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STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

**The Me You Can't See: Stories of Black Male Elementary Teachers' Experiences and
Decisions to Teach, An Endarkened Storywork Study**

By

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Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Arlington in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Dedication

I dedicate this study to the following: God, my grandparents (Howard Davis Sr. and Odile Carrier Davis), my Black Queen Momma, my family, friends, colleagues, but most importantly, the six Black male elementary teachers who have dedicated their lives to impacting, informing, and educating the next generation of brilliant creatives.

Black Queen Momma, I genuinely appreciate your sacrifices for Papa, Angie, and me. I know it has been hard, challenging, and frustrating as a Black woman to produce Black excellence, but you continuously did it with a smile or a stern stare, and you constantly reminded us that God would make a way; just keep getting up and pushing forward. Personally, I thank you for pushing me every bit of the way; even when it was days, I indeed had nothing left in the tank, you reminded me that it's an army behind me rooting for me to be the first in the family as a doctor. Although grandma had a 5th-grade education and grandpa had an 8th-grade education and are no longer with us, the educational roots they have instilled into the Davis blood made me the scholar I am today. I hope I accomplished what they set out for this family to achieve while on earth.

Finally, I want to thank myself for the perseverance, energy, and vision to see this milestone through in its entirety. In the words of the late Whitney Houston, "I'm not the strongest every day, but I'm not the weakest either; but I won't break." As Will Smith states in his 2021 Memoir, "the joy of being right about me," I was able to bet on myself and not quit; I made myself proud. Not many make it out of Baton Rouge (Scotlandville), Louisiana, but I made it. In the words of Muhammad Ali, "I don't have to be what you want me to be." Be blessed!

#LivUnbothered

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

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So, first, I thank everyone who impacted or influenced me to get here. Honestly, I feel I would be thanking people for an eternity. First, however, I want to thank my teachers at Scotlandville Magnet High School, Professors at Northwestern State University, Professors at Louisiana State University, and Professors at the University of Texas at Arlington. Through these experiences, I cried, laughed, loved, and gained insight into my full potential, and I am forever grateful.

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Special thank you to my data analysis tribe, Austin Dixon, Harold Brown, Ashley May, and Loryn Taylor, for being my thought partners and an additional brain for me to share these Black, beautiful, and joyful stories for the world to see, feel, and experience.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Abstract

Black male teachers in PK-12 make up less than 2% of the teacher workforce with an undetermined representation in elementary education. Although there have been efforts to increase their representation in the field, there remains a lack of Black males entering the classroom as elementary teachers. In addition, there has been limited research examining ecological systems' influence on Black male teachers' elementary teacher experiences and their decisions to teach in early childhood education. In response, this proposed qualitative Endarkened Storywork study examined Black male elementary teachers' experiences and highlighted the perceived influence of Black males teaching in early childhood education through the ecological systems. Grounded within the African American Male Theory (AAMT) construct, this study captured the voices of six Black male elementary teachers currently serving in Texas and Louisiana schools and examined their decisions to teach through an ecological system. The findings from this study revealed that Black male elementary teachers understand their experience through a web of different systems that were expressed through the following threads/patches: intersections of gender and race, media influence, intentional investment, self, and superhero complex. The findings provide insight into how the mesosystem ultimately influenced their purpose of becoming a Black male elementary teacher and provide implications for improved practices and response efforts for school leaders, educator preparation programs, and policy makers for recruiting, retaining, and increasing Black male representation into the teaching profession.

Keywords: Black male teacher, Blackness, gendered racism, elementary teacher, ecological systems, Endarkened Storywork

Table of Contents

<i>Dedication</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Abstract</i>	<i>iv</i>
CHAPTER I	1
Purpose of Study	8
Significance of the Study	10
Definition of Terms.....	11
Conclusion	12
CHAPTER II	13
Literature Review	13
Gendered Racism in Education	29
Theoretical Position: African American Male Theory	48
Implications for the Research Study	54
Conclusion	55
CHAPTER III	56
Methods	56
Theoretical Framework	58
Advancing the Theoretical Framework	59
Participants and Sampling Selection.....	60
<i>Note.</i> Pseudonyms were added to protect the identity of the participants and maintain confidentiality. Additionally, insight was given to the district type instead of the actual district name to aid in the protection of the participant.	62
Data Sources	62
Data Collection	62
Participant Interviews	64
Confidentiality	66
Trustworthiness.....	66
Institutional Review Boards (IRB)	68
Analysis of the Data and Reporting of the Findings.....	68
Researcher's Role/Positionality	71
Delimitations.....	72
Conclusion	74
Chapter IV	75
Analysis of Data and Findings	75
The Breakroom Crew: Mr. Steve's Story	77
Family Block Party: Coach Story	81
Garden @ War: Joe Clark Story	87
10-Year Football Reunion: Coach Will Story	96

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Xscape: Mr. Goku Story	101
Barbershop Talk: Mr. Riley Story	105
Presenting the Findings	109
Chapter V	136
Summary, Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations	136
Conclusions/Discussion	144
Research Question One	146
Research Question Two	153
Limitations	156
Researcher Experience	156
Implications for Practice	157
Recommendations for Future Research	161
Concluding Remarks	162
<i>References</i>	<i>166</i>
<i>Appendices</i>	<i>189</i>
Appendix A	190
Appendix B	192
Appendix C	193
Appendix D	196

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

List of Tables

Table 1. Demographics of Participants	61
Table 2. System Breakdown	138

List of Figure

Figure 1. <i>Ecological Systems Model for African American Male Theory</i>	50
Figure 2. <i>Black Male Social Media Engagement</i>	117
Figure 3. <i>Media Family Representation Artifacts</i>	121
Figure 4. <i>Musical Artifact Submission</i>	123
Figure 5. <i>Spiritual Music Artifact</i>	131
Figure 6. <i>Research Question One Ecological System</i>	145
Figure 7. <i>Research Question Two Ecological System</i>	153
Figure 8. <i>The Me You Can't See Quilt</i>	164

CHAPTER I

Introduction

In his 2006 song titled, My Struggle, Torrence Hatch Jr., a.k.a Lil Boosie, once said, "You don't know my struggle, so you can't feel my hustle." Tunes blasting in the street, playing outside coming from school, and running home to beat the streetlights, so I wouldn't have to hear my momma, "make sure ya butt be home before them streetlights come on, or its gone be a problem," growing up in the inner city was just a lot of rhythm to our daily blues. Yes, education was vital, but education was not fun. Being mislabeled, crucified, bullied, and disciplined, education which once felt like a fun time to learn and socialize, became an asylum to my mind. Graduating from college was a thrill, but I was also reminded that I wasn't prepared to enter the workforce. So, I began my journey as a substitute teacher, and who would have known what this experience had in store for me? During my time as a 5th grade Science teacher, I knew my presence was more significant than just making a check, especially since I had 4th graders excited to be in my class the year after. Cassie, one of my students, stated, Mr. Davis, I'm so proud you stayed with us because the other subs gave up on us, but you kept coming back. I came back because I saw potential, I related, but most importantly, I saw beyond their behavior and saw them as a person in a system that excluded them before they had a chance. Momma, why they don't believe in us? I know, baby. Holding me for dear life. A tear dropped.

While public school students' enrollment has diversified over the past decade (Goings & Bianco, 2016), the representation of the public-school teacher is vastly different from their student ratio. In fact, white teachers make up 80% of all teachers, primarily female, while

educators of color (Black, Latino, International, etc.) comprise 18% of the teacher population (Plachowski, 2019; Wallace & Gagen, 2019). Today, Black male teachers represent less than 2% of the teacher workforce (National Teacher and Principal Survey); however, this population has been underrepresented in PK-12 education for decades (Underwood, 2019). Previously, Gordon (2000) reported that the Black male teacher shortage was due to the general nature of their struggles through economic, education, and social and cultural factors. Lewis 2006 defined these factors as:

The economic reasons were low pay, too much education for the return, and a wider range of career choices than previous generations of African Americans had. The educational reasons were associated with inadequate K–12 schooling, negative experiences in the school setting, and a lack of emotional and intellectual mentoring. The social and cultural reasons were related to experiences of racism, lack of encouragement, and racelessness. (p.225)

Additionally, Goings & Bianco (2016) found that due to the treatment of males of color, specifically, Black boys, and the treatment they face throughout their K-12 education has been a prevalent factor that hinders the consideration of teaching as a career option. Although there are recruitment programs vying to increase African American male educators (Jones et al., 2019)—Call Me Mister program (South Carolina). Urban Teachers, African American Male Teacher Initiative (Hutson-Tillotson University), The New Teacher Project (TNTP), and He is Me Institute—there continues to be a shortage of Black male teachers serving the education system.

Exploring the absence of Black males leading in the classroom first prompts unpacking the issues and trends of their experiences in the PK-12 school system. Black male students in the education system have continuously been seen as uneducated, incompetent, vilified (Brooms &

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Wint, 2021), and often overrepresented in special education (Ford, 2012; Ford & Russo, 2016).

Although Black male students represent minority enrollment, they ultimately make up the highest percentage of in-school and out-of-school suspension. The U.S. Department of Education Status and Trends 2019 report mentioned that Black males made up 17.6 % of out-of-school suspensions, which served as the highest male suspension of any racial and ethnic group (De Brey et al., 2019). Moreover, Black students in PK-12 are detained at a higher percentage than their white counterparts at 2.7 percent (NCES, 2019a).

Equally important, as the data suggests disparity in academic access, Black males comprise a vast ratio of students in the school-to-prison pipeline. The NAACP and Education Fund reported (2013) that these students are often thrust into a second-class educational environment, placing them into detention centers or alternative schools where inclusive education becomes non-existent and becomes a breeding ground that fuels negativity in the students who are deemed as disruptors. Scholars have suggested that these experiences lead students, specifically Black males, down the school-to-prison pipeline. While this becomes a standard track for Black males' educational achievement, their educational career inadvertently dwindles and promotes a culture of incarceration (Hemez et al., 2020).

Current literature has emphasized that Black males have been historically left out or underrepresented in PK-12 education due to the social constructs targeted at Black men in American society (Underwood, 2019). Furthermore, Black men have been treated as less than uneducated (Ayon 1997; Lynn, 2006), and labeled aggressive (George Cross, 2010; Brown 2012). Due to these issues, scholars have suggested that Black males struggle to gain confidence in their academic identity, leading to struggles with academic success. As such Black males are typically averaging a grade point average below 2.6 or a "C "average (Sutton et al., 2018) and are

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

identified with a national average of 6.8 percent dropout rate (NCES, 2019b). These structural and systemic barriers naturally lead to the demise of the Black male teacher's presence in the education field. Scholars suggest that the intentional treatment of Black males in the education field has been connected to the factors negatively impacting Black males from choosing teaching as a profession (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Wallace & Gagen, 2019).

Historically, Black teachers have remained scarce in education, tracing back to the depression of Black teachers after the *Brown v. Board of Education (1954)* case. Even though Black teachers are represented in the teacher workforce, they are often clustered in urban school districts (Brown et al., 2018; Pabon et al., 2011) and are traditionally seen as surrogate parents, disciplinarians, nurturers, etc., based on the needs of the Black students attending those schools (Sandles, 2018). Above all, Black teachers have viewed education as a political move to commit to social transformation (hooks, 1996), but trying to address educational inequities has potentially impeded their teacher preparation (Jackson & Knight-Manuel, 2019, p. 67).

However, scholars have noted that Black teachers have higher expectations, supportive relationships, culturally relevant pedagogy, interest in being role models, and developing an interactive and engaging learning environment in and out of school (Duncan, 2020; Griffin & Tackie, 2017; Redding, 2019). For instance, African American educators "are familiar with the neighborhoods and cultural norms of Black students and accordingly could provide important instructional connections with students inside of the classroom and are gatekeepers for students of color" (Meidl, 2019, p. 565). Gershenson et al. (2018) found that if Black students engage with at least one Black teacher in elementary, they are 13% more likely to graduate high school and 19% more likely to attend college than their peers who were not assigned to a Black teacher (p. 33).

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Statement of the Problem

Beyond the consideration of racial diversity in the classroom, education has sought male presence, for the field has been heavily dominated by females. Equally important, NCES (2022) reported that education has acknowledged the importance of males being represented in the classroom; however, for the past two decades, male teachers have dropped significantly in elementary education from the 1999-2000 school year and 2017-2018. According to the U.S. Department of Education 2020 report, women elementary teachers make up 88.6%, and male elementary teachers make up 11.4% of the population (Taie & Goldring, 2020). To this end, it is essential to discuss the sensitive nature of gender relations in education (Brockenbrough, 2018, p. 100). Spence (1985) talks about the development of a child's gender by exposing them to different genders that are different from their gender identity, aiding in their awareness of various patterns and behaviors.

Conversely, heteropatriarchy norms have played a vital role in how one sees masculinity and femininity within society, impacting how gender roles see their place in societal norms. For example, males are expected to take on masculine roles (industrial work), and females are expected to take on nurturing occupations (teaching). Spence (1985) identifies masculinity and femininity through the lens of what can be identified through objects, events, or quality.

As a result, Black males battle with the duality of their race and gender when being a teacher. The intersections of their identity impact how these men experience the world and encounter differences within their interactions (Crenshaw, 1989). Black males frequently experience power structure with students and female administration while carrying the labor of saving Black boys inside and outside the classroom (Brockenbrough, 2018). For instance, those power structures impact Black masculinity when students challenge Black male teachers who

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

they presume exude feminine characteristics (Brockenbrough, 2018). Understanding the patriarchal constructs of race and gender roles is vital to understanding Black male teachers' places in education.

Moreover, similar to Black female teachers, African American male educators are often to assume the following positions once hired: role model (Brown, 2009; Howard, 2008; Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010), mentors, disciplinarians (Brockenbrough, 2015; Pabon, 2016), "other fathering" (Lynn, 2006; Stack, 1975), the savior of the black boy communities, and media portrayed images (Johnson et al., 2020). Brockenbrough (2015) states that female counterparts regularly utilize them as discipline stops, distracting them from teaching and performing other duties, tending to a student based on the assumptions of patriarchal constructs and beliefs of the stern Black male approach.

Additionally, as patriarchy meets women's work, males, specifically Black males, struggle with the negative stereotypes of not being nurturing enough to care for younger children and the imagery associated with that, such as child abuse, sexual harassment (DeCorse & Vogtle, 1997), and predatorial behavior. Likewise, Black males are commonly seen as super-predators (Moriearty & Carson, 2012), which centers on the demonization and criminalization of Black youth (Bogert & Hancock, 2020). Also, Black male teachers struggle with micromanagement and enforcement to assimilate to the standard European way of teaching and develop the structure of their classrooms (Allen, 2015; Sandals, 2020). Vasquez (2019) adds that these men assimilate to the culture of niceness to prevent being labeled as aggressive. Although Black males have navigated hurdles to educate a diverse student population, there remain few Black male elementary teachers.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Research has shown that elementary teachers have been vital to developing children's psychological, career, and educational development. However, female teachers make up a large percentage of early childhood education settings, whereas males make up a small percentage of the early childhood education workforce. Allen (1993) found that male teachers often taught upper elementary courses or ancillary classes. Although some males are present in elementary, there remains a lack of Black male presence in elementary education, prompting greater insight into their experiences in the elementary classroom (Meidl, 2019).

Research also indicates that student success is to have teachers who understand their students' cultural backgrounds. As Scott and Rodriguez (2015) state, having African American teachers is not to support the notion that African American teachers are only suited for Black students learning achievements, but offering a diverse perspective to all students can help develop a new era of diverse learners. Furthermore, data has shown that all students show signs of improvement when encountering Black male teachers specifically, such as improvement of grades of all races, increase in graduation rates and college interest, engagement in classrooms, and a decrease of Black boy's dropout rates (Nadworny, 2015). Increasing the number of male teachers, specifically with the focus of this study, Black male teachers in early childhood education could help dismantle hegemonic forces that limit students' development in assuming occupational choices (Mukuna & Mutsotso, 2011), primarily through the intersections of gender and race.

Additionally, as these Black men navigate the intersections of their race and gender, it is noteworthy to mention that other impending systems often impact the thoughts and practices that are unseen or undiscussed. As Bush and Bush (2013) stated via their theoretical framework, to truly understand the underpinnings of Black males comprehensively, one must look at the system

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

and how the interconnectedness of the systems articulates their position and trajectory in society, particularly within education for this study.

Purpose of Study

Previous literature has shown that African American male teachers holistically feel they are seen through the identities of what education needs them for, rather than their own identity (Brown, 2009; Lynn, 2006; Pabon, 2016). The current literature on this population explores their experiences as a *loner* in pre-service education programs (Bristol, 2018), as in-service teachers in their buildings (Bristol, 2020), and the recruitment and retention efforts (Graham & Erwin, 2011) to increase Black males' presence. Moreover, the experiences of Black male teachers have been primarily researched through a lens of deficit thinking (Baker, 2019; Ford 2010), establishing their purpose to be a change agent and combat racial inequalities (Lynn, 2002), addressing the ins and outs of why African American males prefer not to pursue a teaching career (Walling, 1998), and how Black males have expressed sentiment on education not being financially lucrative and supportive (Meidl, 2019) to engage them in an ever-changing economy.

Although there is extensive research on Black male teachers and the impact of the education system on them, there is a gap in the literature that explores specifically Black male elementary teachers' stories through the lens of ecological systems and the influence of Black males in early childhood education. The literature provides insight in segments focusing primarily on critical race or masculinity and maleness based on published scholarly content. However, this research aimed to bridge the gap by holistically examining ecological system influences on Black male elementary educators to provide a comprehensive perspective for future educators and the Black community. Specifically, this study highlighted their journey as a student and teachers, what led them to ultimately decide to teach in early childhood education,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

and how they understand their experience as a Black male elementary teacher is essential to education. As Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu mentioned in his book, *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* (1987), Black males must be developed at an early age of 0 to 9 years. Black male teachers need to be integrated into elementary education classes beyond the physical education teacher or custodial role because that's where Black boys need them the most. For Black boys to have imagery of success and possibility, there must be an educator of color, particularly a Black male educator presence (Preston, 2014). Furthermore, Black boys who do not experience Black men as educators tend to not be interested in becoming teachers, ultimately affecting Black male teachers' reform efforts (Mitchell, 2016). In addition, this dissertation aimed at liberating the voices of participants and silencing the racism and colonization that's often-plagued Black male educators in research.

Therefore, this Qualitative Endarkened Storywork study examined and highlighted how ecological systems influence Black male elementary educators' experiences as teachers and what potentially led them to ultimately decide to teach in the early childhood education setting. Allowing participants multi-dimensional narratives to be shared, created a deeper meaning to their stories, culture, and legacy. Further, offering a perspective that may naturally be unseen or unheard due to the duality of double consciousness these men can face in an oppressive society and educational environment. Consequently, there are two crucial questions that previous literature has not addressed, which this study sought to answer.

The two research guiding questions for this study were:

RQ 1: How do Black males understand their experience through ecological systems as elementary teachers?

RQ 2: How do ecological systems influence Black males to become elementary teachers?

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for further exploration of the influences of ecological systems on Black male elementary teachers' experience and their decision to teach. Additionally, this study provides significance to the elementary field, and offers a lens on the impact Black male elementary teachers have on students' during their developmental stage, specifically Black boys. Moreover, the study offers insight into the stories behind their reasons for teaching in an elementary setting through their navigation of the ecological systems. Also, this study was conducted utilizing an anti-racist and decolonize methodology, known as Endarkened Storywork, which centers on participants' Blackness, voices, and internal and external experiences. While providing a space to heal, empower, and uplift their identities in a place often seen as unsafe.

While current research focuses heavily on Black male identity (Kunjufu, 1984; Ladson-Billings, 2011), media stereotypes, the influence of the culture of pedagogy (hooks, 1996), and lack of interest in education (Kunjufu, 2007), minimal research focuses specifically on ecological systems and their relations to Black male elementary teachers' narratives. In a 2015 YouTube interview with The New School, Kevin Powell and bell hooks articulated that, "Black males endure so much pain and trauma, but it's rarely a space for them to emotionally speak and share their perspectives in the world." Creating this avenue for additional research on this population revealed unseen factors that impact the growth of this teacher population. This study potentially provides school districts a grassroots-level opportunity to reassess how education can be reformed for Black boys. Most importantly, this research challenges Black male programs' practices that ultimately create Black male teachers at stages where it may be too late. As Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu (1984) states, the current state of education trains Black male educators; however, there is little effort to educate the educator.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Additionally, this study could enhance state and federal policies and initiatives that would have the best interest of implementing nationwide education reform for students of color, specifically Black boys. In addition, this research could guide elementary administrators to understand the complexities of their Black male teachers' identity and provide unique opportunities to help their advancement while simultaneously challenging their notion of how they see Black male teachers in their spaces. Furthermore, this study could challenge dominant ideologies of gender roles and their place in education, developing avenues to increase the presence of more male elementary teachers (Bryan & Browder, 2013).

Finally, this study may impact colleges and universities' education programs and Black male educator programs in their preparation of Black male elementary teachers, offering pedagogical insight on teacher identity and its significance in the elementary education field. Equally important, as Kunjufu (1987) states, placing Black male teachers strategically in elementary grades can potentially have a unique impact on Black boys' development personally, professionally, and academically, ultimately influencing Black boys' career psychological engagement to consider becoming a black male educator.

Definition of Terms

For clarity purposes of this study, the following terms will be defined– (1) Black male teacher; (2) elementary teacher/early childhood education; (3) ecological system; (4) Endarkened Storywork; (5) Blackness; and (6) gendered racism.

The term *Black male teacher/educator* refers to Black American males who may have an ethnic background with African, Caribbean, and other locations ancestral origin (Agyemang et al., 2005, p. 101; Rucker, 2021, p. 9). The researcher referenced teacher and educator, as well as Black and African American interchangeably throughout the study. The term *Elementary*

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

teacher/early childhood education denotes teachers who teach grades kindergarten through fifth grade (Rucker, 2021, p. 9). The term *Ecological System* consists of environmental systems in which an individual interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). The term *Endarkened Storywork* is a methodological approach that hinges on Black storytelling traditions and allows space through fiction, honoring the ways of griots who were the scholars of their African nations (Toliver, 2021). The term *Blackness* is defined as cultural ideas, social practices, and shared identities as well as shaped in response to the social and historical conditions at different moments in American history (Austin, 2006). Finally, *Gendered Racism* is a concept that posits racism exists at both levels: institutionally and individually, creating different experiences for men and women (Wingfield, 2007).

Conclusion

In summary, this chapter offered insight into the overview of the study, the problem statement, the study's purpose, the significance of the study, and the guiding research questions. Chapter II will provide an extensive literature review of Black males' journeys through the education system and experiences as educators, in addition to establishing the basis for the theoretical framework of African American Male Theory before moving into the research methodology outlined in Chapter III.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

One day while talking to my mom, she found the spirit to share wisdom in our conversation that gave light and understanding to our family tree. Now, at the time, I was ready to go to bed, but her words graced my ears with comfort. She informed me that my grandparents, who grew up in slavery, only had a 5th and 8th-grade education. Still, they knew God's power and education and pushed their children to excel academically. One thing about my grandpa, he didn't take wooden nickels from anyone, regardless of his education. As I pondered, I realized I derive from a single mother who worked 80+ hours a week and demonstrated a hard worker mentality but made sure education was the number one goal in the home. During conversations with my mother, she would always tell me, "That it's not about where you come from; it's about where you are going." I'm sure this fell on deaf ears then, but it's crazy how life makes you cherish those small moments. Most importantly, she taught me a message that has been passed down for generations: "Even if the world strips your entire being they can't take away from your knowledge, nah that right there is your power." For instance, in the 3rd grade, a guidance counselor told my mom that I was developing slower than my peers and needed to be placed in special education. Through my mother's power, she fought to make sure that I was not mislabeled due to the lack of structures in place to accommodate my cultural needs. Oh, and the time in the 7th grade, when my ELA teacher told me, "Whew baby, the way you write resembles the way you talk." Oh, how I wish I could teach her about African American Vernacular English. But, as Christopher Wallace, a.k.a Biggie Smalls, a New York rapper, states in his song, Juicy (1994), "You know very well who you are don't let em hold you down, reach for the stars." Momma whispered, you are to make us proud, but most importantly, you are going to make yourself proud!

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Chapter II presents four main strands of literature: (a) historical context of Black students in education, (b) gendered racism in education, (c) Black teacher experience, and (d) elementary teachers concerning the study's research questions. Each section of the literature review offers a variety of subsections, which provides a deeper understanding of the literature and the connection to Black male elementary teachers. For this study, the guiding research questions are:

RQ 1: How do Black males understand their experience through ecological systems as elementary teachers?

RQ 2: How do ecological systems influence Black males to become elementary teachers?

The relevance of this study offers insight into how ecological systems influence Black male elementary teachers' thoughts about teaching younger children and selecting the field of education through the intersections of their identity. Further, this study aimed to develop new knowledge about the holistic perspectives of Black male elementary teachers, their contributions to child development, and the influence they have on education at a grassroots level.

The first section, the historical context of Black students in education, includes insight into the underpinnings of Black people's journey with the American education system. Additionally, the section further explains the experience of Black students and the impact the historical factors had on their enrollment and matriculation in education. Although the researcher will not be focusing on Black girls in this study, the researcher has ensured that their voices are articulated in the literature to offer holistic perspectives of Black people's affiliations with the education system.

The second section discusses gendered racism in education and the constructs placed on Black males in education. In addition, a breakdown of gender roles is articulated to offer awareness to societal pressures inflicted on males in education, specifically Black males. Also,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

racism is discussed to add context to the different layers Black males engage with regarding their identity as a male and being Black.

The third section expounds on Black teachers' presence and experiences as educators and pre-service educators. Furthering the discussion, Black male teachers' experiences will be expounded on to inform one of the contributions, challenges, and contradictions they encounter as educators. It is crucial to grasp a clear concept of Black teachers to understand in its entirety the experiences of Black male teachers. However, Black teachers are included to prevent the erasure of Black women in research, which is often erased when discussing Black male teachers.

The fourth section discusses the elementary teacher component, which aligns with the focus of the study regarding Black male elementary teachers. Identifying the additional nuances affiliated with the elementary sector contributes to the perspectives of the Black male elementary teacher and their experiences.

Finally, the chapter concludes with a detailed overview of African American Male Theory to situate the theoretical framework within the context of the reviewed literature to ground the study methodology reviewed in chapter three.

Historical Context of African Americans in Education

To understand the complexities of Black students' challenges in the educational system, one must be aware of the historical underpinnings that led to the continuation of Black students' issues in American education. Aker (2016) articulates, "historically, it is indisputable that the United States has supported and implemented policies and practices that have contradicted the ideals of freedom and opportunity often professed in the country" (p. 49). Through historical events, Anderson (1988) mentioned that enslaved Black people were furious due to slavery being a prominent tenant of their ignorance and robbing them of their rights to education after the

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. Their freedom fueled an emergence from slavery with a strong belief in the desirability of learning to read and write (Anderson, 1988, p. 5). However, Bell (2004) argues that President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 focused more on pressuring the southern states to rejoin the union and prevented the continuation of the confederates. Unfortunately, Black people continued to be harassed, exploited, and lynched, contrary to the hope of being free and classified as citizens (Bell, 2004, p. 24).

Before the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision, Black teachers were instrumental in developing Black students during slavery (Anderson 1988; Woodson, 1998; Lynn 2002), where they served as change agents during that period. In the early 1900s, teaching was a common profession for Black folks—Black people were pillars of the community and models for young children to emulate and follow (Brown et al., 2018, p. 291). Although inequities existed during the 1900s, some scholars supported the effectiveness of Black schools and the quality of education Black students faced (Bell, 2004; Siddle-Walker, 2005). Also, "Black teachers were hailed as esteemed professionals, and Black students were encouraged to become educators" (Sandles, 2018, p. 3). James-Gallaway (2021) adds that understanding the importance of segregation in Black schools provided high academic and social standards for Black students.

In post-segregation America, Black people were controlled through laws and discriminatory policies to live in segregated neighborhoods, attend Black-only schools and Black-only establishments, have forbidden access to white-only establishments, obtain non-desirable jobs, and earn less than whites (Feagin & Barnett, 2004). Through numerous efforts by prominent Black activists and lawyers, segregation was fought on a higher education level (1930-1950) and then in the public-school sector (Feagin & Barnett, 2004, p. 1105). With the

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

efforts of these Black activists for equality, the *Brown v. Board of Education* challenged the doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the "separate but equal" clause (Feagin & Barnett, 2004), which created white and Black only spaces, allowing whites to resist equitable resources, particularly for Black education (Siddle-Walker, 2005). The success of the *Brown* decision aided in the avenues and rights of African Americans being recognized as full citizens while creating a legal doctrine for other government sanctions to abide by and protect the rights of Black Americans from state-inflicted segregation laws.

Although the *Brown* decision brought success for the Black community, it ultimately led to the demise and elimination of the Black teacher who aided in the success of servicing the Black and Brown community (Davis, 2021; Payne, 2004; Sandles, 2020), as a role model (Fultz, 2004, p. 291), and was considered a failure for the Black community (White, 2017) largely. For instance, Tillman (2004) quotes a letter that was written to a Black woman teacher by the name of Miss Darla Buchanan:

March 13, 1953

Miss Darla Buchanan
623 Western Avenue
Topeka, Kansas

Dear Miss Buchanan:

Due to the present uncertainty about enrollment next year in schools for Negro children, it is not possible at this time to offer you employment for next year. If the Supreme Court should rule that segregation in the elementary grades is unconstitutional our Board will proceed on the assumption that the majority of people in Topeka will not want to employ Negro teachers next year for white children. It is necessary for me to notify you now that your services will not be needed for next year. This is in compliance with the continuing

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

contract law. If it turns out that segregation is not terminated, there will be nothing to prevent us from negotiating a contract with you at some later date this spring. You will understand that I am sending letters of this kind to only those teachers of Negro schools who have been employed during the last year or two. It is presumed that, even though segregation should be declared unconstitutional we would have need for some schools for Negro children and we would retain our Negro teachers to them. I think I understand that all of you must be under considerable strain, and I sympathize with the uncertainties and inconveniences which you must experience during this period of adjustment. I believe that whatever happens will ultimately turn out to be best for everybody concerned. (p. 281)

Sincerely,

Wendell Godwin, Superintendent of Schools

WG: la cc: Mr. Whitson Dr. Theilmann Mr. Caldwell

After *Brown's* verdict, Black schools were shut down by the hundreds, and Black teachers and administrators were fired by the thousands (Bell, 2004, p. 26). The wholesale dismissal of Black educators further crystallizes the crucial aspect of the decision made (Tillman, 2004).

Additionally, Walker (2005) argues that the decline of Black teachers was directly correlated to the rise of white supremacy and the disenfranchisement of the Black voter. For example, Black teachers in the south, who advocated for education, were targeted by gun violence, while advocates of Black education were whipped along with their children (Walker, 2005).

W.E.B Du Bois furthered this notion when he addressed the Negro Common School Conference in 1901, arguing Black teachers were made out to be inferior and white teachers reaped benefits based on skewed viewpoints. Equally important, Ladson-Billings and Anderson

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

(2021) discussed another perspective: many African American teachers had advanced education and degrees from institutions in the north due to the plight after the legislation of Jim Crow laws in the south. Jim Crow laws legalized racial segregation in state and local policies, which held employment opportunities, voting rights, and educational rights for African American people. However, these teachers were met with structural barriers that consisted of a literacy test and language test, often denying their teacher credentials because of their dialect and assumptions that Black teachers were incompetent (Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2021). Due to these ramifications, Black teachers were shunned from education due to poor wages, lack of training, and severe restrictions on educational advancement for Black students. Following these actions through the 1980s, teachers of color disappeared from the education field (Brown et al., 2018; DuBois, 1973; Gladwell, 2017, 30-40). Consequently, Black children headed off to white schools, but Black teachers did not go with them (Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2021, p. 95).

Reflectively, Williams (2020) resonates with Harry Belafonte's last conversation with Martin Luther King Jr. that integration was symbolic of a burning house. Black students suffered due to institutional racism or cultural racism, leading Black and Brown students to rely on ill-equipped teachers to teach students of color. Institutional racism is racism embedded into the structures. In contrast, cultural racism occurs due to assimilation to whiteness (European) values, biases, and beliefs being the cultural norm for Black people (D'Andrea & Daniels, 2007). Further, the *Brown* decision created this false education ideology for all students and eliminated relevant societal issues that impacted Black students (Irby, 2014).

Despite Black folks working hard to shield themselves from discrimination, policies and laws have often inserted Black people as incidental beneficiaries. For example, Bell (2004) suggests that "white policy-makers adopt racial policies that sacrifice Black interests or

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

recognize and provide relief for discrimination per their view of the fortuitous convergence of events (p. 27). In return, Brown (2014) adds that white faculty members have not pushed their white student teachers to develop critical perspectives on ecological factors that impact children of color, specifically Black students, to influence their engagement with students of color. As a result, generations of Black students have failed to receive genuine care, encouragement, and a teacher who truly values their Blackness and intellectual ability.

While Black students began integrating white schools, officials introduced fear tactics within the structures of their operations and classrooms through southern leadership to show their symbolic power of white supremacies (Payne, 2004). As a result, scholars suggest that Black students have never felt safe in the education system. Accordingly, strict disciplinarian "zero-tolerance policies" targeted Black children, introducing the notion of the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) (Bell, 2015). In a 2017 – 2018 report by the K-12 Office of Civil Rights, Black students make up 38.3% of expulsion and 43.3% of out-of-school suspensions, and 38.2% of in-school suspensions. Eventually, research demonstrates that this disciplinary placement affects their ability to perform academically well and expands the educational gap among their counterparts. In addition to those educational statistics, The Sentencing Project (Rovner & Fetting, 2021) reported Black youth are four times more likely to be held in juvenile facilities.

Through these historical events, most Black people have understood that America awards unearned privileges to white people in education (Harper & Davis, 2012) in the form of white property (Harris, 1993). Furthering this misconception that Black people are unwilling and unmotivated to learn, Harris (1993) argues that white property is an invested interest in whiteness and seeks a value of dominance more significant than any other race, predominantly Black people. In addition, the concept of anti-intellectualism is rooted in white supremacy

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

(whiteness) and Eurocentric privilege (Williams, 2020, p. 53). However, Black men and women theorists continued to empower the Black community through liberation (hooks, 1994) and education, even though white-dominant forces felt it was not their interest (Lynn 2002; Watkins et al., 2001).

Historical Context of Education in Louisiana. Specifically in the South, white supremacy permeated and dictated the daily lives of all citizens, specifically Black people. For context, the Deep South consists of seven states: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. In Louisiana the notorious *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case, which created the divisive “separate but equal” laws. Specifically, Louisiana took on an approach that garnered certain citizens (white) more rights than other citizens (Black) because they felt that people of color were a disgrace and exuded inferior behavior that created a division between people of color and whites (Reed, 2021). In addition, the *Plessy* decision impacted southern states' school funding for Black and white students, ultimately hindering Black students learning environments and creating an incriminating reality for Black students in education. Due to the court's decision during the Plessy era, Jim Crow Laws were derived which worsened conditions for Black southerners after the Reconstruction Era in 1877.

Historically, Jim Crow laws were known as the Black codes, which southern states passed to demonstrate their loyalty to the confederacy (Anderson & Gordon, 2022). Jim Crow laws were a set of laws that restricted the rights of Black people from spaces that were occupied by whites, voting rights, prevention from employment, and lack of access to quality education; the goal of these laws was to dominate Negroes and disenfranchise their rights to full citizenship (Anderson & Gordon, 2022; Klarman, 2007). This led to years of lynching and a lack of support and protection for Black suffrage in the South from political figures and northerners. Through

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

this inferiority complex, Fairclough (2000) found with one of his participants, who was a Black male principal in a Louisiana public high school, that Black educators (teachers and principals) obeyed white dominance to respect, performed all tasks that were asked of them because they were “given” a job, and engaged in tokenism to inform white school board officials on what was going on in the Negro community.

As a result, these practices, laws, and biases infiltrated the Louisiana education system. For example, although the *Brown* (1954) decision overturned *Plessy*’s decision, in 1964, the Deep South collectively only integrated their public schools by two percent based on historical records (Allen & Daughterity, 2006; Bourdier & Parker, 2021). More specifically, Louisiana persisted with “separate but equal” requirements well into the 1960s, impacting Black schools that predominantly received less funding based on state regulations (Reber, 2005).

As integration began to occur in the South, efforts by Louisiana Governor at the time, Robert Keon, created legislation that mandated that public schools remain segregated, which received an 82% vote in favor of maintaining segregation in 1954. Furthermore, this administration criminalized schools that upheld segregation (Bourdier & Parker, 2021; Stone, 1992). Due to poor federal enforcement of the *Brown* decision in the South allowed southern school districts to continue their separate but equal tactics for over a decade (Bolton & Daughterity, 2008). Six years later in 1960, Ruby Bridges integrated William J. Frantz Elementary School in New Orleans, leading to the first major city in the Deep South being mandated by the federal government to desegregate (Blanchard, 1981). Although efforts were made to desegregate Louisiana public schools, by 1981, some Louisiana parishes, such as East Baton Rouge School Parish, were still racially segregated (Bourdier & Parker, 2021). Louisiana's public education system has ultimately been a burning house for students of color because of the

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

political and economic issues surrounding segregation and desegregation. Leading families of color to invest in underfunded public schools, experience severe disciplinary problems, and encounter less qualified teachers, according to Bourdier and Parker's (2021) findings. Of course, Louisiana was not the only state that indulged in creating barriers for Black people and students of color in the South.

Historical Context of Education in Texas. Although it was shared that Black people in Texas experienced some sort of opportunity (economic advantage, employment opportunities, and participation in the Republican Party), they were still ostracized and scrutinized (Pitre, 1981). Specifically, in 1866 the Constitution drawn up by Texans excluded Black people from voting, holding public offices, sitting on juries, and extended restrictions to Black people testifying against cases involving white people (Pitre, 1981). In addition, Black men in Texas were seen as a “poor nigger,” who were not considered in Texas's political or social arenas. As the political and social climate excluded Black folks, so did the Texas education system. In 1957, the Texas legislature passed a statute prohibiting the desegregation so if public schools in K-12; however, in 1970, the federal government, *United States v. Texas*, banned Texas's previous statute and ordered desegregation to begin in the state of Texas (Jame-Gallaway, 2021; Schott & Marcus, 1982).

Furthermore, white racial terror was developed by Black people in Texas, especially in the City of Waco, where the culture of lynching and the Klu Klux Klan was prominent (James-Gallaway, 2021). Ultimately, it terrorized local politics and the citizens within the county limits. As this behavior became the norm, it blended into the structures of education, and anti-Black practices began to appear in these spaces. As James-Gallaway (2021) and Du Bois (1935) explain, racially mixing students would create educational inequities by creating unsympathetic

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

teachers with hostile attitudes and poor expectations would create a harmful environment for Black students.

Black Student's Experiences in Education

According to the National Education Association, 2011 reported, 42% of Black students were often faced with the reality of only having access to under-resourced schools that performed poorly. In addition, Buttaro et al. (2010) found that Black student's family involvement (social capital) impacts the student's educational experience because of the historical placement of Black families experiencing high levels of poverty, low-paying wages, and low-status jobs. With the critical relationship of the Black families, Black students often come from economically poor households, affecting their access to resources and parental involvement (Buttaro et al., 2010). Due to their economic disadvantageous, often these students only have access to underperforming public schools, which are neglected, heightened surveillance, and arbitrary and often receive extreme punishment for any perceived disobedience (Maynard, 2022, p. 142).

Additional research suggests the lack of comfort and safety for Black students once they integrated into desegregated schools was negative and primarily impacted their ability to achieve Black excellence in the American education system. Maynard (2022) states Black students saw school environments as a psychologically violent place that degraded and harmed them. For example, Wallace and Gagen (2019) noted that Black students felt stifled due to environmental factors (e.g., stereotypes, bias, and racism) and school climate (anti-Black policies), reflecting lower expectations toward their academic ability (p. 4). Similarly, Bristol's study (2018) suggested that white teachers who engaged with Black students lacked critical dispositions, revealing discrepancies in their expectations.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

From previous literature, Ford and Harris (1996) suggest that Black students' educational disengagement and lowered academic outcomes are established in the classroom environments (p. 1142), increasing their representation in the school discipline data. Bell (2020) found that Black students and their parents felt that schools targeted them specifically for out-of-school suspensions based on cultural appearance, clothing, or hair. Marrus (2015) adds that education, specifically in the South, resembles forms of Jim Crow practices that have been infiltrated into the system through confinement, stigmatizing, ostracizing, and exposing Black students to juvenile delinquency and incarceration pipeline. Often schools implement anti-Black practices that dictate and reinforce tactics that shun Black students from their intellectual property, creating an inescapable punishment they face within the schoolhouse (Coles & Powell, 2020). Jenkin (2021) furthers this notion of anti-Black by stating:

"Black people are hyper-visible and in plain sight, yet they are routinely reduced by the white gaze to a sort of nonbeing, perceived and classified as a people who do not belong here and therefore must be scored, feared, exoticized, rendered, silent, and hidden." (p. 122)

Academically and physically, research has revealed that Black students are excluded from the education system through anti-Black practices, systemic barriers, and institutional racism that affect their success (Cole & Powell, 2020; O'Connor et al., 2007) academically, personally, and professionally. Maynard (2022) adds that "Being Black you are so often not seen or treated as children, schools too often become their first encounter with the organized and systemic devaluation of Blackness present in society at large" (p. 142). Scott and Rodriguez (2015) add that the negative experiences impact the saliency of African Americans' physical and psychological presence in social contexts, particularly in schooling (p. 692). In time, this has led

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

to Black students, specifically Black boys contributing to higher dropout rates, poor academic performance (Marrus, 2015), and school suspensions throughout their educational journey in the K-12 arena.

Black Boy's Experiences in Education. For Black boys, research has suggested that the education system has never been in favor of their success due to societal deficit images of black male educational interest (Harper & Davis, 2012). In fact, Black boys are often viewed through images that include lazy, dangerous, endangered, uneducable, thugs, deadbeats, school to prison, and aimless (Strayhorn, 2009; Wallace & Gagen, 2019; Williams, 2020). An example of deficit-minded stereotypes of Black males is that they are "convicted in the womb" (Upchurch, 1996). To that end, Gloria Ladson-Billings (2011) suggests that Black boys being cute and adorable does not last long before they are identified as criminals (p. 10). In addition, Goff et al. (2014) add that Black boys as young as ten are often mistaken as older and responsible for their actions even as a child, leading to unestablished guilt and police dehumanization. Moreover, it has been argued that Black boys effectively stop caring about school around the end of elementary school (Kunjufu, 1985).

Academically, Black males have underachieved, which is associated with the challenges they face socially and emotionally (Ellis et al., 2018; Howard, 2008). Williams (2020) asserts that Black boys come into grade school enthusiastic, curious, and ready to learn, but because of Eurocentric curricula, tracking methods, and challenges they face, their interest in school fades and they are labeled (i.e., disrespectful, hyper, or overactive) (p. 30). Ladson-Billings (2011) adds that "Black boys' childhoods are evaporated, and teachers begin to see them as "men," leading to a feeling of fear and control, creating a problematic environment" (p. 10). Additionally, Strayhorn (2009) argues that Black males adopt an approach of dis-identification,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

where they become detached because of their challenges in education and society. Additionally, Black boys in education have identified with academic dis-identification because of their institutionalized perception of America. Williams (2020) furthers this ideal by explaining psychological dismemberment, in which he talks about a teacher belittling his ability to think outside of the box and calling his ideas silly and juvenile. Additionally, Ford (2010) mentions extensive educational research that has approached African American males through deficit approaches.

Moreover, disenfranchisement occurs for Black boys when inequitable measures are placed into school disciplinary policies, like the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). Historically, the STPP became an issue derived during the Reagan administration (the 1980s) during the "War on Drugs" era (Heitzeg, 2009) and later extended into the Clinton administration (the 1990s) after the enactment of the "1994 Federal Crime Bill and 1994 Gun-Free Schools Act," which significantly increased the number of school suspensions and expulsions (Hemez et al., 2020).

The School-to-Prison Pipeline. Several scholars have defined the pipeline as a process that punishes youth under criminalized disciplinary policies that intertwines them with the criminal justice system at a young age (Hemez et al., 2020). The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Education Fund (2013) state that historical inequalities, such as segregated education, concentrated poverty, and racial disparities in law enforcement, feed into the pipeline itself (p. 2). In fact, the STPP derived from the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, making the reality of Black students' relations with the juvenile and incarceration system a societal norm (Marrus, 2015). Heitzeg (2009) references the STPP being facilitated by several educational trends, primarily attributed to the expansion of zero-tolerance policies, which inadvertently target racial discrimination amongst minority

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

students (p. 1). Unfortunately, rather than creating an environment of learning, the American school system has blurred the lines of jail and school synonymously (Heitzeg, 2009), leading to one of the significant indicators of the educational achievement gaps amongst students of color (NAACP & Ed Fund, 2013). The STPP feeds on the neglect and under-resourced public education system, creating a second-class educational environment (NAACP & Ed Fund, 2013, p. 4).

Statistically, in the 2000s, over three million suspensions and approximately 97,000 expulsions occurred, exceeding 10% of the number of students enrolled in schools (NAACP & Ed Fund, 2013). Even though the latter portion of the 2000s has experienced some reform from zero-tolerance policies, historically, the STPP impacts children in primary and elementary, with zero-tolerance policies often attached to minor offenses (Heitzeg, 2009). For example, in 2017, the Texas Legislature passed House Bill (HB) 674, also known as the positive behavior program, which prohibits K-2nd grade students from being suspended out of school unless serious actions took place, such as carrying a firearm, selling/possessing weed, having dangerous drugs, or alcoholic beverages (Texas Legis. Assemb, 2017).

Heitzeg (2009) argues what used to be school administrators' disciplinarian issues have been labeled as criminal behavior and engaging K-12 students, specifically students of color, with law enforcement. Hemez et al. (2020) found that 28% of individuals who are suspended during grades 7th through 12th grade had a higher likelihood of experiencing incarceration as a young adult. Due to the STPP, students of color who were suspended or expelled supported the notion that this process harmed their success after grade school and subsequently experienced incarceration between the ages of 18-28 (Hemez et al., 2020).

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

The NAACP and Ed Fund (2013) reported that in the 2000s, African Americans made up 17% of the school population; however, they represented 45% of the school suspension statistics. Because of the high representation of suspensions, African American students are often held behind due to standardized tests or placed into lower educational tracks because of the detachment that occurs once they are removed from their educational environments. Additionally, African American male students make up a high percentage of the suspension statistics. While this study focuses on Black males, it is crucial to recognize that Black girls have been endangered at the same rate but are often invisible in the data presented (White, 2017).

With a legacy of discrimination, disparities, and misjudgment, African Americans, especially the male population, are often seen as dangerous and predatory through media presentation and portrayal of their race. For instance, in the Griffith and Dixon (1915) film, *The Birth of a Nation*, a white male was presented in Black face and exuded predatory-like behavior towards a white woman, portraying imagery of what the white population thought of the Black population. Another example included “super-predators,” characterized by Black men associated with gangs, violence, crack, and youth of color and utilized by the previous first lady, Hillary Clinton (Heitzeg, 2013). Ultimately, the STPP was constructed based on a sociopolitical climate that feared predatory behavior and crime represented in the media (Heitzeg, 2013).

Gendered Racism in Education

According to Google, "gendered racism is a form of oppression that occurs due to race and gender, which is a perpetuation of one's perceptions, stereotypes, and images of certain groups" (n.d.). Additionally, gendered racism focuses on the racial and ethnic understanding of masculinity and femininity and gendered forms of racial and ethnic discrimination. Although some scholars would argue that traditionally Black women encounter gendered racism at higher

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

levels (Szymanski & Lewis, 2016), it could be argued that Black males experience higher levels of gendered racism in education. In education, gendered racism can also be seen as policing, profiling, and denigrating experience by students of color, especially Black boys, or men (Johnson-Ahorlu, 2013). Reazai-Rashti and Martino (2010) expressed that the education system failed to understand the complexities of race and gender and how they intersect in African American male teachers. Still, society has claimed that these issues are more of a personal problem than a structural one.

According to Fine and Weis (1998), argue that gendered racism is far more complex as "these are major problems that could be identified and address social inequities, which they claim, result in attention being "deflected from structural sources of 'personal problems'" (p. 39). Black males feel unsafe emotionally and spiritually in schools due to attacks on their race and gender aggression inflicted on them due to implicit bias and stereotypes (Bridges, 2011). Moreover, Freire and Freire (2014) and Marable (2015) found race brings into play the sense of worthiness, which stems from the portraits painted of Black men being lazy, incompetent, sneaky, and untrustworthy. For most Black male teachers, stereotypes have become a primary target for African Americans, especially African American men. According to Moriearty and Carson (2012), they discussed the term "super-predators," coined by a Princeton professor, John Dilulio, in 1995, which focuses on the American Social War with how Black boys would increase the crime rates and incarceration percentages of black youth by being, criminals, violent offenders, fatherless, jobless, sex offenders, and Godless (p. 7). These stereotypes and deficit mentalities are pertinent considerations for Black male teachers; for Hicks-Tafari (2018) notes that a gendered racism crisis impacts recruitment and retention because of the interactions with student parents and female colleagues.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Gender Roles

Furthermore, research suggests that education is a gender-imbalanced occupation (Bryan & Browder, 2013), meaning certain genders should occupy specific disciplines. More specifically, Hall and Taylor (1985) add that "masculinity and femininity are historically and culturally specific, with particular forms being found in a given society at a particular point in time" (p. 145). These points are contingent upon the role of media, and there are considerations in which popular culture plays in the constructs placed on specific gender roles. For example, people are conditioned to view certain places, things, and objects through the lens of femininity (cosmetics) and masculinity (cologne) (Hall & Taylor, 1985). In addition, heteropatriarchy constructs are associated with the development of maleness in masculinity. Harris (2011) explains heteropatriarchy systems as political, economic, cultural, and social-economic structures that provide privilege and dominance to heterosexual white males. Harris (2011) further explains the five links to heteropatriarchy:

1. Every born person is assigned for life to be a male or female.
2. One's sex is assigned to their gender, aligning them to the social behaviors of genders.
3. Sex/gender places a massive difference between males and females regarding appearance, characteristics, behavior, interests, and innate abilities.
4. Based on one's sex, relationships should be heterosexual, not between the same sex.
5. Lastly, patriarchy creates a division to express that males and females are not equal.

With these points, masculinity suggests a privilege and superiority associated with sex/gender (Harris, 2011). Donaldson (1993), during an earlier period, associated dominance and superiority masculinity with hegemonic masculinity, where males stabilize the domination and oppression as a gender order (p. 647). It is important to note that Black males who align with

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

white male dominance, middle-class values, and heterosexuality are considered "good" (Woodson & Pabon, 2016). Furthermore, when it comes to kids, males are taught to distinguish themselves from girls early in their development. However, Pilburn (2010) dissents with a message to expose children to gender equality early, aiding in a belief system that advocates avoiding dominant gender ideologies. McGrath et al. (2019) extend this perspective, stating that having males present in non-violent spaces contributes to children's gender knowledge.

Femininity has been associated with the over-sexualization of females and the constant reminder to reflect on their appearances. Hall and Taylor (1985) state that young women and girls focusing on their appearance and sexuality tend to be seen as a project, emphasizing society's control over women. On the other hand, in American culture, femininity became synonymous with virtue by the eighteenth century—virtue meaning civic humanism with evangelical ardor (Balmer, 1994, p. 49). Women often took the back seat to their male counterparts, where the male was seen as the head of the household—deriving from the biblical ideology, where God measures a woman's success by her relationship with her husband and children (Balmer, 1994, p. 48), inadvertently boxing females to a lens of domestication, where they were the nurturers, caregivers, and reproducers for all.

Masculinity is primarily associated with males but can be viewed differently based on one's perception of masculinity through characteristics, objects, and behaviors. Blechner (1998) explains that one's biases view masculinity as a good substance and femininity as a lack of substance (p. 601). Donaldson (1993) argues that the substance rendered for both sexes exists with the sexual objectification of one's body parts and pleasure usage. Finally, Gilbert and Gilbert (2017) explain that masculinity is constructed through relationships and involvement and recognizes oneself and others. In schools, masculine and feminine identities are developed

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

through day-to-day interactions with other young boys and girls. Additionally, the school's organizational practices, curriculum, instruction, and structures re-enforce gendered ideologies (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2017). Specifically, boys are situated in schools as troublemakers and aggressive, which are concerns that contribute to men's position in society (Gilbert & Gilbert, 2017).

Most importantly, when it comes to Black males' masculinity in schools, Meidl (2018) explains, "A major force deterring Black males from entering and establishing their place in early childhood education comes from societal views about men and their gender roles" (p. 576). According to King's (1998) and Thornton's (1999) studies, males have expressed concerns about working with elementary students; they fear being viewed as abusers or called out for inappropriate behavior. Hook (1992) argued that women have shown to be more nurturing than men. In contrast, gender theorists Neal (2005) and Jackson (2006) counterargue that Black men provide nurturing aspects differently. Conversely, Black men cannot select an identity; instead, one is assigned to them and internalized due to prejudices, views, and historical images that have been embedded into America's ideology of a Black male (Reid, 2013). Elijah Anderson (1999) states in *Code of the Streets* that the male is seen as the head of the household, the patriarchal of the family, and someone who lays down the law. However, it's worth noting that Black men are often not present in the household, so this notion is often unseen or developed by the Black woman (matriarch) of the family. Moreover, Black males who grow up in homes with or without a father's presence develop characteristics of Black masculinity that take on a different meaning than traditional hegemonic masculinity and center it through the lens of Blackness.

Black Masculinity

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Gray (1995) articulates Black masculinity as a challenge to whiteness and aligns it with Blackness when it allows Blackness to be seen as power within their masculine identity. Powell (2008) expresses in his text, *The Black Male Handbook: A Blueprint for Life*, that Black masculinity is often a lifestyle portrayed through the imagery of Black father figures or fathers, who create an image modeled male. In addition, Black masculinity embodies different forms of maleness through the lens of Blackness, which adds complexity to masculinity. Richardson (2010) narrows this narrative by discussing Black masculinity in the south, where Black males have been seen as cowardly, counterrevolutionary, infantile, and emasculate (p. 6). Saint-Aubin (2002) argues that scientific observations and projections have been placed on Black male bodies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition, Ferber (2007) adds that "Black male bodies are increasingly admired and commodified in hip hop, rap, and entertainment, but continuously invoke fear based on the common trends evident within white supremacy constructions of Black masculinity" (p. 12).

As Powell (2008) states, Black men are hypervigilant because of the anxiety developed based on the stereotypical imagery of Black males being labeled big, dangerous, and scary. Furthermore, Powell (2008) expresses that Hollywood movies and news outlets perpetuate white folks' fear of Black men. Although Black masculinity has shown the understanding of sexuality of Black men, "Black men frequently continue to be treated as an undifferentiated and monolithic racial and gender category" (Richardson, 2010, p. 8).

It is also important to note that Black masculinity has often silenced gay Black males indirectly, "becoming slaves to a masculinist – in the logic of Western racist, sexist, patriarchal discourse" (Lemelle & Battle, 2004, p. 48). Black churches have been critical implementers of the denigration and symbolic assault on homosexuality that adds to Black men's viewpoints on

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Black masculinity. As Ferguson (2000) explains, Black boys have been marginalized and criminalized based on the dominant construction of their Blackness and their masculinity. Through institutional racism and structural policies and practices, Black males have been identified as endangered species in schools. In addition, Ferguson furthers this notion that Black boys' Blackness is associated with trouble. At the same time, their male identity and opposition toward white forces are seen through a resistance lens, ultimately leading to unjust treatment based on their race.

Racism

There are reasons to believe that racism exists in education through race and racism. For example, racism is engrained in every inch of society (micro and macro), making schools a breeding ground for these practices to be implemented overtly or covertly (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Gillborn, 2008), expressing a commonplace for the existence of racism in education. For example, DeCuir and Dixson (2004), one of his Black female participants, described the over-policing and practices that reinforced whiteness during free dress days when a white administrator stated:

"Don't be quoting Marcus Garvey everywhere you go. Don't be so pro-African that you are going to come in the dashiki on the wear-what-you-want-to-wear day when we don't have uniforms (p. 28)."

These subtle racial remarks (i.e., micro-aggressions) offer insight into whiteness and how it reflects cultural expression in education. Apple (2008) adds that value to the previous experience stating, "our society, like many others throughout the world, is organized around compelling dynamics that are very hard to interrupt" (p. 651). These powerful dynamics are the property of

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

whiteness and white interest. Although race is seen as a social construct, it plays a vital role in how one is treated, and the power one may exude.

Systemic racism infiltrates the education system often in various ways: inequitable funding, segregated schools, segregated housing, and zero-tolerance policies (Chatterji, 2020). Unfortunately for Black people, experiencing racism adds to their gender identity due to their race contributing to their experiences. For instance, Anderson (2020) states that Black men have been cornered by America, isolated, and fought to prove their worthiness due to discriminatory practices and their place in society, impacting their mental health. In addition, a Pew Research Center (2016) study found that four-in-ten Black people report that their race has made it harder for them to succeed than their white counterparts, whereas 47% of white people said life was easier for them to succeed.

Scholars report that Black students experience discrimination and bias as early as preschool. Zimmermann and Zao (2019) found that Black students were scored significantly lower than their white peers academically and behaviorally. Equally important, Black students are underrepresented in advanced courses and score lower in English and Math courses (Furfaro, 2020) due to attending schools lacking qualified teachers. Some studies reveal the challenges of Black students who experience racial issues attending white suburban schools. Matrenec (2011) found a salient theme focused on racial stereotyping and the dominance Black students encountered while matriculating into a white school. Love (2014) argued that teachers criminalize, target, mislabel (special education), show less attention toward students of color, exude deficit perceptions of Black men, and police and adultize Black girls (Wun, 2016). Research has associated these practices with these students' racial and gender profiling. For

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Black children navigating education as students, Maynard (2022) adds that this means that they are not considered to be children because they are adultified after age 10 due to their race.

In accordance with these findings, Smith-Maddox and Solorzano (2002) contend that teachers are often unaware and lack the educational experiences that can help them understand the central role of race and racism in education (p. 67). Contrary to the previous study, Young's (2011) study suggests that "educators are aware of the phenomenon of racism in schools but instead were deceived by their activism to recognize how they were just as much a part of the problem as the "others" out there" (p. 1453). Through these interactions and experiences, Black teachers often carry their interactions and encounters with their educational journey into their identity as Black teachers.

Black Teacher Experiences

Historically, Black teachers have viewed education as a political process, invested interest in the public good, and acted as change agents for social transformation (Jackson & Knight-Manuel, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Tillman, 2004). For example, Ladson-Billings stated in her 2021 article:

"Black teachers historically before desegregation served in various capacities such as reading legal documents for people, helping people with evictions, helping with medical issues, and negotiated for them, while community members saw them in church, barbershops, beauty salons, etc., in their local communities" (p. 95).

For a Black teacher, it has not only been about teaching to transform but also about impacting and improving their communities (Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2021). Likewise, Foster (1997) outlined in their book, *Black Teachers on Teaching*, that Black teacher's transition through segregation to integration of the classroom provided an eye for what was gained but, most

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

importantly, understood what was lost, which has created the added burden for them to be all things for the Black community. In the past, Black teachers provided a sense of comfort and light that aided in the reverberation of Black students (Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2021). Although these teachers bring a plethora of opportunities and strengths to the field, they currently represent less than 7% of the teacher population (Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2021; Taie & Goldring, 2020), with the total population of teachers of color representing 18% (Wallace & Gagen, 2019). Previous scholars contend that Black teachers are the saviors, role models, and caregivers (other mother, other father, surrogate father, aunts, and uncles (Pabon, 2016) to students of color, particularly Black students (Brown et al., 2018). For example, Black teachers are often hired in clusters at schools with high populations of Black and Brown students who identify as low-income and are situated in underperforming resource classrooms, in which Black teachers are seen as the source to teach Black students (Achinstein et al., 2020; Brown, et al., 2018).

Researchers have also noted that Black teachers are more likely to continue working at schools with predominantly students of color for many years (Simon et al., 2015). Moreover, through their relationship building, high expectations for their students (academically and personally), and knowledge of cultural competency, research suggests that Black teachers provide a space for students of color to feel connected to their schools (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). Additionally, some scholars have pushed the narrative that Black teachers are credited for developing culturally responsive pedagogies that allow them to effectively engage Black students (Brockenbrough, 2018, p. 6). Jackson and Knight-Manuel (2019) add, "culturally relevant educators consciously make use of their experiential knowledge to connect students to both educational content and the social contexts in which they live" (p. 66), and specifically,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Black educators bring deeper understandings of communities (Ladson & Anderson, 2021).

Duncan (2021) found that this deep understanding of racial justice pedagogy “cultural responsive pedagogies” stems from Black teachers lived experiences and previous educators who informed them of necessity of this kind of teaching. Hooks (1994) adds to the conversation in their

Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom novel:

“All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions—and society—so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom.” (p. 34)

Although Hooks was speaking from a collegiate lens, this same practice can be seen throughout the teaching of Black teachers that centers joy, passion, transgression, and freedom. At the same time, Sandles (2018) argues that Black teachers are hired to teach students; however, the research has perpetuated the narrative of Black teachers only being effective at teaching Black students.

Although these teachers are seen as a "silver bullet" (Brown et al., 2018), which means something that could serve as a magical weapon, these teachers are burdened with being the remedy to closing the achievement gap. Often Black teachers feel stifled in their ability to perform outside of teaching Black students while also being silenced internally and externally (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). For example, Black teachers stated in Griffin and Tackie's (2017) study that their voices were ignored in staff meetings, and although they related to the students, the administration constantly disciplined their personalities. Moreover, Black teachers battle the notion of *double consciousness* coined by W.E.B Dubois, navigating one identity with Black students and a crafted identity by whites (Sandles, 2018). This phenomenon leads to the

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

considerations within the achievement gap of Black students due to their fear of being shunned from their cultural group for "acting white."

Although Black teachers are seen as role models for Black students, role modeling can be seen as an added burden to their identity. Some scholars add that role modeling for Black teachers was a way to advance the Black community in the 1980s to the present (Brown 2009, 2012; Irvine 1989), which connected to the educational reform of African Americans (Brown et al., 2017). However, Irvine (1989) dissents with the concept of modeling and articulates that their pedagogical practices are more than inspiring or modeling, furthering the notion that their teacher identity connected to being a specific model for the advancement of Black children undermines the achievements of Black teachers and groups them into a space of solely being a motivational factor.

These points bring forth considerations for teacher job dissatisfaction, which centers around poor work conditions and low salaries (Ingersoll & May, 2011) and presents structural barriers heavily affecting Black teachers (Brockenbrough, 2018). For example, those barriers are entrance exams, state takeovers and turnaround plans, reliance on alternative teacher certification programs, and undermining unions, which have all impacted the population of Black teachers who teach Black students (Brokenbrough, 2018, p. 8). With the constant shift of identities and challenges, we now transition to focus on Black male teachers and their identities in education.

Black Male Teacher Experience

The exposure from a teacher who is a male of color provides a positive image of that demographic while creating a nurturing development of their identity and challenging the deficit narratives as discussed in the literature (Wallace & Gagen, 2019). Of the 7% of Black teachers, Black males represent less than two percent (i.e., 1.9%) (Bristol, 2014). Decades of research has

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

shown that Black male teachers experience the following associated with their identity of being a teacher: role model and mentors (Howard, 2007; Brown, 2009), coaches and disciplinarian (Brown, 2012), "other fathering" (Hicks-Tafari, 2018; Lynn, 2006), cool uncle (Brockenbrough, 2015), the black boy community's savior, and media portrayed images (Johnson et al., 2020). Historically, Black male teachers by the 1900s were considered a key social and educational reform that could change the narrative for Black boys (Brown & Thomas, 2020). Moreso, Black males are highly sought after and tokenized in education because of the limited pool of Black males interested in education (Kanter, 1977; Wingfield & Wingfield, 2014). On the other hand, Anyon (1997) argues that Black male teachers' imagery exuded aggressive and abusive behavior and showcased a lack of emotions. Additionally, Brown (2012) expressed those Black male teachers are aggressive disciplinary agents who should serve in Black urban schools.

Unfortunately, America has created a system that shuns black men, has identified them as threats to society (Bridges, 2011), and has developed obstacles that have hindered Black men from success in any system (Bridges, 2009). Milner (2016) argues that "it is unfair for the educational system to place the burden on Black male teachers to be saviors, in a system that is designed to be dysfunctional, flawed, and fractured, against people of color" (p. 417). Hicks-Tafari (2018) furthers this notion by stating, "Black male teachers are not needed just to mentor Black boys; every child should be exposed to a variety of educators, mentors, and role models" (p. 797). Additionally, Pabon et al. (2011) suggest that even though Black males have been reduced to disciplinarians and behavior managers and even rendered invisible, there has been an absence of African Americans' male contributions to education (p. 366). Bryan and Browder (2013) argued that, when Black male teachers resist the dominant narrative of educational pedagogy, they are not considered to be the ideal fit for the profession. They go on to state, when

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

they begin to defy these expectations or norms, it leads to biased actions and reactions towards them (2013).

More so, Brockenbrough (2015) states that "the dominant image of the stern Black male teacher clashes with self-defined identities as teachers, cause most teachers to struggle with conforming to the imagery of what a Black male educator is through the eyes of their colleagues and students" (p. 82). Moreover, research indicates that African American male teachers expressed a strong sense of frustration regarding interactions with their colleagues in only assisting students with their behavior, instead of acknowledging their intellect and effort to give to the field (Bristol, 2014, p. 1). In addition, non-African American individuals often believe stereotypes and misconceptions of Black males' educational achievement (Milner, 2007). Brockenbrough (2015) adds that Black male educators' pedagogical style and discipline viewpoints were misunderstood by their colleagues, leading to failed expectations as a perceived Black male teacher. Often those expectations are seen through the lens of how society views Black men. For example, during Brockenbrough's (2008) study on *Black Men Teaching: The Identities and Pedagogies of Black Male Teachers*, a few of his participants articulated that their style of teaching and discipline was often misunderstood and seen as chaotic, which one of the participants noted that they identify with the concept of "organized chaos." Additionally, some participants specified that their discipline viewpoints were the total opposite of serving as the belt dad, the disciplinarian stop, or a savior for Black boys because they were there to teach. To further complicate this issue, one of the participants expressed his frustration:

"My colleague's overreliance on disciplinarian actions and talents often disregard their workload and the continued perpetuation of Black males as disciplinarians and never acknowledging their teacher identity and talents." (p. 79)

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

In addition, the Black male teachers who identified as queer participants experienced teacher and student power struggles due to students' interpretation of what masculinity in male teachers should be, adding to the misconception of what Black male educators do and creating a space for peer and student criticism. In contrast, Allen (2015) and Sandles (2020) argued that most Black male teachers alter who they are to alleviate the impact of racism, opting to conform to white teachers' pedagogy to showcase improvement. Apart from that, Bristol (2020) adds to the term as *Loner*, derived from the psychological literature, which aligns with Black male teacher's experience expressing their loneliness of being the only Black male or male in the space they occupy and feeling disconnected from the core of the school mission. These Black males often felt pedagogically isolated and lacked the will to advocate for support due to structural barriers, and their colleagues were less likely to assist unless assistance was asked of them (Bristol, 2018).

During their time in education, Hicks-Tafari notes in “*Black Male Teachers: Diversifying the United States Teacher Workforce*” (Newton, 2013), Black males conveyed a sense of personal growth and reward that was transformative. In addition, to their passion and commitment to helping Black children succeed, specifically Black male children.

Challenges Black Males face in Pre-Service Teacher Programs

Moreover, Wallace and Gagen (2019) explain, that Black males who are education majors experience roadblocks surrounding the passing of their certification. Further, student teachers who have previously attended schools that are hard to staff environments and high-poverty schools typically demonstrate difficulty with teacher examinations (Wallace & Gagen, 2019, p. 5). Universities' teacher programs have struggled to implement efforts to increase the knowledge of diversity within their teaching programs and recruitment (Plachowski, 2019). Ladson-Billings (1995) found that teacher education programs focus on the preparation of pre-

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

service teachers to provide equitable learning opportunities for all students. While this may be true, the lack of culturally relevant teaching in teaching programs and limited expression of live models of social justice educators (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015) typically fall short of the mission to educate all holistically.

Pabon et al. (2011) state, "The recruitment and retention of Black male teachers, have recently garnered a surge of attention in both academic and popular press" (p. 358). These programs have been created in the United States to increase the number of African American male teachers (i.e., Call Me Mister, Men Teach, Men for Excellence in Elementary Training, Future Minority Male Teachers of California) (Call Me Mister, 2017). Noteworthy, these programs are not created at a lucrative rate as existing teacher education programs embedded in universities/colleges' academic departments. The purpose of the programs are often created to help combat roadblocks Black males face and aggressively recruit, train, and aid in completing their teacher examinations (Lewis, 2006).

Recruitment of Black Male Teachers

While there is awareness that today's students may go without experiencing an African American male teacher (Gursky et al., 2004), there has been some effort in increasing their presence in the classroom. Recruitment of Black male teachers have been a hot commodity for decades to increase the presence of Black males in classrooms on a local, state, and national level. While there are 27,000 teacher programs in the US, according to the National Council on Teacher Quality and numerous US Department of Education Initiatives, small percentages remain that graduate those programs who identify as Black males. For example, one of the recent 2021 campaigns during the Biden administration has been a social media campaign known as #BlackMenTeach, which explored Black males who are teachers and dedicated to advocating

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

and advancing their community through teaching. Bryan and Ford (2014) expressed that there should be national attention to the shortage of Black male teachers to effectively recruit and retain gifted Black male educators. In addition, Bryan and Ford (2014) offered recommendations to increase recruitment, teacher programs should address equity and diversity, incentives should be offered, and a space to be collaborative with other Black males should be offered. However, these tailored recommendations are to expose Black males to gifted programs but could be synonymous with general recruiting of Black male teachers. Moreover, school districts have begun creating strategies and recruitment plans that target Black and Latino teachers. On a local level, Dallas ISD has a targeted teacher residency, building a pipeline for male teachers of color who possess a college degree and show interest in being a teacher. Unfortunately, Ramirez (2009) argues that teacher education programs should recruit in middle and high schools.

With the intentionality of training and producing Black male teachers, there is a range of Black male teacher pipeline programs that assist in placing Black males in the classroom at all levels. Michelle Murphy's (2017) term, economization of life, can be seen in these recruitment initiatives. These program developers created a space to produce and train Black male teachers through their conditions and enhance their possibilities, essentially developing a space and avenue to organize their advancement. Case in point, the Black Men Teach Twin Cities program offers teachers space to thrive in education by following their theory to action plan. This plan consists of the following four sections: recruitment, preparation, placement, and retention, where their goal is to increase their eight-partner schools' Black male teacher presence by 20% within six years.

Additionally, Huston-Tillotson University, a private Historical Black College and University (HBCU) located in Austin, Texas, has developed an African American Male Teacher

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Initiative through funding provided by Apple Inc. to entice first-year students to pursue teaching careers. The institution's Pre-Ed Scholars Initiative program offers a one-year scholarship to high-achieving first-year students. In addition, programs such as Call Me Mister, which began at Clemson University in South Carolina, provide an opportunity to educate and produce Black male college students and place them into elementary settings. However, Lewis (2002) argues that these forms of incentives (student loan forgiveness, signing bonuses, and relocation benefits) are unsuccessful. Even though these efforts have moved the needle at a limited local level, fewer Black male educators continue to enter elementary education on the national level.

Elementary Teachers

Elementary serves as a catalyst for the developmental stages of a child. Karatas (2020) adds that elementary teachers are integral to shaping the mind of a child while exuding positive imagery to showcase healthy personality traits. Likewise, elementary teachers have expressed they were more satisfied than secondary teachers, however, more female teachers were satisfied than their male teachers (Bogler, 2002). Previous research has indicated elementary teachers like the students, colleagues, student progress, and summer vacations, but dislike the fact that excessive paperwork and non-teaching duties are expected of them (Raschke et al., 1985). Unfortunately, current literature focuses primarily on best practices, methods that improve certain subjects for students, and implementation of techniques; however, there is limited research that analyzes the perspectives of elementary teachers.

Moving forward, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report, female teachers represent 89 percent of the elementary teacher force, while male teachers make up 11.4 percent (U.S Department of Education, 2021).

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Male Elementary Teachers

Male elementary teachers have been rare in the past decades due to stereotypes as perverts or ignored due to the movement of feminist work in education centered on the position of women (Head, 2000). Early childhood scholars and practitioners argue that scholarly work in early childhood education should be kept as women's work (Carrington & McPhee, 2008). However, Pilburn (2010) expresses a need for a gender-diverse workforce is becoming the global goal for high-quality early childhood programming (p.46). In addition, offering a balance of female and male presence challenges the social constructs and gender ideology of the children's gender roles and expectations (Pilburn, 2010).

Black Elementary Teachers

According to NCES 2017-2018 percentage of teachers reported that 6.7% of primary school teachers are Black, while white teachers make up 78.2% (Taie & Goldring, 2020). In addition, Black teachers also fall behind Hispanics in public schools as primary teachers with 10.5 percent of teachers being a part of the LatinX population. Furthermore, Black teachers are significantly underrepresented in the private school sector of primary education, where they are only represented at a 3.2 percent average.

There is extensive research on the Black student elementary experience and teacher perspectives; however, there is limited research on the Black female and male elementary teaching experience.

Black Male Elementary Teachers

Although there is a massive effort to recruit Black male teachers, the lack of Black male presence with younger children has been identified as systematic and cyclical (Meidl, 2019), impacting the interest of Black boys wanting to be educators. Meidl (2019) and Brockenbrough

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

(2012) add that Black male elementary teachers experience tension based on their carried identities when they engage with children and colleagues, more specifically, Black males experience tension more so because of their Blackness rather than their maleness. Additionally, there is little-known research on the percentage of Black male teachers that are represented in the primary sector of education. Vasquez (2019) and Bryan and Williams (2017) stated, in elementary schools' men of color, specifically Black men, have remain a rarity even in urban schools. Even though there's a small percentage of these teachers, Bryan and Browder (2013) argue that these Pre-K-2nd grade teachers provide diverse talents and abilities that could benefit all children (p.154). Although Black male teachers may offer a unique experience for younger students, Bryan and Browder (2013) also stated that men are naturally not expected to teach young children, specifically Black men. Especially when the intersection of race comes into play, it can be argued that these educators experience inequitable treatment regarding their race and male identity. The participants in Bryan and Browder's (2013) study discussed experiences with microaggressions and hyper-visibility while being a kindergarten teacher, creating a sense of awkwardness and an uncomfortable environment among the Black male elementary teachers.

Hicks-Tafari (2018) stated children, specifically Black children, spend hours in school and may never experience a Black male figure in their homes. Hence, the benefit of having a Black male elementary teacher in those developmental stages is crucial for their identity development.

Theoretical Position: African American Male Theory

To contextualize the analysis of Black Male Elementary Teachers' (BMET) as presented through the existing literature while advancing this space through the current study, the researcher will utilize African American Male Theory (AAMT) by Lawson Bush and Edward

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Bush (2013) for the theoretical framework. This theory builds upon African worldviews, C.S. Holling's Resilience Theory (1973) and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System Theory (1974). AAMT framework suggests that African American boys and men exist in a symbiotic and bidirectional relationship with other beings, matters, concepts, and phenomena (Bush & Bush, 2013, pg.7). For example, Bush and Bush extends Bronfenbrenner's ecological system by adding systems and tailoring systems that were unique to the Black male identity and life experiences. The six systems are the microsystem (inner and outer), inner subsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, chronosystem, and outer subsystem.

Similar to Bronfenbrenner's (1974) model, the AAMT model comprises of the following, the microsystem is things that they directly encounter within their intermediate environment. However, in AAMT, scholars extended this system into two internal systems (inner and outer). The inner system showcases the inward characteristics of self, and the outer system involves their intermediate environment (e.g., neighborhood, family and extended family, school, peer group, friends, etc.). In addition, as the scholars noted, there was the importance of adding a subsystem to the microsystem to focus on a spiritual or supernatural presence that is critical to the lives of Black boys and men. The scholars deviated from the original model explanation of the mesosystem and situated this through the collaboration of the inner and outer microsystem and the micro-subsystem. Bringing awareness to how the systems intermingle as Black boys and men come to know the world.

Moreover, the exosystem also differs within AAMT; it focuses on external influences and their relation to the individual. Further, the macrosystem provides insight into the effects of government systems, health and social services, mass media, socioeconomic status, and hegemonic norms on Black boys and men. Then, the chronosystem offers awareness of

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

environmental changes that happen over time (e.g., racism, segregation/desegregation, slavery, etc.) and their impact on Black boys and men throughout their lives. Finally, the scholars added an external subsystem, which adds an unknown matter that could potentially shape Black boys' and men's lives. (See Figure 1)

Additionally, in the following paragraphs, the researcher discussed the guiding six tenets that are comprised within AAMT: (1) individual experiences, (2) male and African descent, (3) culture, consciousness, and biological influences, (4) resilient and resistance, (5) Race and Racism; and (6) focus and purpose of programs on African American boys and men, that provide underpinnings that bring awareness to the salient reasons of African American thoughts and practices. Utilizing this framework will offer a theoretical backdrop to conceptualize and relate to how BMET understands how ecological systems influence their experience and decision to teach.

Figure 1

Ecological Systems Model for African American Male Theory

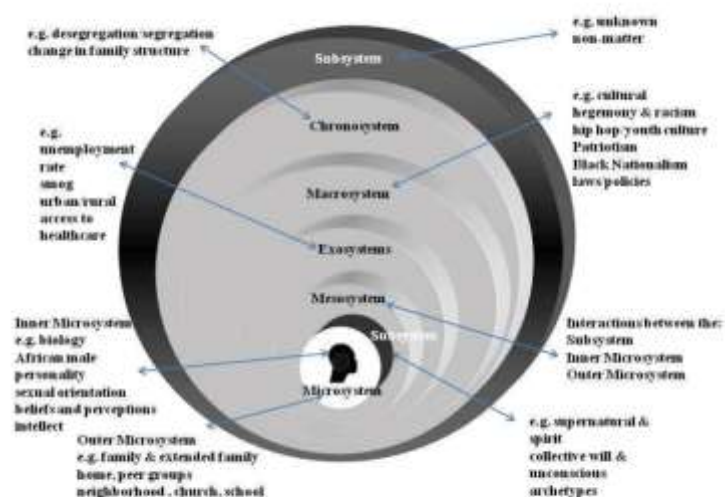


Figure 1. Ecological Systems Model for African American Male Theory

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

To further explain each of the guided six tenants:

- 1. Individual and collective experiences examining the behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectories of African American boys' and men's lives are best analyzed using ecological system approaches.**

The first tenant Bush and Bush (2013) focuses on how Black men and boys come to understand their realities through an examination of several factors. As the researcher, it was important for the examination of these Black males were analyzed through a system approach to truly grasp an understanding of their individual and collective experiences. Black boys and men exist in a symbiotic and bidirectional relationship with matters, beings, concepts, and phenomena. Given environmental factors affecting this population, a multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approach becomes effective when observing Black males and boys (p. 3).

Following Bronfenbrenner's Ecological System (1974) model of the interconnectedness of five systems through microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and the chronosystem (p. 3). However, AAMT covers all five systems, but AAMT divides the microsystem into an inner and outer system, allowing the fluidity of a Black man to be shown through different aspects. The inner microsystem captures one's perception, positionality, personality, and biology. The outer microsystem analyzes one's family, peers, neighborhood, and school environments impact (p. 3) Additionally, AAMT expands the mesosystem that links the inner and outer systems called the *subsystem* (shown in Figure 1). This system considers factors that potentially influence or are associated with matters related to supernatural and spiritual powers.

- 2. There is something unique about being male and of African descent.**

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

The second tenet discussed the beauty and richness of being a male that has an African descent. This tenet explains how the AAMT affirms other populations and the similarities of African American Males and its relation to other populations; however, their individualistic distinction makes them unique as African American males outlining differences from other populations as a group. Ultimately, Bush and Bush states that this allows Black males to create distinctive measures that will aid in creating valuable resources targeted specifically to African American Males, to provide opportunities and access that speak to them as individuals and a group.

3. There is a continuity and continuation of African culture, consciousness, and biology that influence the experiences of African American boys and men.

The third tenet explores the roots and influences of African culture and tradition on Black men and boys. To understand African American men and boys, one must be aware of Africa and African culture because of its impact on this population. AAMT focuses on this culture and consciousness due to the limited research in the United States and the importance to create accurate findings in telling this population's stories.

4. African American boys and men are resilient and resistant.

The fourth tenet brings awareness to the ways in which Black males matriculate through an oppressive and colonial system that aides in the resilience and resistance of whiteness. AAMT positions itself to show that African American boys and men are naturally born with a desire for self-determination and with unlimited capacity for morality and intelligence. Basically, inferring that social and educational challenges stem from socially constructed systems than any innate biological or cultural deficiencies (p. 10). Additionally, AAMT embraces resiliency theory, which opposes deficit paradigms, thinking, and practice (p. 10). Building on C.S. Hollings's

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

introduction of Resiliency Theory (1973) stems from the way in which non-linear dynamics influence the way one understands ecosystems. Specifically, Holling's (1973) articulates that resilience is a measure of which the persistence of systems or of their ability to absorb change and disturbance and still maintain the same relationships between populations or state variables (p. 14).

5. Race and racism coupled with classism and sexism have a profound impact on every aspect of the lives of African American boys and men.

The fifth tenant of AAMT aligns with Critical Race Theory (CRT) in which it provides insight into the pervasive forces and factors of race, racism, sexism, and classism in Black males face in society. Particularly AAMT looks at how racism impacts African American boys and men, and how being a male and of a certain class provides privileges in spaces.

6. The focus and purpose of study and programs concerning African American boys and men should be the pursuit of social justice.

The final tenant primarily focuses on the goal of AAMT, which seeks to undermine oppression and provide a progressive theory that counters previous reactionary-based theories. The aim is not to respond to cultural hegemony and racism but rather to explicitly account for it as AAMT draws upon the historical and current culture, consciousness, and community to determine what is, and strive to achieve, social justice for African American boys and men (p. 12). Ultimately, showcasing Black boys and men's joy through the tumultuous journey they face daily.

Lastly, it is important to note that this theory expands Bronfenbrenner's Ecological theory beyond the five environmental systems: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. However, AAMT adds a subsystem (outer and inner) in the

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

microsystem level, which entails a supernatural and spiritual or unconscious approach that impacts African American males' epistemology and ontology.

In sum, the researcher selected AAMT to analyze BMET experiences in a few ways, (1) it allows for the researcher to examine participants' experiences through a lens created explicitly for Black males, (2) the theory draws on the holistic approach of Black males and how they persevere through the structural barriers they face through the intersections of their multi-identities in different systems, extending beyond the scope Critical Race Thinking (CRT), which focuses primarily on race and racism, (3) due to limited research examining Black male teachers maleness and race comprehensively in educational research utilizing AAMT, specifically, and (4) utilizing a Black male centered framework, provided an anti-racist and de-colonial lens for the researcher to embrace the wholeness of their identity.

Implications for the Research Study

The implications of utilizing African American Male Theory as the theoretical framework for this study allowed the researcher to holistically examine Black male elementary teachers' experiences and decisions to advance the gaps within the current literature. Through the six tenets of AAMT, the theory provides a lens that offers a perspective of the intricate and complex life of the Black male. In addition, the framework created a way for the researcher to move away from deficit thinking and consider these individuals' joys, successes, and triumphs, despite negative influences. Furthermore, this theory acknowledges their presence, importance, and contribution to education, intentionally enabling the researcher to share sides of BMET that people do not see.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Conclusion

To summarize, the literature presented in the section discussed factors and influences related to the implications of Black boys in education, historical underpinnings, societal pressures, and Black male teachers. The current literature presented by scholars in the field offered great insight and provoked the researcher to explore Black males at the grassroots level of education. There exists a considerable body of research targeting this population of educators and their teacher shortage. Specifically, researchers have studied Black male educators by focusing on actively recruiting these individuals into the field and their experiences and potential reasons that Black males have struggled to remain or are no longer interested in the field of education. However, although there are many scholarly perspectives on Black male teachers recruiting into or retaining within the field, there is little inquiry on Black male elementary teachers as a population within itself that furthers the narrative on their experiences. Previous research does not explicitly examine the holistic experiences of Black male elementary teachers and the influence ecological systems have on their decisions to teach. Furthermore, additional research must be conducted to understand their experiences and the influence ecological systems play in the decision for Black males to teach at the elementary level.

In summary, Chapter I focused on the landscape of the problem and the rationale of the study. While Chapter II provided insight into the in-depth literature that offered clarification and context of the Black male teacher and established how African American Male Theory grounds the study to advance the literature. The following chapter will discuss the study's methodology, data collection, analysis and reporting of the findings, researcher positionality, and limitations.

CHAPTER III

Methods

"If you look into my eyes and see what I see" Mary J. Blige once stated in her 1994 debut album, My Life. Whew! Your writing must improve! Recalling every educator voice that uttered those words. Or the time my writing got me conditional status into my program, chuckles. My writing is strong enough; I just don't want to be in a stale writing bubble. Let me be free! I began to lose myself in my writing and began writing for others. Unfortunately, my Blackness cannot be limited to a one-dimensional lens of writing. I want to be free and will be free; I want to tell colorful stories through a multicultural lens of authenticity. Two professors I encountered during my journey, watered my stories and I realized my narrative had meaning; it was enough, but most importantly, it told a deeper story. Muhammad Ali once stated during a 1964 interview (Burns, 2021), "I don't have to be what you want me to be, I am free to be who I want to be and free to think what I want to think" and I live and guide my life and actions based on what I choose motivates, liberates, and prevails my spirit.

Momma knocks on the door and states, "the Lord has it figured out don't worry, keep doing the work."

The purpose of this study was to examine how Black male elementary teachers understand their experience as teachers through the lens of ecological systems and to understand the influence of ecological systems on their decisions to teach. This chapter was situated with regards to how the research questions (Rudestam & Newton, 2014) were answered through a qualitative research design, participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, trustworthiness, and data analysis. Grounding through qualitative methodology, this study

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

utilized Endarkened Storywork, a non-traditional research methodology that allows for Black storytelling traditions and honors alternative ways of thinking about, doing, and writing scholarship (Toliver, 2021). Endarkened Storywork honors Griots and Anasi, who fostered intergenerational and connections to their people's histories through storytelling (Toliver, 2021, p. xiv). This unorthodox form of methodology hinges on the traditions of storytelling, which interrogates, analyzes, and describes the world, celebrates the beauty and flexibility of the Black communities' language, while critiquing power structures (Toliver, 2021). Additionally, Dillard (2000) explains the purpose of Endarkened:

“As a way to inform that reality is known when based on the historical roots of African Americans, embodying a distinguishable difference in cultural standpoint, located in the intersection/overlap of the culturally constructed socializations of race, gender, and other identities and the historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African Americans” (p. 662)

Further, Endarkened epistemology includes spaces outside of text but offers insight into music, dance, visual narratives, and other artistic ways important to the African heritage (Dillard, 2012a). Additionally, Toliver (2021) expresses that this methodology allows storytelling through fiction, honoring the ways of griots who were the scholars of their African nations. This method builds upon Endarkened feminist epistemologies (Dillard, 2000), Indigenous Storywork (Archibald, 2008), and Afrofuturism (Womack, 2013). Although researchers have stated narrative inquiry adds value to human experiences and how individuals can learn from the stories shared by participants (Adams, 2008; Byrne, 2017; Coulter & Smith, 2009; Lawlor, 2000; McIssac Bruce, 2008; Savin-Baden & Niekerk, 2007). McClish-Boyd and Bhattacharya (2020) argue that while such narrative inquiry has been helpful in various types of qualitative research,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

it lacks the nuance and cultural responsiveness needed to highlight the storying structure of Black people's experiences (p. 5).

Selecting Endarkened Storywork provided the freedom to utilize technologies of the researcher's ancestors to help escape the academic bondage of Eurocentric writing and make space for the storied, spiritual-work essential to Black life in the past, present, and future (Toliver, 2021, p. xxiv). In addition, the participant's stories were told in a way that white people may hear them, but essentially benefits Black people. Toliver (2021) states "the messages displayed have underlying meanings that are embedded in their stories, and they hide messages through the imagery of quilts as Black life, acknowledging that Black quilts were used to encode cultural knowledge, memories, and everyday twang and stories" (p. xxvii). The importance of these stories is to teach, heal, and bring life. Therefore, storytelling is not a luxury for Black people—it is vital to their very existence; however, their lives are often shunned in academia (Toliver, 2021). This allowed a space for Black life, liberation, and joy, while eradicating and minimizing racist and colonial practices within this study. Finally, implementing a culturally relevant inquiry that allows for re-humanizing and regaining their narratives, which allowed for a reflective study that illuminates Black male voices and speaks truth to their lives, while affirming and empowering their narratives.

Theoretical Framework

African American Male Theory (AAMT) aims to challenge deficit thinking while exploring the development and life stories of Black boys and men. In addition to the six guiding tenets that expand the ecological system, AAMT discusses how these components influence Black boys and men's navigation in society. Furthermore, AAMT focuses on acknowledging Black boys and men's resistance to the system and showcasing the successful accomplishments

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

of these individuals. Finally, the AAMT framework is positioned to communicate the trajectory of Black boys and men.

Advancing the Theoretical Framework

Since this study was situated within the construct of African American Male Theory (AAMT), it was critical to utilize a design that authentically brings the participant's voices forward. As such, Endarkened Storywork provided the framework in which participants may draw upon their experiences while capturing their African culture and traditions, spiritual, psychological, social, and educational development (Bush & Bush, 2013). Furthermore, Endarkened Storywork worked synergistically with AAMT to situate Blackness at the forefront, while also providing a space for African culture, tradition, and consciousness to further understand Black male elementary teachers. Here, the research design offers a dynamic lens to the participants' identities and experiences, ultimately leading to a rich, deep context to answer the research questions. Finally, Endarkened Storywork supported AAMT by decentering the damaging approaches seen in scholarly literature that primarily offers a racist and colonial perspective regarding Black male elementary educators.

According to Bhattacharya (2017), "utilizing this [Endarkened] framework allows the researcher to explore, discover, understand, and construct stories based on the participants recounting of their experiences" (p. 93). As such, intentional space was provided during data collection (i.e., interviews) to allow for freedom to articulate their experience instead of silencing their voices with traditional ways of collecting the data for narrative design. Therefore, utilizing the Endarkened Storywork approach was appropriate for this study because it revealed a deeper understanding of Black male elementary teacher's experiences and what led them to their decision to teach.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Participants and Sampling Selection

To identify the target of five to seven participants for this qualitative study, the researcher utilized "convenience sampling" and "snowball sampling" to conduct a search through personal networks, colleagues, and peers. Etikan et al., (2016) explains convenience sampling as easily accessible to the researcher. According to Scott and Rodriguez (2015), "snowball sampling serves as a practical approach toward recruiting participants" (p. 697). To choose these participants, the researcher conducted the following steps:

- Communicated with personal contacts affiliated with potential participants (convenience) and who can share with their contacts (snowball).
- Developed marketing material (flyer) to post on the researcher's social media platform (e.g., Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn) to engage their network to gain participants. (See Appendix B)
- Created emails to share with school districts or teachers to attract participants. (See Appendix A)

Individuals were selected through snowball and convenience sampling methods. The researcher relied on his connections and network in Texas and Louisiana to assist with recruitment. Also, the researcher leveraged the participant's relationships with other Black male elementary teachers to help with recruitment. Each potential participant had to meet the following criteria:

- Self-identify as a Black or African American male
- Serve as a current elementary teacher (PK-5th grade)
- Serves in a Louisiana or Texas elementary school

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

The established criteria seek promoted inclusiveness of some Black male elementary teachers' diverse perspectives and unique experiences. To reiterate, Louisiana and Texas were selected based on the convenience of the researcher, but also, to broaden the research on Black male teachers' voices in the southern region, due to most of the current research being positioned in the East and West region of the United States. Providing a southern perspective amplified the voices and research of Black male teachers from different regions of the United States.

Additionally, the range of five to seven participants was selected to ensure that the researcher had a realistic pool of participants, which the researcher took into consideration the limited amount of Black male elementary teachers, and to ensure data saturation occurred within the analysis stage. Rudestam and Newton (2014) noted to reach data saturation, the researcher must have five or more participants. Therefore, this research consisted of six participants to ensure data saturation occurred. Basically, allowing the researcher to enter the data collection stage where there were no additional findings present in the data collected.

Table 1

Participants' Demographics

Names	Teaching Area	Years of Teaching	State	Certification	Type District
Mr. Steve	Science & Social Studies, 4th	1	Louisiana	Alternative	City
Mr. Riley	Math, 4th & 5th	4	Louisiana	Traditional	Rural
Mr. Coach	Math & Science, 5th	7	Louisiana	Alternative	City
Coach Will	Physical Education, K-5th	1	Texas	Alternative	City
Mr. Goku	Math, Science, ELA, Social Studies; 2 & 3rd	8	Texas	Alternative	Rural
Mr. Joe	ELA, Writing, K, 2nd, 5th	3	Texas	Alternative	Suburban

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Note. Pseudonyms were added to protect the identity of the participants and maintain confidentiality. Additionally, insight was given to the district type instead of the actual district name to aid in the protection of the participant.

Data Sources

Following informed consent, the participants received the interview questions for each scheduled interview. Interviews were scheduled over a two-week period during the months of May and June at the participant's scheduled preference. Data was collected from two, 60-minute, semi-structured interviews with each participant, followed by a third reflective discussion on each participant's selected artifacts. Due to ongoing health concerns related to the global pandemic and to ensure safety measures, the two interviews and third reflective discussion were conducted utilizing Zoom. The researcher recorded all eighteen videos and transcribed the participant's interviews through Zoom's Otter Ai transcription feature. Using semi-structured interviews, the researcher had the autonomy to include clarifying questions to ensure accurate interpretation of their responses throughout the interview (Blee & Gray, 2002). Also, it enabled the researcher to ask probing follow-up questions (Turner, 2010, p. 756), to ensure clarity and further enrich the participant's stories. In preparation for the third meeting, participants were asked to journal over three provided prompts that were distributed after each interview session, they also provided five to eight artifacts, which enhanced the data collection with additional information gathered during the interviews (Hayman et al., 2012).

Data Collection

In qualitative research, Canals (2017) states:

"Data collection in the field of language education is done in situations that try to reproduce real-life communication scenarios in which the participants make oral or written contributions that are useful for research purposes and, at the same time, beneficial for their learning process" (p. 390).

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

As Seidman (2006) mentions, the researcher is interested in interviewing for data collection because they are interested in other people's stories. Recounting narratives of one's experiences allows humans to make sense of their experiences through recorded history (Seidman, 2006). The researcher provided various question types throughout the interview process to help generate rich, thick, descriptive stories (Bhattacharya, 2017, p. 132), which provided a plethora of information that attributed to the quality of the findings.

In this study, in-depth individual interviews transpired to gain knowledge related to the posed research questions. Data collection occurred through interviews, personal narratives, journal reflections, a variety of artifacts, and a single image to engage in dialogue amongst the participants. This method of data collection provided an environment that empowered them to be their authentic selves and an upbeat atmosphere that ensured a free-flowing conversation. Each interview started with a music artist ranging over the decades of Black music existence. This practice was followed to bring the connection of Black ancestors, the Black rhythm and blues, and Black connectedness shared through musically gifted artists (e.g., Marvin Gaye, Whitney Houston, Tupac, Gladys's Knight, and Notorious B.I.G). In addition, Black males were assigned journal prompts, allowing the participants to further enrich their narratives. This created a space for the participants to reflect and visually process their mental, emotional, and physical engagement with the researcher's study. Lastly, as described in the methodology, Black people often share their emotions, ideas, and experiences in very artistic ways, the researcher asked participants to share a single symbolic image in their participant journals which were then discussed in the third meeting. Lightfoot (2005) explains this concept to not only hear the participant but to see and feel them through imagery that reveals their essence. Before recruiting

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

and interviewing participants took place, approval was gained from the University of Texas at Arlington Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participant Interviews

The researcher conducted three semi-structured interviews with each participant. The participant's semi-structured interviews ranged from 30 to 60-minutes utilizing Zoom virtual software. A typical qualitative interview could be a one-shot occurrence lasting for about an hour; however, one-shot interviews are insufficient when trying to compile rich data for a study's findings (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 142). For this reason, the researcher felt it was imperative to conduct tier-level interviews to dive deeper into their stories.

Seidman (2006) states that a three-series interview series allows participants to: focus on life history, detail their experiences, and reflect on their meaning. Therefore, the three meetings with participants were strategically designed to reflect on these points and assist with answering the research questions presented in the study. The first interview created a foundation for each participant to share their lived experiences through present day. The second interview served to unpack their experiences and focused on concrete experiences related to the purpose of the study. Lastly, the third and final meeting allowed each participant to make meaning of their experiences through the sharing of their reflective journal, artifacts, and a single symbolic image representing their teacher identity. Hodder (1994) explains, "many areas of experiences are hidden from language, particularly subordinate experience" (p. 176). Merriam-Webster defines subordinate as to treat as of less value or importance. Hodder (1994) further notes that material culture is crucial because it serves as a medium in which alternative and often muted voices can be expressed" (p. 185). Based on previous literature, the treatment of Black males has always been through the lens of less than or unimportant, it is important to articulate their stories. Through the lens of

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

AAMT and Endarkened Storywork and various forms of art outside of language, the researcher aided in the crystallization of the data collected.

The researcher's IRB application was approved and confirmed on March 29, 2022. After, review approval, the researcher engaged in convenience and snowball sampling to identify participants throughout April and May 2022. Then, participant interviews were scheduled throughout May and mid-June 2022, and the researcher allowed for flexibility into the first half of July 2022 if needed for participant needs. Additionally, since participants were current teachers, there were considerations made for their schedules during the interview process. Those considerations were made based on, state testing, end of the year burn out, and impeding summer school schedules. This allowed participants approximately one to two weeks between interviews, with a total commitment of three, 60-minute time periods over the three-to-six-week period. Finally, each virtual interview was held via a private link shared between the researcher and the participant. Each interview began and ended with the reiteration of participants being able to opt out of the study at any time during the process.

During the first interview, the researcher began with introductory questions and moved gracefully into more open-ended questions that allowed for some reflection and deep thought from the participants. The researcher used guided questions incorporating questions that correlated to the theoretical framework of African American Male Theory and previous literature outlined in Chapter 2. The guided protocol is inserted in the Appendix section (Appendix C).

The interviews were transcribed in a written form (Polkinghorne, 2005) utilizing Zoom Otter AI software within one week of the interview, as the researcher sought to identify threads that were emerging. In addition, the researcher took extensive handwritten notes to ensure proper transcriptions were reported via electronic transcriptions. Finally, the researcher implemented

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

member checking (Guba & Lincoln, 1982) of the transcriptions, which were provided to participants within two weeks following each interview to ensure accuracy and contributed to the study's transparency and trustworthiness. To maintain the confidentiality of the participant's data and recordings, the researcher utilized pseudonyms while coding and saving the data in their university-secured OneDrive.

Confidentiality

To minimize any confusion or misunderstanding of the content mentioned in the consent forms (Klitzman, 2013), the researcher 1) emailed the informed consent document (ICD) for review to each participant a month prior to their scheduled meeting and then 2) met with each participant to discuss the consent form to answer any questions or concerns before they signed and confirmed their participation in the study. Furthermore, each participant was reminded of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw from the study prior to each interview. Moreover, participants received a signed copy of their consent form from the researcher.

Apart from this, the researcher saved all collected data on the researcher's university-secured OneDrive to protect the participant's submitted information. Morse and Coulehan (2015) add it is a vital tenant to protect participants' privacy in qualitative studies. As such, all identities and geographic locations shared were scrubbed and given a pseudonym to conceal the identity of the location and individual. The use of pseudonyms supports efforts to eliminate harm, forms of embarrassment, and an invasion of privacy (Nespor, 2000). Finally, the researcher gave the participants the power to select their pseudonyms or give rights to the researcher to select, empowering a stronger relationship between the researcher and the participant.

Trustworthiness

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

As mentioned previously, the researcher used member checking amongst participants regarding the shared content to ensure trustworthiness. Guba and Lincoln (1982) explain member checking as data reviewed by participants as continuous scans until the study completion. Creswell and Miller (2000) add, "the participants add credibility to the qualitative study by having a chance to react to both the data and final narrative" (p. 127). Shenton (2004) furthers by stating states member checking is a space for participants to verify the accuracy of their dialogue and ensure the words presented in the transcripts align with the message they specified via their interviews. Anney (2014) contributes that member checking is essential to the researcher's study to further credibility and eliminate biases when reviewing data and finalizing collection.

Additionally, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing as an additional measure to promote trustworthiness. Guba and Lincoln (1982) express that peer debriefing creates a sense of honesty that includes new insight disconnected from the study. Creswell and Miller (2000) explain that peer debriefing challenges the researcher's thoughts, asks thought-provoking questions, and plays devil's advocate. Anney (2014) reports that seeking support from professionals could strengthen findings and feedback that may provide a different perspective outside of the researcher's worldview. Peer debriefing took place during a three-step analysis approach to assist the researcher with coding.

Equally important, the researcher intentionally utilized an anti-racist and de-colonializing perspective to engage in ethical research. The researcher utilized reflexive discernment allowing the researcher to shape and strengthen compassion skills (Rybicki-Newman & Reybold, 2022). The researcher learned from his mistakes inflicted within the data collection process and contributing to change moving forward. Finally, collecting multiple data sources increased the study's credibility and allowed for crystallization to be shown through the multidimensional

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

experiences and angles lived by these Black male elementary educators (Richardson, 2000; Tobin & Begley, 2004). Again, for this study, data was collected from two semi-structured interviews, the third reflective discussion on participant artifacts, and each participant's journal submission.

Additionally, the researcher recorded his thoughts before and after every interview utilizing a personal recorder and researcher journal to acknowledge reflexivity (Watt, 2007) and advancing trustworthiness. This measure supported the researcher's ability to acknowledge any unclear thoughts, feelings, or impressions that one may overlook before starting the interviews (Chenail, 2011).

Institutional Review Boards (IRB)

As stated previously, the researcher gained approval from the university's Institutional Review Board after completing a detailed research proposal that provided concise and clear tangibles that will be beneficial to the field of education (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The researcher provided a thorough review of the informed consent form to each participant informing them of the research problem and purpose of the study. The informed consent document included the following criteria: (a) central purpose of the study, (b) study explanation, (c) statement of risk, (d) potential benefits, (e) voluntary participation, (f) protection of confidentiality, (g) right to voluntarily withdraw from the study at any time, and signature from the researcher and participant (See Appendix D) (Creswell & Poth, 2016). To ensure full consent was given, the researcher asked for a verbal agreement and a signed informed consent form to solidify their spot within the study.

Analysis of the Data and Reporting of the Findings

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

After transcriptions were completed, open coding occurred to allow for creative, innovative, and unique themes to emerge to be applied to this population of participants (Williams & Moser, 2019). Elliot (2018) describes coding as a way of making sense of the data collected to answer the study's research questions, understanding the data, spending time with the data, and coming to grips with how to report the data. Furthermore, coding is a two-step level process, (1) coding is broader and more descriptive of the data, and (2) the second coding phase focused on a pattern code technique, which pulled material into a smaller more meaningful unit (Elliot, 2018, p. 2852). Utilizing this traditional standard of coding helped as the researcher leveraged this method to assist with the threading and patching method associated with Endarkened Storywork.

The researcher immersed himself into the data and hand-coded the data to truly understand the participant's stories. Further enriching the researcher's knowledge of the participants and to examine every multidimensional angle of their narratives. Studying a historically vulnerable population, the researcher wanted to conceptualize their ideas, thoughts, and feelings and did not want their emerging ideas to be misplaced or overshadowed by overarching themes (Richards et al., 1994). Next, the researcher aimed to share the individual stories of the participants while connecting them to one another, which were larger than the individual. Utilizing a threading and patch method resembling a quilt, the researcher was able to uncover hidden encoded cultural messages, creating a space where patterns, cadences, rhythms, tones, and emotions were shown, allowing the researcher to understand them as BMET and their stories. This will enable readers to center the participants' voices and not the writer's voice. When we discuss findings and how to report them, themes have often been the traditional way of reporting findings. However, when we examine the perplexities of Black and Brown folx,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

threads and patches align best because it added complexity to the findings. In addition, when the researcher began to analyze the data, their focus was on the participant's location, history, place, and time. It was essential to acknowledge that this may play a critical role in one's experience as a researcher, for "Black stories are delicate and must be handled with care and respect" (Toliver, 2021, p. xxxi).

Furthermore, in qualitative research, triangulation is traditionally utilized to ensure truth within the findings. However, triangulation has assumed a single fixed reality (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003) or the same concept (Patton, 1999). For the purposes of this study, it was important to establish crystallization to ensure that the participant's multiple realities and truths were shared through multiple perspectives of knowledge (Ellingson, 2009). To explain crystallization in more detail, Stewart et al. (2017) state, "crystallization centers on understanding the research and researcher position to intimately view the process with an openness that allows discoveries to unfold that would otherwise be lost" (p.1).

Additionally, Richardson and Pierre (2000) explain that crystallization offers a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic (p. 934). Richardson (2000) adds further context stating, that crystallization is symbolic of a crystal and combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionality, and angles of approach (p. 13). Implementing crystallization within this study's method meshed well and allowed for findings to be expressed through artistic illustrations of their experiences, events, and key moments rather than vocal expressions (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Ellingson 2009).

Finally, stories were written utilizing African American Vernacular English (AAVE) also known as "Ebonics", which centers on the dominant language and dialect of African American/Black people and communities. Roberts (2019) explains AAVE as, allowing refuge

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

from white supremacy and an opportunity to feel fully human, protected, rooted in Black life.

AAVE is the usage of double or multiple negatives being presented within a sentence (Chuu, 2020), and linguistic inconsistencies that are contributed to African American or Black dialect that are tied to the authenticity and realistic interactions with one another (Oancea, 2022).

Researcher's Role/Positionality

The researcher is a Black male higher education practitioner and researcher with previous experience as a Black male elementary teacher. As a higher education practitioner, the researcher develops students' career development expertise while connecting students to industry experts to aid in the student's transition from college to career. Sparking the interest of the present research, the researcher felt the need to bring awareness to Black male elementary educators, whose stories are often lost, untold, or generalized based on racist and colonizing academic structure. As such, Creswell and Miller (2000) specify that it is vital for the researcher to express their assumptions, beliefs, values, and biases to enter the study in the research process (p. 127). Additionally, his epistemological commitments to showcasing criticality (interrogating systems), intersectionality (acknowledging and understanding intersecting identities and oppression), and relationality (bound together/non-hierarchical) within his research, will allow for the reporting of these results to be more accessible to communities, through a less formal or traditional style of reporting. Webster and Mertova (2007) explains, access to reliable and trustworthy records of the stories as told by individuals is the cornerstone of validity and reliability (p. 90). While the researcher has completed this dissertation through a standard academic way, his application of new methods is implemented through an approach that advances anti-racist and decolonization through research. The researcher's journey to challenge anti-Blackness within his research was difficult based on his previous knowledge of conducting research and his worldview, often

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

disguised through whiteness and forms of color blindness. Hence, his perseverance to challenge himself while learning how to disrupt a cycle of anti-Black research previously presented in educational literature.

Due to the researcher's career advancement into higher education, he has since been removed from the K-12 education section for eight years. The researcher kept a journal to remove explicit and implicit biases by utilizing bracketing to eliminate preconceived notions. Tufford and Newman (2010) describe bracketing as "a process whereby the researcher draws awareness to presuppositions regarding the topic" (p. 88). However, utilizing a non-traditional methodology approach of Endarkened Storywork, where Black voices are centered and giving power in research, there were some connections that were inevitable due to the shared identity of the researcher and participants. Which enhanced the engagement and strengthened the profound relationships between the two. Furthering this approach, the researcher specifically wanted to immerse himself within the data, allowing him to code based on his positionality. Through his epistemological commitments and his connection to the Black life, it helped advance the coding process that spoke directly to Black life and tradition. Above all, the researcher's goal is to provide extensive knowledge that furthers the literature on this population, provides an authentic depiction of their narratives, and offers deeper meaning and insight to this population of educators and future Black male elementary educators. Lastly, to protect this population without harming them, it was essential that we not only understand, but to bring forth the inadequacy of life and how research contributes to this in some way. Thus, requiring action and increased accountability to people and place because no action is action that has further implications for the continuation of injustices (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015, p. 636).

Delimitations

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Rudestam and Newton (2014) explain delimitations as purposeful limitations placed on the research, specifically by the researcher. The first delimitation for this study was that the researcher focused on Louisiana and Texas Black male elementary teachers because of a readily available population of teachers the researcher had access to during the time of this study. Secondly, the research questions examine a specific population that aims to understand their experience and their decision to teach through the lens of an ecological system, which there has been limited research to this present day. Thirdly, utilizing a reasonably new methodology was the researcher's choice to truly understand their experiences through the lens of Blackness. Also, in this study the researcher addressed participant as “he,” however, the researcher also utilized the implementation of gender-neutral pronouns (they/them) to be inclusive of seen and unseen identities that may or may not have been disclosed during the interviews. Furthermore, to ensure the authenticity of each participant’s stories, the researcher intentionally leveraged their authentic voices utilizing African American Vernacular English (AAVE), often referred to as “Ebonics” (Roberts, 2019). Building on authors like Lorraine Hansberry, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker utilizing AAVE within their work to center Blackness and to speak to an audience that understand slang and colloquial phrases without having to breakdown the meaning of the information shared. In addition, the researcher purposefully utilizes African American women scholars within their work to minimize the erasure of Black women scholars in research. Finally, interviews were conducted virtually through video streaming platforms (Zoom), selected based on the researcher's availability and limited resources and time to travel. Based on these delimitations, there were inevitable limitations that are further discussed below regarding this study.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Conclusion

In summary, this study aimed to increase understanding and awareness of the influences ecological systems have on Black male elementary teachers' experiences and their decision to teach. In this chapter, the researcher reviewed the methodological approach for this study. To showcase Black male elementary teachers' experiences, it was essential to review this population through a Black scholar methodology lens. Through this lens, the researcher believed richer data was presented that extends the current literature surrounding Black male teachers. Finally, in Chapter Four the researcher focuses on the findings of the study and reports the stories of each participant.

Chapter IV

Analysis of Data and Findings

“All that you touch, you change; all that you change, change you!” - Octavia Butler

This study sought to address the limited research that focuses on the authentic narratives of Black male teachers in elementary education to provide insight into their experiences and decision to teach. Previous research indicates Black males make up less than 2% of the teacher workforce (National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2019). Even though there are numerous recruitment programs (Bristol, 2020; Jones et al., 2019), there continues to be a shortage of Black male teachers serving in education. Additionally, scholars have reported on the demonization and criminalization of Black youth identity in K-12 and identifying who they ought to be as educators (Bogert & Hancock, 2020; Lynn, 2006; Stack, 1974). Beyond racial diversity leading the classroom, education has also continued to seek male teachers. However, elementary male teachers only make up 11.4% of elementary education (Taie & Goldring, 2020). Drawing knowledge of this information, although some males are present in elementary, there remains a lack of Black male presence in elementary education (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Meidl, 2019).

The purpose of this study was to examine how ecological systems influence Black males' journey as elementary teachers and explore what influenced them to teach in an early childhood education setting. Further, because this population of educators is highly sought after but primarily absent from the field, it was necessary to factor in how current BMETs navigate the ecological systems that may play into their experiences and decisions (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Bush & Bush, 2013; Meidl, 2019), and to offer insight into their narratives. Finally, this study

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

sought to unravel participant's stories and gain a deeper understanding using Endarkened Storywork (Toliver, 2021). Centering on Black storytelling traditions through fictional stories, it allowed these BMETs to bring life to their stories through reflective experiences, journaling, and submitted artifacts (music, photos, objects, etc.). Additionally, crystallization occurred while analyzing the participant's data submissions, which helped the researcher critically examine their stories through multiple realities.

Chapter four, provided the study's findings and further discusses the relation between the data collected and previous literature. Utilizing fictional stories through the lens of Endarkened Storywork as a methodology added depth to participants' stories. Incorporating Toliver's (2021) Endarkened Storywork advanced the African American Male Theory framework by showcasing the holistic experiences of these six BMET's as they experience and understand life throughout their navigation of ecological systems. Furthering situating, Bush and Bush's (2013) concept that to understand Black boys and men fully, one must analyze their lives through ecological systems to ensure every aspect of their lives is shown and felt. The researcher situates the methodology through AAMT to advance the study's purpose.

This chapter is organized through six short fictional stories of each participant, depicting each participant's experiences as an elementary teacher and their decision to teach in the elementary setting. From the data collected, six titles emerged from the participants' stories that built on the components of AAMT and Endarkened Storywork through the works of recentering, remembering, recovering, revisioning, and reintegrating their narratives into academic research. Those story titles are (1) "*The Breakroom Crew*," (2) "*Family Block Party*," (3) "*Garden @ War*," (4) "*10-year Football Reunion*," (5) "*Xscape*," and (6) "*Barbershop Talk*." The researcher staged

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

each participant's story in spaces, times, and locations of each participant within their life that span over several weeks.

To promote crystallization (Ellingson, 2017), the researcher provided descriptive introductions to the threads and patterns found throughout the data collected, connecting the threads and patterns to the study's two research questions. Finally, the researcher provided a discussion section outlining the threads and patches that answered the study's two research questions—supported by significant statements and direct quotes from the study participants.

The Breakroom Crew: Mr. Steve's Story

Mr. Steve! From my vision, it appeared to be one of my coworkers, Ms. Washington, my co-teacher from afar. My palms were extremely sweaty, and I began to go in a daze. Do my coworkers know who I am? Well, I guess I better speak before they walk away. Hey Ms. Washington, how are you? Ms. Washington responded—"We are heading to the staff meeting; would you like to join?" I was a little hesitant because people do not usually talk to me. But I quickly responded, "Sure." As I slowly walked with the other coworkers, I felt a sense of sorrow; people never invited me anywhere. "Mr. Steve, how's everything going this year?" Even while in a daze, I quickly responded to disguise my timid personality. "Whew, it's been a year, and these children and their parents have been a piece of work. However," rubs hand on head, "it has been a journey that I have enjoyed." Ms. Washington responds, "You are fitting right in." Wow, I remember when my gifted teacher would tell me the same thing in elementary.

Walking toward our table, we were handed red tickets at the door for door prizes. Addressed over the mic, please pull those tickets out at the end of the meeting. I never win things like this, so I put it in my bag. I learned not to get my hopes up on things a long time ago. Finally, a subtle whisper by the secretary graced my melanated ear; Mr. Steve, please take your

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

seat; they are about to start. While seated next to the breakroom crew, as they call themselves, the chatter ceased when the principal graced the room. Being a naturally shy person, I only glanced over and put my head down as he walked the room. He commanded the room with a brisk walk, stern voice, and calm demeanor. The undertone at the table on everyone's face spoke a language that a few would understand. When I picked my head completed up, we all grinned and turned our chairs inward.

The principal masculine voice carried over the room, "Welcome to the annual teacher reception meeting this year; you all have made it through a tumultuous and stressful year. A global pandemic, mass shootings, and social injustice attempted to steal our joy, but you all made a way." The side eyes at the table told a tale of discomfort, aggravation, and agony, yet no one spoke a word. This group of colleagues made me feel accepted and welcomed, which I hadn't felt since elementary. While the principal words played in the background of my thoughts, Ms. Washington's eyes caught my eyes and pointed to the front. I quickly jumped out of a daze and noticed my name on the board. The Chief Academic Officer, Mr. Wilson, signaled me to come to the front, as I had won the trivial question for the month. Internally thinking, this is awkward, I have to walk in front of all these folks. I couldn't feel my legs as I sprinted to the front of the room. I was met by the principal, who looked me in the eye and said: "Show that amazing smile, you are doing a great job."

Days like this reminded me of my purpose and that I was an inspiration to others. Then, Mr. Wilson surprised me with a book titled, "Dear teacher, A Celebration of People Who Inspire Us" and took a picture with me. He then asked me to speak, and I stared at him. Totally missing what he asked me to say, I asked him to repeat what he said. Mr. Wilson reiterated: "Would you please share how you have incorporated hip-hop in your lesson?" A slight chuckle occurred, and

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

I grabbed the microphone. The previous nine weeks, the students and I engaged in learning about the creation of waves. Through my quirkiness and sense of humor, I felt it was important to merge the worlds of education and hip-hop. We connected specific song lyrics with the term wave, which one of the students eagerly raised their hand and recited: "waves on swim, so they hate on him." The famous Nicki Minaj 2010, *Your Love*, song enticed the students to want to know more about waves. As I paused, the entire room stood to their feet to applaud my efforts. In the midst of trying to find my words, a tear rolled down my right cheek, and all I could utter was a soft "thank you" to everyone. I quickly handed the microphone back to Mr. Wilson and proceeded to my chair.

"Are you ok, Mr. Steve?" The ladies at the table asked in concern. "Yes, if you all do not mind, I would love to have lunch in my room after this." They all nodded in agreeance. Then, attempting to gather myself, the secretary, full of excitement, states: "Pull out those door prize tickets." We were sitting so long that I had forgotten about the door prize. Combing through my bag for the ticket, the numbers stated 888; when I looked down at the ticket, those were the numbers printed on my ticket. I jumped up; "Hey, that's me," chuckling, walking to the front to retrieve the tumbler with the slogan, "keep calm and pretend it's on the lesson plan." I felt so special. The cheerful voices in the background concluded the meeting with housekeeping rules for the end of the year.

"Welcome to my safety net ladies, let me move these boxes out y'all way so y'all can sit down." The ladies began to chatter and outwardly whispered you are now a part of the breakroom crew. "This is our haven when everything around us is chaotic." I awkwardly stared in amusement but felt appreciated by their generosity to be sociable. So, what was all that back

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

there in the meeting, Mr. Steve? Overwhelmed by the question presented, “I state this may be a long-winded answer, but here we go.”

Back then, we were dealing with the grueling death of Alton Sterling, so we bonded because of the daily whirlwind of conflicts around us. In grade school, the enforcer teachers decided I was too advanced for the regular curriculum, so they tested me for gifted and talented classes. No lie, I was salty. I left my neighborhood friends and moved to the gifted program with folks who despised my folks. Once I would link with my neighborhood friends on the bus, they ostracize me because they felt I was a trader, and I forgot where I came from. Internally, I struggled to find my place and community, and no one liked me. The room grew cold, and the silence could be cut with a sharp knife. Holding my tears, I continued the conversation. During Black History Month, my English enforcer prompted us to write about current events that plagued our community. I wrote what I felt plagued our community and received an F as a grade. The enforcer passively told me that I didn't know my history nor was my information correct. I was so hurt, before critical race theory became this debate topic, no one was teaching us our history, so how can an enforcer tell me such a thing.

Ms. Washington's hand gracefully moved back and forth with a stern movement to soothe my hurt, and I continued to tell my story. Back then, my classmates teased my speech impediment and cyberbullied me until I became cold. I remained to myself all my life, so to have others see me now warms my heart. I had to pull myself out of a dark place, so you all's love and friendship mean so much to me right now. Visibly paying attention to the breakroom crew, I could feel the synergy of their heartbeat and how my story impacted them, but it also reminded me that my heart was beating a mile a minute. However, I am taking my life back today, as I spoke firmly in my Louisiana dialect. Wiping my face with my hand, the Black history painting

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

the students painted with a Black woman with words uttering her mouth spoke to me, "Who are you?"

I stood up and firmly shared with the ladies I am a Black male who happens to be an elementary educator and a part of the LGBTQ+ community. In addition, today is a special day and my 25th birthday; I am reminded of my purpose, worth, and power. The ladies dropped their belongings and hugged me so tight that I almost turned purple. The ladies' voices grew in harmony as they affirmed who I am.

The next day, as I prepared for the final day with my students, I turned the radio on, and there was a beautiful tribute to Alton Sterling, a native of the area. This was a subtle reminder of why I am needed in this space and the classroom to teach my people the truth. I began to hum a song that reminds me of my students, "Education is my Brain Power." The students stormed the hall with lightning speed running over everyone in sight, the breakroom crew and I glanced at one another and slightly shared a few words. As I walked into my classroom, the class erupted in, "Good Morning, Mr. Steve!" I followed up and asked the class, "What's our class motto?" Collectively, on one accord, they began to rap the words, "I aspire to inspire to learn and teach the truth, even when you Can't See Me." The class erupts in joy; as I turn my head suddenly, I felt the presence of my ancestors smiling around me.

Family Block Party: Coach Story

"Coach, I will need those lesson plans by next Monday." "Ok, Mr. Perry, Ima have them in by Tuesday or Wednesday." A burst of laughter was shared between us both. Mr. Perry responds I see you want to be the comic relief today. We both shared a mutual glance at one another. "Are you doing ok, Mr. Perry?" "I've seen better days, but I'm making it; it's always a blessing to stop by and feel your sunflower energy." "Well, thank you, Mr. Perry, I'm just a ball

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

of comic relief for all of those I touch.” “That you are,” Mr. Perry responds as he walks toward the door. “Oh, before I go, I’ve been made aware of a Jones’ 50th family reunion, Aunt Bertha making that sweet pound cake, so sweet taste like the added sugar to corn flakes, again?” “Mr. Perry, she’s made five already.” “I may let you slide with the lesson plans if you bring me a few plates, but make sure one plate is sweet pound cake. I have my vanilla ice cream in the fridge waiting.” “Wait, didn’t you say you were on a diet, Mr. Perry, or that was to talk that sweet talk cause you were trying to mack with them student’s parents over there in three unit.” He chuckles and rubs his hands together. Shaking my head, I laugh, “you are a mess, but I got you! See you next week.”

Rushing and packing my bags, I was reminded of the numerous administrative task I had not completed. Stands with an arm on my hip, I reminded myself of my God *Haha* will make a way. Turns lights out in classroom. Ok, let me get out of here.

Loud pipes, horses, four-wheelers, BBQ smoke, liquor, and loud music that’s my type of party! It’s the Jones’ 50th family reunion block party, and we are back where it all started. Of course, it all started back in the 20s, when grandma and grandpa worked on a plantation that ain’t offer them anything but twenty-five cents and a can of beans. Grandma would get mad cause Pawpaw would be smiling and grinning in them folk’s face in that house up there but act crazy when he gets home. Even through the rocky times, they kept it together, and the legacy they created made me who I am today.

Growing up in a small city in Louisiana was not for the weak. We grew up in Roe, Louisiana where bullets grazed the air like mosquito repellent, and powder hit the streets like a new Beyoncé track. Shoes would dangle from the electric poles, and trash would fill the abandoned houses and businesses in the area. See, when Pawpaw and Momo lived in this

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

thriving community, it used to be a family-oriented neighborhood, with booming story fronts owned by us, gas used to be a quarter, and fresh sweet pastries served after five. Of course, Momo would have to go up there cause paw-paw would linger around to wait for the *Sunday's best* to show up with their colorful hats and slits in their dress. My aunt said Momo would clock him in the head to remind him who's who. But that was the good ole days before our communities became wastelands.

My memories in this place were far from colorful; however, the community values the legacy around here. We may not have had much, but we did have love, determination, and God's strength, and we made that work. Growing up, I had health complications as a kid, but my family and friends never made me feel like an outcast. They would often crack jokes, and I would have to remind them that I was a comedian at the end of the day. One time my cousins came over with Dixie cups, with the sweet syrup and fruit in them, the kind Ms. Sue made, and we would watch *Martin* perfecting our roasting talents. We would often crack light-hearted jokes, and I would have to remind them that I was the real comedian at the end of the day.

One thing I loved about growing up in this community was that they all nurtured, fed, celebrated, and supported me. Now, that did not come with discipline; they would whoop me if I said something slick. However, they taught me the true definition of love and community, and that's what I share with my students. Ok, enough of memory lane; here's Aunt Shirley and my loud cousins walking up.

"Baby, how are them folks treating you at that school up there?" My aunt asked as she was setting the fresh sweet pound cake down. "Do I need to come up there to handle them?" I respond, "They are treating me just fine; I had one parent try me because she didn't want her daughter in a male teacher's class. Unfortunately, she failed to realize that our principal

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

intentionally placed males in each grade level, so she didn't have a choice unless she wanted to remove her from the school.” Responses from the kitchen erupted, “it sounds like you had to get her together, I instantly responded, “and I did!” “But overall, they allow me to be creative and involved at the school, especially with my own, so I love it. My co-teacher said he had a rough time at his previous school across them tracks, but you know them folks, not our kind.” My mother and her girls sitting at the kitchen table to my left, ear hustling, quickly turned around and said, “Yea, because you heard what happened to Mike at that other school.” A collective sigh, chuckles, and humph sounds filled the room, but no one elaborated. “Well, momma, we ain't engaging in them folks’ business here.” A collective sigh occurred amongst the group. My mom friend Ms. Sheila whispered, “We are so proud you went to college and made something of yourself, and you are not out there on the corner.” An interruption from across the room grumpily yelled, “It’s time to eat,” said my cousin, who had just flown in and appeared to be still hung over from the night before. “Baby, go get the folks from outside, and oh, you are in charge of the saying grace,” my mother insisted.

Approaching the rotten screen door, I could hear and smell Uncle Baxtor in the background yelling, turn the music up, instantly thinking, I don't know why he came here full of himself trying to dictate the function. “Uncle Baxtor, tell folks come eat!” Uncle Baxtor abruptly yells while walking, “Y’all Black ass need to come eat,” as he wobbles into the house. “I told them but let me get in this cool air; this Louisiana humidity is smothering.” Everybody bomb rushes into the small square kitchen space, alright, folks grab each other hands, everyone visibly sweating due to granny nem not having central air in here. Ok, now bow y’all heads folks, wiping my forehead as salty sweat drips around my lip, Cousin Elroy erupts in prayer:

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

“As we bow our heads, we pray a special prayer for the 50th Jones Family Reunion. A special prayer to momo and paw paw for the legacy around the room. In addition to blessing the legs under the tables, I meant on the table. Bless food and bless our stomachs cause we gone eat you hear me! Amen!”

Aunt Bertha's grandkids began coughing, suddenly the room silenced. My mother quickly stated, “Aht! None of that in here!” Plates began to roll, chatter and laughter began, and after a while, we migrated outside.

I heard someone yelling faintly Mr. Coach, Mr. Coach!!! I quickly turned around, and it was my young kings from my class. My momma told me she saw their moms in the local supermarket; she must have told them to come to get a plate. Aunt Bertha begins to outwardly scream, “Coach, them the kings you raising.” “Yes, ma'am,” I respond. “Tell them to come here and get some plates; we have more than enough,” Aunt Bertha insisted. Then, as kids, they began to dance and show the old folks the new dances they saw on Tik Tok. Watching my family and kings engage brought tears to my eyes and soul. These moments reminded me of why I serve the students I do. Those young kings often don't have the love and support my family showed them today, but I make sure I expose them to everything I can. Because we are more than what they paint us out to be. Before I knew it, I felt the ground shake, and the kids broke out in a fraternity step we showed them at school, and all cameras were out. Glancing at the moment, I noticed my aunts and momma were holding their phones upside down; (technology is not their forte); they were delighted and proud of my impact.

Over the mic, I heard my uncles and cousins calling names, and a firm grip was placed around my shoulder before I could turn my head. A soft and gentle voice whispered in my ear, “Look what you have accomplished.” “Ms. Samantha!” I screamed in excitement. “How did you

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

know about our family function?" My mom and Ms. Samantha made eye contact and winked at one another. I chuckled and softly stated, "A mother knows best." Ms. Samantha was my elementary teacher who exposed me to opportunities my family couldn't expose me to due to the lack of resources. Although she didn't resemble us, my family embraced her with open arms. I cried in her arms many mornings and evenings because although I loved our community-- dodging bullets and hiding in bathrooms were detrimental to my spirit. Sitting on the frail wooden bench connected to a concrete slab on the side of the family house, examining the scenery as the wind blew in a northeast direction, a tear fell on the right side of my face. Not because I was sad, but because I realized I had found my purpose and passion. The world is an oyster, and my kids are that oyster. No matter where I go, I know that I have impacted them to be and do anything they want.

"Mr. Coach!" I quickly turned my head, wiping my tears, and saw my first set of fifth graders standing in the driveway with their high school graduation gowns on. "What in the world, now how did y'all know we were throwing a funky two-step in these back parts here?" One of the students, Darrin, responded, "First off, what is a funky two-step? You know the streets talk, Coach." The collective began to laugh. We stopped by to let you know we all graduated and wanted to thank you for your continuous love and support. I stood there shocked and excited, but no words came out. I grabbed them and held them so tight. "Darrin, you are not too old to get a beating; you know what I mean by a funky two-step." Keisha reminded the group, "Everyone knows Mr. Coach is the comical comeback king." We all shared a joyful laugh and hugged again. As they migrated to the food and festivities, I was reminded that this is THE ME THEY CAN'T SEE. Uncle Baxtor walked over with a forty attached to his hand, shook my hand, leaving it a bit sweaty, and said, "Your story continues, brother man, continue the legacy

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

of building community as a powerful Black male." To be a Black male educator, especially in elementary, engaging in these moments made me realize that I am in the right place and these kids are my world.

While the evening came to a close, today's memories brought tears of joy, smiles, and photos that will forever be engraved in Jones' 50th family block party. As my late grandmother would always tell me during our lunchtime kitchen table talks in this very place, "may the work I've done speak for me."

The next day, driving down the street, the winds were grazing my car briskly, but the rhythm of the wind reminded me of this song we were taught in 6th grade. "I can learn, I ought to learn, my mind is a pearl, I can learn anything in this world." As I walked into my classroom, the class erupted in "Good Morning, Mr. Coach!" I respond with a "Good Morning, class stand and recite the class motto?" Carl one of the young men who frequently visits my home stood up to lead the motto. "It doesn't matter where you come from, but it's all about where you're going because this is The Me You Can't See." The class erupts in joy; as I turn my head suddenly, I felt the presence of my ancestors smiling around me.

Garden @ War: Joe Clark Story

The last student slowly walked beside me, tapped my hand softly, and said, "Mr. Joe, I feel ugly. Instantly, I grabbed his face and was reminded of myself. I was once him, touching my melanated skin, not feeling beautiful, and looking in the mirror and seeing no one. That hurt me. Holding his round face, the blood in his body felt jittery yet filled with emotions; he burst out in tears. I held him and reminded him that he was the most beautiful person and do not let anyone tell him differently. I felt at this moment that I was feeding my younger self and watering my garden. Mentally thinking, dang, we don't get told these things. At this point, my head is

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

pounding, and my energy meter has hit a low. The inner voices in my head are yelling, "This is why I want to leave; I am surrounded by kids that remind me of me." Realizing my class was well ahead of us, I sprinted to the area to ensure my kids were being civilized model students.

I yelled, "Hush Up! Line up one behind another and follow one behind another." A student frustrated states, "Mr. Joe, Craig is hitting me"; "class if you can hear me breathe two times." Breathe! Breathe! "Good job, now let's head to the garden area, and I would like for you to act like you know how to act." "Mr. Joe," Kesha yells; "it's so hot outside; we are gonna be sweating bullets in this Texas heat." My response, "good, you will understand the feeling of those chained and shipped here." "Mr. Joe," another student, proceeds to call my name. "Please stop calling my name." The students proceeded to walk forward quietly, as they walked passed me, I could feel each of them burning a hole through my face. Kesha mumbles, "Mr. Joe is so mean!" While the students walked to the garden, Mr. Russell stopped me abruptly. "Mr. Joe, I noticed your test scores falling this year, what is going on?" I respond, "Mr. Russell I am dealing with a lot, and I am trying my best." "Well, your best is not good enough and how do you let kids rule your class, those are kids, brother," Mr. Russell responds. I respond with aggression, "Ok, sir!" Walking off slowly outwardly laughing, but inwardly crying, I could do nothing but examine my students' play within the dead garden. Going off into a daze, I questioned my purpose and why I am being singled out when the bar for us is set so low, Kanye shrugs. Then awkwardly remembering the dreadful journal assignment I was tasked with by my counselor the day before. Internal sigh, another day, another reminder of how I am miserable.

May 28

*Rhythm and blues is in the air, and, of course, mamma P is cooking my favorite tonight,
Red beans and rice, sweet cornbread-- like big mamma used to make-- and cabbage. I*

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

can already sense an extended trip to the bathroom in my future. Any who, I took a significant step today, I talked to my counselor, and she suggested that journaling might help me process my experiences. Now she knows we do not seek therapy; that's why we go to church. When momma nem was growing up during the Civil Rights Era in a coastal city in Texas, and they took the brunt of the beatings, being water hosed, spit on walking to school, and even witnessed crosses being burned. Although Critical Race Theory (CRT) is being scrutinized years later, momma always found a way to remind us during dinner time that the world will do anything to strip us from what we know to be true. Sometimes I am confused about why momma plopped us in Arizona's suburban neighborhood in the late 90s - early 2000s. There were barely any folks there that looked like us. Even when I asked, she would sternly respond, "don't ask me why we are here; just know I don't care about them folks; they ain't our kind, and you are better." Now that I am older, I know her decision and actions were based on providing a new life for us with more opportunities than she had. Even though she hard on us. She made a way out of no way for my siblings and me. The strength she had, plays through my veins like blood reaching the arteries; it's my lifeline and my reasoning for being the type of educator I am. It's also why I have an old soul and love watching "Lean on Me" whenever my friends and I gather. I loved when the principal asked the young man, "You smoke crack dont ya; you smoke crack dont ya, look at me boy?" First, it's the way the principal forcefully asks him that makes it so humorous, and I love dry humor. But then I began to think about my dad, who was on drugs, so my emotions ran rampant, and I fell into deep thoughts. What if that was his only escape? Why are drugs in our community?

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Does the world care about us? Kanye shrugs, one will never know and I am exhausted think about it, honestly.

Anyways, BC, the media, and school district said being an educator would exude all of these perks for Endarkened folks. But quiet as it's kept, I am not wanted in this space, and it feels like a prison cell, so what's the point? Oh, and today, I learned that smearing poop on the wall was a thing; I don't know why Lakeith thought that was ok to do as a Kindergartener. But, why am I not surprised? When I called the boys out, I asked them who did it, but Lakeith stood there and cried, he didn't even say anything, but I already knew. Of course, his mom became outraged and withdrew him from our school, but what's new like Megan Thee Stallion says. Endarkened boys are never afforded the ability to implement their own consequences.

This entire year has been shitty. But being around kids has been a liberating experience; through this experience I learned to be softened, nurturing, and loving even when they were full of tears and boogers. Years ago, Mr. G my previous grade schoolteacher, he was the first Endarkened teacher who made me feel worthy even when I didn't feel worthy. Because of his passion, intentionality, and relationality, it carried over into my garden of tools that allowed me to pour into my kids. The world feels males should be hard and I hate status quo norms and terms; those kids allow me to be an authoritative figure, but they allow and know that I am a safe figure. And to think I found this job out of luck through networking. Guess this was meant for me at this current time. Slowly holding the pen upward pondering on this experience.

Then BCs have the nerve to want me to be the accountability police, the hard figure, and the structure guru. For example, the administrators assigned the Endarkened students to

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

me so I can reprimand them and have them in check. This has been for the last several years. All I hear is, Oooo, Mr. Joe, you are so structured with the kids, that's what they need. Ugh, never mind, "I am willingly participating in a system that is designed to be destructive" talking aloud. Do I look like their grape picker, LOL? At one point, my Endarkened folks were, but I'm no picker, so BC may want to leave me be so I can carry out my slave duties for them and the students.

In other news, going to the motherland for abroad decades ago, I realized the beauty of my Endarkened people and the value of Endarkened culture, traditions, and customs, we bring to others and ourselves. I mean we do rule the world, right? Each day I wake up, I am reminded of my ancestor's contributions, and let me be the first to say they need their darn flowers immediately. I wasn't always at this point, growing up I though being aligned with traditional standard was right thing to do, but whew, I was wrong as hell. Being around them, folks made me feel ugly, I didn't even know my own beauty. So, every day that I am in that hell hole, I have to remind myself that this work is bigger than me and my folx need me in this space. Who am I kidding, I honestly did not want to be an educator, but I needed that bread cause I got fired from my gig after graduating. While the dog squeezes the dog toy making noise in the background, my body tenses up, BCs are so rude, rolls eyes so darn hard. Rocking back and forth in the rocking chair, my eyes glanced back to my letter. I am all over the place here with my thoughts. Pushing my fist into the bed. I am just so frustrated!

Even though I did not plan to become a teacher, the days where I'm able to merge my intellect, background, my flyness, and new techniques to engage with students has lit my fire on many occasions. But lately, dealing with daily pressures and society's bullshit

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

every other day I just sigh, I don't have it in me. Then to top it off, I asked Kesha the other day what she thought of the curriculum. She laughed in my face and pranced off, mumbling, "well I don't know because what's the point of the curriculum anyway, it's not meant for me." I stared and my face frowned in disbelief. What could I possibly say? I mean folks on tv complaining about Critical Race Theory, Fox News overtly saying they don't matter. Like, that shit broke my spirit, because I can't do anything to change reality.

Honestly, the truth is, even coming to be my children superman and try to save them in their universe; BC continues this monolithic narrative, without addressing real things. Visibly cringing writing, what about our gardens? They need water too, but then again, the kids' gardens aren't even watered. Deeply thinking, "At our core, we are Endarkened boys too." But hold on, Mr. Russell from work is calling me to patronize me about being a poor disciplinarian. I have had ten fights in my classroom this week, yes 10... I shall be back to finish this letter.

Love, Joe.

Rubbing my nose as I turn over, think is that sizzling bacon and eggs? Hops up immediately and head to the kitchen. I love coming home, Momma. Momma P responds jokingly, "Yea cause they can't cook like me in them streets." "Momma! You know you a fool in the kitchen."

Grab's plate and heads back to the room. Sitting on the bed eating, I heard the turning of pages on the floor, which happened to be my journal flopping around because of my ceiling fan.

Crap! Crap! I need to finish this.

Grabbing my headphones and phone, a smile grew on my face. Let's get it!

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

June 4

Now how I forgot to come back to the journal is beyond the scope of my mind at this point. But Mr. Russell had me so pissed off that I had to call my friends, stand on sofas at the local lounge, and scream F.N.F. to the top of my lungs. I just don't know why he and I are not meshing, but I do know that he almost got a Will Smith experience. For context, Mr. Russell, is about 6'4, dresses like a preppy kid, and monitors the halls like he owns the place because he's the lead assistant principal. He's always on me about my job performance, and "effectively disciplining" but I never see him doing anything to be a model example. One thing that aggravates me is that he talks to me like he's, my owner; a single mother raised me; I am not his child or puppet. I told him one day before leaving work; you can have a pissing contest with yourself because you have failed me, and I walked off. When I got home, I thought he might have had the same experience growing up in education too, but why treat me like that? Before the night ended, I remember like it was yesterday, I received the most daunting call any child ever wants to receive.

Phone rings

Momma P: Are you sitting down son?

Joe: No, I am preparing for tomorrow's workday. Where are you? I was trying to see if that was you walking in the door.

Momma P: Yes, please come to the living room.

Joe: Ok.

I walk into the living and dining room, and my mom slowly puts her purse down and says, "I have something to tell you." I immediately felt a ball in my stomach; I responded, "What's going on, mom?" Joe, your father, has passed away. It felt as though the room

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

was spinning; all I felt was my knees buckling. The comfort of my mom's arms was the only thing I could feel because I was numb to the world. How could I push through the next day knowing my dad had passed away? All I could think about was how this world destroyed my dad's livelihood, and I couldn't do anything about it. My dad was dead, and all I have of him are broken memories.

The next day at work, the kids were running amuck, and I spazzed out and called them animals. I was so furious and overwhelmed with emotions I walked out of class. I went to speak with Mr. Russell since his father had recently passed, and I knew I needed some support, and I felt he would be able to provide me with some comforting words. Well, it must have been April fools because he did the complete opposite, and at that point, I felt so weak and broken that I cried all the way home. I felt so bad that I called my students animals, and I pondered how I perpetuated the same behavior as those other folks.

When I walked into class the next day, I darn near threw an apology party for my students because I hated that I participated in anti-black rhetoric. When you make it to a certain level in life, some of us have had out-of-body experiences, and we forget who we are and begin believing the other side is the right side. At this moment, I realized the importance of my upbringing, my abroad experience, and how the underpinnings of those experiences brought me back to my Nigrescence.

I am going heal.

Love, Joe.

As the sweet sounds of Devotion by Earth, Wind, and Fire and Outstanding by GAP Band fill the background of my apartment, I tell my momma nem this an Endarkend spiritual, y'all don't know nothing about that you too young, chuckles.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Walking back to my room smiling, thinking my counselor would be so proud of me. I am really into my reflective letter during this time..... A rush of emotions filled my body.

Watching the rain hit the windowpane and bounce into the flower pot to my left, it dawned on me. Even though I am sick and tired, this has been healing and reflective.

Picks up a ballpoint pen and legal pad.

June 11

All this time, I have come to understand that my life has always been in the space of being beautifully broken. When I felt I was ugly and abnormal, education was an enforcer and comfort at the same time. However, it was because of folx like, Mr. G, who reached into my soul and watered my garden. And it's what has kept me going when working with the kids. Mr. G helped me get involved in numerous organizations, gave me the world, and actually saw me in high school, when so many others looked over me. And even though home life was trash, and nobody took the time to pay attention, Mr. G saw me in ways that I needed. It was something about his passion that allowed me to see myself, be vulnerable, and believe in myself. I carry that mentality with me every day; even when my students feel I am hard on them, I am just pushing them because that's what Mr. G did for me.

Yet, even when all structures break me to the point of no return, I am reminded of the beautiful pieces of my Blackness that have helped heal my inner self. So now I am faced with the elephant in the room, will I return to jail? Well, the verdict is I am looking for my great escape. It was a beautiful experience, but I am signing out of this broken space where I do not feel safe because I am more than what this experience has provided or told me I should be. However, remember, you are the most handsome and beautiful

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

person you will ever meet; your Blackness is a gift to all. You deserve the world; now go conquer it in this next dimension. Ok, I smell my leftovers burning in the microwave; we have game night tonight, so I gots to prepare to make a few renege in our family spades night.

Love, Joe.

Sun filling the room, as I rolled out of bed, crust in my eyes and empty cans lying around, I realized I was late for work; what's new! However, clears throat, we had a time last night!

As I slowly drove to work, I pondered on the pieces of me that THEY CAN'T SEE. Good morning class: class responds, "Good Morning, Mr. Joe Clark!" I respond, "So, what's our class motto?" Kesha stands up to lead the motto, "we are afforded the opportunity to express, actively engage, and most importantly, bring joy to myself and those around me." The class erupts in joy; as I turn my head suddenly, I felt the presence of my ancestors smiling around me.

10-Year Football Reunion: Coach Will Story

The South Louisiana Broncos are down at the Hornets ' yard line with 10 seconds to go in the fourth. This has been a hail of a nail-biter to make it to the semi-finals. Here we go, fans, all of it on the line; if the Broncos score, they will beat the hornets 10-7. The ball is spiked and Cody slats across the end zone. The crowd erupts, "Ball Game." Immense sadness on the Bronco's side as the ball was intercepted and Pick 6! Sports anchor comes on the screen, "those Endarkened athletes at Southside Hornet Hill are a force to be wrecking with this year." The tv abruptly turns off. Coach Will then states, "Well, kids, that's how my championship dream ended ten years ago in south Louisiana. Can you believe it?" One of the kindergartens slurring said, "So Coach Will, were you sad?" "I was crushed, my guy, but I now get to make you all champions

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

every day, so it has balanced itself out.” I guess, in a way, this is indirectly pouring back into myself in a way I didn't imagine.

I am jolly and excited about leaving work today; I get to link back up with the bros in South Louisiana. Departing from the school, bags, let's hit the road, I10 by 10. Six hours later, driving to the spot, sirens rang loudly in my rearview mirror, riding bumping dat Boosie. One second. Two seconds. Three seconds. Four seconds. Five seconds. Six seconds. Eight seconds. Nine seconds. What felt like nine minutes and 29 seconds was activating. My heart sank to my ass; I immediately changed lanes, maintaining my hands on the steering wheel, and not making sudden moves, palms sweating profusely. Thinking of all the blood, shots, and yells, my body went into shock, my brain forgetting what my parents taught me if I was pulled over. Quickly the police sped passed me; I tapped the will and thought, looking in the rearview mirror, “thank God for sparing me from a hashtag and the grave today.” Finally, coming out of a daze, I pushed the gas pedal harder and scrolled through my playlist to play my favorite gospel song, “*Order My Steps*,” by GMWA Women of Worship. My heart slowly converted to a regular heartbeat; I pulled up in my coach's driveway. Shaking off the jitters, I walked into the house yelling, “what's good, my bruddas?” Embracing my brothers with some love. Little did they know my life flashed in front of my eyes.

Coach pulls me to the side and begins thanking me for becoming a teacher and coaching a little league youth team in Texas. Praising him and his mentorship I told him, “I was inspired by your leadership, discipline, and guidance, so I am just paying it forward, Coach Bull. It took a while for the teacher gig, but when it happened, I jumped at it, quitting my gig at the warehouse immediately. Coach Bull, those kids are interesting, but I feel like a teddy bear now. They be getting me gifts, writing me letters, and talking about life; they love me bruh. The stern nature of

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

my personality provides a discipline that teaches them consequences, and they love it, man. Like I don't have to force anything on them.” Coach Bull hits his chest man and says, “This what it's all about, and I am proud of you and your growth. Now go over there and reminisce with the guys.” “Ayo Cody, my kids, said you let them down on that drop ball ten years ago. Don't shoot the messenger, though, homie.” Cody chuckles and responds animatedly, “real funny, Will.” “You know I'm messing with you, pimp; how you been, man?” I interrupted and said, “Yo, ten whole years, bruh.” Cody responds, “You remember elementary in Ms. Susan's class?” I begin to react and awkwardly respond; “sure, I remember our jokester moments in that class, but bro, you know she walked over us often when our hands were raised, or we needed help.” Both of us grinned and quickly changed the topic and took a shot.

I asked, “You fading through the spot next week for the class reunion?” Cody excitedly responds, “Man, you know we in there like swimwear!” Energetically responding, “Oh, it's up like Cardi B!” “Cody, do you remember the handshake, folk?” Cody rebuttals and asks the same question. We both laughed and walked to the other room to show the guys. Dap (2x), Clap (2x), Move hands in cross-motion, Jigg (2x), YAAAAA!

I delightfully asked, “What y'all boys know bout that?” The room immense in hateration. I went on to ask, “Man, can y'all all believe we back in one space? It would have been a pleasure for "forty" to be in this space with us, but we can feel his presence. Shot's up for our guy!” “Will, how's being on the other side?” One of my fellow teammates asks. “Honestly, it has been rewarding and beneficial, especially because I predominantly work with our kids, so it be litty. We did field day this past week, and I was super pumped to see their competitive spirit all week; it fed my inner football cup. I mean, you know it's moments that my coworkers raise their eyebrows at certain things, yet, they let me be, so I can't complain. However, those kids are

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

learning from the media mean I ask myself if I am smarter than a fifth-grader. I have to tell them don't grow up too fast. The girls typically ignore me, but y'all know that's a delicate situation." They collectively sighed and responded, "More power to you, my brother."

I went on to say, "I love engaging with the kids, and the guy's cling to me like glue. My little homie he's on my basketball team, and I see his potential, but he's around the wrong crowd. Even reflecting, I'm realizing how much we were in those spaces growing up. Every day I see him, I ask him do you want to go right or do you want to go left? You don't have to go down the most traveled route. Of course, he fiddles with his hands and hold his head down. However, I know that everybody has to take their journey, so I try to understand and leave the door open for him to ponder on what I'm instilling into him. Being around y'all taught me how to be a champion in my way, and now I'm trying to develop little champions." Coach Bull responds, "Oh, we got us a philosopher now." The room fills with laughter. I respond, "real funny, bullhead ah."

After heading out the door and quickly turning around like a Jay-Z meme, I noticed I had forgotten my alpha bag. I responded loudly, "I'm big tripping; I need that! I couldn't leave without that bag, man; that bag gets me through my day-to-day." Cody begins cackling, asking, man, where you going with this man bag. "Chill out, that bag be having me feel like a king. But naw, man, actually, this bag motivated me to go for more and believe in myself. Plus, it reminds me of the impact and step I took out on faith when I joined my fraternity in college. It pushed me to grow and explore the left road I was skeptical about traveling down. You know many of us don't make it this far. So yes, it's my man bag chump. I'm out, fellas, but before I go, shots up to the best damn ballers in Z-Town!"

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Driving to my parent's home, I looked in the rearview mirror and uttered, "I am thankful for my experience, God; you ordered my steps. "It wasn't easy, but it was worth the lessons I've learned. I'm proud of the leader I have become. Being a part of a brotherhood and sports team guided my path to make the right turn and align my life according to god's purpose. Pulling up in the driveway, and tapping on the steering wheel, I had a thought. Like I am basically in a space by myself, I have the wisdom that can help my students, particularly my Black boys, understand that they are still human beings, you know. Like for my fifth grader, he may have made wrong decisions, but he can get better from it and learn from it, you know, like Will Smith helped the zombies in I am Legend. Let's go, this some legendary shit! Ok, let me grab this bag and go inside and get some sleep.

Grabbing my bag, the following day, I was rejuvenated to make an impact after last night's reunion. Those guys have played a significant role in my development. In addition, to being a part of my fraternity and developing my leadership identity. Tapping on the steering wheel, I realize I took a left to make way for myself, but that's not the me they see. The journey had losses and lessons, but the growth built me into my version of a champion. Now I am injecting lessons into their brain that can impact their decision to go right.

Setting up for my classes today, the first class entered the gym chatting. "Good Morning, Coach Will!" I respond with Wassup champions! Before we begin our dodgeball activity today, what's our class motto? The second graders off beat voices states, "when we understand (understand), listen (listen), and apply (apply) effort (effort), we (we) become (become) the (the) champions (champions)..... meant (meant) to (to) be (beeeee)." I respond, "their y'all go; music to my ears." Now let's play ball; as I blew the whistle, I turned my head suddenly, whispering; I felt the presence of my ancestors smiling around at me.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Xscape: Mr. Goku Story

The music slowly coming from the desktop: "Who can I run to when I need loveeeee."

Sitting at my desk and observing my students' tests, I noticed them struggling to sit still in their chairs. Drastically taken back by their movement, I instantly interjected and told the students to come to my desk. As the student approached, I asked what was going on. They stared at me; I knew it was more profound than I could see. Ok, go back to your chair, and we will chat after class. In a gaze, I began to think about that time....

Help! Help! As my young skin was caressed by my cousin's rough, vile, and scaly hands. Scared and trembling, I lay in silence as a tear fell on the left side of my face. No one was near to interject in this engagement. Their silent whispers reiterated in my ear, "ight lit niggah, make sure this between me and you or else" with a slight mug. Cuddled up in a fetal position, my soul left my body, no one was around to help, and I was defenseless.

"Mr. Goku! Are you ok?" one of the students waved his hands in the air. Shaking back from my gaze, I realized I was daydreaming. Yes, sorry, I had a moment. Then, the student yelled, "I almost used it on myself!" I chuckled; "well, you bets to get your butt to that bathroom." "Ok, let's wrap up your testing material. Please place your documents face down and pass them to the front." "In addition, grab some cleaning wipes, wipe your materials off and pack up for lunch." "Bobby, can I speak with you before you leave?" He softly responds, "Yes, Mr. Goku."

"Bobby, this is the third time we have had this conversation, and I have already talked to you, mamma. So, what's going on?" Looking down at his shoes, he responds semi-emotionally, "I do not want to talk about it, Mr. Goku." "Well, here's my advice, how about you talk to your mamma, and if you feel she doesn't listen or don't have time, you come back and talk to Mr.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Goku, ok?" An awkward silence was shared between us. Finally, he looked up, held his fist out for a fist bump, and stated, " I gotcha, see you later." A sudden knock on the door grabbed my attention. Ms. Johnson, yawning, asked, "Mr. Goku, you forgot about our mid-day professional development meeting? Make sure you bring your data sheet." "Honestly, I did forget," frantically looking for my materials and pondering on Bobby's situation, I was so discombobulated. "I'm coming just save me a seat."

Power walking toward the meeting space, I noticed my co-teachers congregating at the far-left table. We typically sit at the far left when we know the meeting gone be bullshit. As I sat down, I started the conversation, "so tell me why, the principal just had a run-in with EJ. So, boom, check this out tho, I sent him to deliver some papers for me, and I am assuming he wandered off, and somebody bought him a snow cone. As Ms. Johnson and I were walking around, we noticed EJ furiously walking toward us with his snowcone. Come to find out, the principal was stalking him to see if he was misbehaving. Apparently, she stop and chatted with us for a second and stated she felt he was just wandering around; while standing there, she yelled at him, then proceeded to throw his snowcone away in front of us." One of the ladies at the table leaned in and said, "Oh, this shit finna be goodt." Folks at the table laughed hysterically. Continuing on with the story. "Now, y'all know you can't do that to our Endarkened babies, a collective hmmm. Then, when she did it, he bolted over at her with this look in his eyes." A colleague asked, "what you did, Mr. Goku?" I instantly responded; "I turned my back and minded my Endarkened business. Cause you don't do no shit like that, and y'all know I don't play about my babies, so you know me and her had a lil conversation." The microphone being tested by the secretary interrupted the juicy work gossip conversation and mentioned, "Y'all are

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

extremely loud to my far left." Without looking up, I noticed the principal being the voice blaring over the speaker. "This will be a brief meeting, but please pull up your testing data."

"Mr. Goku, do you mind sharing your testing data?" The principal firmly asked. Quickly turning on my BC voice, I slowly began to share my scores and reiterated that although some of my students tested low, I know they are competent in the material, but y'all know how testing models are set up. So, as we think about this data, let's remember that there are barriers that play into the scores we receive. Some of my other colleagues began to praise and shout across the room, "Speak on it!" Finally, Ms. Johnson turned around, poked me, and jokingly stated, "You know it's a Kardashian syndrome these folks have with you in this space." Although some side-eyed my response at the other tables, I paid them dust. The principal summarized the meeting and reminded everyone of the last day of school PD we had tomorrow. Sighs grew at the table as everyone got up to depart back to their classrooms. Walking out of the door, one of my faves looked at me and said, "really, another PD and rolled her eyes."

Emotionally filled, I felt a spirit over me as I drove the kid's home this evening. Something in my soul just ain't sitting well with Bobby's situation. I didn't know what the pastor was alluding to back then at church when he said, "everything you will need is back in East Texas." But now it's starting to make sense and knowing that I played school as a youngin my purpose has been filled. When I arrived home, my mom and aunt sitting at the kitchen table could tell I was anxious about something, and she said, "baby, don't let them folks stress you out." "Momma, you know I am always in my head sometimes." "You know my sister, civilized, but you know I don't mind when it comes to my baby," my aunt states with a stern look and a hand on her hip. Cackling at my aunt, hugging them both, and gently kissing their foreheads, "I am so thankful for y'all's coverage." Walking toward my room, I began contemplating my

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

influence on the future, which brought a smile to my face. My phone pinged, and it read, "Texas school policy and mass shootings," I clicked the phone off and pulled up social media. Then, speaking aloud, "ain't nobody got time for that."

Revived and gearing up for the last day of school, I realized I don't see me, but we are a dime a dozen! It's a gift to be a superhero to these babies! I am an elementary teacher who happens to be an Endarkened man. Softly whispering and singing to myself, "Who can I run to when I need loveeeee?" I became grateful and filled as I am now a space of liberation and safety for my babies. No one can ever deny the experience and lessons I have instilled in my kids. That's lit!

Entering my classroom for the last time, I started the day listening to "We are the World" as the kids entered the room. Energetic and full of sugar, the students jokingly stated, "Can you go green today for us?" I gave them that look, and they instantly scattered to their desk. Then, slowly turning down the music, I stood in front of the class and softly stated, "Y'all, I am departing from the district after this year." The kids screamed, "WHATTTTTT." "Yes, I will be transitioning and moving away, but I will still teach." The room's spirit immensely dwindled; the kids ran to the front and wrapped their arms around me. Consoling their emotions and reminding them that I have prepared you all for the future, no worries, everything will be ok. After, Bobby pulled me to the side and told me he spoke with his mother but asked me to pray over him. Then, he stated, "Mr. Goku, I have demons chasing me when I go to sleep." Instantly, I knew my gut feeling was real, and I needed to cover this baby.

Throughout the day, constant visitors were stopping by to share their appreciation. To know that my work here has been impeccable is an understatement; my east Texas twang is entrenched in these halls! Ya, dig!

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

“Before we leave today what's the class motto:” the class responds, “No one can tell me how to be me, it's my journey, and I am the drum major of my life.” The students hugged the green out of me; as I turned my head suddenly, I felt the presence of my ancestors smiling around me.

Barbershop Talk: Mr. Riley Story

Bell rings.

“Ok, class, make sure you grab your things as you head to the bus.” “Mr. Riley, you are so magical and incredible. I can't wait to see your Instagram stories this weekend of your master's graduation,” one of the students stated before hugging me and walking out the door to the bus. My face smiled so hard; I felt all 32 teeth being shown after the students dipped from the classroom. Packing my bags, I began reflecting on my life and career. Chuckles, and to think I had BC teachers who were dismissive of my emotions. Like what the fuck? I can't have feelings because I am an Endarkened boy; this world is screwed. Yes, I am sensitive because I am not a robot; Black boys have emotions, ya know. However, in 4th grade, I knew there was something about this profession that touched my soul. Plus, once I made it to high school and saw men that look like me academically intellectual, man, you don't come around those too often in these neck of the woods. That motivated me to be a historical figure in this space. Looking at my apple watch, I jumped up from my desk, running toward the door. I am frustrated that I am running late to the barbershop, AGAIN!

Clippers humming, oil sheen spray, alcohol (the kind that stings), hair fiber, crisp line up, and barbershop shit-talking; it's fresh-cut Fridays! “Mr. Riley, you up next,” the barber looks at me, signally to come sit in the chair. Barber shares, “Same chop as last time?” I respond, “Yessir, fade me, make it crisp I am graduating tomorrow.” Barber responds, “I gotcha, bro.”

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Barber began fading the edges of my hair as we began to conversate. I began to ask him his thoughts on everything going on as one of his clients yelled through the door, "Aye, how many in front of me? The barber raised his finger as he positioned my head toward the left to fade my hair. I asked, "How it's been going, bruh?" His response presumed to be a little suspect, but he gave the cliché, "it's been going, good man." Barber swiftly changes the topic; "enough about me, man, you are the one graduating; what's next, man?" Pondering on my response, I immediately said man, "It feels great, but have you ever just thought about how you got to where you are?" One of the seasoned brothers in the shop abruptly interrupted and asked, "Whatcha know about living, young brother?" In a daze from the question, I chuckled and told him, "Man, when you live in this space, you have no choice but to find your compass." Radio softly playing in the background, I could feel the vibration of Whitney Houston's vocals on, *Greatest Love of All* shivering through the thin walls of the shop.

"Man, I have given my all during my time as an educator for our community. However, why won't the community allow me to grow? That's hard, man." Barber zapping away at my line, he responds, "Young buck, we practically all raised you around here in Louisiana; you know how that goes." Talking to myself, ugh, when will I get out of this kid syndrome? "Lil Ri, did you hear what I said?" I responded, "yeah, my bad." Barber stops abruptly; let me take a smoke break real quick, come holla at me outside.

The barber states, "I feel this energy on you, Ri, what's going on? Like, what's really going on? Let's sit on the curb, bro, you my last customer, so I got time." I was rubbing my peach fuzz, reluctant about diving into deep conversation with him because he's my dad's friend. Shrugging my shoulders, I said, "Ok, let's talk, but you know you are in my business, right, maaan listen, I had a time where I felt I was just walking in the wilderness with no direction or

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

actual attention to me. Like I love the impact and emotional connectedness I have with my students because, man, you know, our kids in this neighborhood go through so much trauma and abandonment. Like, I went through that shit, my dad was partially there, and momma had to take care of my siblings and me! That's why I am there for those students; even if it's taking them to get a haircut, joining 4-H camps, supporting their supporting events, whatever, I am there. Somewhere along the way, I felt abandoned.”

Emotionally talking at this point, I felt my head drop forward. “I knew this was my line of work when I went abroad and taught kids; something about that experience made me feel free and alive to teach and make it enjoyable. I'm glad to be in the education field and working, but when can I spread my wings and fly? When do you stop the cycle of impoverished mindset and molestation abuse in this community?” “Say, man, you can't fly with a whole bunch of stuff holding you down,” the barber responds. Cars began to pull up, park, and clients began to exit their vehicles. Lamarcus, one of my students, walks from one of the cars, “Wassup, Mr. Riley; I saw you turning up the other day on Insta.” I chuckled and responded, “Yeah, that's cause I'm grown; now go get your haircut.” Barber warmly responds, “Ri, the community loves you.” Joyfully laughing it off and brushing each other shoulders, the nostalgia in that comment rejuvenated me.

Jumping back to the conversation, I shrugged and said, “mind you, I have considered quitting after this school year. I am over the notion of being policed, treated like a kid, following bullshit policies, and having to give more of myself emotionally. In addition, dude slighted me on a new gig at the school and gave it to a teacher I trained; like how that go; like you best friends with my dad, and you do some weird shit like that? Naw, you only have two times to mess over me. But it's all good tho, I went through those experiences to make sure my students

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

have access and opportunities to things that in this community we can't even fathom. So anyway, let's head back, man; I have plans tonight.”

As we entered back into the shop, I sat back in the chair and was overwhelmed by the conversation. The barber began to set up the facial steamer in the corner. Immediately thinking, wow, look how far the shop has come in decades, getting a facial at the shop, what the hell! Then, the barber posed a question: “who are you?” I responded, “What do you mean?” and he responded, “exactly what I asked, who are you?”

I awkward respond, “what the world won't let me be, thriving emotionally, mentally, intellectually, and physically as a Black man. Going to college made me feel seen, heard, and loved. I still receive blessings from the university; they provided t-shirts that my students jumped up and down about for a month. But most importantly, they saw fire in me and lit my torch. Even though I knew I was the unicorn in many spaces, I leveraged those opportunities like a chess game.”

Whispering distinctly, "somebody finally saw and valued me."

Barber handed me the personal mirror to check out my haircut, tapped my shoulder, and stated, “go enjoy yourself, and congratulations, Lil Ri; haircut on the house.” Weary about the entire conversation, I dapped him up and headed out the door. The older gentleman flagged me down to hand me five dollars, gently nudged me, and stated, "One of us gotta make it out the mud bruh; why it can't be you; congratulations, young buck." Headed to the daiquiri shop, I tossed the conversation in the back of my mind and decided to enjoy the festivities for the weekend.

.....

What happened to the weekend!?

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Head visibly pounding, I rolled over in the bed trying to shake back from the festivities, however, I prayed and knew my mind was made up by the end of the weekend; before heading to work, I hit send on my resignation letter and placed my phone in my workbag. Instantly yelling aloud, “Ah, I am FREEE!” Now, let me get this Monday started.

As I walked the outside halls, I felt the birds chirp for what seemed to be 30 minutes. At that moment, I realized that Riley was spreading his wings. Chirpy walking into class, I spoke, “Good Morning, class”; class responded, “Good Morning, Mr. Riley; congratulations, we were cheering for you this weekend!” Smiling at them all, I asked, “let me hear the class motto one more time?” The students stood up, pushed their chairs in, and began the motto. “My blackness is comforting, I am proud of myself, and I don't have to water myself down because I am smart and fine just the way I am.” The class magically pointed their swords to the sky; as I turned my head suddenly, I felt the presence of my ancestors smiling around me.

Presenting the Findings

The stories of Mr. Goku, Mr. Riley, Coach Will, Mr. Steve, Mr. Coach, and Mr. Joe as demonstrated, offers a richness to their Black storytelling narratives that offers meaningful insight into Black male elementary teachers’ experiences as a teacher and their decision to teach in the P-12 education system. Throughout their stories, we see vulnerability, self-reflection, liberation, frustration, invalidation, alignment, and a connection to their ancestors as they navigate their experiences as elementary male teachers through the interconnectedness of the ecological system and remembering the components associated with their decisions to teach in elementary setting connected to their inner selves throughout their matriculation in the ecological system. As a continuation of this analysis, in this section, we will review the emergent threads

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

and patches through a cross-analysis of the participants' stories focusing on the two research questions that guide this study.

The researcher focused on the protocol questions that guided the responses that answered research question one (RQ1): How do Black males understand their experience through ecological systems as elementary teachers? The threads and patterns the researcher followed for RQ1:

Intersection of Race and Gender. This thread pulled on the participant's complexities of their intersecting identities and how the macrosystem and chronosystem influenced navigating through their experiences. Characteristics of the macrosystem focuses on government influences, social and cultural values, socioeconomic status, and hegemonic norms. The chronosystem dives more into environmental changes that have occurred throughout their lifetime, for example, historical events (e.g., desegregation and segregation) in which the participants revealed through their stories how the interconnectedness of gender and race influenced and impacted their identity as a teacher. Specifically, this thread supports, extends, and refutes, past research that has brought awareness to the intersection of their identities impacting their experiences.

Gendered Racism. Through the three-dimensional space of the participants' voices, there was a consensus that gendered racism was present through each of their experiences. Specifically, as a collective, these young men were unable to differentiate the two, as both identities were targeted based on societal norms. Participants also mentioned some expectations that were implicitly in place for them to contribute to the collective space. In particular, Mr. Coach expressed, "Black man teach my child in elementary school—you know it becomes problematic because they don't want their child to get you. Know how some older folks are when it comes to men and being emotional?" He goes on to say:

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

How do I say this? How they say hey those girls shouldn't be around those men or something like that and, like in my setting, both of the teachers are Black males and so you know I've had maybe two to three parents out of my 43 students this past school year who felt their child needed another teacher. Because they didn't want their daughter around us men and I'm like and I don't know if that's from parents experiences, you know, because some people may make bad blood in situations like that, especially the high school setting you know that's where Black male educators have been put in jail and things like that for fooling around with you know the children, but hey that that's the only aspect that you know really feeds into how they feel. - Mr. Coach

Mr. Joe also spoke about gendered racism in his engagement with his colleagues, explaining, “I like catch certain teachers, being a little bit more like stern with me versus like explaining themselves.” He further noted:

The women like my co-workers like they always asking you to do things and I'd be like y'all can do it too. You know, like I don't know like it'd be like the typical like masculine things like, you see my hands full too, I don't want to lift that, like I know it's courtesy, but like you know I just came back from the gym like where's the consideration for me type of deal but yeah. - Mr. Joe

All six participants knew that the duality of their race and gender were critical to their experience, and how students, parents, colleagues, and administrative interacted with them. Noteworthy to mention that, along with gendered racism within their experience, as a male they encountered some aspects of power dynamics that plagued their matriculation.

Power dynamics. Another commonality amongst the participants was the challenge of power dynamics, as they struggled to be respectful when it came to male or female leadership.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Mr. Goku explained, “You serve them. You're not dictating in a sentence. You're serving, but the decision made impacts the masses, and so I think sometimes that happens when men and women collide, honestly.”

I have seen several women that have been good principals, but they clash with people.

We have this tendency, when we get these positions, we like to control and in the manner which I've seen people trying to control has been dangerous. We're co-laborers in education and I respect you for your position; please understand I've done my part in my room, so you can't control everything, because then you're infringing upon my character and my personality that I bring into teaching, which is my authenticity. And when you start infringing upon that you start messing with who I am and then we start colliding. -

Mr. Goku

Mr. Goku perspective sheds light on the power dynamics that leaders often exude when they oversee the campus. Overall, the participants believed that the power held by these leaders removed them from the knowing of the people they served; creating a distinctive disconnect between the educators. However, as Black males, there was a notable sense of tokenism because of the limited number of Black men in the elementary setting.

Tokenism. The participants referred to forms of tokenism throughout their experience, expressing the advantages they received but also the hindrance that singled them out.

Specifically, Mr. Riley states, "it's a running thing at the ABC that I was the unicorn because we're far and few in between, so they would always say stuff.” Mr. Riley went on to say:

You're always going to be an asset, wherever you go, so I definitely understand my value, but like I said, there's an added pressure of being a Black male in elementary education,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

because so many people want you to do so many things, or they expect certain things of you because you are quote-unquote the unicorn. - Mr. Riley

Indirectly, each participant understood the privileges of being a Black male teacher in the elementary setting. However, they also felt the challenges as they struggle with navigating a space that enjoys their presence, but not their intellect. Through this mental tug-a-war on their identities they carried, an indication of “self” prevail that was activated.

Self. This thread aligned with how the participants saw themselves and introspective development, primarily situated in the inner microsystem and sub-microsystem. Characteristics of the microsystem derive from the immediate environment, such as the biology of African American males, beliefs, personality, sexual orientation, and intellect. On the other hand, the sub-microsystem looks at supernatural and spiritual involvement within Black boys' and men's lives. Indirectly there appeared to be a sense of self throughout the participant's interviews that targeted their efficacy and imposition. Particularly in this section, the participants focused on this inner development through their experience navigating their time as elementary educators. This thread adds to the research by centering their mental and emotional wellbeing navigating their experiences as Black male teachers, which has often been silenced in previous research.

Self-efficacy. As the participants reflected on their journey in education, they shed light on their inner development of themselves, which spoke to their self-efficacy and knowledge of themselves. Mr. Riley provided insight to his education with white teachers, “And, most of them are white, and I would always end up in some type of struggle because of me being expressive.” He emotionally went on to say:

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

And they're not understanding that. This is kind of normal to express myself this way when I'm at home or if I'm in Black spaces, I can express myself this way you just don't understand it. I was very much misunderstood. - Mr. Riley

Moreover, each participant showcased self-efficacy in their unique way, which spoke to them often as they pondered on continuing as an educator or leaving. More importantly, some of the participants spoke about an internal battle that is a constant struggle daily for them as they continue in the profession.

Self-imposition. In particular, the participants grappled with an internal (me vs. me) battle that played into their experience. Mr. Joe states, “In the current state, I'm always like battling between the two. It's the lack of motivation, like. And I also like, if I can note this, it goes into me being viewed as a disciplinarian and, like, I had a child that like went in every day and just like tested me. He continues:

Like, and I mean like, really pushed me to my limits, and it was like at the end of the day, I was told you're going to let a child, like. It was almost like being belittled but gaslighted at the same time, and I'm like y'all [administrators], I didn't understand the psychological warfare that was going on like it was deeper than me, just like gearing up to just go to work; it was like I can't snap you know like so it's this high regard that I have to like deal with the student population, and it just was driving me down and. that's why I really talked about like it, this was just this, this was a destructive year I just felt like this year, like showed itself truly have like a sense of complacency because I would have stayed being a teacher honestly. You know, like, but I just. Coming into what the system is to like, the system is not designed to show support for students that are like ED (Emotionally Disabled) or SPED (Special Education) that needs these accommodations,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

and they place this teacher in there with this preconceived idea; Of what the superhuman I use air quotes like looks like and you're stuck, and that like drives down like the mental you know. And so, it was no amount of things that I can look at from an external view, like other teachers on Tik Tok or Facebook or reading articles or watching my favorite documentary. That like really promoted me to like get up every day and like with zeal like really go to work like it was like hardcore work like getting up being consistent on a schedule to be mentally ready like who wants to go to work like that. - Mr. Joe

Collectively, participants felt that it was essential to have a sense of self-navigating this experience because they understood the importance of Black males being in this space. However, they also felt the world's weight on their shoulders to continue to show up and fill the void that plagues them every day, even when they mentally struggle to keep going. In relation, each participant also spoke about media influence and its effect on their journey.

Media Influence. This thread evolved through the lens of political influence, mass events [school shootings & Covid-19], social media, and male teacher initiatives—heavily centered in the exosystem—which focuses on the influences that are external to the individual. Many participants, in some ways, contributed media to their positive and negative thoughts on their experience. The findings within this area support previous research, but the findings also extend the research by providing ways in which media influences are positively and negatively interpreted.

Political influence. When the participants were asked how external systems play into their experience, Mr. Goku explained that “local policies a lot of times are disconnected and out of touch with current teachers and do not include teachers' voices that are doing the groundwork.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

A lot of times, if you look at policies that have been debated; all the stuff actually discouraged you, so I don't really focus.” Mr. Goku further explains:

They're making education a lot more difficult when you use the capacity, like a generalized test with a certain number they've changed it where you have to pass each particular subject with a certain number, so the testing has become more difficult in the State of Texas for elementary teachers, especially if you're teaching reading which I'd be this year, you have to go through a reading academy. Well, I just want to put a plug in and say, the academy was over 60 hours that to me is almost a master's degree and it's just called professional development. We have artifacts, pre and post text, quizzes, discussions quizzes, checkups all this stuff and it's just considered professional development. So, I will say, if a male teacher wants to teach reading that's going to make it even harder even if the student graduated, they still have to go and take the reading academy test. So, the testing itself has gotten harder. - Mr. Goku

Additionally, Mr. Riley felt that state and federal policies hinder the ability to teach the whole child:

Because you're teaching them how to take a test; you're very limited in the space and by the time they get to high school where their minds can take on more knowledge, they've already become test-taking robots. - Mr. Riley

Mr. Coach shared a perspective of disappointment regarding the future of education based on political influence:

Because there's a teacher shortage, right now, to be honest, unless there must be some improvement in the way things are handled with the Department of Education. Because you know one big thing that you know a lot of us[in-service educators] have been saying

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

a lot of people in the Department of Education have never step foot inside of a classroom, so there is things that are being done and rules and regulations are being made from people who don't know what the inside of a classroom looks like beyond what they've done in their own school setting you know so they don't see from our aspect, so when I say that I think that there might be a decline in the number of Black male teachers, even though they're trying to give out the supplements toward it they're going to have to make some major reforms in order to you know, to keep it going the way it is. - Mr. Coach

Although the participants felt policies negatively affect their experience, they expressed the positivity within their community that was indirectly created via the sharing of footage via social media communities, which has positively impacted their continuation as an elementary educator.

Figure 2

Black Male Social Media Engagement



Social Media. The participants spoke highly of the interactions and community social media brings them as Black male elementary teachers. Mr. Goku explains (see Figure 2), “Especially for Instagram, I've seen several Black male teachers. There's a guy that I follow I think he may be in Brooklyn, New York, and a lot of things that he posts on his little, you know, Tik Tok.” He added:

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Stuff like that lets me know we all kind of think similar and it's not just you know the Black male race that's thinking, the same thing, a lot of teachers are on the same page, so there are some positive aspects to some of the things I've seen. - Mr. Goku

Mr. Coach furthers this notion by explaining his impact and influence and how it had prompted past students to change the narratives of when they first encountered a Black male teacher in K-12.

You know there's a Facebook post circling around that states, "when did you first have your first Black male teacher?" and I was like, people were saying high school nobody ever said elementary until I saw my students. You know, because they're gone now so I'll follow them on Facebook, you know, and they would tag me and say that Mr. Coach was my first Black male teacher, but nobody my age ever said that they had a Black male teacher until they got to high school. - Mr. Coach

Uniquely, these participants also shared their thoughts on how mass events have impacted their experience in the classroom and altered how they must show up in the classroom.

Mass Events. A salient piece of the stories subtly expressed the fears and adjustments that the classroom brought over the previous decades. Mr. Steve explains his fear, "In particular, the past five-ten years, I noticed these mass shootings that's been going on in schools."

Mostly it seems like it's been a lot of elementary schools and that's a little terrifying, and the one that just happened the other day [Uvalde School Shooting] was actually with a fourth-grade class and I'm like oh I teach fourth grade, and you know that was a little scary, and I'm like you know, God forbid that that happens, over this way, but you know I'm kind of wondering, you know not saying that would affect me, but to like to stop him[active shooter], like, what can we do to you know kind of combat that type of

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

situation? And why are elementary schools being targeted because that's what it seems like lately it's been mostly elementary schools to me. - Mr. Steve

Additionally, Coach Will expresses his adaptability as a first-year physical education teacher, due to battling the demands and gaps Covid-19 has caused over the past two years.

It's definitely a learning experience, being a first-year teacher, especially after Covid going on, I had some challenges. The kids haven't been in school for maybe about three years because of the break between Covid. Having virtual classes via zoom for them to go to, they kind of don't know exactly how school runs, especially like fourth and fifth graders they were in first and second grade when Covid hit. So, standard things that they should have learned regarding classroom behavior or school behavior they don't understand so it's a learning experience for me to say, is my first year. - Coach Will

Noteworthy to share, five out of the six participants stated they received their alternative teacher certification; although they did not participate in traditional educator preparation programs, they mentioned awareness of the programs being offered.

Male Educator Initiative Programs. Mr. Coach stated, so I didn't think about it at the time when I was going through the process, and then so after I left Eastern University, they developed the “Call Me Mister” Program. Mr. Riley alluded to his involvement with being a part of marketing material for his alumni for the start of the Black male educator initiative:

I was not a part of the program, but I met with the founders from Clemson when they came. They were starting the program when I was graduating so they used my likeness to promote the program and to try to get people there, but I met with the founders, and I spoke to my experience and how I thought it would have helped me throughout my journey in undergrad. - Mr. Riley

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

In the same breath, Mr. Riley also expressed his lack of optimism when it comes to more Black males entering the profession:

Initially, I would think that with these initiatives like the Call Me Mister program that they piloted at Clemson and has now reached more universities in Louisiana and across the United States that the population of black male educators will grow. But with the landscape of teaching following the pandemic, I mean. I don't know, I don't, I don't. I don't foresee it growing because people, in general, are not running to pursue degrees in education anymore or going to college, for that matter, because you don't get such a great return on investment now when you could just take certifications or do an apprenticeship; there are so many other opportunities to make money and not go into mountains of debt while trying to progress. So, I felt more Black males would occupy the field of education, but I feel its dying before it even got started. - Mr. Riley

On the other end, Mr. Steve discussed his awareness through the information he stumbled upon:

I read an article or something somewhere saying that there was more of a need for elementary male teachers I don't think they touched on race or ethnicity, at that point yet.
- Mr. Steve

Although Black males have actively been portrayed in the media through a deficit lens (Goings, 2021; Martino, 2015; Milner, 2007), Black male teachers have created an unspoken community that speaks even when words are not spoken via media outlets, which adds a progressive extension to the current literature. In addition, these Black male educators spoke on the mass events and political influence that emotionally activates their safety and continuation in a learning space. Furthermore, these participants have a unique perspective on male initiatives'

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

intent and the impact of its benefit to the field of education. Simultaneously, the participants shared a love of community that offered their students a family and protection.

Figure 3

Media Family Representation Artifacts



Superhero complex. During the participant's interviews, this thread was prevalent through their voices, artifacts, and thoughts on the participant's way of knowing and developing relationships with their students as a superhero complex through the inner and outer microsystem. To reiterate, the characteristics of these systems are the inner focus on self-perceptions, whereas the outer focus is on the engagement with family and extended family, friends, school, neighborhood, church, and peer groups. Whether through a protective spirit or adopting a family figure role, each participant assumed this role in relation to their student's and colleague's engagement. This thread supports the current literature in how Black male teachers are often seen as family, but this thread extends this notion of seeing them as family members and adds meaning to what it means to be a positive figure to the students they encounter on a daily basis.

Protective spirit. All six participants found joy in providing a haven for their students. Mr. Goku asserted (see Figure 3), “You can talk about me all day long, but when I see you

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

picking on somebody that can't defend themselves, I'm coming." He furthers this notion by stating:

So, I'm like that for the children when they come, I sometimes forget that I'm actually their teacher, I kind of take on the role of saying I'm their parent outside of their parents. I let no adult no matter if it's the cafeteria staff or the principal from the highest to lowest be careful how you approach my children and I see it, or the children give me that look where they're talking to me with their eyes or their eyebrows without saying anything, I shut it down. - Mr. Goku

Mr. Joe shared his experience through his love for the character in the movie *Lean on Me* (see Figure 3):

We look at Morgan Freeman's character, like the way he did it very stern was holding those kids to a higher accountability, but like those kids felt safe. When her mother kicked her out, you know and say that she had no place here, he went to her house and advocated for her. When that boy, you know, was like about to fell out of school and it seemed like he didn't have no hope, like there he was letting him know like we're here for you, rooting for you, and I think that's how you cultivate that safe space. - Mr. Joe

Largely, the participant's felt that through their life experience, they wanted to ensure that their students were protected. Even if communication was unspoken, there was an unshared language that ensured that there was a haven for students to rely on if they were experiencing something in their lives. Specifically, this haven created a family figure for the students, adding to these participants' relationship development.

Family figure. There were like-minded experiences that allowed their relationship to grow beyond the school's walls. Their perspective was committed to the development of a

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

community inside their classroom and outside the classroom. When asked several protocol questions, Mr. Riley responded, “Well, for me, sometimes I always explain it like I’m sometimes I’m big brother or uncle I can be. Just that person that they can share stuff with, especially the young man. Mr. Riley continued:

Because they don't have that I'm there point person for a lot of things I attend basketball practice, football practices, and any other extracurricular activity that shows up. A lot of them I have brought to my home, I take them to get haircuts, make sure that they have things, or pay for 4-H camp and things like that. So, I take on the role of somewhat of a provider but more so emotional support for them. - Mr. Riley

Indirectly, Mr. Coach provided his perspective (see Figure 3), “I tell them when they step outside of my classroom, your brothers and sisters in here I'm the Daddy; so, act like it.” He furthers his perspective by stating:

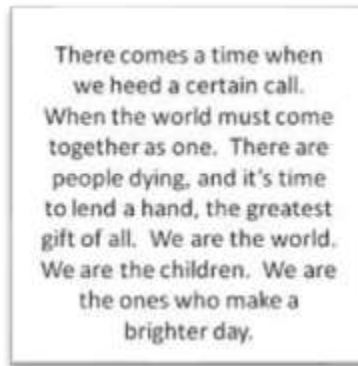
I found within this year, how the boys that are in my classroom has grasp hold of me because working in this high poverty area they don't really have a dad at home or have a father, so I have four boys that were in my fifth grade class the last year, who have come to my house, they call their parents and tell them they going to Mr. Coach's house, and I just say yeah because you know you never realized how you're impacting those kids. -

Mr. Coach

Figure 4

Musical Artifact Submission

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS



Note. U.S.A for Africa – We Are the World; 1985

Intentional Investment. Throughout the participant's interviews, this thread followed the participant's overarching interest in investing in their students holistically, primarily through the lens of the mesosystem. The characteristics within this play on the interplay of the inner and outer microsystem and the micro-subsystem, which encompass their immediate environment. Through forms of expression that were fluid, cultural pedagogy, and acts of authenticity. Especially for Black male teachers felt it was natural for them to be themselves and teach from a genuine space about who they were and how they were raised. The participants carried an understanding that the one-dimensional way of the education system only spoke to white students; however, they knew it was essential to create an intentional learning environment that allowed students to grow. The participants acknowledged a sense of fluidity within students' expressions that shared insight into the student's holistic development. This thread supports the narrative of Black teachers teaching to transgress from a cultural perspective, but it also extends that narrative by expressing this fluidity of expression that adds to the holistic development of the child. Additionally, extending their identity of being relatable to the generation of students they serve.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Fluidity of expression. There was solidarity amongst the participants regarding being an expressive human and accepting the differences one brings into the schoolhouse. Mr. Coach states:

I was up teaching, and the students naturally jump totally off subject and asked a question and I think that's what was going on in this picture. They jumped off actually to something that had nothing to do with math. And guess what at that point of time I started giving a life lesson after that, and so I really think that that picture really exemplifies my image of being a black male elementary teacher. - Mr. Coach

Whereas Mr. Goku talks about how he allows his students to engage with him:

The children, you know that that's another thing, so I've learned that boys really do need that touch, so it's like playing. They like to play wrestle that is necessary because the children especially this year they forget some time that I'm teaching, and we're at school, you can't just jump on me because naturally I am going to want to flip you over, and then realize we still in school, and sometimes you know they ended up on the floor because they wanted to jump on me. - Mr. Goku

Through their playful interactions with the students and expressive environment, their love for the kids and the kid's love for them is deemed okay. However, they are aware that students are not afforded the opportunity to express themselves freely, so that's an active conversation they often have with one another. At the same time, the participants believed that offering a space of cultural pedagogy connects with the child's development and helps with their approach to teaching in the classroom.

Cultural pedagogy. The freedom and liberation to provide cultural-based pedagogy spoke to each participant (hooks, 1996). They talk about this style of teaching is a way to

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

connect with the generation of students they teach and a way of making learning a place that is fun and relatable. Mr. Riley states, “I’m bringing a unique perspective because of my experiences and stuff that I didn’t I definitely tried not to do the stuff that I didn’t like or that I didn’t see best when I was a kid.” Mr. Riley continues:

I’m aware of what they like, I mean I’m young, I’m aware of what they like, I am aware of the music they listen, I am aware of the lingo, I can do a Tik Tok with you, if we need to do a Tik Tok. I’m just more engaging than most people in my building. I’m able to, I don’t think a lot of people consider that emotional component of education and how socially, you need to be fostering those types of conversations and then environment to get the best out of them [students], my kids will do any and everything that I need them to do, because they know me, I let them in on my life. - Mr. Riley

Mr. Steve in some ways aligns with the awareness of his population of students by staying:

I’m trying to think of what song that is, however, we were talking about waves and there’s a song that talks about waves I forgot which rapper it was. Uh I kind of took a verse from this song and put one of the concepts about waves in it and we kind of did a little dance with it too, so I taught it to them and I’ve had them give it back to me, plus I’ve noticed this generation of kids listens to a lot of rap, so it worked well together. - Mr. Steve

On the other hand, Mr. Joe articulated his cultural pedagogy stems from his West African study abroad experience:

Alright, so the first one is Kente Cloth, so it’s like West African. The reason why I picked that one is because I feel like everything I do in the classroom or my identity or my approach into why I wanted to be a teacher at that is centered and rooted in African Centricity, shall we say. So, I feel like the journey was for me more so, I began becoming

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Afro centric in college and it was through you know my study and me going study abroad in West Africa is what kind of connected it and wanted me to serve the Community at that particular age, and make sure I have an emphasis or I'm being intentional about bringing Africology to the forefront, you know, showing them that reclaiming shall I say that those negative stereotype do not come from an Afro-centric perspectives. - Mr. Joe

Throughout the participants' interviews, there was an overwhelming consensus to provide an environment that spoke the students' language. In addition, the participants offered a multicultural learning environment that welcomed, transformed, and liberated each student. All six participants spoke with a passion regarding the authenticity they carry as an educator and how that is shown through their actions.

Authenticity. The participants expressed their feelings of realness and teaching the truth. The participants felt that was a unique thing they brought to the classroom and education that taught students about life outside the curriculum. Coach Will explained his authenticity through the lens of consequences:

I make kids understand that its consequences for their actions, accountability, will be a better word. In my class you're not going to get away with just about anything just because oh well, you made this decision, you made this bad choice. And you're sorry about it you're still going to be a consequence for it, you know you don't have to sit down for ten minutes, while everybody else is doing activities. And so, I feel like I bring it especially to elementary school because elementary kids need to understand that is its consequences for their actions and as they get older consequences change, you know, I feel like I bring that into the space, because it's going to help them for the rest of their lives. - Coach Will

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Additionally, Mr. Joe expressed his authenticity by the way he communicates and dresses:

Um I think like that comes from the way that I talked to them so I'm very true to you know Ebonics being a dialect. And you know, like just talking to them in what I feel most authentic and comfortable in and showing them that, like that duality like you know my teacher is cool you know he fly he rocked jays but like you know, he comes in he's very stern you know, has a wealth of knowledge, I hope, that's what they're getting. Like I feel like I provide that from a Black perspective, like oh, this is a down to earth Black male and I feel like it's important to see that figure of representation. - Mr. Joe

In summary, analyzing the experiences of these six Black male elementary teachers (BMETs) presented a fluidity of multidimensional experiences throughout their engagement within the ecological systems as elementary educators. While negative and positive experiences are evident through the identified ecological systems, this unique collective connection between the six of them speaks to their Blackness, consciousness, and ability to protect, nurture, and educate their students throughout their experience and identity as a BMET. Finally, one thing prevalent through their experience was the opportunity for them to internally heal their inner self, whether through Black boy trauma or school trauma (Motley & Banks, 2018), which will be further discussed through the conclusions in Chapter 5.

Additionally, the researcher reviewed each participant's interviews to determine the threads and patterns for research question two, RQ2: How do ecological systems influence Black males to become elementary teachers? One thread and pattern that emerged through the analysis process was rooted in purpose. The six participants resonated their decision to teach elementary through the interactions and engagement within their mesosystem that guided their purpose. In addition, this thread supports previous research, but extends the concept of what purpose means

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

to Black male teachers and, more specifically, how “purpose” is derived from the origins of their internal environments.

Purpose. The essence of the six participant’s words and their personal demeanor and expressions throughout their interviews contextualized the varied reasons that drove their purpose in becoming elementary teachers, which is situated with the mesosystem. The characteristic of the mesosystem includes the interconnectedness of the micro-subsystem and the inner and outer microsystems, but for the participants, it primarily focused on connections within their immediate environment.

Career Transitions. Three of the six participants shared that their decision happened through connections that led to a career transition within their journey. Mr. Coach shared, “well, actually all the way up until my senior high school, I want to be a pharmacist. And then there was this program at my high school, General Cooperative Education and they allow us to work at the elementary schools that paid.” Mr. Coach continues:

Since we got out of school early, I started working at the school called Pioneer Elementary, which was actually my first job. And what they did is, they had me in the office. The principles said you could really help us in different aspects; they asked me to be their math intervention and I did that, and it just went from there. And I started, you know looking into the path education, I think this is really what I want to do. I found out that children and teaching, and helping children grow that are from where I'm from; I found that helping them more would be more stabilizing for me, even though the money, ain't there like a pharmacist would be. I still choose to go into the path of education, after being in a school setting and actually working in it. - Mr. Coach

In addition, Mr. Riley explains his career transition through the lens of realization:

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

In high school, we had a very innovative biology teacher and we had to create a website and display it to our classmates, and it was kind of like a natural thing for me. I was like oh, I could really teach like I see how to get their attention and make them understand the content that I'm presenting to them. So, it was just in the back of my mind, but initially I went to NSU pursuing a degree in nursing and I was like yeah, I don't really like this, I don't really care for blood it or the Gore or anything like that, like that's not my steelo I'm not trying to do that. So, I switch to elementary education, because it was always in the back of my mind that I could be a teacher like I could do this, but what really made me even consider was the impact of two black male teachers that I had in high school my freshman year. I had an English teacher who was young, he was like 27 and I could see myself, like it was a black man, being a scholar, he liked to read books, he taught us a lot of poems. And he taught me that there's more to life than what's around me, and I also had a high school English teacher, when I was like junior or senior year, he was like a renowned educator he had worked for the NCAA through their Historically Black College and University (HBCU) and became a very historical figure in our community. And he taught me so many life lessons and those people definitely stayed in touch, and it was just basically saying that I could be there [education], like I aspire to be that and that's why I chose to pursue education as a profession.

Most participants spoke of their life experiences leading them to education through a career shift. Through those experiences, there were critical moments that impacted their lives in ways in which they did not imagine until the opportunity of teaching presented itself. However, the participants also emphasized the traumatic experiences of school that lead to their decision to teach.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

School Trauma. From a different experience, Mr. Steve navigated their decision through familial capital that indirectly sparked interest, “Well, actually, let me tell you this yet, but my mother actually is a high school teacher.”

So, I don't know if I picked up on that through genetics or hereditary or not, but um. I've always wanted to work with kids, I just didn't know in what capacity or what setting, so I started out, like let's try to work in a school and see how it goes, you know. - Mr. Steve

However, Mr. Steve relied heavily on emotional scars that affected him during his school years that led to his interest in the elementary space.

So, I'm gonna start there [elementary] and see how it turns out. If there's another area, I need to venture off to then I'll cross that bridge when we get there, but I want to see how this goes for right now. Well, I know I did not want to work with middle school grades, because I remember my middle school experience, and it was it was kind of weird. I think I had a better elementary experience as a child it was easy to develop a good social group of friends. However, in middle school, the socialization was hard; like there were clicks and stuff I didn't really experienced in elementary. So, I felt like it was the best option of the two. - Mr. Steve

Mr. Steve's traumatic experienced silently spoke to the participants' experiences as Black males and the hardship they endured matriculating through the education system. As a whole, the participants shared a multi-dimensional perspective on their purpose and how they got to their decision. Moreover, the participants shared the influence of spirituality within their trajectory to becoming an elementary teacher.

Figure 5

Spiritual Music Artifact



Note. GMWA Women of Worship Order My Steps in Your Word, 2003.

Spiritual calling. Two participants spoke about the supernatural or spiritual powers that influenced their decision to teach in elementary. Coach Will expressed:

Ha! Funny story. I was actually outside six o'clock in the morning getting ready to clock in my other job before I started teaching and I was just filling out applications left and right trying to find somewhere to go. Again, I wanted to do high school, but it just seemed like it wasn't there for me; that's not where God wanted me to go. So, I've seen an elementary job and they're looking for a PE teacher, let me just fill it out and see where it goes filled it out boom two days later, they're calling me in for interview. Well, this is where God's leading me to keep leading me, you know you have to follow wherever he [God] takes you. And so, he took me into elementary school and ever since then I fell in love with honestly, I kind of don't want to do high school. - Coach Will

Mr. Goku explains his decision through a life-changing sermon that was placed onto his heart during a service:

Honestly, I did not know. When I graduated from the University of Green in 2011. I have to be very, very candid and I'll say this. There was a preacher that actually told me that I was moving back home, to the current district, which is actually the school district I went to school in. And so, my father was saying, my best friend mom and she was saying, some things too, but I wasn't hearing and I'm like okay I'm gonna get my Kinesiology degree I

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

don't really know where I'm going to move and how I'm going to move. But I'm gonna do something more so, like coaching sports. So, I went to church service, and this is literally what happened preacher stopped in the middle of like offering and pointing and he said everything that you need is at home. Go back home, everything is going to fall into place. Around the end of March, I started substitute training just to kind of like work a little bit. I got hired at the Elementary in Green ISD. - Mr. Goku

Through sharing their experiences, Mr. Goku and Coach Will indicated the motivation and guidance that helped them make a firm decision to be an educator. Thus, it was clear that their decision was more significant than the cliché thoughts of just choosing a career. Instead, it was a divine purpose and calling on their lives, grounded within the mesosystem focusing on tenet three of African American Male Theory, influencing their culture, consciousness, and biology derived through the roots of African culture and tradition, which has been a continuation passed down by ancestors. Likewise, there was a consensus that the lack of Black male representation in the classroom impacted their life in some fashion.

Representation. A consensus also emerged from the participant's journals and artifacts that provided insight into the final pillar of their decision. Mr. Joe attributed, "I think if a black boy can see themselves in a teacher in elementary years, it would promote that black boy to become one." Mr. Coach stated:

I currently work in the elementary setting in Blue, LA. Teaching has been considered a career for a woman in the past. Here at the elementary school, I teach at; there is a male educator in every grade level (2 within 5th grade). Many of my friends didn't see Black male teachers until high school as I did. Elementary is the foundation of learning and it should be exhibited here as well through the presence of men within the field. - Mr. Coach

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Mr. Riley explained his perspective through the lens of showcasing and uplifting Blackness around the school:

Students should see images of historical Black figures around the school. Black boys seeing men in positions of power or leadership would propel them to make the decision to choose teaching as a career. - Mr. Riley

However, Mr. Steve furthers this concept by stating, “There needs to be some form of lingo/dialect within posters that celebrate black culture and signage that states “Black Teachers Teach the Truth.”

Overall, the thread presented here was deeply rooted in the mesosystem and its influence on their decision to work with the development of younger children. The participants verbally showed, visually expressed, and emotionally articulated a sense of being a voice for those who can’t speak for themselves while nurturing and focusing on the development of the entire child at an early stage, especially Black and Brown children. Finally, there was an overall demeanor of joy and spirituality, which contributed to a sense of healing and guidance in fulfilling a sense of being what they did not have during their time in K-12.

Summary of Key Findings

The results in this chapter indicated that these six Black male elementary teachers (BMETs) are, in some ways, returning to knowledge gained in the past while reciprocally bringing it forward to the present in an effort to improve the future for the Black boys they currently teach. Specifically, alluding to this representation of Sankofa, an African word that originates from the Akan tribe in Ghana, the symbolization of this word means to nurture what is at risk of being left behind. The interview protocols created a space that aided in the participants' openness and an opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences and decisions. Moreover,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

the study's results were viewed through the African American Male Theory framework, which demonstrated how different systems within the ecosystem influenced the matriculation of their experience as elementary educator and their decision to teach in an early childhood education setting. Finally, in Chapter 5, the researcher will provide a reflective discussion of the findings through the conclusion, identify how the information may influence the field of education, and make recommendations for future research based on this study.

Chapter V

Summary, Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

“I am worthy even when I am not smiling.” – Nia Daughtry

“You are the revolution; burn it down and rebuild it.” – Dr. Shekila Melchior

Currently, students of color make up 50% of the nation’s public school system. However, 79% of teachers are white, while 18% are Teachers of Color (NCES, 2022). Examining diversity further, 76% of public-school teachers are female, whereas male teachers make up 24% of the population (NCES, 2022). Disparity is more evident within the public-school elementary setting where males make up 11.4% of teachers (Taie & Goldring, 2020). Here, many students do not see themselves represented in their classroom, even more so Black boys. National data indicates less than 2% of teachers are Black males (Bristol, 2020), with an uncertain percentage within the elementary setting. Research suggests influential development for Black boys’ identity and academic trajectory happens in the elementary setting (Kunjufu, 1985), establishing the need for Black male educators presence. However, although there are several recruitment and retention initiatives, shared experiences of pre-service and in-service, and insight into their challenges within the professions, there remains a lack of research regarding the holistic perspectives of the Black male teacher’s decision to teach in the elementary setting.

The purpose of this study was to examine how ecological systems influence Black males’ journey as elementary teachers and explore what influenced them to teach in an early childhood education setting. To contextualize African American Male Theory (AAMT) and provide a three-dimensional space for ecological systems, this study used Endarkened Storywork to bring the voices of the participants forward and provide an authentic lens of the intersectionality of

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Blackness and maleness within the teaching profession. The research questions that guided this study were:

RQ1: How do Black males understand their experiences through ecological systems as elementary teachers?

RQ2: How do ecological systems influence Black males to become elementary teachers?

It was important for me as the researcher, which for the purpose of engagement throughout the remainder of this chapter, I utilize first person, to examine how systems play into these teachers' experiences and decisions as efforts continue to increase the Black male population in the classroom. Previous researchers have examined aspects of systems that often dehumanize, demonize, and exclude Black males and boys in education. However, it was essential for me to shift away from the deficit mentality and instead bring awareness to their conceptualization of their experiences through systems, to gain a richer understanding of how to liberate Black males and boys in education and add depth to current educators' narratives and future Black male educator's discourse.

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the significant findings and spiral back to the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2. After, I provided limitations that impacted the study and offer insight into how these limitations affected my overall findings and their interpretation. Then, I provided recommendations for further research derived from the lingering questions based on the data collected. Next, I delivered implications for practice through the form of written letters. Lastly, I concluded with connections to Endarkened Storywork through aesthetic design of the threads coming together in the form of a quilt and resonating sentiments from the participants that spoke to me, as the researcher, through some final thoughts on advancing this space for Black males in education.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Review of the Study Design

The research design for this study was grounded in the African American Male Theory (AAMT) and Endarkened Storywork. Applying AAMT to this study provided a holistic perspective, which offered a different framework that focused on their two salient identities: Blackness and maleness. This framework created a universal lens to the way in which Black male elementary teachers (BMET) navigate their experiences, but also how they came to understand the influences that ecological systems had on their decisions. As the researcher, it was vital that I provided a framework that would speak to every dimension of their Black male lives to foster an authentic awareness of their experiences and decisions to teach in an early childhood education setting.

The following table (Table 2) beginning on the next page provides an overview of each system with AAMT and how it was represented, if applicable, within the participants' frames of reference. An important area to note that an N/A in 'Participant Quotes indicates that this system was not identified or represented within the findings from data collected among the six participants.

Table 2

System Breakdown

Systems	Meaning	Participant Quotes (Application)
Outer Subsystem	This system serves as an unknown non-matter system that happens through the external portion of the system.	N/A
Chronosystem	This system serves encompasses mainly environmental changes and historical events that have happened over years that have a lingering effect on ones' life. (e.g., segregation/desegregation)	<i>"So, my mother was raised in the 60s and 70s, so she saw crosses being burned in the median. Like my mother went to one of the first integrated high schools in Beaumont, Texas. So, we got that, and then she plops us in suburban</i>

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

		<i>Arizona with all these white folks, and I was constantly I'm being told I got to be better than them.” – Mr. Joe</i>
Macrosystem	This system indicates the affiliation of the government, structural racism, mass media, cultural hegemony, etc.	<i>“My white gifted teacher showed prejudice signs especially when we talked culturally relevant topics, because I was Black/African American she expected me to be well versed in topics associated with Black people, like slavery and civil rights. It did turn out that I was more harshly graded because of the color of my skin, because it was assumed that I should be very intelligent about Black subject matter.” – Mr. Steve</i>
Exosystems	This system focuses on the carried identities, such as socioeconomic status (class), access, ethnicity, geographic location, etc.	<i>"Having to run and duck behind trees and brick walls and stuff like that, because people were driving down the road be crazy, you know I've seen a lot of my childhood friends not make it even to middle school." (see Figure 3) - Mr. Coach</i>
Mesosystem	This system intersects the inner and outer mesosystem and the micro-subsystem, and its influence on one's life through their immediate environment.	<i>“A preacher told me that I was moving back home, so the current district I am working in is actually the school district I went to school in. And so, my father was saying you're probably moving back home, my best friend's mom was saying some things too, but I wasn't hearing that and knew I was going to be a coach. So, I went to church service, and this is what happened; the man [pastor] stopped in the middle of the offering and pointed at me, saying everything that you need is at home, go back home, everything is going to fall into place. So, fast forward, I graduated in December 2011, moved back home, and began to substitute teaching.” (see Figure 5) – Mr. Goku</i>

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Micro-Subsystem	This subsystem is crucial to the understanding of spirit and supernatural practices and the influence it has on the development of Black men and boys.	<i>"Well, this is where God's leading me, I ask him to keep leading me and take me whenever he wants to take me, and that's where he took me to an elementary school."(see Figure 5) - Coach Will</i>
Microsystem	This system is broken down into two systems: inner and outer. The inner focuses on how one see's themselves through their sexual orientation, self-identity, personality, etc. The outer system connects the socialization aspect of their development through friends, school, peers, community, family & extended family, etc.	<i>"I was a very sensitive kid, and being sensitive and being a boy or a man are not synonymous, so everybody wanted you to be stern or stop crying or stop doing this, so I don't have the best memory of elementary school because I couldn't be emotionally expressive because I was young, I was male, and you were expected to be tough or forced to be tough or taught those characteristics or traits. But I was definitely. I don't know, I was uh, I wasn't an athlete, I was always a learner, and I was wondering, I wanted to learn something, I always wanted to know why." – Mr. Riley</i>

Note. This table breaks down the systems descriptive and the application of the participants experiences.

Each system and sub-system provided a lens to unpack the influence and impact that each participant reflected upon in their journey to becoming and currently serving as an elementary teacher, but the methodology of Endarkened Storywork supported and advance the theoretical frame to provide a three-dimensional space to explore the implications for these systems within each participants' narrative.

Endarkened Storywork. Incorporating the approach of Endarkened Storywork, I was able to re-center, remember, recover, revise, and reintegrate Black storytelling and Blackness within the narratives of these Black male elementary teachers (Toliver, 2021). I utilized Endarkened Storywork to provide a space to break away from Eurocentric bondage, give meaning to their individual stories, center their thoughts rather than my interpretation as a

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

researcher, and analyzed their narratives for common threads individually and collectively, while deciphering hidden messages that were encoded in their stories and experience. Additionally, this design allowed fictional writing to speak the people's language and share things that often would be left out or eradicated from standard research design. Along with this method, I pulled on multi-dimensional threads and patches that spoke various languages and were vital to understanding their stories, combating the traditional themes associated with the findings (Toliver, 2021).

Implementing Endarkened Storywork as my method advanced my study by adding depth to the previous shared stories centering Black male teachers' narratives. The rationale for selecting Endarkened Storywork were for several reasons: (1) to recover the hidden identities and experiences of Black male teachers in research that are often silenced, (2) to re-center wisdom, knowledge, liberation, triumph, and transgress from the deficit narratives that have been placed on this population of educators, (3) to break away from the colonial way of remembering the work of these teachers that has for too long been squeezed into literature one dimensionally, and (4) to acknowledge and honor that storytelling is the existence of Black life, which allows for the continuation of their stories to never be forgotten. Most importantly, their stories helped me understand how storytelling is a deeply rooted communal connection that makes space for the preservation of their history and acknowledgement of their ancestral connections and foundation as people. While this methodology is more commonly practiced with a feminine lens, the practices of Griot storytelling were often led by West African men, and harnesses the African American storytelling practices of our ancestors and remembering our history. It is not germane to the feminist space and instead, it showcases a rich oral tradition that has been rooted in African storytelling for centuries. As such, utilizing Endarkened Storywork in this study further

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

advances the field and challenges the expected narrative, creating more space to understand Black male identity and encouraging research exploration that may be considered unorthodox. Through the utilization of AAMT and Endarkened Storywork, I was able to examine six BMET experiences and what potentially led them to become an elementary teacher, providing a study that was authentic and honored Black life and culture and simultaneously allowed for a space of potential healing, teaching, and giving life to the BMET.

Participants and setting. Participants for this study were selected based on the snowball and convenience sampling methods. Participant selection criteria included: (a) identify as Black or African American male, (b) currently serve as an elementary teacher (PK-5), and (c) work in a Texas or Louisiana school. The interview setting was coordinated based on the selected participant's availability. In addition, all interviews were conducted and recorded virtually via Zoom.

The study participants included six Black male elementary teachers from Louisiana and Texas. The Louisiana BMET consisted of the following: (1) Mr. Steve; Science and Social Studies in the 4th grade, (2) Mr. Riley; Math in 4th and 5th grade, and (3) Mr. Coach; Math and Science in the 5th grade. The Texas BMET consisted of the following: (1) Coach Will; Physical Education for K-5th, (2) Mr. Goku; self-contained (all subjects) in 2nd and 3rd grade, and (3) Mr. Joe; English Language Arts and Writing for kinder, 2nd, and 5th grade. Additionally, the participants were teachers within rural, suburban, and city schools in Louisiana and Texas.

Data collection and analysis. I collected data through three semi-structured tiered interviews via video conference (Zoom), artifact submissions, and journal prompts. To create a welcoming environment, I played cultural music and checked in with the interviewee before each interview to ensure their continuation within the study. Further, I utilized reflexivity methods

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

during the interviews, including video notetaking and journaling. To enhance the crystallization of the data, I analyzed several supplemental documents submitted by the participants that provided a multi-dimensional reality of the participant's narratives. I implemented member checking with the participants to review their transcripts to ensure the authenticity of their stories shared. After transcripts were verified, I began a three-step data analysis process:

1. I reviewed all transcripts, journals, and artifacts while reviewing the recorded audio continuously and began threading and patching with a peer debriefer.
2. With a peer debriefer, I reviewed the threading/patching list and began condensing the list based on the saturation and relevancy of the threads and patches to the research questions. Afterward, I immersed myself within the recorded audio, journals, and artifacts, while focusing on the participant's cadences, tones, rhythms, patterns, and emotions to provide a complete feel of their narratives within the fictional stories.
3. After creating the fictional stories and reviewing the threads and patches again, I established the overarching threads and patches that spoke to the narratives of the research participants that answered the study's research question.

Summary of Major Findings

In revisiting Chapter 4, the findings were presented through threads, representing Endarkened Storywork methodology, that were grounded within the construct of African American Male Theory. These threads and the supporting themes were presented by organizing the information within the respective research questions within this study:

- RQ 1: How do Black males understand their experiences through ecological systems as elementary teachers?

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

- Black male elementary teachers understand their experience through a ripple effect that is fluid throughout the ecosystem:
 - Gendered Racism, Self, Media Influence, Superhero Complex, and Intentional Investment
- RQ 2: How do ecological systems influence Black males to become elementary teachers?
 - Primarily, the ecological system influences Black males to become elementary teachers through one guiding thread and patch:
 - Purpose

Conclusions/Discussion

This Endarkened Storywork study examined the stories of Black male elementary educators' experiences as teachers and their decision to teach framed within Bush and Bush's (2013) African American Male Theory. Providing a deeper perspective and consciousness that is far often forgotten or overshadowed, Bush and Bush's (2013) research on African American Male Theory articulated the importance of understanding Black males through a holistic lens to understand how Black males and boys navigate the world. Their intention here was to break down the components central to the Black male development and how they come to their worldview through the systems at play. In addition, they offered a frame that moved away from a deficit approach, allowing for the evolution of Black men and boys to be seen at their highs and lows. While AAMT is equipped to look at the phenomena, experiences, outcomes, and oppressive in African American boys' and men's lives, it equally offers the capacity for Black males to be joyful, healthy, and thriving (Bush & Bush, 2013).

This study suggests that BMETs navigate their experience as a teacher through multiple areas of the ecological system, which influenced how they navigate their experience as BMET;

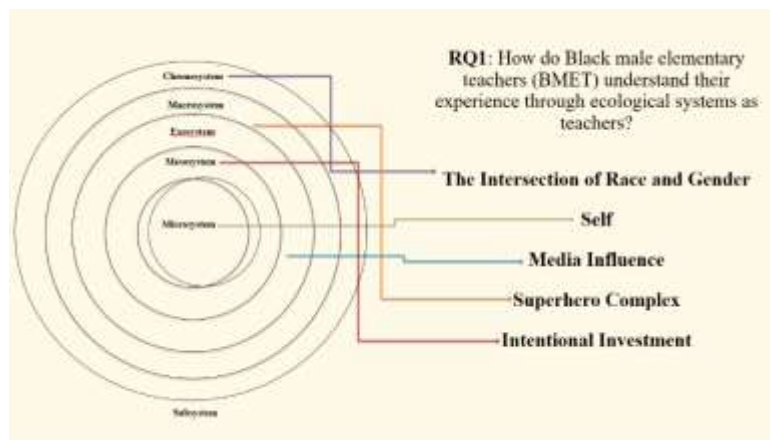
STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

however, much of their decision for teaching in an elementary setting is rooted in the interconnectedness of the mesosystem that centers on their immediate environment. In this next portion, we will discuss how the findings from the data support, refute, and extend some of the previous/existing research.

The findings led me to conclude that Black male elementary teachers' experiences are multi-dimensional, leading to their continuation or departure in the profession. In addition, Black male elementary teachers must battle with the duality of the identities they carry, which often plays into their experience and interaction with power dynamics. Another conclusion drawn from the findings suggests that Black male elementary teachers' decision relies heavily on purpose derived from experiences in their mesosystem and the micro sub-system. These finding suggest an overarching conclusion: As Black male elementary teachers navigate the space of education, whether as a boy or man, the system ultimately influences their experiences and decisions positively or negatively. However, what remains the same for these Black male elementary teachers are, the authenticity of being themselves, valuing their culturally rooted upbringing, and liberating their Blackness as it shines through everything they do.

Figure 6

Research Question One Ecological System



STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Research Question One

How do Black males (BMET) understand their experience through ecological systems as elementary teachers? The findings suggest that Black male elementary teachers understand their experience as a teacher through a multi-dimensional lens that incorporates far more than just what occurs within the schoolhouse. Presented in Figure 2.

Gendered Racism

Throughout the findings, there was this inner play on the relations of the participants' gender and their race, which centers on the chronosystem and macrosystem. Richardson (2010) mainly discusses Black masculinity in the south, where Black males have been seen as cowardly, counterrevolutionary, infantile, and emasculate (p. 6). The findings are consistent regarding how one may view Black males, the social norms of masculinity forced on Black males, and how they should exude masculinity. For example, Mr. Joe spoke about his experience with a Black male administrator belittling and gaslighting his experience with challenging students while continuously expecting him to perform at a level that dehumanizes him as a person. This finding is significant and consistent with Bridge's (2011) study and their conclusions on Black males feeling unsafe emotionally and spiritually in schools due to attacks on their race and gender aggression inflicted on them due to implicit bias and stereotypes. Additionally, Mr. Goku speaks about the power dynamics he encountered when engaging with white women and his struggles with the infringement of leaders utilizing their power to dictate, leading him to leave his district altogether. This finding is consistent with Hicks-Tafari (2018), as they note that the gendered racism crisis impacts recruitment and retention because of the interactions with parents, students, female colleagues, and administrators. This finding is consistent with Bryan and Browder's (2013) finding suggesting that when one defies the narrative/expectation placed on them, biased

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

actions and reactions are inflicted on them. Moreso, this finding refutes Brockenbrough's (2012) and Ferguson's (2000) findings stating that tension is experienced based on their Blackness rather than their maleness; the findings suggest that the experience is heightened due to the duality of both identities.

Furthermore, participants alluded to the intersections of their identities and how they placed them in spaces that implicitly and explicitly targeted them. This finding is consistent with Szymanski and Lewis (2016) arguing that Black males experience higher levels of gendered racism in education. Notably, the results are consistent with the societal fears of Black men being “super-predators” that engage in mischievous behavior (Moriearty & Carson, 2012). For example, Mr. Coach expressed an experience where a parent did not want her daughter in his class or any male class because men should not be teaching little girls. The inferiority complex often placed on Black males hinders their navigation in the world and the classroom. In addition, this finding is consistent with Johnson-Ahorlu's (2013) study, which centered on gendered racism through the enforcement of education policing, profiling, and denigrating of students of color, specifically Black boys, or men.

Tokenism

On the other hand, these Black male elementary teachers spoke how tokenism was often granted to them because of their intersectional identities and the limited access to Black male teachers in the profession. This point is consistent with Kanter's (1977) and Wingfield and Wingfield's (2014) study, where they mentioned that Black males are the tokens of the profession because of the limited number of Black males in education. To clarify, Mr. Riley talks about this sense of privilege gained as he was the unicorn in his building because he was the only Black male, and he would quickly get a job because of his intersecting identities. Although this

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

could be seen as a privilege connecting back to the fifth tenant of AAMT, this could also be seen as another tactic that perpetuates an oppressive cycle.

Self

Through the microsystem, these men shared their thoughts on themselves. Affirming the contributions of Brockenbrough's (2015) research around, "the dominant image of the stern Black male teacher clashes with self-defined identities as teachers, cause most teachers to struggle with conforming to the imagery of what a Black male educator is through the eyes of their colleagues and students" (p. 82). Additionally, although Hicks-Tafari (2013) brings awareness to the transformation of self-regarding these individuals, I believe these findings extend self-regarding in how these educators may personally grow or question their place in the classroom. Further, I believe this finding confirms and extends Scott and Rodriguez's (2015) study regarding how salient physical and psychological social context impacts their experience, but more from a personal standpoint. This finding of "self" suggested throughout the participant's interviews extends the research on the psychological warfare Black male elementary teachers face, bringing to light the challenges faced within the internal battle that is often eradicated from the public's view.

Media Influence

Through the macrosystem, media influence was prevalent in sharing contributions to the participant's experience as an elementary teacher. Previous research has heavily focused on recruitment programs to recruit and assist with the retention of Black males in the classroom to help combat the roadblocks Black males face and aggressively recruit, train, and aid in completing their teacher examinations (Call Me Mister, 2017; Lewis, 2006; Pabon et al., 2011). However, the findings suggest that although these efforts are helpful, they don't seem as effective

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

when implementing and sustaining these programs. For example, Mr. Riley speaks about his groundbreaking efforts to get his historically white institution to adopt the Call Me Mister program. However, the percentage of Black males in the program remained significantly low, with little to no demand for Black male interest. Additionally, he expressed the approval of the college to utilize his face for marketing material; however, outside of that initiative, the college's lack of accountability created an unsustainable system, which has caused failure in the number of Black males interested in joining the program. This finding refutes Meidl's (2019) finding that recruiting alone is not the challenge but confirms their finding regarding the lack of institutional effort when connecting with students of color, particularly Black males. So, although this resource exists for Black males to consider, the interest of Black males pursuing a teaching career is still low, and marketing efforts are surface level.

In addition, previously, there have been initiatives by the U.S. Department of Education within the Biden administration in 2021 to engage in a social media campaign known as #BlackMenTeach focusing on advocating and advancing the community through the voices of Black male teachers. However, the findings refuted this parading campaign by creating an unspoken community via social media. This shared community via social media was an unspoken language that Black male educators shared through Tik Tok and Instagram, showing tangible experiences and pedagogical styles that resonated with the participants, which motivated and encouraged these young men to keep going in the profession. This silent practice resembles the symbolic imagery of how our ancestors communicated via quilts during slavery.

Equally important, these Black male elementary educators' expressed concerns and remarks regarding mass shootings and the global pandemic. Mr. Steve expressed his fear of mass shootings occurring in elementary spaces and has grown weary of why it's happening,

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

particularly the Uvalde Elementary shooting happening in a fourth-grade classroom. This finding extends Powell's (2008) result stating that Black men are hyper-vigilant due to the stereotypical image of what society says a Black man is: big, dangerous, and scary, which offers a different narrative to the Black male image. This narrative provides a space for the humanization of Black men. Lastly, regarding the lingering impact of Covid-19, these Black male elementary teachers shared a consensus that all educators are feeling burnout and learning gaps (e.g., inequities) that have been brought to the forefront.

Superhero Complex

In discussing the complex of being a superhero for their students, previous scholars contend that Black teachers are the saviors, role models, and caregivers (othermother, other fathers, surrogate fathers, aunts, and uncles to students of color), particularly Black students (Brown et al., 2018; Hicks-Tafari, 2018; Lynn, 2006; Pabon, 2016). The findings support some of these identities; however, there were no specifications that these men felt they were role models or saviors. Also, the findings further confirm Sandles's (2018) and Scott and Rodriguez's (2015) finding that Black teachers are hired to teach students, the findings in this study showcase that their ability to be all things to all students doesn't stop with just Black students. This finding also supports and extends Bryan and Browder (2013) that Black male teachers can impact and influence Pre-K- 2nd grade. The participants showcased that their impact and influence provide diverse talents and abilities to all children in K-5th grade. Additionally, this finding refutes scholars such as Newton and Hicks-Tafari's (2013) findings that Black male teachers' commitment is to only help Black children, specifically Black males, succeed. From observation, it appears that these educators are contributing to a global commitment to uplift and educate all students. For example, Coach Will oversees a large population of Hispanic students who

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

consider him a cool uncle. In addition, Mr. Goku shared an experience with a non-Black female student going home and informing their parents about the different things she learned in his class. Those shared experiences further validate that Black male elementary teachers are more than just a vessel for Black students, particularly Black boys; they are vital for all students and their multicultural development. This finding indirectly supports Milner's (2016) argument that "it is unfair for the educational system to place the burden on Black male teachers to be saviors, in a system that is designed to be dysfunctional, flawed, and fractured, against people of color" (p. 417).

The findings also add a concept that focuses on these participants being protective of their students, both through seen or unseen behaviors, extending Neal's (2005) and Jackson's (2006) argument regarding Black men providing nurturing in a different aspect. For example, Mr. Goku talks about his ability to communicate with students via nonverbal cues to ensure that his students are always protected. Further refuting the generalized argument of Anyon's (1997) and Brown's (2012) perspective of Black men being aggressive and abusive, the participants demonstrated the ability to be stern, nurturing, and protective of their students physically, emotionally, and mentally, which is often left out of the educational discourse. Mr. Joe and Coach Will both talk about their natural personality being that of a disciplinarian figure but also providing a safe space for their students that taps into their feminine traits. These men articulated that the superhero complex is often more than exposing them to a Black male; it's about providing substance and support that may be lacking within their home or community.

Intentional Investment

In keeping with the holistic development, these Black men expressed an intention to invest in their students that spoke the student's language, not to pass a test, but to understand the

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

content and material being truly taught. Unlike Allen (2015), Sandles (2020), and Vasquez (2019), who mentioned that Black male teachers alter their pedagogical and demeanor style to conform to white standards, instead, these participants shattered that confirmative lens by stating that their Blackness and authenticity liberates their style in keeping it real with their students, which speaks to the true development of the students and their placement at schools with majority Black and Brown students. More specifically, these Black male elementary teachers are intentional about their pedagogical approach being inclusive and speaking a language that impacts the students. This finding supports and extends Coles and Powell's (2020) argument of the importance of straying away from enforcing anti-Black practices that dictate and reinforces tactics that shun Black students' intellectual property development, especially in schools predominantly occupied by Black and Brown folx. For example, Mr. Joe and Mr. Steve express their pedagogical style to incorporate pedagogy in their curriculum that speaks to the generation and race of students they teach. Notably, these Black men push back at Eurocentric ways of teaching and center BlackCrit (Powell & Coles, 2020) inside of their classroom, supporting Jenkins' (2021) concept of eliminating the dehumanization of Black and Brown folks in plain sight based on the white gaze. To further their unique pedagogical style, this finding is consistent and extends Brockenbrough's (2008) argument regarding previous thoughts on Black male's teaching style seen as “organized chaos” or is often misunderstood; however, these men expressed a sense of praise now being received.

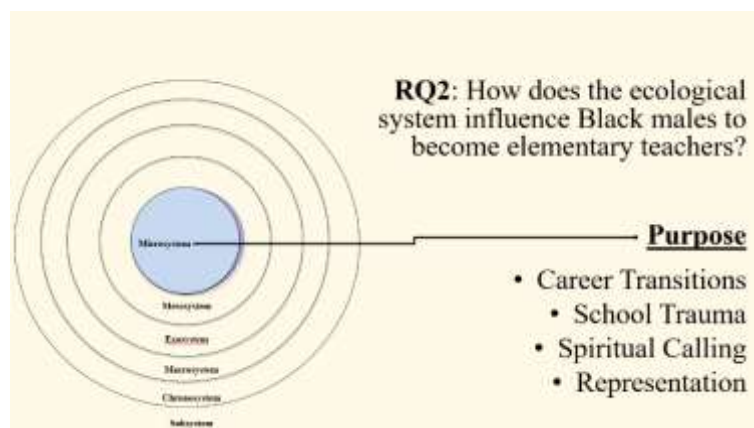
One consistent thing I noted throughout their experience was this fluidity of expression they allowed their students to showcase. Lemelle and Battle (2004) argued that Black masculinity often silences other characteristics of masculinity; however, the findings in this study refute this concept based on the study participants, mainly speaking freely on allowing

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

their students to be whom and what they choose to be no matter what society says. In addition, Williams (2020) indicated that Black boys come into grade school enthusiastic, curious, and ready to learn, but because of Eurocentric curricula, tracking methods, and challenges they face, their interest in school fades, and they are labeled (i.e., disrespectful, hyper, or overactive). The findings through this study and these participants support and extend their rationale of embracing the fluidity of their kid's engagement without adultifying, demonizing, or criminalizing their students because of their activeness as kids.

Figure 7

Research Question Two Ecological System



Research Question Two

How does the ecological system influence Black males to become elementary teachers?

The findings suggest that Black male elementary teachers felt that internal emotions, familiarity, and life experiences led them to their decision to teach in an elementary setting. The findings support the conclusion drawn from the study that Black males become elementary teachers based on their engagement throughout their lives that were close and personal to them. Presented in Figure 3.

Purpose

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Through the sharing of their stories, the uniqueness of their differences shared a commonality of how life lessons fed into the ultimate decision made. The linkage to the African American Male Theory (Bush & Bush, 2013) showcased a shared purpose for them as elementary educators. Through their internal experiences (family, friends, community, school, and peers), their personality and perceptions of life, and their spirituality, the influence of the internal system proved to be heavily relied on as they chose to become elementary teachers. Moreover, these participants shared eclectic narratives that provided unspoken thoughts and experiences that they endured. This spoke to how Black men are often silenced or taught to suppress their feelings because the world doesn't care.

For example, Mr. Steve shared a narrative often not discussed in educational research, with how traumatic experiences influenced the thoughts and navigation of his decision to teach in an elementary setting. Due to the oppressive nature of schools, a few participants shared their thoughts on transitioning careers once they enter college. For example, Mr. Riley expressed his disdain for nursing and realized that his opportunity to teach the class in high school showed him that he could potentially teach. This finding is consistent with the intentional argument for marketing strategies for teacher education programs to recruit in middle and high school (Ramirez, 2009). I would extend this finding to express the need to expose teaching as a career to elementary students, especially Black boys, as they began to understand career options; additionally, helping to combat the negative experiences often experienced by Black men and boys in education. The positive or negative experiences in the mesosystem and sub-microsystem of their lives proved the power of influence in this space for Black males and boys.

With eclectic journeys leading them to become elementary teachers, these men sought to provide an experience for students they did not have growing up in the education system.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Specifically, this finding is consistent with previous literature in the fact that these Black males see beyond the labels of belt dad, the disciplinarian stop, or savior for Black boys; they are there to teach (Brockenbrough, 2015). Most importantly, their purpose is to pour into the students holistically by paying attention to the whole person and not just their academic ability. More so, this finding supports Mitchell's (2016) argument that if Black boys don't experience Black male educators that it ultimately affects their interest, specifically, when it came to Mr. Riley, seeing a Black male teacher in high school who was intellectual, liked to read inspired him, and poured into him, which he felt he saw himself within that Black male teacher. Furthermore, this was an important finding because it provides a spectrum of rationales for Black male elementary teachers to teach in this space, which goes beyond the flat narrative of representation. In addition, this finding refutes the narratives that Black male elementary teacher's only becoming teachers because of the lack of Black males in education.

These Black male elementary educators shared similarities regarding their decision to teach in the elementary setting, their purpose was woven together through the centering of their rationale on the impact they make on the development of the young minds of the future. Finally, witnessing and hearing their thought process regarding their decision dug deeper into who they are as Black males and the emotions they bring into the elementary setting, which was so freeing and transformational. Their stories provided a humanistic perspective that is often stripped away from Black men through anti-Black practices and systems that problematize and dehumanize the existence of Black men (Powell & Coles, 2020; Ross, 2019). While these are only six stories and the findings are not generalizable, they provide a deeper examination of Black male elementary teachers' experiences and what led them to become an elementary teacher through the influence of different aspects of their lived experienced within the ecological systems.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Limitations

The first limitation of this study was my failure, as the researcher, in my lack of awareness and understanding of the impact of Covid-19 and the learning gap the BMET faced. As such, through the data collection schedule, half of the interviews were held back-to-back due to summer schedules, end-of-the-school-year pressures, and new career updates, which may have impacted or not sufficiently provided adequate time for the participants to reflect. As a result, this may have hindered the ability of the participants to share additional thoughts, concerns, or stories that could have enriched their narratives. Second, the lingering impact of Covid-19 burnout was not factored in, which ultimately could have impacted the ability to think critically about their experiences because of the intense school year these educators endured. Thirdly, studying Black males via a virtual platform limited my capacity as a researcher to grow a relationship and interact with them in person. As a result, an opportunity to have an in-person forum may have generated more data into their stories that could have strengthened my findings. Fourthly, during some of the interviews, there were a lag in the video and audio and volume levels issues, which caused the participants to repeat their answers, which may have caused unseen frustration. Finally, this study only comprised six BMET participants from two southern states, Louisiana and Texas. The study's findings shared from their worldview could be limited based on their geographic location, state region, exposure, capital, and access. In addition, these BMETs represented a wide array of grade levels. For that reason, shared experiences and years varied, which could have potentially impacted the data transmitted throughout the interviews.

Researcher Experience

As a Black male researcher striving to become a critical researcher, I struggled tremendously when asking probing questions to the participants due to the fear of not wanting to

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

lead the participant in a particular direction. In addition, although the participants and I shared the same identity, some participants' energy was tricky to pick up on, which caused some concern regarding how much information they felt comfortable sharing. Additionally, with the global pandemic turning the world upside down, I did not realize the mental effects it had on us all, which was prevalent within the engagement with the participants. Lastly, although I knew going into this research that the participants would share raw and vulnerable moments, I did not factor in the emotional triggers I had during sharing their stories that had not been unpacked personally. While I situated myself as the researcher through intentional protocol with the researcher journal, field notes, and reflexivity, these triggers were an aspect of my qualitative research journey, which may have been different had someone from a separate identity conducted a similar study.

Implications for Practice

While this Endarkened Storywork study encompasses the stories and experiences of six participants and cannot be generalized for all Black male elementary teachers, I provide some implications that may be considered. First, the findings of this study suggest ways through which Black males and boys can begin to free themselves of the confines of the education system and liberate their consciousness of how they see themselves and their value in education as Black male elementary teachers. Additionally, the findings suggest how systems interconnect and how cultural practices, beliefs, and upbringing influence one's worldview. Furthermore, societal norms, traditional practices, policies, procedures, and initiatives may be influenced to redevelop, re-approach, or reassess how systems engage and interact with Black males and boys. Utilizing the ecological system to examine Black males, these stories provided insight and details on how systems influence how they navigate the world as person and elementary educators. Based on

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

their experience, the multi-dimensional realities go beyond their identities of race and gender; several factors (social media, historical events, immediate environment, etc.) impact how they show up as an elementary teacher. Lastly, the BMETs decisions are affected based on the purpose that's ultimately shaped by their upbringing and surroundings in their microsystem, offering a perspective that's beyond close-knit. Although there is a plethora of literature on cultural pedagogy, when it comes to understanding, teaching, and shaping the minds of Black males, one must intentionally invest in their development in the school house and beyond the school house. Any teacher can be trained to teach from a lens of cultural pedagogy, but if a teacher doesn't understand the ways in which cultural pedagogy impacts Black males then the work is insufficient. The following implications for current and future practices are written in letters. As the researcher, I prepared letters that speak directly to those impacted by this research that seeks to liberate and provide a space to heal, uplift, and thrive (Melonas, 2021):

Dear Black Male Elementary Educators,

A gentle nudge and affirmation you are worthy, valued, and essential in your life and your passion for impacting and influencing our children. Your ability to teach the truth, invest in kids' minds, and see each student internally and externally, makes you the most powerful person on this planet. So don't you ever forget it! A reminder to never dim your light because others around you are inferior of your capabilities. The fluidity of expression shown throughout your experience is vital to your students and yourself. Break those chains of bondage and transform your consciousness that allows you to thrive as a Black male who happens to be an elementary educator. Let your light shine, Black King!

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

P.S. allow yourself to heal as you continue to do this work. It's ok to take a break and replenish your garden.

Dear Black Boys,

First, let me acknowledge that I know school is a burning house filled with white dominance, and it's a complex system to navigate. However, you are worthy of being creative, fluid, and educated, and do not allow anyone to tell you otherwise. Your ability to express is not a weapon; it's an art and continue to leverage it to be the best damn person you can be. Also, if no one tells you, I will tell you that it's ok to be an educator. Yes, I am talking to you, the one with the coarse hair, good hair, and light, brown, and dark skin complexion who carries various identities, all those things that make your blackness unique; it's ok to be an educator. Most importantly, invest in your garden and water your seeds even when others don't. Finally, remember to hold your head high and own every space you enter. You got this, kid!

P.S. They gone act like they know you, but they don't really know you!

Dear My Beloved Black Community,

Let's hug on our Black boys and men! Remember, it takes a village; we must allow our boys to grow up and become men. Teaching ain't feminine; its gender neutral, don't forget that! We can't continue working through the lens of a system that perpetuates the same oppressive measure on our Black community. It takes a village that starts with supporting, healing, and uplifting our community and the Black men and boys!

Additionally, it's okay that we understand and reveal the traumatic cycles that have plagued our community for far too long. The lasting effect of trauma on our Black boys and men will continue if we do not reveal the things we wish to heal from.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

P.S. We gone make a way out of no way!

Dear Education System,

Yes, I am aware of educational inequities in Black and Brown communities, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rodney King, shall I continue? Spare us with performative practices. Creating initiatives and throwing money at a system problem will not fix the issue. Cutting corners to train administrators and teachers on implicit biases will not change the experiences of Black men and boys. Turning a blind eye to anti-Black policies, procedures, and processes, will not help the recruitment and retention of Black male educators, specifically Black male elementary teachers. There needs to be intentionality behind reformed policies, initiatives, and systems. That first starts with acknowledging that there is an issue, and it's beyond the realm of disciplinarian policy adjustments. The question for you is: Is the education system ready to transform from a Eurocentric system?

Dear Current & Future Education Scholars,

Before we begin the process of diversifying the teacher workforce, we must start the work of acknowledging the historical underpinnings that plague the reason our teacher workforce lacks diversity. Creating one-dimensional research on diversifying the recruitment model for our counterparts in K-12 education to leverage to gain a diverse pool of teachers will only inadvertently affect the retention of those teachers. Instead, we have to come together as scholars to develop an intentional and inclusive research model/framework that focuses on the sense of belonging, recruitment, supportive needs, leadership development, and retention efforts. As the enrollment numbers continue to represent high percentages of students of color, teachers of color percentages should be

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

the same. Lastly, education for many affinity-based groups has not been a space of safety, so as a researcher, we must understand how trauma impacts their decision-making and how our research could inflict harm on these communities to change the narrative for the teacher workforce.

Dear Self,

As you continue to navigate uncharted waters and disrupt the status quo, remember to show yourself grace and stay true to who you are as a scholar. Of course, everyone will not agree with your stance or epistemological commitment, but the goal is to do the work needed to advance the Black community within education. Black male educators are essential and valuable to the field of education. However, you do take on a load of adding Black men to a system that does not want to change the system. Your goal and mission are to disrupt and challenge how the system has depleted the number of Black males in or entering education.

Recommendations for Future Research

This Endarkened Storywork study aimed to examine and share the narratives of Black male elementary teachers' experience and their decision to teach through the framework of the African American Male Theory (Bush & Bush, 2013). Previously, Black male elementary teachers' narratives were minimized or erased, so it was essential to bring their voices to the forefront because of the importance of Black males being elementary teachers. However, to further understand this population of educators, their contributions, experience, and ways to recruit and retain Black males in education, I recommend advancement of the research in this space through the following studies:

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

- A critical qualitative study exploring the lived experiences of queer Black male elementary teacher experiences and what it means to be LGBTQ+ in early childhood education.
- A critical qualitative study examining the experiences of Black male elementary teachers teaching in rural districts.
- A critical qualitative study investigating how the Deep South education system impacts the recruitment, retention, and sustainability of Black male teachers.
- A critical quantitative study describing the relationship between education policies and Black male educators' job performance and its impact.
- A critical mixed-method study analyzing Black male elementary educators' perceptions of alternative and traditional teacher certification and the extent to which either program can show longevity in the education field.
- A critical mixed-method study exploring how trauma influences Black male elementary educators' relationship development with students, parents, and administrators.

Concluding Remarks

The study sought to offer a narrative that authentically shared Black male elementary teachers experiences and what potentially led them to teach in this setting through the ecological system. Throughout this process of interviewing the participants, I was liberated, motivated, and enlightened by the matriculation of these educators. After data analysis, it is evident that the richness and uniqueness of their stories shared a message that spoke a language of power through threads that emerged: (a) superhero complex, (b) media influence, (c) intersections of gender and race, (d) intentional investment (f) self, and (g) purpose. I was filled with emotions as these Black male elementary teachers allowed themselves to be vulnerable, authentic, and reflective.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

The joy I felt in sharing their stories spoke a language I do not think I can put into words in this lifetime. As a former Black male elementary educator, it's rare. Still, their willingness to take this enormous task by the horns and run with it while painting multiple realities for these students in a way that speaks truth and shows resistance against whiteness speaks to their character, determination, and fantasy to impact the world.

To this point of sharing their stories, Endarkened Storywork has frequently been utilized within a feminist angle, which as a doctoral student, I have been challenged on as a male who's focusing on Black males. However, Toliver (2021) reminds us that this methodology goes beyond the standard concept of feminization, as it is designed to capture Black life and the ways in which Black people communicate, connect, and remember—there is no barring to a gendered norm approach. Through ancestral traditions, Black storytelling has been a tradition since West African Life when Griots would share stories, music, and poetry to preserve and remember their people's history. Although my ancestors were chained and shipped across the ocean to the land now referred as the United States of America that Black storytelling tradition has continued to be a light and guiding practice in the Black community. I would highly encourage the usage of Endarkened Storywork to be incorporated regarding educational discourse focusing on Black boys and men.

Finally, an aspect of Endarkened Storywork that was a cornerstone to my understanding of this methodology was the symbolic emphasis on Black life intersecting threads and unraveling the raw edges of the fabric that represented within the quilt. Through this figurative image presented in Figure 2, the threads I shared through the findings come together with the images shared by the participants to exemplify the hidden messages within their triumph, pain, resistance, trauma, and freedom within their journeys as Black male elementary teachers

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

(BMET). Here, the powerful illustration of the encoded and threaded cultural knowledge and memories these BMET carry individually and collectively intertwine together to speak of their experiences we can learn from and lift our present and future educators.

Figure 8

The Me You Can't See Quilt



Throughout this study, I realized that, as Black men, we are not monolithic; however, there is a collective experience that Black men have as they navigate the world that must be intentionally examined to advance opportunities and experiences for them. These Black male elementary educators (BMET) exuded this transformation of consciousness within their experiences, which is often unheard of when researched or depicted in the media and instead frequently viewed through a deficit lens. However, these BMET are changing the narrative and providing an authentic and emic foundation capturing the holistic development of social, psychological, spiritual, emotional, and educational growth that's often unseen but can be felt internally and externally as they continue their journeys.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Through their interconnectedness as Black men, their voices remind us of the importance of their presence and continue to add threads to the quilt, with the prospect of new voices and threads woven in through the eyes of the boys in their classrooms . . .

“I want my students to take what they learn from me and make something out of it.” – Mr. Steve

“One thing we must do is show them no matter who you are that learning is possible.” – Mr. Coach

“The kids are extremely interested in learning, and everything is magical.” – Mr. Riley

“No matter what anybody tell you, you can still do it, you can make it.” – Coach Will

“My duty isn’t just to teach the students academics, yet to instill in them about life choices and the consequences of those decisions.” – Mr. Goku

“I myself through teaching am giving my inner child the confidence, voice, autonomy that he didn’t have in his primary years.” – Mr. Joe

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

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Appendices

Appendix A

Recruitment Email and Recruitment Form Questionnaire

Greetings Participant,

I hope this email finds you well.

My name is Trevor McCray, and I am a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Texas at Arlington in the K-16 Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program. For my dissertation research, I am seeking to recruit Black male elementary teachers for an interview-based study regarding their experiences as a teacher and the factors that contributed to their decision to be a teacher. Participation in this study will provide opportunities for improved practices for Black boys and males in the education field, as less than 2% of elementary teachers are Black males.

To qualify as a participant for this study, I am seeking individuals who:

1. Self-identify as a Black or African American male
2. Currently serves as an elementary teacher (PK-5th grade)
3. Serves in a Louisiana or Texas school

If you are interested in participating or would like to know more, please complete the survey link below: <https://utaedu.questionpro.com/t/AVI29Zrz2D>.

For any additional information, questions, or concerns regarding the requirements, please feel free to reach out to me at trevor.mccray@mavs.uta.edu or call me on my cell:

Thank you for your time.

Best Regards,
Trevor McCray, M.A.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

Participants Questionnaire Form

Hello,

You are invited to participate in our survey. “The Me You Can’t See: An Examination of Black Male Elementary Teachers.” In this preliminary survey, individuals will be asked to complete a survey that asks general questions for consideration to participate in this study. It will take approximately two to three minutes to complete the questionnaire. Your participation in this survey is entirely voluntary. There are no foreseeable risks associated with this project. However, if you feel uncomfortable answering any questions, you can withdraw from the survey at any point. Your responses will be strictly confidential, and data from this research will be reported only in the aggregate. Your information will be coded and remain confidential. If you have any questions about the survey or the procedures at any time, you may contact Trevor McCray at 225.454.8954 or by email at trevor.mccray@mavs.uta.edu.

Thank you very much for your time and support. Please start the survey now by clicking on the continue button below.

Survey Questions (Contact Information)

First Name

Last Name

Phone


Email Address


*Do you identify as a Black or African American male? **Yes or No***

*Are you an elementary teacher in Louisiana or Texas? **Texas or Louisiana***

Appendix B

Recruitment Flyer


 **Seeking Black Male Elementary Teachers**



1. Would you like to be a part of a study sharing your experience as an elementary educator?
2. To qualify for participation, you must:
 - a. *Identify as Black or African American male*
 - b. *Currently serve as an elementary teacher (PK-5)*
 - c. *Work in a Texas or Louisiana school*

To learn more, scan the QR code or contact the researcher:

Trevor McCray, M.A.
UTA - Ph.D Candidate
Email: trevor.mccray@mavs.uta.edu
LinkedIn: www.linkedin.com/in/trevormccray8/
UTA IRB #2022-0341



Appendix C

Interview Protocols for Participants

Round 1 Interviews:

1. Can you first share about you professionally—including what grade(s) you are currently teaching or have taught during your time in elementary?
2. Describe your experience teaching in an elementary setting. What do you remember about that experience?
3. When did you first consider becoming an elementary teacher? How did that make you feel?
4. Can you share any stories that were internal influences from your childhood/school-age that influenced you to become an elementary teacher?
5. Can you share any stories that were external influences from your childhood/school-age that influenced you to become an elementary teacher?
6. Can you recall any experiences where femininity or masculinity influenced your decision to teach in an elementary setting?
7. How do you feel femininity and masculinity have influenced your style of teaching as an elementary teacher?
8. How would you describe your experiences as a Black male student in K-12? What were your best parts as a student? What was the most challenging?
9. What do you feel you bring to an elementary classroom that makes you unique?
10. If you could describe your identity as an elementary teacher as a character, what would it be and why?

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

11. What does it mean to you to be a Black male elementary teacher?

Round 2 Interviews:

1. How do you feel about being a Black elementary teacher? Probe—Do you ever feel like there are conflicting pressures in this?
2. Do you think your experience has been different because you are Black? If so, please share a story? If not, why?
3. Do you think your experience has been different because you are a male? If so, please share a story? If not, why?
4. How do you feel external (media, society, policy, segregation, etc.) currently (as an adult) influence your experience as an elementary teacher?
5. How do you feel internal (family, friends, self, sexual identity, faith, etc.) influences currently (as an adult) influence your experience as an elementary teacher?
6. There are images in the media and research that have made varied perceptions of male teachers and/or Black teachers. In your experiences have there been perceptions of you as a Black male elementary teacher?
7. Within the next 50 years, where do you see Black male elementary teachers being?
8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience as a Black male elementary teacher that we haven't discussed?

Third Interview:

- Please provide one image that symbolizes your Black male elementary teacher identity and explain why you chose this.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

- Additional artifacts: Bring 5-7 photos, mementos, or other items that are significant to you in your teaching identity.

Journal Prompts:

1. After reflecting on the first/second/third interview, can you describe any other stories, moments, or situations you feel you want to share? Or any previous discussion you wish to expound upon?
2. If you could describe your decision to teach children in a song, what would it be and why?
3. Can you share one example of each of an internal and external success you have had as an elementary teacher and how each made you feel? Alternative—What has been the most meaningful experience as a Black male elementary teacher?
4. What language or imagery should be displayed in school settings to encourage Black boys to become interested in choosing a career in teaching, specifically in the elementary setting?
5. Do you feel you represent what you needed when you were in elementary or represent what you feel your kids need? Explain.

Appendix D
Informed Consent for Studies with Adults

Researcher: Trevor McCray, Ph.D. Candidate
Supervising Professor/Chair: Dr. Jennifer Bailey
Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

My name is **Trevor McCray**, and I am asking you to participate in a UT Arlington research study titled, “*The Me You Can’t See: An Examination of Black Male Elementary Teachers.*” This research study is about Black males’ experiences as an elementary teacher and factors contributing to their decision to teach. You can choose to participate in this research study if you are at least 18 years old, identify as a Black or African American male, serve currently as an elementary teacher (PK-5), and teach in a Louisiana or Texas elementary school.

Reasons why you might want to participate in this study include: sharing your experiences as an elementary teacher to potentially improve the future for Black men in the education field or providing insight to factors that contributed to your decision to teach which may inform improved practices for Black boys in the elementary setting. You might not want to participate if you are uncomfortable sharing your personal experiences with a researcher or if you are not able to commit to three virtual interviews for 60 minutes over the duration of four to six weeks. Your decision about whether to participate is entirely up to you. If you decide not to be in the study, there won’t be any penalty nor any impact to any benefits or services that you would normally receive. Even if you choose to begin the study, you may also change your mind and quit at any time without any consequences.

If you decide to participate in this research study, the list of activities that I will ask you to complete for the research are: (1) participate in three virtual/online interviews (2) submit 5 to 7 artifacts, and (3) journal throughout the interview process. The interviews will be spread out and take place over four to six weeks, depending on your availability and they will be recorded via Zoom for transcription purposes only. Although you probably won’t experience any personal benefits from participating, you may benefit from sharing your experiences to impact the research on Black male educators. The study activities are not expected to pose any additional risks beyond those that you would normally experience in your regular everyday life or during routine medical/psychological visits. However, some of the questions that I will ask may be about sensitive or uncomfortable topics during the interview. Please keep in mind that transcriptions will be provided to you to ensure the accuracy of the data provided based on your interview.

You will not be paid for completing this study, and there are no alternative options to this research project. As the researcher, I am committed to protecting your rights and privacy as a research subject. I may publish or present the results, but your name will not be used, and artifacts submitted will not be published, but will only be analyzed for themes. While absolute confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, as the researcher, I will make every effort to protect the confidentiality of your records as described here and to the extent permitted by law. If you have questions about the study, you can contact me at trevor.mccray@mavs.uta.edu. For questions about your rights or to report complaints, contact the UTA Research Office at 817-272-3723 or regulatoryservices@uta.edu.

STORIES OF BLACK MALE ELEMENTARY TEACHERS

If you agree to participate in this study, please complete the information below.

Print Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____