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## A Cultural Legacy of Resiliency: Black Male Teacher Retention in K-12 Classrooms

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A Cultural Legacy of Resiliency: Black Male Teacher Retention in K-12 Classrooms

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy  
in  
Educational Administration

by

Mitchell Brookins

B.A. Illinois Wesleyan University, 2005  
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May, 2023

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to the children I have served through my teaching. All of you are the reason that I am the educator I am today. It was your trust that sustained me. It was your effort to attain academic success that propelled me to perfect my instructional craft. It was your demonstration of learning that affirmed my purpose and my vocation. I did this for all of you as a testament and emblem of Black scholarship.

## **Acknowledgements**

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To my family, friends, and Dr. Earnest Ricks, you all have lifted me and represent the pillars on which I stand. To my loved ones who have transitioned into their eternal rest (my father and my grandparents), I envisioned you all smiling down on me at this very moment.

To the educators I've had the esteemed honor to grow in my practice, all of you are a part of my legacy.

To all the Black scholars that have come before me, I'm humbled to be a part of a rich, collective lineage.

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To the children I taught throughout this 18-year journey, you all are why I decided to be a part of the 2% of the U.S. who holds a doctoral degree.

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## **Abstract**

Only 18% of the nation's teaching force are minorities, with 2% being Black male teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). Black educators have the lowest retention rate and the highest departure rate (Snyder et al., 2014). There is limited empirical research that explores turnover patterns and organizational conditions that impact Black male educators' decisions to remain in the field (Achinstein et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2005; Kirby et al., 1999). As a result, this qualitative study is imperative in that it contributes to a body of literature that explores aspects and experiences of Black male teachers in K-12 classrooms. Utilizing the late historian, Clyde Woods' (2017) concept of the blues epistemology, which illustrates the African American identity as one rooted in the tradition of resistance to the antebellum plantation regime, this qualitative study sought to better understand how Black male teachers navigate workplace experiences and how organizational conditions impact retention. Data collection included personal essays and interviews. This dissertation contributes to the literature that explores how organizational school conditions impact retention, but more importantly, this study highlights elements of the decision-making process in which the participants grappled with workplace challenges, wrestled with their professional choice, and decided to remain in the classroom for one of the following reasons: their connection with students, collegial support, or their belief that teaching is their vocation.

## **Preface**

From Chicago Public Schools to New Orleans public schools, my school administration experiences have primarily served Black and Latino students of lower socioeconomic status in turnaround schools. By my fifth year as an assistant principal, I was a part of a White-ran charter school in which 100% of the executive leaders and principals were White, and 100% of assistant principals were Black. By that time, our staff included six Black male educators. I frequently visited their classrooms to see the interaction between the students and them. Their presence demanded students' attention, ensured all students attempted instructional tasks, and I saw students with the most challenging behaviors comply with the teacher's behavioral expectations. I saw students who were well below grade-level expectations participate in class discussions. The energy was very different in their classrooms.

As I observed their classrooms, I saw teachers who needed support with instructional clarity, scaffolding, questioning, facilitating class discussions, and increasing rigor. With that in mind, I began holding debriefs with them to discuss instruction and everyday events in the school. What I learned was that all of them wanted their students to be successful, but they struggled with how best to accomplish it. Our conversations centered around their dissatisfaction with the New Orleans' educational landscape having a majority White-controlled board of directors, and educator workforce (Dixson et al., 2015; Henry, 2019). Over the years, I built a bond with them, but the fact remained, they were dissatisfied. The majority did not plan to remain in the teaching profession for more than five years, which was disheartening because of their daily impact on children. I began to think about how I could mentor, coach, or be a thought-partner. I needed to figure out how to get them to stay.

I began to reflect upon my experiences with Black male educators who were committed to staying, experienced success, grew professionally, and stepped into leadership roles. They worked in urban areas, taught low-performing students yet, their experiences were different. Even my experiences as an educator have positioned me to increase teacher capacity of all races. So much of the narrative that circulates about the Black male educator experience is high turn-over rates, alienation, dissatisfaction, hard-to-staff school, and performance pressure in white-dominated spaces. What about our triumphs? What about our student success results? What about our advancement? Ultimately, we have become the face of what it means to be disadvantaged. Our stories are more nuanced, but the prevailing narrative does not depict them as such. In no way am I asserting there are no complexities, but we come from a lineage of Black educators who overcame those obstacles to impact the life trajectory of students. So, for this study, I did not want to focus on the reasons why Black males leave the teaching field. I wanted to learn from those who have had successful journeys. I sought to understand aspects of their successful experiences in hope that these success stories could potentially be used to flip the narrative for Black male educators who confront negative experiences and be a window into how to navigate workplace complexities successfully. Ultimately, the voices of successful Black male educators need to be lifted for the sake of the educational attainment of all children.

## Chapter 1

Currently, there are about 6 million teachers in the U.S., and two percent are Black males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). While students of color represent 49% of public schools, only 18% of teachers belong to a minority group (2013). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics and the most recent 2012-2013 survey, Black educators have the lowest retention rate and the highest departure rate (i.e., 10%) (Snyder et al., 2014). Black educators are leaving the classroom for a myriad of reasons.

The bleak numbers of Black male educators (BMEs) have its roots in the K-12 educational system. The systemic marginalization within the U.S. educational system is a consistent experience in which Black males have confronted systemic impediments since the onset of their schooling as students, and their academic trajectory continues to be in jeopardy. For instance, according to the high school drop-out and completion rate report in 2013 by the Institute of Education Sciences, 9% of Black boys dropped out compared to 4.7% of whites (McFarland et al., 2013). Taking a closer look into U.S. urban cities where 80% of all Blacks live (Mincy et al., 2006), the graduation crisis for Black males is as follows: New Orleans is 28 percent, New York City is 28 percent, Detroit is 27 percent, Cleveland is 27 percent, and Boston is 47 percent (Schott, 2010). But looking at dropout rates without considering how well documented exclusionary discipline practices have disproportionately affected Black males from the early beginnings of preschool through secondary school, which has been well documented (Ferguson, 2020; Finn, 1991; Meiners, 2010; Morris, 2016; Wesley & Ellis, 2017; White, 2017), is misleading.

The discussion of Black male students' academic underperformance cannot be void of considering the contributing socioeconomic factors. Due to the impact of geographical redlining (Pearcy, 2015), socioeconomic factors caused many Black children to live in poverty-stricken, racially segregated environments. This systemic issue has led to the following: 71% of Black children are born out of wedlock, 39% of Black children live in poverty, 35% live in food-insecure households, 13% of Black children have a mother with less than a high school education (Prager, 2011). The educational system expects Black children to perform academically in this context, but these socioeconomic factors are barriers to creating adequate school conditions. Inequitable school outcomes include the following: Black boys experience challenges forming relationships with teachers (Sutton et al., 2018), they achieve lower grades than all other groups (Sutton et al., 2018), and are more likely to be assigned to disadvantaged classes than Whites (Becares & Priest, 2015). Black boys are historically linked to being the face of the achievement gap and are often perceived as being the sole cause of their academic status. A key aspect of Black intellectual thought (Grant et al., 2015) is the focus on issues that impact Black education such as academic disparities, and the scholar, Ladson-Billings (2006 & 2007) called for a redefining and understanding of the critical issue coined the achievement gap. Ladson-Billings (2006 & 2007) asserts that the achievement gap is not purely academic, for it is an educational debt comprised of economic, sociopolitical, and moral disparities inflicted and experienced by Black people in the U.S. Thus, Black boys should not be labeled as the cause when they are the recipients of limited access. These inequitable school conditions and socio-economic disparities contribute to Black male underachievement in the K-12 educational system.

The discourse as noted above about Black boys' school experiences is rooted in a historical, deficit perspective connected to the pervasive social images and beliefs about Black

men in our society. As early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century, images depicted Black men as physically strong, mentally inept, hyper-sexual beings suited for enslavement (Howard et al., 2012). By the twentieth century, Black men's images were as thugs, hustlers, violent, and menace to society (Bogle, 2001; Diawara, 1993). Berger and Simon (1974) point out that in the Moynihan Report of 1965, the breakdown in the Black family structure in which the woman is the head of the household contributed to the educational disparity between Black boys and their counterparts. Almost fifty years ago, the lack of Black boys' academic attainment is not ascribed to ineffective school conditions but the Black family itself.

These societal images and beliefs have infiltrated schools and affect how practitioners interact with students of color. One of the effects of such imagery and beliefs is the start of “no-excuse” schools. Sondel et al. (2022) explained the rise of “no-excuse” charter schools as organizations who target low-income students and argue that poverty is no-excuse for academic underperformance. Findings show teachers in schools grounded in a no-excuse belief system viewed Black communities' cultural trait as violent and chaotic (Sondel et al., 2022) and incapable of helping themselves (Cammarota, 2011). As a result, teachers used surveillance tactics (i.e., frequent scanning or monitoring students' behavior) to instill compliance to rigid behavioral expectations (Golann & Torres, 2018).

Gilliam et al. (2016) confirmed teacher surveillance when trying to understand the disproportionality of teacher discipline systems. The study tracked teacher eye-movement as they watched various ethnic groups. The study found that teachers' gaze linked to the expectation of the child demonstrating disruptive classroom behavior. Black children did not misbehave more; teachers caught them misbehaving more frequently (Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Teachers' beliefs that Black males would harm other children were less innocent, more



mature, most likely perpetrators of misbehavior, and more discriminatory and exclusionary tactics (Wesley & Ellis, 2017).

This perspective has led to teacher low-level expectations and learning experiences that do not advance the academic achievement of Black males. Low expectations and non-rigorous learning experiences have led to Black boys disproportionately experiencing more tracking into low-ability groups and held in lower academic regard by their teachers (Gordon et al., 2009; Oakes et al., 1991). In fact, research has found that white teachers in urban schools, who differ socially and economically from their students, have low-expectations and are more inclined to see Black student failure due to class and racial backgrounds (Hale, 2001). If Black boys continue to have low achievement scores, schools place them in low-ability groups (Gordon et al., 2009). In that case, there is no surprise why Black boys may view school as not a welcoming place due to confronting inequitable learning experiences, which can impact self-efficacy and motivation.

Teacher low-level expectations can lead to the lowering of students' self-efficacy. As Black students enter adolescence, they become increasingly aware of negative stereotypes about their group (Goyer et al., 2019). Teachers' pre-existing stereotypes may hinder positive relationships with Black students (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019). In fact, Steele and Aronson (1995) found in their study the mere presence of racial stereotypes could impair Black students' test performance, and thus, they underperformed in contrast to their White counterparts. These studies illustrate the socio-historical experiences of Black males continued as these upper elementary, Black males confronted the realities of low expectations, lowered self-confidence, and non-rigorous academic experiences.

Not only does teacher perception impact student efficacy, it impacts their academic performance. The academic disparities by race continue to exist in the area of literacy. According to NAEP, a national assessment given to fourth and eighth-grade students, 13% of fourth-grade Black boys scored proficient in reading compared to 40% of white boys, and in eighth grade, there was a 26% literacy gap between Black and white males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). This begins as early as primary grades. Research shows that school practices marginalize kids by gender. From the early start of learning to read, schools heavily focus on narrative texts that do not cater to boys but girls (Husband, 2012). Boys prefer reading texts highlighting action, superheroes, and information about their world (Husband, 2012). Even more, the reading instruction Black boys participate in is above their reading level and socially and culturally irresponsible, and as a result, Black boys fall further behind their counterparts (Husband, 2012). As students get older, the complexities of texts increase, so Black boys who do not acquire proficient reading skills early on continue to struggle.

Reading achievement for Black males is a concern and, a closer examination of school practices can provide some insight as to why academic failure persists. Husband (2012) asserts standardized curriculums contribute to racial disparities in reading achievement. School curriculum texts ignore students' local context and adolescents' desires for self-discovery and instead focus on skill and strategy development due to policy decisions on measuring reading achievement (Tatum, 2006). Assessment tools do not reflect the diverse student population, and schools align their instruction and curriculum to these metrics without considering the impact. Furthermore, teacher's text selections in school are not culturally relevant, and thus, Black adolescent males are resistant to them or just do not read them (Husband, 2012). Tatum (2006) asserts meaningful texts must be at the core of the curriculum regarding the literacy

development of Black males. Schools are not providing culturally relevant learning experiences, which adds to Black male reading achievement disparity.

Additionally, teacher perception impacts how some teachers approach classrooms with Black boys, emphasizing controlling behavior and demonstrating extreme reactions to misbehavior that is not severe (Monroe, 2005). School exclusionary discipline tactics have disproportionately affected Black males from the early beginnings of preschool through secondary school (Ferguson, 2020; Meiners, 2010). Exclusionary discipline, such as zero-tolerance policies, is any form of punishment that takes students away from the learning environment (Wesley & Ellis, 2017). Morris (2016) describes zero tolerance policies as rooted in the belief that small criminal acts yield more severe, negative behavior, and this premise has permeated schools and directly impacted Black students, specifically girls. Exclusionary tactics include in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions. Furthermore, Wesley & Ellis (2017) found that Black preschoolers comprise 19% of overall preschool enrollment but 47% of suspension rate. To add, Giordano et al. (2020) found 42% of preschools expelled at least one Black child for negative behavior resulting in 50,000 suspensions and 17,000 expulsions.

Schools suspend Black students three times as much as other ethnic groups (Giordano, 2020). Teachers in middle and secondary schools use punitive disciplinary policies to maintain control, although students desire more autonomy and respect (Goyer et al., 2019). Hope and colleagues (2014) found that Black students had at least one experience with a teacher or staff member who treated them unjustly based on race. Often, drop-out rates are reported, and the assumption is it reflects a student-driven decision, however, the literature challenges the use of the term “school drop-out” considering the attrition of Black students in schools is due to

systemic school policies and practices that are punitive and exclusionary (Finn, 1991; Morris, 2016; White, 2017).

The push-out strategy further confirms the inequitable realities of Black males in K-12 settings which is a critical concern raised in the literature-base of Black intellectual thought (Grant et al., 2015).

This inequity is evident as it relates to the gap in suspensions (26.9%), expulsions (4.35), and drop-out rates (6%) between Black and white males in public high schools (McFarland et al., 2016). Black students are two to five times more likely to be suspended than whites and Latino peers (Monroe, 2005). These are the realities within the four walls of the schoolhouse that Black male students must traverse. Boutte et al. (2021) categorizes these realities in four categories of school violence: symbolic, systemic, physical, and curricular. Black children within the school system experience violence on their identities, their liberties within school, curricular exposure, and sometimes physical harm due to harsh discipline practices (Boutte et al., 2021). Bettina Love (2019) points out that Black children experience an educational survival complex in which they are always surviving while navigating unfavorable school conditions. Interestingly, the harsh realities of the K-12 classrooms did not begin when Black males entered the teaching field, but it is an accumulation of the educational debt built and sustained from the moment they entered the educational system as a child.

### **Problem Statement**

Although the K-12 pathway for Black males continues to be bleak, 31% of Black males between ages 18-24 enrolled in degree-granting institutions (Gist, 2016). However, college-life for Black males in education programs also comes with challenges. It is predominately a white

staff in colleges of education, and Black students reported feelings of isolation because of the lack of student and teacher diversity (Gist, 2016). Also, students of color in teacher preparation programs felt isolated and felt professors constructed diversity courses for whites and not them (Chung & Harrison, 2015). Professors did not design curricular topics for those with first-hand experiences with issues such as racism. Instead of teacher education programs being culturally relevant, professors designed courses only to increase awareness of diverse student backgrounds not necessarily how to teach them. It is these types of experiences that make Black males feel ill-prepared for the classroom. Yet, Black male educators persist.

Furthermore, Black males who enter the teaching profession have expressed dissatisfaction due to a lack of autonomy to make curricular and instructional decisions, being treated as disciplinarians and not content experts, and not feeling as if they are fulfilling their purpose in educating Black children (Brown, n.d., 2009, 2012, in press). Staff members often see Black males as role models and disciplinarians. As a result, school officials give them the task to deal with the most challenging students instead of being consulted for their pedagogical expertise. Pabon's (2014) study describes Black male teachers' pressure to change their teaching practices to be more aligned with standardized curricula and pedagogies. Because they feel the pressure to conform, some Black men leave the teaching field. This reality aligns to Black intellectual thought (Grant et al., 2015) for it highlights the racialized experiences that create enclosures for Black educators as they seek to serve their students.

Black males leaving the teaching field is problematic because a growing body of research shows that students of color perform better on standardized tests when they have teachers of color (Viano & Hunter, 2015). A study of the Florida public school students in grades three through ten from 2001 –2002 through 2008 – 2009 on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment

Test found a positive impact of race-matching teaching assignments (i.e., matching students with teachers of the same race). A significant effect was found at the elementary level of .005SD in reading and 0.13 in math (Egalite et al., 2015). For Black students, the impact of race-matching teaching assignments was larger with .019SD in math and .004SD in reading (2015). Regarding lower-performing students, Black students benefit from race-matching by .016SD in reading and .014SD in math (2015). A similar study was done in Tennessee in Grades 3 through 8, and a positive impact on student achievement was found. In Tennessee, students in K-3 experienced a test score gain of 2 to 4 percentile points from race-matching (Doan et al., 2018). A recent study found that Black students in grades three to five have a 29% chance of graduating from high school with at least one Black teacher (John Hopkins Study, 2017).

Cherng and Halpin (2016) found not only do students perform better, but also, students of color have more favorable perceptions of teachers of color. The Measure of Effective Teaching study collected student survey data of about 157, 081 students. They evaluated 2,756 ELA and Mathematics teachers in 317 schools in six U.S. school districts between 2009 –2010 and 2010-2011. On five out of seven measures, students have more favorable perceptions of Black teachers than white teachers in the following categories: challenge, captivate, consolidate, care, and clarity (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). In fact, students perceived Black teachers more than their white peers to hold higher academic standards and be more supportive in aiding them in learning through their support, modeling of key concepts, and providing feedback (2016).

However, despite the above studies on how to improve Black student outcomes, between 2002-2012, the number of Black educators has declined in some of the largest urban school districts such as Philadelphia (18.5%), Chicago (40%), and New Orleans (62%) (Rigza, 2016). With the national goal of ensuring that all students meet or exceed grade-level

expectations still unmet, a better understanding of Black male teacher retention is an essential part of the solution.

### **Research Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) is to describe how Black males in K-12 successfully approach and work through their workplace experiences. The goal is to put a lens on their success to support educational leaders in creating the conditions in which Black male educators feel embraced, affirmed, and successful in their workplace. If the educational system creates these conditions, educational leaders should be more prepared to retain Black males in the K-12 classrooms to impact student achievement.

### **Research Question**

This study's research question is: How do Black male educators successfully navigate workplace experiences that lead to their retention in K-12 classrooms?

### **Outline for Dissertation**

Chapter One describes the K-12 context for Black males that starts with their academic trajectory and disciplinary tactics that have disproportionately affected this subgroup (Becares & Priest, 2015, Gordon et al., 2009; Noguera, 2010; Oakes et al., 1991). This trend continues as Black males matriculate into higher education institutions to finally the classroom. Despite their impact on student achievement, Black males' retention rate is one of the lowest in the field (Snyder et al., 2014).

In chapter Two, I begin by describing the historical narrative of Black education from Reconstruction to the No Child Left Behind (2002) legislation. The chapter describes Black male educators' experiences in college and K-12 classroom settings. Then, I explain the theoretical premises of the blues epistemology that undergirds my study (Woods, 2017).

In chapter Three, I describe how I utilize a qualitative method (Merriam, 2009) to answer my research question of how Black males successfully navigate workplace conditions that lead to their retention. Next, I explain my methods for collecting data through personal essays and semi-structured interviews to understand the experiences of how Black male educators successfully navigate workplace conditions. Chapter Four contains the findings of the study. Chapter Five includes a discussion of the study's findings and recommendations for future research.



## **Chapter 2**

In this chapter, I review four bodies of literature that provide the context for my study. The chapter begins by describing the historical narrative of Black education from Reconstruction to the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). The chapter transitions to describing Black male educators' experiences in college, specifically teacher education programs. Then, the focus is on Black male educators' experiences in K-12 classroom settings. Finally, I explain the theoretical framework that undergirds my study. The literature highlighted in this chapter is part of Black intellectual thought that describes the oppressive conditions Blacks have confronted and the social realities of Black educators in the U.S. educational system (Grant et al., 2015). These bodies of literature are imperative to my research because the literature puts a lens on Black educators' experiences in their workplace and shows how they navigated the complexities they confronted. Understanding how Black male educators have navigated complexities will be integral to understanding Black male educator retention in K-12 classrooms.

### **Disenfranchisement of Black Education**

In traditional Black belt counties of Alabama between 1870 – 1900, the Reconstruction Era was when African Americans began to experience initial equality (Anderson, 2015). Before the American Civil War, almost every state in the South had outlawed literacy instruction of enslaved persons because lawmakers feared that educated enslaved persons would become dissatisfied with their inferior status and attempt to overthrow the institution of slavery (Brosnan, 2016). Soon after the *Emancipation Proclamation*, once-enslaved people were determined to ensure schooling was in place for the community by building schools, recruiting teachers from within, welcoming anyone willing to teach, and raising student attendance (Butchart, 2010).

After the Civil War, freed persons were the first among native southerners to campaign for universal public education. Freed people operated the "Sabbath" school system, which was church-sponsored. There were about 1,512 Sabbath schools with 6,146 teachers and 107,109 students (Anderson, 1988). As freed people worked to promote Black education, there were various viewpoints on its purpose and design. Proponents of Southern industrialization viewed mass schooling as a means to yield efficient labor and instill a racial hierarchy in children (Anderson, 1988). However, Black educators taught subjects not geared toward producing a caste or race-based labor force. One of Black educators' primary goals was to increase literacy rates of freed people along with democratic citizenship training. The purpose was to raise moral and intellectual development that would lead to equality and freedom (Anderson, 1988). In 1890, most Black teachers were in the South, with 49% men and 51% women (Fultz, 1995). They built 100 secondary and post-secondary schools (Butchart, 2010). Two decades after the Civil War, Black school attendance went from less than 2% to nearly a third of Black children of school age (Butchart, 2010). Black educators' actions showed how their primary aim for educating their communities was a driving force in increasing and sustaining the Black teacher pipeline.

The initiative to open and maintain Black schools did not come without its challenges. Northern aid societies, which sent many teachers into the South, routinely sent young Black teachers to school locations, usually with low pay and lacking resources (Butchart, 2007). Black teachers faced violent attacks, terrorist intimidation, and open hostility. In the 1860s -1880s, White supremacists terrorized the Black education institution. Black teachers confronted and endured thousands of assaults, beatings, and killings (Butchart, 2007). Whites put torches on hundreds of Black schools, fired shots through doorways, rioters in Memphis burned a dozen

Black schools, and even riots in New Orleans caused a reduction of teachers to return to the city (Butchart, 2010). Even at the earliest conception of Black schooling, Black educators' drive to educate their communities aided them in navigating workplace conditions that were oppressive and terrorizing.

The *Reconstruction Era* was when Blacks formally established an educational system built to advance Black academic achievement while plagued by White terrorism. During this time, the following occurred: Black children received 44% of state funding for schools, attendance of Black children surpassed that of Whites, and Black teachers' salaries were almost double that of Whites (Anderson, 2015). State legislators allocated appropriate funding per capita, allowed Blacks to be involved in political processes, and because they allocated funds, Black students and educators benefited. However, House Bill 504 in February 1891 brought stark changes. White legislators and voters realized the discrepancy between White and Black school funding and deemed it unfair. Soon after Bill 504 went into effect, the following occurred: 11% of state funds went to Black schools, White teachers' salaries doubled that of Blacks, and school attendance for Whites surpassed that of Blacks by 54 days (Anderson, 2015). This intentional legislative action was a critical event that began the disenfranchisement of Black educators. It was at this juncture, Black educators had to find alternative ways to fulfill their aim of creating literate, democratic citizens while confronting an oppressive system aimed at sustaining a racial hierarchy.

### ***Black Education During the Jim Crow Era***

During Segregation, Blacks carved out their communities with Black-owned businesses and many professional jobs such as factory workers, teachers, postal workers, and doctors. There

were Black communal efforts to support the schools through monetary assistance, school supplies, and facilities. However, Black educators had to confront many complexities. With so few trained Black teachers, this proved challenging and forced many Black schools to hire White teachers from northern states (Barber, 2018). In the Arkansas Delta, a problem for Black schools was procuring quality teachers because many teachers were often poorly educated (Jones-Branch, 2019). Also, Blacks remained politically powerless and suffered from job discrimination (Fairclough, 2000). They depended upon White support, both political and financial, to do their jobs. Black educators achieved school improvements through the supplication and persuasion of Whites. Black teachers had to bribe trustees, school board members, and superintendents to secure job opportunities (Fairclough, 2000).

Another problem Black communities faced were in places such as Kentucky that funded schools through property tax. With Black Kentuckians holding a fraction of their White counterparts' taxable property, these communities could not adequately fund their schools, leading to inadequate education for Black children. National and state officials expected more than 200,000 Black Kentuckians to operate their schools while facing underfunding and terrorism aimed at destroying their institutions (Barber, 2018). The systemic, economic barriers that Black educators confronted made their working conditions and aim to provide quality learning experiences for Black students more challenging.

Another source of tension centered on the type of curriculum implemented in Black schools. The choices were between classical and industrial education. White assistance to Black schools desired an industrial curriculum to be part of the learning. Watkins (2001) described critical White figures such as Franklin Giddings, who brought scientific sociology into the

curriculum that justified racial hierarchy, and Thomas Jesse Jones, who accepted the concept of the racial hierarchy while championing Negro education. However, some Black scholars opposed state efforts to limit Black education to an industrialized curriculum. W.E.B. Du Bois (1902) asserted education should facilitate individuals who would disrupt the social order, and he proposed that education for African Americans should advance communal political and racial progress. He believed Black children should attend schools where they are treated like humans, trained by their race of teachers, and learn their history is superior.

Anna Julia Cooper contributed to this discussion by viewing education as a liberating agent to escape daily institutional and personal racism and sexism. She viewed education as a tool to advance Black people's intellectual capacity through a rigorous, academic curriculum. She fought against systemic attempts to segregate Blacks from an academic curriculum that would challenge their academic talents (Grant et al., 2015).

Furthermore, Woodson (2000 [1933]) contributed to intellectual thought about Black education with his primary argument, which he coined "miseducation." Like Du Bois, Woodson was critical of how White supremacy infiltrated and negatively impacted the schooling of Blacks. Miseducation occurs when the educated Negro no longer commits to the community's needs and holds contempt toward one's people (Woodson, 2000 [1933]). As a result, he advocated for a re-development of a curriculum in which Black history was the content and context to produce a new conception of Black life and education (Woodson, 2000 [1933]). For Woodson, the needs of the community and race are guiding principles for educating Blacks. The voices of Black scholars understood the necessity of taking ownership in driving how philosophical principles and curricula choices shape the learning experiences of Black students.

These scholars described their vision of instructional excellence as a form of resistance to White insistence on an industrialized curriculum.

Despite the challenges confronting Black educators, a critical change agent of Black education during the Segregation Era was Black school leaders. "The Black principal represented the Black community; was regarded as the authority on educational, social, and economic issues; and was responsible for establishing the all-Black school as the cultural symbol of the Black community" (Tillman, 2004, p. 102). The Black principal was a central figure that communicated and monitored the vision of Black education. Walker writes, "Segregation norms required Black professors to utilize strategies that would make them appear to be following the accepted social mores of the time while covertly crafting an outcome that would be in the best interests of Black children" (Walker, 2009, p.24). Black principals were the liaison to the White community. Principals would have to be crafty to find ways to get their schools funded because White superintendents and school boards had no interest in advancing Black educators. Black principals had to have traits that would allow them to voice the needs of the Black community while making the White superintendent feel that they were allies.

Also, Black principals were integral in creating a professional learning community of Black educators such as the GTEA (Georgia Teacher and Education Association). GTEA efforts included the following: publishing the *Herald*, which was a monthly journal, professional development around standardized testing, collaborative efforts to strengthen teacher-made tests, support in submitting yearly budgets, and teacher evaluations (Walker, 2009).

Furthermore, Black principals were pivotal in engaging the community. The Black community operated from a communal stance at it related to the rearing of children. There was a level of trust in which parents believed the Black staff would nurture, educate, and discipline their

children as they saw fit. The principal was pivotal in maintaining those interpersonal interactions (2009). Overall, the Segregation Era was when Black school leaders took ownership of advancing Black education; it was a time of strength for the community despite racial inequities.

### ***The Effects of Desegregation***

The Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) established that equal accommodation, although separate, was not discrimination. Psychological experiments later found evidence that segregation was inherently harmful to the socio-psychological development of stigmatized racial groups related to racial identity and preference. (Clark & Clark, 1950; Gaines-Brown, 2004). As a result, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) reversed the principle of separate but equal due to findings showing the sanction yielded an inferiority complex in Black children. Despite this reversal of separate but equal, the actual educational experiences of Blacks did not change (Ladson-Billings, 2007). Time was a vital barrier to implementing *Brown vs. Board*. The U.S. Supreme Court used the phrase "with all deliberate speed" related to enacting the new legislation. However, W.E.B. DuBois suggested *Brown vs. Board* would not secure Black civil rights without a specific deadline (Gaines-Brown, 2004). The transition was a slow process, a decade or so before any substantive implementation (Horsford, 2010).

Desegregation resulted in the loss of key pillars in the Black community. With *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Black community's control of Black education declined. School officials dismissed Black teachers from their jobs, and even the NAACP made a point to message that the elimination of segregation was a greater priority than the career interest of Black educators (Fairclough, 2000). Black educators knew that fighting for integration to give

Black children access to quality education would be coupled with job loss, retaliation, and violence (Karpinski, 2006). The disheartening fact was to increase equity for Black children meant increasing inequity for those who educated them. However, Black educators' commitment to racial uplift drove their commitment to the teaching field.

Integration led to Black schools closing because Black students integrated into White schools. As a result, Black teachers lost their jobs, school boards refused to pay Black teachers comparable to their White counterparts, and laws allowed for the dismissal of Black teachers without cause (Haney, 1978). Between 1954 and 1965, 38,000 Black teachers lost their jobs (Epps, 1999). Even more, standardized teacher licensure testing became a barrier for Black teachers, for their results deemed them unqualified to teach (Milner & Howard, 2004). Integration cemented the perception that Black schools and educators were inferior to White educators (Horsford, 2010).

Furthermore, integration impacted the pool of Black administrators. When school officials placed Black children in integrated settings, they did not give Black principals opportunities to lead those schools. Instead, they provided opportunities to White educators with fewer qualifications (Horsford, 2010). Removing Black principals led to drying up the "pipeline" of African American teaching recruits (Horsford, 2010; Karpinski, 2006;). Without the presence of Black principals in integrated settings, ability tracking, increased enrollment in special education programs, suspension, and expulsion have had a significant impact on Black students. (Horsford, 2010; Karpinski, 2006).

Equal funding of schools after *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) continued to be a pervasive issue. Compared to White superintendents, Black superintendents inherited school



districts with significant financial deficits (Horsford, 2009). To add, Chicago Public Schools spent \$8,482 per pupil, while Highland Park spent \$17,291 (Ladson-Billings, 2007). In Philadelphia, expenditures were \$9,229 per pupil compared to \$17,261 in Lower Merion (Ladson-Billings, 2007). On average suburban White children are worth \$10,00 more than Black and brown children in urban cities (Ladson-Billings, 2007).

During desegregation, officials bussed low-income Black students into middle-class, predominately White schools, and as a result, long-term adverse effects ensued, destroying the connectedness and bonds of Blacks (Morris, 1999). Ultimately, this strategy resulted in Black students being moved around and academic underperformance (Milner & Howard, 2004). This effort separated African American students from their communities, history, traditions, and culture; the community lost social institutions that served, celebrated, and honored their lives and beliefs (Shujaa, 1996). By 1960, middle-class Blacks departed to the suburbs, with an exodus of industries and a decline in jobs for low-skilled workers (Morris, 1999). School desegregation failed because local officials reduced the policy to busing and school assignments, not racial equality (Shujaa, 1996).

Desegregation has evolved since its inception, yet desegregation has not fulfilled its intended or promised outcome. The historical timeline illustrates desegregation was slow to liberate but quick to enclose the African American community in economic and academic disenfranchisement. The late African American legal scholar who worked with Thurgood Marshall for the Office of Civil Rights, Derrick Bell, wrote: "achieving racial justice is accommodated only when and for so long as policymakers find that the interest of Blacks converges with the political and economic interests of White" (Bell, 2004, p.1056). Changes would only be made if they benefited the White supremacist system. According to Bell, if

equitable outcomes were the goal, there was no interest in taking political risks to uphold the 1954 Brown law, anti-lynching laws were not immediately enacted, and there was no outcry about massive unemployment or incarceration of Black men. The historical narrative of desegregation shows the ideal of integration remained a theoretical premise never fully realized.

Dumas (2011), like Bell (2004), brings to the forefront the reality that the promise of academic success for Black students has not materialized. Also, the decrease of Black educators in schools resulted from integration and has negatively impacted Black student learning outcomes. This study highlights the lack of BMEs in K-12 classrooms and emphasizes how BMEs see their role as one who navigates the integrated school terrain to fulfill the promise the educational system has yet to deliver. Thus, the outcome of studying how BMEs successfully navigate organizational conditions has the potential to move integration from an ideal to a reality.

### ***No Child Left Behind***

The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) was put into action with the primary aim that by 2014, all students will perform at grade level in reading, mathematics, and science. This legislation reached across political lines in which Democrats and Republicans recognized certain groups of students who were not succeeding academically compared to their White counterparts (Leonardo, 2007). This reality catapulted a concerted effort to put more attention on improving teaching and learning in the poorest-performing schools in the U.S.; essentially, the goal was to close the achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts. Ladson-Billings (2007) contributes to this discussion by asserting the achievement gap is not just merely an academic issue; it is an educational debt that has incurred over decades comprised of health and wealth gap issues as well (Ladson-Billings, 2007).

Unlike past educational reforms, NCLB introduced a new form of accountability in which low school performance came with the threat of an exit of students and funding (Leonardo, 2007). Instead of providing resources to schools that needed intense remediation, NCLB regulations withheld services, and essentially, failing schools had to pull themselves up by their "bootstraps" (Leonardo, 2007). This harsh reality illustrates Ladson-Billings' (2007) charge that the onus of closing the achievement cannot reside with students and families. Here, failing schools are left to solve this educational debt without the support of society-at-large.

NCLB seemed promising but ended up punishing schools with higher populations of students of color, and for mostly White schools, NCLB rewarded their Whiteness (Leonardo, 2007). Due to NCLB's standardized test accountability metrics, experienced, certified teachers have been pushed away from the neediest schools that serve underserved students (Irvine & Irvine, 2007). For the most part, Black students attend schools mostly labeled needs improvement. Even more, there are higher drop-out rates due to the mindset of getting low-performing students out (Irvine & Irvine, 2007). Leonardo (2007) asserted NCLB gave Whiteness the license to declare students of color failures under a supposedly fair system. The legislation did not account for the disparities that face communities of color or provide support for greater learning. Instead of meeting the needs of communities of color, it blamed them for their academic performance.

This section demonstrates that oppressive systems were a reality for the Black community from the inception of schooling. Black educators were on the frontline establishing learning spaces, recruiting and training their teachers, advocating for funding, and determining the curriculum despite being systematically marginalized. Bettina Love's (2019) depiction of the educational survival complex connects to Black educators because historically, Black Educators had to traverse systemic barriers, and their display of resilience connects to Love's (2019) assertion that grit is in the DNA of the African American community.

### **Black Males' Pathway to the Teaching Profession**

College life for Black males comes with challenges such as financial issues, academic needs, and personal obligations. Black males report financial resources as a critical impediment to success (Davis et al., 2009). Financial strains from having to pay tuition while supporting their families are a prime indicator of drop-out. Anderson et al. (2011) showed Black males need mentorship in navigating academic, social, personal, and work responsibilities. The demands of college are often vastly different from their lives in their communities, academic rigor in coursework can be difficult, and they experience difficulties adjusting to prevalent social constructs of Whiteness found on college campuses. Davis et al. (2009) found that Black men can hesitate to seek academic and social support. Although they need help, they also wrestle with this notion as Black men: they are strong, confident, and self-reliant. As a result, they can experience a lack of academic success because they do not seek the necessary support.

While in teacher preparation programs, students of color must decide when to fight or avoid unnecessary conflict with White students concerning diversity in education (Amos, 2010). Students of color report silencing themselves instead of being critical participants in diversity discussions (Gist, 2016). Because of a lack of diversity, professors skew discussions toward the White majority's view, which can be permeated with a deficit, racist thinking. Students of color, who are in the minority, often do not feel comfortable being the only one in class speaking out against those views (Gist, 2016) and thus, are marginalized in the same courses that are meant to liberate them.

Additionally, Black students report that teacher preparation programs' curricula lacked relevance to urban school contexts (Pabon, 2016). Programs do not focus on the skill sets teachers need to work with students in urban schools. Furthermore, teacher preparatory programs usually instruct through a deficit lens related to academic expectations of teaching students of color (Anderson et al., 2011). As a result, teacher candidates lacked effective teaching practices for African American students (Anderson et al., 2011). Overall, BMEs' experiences in higher education further illustrate how Black educators confront persistent, negative conditions that hinder their professional success. In the prior section, those barriers came in the form of legal school sanctions, and here, the barrier surfaces through inadequate teacher preparation.

### ***Black Male Recruitment and Retention Efforts***

A trending focus in teaching has been Black males' recruitment efforts to increase their presence in teacher preparation programs and the teaching pipeline itself. Due to school reform policies primarily seeing the strategy toward improving student comes as a human capital issue (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003), increasing the number of Black male teachers in the

classroom has been a primary aim. As a result, Call Me Mister began in 2000 through Clemson University Research Foundation, Claflin University, Benedict University, and Morris College. The goal was to recruit, train, and certify more Black males in South Carolina's schools. Students completing this program agreed that after completion, they would assume a teaching position and commit a total amount of years equivalent to each year of financial support they received during their participation in the program (Byrd et al., 2011). Also, the Griot Program is the Marygrove College of Education initiative targeting Black male career changers (2011). Participants could continue to work full-time with classes on the weekends. Their goal is to produce teacher leaders of urban institutions. Lastly, the goal of the Urban Community Teachers organization in New York was to have 100 Black teachers in Brooklyn public schools by 2015. Participants engaged in workshops and teaching communities where they collaborated on effective teaching practices (Pabon et al., 2011).

### ***Teacher Licensure***

Teacher competency is a critical component of student success, and it is vital to identify teachers who will positively impact student achievement. Over the past 40 years, teacher competency-based testing identifies which teachers have "basic skills" in core subject areas. Teacher licensure began in 1977 in Louisiana and Mississippi. From 1978 – 1982, in Louisiana, 10% of Black students passed certification exams (George, 1985). In 1979, 31% of testers were Black compared to 69% Whites, but by 1982, only 13% were Black compared to 87% Whites (Kauchak, 1984). Black students' attempts to take the exam decreased. Since 1964, there has been a 66 percent reduction in Black teachers in the United States (Kunjufu, 2010).

Today, certification exams are still a part of the pre-service teacher experience. To matriculate into the profession, pre-service teachers must pass a series of tests. Companies such

as Pearson create a battery of timed tests in reading, math, and writing for prospective teachers to demonstrate their mastery of basic skills. Teacher Praxis exams have three phases: basic skills of reading, writing, and math (I), principles of learning and teaching (II), and theory and practice of the field (III) (Latiker et al., 2013). About 29 states use ETS' Pre-Professional Skills Test (i.e., Praxis I) for pre-admission into teacher education programs. Nettles et al. (2011) found the first-time passing rates of Black test-takers between 2005 and 2009 were as follows: reading (40.7%), writing (44%), and mathematics (36.8%). However, the percentage of first-time White test-takers who pass are the following: reading (81.5%), writing (79.5%) (Nettles et al., 2011)

The late scholar Asa Hillard (1986) argued that competency tests should provide information on which teachers can get students to meet their achievement goals and who cannot. A significant issue is codifying a teacher's standard basic skills or competencies. There is no agreed-upon set of academic, professional skills, and professional knowledge that all teachers must hone throughout their training programs (1986). Another major issue with competency-based tests is their reliability and validity (1986). The issue of test bias comes into play when uncontrolled variables such as family background, income, and school experiences can impact test results (Wakefield, 2013).

Graham (2013) argues the Praxis I test contributes to selection system bias because it determines who gets into colleges of education and their future classroom performance. Goldhaber (2007) found that The Curriculum Test of the Praxis has a stronger relationship between teacher performance and student achievement than the Content exam (Goldhaber, 2007). The evidence shows the predictive power of competency-based tests for teacher impact on student achievement is not guaranteed.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) produce a significant amount of minority teachers in the United States (Graham, 2013). African American students score significantly lower on Praxis exams; thus, HBCUs have been in danger of losing their teacher education programs (Latiker et al., 2013). HBCUs address Praxis preparation through semester courses, making materials available, and encouraging faculty to take the exams to become more knowledgeable. Some HBCUs require that students pass the Praxis I as part of the admissions requirements into the program (Latiker et al., 2013).

Black teacher candidates' feelings and beliefs about Praxis and their competency are mixed. Albers' study (2002) found Black students reported feeling confident in their content knowledge and thus, did not prepare for the Praxis. In Graham's study (2013), 47% of the teacher candidates felt "moderately comfortable" taking standardized tests, and 38% of participants felt extremely comfortable. Although most of the 52 participants felt comfortable, they reported not knowing how to prepare for standardized tests. Additionally, Black teacher candidates reported they felt academically prepared by studying canonical texts; however, their engagement with them was not as strong as African American writers (Albers, 2002). Standardized tests continue to focus on European-American cultural knowledge, with test items including a disproportionate amount of literature by White authors; far too few questions about African American authors and poets, which were more comfortable for Black teachers (2002).

Hilliard (1986) asserted teaching involves many skills that competency-based tests do not assess, such as: establishing and maintaining rapport with students, keeping students motivated, and stimulating critical thinking. Teacher licensure testing does not afford an opportunity to look at teachers comprehensively. Black teachers who possessed confidence, content knowledge, and a desire to work with students in culturally responsive ways could not become



classroom teachers due to their test results (Albers, 2002). Praxis results are critical to understanding why the percentage of Black teachers in the United States is low. One cannot become a teacher if one cannot pass the Praxis. Entrance exams, such as the Praxis, have become a source of inequity (Petchauer, 2012). Historically, these certification exams have not created access or diversified the teaching pool. These exams are an aspect that continues to contribute to the lack of Black males in the classroom.

This section further highlights how oppression leaks into our future teachers' preparation for the profession. Black male educators experience marginalization in the teacher preparation programs, the curriculum does not reflect the needs of the schools they plan to teach in, and testing requirements bar them from being fully-certified teachers. The historical trend is Black educators must confront pervasive, systemic conditions not designed to support them in reaching their ultimate aim of impacting student achievement.

### **Black Male Experiences in the Teaching Profession**

Black educators have varied experiences that shape their purpose for entering and remaining in K-12 classrooms. Brown's (2011) study found that African American educators drew on biblical, cultural, and institutional narratives to inform their teaching philosophy. Lynn et al. (1999) study found that African American educators believed in emancipatory pedagogy in which they create learning environments that nurture and develop students with the capacity to change the world. Dixon (2003) found that Black female educators viewed their professional commitment beyond subject-matter teaching expertise and that it was a lifestyle and public

service. Their sense of obligation ties to their belief in their responsibility toward the Black community and, specifically, to advocate for Black children and their families as they confront racist, hostile experiences in the K-12 settings (2003). Harding's (1974) historical analysis adds to this discussion in which he described key characteristics of Black scholars in higher education who saw themselves as having a vocation, sense of obligation, or calling: they speak truth to their people, they speak truth about their people, they speak truth about the enemy, and they free the mind of their people. In a study conducted by Dixson and Dingus (2008), they found not only did spirituality guide participants' interactions with students, but participants also shared it helped them deal with challenges. Participants shared how God guided them when it was time to move to a new job, and it was God that gave them the endurance to stay in the profession for more extended periods. Even faith impacted decisions to teach after retirement (Dixson & Dingus, 2008). These Black scholars illustrate how the reasons that steered Black educators to the field are the same reasons used to deal with challenges leading to retention.

Studies show Black male educators enter the teaching field because of their commitment to Black children (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Lewis, 2006; Lynn et al., 1999). Haynes et al. (2014) found that Black male teachers recognize and want to change inequities, and a key aspect of their work is using education to create a democratic transformative end. However, Pabon (2016) study highlighted the experiences of BMEs and found BMEs felt pressure to shift to standardized curriculums. The BMEs in his research rejected standardization because he saw it as an injustice to his students, and ultimately, standardization meant adjusting to injustices. The BME rejected the notion and recognized it as a ploy to get him to adjust to injustice. These studies show BMEs understood the oppressive systems in the K-12 educational setting and desired to free themselves and their students from it.

In Lynn et al. (1999), Black male educators desired to use education as a tool to improve surrounding social conditions. They saw their role as one to develop students' knowledge, skills, and dispositions so they could navigate sociopolitical constructs such as White supremacy (Lynn et al., 1999). This study showed that BMEs saw their role as developing skills in their students to navigate and resist White supremacy. BMEs do not just see themselves as being called only to teach subject-area matter but to emancipate the minds of their students, so they become change agents in their world. Their sense of calling drives their daily work with their students and communities, which connects to the focus of this study of understanding conditions that lead to retention.

### ***Black Male Teacher Impact on Students***

Lynn and colleagues (1999) highlight BMEs' contributions to the field as models who implement effective pedagogy. The BMEs in this study shared how it was imperative to build on students' prior knowledge and use it as an asset to strengthen academic outcomes. In this study, BMEs exemplify key tenants of culturally relevant pedagogy (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995) as they used their knowledge of "street culture" as a bridge to connect gaps for students with the greatest need. For BMEs, their intimate knowledge and respect for the comfort and danger of "street culture" make them an asset toward increasing academic achievement in minority children (1999).

Furthermore, studies have shown the impact of teachers of color on student achievement, especially Black students. Black students achieve higher test scores and are less likely to drop out (Eddy & Easton-Brooks, 2011; Gershenson et al., 2017). This finding is critical because it shows the need for Black educators and provides hope that diversifying the teaching field through Black male teachers can address racial educational disparities (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

### ***Black Male Educators' Workplace Challenges***

Work demands such as workload, unsatisfied expectations, and routinization are closely related to teacher burnout (Molero Jurado et al., 2019). Problematic student behaviors and parent interaction are two main factors contributing to teacher job stress (Molero Jurado et al., 2019). Research supports that educators' well-being is problematic (Dicke et al., 2018). As a result, teacher attrition increases with high financial costs for recruitment, disruption to academic programs, and, ultimately, decreased student achievement (Ronfeldt et al., 2013).

Internationally, teachers experience high stress and strain levels (Dicke et al., 2018; Dupriez et al., 2016). At least 30% of teachers have experienced high levels of burnout in various countries, leading to health, economic levels, and commitment and satisfaction with the teaching profession (Molero Jurado et al., 2019). 67.4% of teachers have shown low levels of burnout (Molero Jurado et al., 2019). Against this backdrop is the reality that almost a third of teachers leave the profession within the first five years in many countries (Chang, 2009; Gallant & Riley, 2017; Ingersoll, 2012; Jalongo & Heider, 2006). Achinstein et al. (2010) meta-analysis of 70 studies focused on teacher turnover and identified one study (Kirby et al., 1999) that explored the turnover patterns of BMEs.

Job satisfaction is a crucial indicator and predictor for turnover, retention, and employee commitment (Dicke et al., 2019; Holtom et al., 2008; Hom & Kinicki, 2001; Griffeth et al., 2000; Meyer et al., 2002; Shen et al., 2012). Teacher retention and attrition have become significant issues for the teaching profession due to poor working conditions, workload, administrative support, teacher autonomy, and low pay—the reasons cited for teachers leaving the profession linked to the onset of burnout. Farber (1991), a researcher in educator burnout,

explained that a lack of personal accomplishment leaves teachers feeling ineffective in impacting student achievement and, thus, they become uninvested in other school duties. Knouse (2001) found mentoring that involves modeling and coaching to be effective in increasing teacher satisfaction, yet, there is limited access to teacher coaching. These realities are important because job satisfaction is directly impacted by teachers' working environment (Darmody & Smyth, 2016; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011).

Turnover rates for teachers vary depending on years of experience. By in large, turnover rates are the highest with new teachers, with 30% leaving the profession within the first three years and 50% attrition within five (Achinstein et al., 2010). However, studies show teachers of color have the highest attrition rate of almost 19% (Achinstein et al., 2010; Albert Shanker Institute, 2015). One of the leading causes of the retention gap is most Black teachers work in hard-to-staff schools. Black teachers work in schools with higher percentages of Black students, low-achieving students, and students with long-term suspensions (Sun, 2018). Between 2011 – 2012, 17% of all public school teachers were minorities, 40% taught at high minority schools, 31% taught at high-poverty schools, and 29% taught at urban schools. (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015). 50% of minority teachers in public schools between 2012-2013 reported job dissatisfaction as their reason for leaving the field (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015). The top reasons for being dissatisfied are the following: administration (81%), accountability and testing (65%), and student discipline (61%) (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015).

Considering that African American males are 2% of the U.S. teaching force (NCES, 2013), they are of the numerical minority in schools. Cose's (1993) study revealed that African Americans experience psychological scrutiny when they are part of a majority organization. The types of issues that successful Black professionals confronted were the following: inability to fit

in, lack of respect, low expectations, shattered hopes, faint praise, coping fatigue, pigeon holding, identity troubles, self-censorship and silence, collective guilt, and exclusion from the club (1993).

Anderson's (1999) research is similar to Cose's. His study revealed that African American executives deal with complex social dynamics when dealing with European colleagues. Because of skin color, African American executives struggle to integrate into the organization entirely. Some executives align themselves with the community's core group of other Blacks to maintain solidarity, keeping them from integrating with the organization. The company's executives who desire upward mobility have the complex task of assuring their alignment with the core group of Blacks while integrating with their White colleagues. Integrating into a White organization while maintaining one's cultural identity is complex. It can yield isolation and a decrease in job satisfaction.

However, Kelly's (2007) study adds an alternative perspective to the discussion of racial tokenism. However, what is different in Kelly's study is that Black teachers described what she calls performance enhancers, border crossing, and role integration. Regarding performance pressures, Black teachers navigated them and performed higher than expected (2007). When faced with boundary heightening, these teachers crossed those borders and engaged with the numerical majority (2007). Instead of fulfilling stereotypes, Black teachers shared how they portrayed the desired image: an effective teacher (2007).

The working conditions in K-12 settings can perpetuate stereotypical roles that BMEs do not adhere. There is an expectation that BMEs fulfill a father-figure role for Black boys (Brockenburg, 2009). BMEs are to be the role models that will address the behavioral needs of Black boys, essentially, control them. Not all BMEs desire the disciplinarian role and the stress

of being a father figure to all Black boys. Because of the historical and current context in urban schools where students may have absent fathers, BMEs must fulfill a patriarchal image (Brockenbrough, 2015). The patriarchal image emulates a dominant male persona. This patriarchal image sees BMEs as solely disciplinarians instead of content experts. BMEs often desire to reject the sole image of a disciplinarian because it does not fit the type of teacher they desire to be (Brown, 2012). However, because this is the dominant desired image of BMEs, they often feel inadequate compared to their White colleagues, who staff officials see as ones who possess and can demonstrate their content expertise. (Mabokela & Madsen, 2003).

Not only are they constrained by a patriarchal image, but BMEs experience constraints relating to teacher autonomy in curricular decisions. BMEs report that the curriculum and instructional models used in K-12 schools are too restrictive (Pabon, 2014). BMEs must implement standardized practices mandated by schools instead of using strategies unique to them in engaging students. Culturally-relevant pedagogy takes a backseat to the standardized curriculum linked to testing accountability systems.

The barriers that BMEs face in the workplace indicate racism is still prevalent. Racism is more than just acts of violence. It is prevalent through inaction, deletion, and exclusion (Lander & Santoro, 2017). Today, we can view racism through microaggressions. Microaggressions are everyday racism that keeps marginalized groups in their place (2017). Microaggressions can come in the form of insults, rudeness, and insensitivity. It can even come in the form of microinvalidation, in which those of the majority negate the feelings, psychological thoughts, and experiences of marginalized people (Kholi, 2018; Lander & Santoro, 2017).

Microaggressions thrive in predominately White institutions in which Blacks are the numerical minority. Since about 80% of U.S. public schools employ White female teachers,

public education is a White institution. In these institutions, BMEs are often utilized and seen as disciplinarians who are solely responsible for policing the behavior of Black children (Bristol & Goings, 2019). They take on the role of being the "savior" or "father figure" instead of content experts (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Carey, 2018; Nelson, 2016; Wallace, 2017). School administrators do not ask BMEs to lead professional development or share teaching practices; instead, they address challenging student behaviors. The ultimate task they joined the field to do is no longer a priority because BMEs fill in the gap where the White majority has not had success. Even more problematic is Black male teacher recruitment efforts, to some degree, place the onus of increasing Black male achievement solely on Black male educators. Amid these expectations, BMEs consistently have to prove their worth as educators, and ultimately, staff members treat them as social- outcasts because of the negative perceptions of their teaching abilities (Bristol & Goings, 2019).

Institutional, interpersonal, and perceived racial discrimination is crucial in mental health (Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Williams et al., 2003; Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000). Microaggressions that BMEs experience in the workplace can make them feel the workplace is hostile and stressful. Because BMEs are underrepresented and racialized, they are susceptible to stereotype threat in professional settings (Milner & Hoy, 2003). The awareness of the stereotypical label links to Du Boi's (2018) theory of double consciousness, in which African Americans have a dual identity in which they are consciously aware of who they are, but concurrently, they see themselves through the lens of others. This awareness can be stress-inducing, yet BMEs are often not given the opportunity or space to express their perspectives on workplace conditions. Black professionals experience a different standard of emotional rules than their White counterparts, such as not expressing their frustrations in the face of hostility



(Wingfield, 2010; Rausher & Wilson, 2016). Not having the space to express their sentiments about their workplace conditions is stress-inducing and can lead to retention issues.

BMEs' experiences in the classroom suffer from external systemic issues that create conditions where they feel inadequate or silenced. If BMEs do not feel valued, what is the impetus for retention? If they cannot be authentic, why would they continue? The current context shows systemic issues with the matriculation of BMEs, but once they get into the classroom, they also experience working conditions that yield dissatisfaction. This dissatisfaction lessens their commitment to the profession, and thus, they leave. BMEs' experiences highlighted in the literature are central to my study because they show how workplace conditions can lead to teacher burnout, leading to attrition. However, this study can be an integral contribution to the literature because it seeks to understand how BMEs navigate those experiences, and instead of burning out, they stay. Understanding how BMEs navigate those conditions can be useful to the teaching field to reverse Black teacher attrition.

This section demonstrates that when BMEs finally enter the classroom as fully-certified teachers, they still confront workplace complexities despite overcoming barriers of the PK+16 experience. They are the tokens that represent authoritarian discipline. They are not seen as content experts nor have the autonomy to use authentic teaching styles. The field says it needs them but strips away their voice. The field says it needs BMEs but pushes them out. As they navigate their workplace experiences, these complexities impact their overall job satisfaction, and the danger is workplace dissatisfaction can lead to retention issues. What is the purpose of the BME: to eradicate or reinforce present oppressive systems? Systemic barriers have plagued the Black educator's experience, but not everyone leaves. There is still a remnant that continues

to educate Black children. This study seeks to understand the continual commitment and strategic navigation of workplace experiences that may be oppressive, stifling, or cause one to question longevity in the field.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study's theoretical framework aligns with the work of Clyde Woods' (2017) historical retelling of the blues tradition. This study seeks to understand the aspects or experiences contributing to Black male educators' retention in K-12 classrooms. Through the lens of this framework, this study explores the experiences of BMEs to make sense of how they navigate educational systems and how their status of being in the numerical minority impacts their longevity in the teaching profession.

The Mississippi Delta is the home of the blues tradition. In 1945, Richard Wright wrote *Black Boy*, an autobiography describing his upbringing in the Jim Crow South. Richard Wright is coined as one of the first to embed the blues tradition in an extended-narrative form highlighting his personal story. Woods (2017) explained how Richard Wright was the first to fully explain the blues epistemology because of his studies on African American daily life and his music-based critique of African American literature. Wright (1937/1971) described the blues as spirituals of the daily life of Blacks, from lyrics of love to indicting social systems. Blues was the channel through which racial wisdom flowed (Wright, 1937/1971). Furthermore, Murray (2017) contributes to the blues epistemology literature by describing the blues tradition as a three-line stanza style originating among African Americans that emphasizes the most disturbing

aspects of life but simultaneously is a form of entertainment. Regardless of lyrics, the blues made its listeners dance, snap their fingers, and puts them in high spirits.

Woods developed his theoretical lens as a part of his studies of African American daily life and his music-based critique of African American literature (Woods, 2017). As a result of its origin, it is fitting to understand the tension and crisis in the Delta and how African Americans attempted to create a new reality based on cultural freedom, economic growth, and social justice (Woods, 2017). The blues epistemology emerged during the antebellum plantation period in which working-class African Americans used the musical tradition to explain their harsh realities, critique the plantation regime, promote social change, and ultimately, resist the oppressive system (Woods, 2017).

The blues epistemology rests on two foundations. The first involves the continual re-establishment of collective sensibility in the face of constant attacks by the plantation bloc and its allies. The blues musical tradition expressed dissatisfaction and resistance to domination present in the daily lives of African Americans. Through its improvisations such as riffs, Blues music represents the human reality and ability to confront life's complexities while maintaining equilibrium despite precarious circumstances (Murray, 2017). The second aspect of the blues epistemology is the social relations in the South as a pillar of African American culture. The plantation was a site of conflict and cultural formation (Woods, 2017). The blues epistemology represents Black consciousness and remains unquestionably oppositional (2017). Clyde Woods (2017) wrote:

The blues was capable of undergoing constant metamorphosis without losing its central messages of global social justice and the sanctity of African American culture.

Therefore, as the process of global alienation intensified, the blues always held out a hand

to the lost, the dispossessed, and the disavowed. Its position as the counternarrative of the American Dream enabled the blues to expand simultaneously with the United States power in the period after World War Two. (p.164)

For this study, I connect the concepts of resistance, resilience, and evolution within the blues epistemology with the historical tradition of Black intellectual thought on education. Black scholars have written about the experiences of Black educators and children in the U.S. educational system, the ideas concerning culture, knowledge, and pedagogy, and interrogated theories in education (Grant et al., 2015). Black scholarly writing and the blues traditions are similar in that both describe the control, limits, physical pain, the establishment of a community, and the continual evolution of Black people.

African American realism is institutionalized in the blues, and the blues would speak of a world simultaneously full of misery and resilience (Woods, 2017). The plantation bloc aimed to gain and sustain control over resources by dominating the ideological and distributive institutions that govern their allocation (Woods, 2017). Similarly, Black scholars such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Anna Julia Cooper, and Carter J Woodson echoed like sentiments as they wrote about how oppressive societal constructs were determined to confine the vision and purpose of schooling for Black children for only industrial means (Du Bois, 1902; Grant et al., 2015; Woodson, 2000 [1933]). Clyde Woods (2017) described how, throughout slavery and after, the plantation bloc attempted to set limits on Black initiatives and advancements. Likewise, Derrick Bell (2004), a legal scholar, described how this type of systemic control continued after desegregation was put into law but yet, the enactment of desegregation laws was not expedient.

Furthermore, the planter development agenda focused on disciplining African Americans who rebelled by taking up arms, rewriting the state constitution, governing, and seizing land. Mississippi led the nation in lynching, whippings, and human burnings (Woods, 2017). This movement reestablished the plantation bloc's regional regime that exercised a complete dictatorship over politics, production, class, ethnic, and gender relations. Similarly, Black scholars have recorded acts of terrorism that Black educators had to confront while establishing Black schools (Butchart, 2007), the effects of desegregation in which Black educators lost their jobs (Epps, 1999; Haney, 1978; Karpinski, 2006), and even the hurdles of licensure that made it difficult for Black educators to be fully-certified teachers (Milner & Howard, 2004).

Despite these barriers, Woods (2017) described how working-class African Americans resisted and showed resilience as they established a social democracy within a plantation-dominated economy. This has particularly been relevant in education in which the historian, Vanessa Siddle-Walker noted how during the Segregation Era, Black educators established professional learning communities and how Black principals were key liaisons in advocating for the needs of Black children (Walker, 2009). Tillman (2004) and Lomotey (1989) add to this by describing how the Black principal was committed to educating Black children, understood the community, and was key in establishing the all-Black school as a cultural symbol for the community. The conflict between the plantation bloc and those it dominated provides the social change theory found in blues epistemology. African Americans used their experiences as a material basis of survival, subsistence, resistance, and affirmation in opposition to the plantation powers (Woods, 2017).

Finally, the blues extended its geographical range, in which blues and jazz piano were popular nationwide by 1916. Chicago was the second-largest recording center in the country.

During the 1920s, Northern Whites embraced blues and jazz and engaged in minstrelsy, representing both acceptance and degradation of the African American culture (Woods, 2017). There is an underlying truth about what the Blues epistemology represents: the irrepressible voice of daily anguish and forgotten agendas demanding fulfillment (2017). This sentiment rings true as African American teachers have historically resisted role confinement, are professionally committed to emancipatory pedagogy, and continued to extend their influence and serve the needs of Black students in varied geographical locations (Brown, 2012; Dixson, 2003; Lynn et al., 1999).

### ***Application to the Study***

For this study, I assert K-12 educational settings have functioned similarly to the plantation regime in which BMEs have confronted harsh, oppressive systems. BMEs are racialized and confront stereotype-threat in professional settings (Milner & Hoy, 2003), take on the role of being disciplinarians, “savior,” or “father figures” instead of content experts (Bristol & Goins, 2019; Carey, 2018; Nelson, 2016; Wallace, 2017), and change their teaching practices to be more aligned with standardized pedagogies (Pabon, 2014). It is these limits that lead to dissatisfaction and attrition.

The participants in this study have been in the field for more than five years. Thus, they surpassed the mark in which many new teachers flee the field's pressures and realities (Achinstein et al., 2010). In the face of these realities, I propose that BMEs share a cultural trait represented in the blues epistemology. Throughout time, blues was a tool of resistance to the oppressive system. Instead of dying out, its draw caused an extension into various geographical locations, religious sects, and White northerners. Despite its critique, it was a viable component of the African American community. This continual, evolving metamorphosis is a symbol of

resilience. The blues epistemology adds an integral element to this study by clearly depicting Blacks' historical narrative confronting oppressive systems. Thus, it applies to this study by serving as a reminder of the societal pressures that infiltrate the professional experiences of BMEs. However, the blues serve as a symbol of resurgence, resilience, and resistance to societal barriers, and it maintains its place as a part of the African American community. In this study, I seek to understand how BMEs have responded to the challenging workplace conditions in K-12 settings. How have those experiences or critical turning points affected them? Because they surpassed the five-year mark, have they experienced a metamorphosis of resilience, and if so, was it integral to their retention? In this study, BMEs will share their classroom and workplace experiences through an interview and a written essay by describing professional turning points in which they had to confront the decision to either leave or stay in the classrooms.

The theoretical framework in this section provides a lens that guides my approach to this study. The blues epistemology focuses on Black experiences within society at large. It describes the impact of how Blacks navigated societal complexities and depicts a historical narrative of resistance, resilience, and longevity. As a result, in this study, I will use this theory to narrow my focus to analyzing participants' approaches to navigating workplace conditions to understand how their ability to successfully navigate impacts job satisfaction and their longevity in the teaching field.

### Chapter 3

This qualitative study aimed to gain insight into factors contributing to the retention of Black male educators (BME) in K-12 classrooms. Merriam (2009) describes a qualitative study as one in which participants interpret their experiences and contribute meaning to their experiences. A qualitative study can be used to determine techniques, strategies, and educational practices to improve outcomes (Merriam, 2009). In qualitative research, the researcher aims to understand how people interpret their experiences, worldview construction, and what they attribute to their lived experiences. Qualitative research situates the researcher as a learner and storyteller of the participant's experience, and thus, allows finding recurring themes without compromising the participant's perspective (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Beyond capturing how participants make sense of their experiences, the qualitative researcher aims to understand the underlying meaning of those experiences.

Qualitative research produces rich, descriptive data (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016). Qualitative research uses an inductive approach leveraging data collection to form ideas or theories while still grounded in the participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The inductive method emphasizes occurrences or people, focusing on what is being described or said instead of using quantities (Maxwell, 2012). A qualitative study was suited because the study aimed to learn about various Black male educators' experiences and perspectives from various geographical locations, sites, and roles within the field of education. Additionally, a qualitative design is appropriate to capture the participant's description of the school conditions that have posed a threat to their retention and the experiences that impact their decision to remain a teacher. Qualitative research has the potential to impact the lives of participants. In this case, it



brings awareness to workplace realities of Black male teachers in hopes educational leaders will use these findings to retain a diverse teacher workforce.

### **Participant Selection**

Minority teachers are predominately employed in public schools that serve minority students who live in high-poverty and urban communities (Albert Shaker Institute, 2015). The schools that employ minority teachers are often labeled hard to staff. To add, between 2002-2012, Black teacher employment in nine large urban districts (i.e., Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, DC) decreased by an average of 30% (Albert Shaker Institute, 2015). As a result, the first criterion for selection in this study was the following: participants must be employed in a large urban school district. I sought a national sample from large urban public school settings because these settings employ the majority of minority teachers and have a history of significant turnover of Black teachers (Albert Shaker Institute, 2015). It is these settings that could provide insight into the turnover patterns of Black male teachers.

The second criterion for selection for this study: participants must identify as Black with a direct linkage to the history of slavery in the U.S. For this study, the term Black is nation-specific to those whose families are born in the U.S. and who are descendants of enslaved Africans. Participants in this study are not immigrants to the U.S. who identify as Black.

The third criterion for selection in this study: participants must have at least five years of teaching experience and currently hold a full-time teaching assignment. This selection criterion was imperative for this study because staying in the classroom beyond three years surpasses the average retention rate for new teachers nationally (Achinstein et al., 2010). Since attrition is a

significant issue in the teaching profession, these participants' track record of retention would be a source to understand the complexities of the field, but more importantly, it could yield detailed description of how they navigated those complexities.

The fourth criterion for selection in this study was: participants hold a full-time teaching assignment in a core subject such as reading, math, science, etc. Black male educators historically report dealing with stereotype threat, achievement pressure, and curriculum and pedagogical standardization. Black male educators who teach core subjects would be a source of understanding how those complexities show it up in their daily workplace experiences.

The empirical literature (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Brockenbrough, 2009; Kirby et al., 1999; Lynn, 2006) on Black male teachers is limited with sample sizes primarily ranging from one to twenty-seven. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained there is no normed number of appropriate participants for a study beyond the recommendation that sampling should occur until saturation is reached. For this study, I used a network recruitment method with the aim of recruiting a minimum of fifteen participants. As an educational consultant, I used my contacts with the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards organization, social media groups, and Black male educator organizations to recruit participants. I posted a recruitment flyer (see Appendix D) on social media sites to enlist participation. Potential participants responded by emailing me of their interest, and finally, I selected 14 participants who fulfilled all criteria. Again, the following were the criterion for selection in this study: employment in a large urban school district, identify as Black with a direct link to enslaved Africans in the U.S., five or more years of experience, and a full-time core-subject teaching assignment. This participant sample fulfilled my ultimate aim of understanding how Black male educators navigate workplace experiences that lead to their retention in K-12 classrooms.

## **Study Participants**

All 14 participants met the following selection criteria: identify as Black, employed in an urban school district, have a full-time core teaching position, and have at least five years of teaching experience. The participants have all been assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity, and all identifying information, such as school names, has been eliminated for confidentiality purposes. The following section provides more context about all 14 participants' professional experiences.

### ***Phillip***

Phillip has twenty-two years of experience in which he has taught second through seventh-grade language arts. Beyond his classroom duties, he started a student council, is the after-school program administrator, and is a teacher leader for his grade-level team. He shared that education was not his original choice, but he went to graduate school to get his master's in education.

### ***Marc***

Marc has nine years of teaching experience in teaching chemistry to students in tenth through twelfth grade. He supports his school community by overseeing the student council outside his classroom. Marc shared that he originally began his career in pharmacy, but it did not fulfill him. He decided to join a teaching program with a two to three commitment. After the first year, he was enamored by his students and committed to teaching long-term.

### ***Dwayne***

Dwayne has fifteen years of experience in which he has taught math to middle and collegiate-level students. His professional role outside of the classroom is as a mentor teacher

who observes and gives feedback to his colleagues. Dwayne's time at the juvenile delinquent center was the impetus for joining the teaching profession. He realized that he pre-judged students and felt convicted to want to help future children not end up in correctional facilities.

### ***Damen***

Damen has eight years of experience teaching students in grades one, two, fifth, and seventh. His content expertise is in science and social studies. Beyond his classroom duties, he coordinates a student mentoring program, coaches the basketball team, and is applying to be on the local school council. His reason for entering the profession is his fourth and fifth-grade teacher, who cared, connected, and demonstrated a lot of patience as he went through troubling times as a child.

### ***Travis***

Travis has five years of experience teaching second through seventh grade. His content expertise is English-Language Arts and social studies. He supports his school community by coordinating a student mentor program. He shared that his reason for becoming a teacher was due to his family. His mother and grandmother were teachers; he saw their impact and desired to do the same.

### ***Michael***

Michael has nine years of experience teaching first, third, fourth, and fifth grade. Outside the classroom, he continues pushing academics by hosting a monthly book club with students. His impetus for joining the profession was his experience being a sports coach. He saw that his junior and senior athletes could not write essays or use technology such as Microsoft Office. Upon seeing their low academic skills, Michael decided he wanted to be a teacher.

***Jackson***

Jackson has nine years of teaching experience in grades three, four, five, seven, and eight. His area of expertise is science and math. Outside of the classroom, he was a STEAM coach and provided instructional support to his colleagues. His impetus for becoming a teacher was he wanted disposable income, and when presented with the opportunity to teach, he took the job and stayed longer than he intended.

***Kenneth***

Kenneth has twenty years of experience teaching English-Language Arts to students in fourth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade. Beyond his teaching duties, he serves as a member of the school's literacy team that creates, promotes, and monitors instructional initiatives. His reason for joining the teaching field was an experience with a student who he tutored telling him about his impact on his life, and from that day forward, Kenneth dedicated his life to teaching

***Roderick***

Roderick has nineteen years of experience teaching math and English-Language Arts to third and fourth graders. He supports his school community through his membership on the intervention team, in which he provides colleagues recommendations to support students who need intensive academic support. His impetus for joining the field was due to various role models in his life that provided an example of success.

***McNeil***

McNeil has eight years of teaching experience in English-Language Arts and math to students in second through sixth grade. Beyond classroom duties, he collaborates with teacher leaders to lead professional learning sessions for teachers in his building. McNeil decided to be a

teacher after his experience tutoring middle and college students. Upon seeing the low academic skills of students, he was determined to be a teacher.

### ***Martin***

Martin has twenty-nine years of experience teaching grades four through six, with an emphasis on students with exceptional needs. In his school building, he has fulfilled disciplinary leadership roles by de-escalating children, meeting with parents for students who need behavior support, and supporting teachers with honing classroom management skills. Martin shares that visiting his mother's classroom as a child and seeing her impact is why he became a teacher.

### ***Jay***

Jay has eight years of experience teaching computer technology to high schools. His love for his subject matter started in high school when he loved conducting research and public speaking. His love for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) motivated him to pursue computer education as his teacher pathway. His expertise reaches beyond his classroom to support the technology needs of his colleagues.

### ***George***

George has taught for 16 years with content expertise in English/Language Arts. At his school, he serves as the Head Boys Basketball Coach, student council sponsor, and sponsors the English/Language Arts academic club. His aspiration to be a teacher is rooted in his desire to make a difference in the lives of children, specifically Black and brown males in underserved communities.

## ***Raymond***

Raymond is in his 13<sup>th</sup> year of teaching. His content expertise is in the area of mathematics, in which he has taught fifth through eighth grade. Currently, he teaches high school Geometry along with fulfilling his duties as a teacher of students with exceptionalities.

### **Data Collection Tools**

This study used two tools to collect data that align with the research question: a participant essay and a semi-structured interview. This study focused on how Black male educators navigate experiences in the workplace, and as a result, I designed a conversation guide and essay prompt to probe participants' thinking as they described their experiences. Participants engaged in a writing experience in which they responded to the following prompt: describe the turning points in which you were confronted with choosing to leave or stay, how you navigated those experiences, and finally, how you reached your decision to remain a K-12 teacher.

The last data collection tool I used was a semi-structured interview (see Appendix A), in which I used a conversation guide as a part of my protocol (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). I created the guide to have a bank of interview questions that aligned with the research surrounding my topic of study. As participants shared their experiences through essays or interviews, I used the bank of questions to extend the dialogue. Regarding job satisfaction, I created questions to address leadership, autonomy/responsibility, student discipline, student results, and collegial relationships. Regarding the theory of the blues epistemology, I created questions to understand race relations in the workplace and how they impact job satisfaction and the participants' decision to stay.

The overall data collection process began with the participant's essay. Participants received the writing prompt and a Word document to construct their essay. Participants had three weeks to submit their responses. The final phase of data collection was a one-on-one interview. Before I conducted interviews, I analyzed participant essays to determine questions for further probing to glean a detailed description of the participant's experience. Overall, the study required about two hours of participants' time.

### ***Participant Essay***

In qualitative research, personal documents are like observations that give a snapshot of a person's attitudes, beliefs, views of the world, and what they deem essential (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Personal writing exercises enhance the writer's psychological and physiological well-being (Elizabeth, 2008). Researchers have given attention to the role of participant writing in research in the form of poems, diaries, dramas, and other performance techniques. Richardson (2000) describes a type of writing, autoethnography, in which an author tells stories about their lived experiences using fictional-writing techniques such as imagery, subtexts, allusions, dialogue, and tone. These techniques allow the reader to relive these moments with the writer (Richardson, 2000). Participant writing allows individuals to speak and reflect on their innermost feelings and experiences without fearing another's reaction (Elizabeth, 2008). Participant writing is a method of inquiry that can serve the interests of participants and the researchers. It attends to the well-being of the participants while providing the researcher with a rich data source for qualitative research (Elizabeth, 2008).

Zimmerman and Wieder's (1997) study utilized participant writing by implementing the diary-interview method. Participants maintained a diary that functioned as an observational log



which would then be the basis for intensive interviewing (Zimmerman & Wieder, 1977). The diary-interview method solicits participants to reflect on issues of interest to the researcher and will be read and interpreted by another (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). Participants can respond to the researcher's questions and communicate the stories of their daily lives (Jacelon & Imperio, 2005). After participants complete their diary entries, the researcher does follow-up interviews with them to fill in the gaps or extend the writing.

Journal writing has become a widely accepted approach to facilitate teacher candidate reflection (Lee, 2010). Reflection journals require pre-service teachers to reflect on how they convey experiences that require critical thought and honesty (Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019). Findings indicate that participants were able to use their reflections for future planning and instruction (Lee, 2010). Overall, writing artifacts such as journals are sources of information to inform the academic community about the experiences of the novice, beginning teacher (Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019; Nguyen, 2017)

For this study, I analyzed participants' essays, answering the following prompt: describe the turning points in which you were confronted with making a choice to leave or stay, how you navigated those experiences, and finally, how you reached your decision to remain a K-12 teacher. I analyzed the following elements: content, structure, language, and navigating workplace complexities. In this study, the participant's essays represent their own historical timeline of the realities they faced in the K-12 system. Through their essays, participants described the challenges they confronted but also navigated. Wright's (1945/1993) narrative account of his upbringing is similar to the participants' essays in this study in which their retelling of confronting the realities of the K-12 educational system and, ultimately, deciding to remain in the classroom exemplifies both aspects of the blues that Ellison (1992) described as

essential elements: agony and self-conquering of harsh realities. The blues represents the Black experience in that Blacks experienced daily attacks, chaos, and death, but through all that, the Black community continued to thrive and reestablish itself. Similar to how the blues represents how Blacks reestablished themselves in society, participants' ability to navigate workplace experiences represents their resurgence and resilience.

### ***Interviews***

Before interviewing the participants, I analyzed their essays to decipher what barriers participants confronted and their reactions to those barriers. I focused on the response because those represent how participants must navigate complexities. The reaction revealed their emotion, inner thoughts, and reflective thinking. Their response sheds light on the driving force that impacts their decision to remain or stay in the classroom.

After analyzing their participant essays, I used the interview protocol guide (see Appendix A) to identify and construct probing questions to understand the participants' workplace experiences further. I used the Zoom platform to record and interact with participants for a thirty-minute interview. I utilized Zoom because participants live in different geographical locations. Also, Zoom allowed me to capture facial expressions, body language, and tone. After each interview, I used Zoom transcription services which convert audio recordings into written text to transcribe participants' responses. To ensure accuracy, I reviewed the audio and compared it to the transcription, and allowed participants to review the transcriptions for accuracy.

After an interview, I completed a contact summary sheet (see Appendix B). A contact summary sheet is a series of questions about a particular field contact that allows the researcher

to reflect on the main themes, issues, and questions raised during that contact (Miles & Huberman, 1984). It became a log that I used later in the data analysis process.

### **Data Analysis Method**

For this study, I used thematic coding methods to analyze this study's data. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach to analyzing data in which the aim is to use contextual descriptions to interpret social phenomena (Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019). Two of the approach's main features are description and interpretation. Thematic coding is inductive because categories are not predetermined before coding data but, instead, induced from the data (Douglas, 2002). The researcher immerses oneself in the data and attends to descriptions and interpretations to discover cross-cutting themes. Qualitative data analysis aims to explore how patterns and categories interact and interplay (Saldana, 2011). A theme or pattern is the final product of thematic analysis and can be described as a subjective and cultural-contextual meaning or message of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Vaismoradi & Snelgrove, 2019).

The data analysis process begins with the researcher immersing oneself in data and doing initial codes of segments or units of data. Open coding involves experimentation and is a way to generate emerging categories (Douglas, 2002). Units of data must reveal information relevant to the study and interpretable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A code is applied each time there is a shift to a new subtopic, and codes can be used repeatedly if subtopics are similar (Saldana, 2011). The task is to compare one unit of information with the next, looking for recurring regularities in the data. During the data analysis process, it is important that the researcher not become too attached to early categories so that their analytical lens is not restricted to only issues that concern the researcher (Douglas, 2002). The overarching task of analyzing units of data is to

begin noticing a recurring regularity in the data in which categories are formed that ultimately answers the research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

I began my analysis process by analyzing the participant essay and interview script with open coding. Open coding is a process in which one adds written comments to the margins. These notations are adjacent to bits of data that are found interesting or potentially relevant to one's study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is called open coding because, in the initial stages of data analysis, the researcher is open to possibilities, and the focus is not narrow (Douglas, 2002; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Saldana, 2011). The coding process involves data reduction in which the researcher selects, focuses, and abstracts raw data from written-up notes (Miles & Huberman, 1984). When analyzing interview responses, I looked specifically for a detailed description of the decision-making experience for each participant that led to their decision to stay.

After coding my initial data set, I reviewed those codes and group codes that are similar and fit together. Category construction is the researcher's way of clustering similar data units into appropriate groups (Saldana, 2011). Next, I moved to a new data set and repeated the process of coding and grouping codes. However, as I coded data, I kept in mind the initial codes I used in the previous set to see if those codes apply to the new data set. Upon seeing recurring codes over multiple data sets relevant to my study, I decided to make that code an established category. Categories are concepts that span multiple examples (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Finally, I analyzed the categories of my data to determine themes. Unlike codes which are usually single words, themes are extended phrases that summarize the meanings of the data (Saldana, 2011).

## **Researcher Subjectivity**

Maxwell (2013) explains the importance of the researcher making one's perspectives, biases, and assumptions clear to the reader. Hence, it sheds light on how the researcher's values and expectations can influence the methods and conclusions of the study. As a Black male educator, I acknowledge my positionality in this work. I feel my experience as a BME is different than the prevalent narrative. During my teaching career, the staff, parents, and students deemed me a quality teacher based on my instructional practice and relationships with students. 70%-100% of my students met grade-level expectations on state math, reading, and writing exams for five consecutive years. Finally, I achieved National Board Certification in Literacy: Reading-Language Arts after my fifth year of teaching. My talents, expertise, and skills were welcomed and applauded. Even my collegial relationships were positive. Some of the dominant images of BMEs, such as being a disciplinarian, not being treated as an expert, academic struggles in college, and not passing certification exams, were not my story. Currently, I am a national literacy consultant in which I support schools, districts, and professional development companies to build educator content and pedagogical knowledge. I believe if one studies the craft of teaching, their subject matter, and refines implementation, one can achieve success in the K-12 educational setting. It is these experiences that I bring to my study as an asset. I have navigated complexities and have experienced success, and I understand the dynamics that Black male educators confront. Black male educators throughout my career as a teacher, instructional coach, district leader, and school administrator have viewed me as a role model, mentor, coach, and consultant due to my successful trajectory. LaViscount & Jeffers (2021) assert that African American researchers' personal experience with double consciousness is an asset and allows them to interpret African American experiences more accurately. It is my experience that I feel

positioned me as a researcher so that participants can develop relational trust more easily. Being a Black male educator increased my chances of hearing participants' narratives they may not share with researchers of other ethnicities. Finally, I was conscious that Black male educators are not monolithic, and as a result, I used member checks to log the experience and create an awareness of how my perspective and experiences shape the methods and conclusions of this study.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In this study, the following special protections were enacted as safeguards for participants: informed consent, member-checking, anonymity, and secure data storage. As participants shared their experiences, they mentioned organizations they had worked for and unique practices that could easily be identified if described in writing. I ensured in the consent form that no names of participants or organizations would be used in this study. All participants were provided a consent form (see Appendix C) they signed that explained the nature of the study, data collection methods, potential risks, and the benefits of the study. The consent form served as documentation of participants' consent and full knowledge of the nature of the study. Participants were informed they may withdraw from the study at any time. Also, anonymity was upheld by using participants' pseudonyms throughout the data collection process.

Interpretation validity is the researcher's aim to ensure participants' experiences are described accurately. Maxwell (2013) recommends using member checks to rule out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say, do and their perspective of what occurred. Member checks are integral in identifying one's biases and misunderstandings of what one observed (Maxwell, 2013). As a result, I summarized my interpretations of each

participant's essay and interview to ensure I captured the meaning they wanted to convey. Participants engaged in a member-check process for a week. They had access to the section of the data findings report that highlights their experiences to ensure an accurate summary and interpretation of their experience. As a researcher, I must represent my participants' experiences aligned with their intent. In K-12 settings, BMEs have experienced systemic marginalization. This study's goal is to lift their experiences with the hope of raising the consciousness of this marginalization so BMEs are embraced, retained, and, ultimately, positively impact student achievement. Lastly, all data was electronically stored with password protection that was only accessible to the researcher of this study. The researcher followed all procedures in his IRB application to ensure participants were treated ethically and protected.

### **Conclusion on Methods**

This study aimed to gain insight into how Black male educators successfully navigate workplace experiences leading to their retention in K-12 classrooms. This qualitative study aimed to learn about Black male educators' experiences and perspectives from various geographical locations, sites, and roles within education—a purposeful sample of participants engaged in personal essay writing and an interview. I coded the results from all sources to determine key themes related to my research question. Throughout the data collection process, I ensured participants' confidentiality.

## **Chapter 4**

This study sought to answer the following research question: How do Black male educators successfully navigate workplace experiences that lead to their retention in K-12 classrooms? Chapter Four is organized by subthemes illustrating each participant's experience. It was important to honor their voices and unique experience by not decontextualizing their experience through broader categories. This chapter reports on the findings of how participants confronted and worked through workplace challenges. The findings illustrate how the participants uniquely dealt with workplace challenges (i.e., student relationships, professional relationships, and a commitment to one's calling). Ultimately, the participants share their journey of being deeply committed to teaching.

### **His Students: The Impact of Student Relationships**

In this section, five out of 14 participants shared the importance of how student relationships were pivotal in dealing with complex workplace situations. Two participants described how supporting their students to demonstrate behavioral and academic expectations was integral to their success as teachers. One participant described how student affirmation empowered and motivated him to stay in the field. Finally, three participants asserted having moments with students when one learns more about them and their life stories caused a personal connection between the teacher and the student.



**Table 1***Student Relationships as a Source of Teacher Retention in the Classroom*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>How do Black male educators successfully navigate workplace experiences that lead to their retention in K-12 classrooms?</b>
Phillip	22	“But after a while, I didn't look at in that perspective because I wanted to take what the students were doing into a different direction. I wanted to, instead of managing their behavior, I wanted to help them to manage their own behavior” (Phillip, personal communication, January 23, 2022).
Roderick	29	“Seeing a child go from not being able to really even call letters... to go from that to being able to sound out three-letter words, to be able to blend words, decode words, and eventually get sentence...you know that aha” (Roderick, personal communication, February 28, 2022).
Martin	29	“Because you want to know that you make a difference, and when you see that you make a difference And it comes back to you...oh, that affirmation definitely feels good. When a child comes back to you and tell you you're the reason for their success. It just does something to your spirit, it raises

		<p>you. And it gives me the reasons to go one more year. You know what, I know I can see this in this child. Let me push a little further” (Martin, personal communication, January 22, 2022).</p>
Jay	8	<p>“The easy choice would be to resign and move on until you encounter that one student you didn’t know you needed in your life to push you to the next level” (Jay, personal communication, November 11, 2021).</p>
Kenneth	20	<p>“I want them to know I'm approachable. I'm not above anybody. I don't care what my role is. I'm human first. And I want them to know that no matter what, you can come to me. I'm available” (Kenneth, personal communication, January 18, 2022).</p>

### ***Student Attainment: Demonstrating Behavioral and Academic Expectations***

#### **Phillip**

Phillip’s experience began in a public school teaching fourth grade. He described his first experience with contention with his White principal concerning his teaching style. He wrote: “I, however, became strict and stern” (Phillip, personal communication, October 23, 2021). His actions resulted in his students' shift in behavior and desire to learn. Phillip wrote:

“My students know I am an enforcer, but I care about them” (personal communication, October 23, 2021). However, due to the conflict with his principal concerning his discipline style not being age-appropriate, he was transferred to the middle to fulfill the eighth-grade social studies position.

Upon taking the eighth-grade position, the principal configured his class make-up to be exclusively all Black boys with behavior problems and over-age. “At first, I took that as a compliment. But then, it kind of shifted to the stereotype... like why are they calling me? ... they're not knocking on other teachers' door” (Phillip, personal communication, January 23, 2022). Initially, Phillip saw this directive as a compliment due to his skillset in behavior management. He interpreted the principal's actions as a testament to his strengths as a practitioner but soon questioned the sincerity and genuineness of those actions. At that moment, he realized how the principal was utilizing him as an enforcer of behavioral expectations. He realized that other teachers were not being used similarly and that, ultimately, his position fulfilled the stereotype that Black men are disciplinarians (Brown, n.d., 2009, 2012, in press).

“But after a while, I didn't look at in that perspective because I wanted to take what the students were doing into a different direction. I wanted to, instead of managing their behavior, I wanted to help them to manage their behavior “(Phillip, personal communication, January 23, 2022). Phillip navigated this complexity by not simply giving up or succumbing to it but working against a discipline system that has historically negatively impacted Black boys (Kunesh & Noltemeyer, 2019; McFarland et al., 2016; United States Government Accountability Office, 2019). Even more, he decided to leverage his skillset as a behavior manager to support his students in managing their own instead of being controlled.

Woods (2017) explains that the blues became a channel by which African Americans grasped their reality of the plantation bloc, critiqued social structures and relations, and ultimately, organized against it. In this instance, the school system in which Phillip resided is likened to the plantation bloc in which he grappled with the reality that his principal viewed his role solely as an enforcer of discipline. The reality was his Black boys were to be controlled, not educated. However, Phillip's ability to approach this condition from an alternative perspective is vital to his dealing with the plantation bloc. Instead of contributing to conditions that would further impact his students negatively, he supported them with navigating the system itself. It takes away from the narrative that the Black boy needs to be controlled but that the Black boy is self-regulated. Here, Phillip did not succumb to the system but organized against it. How Phillip navigated his workplace conditions was based on his motivation to use the stereotype to his advantage to ultimately empower his students to manage their behavior, not be controlled by the system. Instead of allowing this to be a moment in which his and his students' development was arrested, he created an alternative result. This was an example of Phillip unraveling the effects of the system and making it work for him and his students.

"My students know I am an enforcer, but I care about them. I hold all students accountable for behavior and academics despite district policy. My goal is to give them the skills they need to make education a priority" (Phillip, personal communication, October 23, 2021). It is Phillip's final statement in his essay that illustrates the fundamental reason why he remains in the classroom. His desire to ensure he created an environment in which his students ultimately decided to prioritize education was a driving factor in his sternness and care. Despite the stereotyping of his administration, he used reality to make his students owners of their behavior, become more self-regulated, and ultimately, not need an external source to force them

into aligning to behavioral expectations. “I, however, felt that I would always remain a teacher because I could keep students from misbehaving drastically” (Phillip, personal communication, October 23, 2021). His success with students motivated him to start a mentoring program with similar goals. After 22 years, his developed passion is something he wants to do, and he cannot find another career fulfilling his desire to mentor and guide young students.

### **Roderick**

Roderick described three key challenges he confronts as a teacher: low salary, workload, and a lack of public respect for the profession. He shared that he could not live comfortably, enjoy his time off, and indulge in material pleasantries that make life enjoyable (Roderick, personal communication, February 23, 2022). He explained how his life was not balanced from his days not ending at 3:30 pm due to him having to take home papers to grade, lessons to write, and documents to review. “The behavior of students, lack of supportive parents, assessment requirements, pay scale, and political policies concerning education sometimes makes me feel that the teaching profession isn’t held in the light as it once was” (Roderick, personal communication, February 23, 2022). Studies show teacher workload continues to be a prevalent issue that impacts overall teacher satisfaction (Molero Jurado et al., 2019).

Despite those challenges, Roderick wrote, “I have the pride of feeling that no one can do what I do for my kids, even though there are multiple people who do it much better than I do. I feel my presence is needed (personal communication, February 23, 2022). He goes on to share how he felt confident that he is uniquely set up to provide the learning experiences his students need. Roderick’s confidence shows his self-efficacy as it relates to his pedagogical knowledge and skill. Furthermore, he wrote, “Watching the lightbulb come on or seeing abstract ideas become concrete is a gift that I enjoy” (Roderick, personal communication, February 23, 2022).

At this moment, he described an essential element of his retention: he enjoys seeing students learn. “Seeing a child go from not being able to really even call letters... to go from that to being able to sound out three-letter words, to be able to blend words, decode words, and eventually get sentence...you know that aha” (Roderick, personal communication, February 28, 2022). He sees students learning as validation that what he is doing is appreciated and needed (Roderick, personal communication, February 28, 2022).

Roderick’s focus on academics, specifically literacy, upholds the very premise of education to develop academic skills and those academic skills that drive his retention. Roderick described student learning: “I guess sometimes it gives me at least a purpose, you know, makes me want to keep going and put more into it (personal communication, February 28, 2022). In the face of the systemic challenges, he uses student achievement as his motivator and drive because, as he stated, “...like I said, I just enjoy what I do” (Roderick, personal communication, February 28, 2022)

### ***Student Affirmation***

#### **Martin**

Martin described one of his key challenges as his misalignment with the White district’s Chief Academic Officer (CAO) regarding ELA curriculum choice and implementation within his school. He felt the selected scripted curriculum was not meeting students' needs, so he pushed back against its usage. This led to the CAO’s recommendation to fire him. Still, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) placed Martin in a dean role, coordinator of student discipline systems and structures, that would serve the entire school. After a few years in the dean role, he became

dissatisfied and stressed. He wrote, "...I was bringing that anger and that stress and that anxiety back into my home...dealing with adults can be difficult" (Martin, personal communication, January 22, 2022). He further explained, "My greatest memories were never coaching teachers." (Martin, personal communication, January 5, 2022). Martin's experience as an administrator did not fulfill his needs and negatively impacted his overall work and life conditions.

However, the CEO asked him for a favor mid-year: to fulfill a teaching position for an exceptional needs class. The students in this class had extreme social-emotional and behavioral needs, and Martin accepted the role. He described his re-entry to the classroom: "My blood pressure returned to a manageable level and my joy returned. I realized that my happiness and joy was only present when I was standing and working directly with students" (Martin, personal communication, January 5, 2022). It was going back into the classroom that he began to reflect upon his impact on students, which solidified his belief: "There is no joy that is greater than seeing a student experiencing educational, emotional, and physical success for the first time. This might be selfish, but this is where my cup is filled" (Martin, personal communication, January 5, 2022).

Martin's retention is linked to his realization that directly impacting students' lives and educational outcomes gives him the most satisfaction. Although he was an administrator, his personal needs were met in the classroom. He stated:

Because you want to know that you make a difference and when you see that you make a difference and it comes back to you...oh, that affirmation definitely feels good. When a child comes back to you and tell you you're the reason for their success. It just does something to your spirit, it raises you. And it gives me the reasons to go one more year.

You know what, I know I can see this in this child. Let me push a little further (Martin, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

Student affirmation in which students tell him about his direct impact is a driver for him to come back year after year, and now, he is in his 30<sup>th</sup> year as an educator. “If I give up. And it sounds arrogant, but it's my job to make sure that they can be successful, and do what the world needs in the future, even make sense” (Martin, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

### ***Student Connection***

#### **Jay**

“The easy choice would be to resign and move on until you encounter that one student you didn’t know you needed in your life to push you to the next level” (Jay, personal communication, November 11, 2021). In the face of challenges, Jay asserted that the student connection draws him in. He shared a key interaction with a student who expressed wanting to start his own business when he gets older. “...he shared that he never had anyone to sit and listen to his thoughts on one day starting a business...what it looks like to develop his business plan. The student indicated that it wasn’t until my class that he noticed that it was possible to flourish” (Jay, personal communication, January 22, 2022). He shared that this moment was integral and stuck with him for a long time because he realized the far-reaching effect he could have on his students. “And the more I saw those type of students, they tend to gravitate to me, and I'll say okay hey, maybe there's something...” (Jay, personal communication, January 22, 2022). Jay described his experiences with students as affirmation for himself, but even more,



they fulfill his personal needs. “My purpose is not for my colleagues... not for leadership... it’s not for me...not even for the student’s parent or guardian... it is for that child...for the student...to reach their full potential no matter where you come from, economical, your social status, or where you are...you can succeed and thrive outside your environment” (Jay, personal communication, January 22, 2022).

“I learned early on to focus on what applies to me and ignore the other stuff “ (Jay, personal communication, November 11, 2021). Jay described his issues with his White leadership team and their low expectations of students. Also, he shared how administrators added more duties to his plate in addressing issues like student attendance. Furthermore, he described how even his colleagues engaged in toxic behavior, but in spite, he ignored the noise for the betterment of his students to fulfill his ultimate purpose (Jay, personal communication, January 22, 2022). While teaching, he ignored the noise of testing accountability, toxic work conditions, and ineffective communication styles that were prevalent in his schools. “My students help me to navigate and ignore the issues in K-12 through their willingness and eagerness to learn despite their problems. Each student helps to center me and help me to bring out my best teaching skills” (Jay, personal communication, January 22, 2022). His ignoring those conditions allowed him to not get warped, burnt out, and lose his commitment to his profession.

### **Kenneth**

Kenneth’s essay described an interaction with a past student outside of school in the local community. The student referred to Kenneth as family and said, “No, not like as in blood relatives,” but in a sense that you “get me.” You understand me whenever I stutter. You let me

take my time. When you see me get frustrated, you calm me down, and you don't let the others pick on me because I am slow.” (Kenneth, personal communication, November 11, 2021).

Kenneth wrote: “He, too, left a MAJOR impact on me as well! It made realize, BLACK CHILDREN NEED TO SEE BLACK EDUCATORS” (Kenneth, personal communication, November 11, 2021). Kenneth's realization showed that as much as this student was sharing his impact, at the same time, this student was affirming Kenneth's work as an educator.

It is that experience that Kenneth reflected on the aspect of his work that satisfies him. “The joy of knowing that they can come to me. And let their guard down around me” (Kenneth, personal communication, January 18, 2022). His student shared how Kenneth understood his learning challenges but never made him feel inferior. “I never would intentionally make a student feel invisible like my teachers made me feel” (Kenneth, personal communication, January 18, 2022). Kenneth shared that his experience with teachers who did not address his learning challenges and who made him feel that he did not exist in the classroom is a key reason why student connection is important to him. “I want them to know I'm approachable. I'm not above anybody. I don't care what my role is. I'm human first. And I want them to know that no matter what, you can come to me. I'm available” (Kenneth, personal communication, January 18, 2022). He consistently wants his students to see and know that he sees and hears them. He knows how it feels to be in a classroom where you feel unseen. As a result, a key aspect of his practice is ensuring that he connects with his students so they do not feel invisible but feel affirmed by their teacher's efforts.

Additionally, Kenneth realized that his true passion was not just teaching social studies but assisting his students in overcoming obstacles (Kenneth, January 18, 2021). He sees his work as beyond teaching content and academic subject matter, but he understands that if student

connection is important, one must support students in their personal development. A part of personal development is helping students understand how they can navigate complex life issues such as drugs, low self-esteem, sex, and family dynamics. Again, he sees his work as more than just academics but educating students on how to traverse life (Kenneth, January 18, 2021).

Kenneth's experience showed students could have a profound impact on teachers. Although educators pour into students, students can affirm their teachers and, thus, increase the likelihood of them staying in the field. Beyond subject-matter expertise and teaching, Kenneth valued being able to provide students with support that leads to their personal development. He does not see his sole role as developing students' knowledge of history but, even more, how to traverse the complexities of life. For Kenneth, the realization that he is providing students a safe space to be themselves, equipping them to navigate complex life situations, and having those same students affirm that his commitment to personally connecting with them had an impact is critical to his retention in the field.

### **Closing**

The student-teacher relationship goes beyond teaching subject matter but more building a human connection. This relationship can drive a teacher to ensure their students confront and oppose inequitable systems. The effects of this relationship not only impact the student but also affirms the teacher in knowing they make an impact. The affirmation of impact reminds the teacher of his purpose and strengthens his commitment to the field. In this section, these five participants illustrated the impact of student relationships on teacher retention.

### **His Colleagues: The Impact of Professional Relationships**

In this section, participants described the impact of their relationships with peers and professional colleagues. One participant shared how a past role model, an exemplary teacher, can be a source of inspiration. Another participant described how mentors and professional colleagues could make an impact on key decisions and can provide a source of comfort when dealing with challenging conditions. Finally, the last participant illustrated the impact of an administrator who improves teacher practices that lead to retention.

**Table 2**

*Professional Relationships as a Source of Teacher Retention in the Classroom*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>How do Black male educators successfully navigate workplace experiences that lead to their retention in K-12 classrooms?</b>
Damen	8	“... first of all, to stay in education 20 years. And so, if you need to look at somebody and, you know, as inspiration, he will be that person because he didn't quit ...” (Damen, personal communication, January 27, 2022).
Dwayne	15	“You need to learn how to play the game...It just means that you have to work on your delivery. And you have to not only build relationships with the students, but you have to learn to build relationships with the adults” (Dwayne, personal communication, January 23, 2022).

McNeil	8	And then it was just the aha moment for me. They saw how vulnerable I was, and my best friend... I'll never forget. She said it was her first time to ever seen a Black man cry. And that also reminded me of my purpose because for a lot of my students it is their first time seeing a Black man in the academic setting. It's the first time seeing a Black man for a lot of my students with a pressed shirt and bow tie or tie or suit jacket” (McNeil, personal communication, January 21, 2022).
Jackson	9	“Mr. James. He reminded me of my teachers in the sense that, like he really cared about my development. When I was a kid, my teacher saw that I was pretty bright and he really cared about my development from an academic standpoint. I feel like he reminded me of those teachers, and I gravitated toward him because that is the feelings he reminded me of” (Jackson, personal communication, January 23, 2022).

### ***Impact of Role Model***

#### **Damen**

Damen described one of his key challenges as a teacher as student misbehavior. He recalled a student whose behavior was so extreme that he ultimately walked out of the school and vowed not to return. He asserted the student’s behavior was beyond his expertise (i.e., mental

issues and parental problems) and skillset, and his only recourse was to leave the profession (Damen, personal communication, January 27, 2022). However, his school administrator switched his role to that of a first-grade teacher to retain him.

During that transition, he thought: “You know, ... I had to come back to the drawing board and think this through. This situation won't push me out of education. And then, once I thought about it, and of course, the position changed. I mean, I've been in here ever since. So just thinking about long-suffering...” (Damen, personal communication, January 27, 2022).

Amid a challenging situation, he reflected upon the concept of long-suffering, which links to endurance. A key aspect of how Damen dealt with this issue was thinking about his past teacher. “... first of all, to stay in education for 20 years. And so, if you need to look at somebody and, you know, as inspiration, he will be that person because he didn't quit” ...” (Damen, personal communication, January 27, 2022). His past teacher became a role model of long-suffering. Even more, Damen shared this sentiment:

Maybe he knew how to handle me as a student because I think I mentioned this in the paper that behavior wise I wasn't the best student. But I did my work. But I still had a behavior component that needed to be targeted. And also, I was on medication when I was in elementary school a lot of people don't know that. And then my mom took me off. Some years later so even when I was with him, I was on medication. And that's if I took the medication. So just his patience and long-suffering with me, I'll never forget that (Damen, personal communication, January 27, 2022).

It is in the moment in which he considered leaving the field that he reflected upon his role model and the impact he had on his life. His role model was a personal example of long-suffering because of the same patience his teacher had for him as a student; Damen needed to exude patience to his student. That memory was convicting and compelling.

The blues embodies the collective tragedy experienced by African Americans while also instilling pride and channeling collective wisdom (Woods, 2017). In this instance, Damen, in the face of a challenging situation that almost drove him to leave the field, thrived and leveraged the wisdom he gained from his role model. “Am I going the extra mile....I'm telling you now, he always worked outside of his job description. I'm thinking about it now. You know, the things he's done. And, as I think about it as an adult. I'm like, man, this man really invested in us.” (Damen, personal communication, January 27, 2022). He found himself in a place of understanding the necessity of long-suffering as a component necessary for dealing with stressful moments in the field, and without this wisdom, he would have been another Black male exiting the profession.

“I believe that what you sow, you will reap. I want my children to reap what I sow...this anchors me in education” (Damen, personal communication, December 9, 2021). Damen’s use of language represents his mission mindset in which he takes on the ownership and duty that he positions himself as one who is to impact the trajectory of his students’ lives. “I often wonder that if not me, then who?” (Damen, personal communication, December 9, 2021). This statement shows he recognized that he had been positioned to be an asset to his students and that the source of support for students does not lie outside of him but within him, and thus, he has remained in the classroom. “I want this generation of scholars to be put into a better position...I

feel obligated to stay with our students to get them ready for the real world” (Damen, personal communication, December 9, 2021).

### ***Impact of Mentorship***

#### **Dwayne**

A critical juncture of his career was when Dwayne joined a charter school where he was the only Black male teacher. His motivation for joining the staff was “I was going to be an ADVOCATE for them. I want to motivate students in ascertaining their inner strengths” (Dwayne, personal communication, November 17, 2021). However, he realized that his staff did not share the same sentiments. “...they thought they were doing a good service by educating African-American kids and doing them a FAVOR” (Dwayne, personal communication, November 17, 2021). He shared how his White staff members wanted to force their beliefs on Black students without understanding the student’s struggles, backgrounds, or lives. Students who committed behavior infractions were sent to isolated rooms and barred from educational experiences for days on end. “I couldn’t believe I was experiencing systematic racism within this charter school (Dwayne, personal communication, November 17, 2021).

Furthermore, his interchanges with his White administrators were ineffective. “My conversations with administration seemed worthless. They were set in their ways and didn’t seem to want change” (Dwayne, personal communication, November 17, 2021). As Dwayne pushed for change in the discipline system, such as not administering harsh penalties for minor offenses, his administrators felt it was unnecessary. This experience caused him to question: “Was the fight worth it? Would my reputation be tarnished? Would I seem like the angry Black man?” (Dwayne, personal communication, November 17, 2021). These self-reflective questions



showed Dwayne wrestling with the reality of double consciousness (Du Bois, 2018), and ultimately, he decided to leave the classroom and become a real estate agent.

That interaction led Dwayne to reach two key people in his life: his high school math teacher and his mother. That same summer, he went back home to visit and ran into one of the students from his earlier teaching job at a juvenile detention center. Dwayne wrote, “His testimony he shared with me was so powerful. He shared with me that his time in my classroom while in prison affected him more than I thought it did” (Dwayne, personal communication, November 17, 2021).

His past teacher told him: “You need to learn how to play the game...It just means that you have to work on your delivery. And you have to not only build relationships with the students but also learn to build relationships with the adults” (Dwayne, personal communication, January 23, 2022). At that moment, Dwayne confronted advice that made him look at his social interaction tactics and how his actions worked against his aim of advocating for students to get better treatment from their teachers. His lack of ability to form relationships with colleagues made it more difficult for him to reach and support them in their interactions with the very children he was advocating for. He saw that his colleagues needed support, but his delivery obstructed the progress.

While talking to his mother about his decision to leave education, she said: “If you want to teach, it is something that you have to really want to do. And she was like, What else are you going to do? And I was like I really don't have no idea. She was like well, you know, she's real cutthroat, like, well... you need to figure it out. Because if you don't have a plan B, what are you trying to leave?” (Dwayne, personal communication, January 23, 2022). He shared that in those moments that he had to face, he did not have other options but even more, they both reminded

him of his purpose. He shared this internal thought: “You are here for the kids. You got to get along with the adults. Make it happen” (Dwayne, personal communication, January 23, 2022).

A key pillar of the blues epistemology is the African American community’s continual reestablishment of its collective sensibility despite the constant attacks of the plantation bloc (Woods, 2017). The concept of sensibility illustrates the ability to respond to complex situations that elicit strong emotions, be aware of one’s emotional response, and self-regulate. Similarly to African American life during the Reconstruction Era to 1960, Dwayne had dealt with the harsh realities of a system in which educators used punitive discipline tactics on Black students, and his administrators dismissed his perspective. In the face of those realities, he had to self-regulate to not show anger or become insubordinate because doing so could get him labeled as the stereotype he was trying to avoid. Even after talking to his teacher and mother, he engaged in an internal conversation in which he had to collect his thoughts and recommit to his ultimate purpose of serving his students. His ability to regulate his emotions and reestablish his commitment to his purpose and students led to the next four years as a classroom teacher.

### ***Impact of Professional Colleagues***

#### **McNeil**

McNeil's major challenge as a teacher was his misalignment with his White school administration on how students’ misbehavior should be addressed and his relationship with his White colleagues. One of his administrators would use disparaging language to describe their mostly Black student population while the other coddled students (McNeil, personal communication, November 28, 2021). He often found himself at odds with his administrators because he believed in setting boundaries and holding students accountable for their behavior.

Another issue he confronted surrounded his interactions with a White female colleague. One day, after a classroom observation, his administrator shared with him that he needed to build relationships with his colleagues. “One teacher unfortunately told the principal that she felt threatened by me...She just felt threatened by my presence” (McNeil, personal communication, January 21, 2022). McNeil shared that this was his breaking point after all the issues with his administrators about student discipline; now, he was being labeled a threat.

McNeil went to his “Tribe,” a group of Black female teachers who were his support system. “...my Tribe actually saw me cry because I was at my breaking point. I was very frustrated, and I'm like, I feel like here I am again. I'm just trying my best to just live life, and I feel like I'm back in grade school again” (McNeil, personal communication, January 21, 2022). His administrators reminded him of the teachers in his past who never gave him a chance (McNeil, personal communication, January 21, 2022). At that moment, he thought: “Maybe I'm too out of the box of my thinking... maybe I need to pursue a degree of law or something. I just wanted to leave, but they remind me of my purpose.” (McNeil, personal communication, January 21, 2022). He shared this sentiment in his interview:

And then it was just the aha moment for me. They saw how vulnerable I was, and my best friend, ... I'll never forget. She said it was her first time to ever seen a Black man cry. And that also reminded me of my purpose because for a lot of my students it is their first time seeing a Black man in the academic setting. It's the first time seeing a Black man for a lot of my students with a pressed shirt and bow tie or tie or suit jacket. So it's a lot of, a lot of times I am that first for a lot of kids, and I feel like that's important” (McNeil, personal communication, January 21, 2022).

At his breaking point, his Tribe provided the space for him to reflect upon his ultimate purpose and reestablish his sensibility. McNeil's experience illustrates Du Boi's (2018) concept of double consciousness in which McNeil wrestled between self and society. Additionally, his experience connects to research showing that Black employees reported being unable to express workplace stress with colleagues or their employers (Wingfield, 2010; Rausher & Wilson, 2016). This moment with his Tribe allowed him to reflect on why he entered the teaching profession. "A crucial factor for keeping me in the profession is my strong disposition regarding developing a numerate society" (McNeil, personal communication, November 28, 2021)). McNeil started his journey of teaching in the sixth grade as a math tutor. "Tutoring became a part of my identity in the neighborhood" (McNeil, personal communication, November 28, 2021). At such an early age, he established himself as one who supported academic success in his community. Those experiences influenced his decision to be a mathematics engineer major to finally land in mathematics education. His intimate moment with his Tribe reminded him of this: "I live for eureka moments in my classroom. I love posing problems in front of my students and bouncing around from group to group scaffolding their learning and facilitating the conversations" (McNeil, personal communication, November 28, 2021).

### ***Impact of Administration***

#### **Jackson**

A school administrator impacted Jackson's decision to remain in the teaching field. "Mr. James. He reminded me of my teachers in the sense that, like he really cared about my development. When I was a kid, my teacher saw that I was pretty bright and he really cared

about my development from an academic standpoint. I feel like he reminded me of those teachers, and I gravitated toward him because that is the feelings he reminded me of” (Jackson, personal communication, January 23, 2022). Mr. James made Jackson feel he was personally invested in his growth. Jackson shared that he charged Mr. James to make him a National Board-Certified Teacher (Jackson, personal communication, October 14, 2021). “He just made me feel comfortable, feeling like someone I can go to and talk about my ideas and not always having to feel like pressure to have evidence immediately” (Jackson, personal communication, January 23, 2022). Jackson’s experience illustrates the impact of school administrators on teacher retention. “Mr. James showed me ...that as long as I first model a problem or process in a way that was accessible to the student ... my data would yield the type of results that would push my class forward, thus expanding the types of discussion around math that I aimed to nurture with my students” (Jackson, personal communication, October 14, 2021). As of result of Mr. James’ display of concern, care, and instructional coaching of Jackson, he looked beyond the constraints of his job and became motivated to improve his craft for the betterment of his students.

However, Jackson raised a pertinent concern about how it caused him to wrestle with staying in the field. “Baldwin James proved to be the hardworking man in the building. As a Black man, he would always be working for some young White woman, and that was something I felt was a disservice to the students” (Jackson, personal communication, October 14, 2021). Jackson explained that Mr. James was the school's assistant principal while a younger White woman was the principal. “Seeing him work as hard as he did, yet did not receive the recognition that he deserved for moving those needles. It showed me that maybe this isn't the

place that I need to be” (Jackson, personal communication, January 23, 2022). If his mentor was never recognized, Jackson wrestled with what that meant for him and his longevity in the field.

Jackson witnessed his mentor’s impact on his 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade team and students in one year, but then the following year, Mr. James was only the assistant principal of third and fourth grade. “This is your strongest teacher developer here. Why is it that we’re giving him less people? I was not only angry for him but I was mainly angry for the students because I feel like, as a whole, that whole community of students was not receiving the level of educators that they deserved and that they needed” (Jackson, personal communication, January 23, 2022). In Jackson’s eyes, Mr. James had the expertise to support teachers in educating their student population. So, giving him fewer teachers to support meant teachers would not get developed, and that would negatively impact student achievement.

Jackson’s experiences show the impact administrators have on retention. In this case, Jackson witnesses the inequity that his administrator experienced in the K-12 system: increasing student achievement through effective leadership but never being recognized for his work. This reality caused Jackson to question his commitment to the field and whether it was worth it. If he sees his role model as the hardest working person and he still confronts inequity, what hope would there be for Jackson?

Despite these realities, Jackson transitions to a new school and matriculates into a teacher leadership role in which he supports increasing the capacity of his colleagues. He shared how teachers had the freedom to do what they wanted in their classrooms, no one ever checked on their classes, and student achievement was low (Jackson, personal communication, October 14, 2021). In response to his colleagues’ lack of investment in making instructional improvements for students, he stated: “I actually called Mr. James about teacher development things and really

a lot the development techniques that I ended up using with my colleagues were just things he had shown me and the experiences I had with him” (Jackson, personal communication, October 14, 2021).

Another pertinent issue Jackson shared weighed heavy on his mind was the lack of Black students' academic attainment. “I feel as if I am spinning my wheels. My students will soon be entering the world, and for the majority of them, their lives will be no different. They will just be finally done, but few of them will rise out of poverty to build anything for their next generation, and I feel like the “MAN” has won. (Jackson, personal communication, October 14, 2021). Jackson’s statement shows the reality of a teacher coming to grips with the fact that although they aim to improve their students' life outcomes, that goal will largely not be met due to the systemic issues at play in the K-12 educational system. Jackson’s experiences are echoed in the NAEP assessment results for 8th-grade students from 1992-2022, which illustrates about 70% of Black students have not attained proficiency in reading and math for about 30 years (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1990-2022). Despite his internal wrestling, Jackson is still teaching students, is in a teacher-leader role, and leans on the advice from Mr. James to support his colleagues’ development.

## ***Conclusion***

In this section, these four participants illustrated the impact of professional relationships on teacher retention. Despite workplace challenges, these participants leveraged their relationships with mentors and colleagues in aiding them in reestablishing their commitment. The participants viewed their mentor as a model of success and support, and in complex situations, the mentor inspired them to remain in the classroom. The participants’ colleagues

offered encouragement, reminding them of their purpose. The findings in this section show the value of teachers having a network of people who can support them as they make sense of their experiences and, ultimately, recommit to their profession.

### **His Vocation: The Impact of One's Vocation**

Studies have shown that Black educators are deeply committed to Black children and see their role as aiding Black children in navigating inequitable social conditions (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Lewis, 2006; Lynn et al., 1999). In this section, five participants asserted that their commitment to the teaching field is rooted in their viewing of teaching as a vocation linked to improving their students' lives. This aligns with Harding's (1974) premise that the scholarly vocation is to build infrastructures for the optimal success of the community. One participant described his commitment as driven by his hope for a better system that he felt he was called to improve. Another participant asserted his commitment to the field through his unwavering desire to be an effective practitioner. Finally, two participants illustrate how their mission mindset compelled them to address school inequities while being an exemplary representation for Black students.



**Table 3***Vocation as a Source of Teacher Retention in the Classroom*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>How do Black male educators successfully navigate workplace experiences that lead to their retention in K-12 classrooms?</b>
George	16	“I think the education field can become what it once was, but not until we get back to the basics with a complete overhaul” (George, personal communication, November 30, 2021).
Michael	9	“...maybe like you have to develop yourself... I went in on Saturdays and Sundays. My personal belief is working till something changes” (Michael, personal communication, January 17, 2022).
Marc	9	“...every day that I show up at school and being a man of color who teaches a science and advanced science course... my presence addresses it just by simply being present. The fact that I can teach in a way where I’m not upholding those same systems and structures of White supremacy to an extent. (Marc, personal communication, May 4, 2022).

Travis	5	“Due to my faith and burning passion for the youth, I remained in education. It’s been relationship-building with students rather than test scores” (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021).
Raymond	13	“To put it plainly, I stay because I am on an assignment. I always knew that a portion of my purpose was to be a vessel through which needs might be supplied for the generation behind me. This assignment has transcended time and space, ordered and ordained by God almighty.” (Raymond, personal communication, December 23, 2021).

### ***Hope Drives Commitment***

#### **George**

“Most students would rather sit in class and entertain activity on their cell phones than to learn a valuable less about the works of Langston Hughes or write an error-free literary analysis, where the teacher has put so much effort into the lesson to ensure student success” (George, personal communication, November 30, 2021). George begins his story by calling out a key prevailing challenge in public schools: student misbehavior. In Molero Jurado et al. study (2019), teachers reported student misbehavior as one of the key contributors to job stress. In addition, George writes: “It appears as if the administration is afraid of the parents, the parents are afraid of the students, and the students aren’t afraid of anyone” (George, personal communication, November 30, 2021). He recounted how he had seen school administrators on

multiple occasions who would not address student misbehavior to keep the peace and pacify parents and students (George, personal communication, November 30, 2021). This is one of the realities that weighs heavily on George's satisfaction but, even more, his retention.

Additionally, he shared a final challenge: "Believe it or not, some teachers have even been terminated, demoted, and even reassigned based on their students' test scores" (George, personal communication, November 30, 2021). George's experience demonstrates that teachers are working in non-optimal conditions. From test scores to student misbehavior, these conditions can take a toll on an educator's motivation, satisfaction, and overall longevity in the field. "I think the education field can become what it once was, but not until we get back to the basics with a complete overhaul" (George, personal communication, November 30, 2021).

George shared that too many lawmakers making decisions about education have not stepped foot in a classroom. He furthered his point by asserting that for this overhaul to happen, students need passionate teachers who provide structure, discipline, and desire to see them be successful by holding them to high standards and expectations (George, personal communication, November 30, 2021).

George's plight is like a game of tug-of-war. He has faith the educational system can change on one end, but on the other end, the poor working conditions are pushing him over the edge. The continual pulling from opposite sides puts him in a state of frequent questioning if he should remain a classroom teacher. However, his faith in what is possible and his commitment to students are key factors in his plan to open his own school (George, personal communication, November 30, 2021).

## ***Teacher Effectiveness Drives Commitment***

### **Michael**

“I was promised mentorship, constant coaching, and opportunities to work with their best teachers. However, those promises were not kept as I was placed with a new teacher to help with behavior management (Michael, personal communication, December 11, 2021). Michael entered the field because he wanted to be an effective teacher, and even more, he understood that he had developmental needs. Thus, he decided to join a staff in which the principal did not deliver on the promise. Instead, Michael was the secondary teacher in the room to enforce behavior, while the primary teacher was a White female. “It made me feel like maybe this is not for me. In the moment those moments where I felt like a zombie at this school...maybe I'm not meant to be in this field...made me feel low self-esteem” (Michael, personal communication, January 17, 2022). For Michael, he aimed to be an effective teacher, not a classroom manager, and the mere fact that his administrator restricted him to such a role did not sit well with him. Brown (2009) confirms that Black male teachers are often stereotyped-cast into disciplinary roles and not seen as content experts.

Instead of leaving the field or the school, Michael thought “...maybe like you have to develop yourself... I went in on Saturdays and Sundays. My personal belief is working till something changes” (Michael, personal communication, January 17, 2022). His response to his mistreatment was to take ownership of his development. He did not wait on the system to build or create it; his dedication to his vocation was a paramount factor.

Eventually, Michael left the school due to his dedication to becoming an effective teacher. Michael wrote: “In the second interview I was able to pull a small group to deliver a small group lesson. Ms. Jackson had me re-prompt students, practice management strategies and

gave me feedback throughout the lesson to help me grow as a teacher. As a former basketball player, I learned that the coaches who are hardest on you and require the most out of you are the most invested in your development (Michael, personal communication, December 11, 2021). He was finally in an environment that cultivated his professional growth, but the staff culture was toxic. “The problem was could I see myself learning the negative habits within a public school system” (Michael, personal communication, December 11, 2021). Eventually, Michael transitioned to a new school due to his dedication to not allowing a toxic environment to impact his teaching practice.

Michael’s retention is linked to his unyielding aim to be an effective practitioner. Due to his aim, he took ownership of his development, although his school conditions sought to delay it. When the school conditions did not prove beneficial, Michael’s yearning to be effective led him to a new school, but upon confronting a toxic culture, he made a critical decision again. The decision was not to remain in an atmosphere that would stifle or taint his growth. He would not allow a lack of professional development or a toxic staff culture to impede his journey. He intentionally removed himself from a context that could warp his perspective and lead to habits and practices that would not be conducive for himself or his students. “...consistent coaching, a positive school culture, and an impactful purpose all led me to remain in teaching. Consistent coaching at HAWK Academy and a positive school culture based on what’s best for kids is what helps me remain in teaching “ (Michael, personal communication, December 11, 2021). This level of conscious determination allowed him to navigate complex terrains and, ultimately, remain in the classroom.

## ***One's Mission Drives Commitment***

### **Marc**

Marc retold his experience as a teacher in which he witnessed the educational system ensuring his students conformed to White-dominant norms. He described the discipline policies and behavioral expectations (e.g., dress code and attendance policies) as those in which his students were being controlled and not allowed to embrace their unique cultural identities. “It was also harrowing to see the manifestations of racism in our society replicated in our schools. Being a teacher showed me that the programming of White supremacy begins in our schools almost as if the schooling our students are receiving is just an education to conform to the White-dominated world” (Marc, personal communication, November 14, 2021).

Additionally, his administrators created policies that stifled his autonomy. His administrators prescribed the instructional techniques, assessment practices, and grading policies teachers had to utilize in the school. He shared how his grade book adhered to guidelines he did not create (Marc, personal communication, November 14, 2021). For him, the most frustrating aspect was how administrators and district leaders focused on trivial guidelines rather than making systemic changes. “I had an overwhelming feeling that the people who were in positions to make the necessary changes for a system that was woefully broken were uninterested in making those changes” (Marc, personal communication, November 14, 2021). By the end of Year 5, Mach grew tired of the bureaucracy and decided to leave the classroom.

Two years later, Marc returned to the classroom. His two-year separation was void of the following:

“That sort of like the buzz of a classroom, you know, there's always the chattering between the students the interactions that you had. And I missed working with other

educators, you know people who I felt like just pushed me not only in my craft as a teacher, but also who pushed me intellectually. I miss being kind of in that like that area where everyone was kind of working towards a common goal” (Marc, personal communication, May 4, 2022).

However, Marc shared a sentiment about his return for his Black students: “Right now, there's some part of me that is terrified about what they're experiencing in some of their other classes, and I hear what my students say about our school. It terrifies me to know what they may be experiencing all these the White dominant cultural norms in schools” (Marc, personal communication, May 4, 2022). At the heart of Marc’s concerns were his students’ stories of harsh penalties, microaggressions, lack of support, and poor instructional quality from their teachers. His students’ experiences were not unique because studies confirm that minorities can experience microaggression in White-dominated spaces (Kholi, 2018; Lander & Santoro, 2017). However, he shared: “...every day that I show up at school and being a man of color who teaches an advanced science course... my presence addresses it just by simply being present. The fact that I can teach in a way where I’m not upholding those same systems and structures of White supremacy to an extent. (Marc, personal communication, May 4, 2022). Marc saw his presence as a stop-gate; it is in his classroom where he can provide his students to be free from inequitable systems and treatment. He also saw his presence on his teacher team as one to advocate for better classroom conditions beyond his four walls. Marc’s actions exemplify Du Bois’ (1902) assertion that Black students in desegregated schools run by Whites will need teachers who care, believe, and disrupt school conditions that negatively impact Black students.

At the heart of Marc’s retention is his belief that he is called to show students the value of education. “My teachers raised me. And so, in largely that's why I'm a teacher today. I think

because of the impact my teachers had on my own life” (Marc, personal communication, May 4, 2022). He shared that he understands teachers' instructional power in shaping their students' life outcomes because a teacher saved him. Thus, his mission is to be an example, an advocate, and provide his students an escape from oppressive systems. “Growing up poor also meant receiving a quality education was a ticket to escape poverty. This is why education has always meant such a great deal to me. Ultimately, this is why I stay in education” (Marc, personal communication, November 14, 2021).

### **Travis**

“Being labeled an ineffective teacher hurt my confidence and almost drove me into a career change” (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021). Travis, a 5th-year teacher, recounted his struggle confronting the reality that his students' demonstration of learning on standardized testing was insufficient. “It was a devastating blow to my confidence, as the charter network never took into account the amount of academic, and personal growth my students attained in just one academic school year. The network discredited the countless hours spent lesson planning, scaffolding, and problem-solving that took place every day within my classroom” (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021). Darling-Hammond & Berry (2006) explain the over-emphasis of standardized testing due to the No Child Left Behind Act in classrooms and how it has led to less rigor. The charter network heavily emphasized students meeting or exceeding state benchmarks on the annual assessment. If students did not perform, it reflected the teachers' ability to provide adequate instruction. “It was blow to my self-esteem, and I felt as a failure” (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021).



“As a young educator, I accepted the challenge and never used any of those factors as a possible excuse. I began to buy into the numbers game and began teaching with an emphasis on standardized testing, which was completely against my beliefs as a teacher” (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021). Travis went down a path of trying to prove himself to his colleagues and the charter network, but he shared it took a toll on him (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021). “I wanted to show like hey, you can label me as this but I’m still gonna rise and I’m still going to persevere through. (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021). Despite his colleagues supporting him and him becoming more intentional in his teaching practices, the label of ineffectiveness still lingered (Travis, personal communication, January 23, 2022). Travis reached his breaking point:

I didn't want to leave education because I love the interactions that I had with students. And the whole idea of preparing the future for our young Black kids in my city, so I didn't want to quit. So, that's why I didn't leave. But I was also looking to find joy within educating again because I've gotten to the point to where it wasn't enjoyable. It was...it was almost like a burden to be a teacher, and once I reached that point, that's when I knew I should make a change and find somewhere else where I can look for that joy in education (Travis, personal communication, January 23, 2022).

“Once I realized I was fighting an uphill battle, it was like, hey, maybe it's time to go and see if there's another place for me somewhere. You know, find happiness and education again” (Travis, personal communication, January 23, 2022). Travis left the charter network for a new school due to the toll the stress had on his well-being. “In my first year at the new school, my

school leaders routinely expressed how much confidence they had in me as a teacher” (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021). His administrators allowed him to choose his instructional methods, shared his practice with the school through photos and videos, and offered him verbal praise and affirmation (Travis, personal communication, January 23, 2022). Travis shared that the trust of his administrators removed the vengeance inside of him and the ineffective label that overshadowed his career (Travis, personal communication, January 23, 2022).

Travis is now in the fifth year of teaching, and he wrote: “Due to my faith and burning passion for the youth, I remained in education. It’s been relationship-building with students rather than test scores.” (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021). His motivation is linked to students’ smiles and the joy of learning (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021). “It’s my mission to educate and inspire the next generation of leaders” (Travis, personal communication, November 21, 2021).

Travis’ experiences show the pressures of the school system can harm teachers’ emotional well-being. The overemphasis on student achievement results can decrease teachers’ self-efficacy and put them in a place where they cannot function at optimal levels. It is the decrease in self-efficacy that can lead to retention issues. Also, Travis’ experiences show the lack of trust from administrators and labeling teachers ineffective can divert a teacher’s attention from improving student learning to proving their self-worth. This type of pressure ultimately leads to teachers leaving schools and the field. However, despite those pressures, Travis shows a teacher’s ability to acknowledge and utilize their ultimate mission to educate children as a tool to recognize when school pressures are becoming a barrier to fulfilling that mission. The recognition of that barrier ultimately leads the teacher to remove themselves from those

conditions. Ultimately, Travis shows that the commitment to children and one's mission that aids in retention.

### **Raymond**

"I return for every Black boy who yearns for a walking, talking manifestation of his dreams, even dreams yet to be dreamt; I return for every Black boy who has been waiting on his likeness to show up for him; I return for the Black boy within me, who is now a Black man, wishing one had returned for him" (Raymond, personal communication, December 23, 2021).

Raymond's educational journey is rooted in his K-12 experience of seeing successful Black school administrators. "Much of my motivation to become a part of the anomaly has been rooted in knowing that I was super fortunate to witness Black male leadership in education early on" (Raymond, personal communication, December 23, 2021). Raymond shared that the Black male administrators he had growing up ran the school, made bonds with students, and represented strength. Seeing exemplars provided him with the charge of how he must continue that legacy within the classroom. The charge understands that representation matters and impacts students, and thus, the charge is to continue to be an example of Black success.

"I now am more aware than ever that I have actively tried to be for young Black boys what I was missing from my school life—the presence of someone that looks, sounds, and feels like me" (Raymond, personal communication, December 23, 2021). Raymond's experiences illustrate some teachers enter the field with a sense of calling, in this instance, a higher being, and that calling drives them to stay committed to the work. Multiple studies have illustrated how some Black educators view their careers as a vocation in which they are committed to Black students, and that commitment aids them in dealing with workplace challenges (Dixson and

Dingus (2008), Brown (2011), Goings & Bianco, 2016; Lewis, 2006; Lynn et al., 1999).

Raymond's past experiences with those who look like him cemented an image of inspiration and a charge to continue in the same vein. He decided to extend that representation into the classroom because that was where the void was: he experienced Black administrators but not teachers. Realizing the impact representation had on him motivated and impacted his personal development. If that representation had not been there, he is unsure what his path would have been (Raymond, personal communication, December 23, 2021). As a result of seeing the void in the classroom, he desired to fill that space for his future students. "To put it plainly, I stay because I am on an assignment. I always knew that a portion of my purpose was to be a vessel through which needs might be supplied for the generation behind me. This assignment has transcended time and space, ordered and ordained by God almighty. "(Raymond, personal communication, December 23, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

In this section, all four participants show how viewing one's profession as a vocation can impact teacher retention. These four participants envision what they want for themselves and their students. Their desire to be effective practitioners shows up in their commitment to further their craft, advocate for equitable practice, and be an example of success for their students. For these participants, there is no thought of leaving the teaching field because their vocation, or inner calling, drives them to consistently commit to advancing student achievement as they confront and overcome workplace challenges.

## **Chapter 5**

If a critical aim of our U.S. educational system is that all students meet grade-level, subject-area mastery, there is a need to understand Black male teacher retention. Two percent of the U.S. teaching force is Black males (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). A third of teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching, with Black educators having the lowest retention rate and the highest departure rate (Chang, 2009; Gallant & Riley, 2017; Ingersoll, 2012; Jalongo & Heider, 2006; Snyder et al., 2014). Against this backdrop, a growing body of research shows students have more favorable perceptions of teachers of color than their White teachers and perform better on standardized tests when they have teachers of color (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Viano & Hunter, 2015). However, between 2002-2012, Black educators declined in some of the largest urban school districts, such as Philadelphia, Chicago, and New Orleans, by about 40% (Rigza, 2016). This chapter starts with a summary of the findings, which is a discussion that addresses the research question about the professional experiences of 14 Black male educators that led to their retention in the classroom. The researcher then provides recommendations and limitations and concludes with future research opportunities.

### **Summary of Findings**

The findings of this study suggest that teacher retention is linked to a decision-making process that involves an internal reflection in which one grapples with the tension between workplace challenges and one's ultimate purpose for teaching. This study's research question is: How do Black male educators successfully navigate workplace experiences that lead to their retention in K-12 classrooms? This study had 14 participants with 5-29 years of teaching experience. Each participant uniquely navigated their workplace challenges and decided to

remain in the classroom for one of the following reasons: their connection with students, collegial support, or their belief that teaching is their vocation.

**Table 4**

*Workplace Conditions that Impact Teacher Retention in the Classroom*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Years of Experience</b>	<b>Content Expertise</b>	<b>Reason for Staying in the Classroom</b>
Phillip	22	English- Language Arts	Student Relationships
Roderick	29	English-Language Arts and Mathematics	Student Relationships
Martin	29	Special Education	Student Relationships
Jay	8	Computer Technology	Student Relationships
Kenneth	20	English-Language Arts	Student Relationships
Damen	8	Science and Social Studies	Professional Relationships
Dwayne	15	Mathematics	Professional Relationships
McNeil	8	English-Language Arts and Mathematics	Professional Relationships
Jackson	9	Mathematics and Science	Professional Relationships
George	16	English- Language Arts	Vocation
Michael	9	Upper Elementary	Vocation

Marc	9	Chemistry	Vocation
Travis	5	English-Language Arts & Social Studies	Vocation
Raymond	13	Mathematics	Vocation

Five participants asserted that student interactions that included making personal connections with students, demonstrating behavioral and academic achievement, and students' personal success stories affirmed and motivated them to remain classroom teachers. Also, four participants described professional interactions in which colleagues supported their decision-making by being an exemplar, providing guidance and coaching, and creating a safe space to have tense conversations about their inner thoughts and emotions. Finally, five participants asserted that teaching is their passion and calling. Their passion, despite workplace challenges, was integral to deciding to remain in the classroom.

The following is a discussion of this study's findings on the impact of student-to-teacher interaction on five participants' decision to remain in the classroom. It is followed by discussing how professional relationships were integral to four participants' decision-making process. Finally, a discussion on how viewing one's profession as a calling impacted five participants' longevity in teaching.

### ***His Students: Impact of Student Relationships***

One key finding in this study is how students impact their teachers' decision to remain in the classroom. In this study, the following types of student-teacher interaction led teachers to

deepen their commitment: witnessing students attain academic and behavioral expectations and sharing their personal success stories with their teacher. The decision to remain did not come without financial strains, poor working conditions, or witnessing the impact of racism. One participant shared he consistently wrestled with the decision to remain a teacher or provide for his wife and soon-to-be firstborn; his salary caused much financial strain on his household and marriage. Two participants described adverse workplace conditions, such as misalignment with White school administrators that led to a possible firing and the overwhelming teacher workload that impacted their quality of life, aligned with Molero Jurado et al.'s (2019) findings. Furthermore, a participant described his experience, which aligns with Brockenbrough's (2015) research of being labeled a disciplinarian in which his White administrator ensured his class housed all students with severe misbehaviors.

Despite these realities, two participants shared how students' academic and behavioral attainment were their linchpins to the profession. One participant shared the impact of witnessing his students' academic achievement. His self-efficacy increased as his students' ability to master foundational reading skills increased, which then yielded his students' increased ability to read more challenging texts. The participant shared seeing student growth over his 29 years as an educator reinforced that his presence is needed due to his effective pedagogical practices. Another participant shared how he was treated as solely a disciplinarian to control the school's severe student misbehaviors. Instead of allowing the label to consume him, he created a classroom culture in which students took ownership of their behavior. Upon seeing his students rise to the occasion and meet high behavioral expectations, this reality was essential to his 22-year commitment to the classroom.



A tenet of Wood's Blues epistemology highlights how African Americans use the Blues to critique the plantation bloc (Woods, 2017). The participant's experience illustrates how teachers can use their strongest skill sets to aid their students in opposing stereotypical labels that an inequitable system tries to impose on them. Similarly, one participant critiqued their schools' systems, expectations, and conditions. He did not believe that his sole responsibility and strength was managing only student behavior. Upon critiquing the system, he strategically decided to organize against it, another feature of the Blues epistemology. Through the opposition, his students develop habits in his class to uphold and take ownership of their behavior.

Three participants' experiences describe the impact of students sharing their personal success stories. One participant shared how a student's high school academic success story pushed him to continue teaching for another year. The past student visited the participant and told him he was the reason for his success. The participant's 29 years of experience shows how a student sharing words of affirmation with their teacher can become a personal motivator. Another participant shared how a student's success story affirmed his decision to see his job beyond academics and make bonds with students. His student shared that he appreciated the moments in class when they could talk about anything and how his teacher made him feel safe despite his disability. This participant's experience aligns with previous studies showing how African American educators view the role of education to have an academic component but desire to support students in developing skill sets that will ultimately bring about a democratic transformation of the world (Haynes et al., 2014; Lynn et al., 1999). The participant's 20 years of experience demonstrates how a teacher can see their roles as more than just a facilitator of

academic content; they can nurture multiple aspects of a child's life, including a child's personal development.

Overall, the participants' lived experiences highlight students' impact on teachers' decision to remain in the classroom. Teachers' motivating factors are rooted in their connections with students and student achievement. Hearing personal success stories and witnessing student success affirms the teacher's belief in themselves and the impact of their work. These five participants' teaching experiences range from 8-29 years, and the length of their experience speaks to their persistence in impacting students. In critical moments in which they wrestled with their decision, they leveraged teacher-to-student interactions, and through conscious efforts and choice, they successfully navigated workplace barriers.

### ***His Colleagues: Impact of Collegial Relationships***

Another key finding in this study is professional peers' impact on a teacher's decision to remain in the classroom. In this study, the following professional interactions reignited the teacher's purpose: an internal reflection of a past role model, advice from peers, and instructional coaching from the administration. These four participants confronted student and administrative challenges like the other participants. One participant almost left the field due to him having to teach a student with a severe behavior condition beyond his expertise and void of administrative support. Another participant witnessed White teachers impart harsh discipline practices upon Black students, which connects to Giordano's (2020) findings of schools disproportionately suspending Black students. When he spoke up about it, his White administration ignored him.

The final two participants raised concerns about their White administration as well; one dealt with his administrator not agreeing with his instructional practice, while the other took issue with how White senior executives were negatively treating his administrator.

Although these four participants faced challenges, each uniquely utilized their professional colleagues to aid them in navigating workplace challenges. Upon the first participant realizing he did not have the expertise to support severe student misbehavior, which caused him to walk out of his classroom to quit, he later engaged in self-reflection. He remembered how his role model exhibited patience even when dealing with him as a child. As a child, this participant needed medication to address his behavioral need, and his teacher demonstrated patience toward him. It was that memory that shifted his attitude and behavior. That memory reminded him of the patience he would need to show his students and remain a teacher. In the moment of distress, one's memories of past role models can guide how to deal with current realities. The participant's experience shows how teachers benefit from role models whose work-ethic example becomes a means to confronting and overcoming workplace conditions. He is still in the classroom after eight years.

The second participant had a moment in which he realized that if he wanted to change his administration and colleagues' approach to discipline, he would have to shift his approach so they could receive his feedback. He would often use harsh words to admonish the school policy of isolating students in rooms when they misbehave, and it was the harshness of his tone and words caused tension between him and his colleagues. His shift in mindset did not occur until he sought advice from two key people who were past teachers. Their advice pointed to him learning how to work with his colleagues if he wanted to change his students' experiences. In those conversations, he realized his purpose was to teach and advocate for kids. This participant

described how his professional relationships were pivotal when deciding if he would remain in the classroom, which aligns with Shen et al. (2012) findings of staff support as a strong predictor of teacher satisfaction. This participant's 15 years of experience points to how teachers can benefit from having a safe space to receive advice that recenters them, aids them in reflection, and ultimately reignites their commitment to the field

The third participant almost left the field due to his negative interactions with his administrator had it not been for his professional network of Black female teachers who encouraged him in a particularly tense moment. His White administrators felt his discipline style was too harsh, and he felt their style placated and reinforced student misbehavior. Also, his administrators accused him of making his White colleagues feel threatened but offered no specific examples; this became his breaking point. He shared he could no longer suppress his feelings. Studies have shown that Black professionals are held to different standards than their White counterparts and often cannot express their workplace frustration; this reality is stress-inducing (Wingfield, 2010; Rausher & Wilson, 2016). Amid his tears, while conversing with his Black colleagues, they reminded him that his students needed to witness the presence of Black men. His students needed him. As a result, he recentered himself and ultimately decided that teaching was for him. In this instance, the participant's administrator did not provide a safe space for him to express his concerns; he then turned to other Black teachers at his school for emotional support. This participant's experience highlights how in times of extreme stress, teachers can benefit from vulnerable moments where they can share their thoughts and emotions in a safe space with colleagues. This can lead to recentering one's purpose and, in his case, remaining in the classroom for eight years.

The final participant shared how his administrator created space during instructional coaching debriefs for him to ask questions, practice his instructional moves, and advise him on improving his craft. Those experiences taught him how to analyze data, scaffold student learning, and he saw student achievement gains. In this instance, his administrator providing instructional coaching increased this participant's satisfaction due to witnessing student success because of his administrator's coaching. This experience aligns with Farber's (1991) finding that personal accomplishment links to an employee's feeling of success. That experience compelled him to stay in the classroom for nine years, and eventually, he became a teacher leader who supported other teachers. His experience highlights coaching experiences in which teachers explore their craft without evaluation can lead to teacher retention.

Overall, the participants in this study show the power and the importance of having social networks they can lean on in times of distress and uncertainty. The social network's support allowed them to reflect on their purpose and, even more, strategize a path forward as they confronted complex work conditions. Also, the participants show the power of collectivism; teachers need not work in isolation but in collaboration with their peers. A vital aspect of the Blues Epistemology was African Americans' ability to consistently reestablish their collective sensibility (Woods, 2017). Similarly, the four participants utilized their professional peers to recollect their thoughts and feelings about their workplace experiences while reestablishing their commitment. The process of reestablishing their sensibility occurred through conversations with professional peers. Workplaces challenges can make teachers question their practice, identity, and role in students' lives. In those moments, teachers benefit from other educators to help them make sense of their realities so they can stay the course. In this case, these four participants' 8-

18 years of experience illustrate the impact of social networks on teacher persistence and retention.

### ***His Vocation: Impact of One's Vocation***

The final key finding in this study indicates that a teacher seeing their job as a vocation impacts their longevity in the field. Participants described their vocation using terms such as faith, hope, assignment, belief, passion, and ordained. Harding (1974) describes those who are called as those who speak the truth to free the minds of their people. Additionally, Dixon (2003) explained how Black educators' obligation to Black children stems from a belief it is their responsibility to advocate for Black children and their families. The participants' experiences illustrate how a vocation is an individual's inner drive and self-commitment to a cause or outcome. External factors do not create the vocation. It is rooted in the individual's sense of how they should interact in society to bring about a positive outcome for themselves and their community.

Similar to the other 9 participants in this study, the four participants who described their vocation as a key factor to their retention faced challenges in the K-12 setting. One participant shared the challenge of getting White administrators to hold high academic and behavioral student expectations. He shared that his administrators placated parents and students, which led to student apathy in the classroom. Another participant described how his administrator promised professional growth but instead utilized him as an enforcer of discipline. This experience made him realize his purpose was misaligned between him and his administrator. The third participant shared his discomfort with the harsh treatment and the lack of educational quality his students received from other classrooms led by White teachers. Another participant

faced the reality of his administration labeling him an ineffective teacher due to his student's lack of success on state tests which negatively impacted his self-efficacy.

In the face of those realities, these five participants navigated their school systems leveraging their vocation or sense of calling as a path forward. One participant shared that his hope for a better future educational system was a critical reason why he stayed in the field. He desired to be a part of and witness the change. His hope prevented him from foregoing his commitment to teaching for 18 years. Instead of giving up, he is steadfast in providing structures for academic discussions and rigorous assignments that live up to the future vision he believes can be achieved. His experience showed that a teacher who has hope could become even more frustrated with their current realities. But also, their hope for what is possible can be a driving force in aiding them in working through challenges because they inevitably want to witness their desired vision.

The second participant shared that his primary aim and calling was to become an effective teacher. His drive to be an effective teacher made him realize that his administration's actions did not align with his goal. He did not see himself as solely a disciplinarian. Still, his administrator placed him in behavior support roles to aid teachers who did not possess classroom management skills. When he raised his concern about not receiving pedagogical development, his administrator consistently shared it would happen later. As a result, he transitioned to a school aligned with his aim. His experience shows a teacher's drive to be proficient at their craft allows them to identify when work conditions are not optimal and work against their aim. This drive compelled him not to leave the profession for nine years and seek workplace environments that cultivated his craft to increase student achievement.

The third participant's experience shows his calling to be an intercessor and mediator for his students as a driving factor in his retention. Upon realizing the lack of quality learning experiences his students received in other classrooms led by White teachers, he became deeply committed to remaining a teacher to be an example for his students. Additionally, he advocated for equitable discipline policies and the creation of advisory periods. His experience illustrates how a teacher's commitment to be a "stop-gate" to inequity for their students can be the foundation of their retention in the field. His actions align with the body of literature by displaying how he desired to improve social conditions in his school (Lynn et al., 199), and organized against oppressive discipline systems (Wood, 2017), which illustrates Du Boi's (1902) assertions about necessary school conditions for Black children. This participant recognized how the school conditions were not conducive for his students and saw his decision to remain in the classroom as a means of organizing against a system that lacks educators who create positive learning environments for minoritized students.

The fourth participant's faith and drive to inspire the lives of future youth was a critical aspect of his retention. Despite his school district's label of him as ineffective due to his students' lack of high performance on state tests, he decided to transfer to a new workplace environment that would build his trust and self-efficacy. His prior workplace conditions led to self-doubt and apathy toward the profession, and once apathy set in, he decided to transition to a new environment. His experience demonstrated that a teacher's faith and mission to inspire and educate children would allow them, in their darkest moment, to make a pivotal decision not to leave the profession but move to a healthy environment that will enable them to thrive. This participant's actions align with Dixson & Dingus (2008), who found Black educators described how their faith was integral in deciding to remain in teaching even after retirement. This



participant shared that he could have easily left education, but his passion for youth led to him ensuring he was working in the right conditions that allowed him to thrive in his sixth year of education.

The final participant strongly asserted that his role as a teacher was a spiritual assignment ordained by a higher being. This participant's acknowledgment of a calling from a higher being aligns with Brown's (2011) study that found African American educators drew on biblical, cultural, and institutional narratives to inform their teaching philosophy. After reflecting and acknowledging his K-12 experience, the participant realized he had exposure to Black administrators but few Black teachers. His experience illustrated how a teacher's vocation could be cultivated by seeing and filling a gap in a pivotal space for personal development. He recognized how the school system lacked a significant amount of Black educators, specifically Black males. Harding (1974) describes how those who have a calling know how vital it is to make connections between the past, and this participant's awareness of the impact Black administrators had on him made him keenly aware of the impact the lack of Black educators could have on his students. There are adverse effects in the K-12 educational system due to a lack of teacher diversity, and his decision to remain in the classroom works against those systemic effects. For the past 13 years, this participant's retention did not waver due to systemic challenges but strengthened as he fulfilled his spiritual assignment to meet the needs of his students and the Black community.

These five participants demonstrated an unwavering commitment to be an educator that was not contingent on external factors. They exhibited an inner drive, understanding, and belief they were created for the teaching role. For them, challenges are only impediments, not deterrents; their mission to fulfill their vocation is stronger than their desire to leave.

## **Implications**

The literature on the experiences of Black male educators in K-12 is limited. The sample sizes of prior studies focused on Black male teacher turnover rates are relatively small, ranging from 1-27 participants (Bridges, 2011; Bristol, 2014; Brockenbrough, 2009; Lynn, 2006; Rezai & Martino, 2010). This study had a sample size of 14 participants. Furthermore, most studies on Black male educators focused on these aspects: their pathway into the profession (Lewis, 2006; Sealey-Ruiz & Lewis, 2011) and their teaching practices (Bridges, 2011; Brockenbrough, 2012; Brown, 2009; Lynn, 2006). There is limited literature on how school conditions inform BMEs' longevity in teaching. Bristol's (2014) study focused on organizational conditions that impact Black male teachers' decision to stay, move within, or leave the field. This dissertation further fills the gap in the literature by continuing to examine organizational conditions, but with a focus on how school conditions lead to BMEs making a critical decision to stay in the classroom. More specifically, this study highlights elements of the decision-making process in which BMEs grappled and wrestled with their professional choice.

To address the gap in the literature, this study's research question was: How do Black male educators successfully navigate workplace experiences that lead to their retention in K-12 classrooms? Through participant essays and interviews, this qualitative study was designed to understand the workplace experiences of Black male educators. Also, this study aimed to understand how Black male educators navigate complexities of the K-12 educational system to provide insight to educational leaders on school conditions that strengthen teacher retention.

This study's theoretical framework aligns with the work of Clyde Woods' (2017) historical retelling of the Blues tradition. Clyde Woods' Blues epistemology is a conceptual

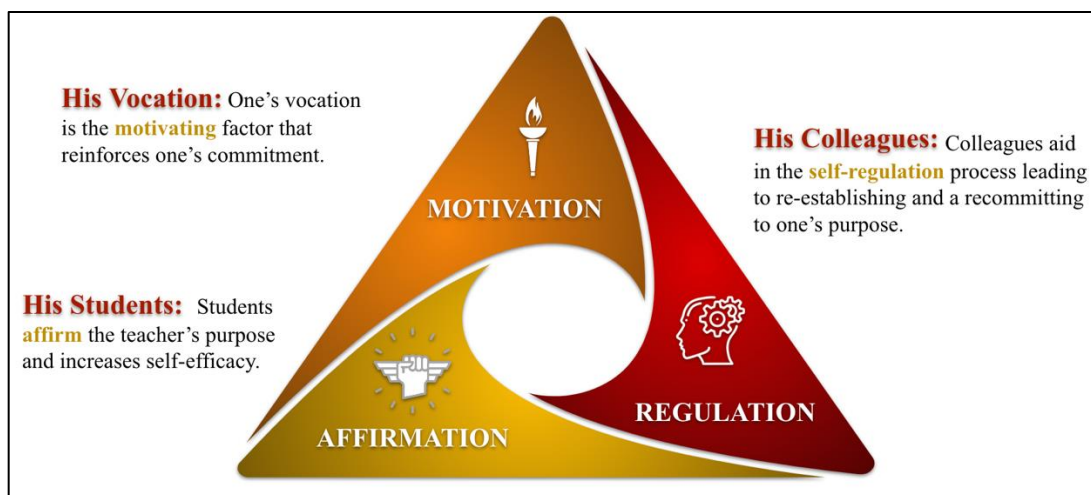
framework describing the African American experience during Reconstruction with the resurrected Plantation Bloc. The framework highlights how African Americans critiqued and organized against inequitable systems that impacted their daily lives (2017). The Blues epistemology rests on two foundations: the continual re-establishment of collective sensibility in the face of constant attacks, and the social relations in the South were a pillar of African American culture (Woods, 2017). The Blues epistemology focuses on the impact of the plantation bloc, which has its roots in U.S. chattel slavery and controls the daily lives of African Americans post-Slavery through economic and agricultural systems that arrested the development of African American people. Additionally, the Blues epistemology illustrates how African Americans had to consistently reestablish their sensibilities, navigating their internal thoughts with external experiences and making sense of their reality as they found ways to cope and thrive.

Murray (2017) explains that blues music is not synonymous with lamentation and commiseration due to its power to yield a positive action-oriented disposition; it illustrates the disposition to persevere and relieves its performers and listeners. In this study, the researcher applied the metaphor of the plantation bloc to situate the K-12 classroom experiences of the participants. Like the Blues epistemology illustrates African Americans at that time, these participants critiqued and organized against the inequitable systems in their K-12 learning environments. They underwent a similar process of making sense of their current realities as they dealt with conditions that caused them to question their commitment to the field. These educators had to wrestle with inequitable realities such as the following: the suppression of thought as it relates to lesson planning, the terror of harsh discipline policies, conforming to White behavioral norms, and student academic disparities. The Black male educators in this

study represent the Blues epistemology in that they represent an action-oriented approach to resisting the pressure to conform to the dominant cultural views of themselves and their students. As shown in Figure 1, their decision-making process included reflecting on the affirmation they experienced through student interactions, the professional support from colleagues to regulate their sensibilities, and their inner drive to fulfill their purpose. Ultimately, they demonstrated resiliency through their decision to remain classroom teachers despite workplace challenges.

**Figure 1**

*Components of the Retention Decision-Making Process*



### **Future Recommendations**

Student success and connection were key sources of affirmation and motivation for the teachers in this study, which aligns with Farber's (1991) finding that job satisfaction is linked to personal achievement, which can impact employee retention. Educational leaders could utilize this key finding to guide their work by reflecting on the following: How do I create

opportunities for meaningful engagements between students and teachers so they can affirm each other's personal impact? Utilizing this question as a guide to increase teacher satisfaction and retention, educational leaders could implement structured time for teachers and students to engage in dialogic exchange. This exchange can be an individual conference, small group meeting, or whole class configuration to discuss life issues, academic goals, or engage in informal community-building activities. This structure would increase the frequency of teacher-to-student interactions to build rapport and moments of affirmation. Doing so would leverage a critical finding of this study and its potential impact on teacher retention. Determining the necessary conditions for teachers to facilitate structured conferences with various student configurations was beyond this study's scope. Therefore, there is a need for further research to determine the frequency of touchpoints needed for teachers and students to build a positive rapport. Additionally, there is a need for future studies to determine the type of discussion topics needed to ensure meaningful exchanges happen between teachers and students. Finally, research must understand the social dynamics essential to building a positive classroom culture where authentic, transparent discussion can happen.

To increase teacher satisfaction and retention related to students' academic success, educational leaders could implement instructional coaching debriefs with teachers focusing on evidence-based practices that yield student academic outcomes. This coaching experience can be in an individual or a small group setting where teachers learn about a specific instructional routine in which they role-play and give each other feedback on how well they implemented it. This type of experience allows teachers to hone teacher practices so they can use them to improve student academic outcomes. Knouse (2001) found mentoring experiences that included coaching and modeling of teacher practices were beneficial in providing adjusting feedback,

creating a shared understanding, and facilitating change. One of the key findings of this study is that teachers felt motivated by student academic growth. So, if, in these coaching sessions, teachers can learn an instructional routine that scaffolds student learning, one could see an increase in teacher retention. Furthermore, this recommendation opposes the narrative that Black male educators are not content experts (Brown, 2012); instead, this retention effort centers upon the development of pedagogical practice. This study did not seek to understand the types of instructional approaches or routines teachers would find beneficial to learn to impact student achievement. Research would be needed to understand the key characteristics of a coaching session that teachers desire to improve student impact. Additionally, this study did not probe to determine the type of student achievement data that affirms teachers the most. Future research is needed to decide to what degree and type of students' academic achievement impacts teacher retention.

The second key finding of this study was the value colleagues had when the participants were wrestling with their decision to remain in the classroom; this aligns with research that shows teacher satisfaction increases with collegial support (Dicke et al., 2019; Shen et al., 2012). Educational leaders could utilize this key finding to guide their work by reflecting on the following: How do I create the conditions, so teachers have access to professional networks that provide social-emotional support? Utilizing this question as a guide to increase teacher satisfaction and retention, educational leaders could create structures or systems to create informal settings where teachers can support each other. With teacher stress and burnout being dire realities of K-12 schools (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015), these informal settings where teachers can share moments to decompress could benefit teacher retention. This could be an opportunity to strengthen teachers' social-emotional well-being so they can regulate and

recommit to teaching. These moments could take place during staff meetings or outings so teachers can engage in dialogue with each other beyond their subject-matter expertise. This study did not focus on understanding the conditions of how to set up and monitor informal settings for teachers to interact. Thus, more research is needed to understand the conditions for cultivating such a structure.

The third key finding of this study is that viewing teaching as a vocation increases teacher longevity in the field. Each participant's vocation was linked to their commitment to using effective pedagogical skills to advance Black students' academic success. This aligns with the findings on the positive impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on minority students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Educational leaders could utilize this key finding to guide their work by reflecting on the following: How do I create opportunities for teachers to identify, reflect upon, and leverage their inner drive as a source of commitment? Utilizing this question as a guide to increase teacher retention, educational leaders could develop a screening process to identify potential teacher candidates who see their role through the lens of a vocation. With the complexities of the school system that cause teacher dissatisfaction (Albert Shanker Institute, 2015), it might be advantageous for school districts to identify potential employees with the fortitude and an internal source that drives and keeps them committed to teaching. Perhaps, create a list of interview questions that probe candidates on their purpose for teaching, what motivates them when confronting significant challenges, or what aspect of their teaching role is a source of inspiration and drive. This study did not attempt to identify how a vocation is cultivated. Thus, further research is needed to understand what conditions are necessary to build or nurture a sense of calling in a teacher's practice.

To increase teacher retention, educational leaders could develop structured opportunities for teachers to reflect on their passion for reigniting or affirming one's commitment to the classroom. These opportunities could come in the form of staff celebrations in which teachers are awarded for their contribution to the school community and given the time to reflect on their passion and draft action plans for classroom application. Research has shown having teachers reflect in writing engages them in critical reflection on their learning, and they utilize the reflection notes as a tool for future planning and instruction (Dyment & O'Connell, 2010; Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019; Nguyen, 2017; Lee, 2010). This type of opportunity would allow teachers to reflect on how they can use their drive to strategically plan how to work through daily challenges. This study did not focus on understanding the conditions to set up and monitor these structured reflection opportunities for teachers to reignite their passion. Thus, more research is needed to understand the conditions for creating strategic, structured reflective engagements.

This study's findings provide insight into aspects that impact teacher retention, but those aspects are not exhaustive, and thus, further research is needed to determine other essential elements needed to ensure teachers make a retention decision. Future research is needed on how educational leaders can identify the behaviors that signal a teacher is questioning his or her longevity and how educational leaders can support teachers in the decision-making process concerning retention. Leaders will need to proactively put systems and structures in place and not wait for teacher failure but intervene before the teacher decides to walk out of the halls of student learning. This is not something the system can allow teachers to do in isolation, for this study highlights the impact of teachers' social networks.

Finally, this study did not seek to understand the necessary school conditions that could cause a teacher to question the strength and endurance of their calling. Thus, future research is



needed to determine at what point is one's calling insufficient in motivating one to stay in the teaching field. One critical consideration for establishing necessary school conditions is educational leaders must not abuse a teacher's commitment to their calling. One needs to avoid assuming a teacher's unwavering commitment means they have no desire to dismantle inequitable conditions and not assume they do not expect their administrator to reduce unfavorable work conditions. The participants in this study were committed but admitted some experiences almost pushed them out of the classroom. Thus, more research is needed to understand the conditions that could lead to a breaking point in a teacher's commitment to their calling.

### **Limitations**

There are limitations to this study. One of those limitations is the sample size. With only fourteen participants out of the 2% of BMEs nationally, the individual experiences of these participants cannot be used in a generalizable way as a representation of the experiences of all BMEs in the United States. Another limitation is this study only highlights the workplace experiences from the perspective of BMEs. I did not interview their colleagues to support or refute the claims the BMEs shared in their essay and interview. Overall, my findings are confined to the participants in this study. My participants' claims about their experiences, especially their reasoning as to why they remained in the classroom, cannot be generalized. Transference will depend on the contexts of potential appliers of this study's findings. In qualitative research, the findings, in the form of thick descriptions, are bound to the time and context of the study. Qualitative researchers cannot specify external validity, but the researcher, through the use of thick description, can create a database that enables a potential applier to

reach a conclusion if the findings can be applied or transferred to a new context (Guba, 1985). The degree to which the findings may be transferable depends on the similarity between the sending and receiving contexts (Guba, 1985).

## **Conclusion**

So often, the question is: why is there a lack of Black male educators, or why are Black male educators leaving the field? The literature is filled with studies explaining why Black educators enter the field, their experiences while in the classrooms, and the systemic conditions that push them out altogether. The gap lies within hearing the stories of how Black educators use their aim and purpose as a tool to recenter, recommit, and retain. The focus of this study does not rest on why Black men leave the classroom but on why they stay. This study contributes to the literature of Black intellectual thought on education by affirming and extending how Black male educators exemplify the legacy of African Americans coming against, confronting, and overcoming oppressive systems. Black educators have had to navigate and develop alternative ways to fulfill their aim in a system they did not control. The cultural trait of resilience is a byproduct of their successful navigation of oppressive systems. From being treated as a behavioral enforcer to being labeled as a threat, the participants in this study confronted and overcame harsh realities in their school systems. Their unwavering commitment illuminates their resistance and retention. These participants' lived experiences show the power of student relationships and the power of centering students' needs, which ultimately fulfills the teachers' needs. The participants' experiences demonstrate that teaching does not have to be a lonely career. One does not have to shut their door and work in isolation, but these participants showed how collaboration and collective support in a moment of weakness could strengthen one's

commitment to the field. Furthermore, the participants in this study were vulnerable enough to share how they wrestled with the decision to remain in the classroom. They did not need support in establishing their drive but called for support in dismantling the conditions that put them in a position to reconsider their professional choice. However, due to their commitment to students, collegial support, and purpose-driven orientation, they exemplify the trait of having the fortitude to stand. What's powerfully clear is these Black men have decided that even if the conditions are not diminished, their unyielding, relentless commitment to students draws them to the very heart of the classroom.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Teacher Interview Protocol**

#### **A. Introduction**

1. How did you decide to become a teacher?
2. Have you taught at other schools? If so, how many?
2. What are some aspects of teaching that bring you satisfaction?
3. What are some of the challenges you've faced in the teaching profession that has caused dissatisfaction?

Based on the topics or themes that emerge from the analysis of participants' questionnaire responses and personal essays, key question sets below will be used to further probe participants' thinking about their experiences:

#### **B. Leadership**

1. How would you describe your interactions with your administration?
2. What perception do you think your administration has of your teaching ability?
3. How has that perception shaped your daily experiences?
4. Are there certain actions by your administration that caused you satisfaction or dissatisfaction? Why? How did you navigate those feelings?

#### **C. Responsibilities**

1. What school-wide responsibilities do you hold?
2. How have those responsibilities shaped your perception of the profession?
3. How have those responsibilities impacted your decision to remain in the classroom?

#### **D. Teacher Autonomy**

1. What type of decision-making abilities have you been given that has increased or decreased your satisfaction?
2. How have those decision-making abilities shaped your perception of the profession?
3. How have those decision-making abilities impacted your decision to remain in the classroom? How did you navigate those experiences?

#### **E. Student Interactions**

1. How would you describe your interactions with your students?
2. How have student interactions impacted your satisfaction with the profession and/or school?

#### **F. Student Achievement**

1. How have your students' achievement results impacted your daily work life experiences?

2. Have student achievement results impacted your decision to remain in the classroom? How did you navigate those feelings?

**G. Colleagues**

1. How would you describe your interactions with your colleagues?
2. What perception do you think your colleagues have of your teaching ability?
3. How have those perceptions shaped your daily experiences?
4. Are there certain actions by your colleagues that caused you satisfaction or dissatisfaction? Why? How did you navigate those feelings?

**H. Race**

1. Have you had experiences that made you more aware of your racial makeup? Can you describe them?
2. How did the experience affect your work conditions?
3. How did you cope with this experience? Why did you use that coping strategy? What was the result of using that coping strategy?

**I. Closing**

1. As you know, this study is about how Black male educators successfully navigate workplace experiences that lead to their retention. Is there anything else you think I should be aware of or you would like to add?

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Contact Summary Sheet**

1. Participant's Name Initials
2. What were your key takeaways from this conversation?
3. Describe any of the participant's responses that align with your overall research question.
4. How would you categorize the participant's response as it relates to their alignment with the research that undergirds your study? Check all that apply (e.g., leadership, autonomy, responsibilities, collegial relationships, student relationships, student achievement, racism/discrimination, etc.).
5. Do you have any lingering questions?
6. Other Thoughts

**Appendix C**  
**Letter of Consent**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a graduate student under the direction of Elizabeth Jeffers, Assistant Professor, in the Department of Educational Administration Program at the University of New Orleans. I am doing a study to understand retention of Black male educators in K-12 classrooms.

In this study, you will complete a questionnaire, write a personal essay, and participate in an interview. At any time, you can choose to withdraw. Please know your contact information will not be published.

Overall, your participation in this study will contribute to educational leaders understanding how to retain Black male educators in K-12 classrooms.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, you can contact me at [mbrookin@uno.edu](mailto:mbrookin@uno.edu) or (504)559-9983. You may also contact Dr. Elizabeth Jeffers at [ekjeffel@uno.edu](mailto:ekjeffel@uno.edu).

Sincerely,

Mitchell Brookins

By signing below you are giving consent to participate in the above study.

_____ Signature	_____ Printed Name	_____ Date
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If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, please contact Dr. Ann O'Hanlon at the University of New Orleans (504) 280-3990.

## Appendix D Recruitment Flyer

**ARE YOU A  
K-12 BLACK MALE  
EDUCATOR?**

Looking for volunteers to participate in a research study aimed at understanding Black male educator retention in K-12 classrooms.

**Participants must:**

- ✓ Identify as Black
- ✓ Teach in an urban public-school setting
- ✓ Have 5 or more years of teaching experience
- ✓ Currently teach a core subject

**What's involved?**

- ✓ Essay
- ✓ Interview

Please contact:  
Mitchell Brookins  
[mbrookin@uno.edu](mailto:mbrookin@uno.edu)

INCREASE THE PIPELINE  
STAIN THE PIPELINE  
IMPACT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

## **VITA**

Mitchell Jermaine Brookins is an educational consultant that supports teachers, school administrators, and district leaders in advancing student academic attainment. His 18 years of professional experience include teacher, instructional coach, school administrator, district leader, consultant, and educational thought leader in K-12. He was born in Champagne, IL, to Verlene Grant and Mitchell Brookins. He attained his bachelor's degree in elementary education and religious studies from Illinois Wesleyan University in 2005 and obtained his master's degree in teacher leadership from Roosevelt University in 2010. In 2016, he joined the University of New Orleans graduate school and attained his Ph.D. in educational administration in 2023. His research interest lies in instructional leadership and evidence-based literacy instruction to lead toward school improvement.