate a commitment to the research participants and contextualize the depictions of individuals and events" and blend together "life history, naturalist inquiry, and most prominently, that of ethnographic methods" into a single study (Dixson, Chapman, & Hill, 2005, p. 17). The need for this study is both a historical inquiry into flawed legal decisions that nearly eradicated the once prominent Black teaching force and a contemporary examination of the lasting impact these decisions have made on society sixty years later (Sandles, 2020).

I believe that my study provided counternarratives to the type of Black man who teaches elementary school and offers some support for how a Black man can be successful in the elementary classroom, especially as I suspect from my interviews with them that all three of my participants are excellent teachers. As a core component of Critical Race Theory, these counternarratives are illuminating the lived experiences of my participants as Black male teachers, communicating perspectives and experiences that white people, myself included, am

unlikely to experience. While the three portraits demonstrate that there are both common experiences for Black male elementary educators and unique individual occurrences, one of my goals was to accentuate the good that each participant brings to the profession, a key element of portraiture. “Portraiture very purposefully says we’re going to try to understand what’s worthy and strong; always recognizing of course that goodness is inevitably laced with imperfection” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p. 20). My participants proved that there is goodness in being an elementary educator; other Black males may find inspiration in their stories and decide to follow in their footsteps.

Future research should continue to center the voice of Black male elementary teachers through research methodologies that enable participants to share their experiences and perspectives in rich detail, such as portraiture. While my study is limited in the fact that I only worked with three participants, further studies with Black men could uncover more ideas and insights that can support the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Black male elementary educators. Further research can also address issues that were not discussed in-depth in this study or stem from my research. For example, are there differences in expectations for Black males who appear to be more “feminine” versus “masculine”? Are Black males who do not enter the profession through traditional licensure treated differently? How do school demographics impact the treatment of Black males by families?

Final Thoughts

As I come to the conclusion of this study, one surprising realization is that I never would have thought that at the beginning of this journey I would feel such a sense of connection to my participants. After hearing each of their stories and interviewing them for many hours apiece, not only did I feel like I knew them, but I felt like I shared many common experiences with them

when it comes to being a male elementary educator. I have spent fifteen years of my career working with elementary students, and many of their tales resonated personally with me, even though we do not share a racial identity. For example, I too learned from experience to be mindful not to be alone with a student, give side instead of front hugs, and not spend too much time with a female teacher to avoid suspicions from colleagues.

Of course, while I found much in common with these men, I also understood that my life was different in many ways. Being a white male, I do not face fear of Black male stereotypes and the negative perceptions that can bring, especially from white parents. I never question whether I belong in a space. I can avoid controversial issues around race if I want to. My privilege carries into the school setting, even when I am in the minority when it comes to gender. Even though I knew I would share some of the experiences of my participants, it was important for me as a researcher not to conflate my story into theirs as I wrote.

I hope that I allowed my participants the welcoming space to share their unfiltered stories with an open mind and listening ear. At the conclusion of our discussions, I asked them to share anything else they had on their minds, both as a way of bringing the interview to closure, and because I wondered how they felt about the research experience overall. Based on their responses, I believe that they found this experience rewarding. For example, Mr. Fields shared,

> It's been really awesome to talk with you, and the conversation … really cathartic. I think this work is so powerful, and you're shining a light on something that kind of gets thought about and is like incipient, but never actually concretize or actually doing the work because it's … It is the hard work that is less sensationalized. And so, that means the work is valuable … and you're doing it.

And Mr. Goff said,

> It's been a very cool opportunity. I've learned a lot about myself … almost like therapy in a way, just like things that you don't typically think about on your own … I haven't really spent time to reflect and think about like, "Why am I in this? What is my why? What is my purpose? Where am I going? How did I get here?" And all of that is important. So, I appreciate you helping me bring some of those answers.

It is rare that teachers get to think about their practice in such depth, and to share their insights and wisdom with someone who really wants to learn from them. These final statements from my participants affirm the need for this type of research, but also show how much impact it can have on people when they are given the opportunity and space to openly share reflections on their life and career.

While certain stories and thoughts from my participants are consistent with the literature I reviewed, I was surprised at times by both what I heard and did not hear from the men. For example, I was not expecting to hear about the arts and music as much as I did. For all three participants to mention the importance of music and the arts was insightful and made me consider future recruitment efforts for the type of men who could be interested in teaching. I was also drawn in by the conversations around vernacular and code-switching by Mr. Fields and Mr. Goff. Both men discussed how they have been complimented throughout their life for how they speak, but I wonder how often those compliments are often also connected to microaggressions by white individuals who hear someone that sounds like them. The topic of speech and code-switching for Black male teachers could be an interesting future study.

While discussions around race certainly came up throughout our interviews, I found that my participants did not dive into personal experiences of racism or oppressive experiences as much as I thought they might, especially given how much this topic came up in the existing

research literature. This could be for several speculative reasons. For one, there is the possibility that they did not feel comfortable telling me as a white male about negative experiences involving other white people. However, similar results were identified in the research of Monk (2020), a Black male. His participants discussed issues around gender and sexuality at length, but little dialogue was around racism in the workplace. This shows that my whiteness may not have been a huge barrier. A second reason could be that all three of my participants have experience being immersed in white culture; they are versed in navigating it and may know how to circumvent oppressive practices, or at least not be consumed by them. Mr. Fields was adopted by a white family at birth and went to a predominantly white elementary school. Mr. Walker also went to a predominantly white elementary school. Currently, Mr. Goff and Mr. Walker teach at predominately white schools. I do not share this information to dismiss or diminish any negative experiences each have had, but because I observed that all three men appear generally comfortable being in white spaces and had generally positive things to say about their time in these spaces, which may make them unique in their experiences. Mr. Walker even discussed how his preconceived notions of teaching in a predominately white school have been wrong and he has been welcomed with open arms by families and staff. At the same time, each had passion for ensuring that racist barriers and hurdles were addressed inside and outside the classroom. In fact, Mr. Fields is about to write a book on equitable teaching practices and Mr. Goff has already published a children's book on empowerment for children of color.

As a school administrator, I would proudly recruit and hire any of these three men. They each bring a different dynamic experience and strengths to the schools where they work, but they also each possess something that is intangible in the classroom—the ability to connect and build relationships with all students. Personally, I never had a Black male elementary teacher growing

up, but I wonder if my perception of who is a Black male teacher would have been any different if I had. This study has given me hope for increasing the number of Black male teachers and has even opened a door for a partnership to personally make a difference in the recruitment of them in my hometown. It has motivated me to fight even harder as an advocate for breaking down oppressive practices and building pathways with equity.

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APPENDIX A: SOCIAL MEDIA RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

Help needed! I (Adam Dovico) am a student at the University of North Carolina – Greensboro and I'm looking for participants for my dissertation research study on "Motivations of Black Males to Become Elementary School Teachers" to help further knowledge on the recruitment, hiring, and retention of Black males teaching in elementary schools. If you are or know a Black male who currently teaches in a preK-6th grade classroom and went through a traditional certification program (not lateral entry or emergency licensure) and would be willing to participate in 3 one-hour recorded Zoom interviews to share your story, please let me know! You will receive a $50 Amazon gift card at the conclusion of the interviews. Thank you for your help!

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT LETTER

UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA AT GREENSBORO

CONSENT TO ACT AS A HUMAN PARTICIPANT

Project Title: Motivations of Black Males to Become Elementary School Teachers

Principal Investigator and Faculty Advisor: Adam Dovico (PI), Dr. Kathy Hytten (FA)

Participant's Name:

What are some general things you should know about research studies?
You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in the study is voluntary. You may choose not to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty.

Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future. There may not be any direct benefit to you for being in the research study. There also may be risks to being in research studies. If you choose not to be in the study or leave the study before it is done, it will not affect your relationship with the researcher or the University of North Carolina at Greensboro.
Details about this study are discussed in this consent form. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in this research study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form. If you have any questions about this study at any time, you should ask the researchers named in this consent form. Their contact information is below.

What is the study about?
This is a research project about the motivations of Black males to become elementary school educators. Special attention will be paid to hurdles and boosters (supports) that the men faced in their journey to become a teacher. Your participation is voluntary.

Why are you asking me?
You have been asked to participate in this study due to meeting the following criteria: a) identify as a Black male, b) teach in a Pre-kindergarten-6th grade classroom, and c) were licensed in a traditional certification program.

What will you ask me to do if I agree to be in the study?
If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked to participate in three, approximately one-hour interviews over the course of approximately six weeks. These interviews will take place over Zoom. Between each interview, you will be asked to look over the previous interview transcript in order to identify any key quotes or themes that stand out to you, which may be used as a discussion during the subsequent interview. Should you have any questions, you can contact

Adam Dovico at 336-918-8271.

Is there any audio/video recording?
Interviews will be recorded using Zoom. Because your voice will be potentially identifiable by anyone who hears the recording, your confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed although the researcher will try to limit access to the recording as described below.

What are the risks to me?
The Institutional Review Board at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro has determined that participation in this study poses minimal risk to participants.

If you have questions, want more information or have suggestions, please contact Adam Dovico, who may be reached at 336-918-8271, or Dr. Kathy Hytten, who may be reached at 336-334-5000.

If you have any concerns about your rights, how you are being treated, concerns or complaints about this project or benefits or risks associated with being in this study please contact the Office of Research Integrity at UNCG toll-free at (855)-251-2351.

Are there any benefits to society as a result of me taking part in this research?
Your participation in this study may assist school boards, school districts, policy makers, and educational leaders to better consider the pathways for Black men to become elementary school teachers.

Are there any benefits to *me* for taking part in this research study?
There are no direct benefits to participants in this study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?
Upon successful completion of the three interviews, you will receive a $50 Amazon gift card. Your participation will not cost you anything.

How will you keep my information confidential?
All information obtained in this study will be maintained in Word documents that will be password protected. In addition, publications will not identify participants by name when data are disseminated. Data will be kept for up to three years. After this, data will be deleted from files. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

Will my de-identified data be used in future studies?
No, your data will be destroyed three years from the defense of the dissertation. De-identified data will not be stored and will not be used in future research projects.

What if I want to leave the study?
You have the right to refuse to participate or to withdraw at any time, without penalty. If you do withdraw, it will not affect you in any way. If you choose to withdraw, you may request that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identifiable state. The investigators also have the right to stop your participation at any time. This could be because

you have had an unexpected reaction, or have failed to follow instructions, or because the entire study has been stopped.

What about new information/changes in the study?
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing this consent form you are agreeing that you read, or it has been read to you, and you fully understand the contents of this document and are openly willing consent to take part in this study. All of your questions concerning this study have been answered. By signing this form, you are agreeing that you are 18 years of age or older and are agreeing to participate, in this study described to you by the primary investigator.

Signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE GUIDE

Interview 1 (~60 minutes): Educational Experiences and Professional Aspirations

1. How would you describe your experiences in school growing up? Were they different at different levels? Describe the schools you attended.
2. Did you have a teacher or other role model who made a significant impact (positive or negative) on your life that influenced your decision to become a teacher?
3. At what point in your life did you realize that you wanted to be a teacher?
4. Were there any motivations that boosted your decision to be a teacher? If so, what were they?
5. Did your family push or support you in the decision to become a teacher?

Interview 2 (~60 minutes): Teacher Education Experiences and The Recruitment/Hiring Process

6. Can you describe your experiences in your teacher preparation program?
7. Did you have any particular courses or professors that influenced your decision on becoming a teacher?
8. Were there any hurdles in your journey through your teacher preparation program and into the recruitment and hiring process? If so, what were they?
9. Can you tell me about the process in which you were recruited or found a district to interview?
10. Can you tell me about the process and your experiences in which you were hired as a teacher?

Interview 3 (~60 minutes): Induction, Professional and Personal Support/Development, Retention Efforts, and Recommendations for Policy and Practice

11. How do you believe other teachers and families view you and other Black male elementary teachers?
12. Have you experienced any type of mentorship or support that has assisted you in remaining in the classroom?
13. Have you experienced the intentional placement of students in your class?
14. How do you view your relationships with students?
15. Do you have any recommendations for policy or practice within the school system that would encourage and support more Black male elementary teachers?
16. Where do you see yourself in the future and what would you need to get there?
17. Fill in the blank: The type of Black man who teaches elementary school is …
18. Are there any other concluding statements or thoughts that you have?

Interview Guideline:

- All participants will conduct three, approximately 60-minute interviews approximately over the course of two months
- Interviews will take place over Zoom
- Interviews will be transcribed through Zoom via Otter.ai, and then reviewed for accuracy

- Finalized transcriptions will be shared with participants after interview one and two, and individuals will be asked to identify quotes or important sections that will be leveraged for the subsequent interview
- Portrait will be shared with each participant for final review and feedback