Voices at the Intersection: Exploring the Roles of Race and Gender in the Pedagogies of Black Male Special Educators

Patrice Elizabeth Fenton
University of Miami, patrice.fenton@gmail.com

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VOICES AT THE INTERSECTION: EXPLORING THE ROLES OF RACE AND GENDER IN THE PEDAGOGIES OF BLACK MALE SPECIAL EDUCATORS

By

Patrice Elizabeth Fenton

A DISSERTATION

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VOICES AT THE INTERSECTION: EXPLORING THE ROLES OF RACE AND
GENDER IN THE PEDAGOGIES OF BLACK MALE SPECIAL EDUCATORS

Patrice Elizabeth Fenton

Approved:

________________________  ____________________
Beth Harry, Ph.D.          Batya Elbaum, Ph.D.
Professor of Teaching and Learning  Professor of Teaching and Learning

________________________  ____________________
Wendy Cavendish, Ph.D.    Guillermo Prado, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Teaching and Learning  Dean of the Graduate School

________________________
Osamudia James, J.D.
Professor of Law
The purpose of this study was to explore some of the questions that arise as one probes the call for more Black men to enter the teaching profession, particularly as these questions relate to their racial and gendered identities. Further, the focus was on Black male special educators, as the literature demonstrated that there was very little research that captured the experiences of this group. To this end, the following research question was posed: What roles do race and gender play in the pedagogies of Black male special educators?

Using intersectionality as a conceptual framework, this qualitative study included, 12 interviews and one focus group with 6 Black male secondary special educators who work in New York City public schools. Transcripts were analyzed by employing grounded theory methods and invoking the African-American oral tradition via narrative inquiry concepts. Several themes emerged which led to the construction of a theoretical statement which asserted that black male special educators were driven to enact social change using education as a platform to serve as transformational leaders. They did this by building on and transferring to their students a rich sociohistorical knowledge base in order to empower minoritized students to rise above the oppressive circumstances they
often face both in schools and in society at large. Results from this study have implications for research, policy and practice for recruitment and retention of minoritized male teachers as well as urban teacher preparation.
DEDICATION

To my beautifully brilliant children, Jair Asad and Haile Masani; so that you have a living example of her words: “Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars and change the world.” ~Harriet Tubman

To my amazing mother, Rita Angie Fenton, who always knew I should be a teacher and has stood by me with undying love and support, both as I’ve stumbled and as I’ve prevailed. I pray I always make you proud.

To the men of this study, and the others out in the field. Please know that I stand with you in solidarity. I hope I have done your voices justice.

To the Brooklyn girl who always wanted to be a doctor. Smile. You did it!

And to Orisha and Egun, for the constant reminder that, “I am my ancestors’ wildest dreams!”
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Chapter One: Introduction

*Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced* (Baldwin, 2010, p. 34).

The call for more Black males to enter the teaching force is a worthy, yet curious one. On one hand, there is the fact that the racial and gender composition of the teaching profession is largely homogenous (i.e. White and female) and therefore not reflective of the student population (Ingersoll, Merrill & Stuckey, 2014; NCES, 2013; NCES, 2015). On the other hand, there are many challenging questions that arise when one examines deeply the contextual factors that surround the call for this group’s increased presence in the profession.

To begin, one might ask whether it is enough just to recruit more Black men into teaching. For example, considering their socio-historical experiences in this country, what kind of supports might this group need once they enter the profession? How much are the Black men who are already in the profession truly valued and supported in doing their work effectively? Moreover, is the call for more Black men in teaching an assumed panacea for issues in education that are really systemic and therefore extend deeper than just improving teacher diversity? In the special education context, these questions become even more suggestive. This is particularly the case since researchers have found that Black boys have the highest risk of receiving special education labels for high-incidence disabilities (Sullivan & Bal, 2013). The purpose of this study therefore, was to explore some of the questions that arise as one considers the call for more Black men in the teaching profession, particularly as these questions relate to their racial and gendered identities. In this chapter I outline some key considerations related to this exploration.
Gender and Racial Diversity in Teaching

In terms of gender, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2013), in the 2011-2012 school year, there were 3,385,200 public school teachers in the United States, where 76.3% were women. Additionally, the profession is increasingly dominated by female teachers, with the rate of women entering the profession increasing over twice the rate of men between the years 1980 and 2012 (Ingersoll, et al, 2014).

In terms of race, the teaching force has seen gradual diversification over time. In the 1987-1988 school year, across the nation, 87% of teachers were White, whereas in the 2011-2012 school year, they represented 82% of the teaching force (USDOE, 2016). According to Ingersoll, et al. (2014), when looking at the student population in the 2011-2012 year, the report showed that of more than 49,000,000 children educated in public schools, just over half (51.7%) were White, while 15.8% were Black. Thus, while there has been a trend to increased ethnic diversity in the teaching force, it is the student population’s decrease in White students that prevents the teaching force from keeping pace. For example, over the 24-year timespan between the 1987 and 2011 school years, minoritized groups increased in the teaching force by 28%, while the White student population has saw a 36% decrease.

The Dearth of Black Male Teachers

When parsing the numbers out even further, Lewis, Toldson and Moore (2013) reported that men are underrepresented across all racial groups. However, African-American men comprise less than 2% of the teaching force. These scholars also stated that while the percent of White male P-12 students was twice that of the male teaching
population, the percentage of Black male students was roughly more than four times that of Black male teachers. Their report also showed that while 42% of White women and 41% of African-American women with education degrees actually acquired employment in education, only 27% of White men and 23% of African-American men obtained employment in the field. Additionally, according to the Albert Shanker Institute report (2016) on teacher diversity, New York City, the site of this present study, saw increased diversity in its public schools, consistent with national trends. However, there was a slight dip in the number of Black male (and female) teachers in the profession from 2001-2012, while other minoritized groups have either remained stable or seen a slight increase.

The special education context. As mentioned previously, a spotlight on special education intensifies the issue. Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna and Flippin (2002) reported that African-American men comprised only .4% of elementary special education teachers and 2.2% of secondary teacher. However, students from cultural and linguistically diverse groups (CLD) comprised 38% of special education classrooms. Therefore, public school students, and even more so special education students, had a high chance of never being taught by a Black man, or anyone from a CLD group throughout their journey in the public school system. This is particularly problematic as it pertains to Black boys with disabilities who, research has shown, are more vulnerable to discrimination (Skiba, et al, 2006; Sullivan & Bal, 2013) via cultural incongruence.

What the Numbers Say

These numbers make it clear that the call for more Black men to enter the teaching profession is a logical and necessary call. Students should get a chance to
encounter teachers who amply reflect the diversity that is the fabric of our nation. This is particularly the case as our country, from its inception, not only has racism as a core societal attribute, but also perpetuates discriminatory practices (Alexander, 2010; Booker, 2000) that are ingrained in our education system. Moreover, many scholars have documented how these practices are exacerbated in the special education context (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Hosp & Reschly, 2003; Skiba, et al., 2006).

This leads to another integral component of the picture; the persistent poor outcomes that minoritized students, particularly Black boys, have experienced in the education system. Studies have shown that Black boys are overrepresented in special education and school disciplinary practices (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). This literature has demonstrated that their disproportionate presence in special education and in acts of discipline can lead to higher dropout rates, juvenile justice involvement, and thus, the school-to-prison pipeline. To this end, while studies have shown that matching students and teachers by race and gender may not have a direct effect on student achievement, it appears to influence subjective evaluations of students. For example, Ehrenberg, Goldhaber, and Brewer (1995) found that “although white female teachers do not appear to have induced higher gain scores among White female students in mathematics and science than did White male teachers, they did give higher subjective evaluations to those students” (p. 559). With disciplinary and special education referrals often taking a subjective bent (Ferguson, 2001; Harry & Klingner, 2014), findings of this nature may suggest that having more men of color in classrooms could help prevent Black male students from
receiving special education and disciplinary referrals at special disproportionately high rates.

The impact of black male teachers, however, has been debated by scholars. Some scholars have also suggested that having more Black men in the teaching force to serve as role models for boys who experience such poor outcomes, can help diminish the troubles these students endure in our school system (King, 1993; Kunjufu, 2004; Porter, 1998). However, other scholars have countered this position. For example, Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2010) asserted,

…invoking Black male teachers as a basis for addressing the plight of Black boys in urban schools can lead to a focus on the idealization of teachers as role models. The result of this is a decided failure to give due consideration to the pedagogical requirements and resources needed to address the systemic and structural influences of racism and economic disadvantage experienced by minority groups (p. 44).

Here is where the curiosity begins to seep in. While the call for more Black male teachers is a worthy one, the countering assertion has indicated two main concerns. First, that the call should not eclipse the need to address other systemic issues within education that have brought about problems like poor academic outcomes, and disproportionality in special education and acts of discipline for Black boys in the first place. Second, there needs to be a complete understanding of who Black men are, and what they would need, in order to maximize their effectiveness as teachers within the school system. This study will center on the latter concern with an eye on the gendered and racial identities of Black male special educators.

**Black Male Identity Through a Socio-historical Lens**

The call for more Black men in teaching gets even more curious when examining the perceptions that surround the identity construction of Black men in this country. From
a socio-historical perspective, this is particularly the case considering that racism and
patriarchy have been permanent fixtures in this country’s development. Wrought with
White supremacist conceptions of Black bodies, intellect, capabilities and more (Booker,
2000; Horton & Horton, 1999), the enslavement era in this country has had such an
insidious and ubiquitous impact, that many take for granted just how deeply its effects have
laced themselves into our country’s fabric. Yet, when we look at the identity formation of
Black men in light of that era, we see a decimating construction. In framing the social
context of the enslavement era (1619-1860), Booker (2000) noted that,

Docility, humility, silliness, and childishness were basic elements of personality
demanded of Black male slaves by owners and overseers. The elements of
‘irresponsibility’, laziness, and lying clearly represent forms of resistance of the
enslaved, forms that were difficult to punish due to both their subtleness and
consistency with racist stereotypes (p.21).

Black men also faced having their family structures annihilated by physical
separation, rape, and egregious, often public, acts of assault and murder (Booker, 2000;
Horton & Horton, 1999). Their acts of daily living were criminalized, whereby something
as simple as a Black man turning his head at the wrong time could result in him being
whipped severely (Booker 2000). Further, in terms of intellect, Booker (2000) noted the
following thoughts of one of the nation’s founding members:

Jefferson believed Blacks to be an emotional people whose gender relationships
lacked tenderness and involved almost pure lust in comparison to Whites… Blacks
to Jefferson were a people who felt, but did not reflect. In his Notes on Virginia,
Jefferson wrote unfavorably of Black intellect, writing that ‘in memory they are
equal to the White; in reason much inferior…’ (p. 8).
In addition to perceptions of their intellectual faculties as subordinate, Black men were often thought of as savage and violent. Enslavement, then, was meant to civilize their supposed inherent nature to be boorish and unfit to conduct themselves properly in society (Horton & Horton, 1999). This turned into a curious predicament, as often, in order to attain their freedom from the clutches of enslavement, Black men had to resort to rebellion through violence and protest, in effect, drawing on some of the very same negative notions held of them by White supremacists (Horton & Horton, 1999).

The ‘science’ of racism perpetuated this type of thinking through the eugenics movement of the early part of the 20th century (Fallace, 2015). At the core of eugenics was the belief that:

…individual intelligence, disposition, behaviour and morality were largely products of specific inherited units or germs; second, an individual with bad heredity could make an exponentially detrimental impact on society over generations through the proliferation of his/her offspring by passing along the unmodified inherited germ; third, certain races of bad heredity could influence the gene pool of the entire population with undesirable traits over time, especially if they procreated faster than the superior races… (Fallace, 2015, p. 259)

In fact, Fallace (2015) noted that some of the prominent educational scholars like John Dewey, denounced eugenics not for its adherence to the idea of fixed, inferior traits, but because of Dewey’s belief that education and environment could overcome negative traits an individual might acquire through genetic heredity. Notions like these, which research has shown to permeate societal perceptions and the foundations of our schooling system, have impacted Black men in ways that negatively influence their life trajectories and outcomes.

Currently, scholarly discourse suggests that Black men’s prevalent presence in our nation’s jails and frequent encounters with police brutality are remnants of these past
perceptions, and even evidence that these atrocious notions of Black masculinity still exist (Alexander, 2010). For example, according to a report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics (Carson, Minton, Kaebke, & Zeng, 2015), at year end 2014, Black men between the ages of 18 and 19 were 10 times more likely than their White counterparts to be inmates in state or federal prisons. Additionally, according to the same report, more than 1% of the U.S. White male population ages 30 to 39 were in state or federal prison at year end 2014, while 6% of Black men of the same age group were in prison.

As a result of these realities, scholars have taken to examining expressions of Black masculinity in society and popular culture. Majors and Billson (1992), for example, described Black men as adapting “cool pose”, a survival technique, which can manifest in a paradoxical fashion. The authors discussed how “cool pose” has helped Black men to endure and exhibit resilience through many atrocities that they have faced throughout history. However, “coolness” can also translate as a need to suppress and mask how Black men are feeling, and the supports they need to overcome challenges. In a somewhat similar analysis of Black male identity expressions, Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani, and Seaton (2009) purported that societal norms around masculinity frown against displays of vulnerability, which can result in Black men presenting themselves as confident and stable when this may not really be their true state. In light of this, the authors stated the following:

In an exaggerated form, this discordance of emotions may manifest itself as hypermasculinity: the exhibition of stereotypic gendered displays of power and consequent suppression of signs of vulnerability. This exaggerated presentation of masculinity can lead to conflict in school, neighborhood, and family settings, but it can also serve as a coping response to deal with environmental stressors such as lack of economic opportunities and fear of victimization (p. 234).
While Spencer, et al. (2009) focused on adolescent identity development, they also stated that the coping strategies are often employed throughout the life course.

It can be argued that these manifestations of hypermasculinity and “cool pose” (Majors & Billson, 1992; Spencer, et al., 2009) are made visible through mainstream hip-hop culture where Black men, by and large, stand at the fore. As a result, some critique hip-hop, and consequently, Black men, for their displays of “cool” and hypermasculinity as they manifest through instances of misogyny, homophobia, violence and drug use (Neal, 2006). Therefore, as hip-hop has become embedded in mainstream American culture, perceptions of hip-hop culture can also contribute to essentializing and unfair instances of Black male demonization (Neal, 2006).

Some suggest that this demonization, and often unconscious belief in race as a way to “correctly organize society” (Coates, p. 7, 2015), has contributed to the increased instances of police brutality and the undue deaths of many Black men, and to a lesser extent, women, at the hands of police. In regard to this phenomena, in an open letter to his son, Black male writer and educator Coates (2015), recounted the following:

And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of our country have been endowed with the authority to destroy our body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy… The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions. And destruction is merely the superlative form of a dominion whose prerogatives include friskings, detainings, beatings, and humiliation” (p. 9).

Consequently, if all of the foregoing issues are part of this country’s historical legacy and current reality, how are Black men faring as they maneuver through society? Furthermore, adding gender to the picture, how do they navigate the juxtaposing duality of the male privilege that comes with operating in a patriarchal society, and the
marginalized experience of being a racialized other (Brockenbrough, 2012)? If we are to make changes to improve the conditions that Black men endure, these are just some of the questions we must courageously face. Consequently, with identity at the core of these conditions, facing these questions means we must openly examine identity and how it situates itself within the social milieu, and in this instance, the field of education.

**The Case for Identity Consciousness in Education**

*Who am I? But it was like trying to identify one particular cell that coursed through the torpid veins of my body. Maybe I was just this Blackness and bewilderment and pain, but that seemed less like a suitable answer than something I’d read somewhere (Ellison, 1995, p. 240).*

Identity, who one is and how one defines oneself in the world, permeates all one’s interactions (Gee, 2000). The field of education seems to understand this concept, as much research has shown great support for culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP). Taking into account the cultural identities that students bring into the classroom, CRP embraces the notion that identity matters and that it is certainly important within the socially mediated context of teaching (Gay, 2002; Irvine, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Seidl & Pugach, 2009).

However, where education has failed to make strides is in taking this same approach as it prepares teachers for, and supports teachers in, culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) classrooms. It has not taken into account teachers’ identities and how those identities impact the process of teaching. For groups like Black men, and other marginalized groups who enter the profession, this is a critical consideration as the pervasiveness of racism and discrimination quite possibly means that these groups face varying levels of oppression and stigmatization. Whether this oppression is experienced as a result of not subscribing to dominant group ideologies and categorizations (Collins,
or whether they are stigmatized via their work with marginalized special education students in urban settings (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2012), these experiences are palpable ones that may be inescapable.

Identity then, is not only an important consideration, but also one where these groups must be free to define themselves both in research and as they are prepared for the classroom. Additionally, as there are multiple ways within different contexts for individuals to identify themselves, it becomes important to consider the full gamut of the ways in which they self-identify and then situate those identities within the larger schooling context. As Gee (2002) stated,

…researchers in a variety of areas have come to see identity as an important analytic tool for understanding schools and society. A focus on the contextually specific ways in which people act out and recognize identities allow a more dynamic approach than the sometimes overly general and static trio of “race, class, and gender (p. 99).

This is critical because of a common tendency to essentialize those on the margins by assuming they all have one monolithic, homogeneous experience (Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010). In this light, we cannot examine passively one identity marker in a vacuum when there is great dynamism embedded within how individuals self-identify as well as how society perceives them.

The Case of the Black Male Special Educator

And it isn’t long – in fact it begins when he is in school – before he discovers the shape of his oppression (Baldwin, 1985, p. 327).

Examining the dynamism embedded in identity pushes us to see that Black male identity and the multitude of experiences it comes with, does not cease to exist once once Black men enter public school buildings as youth, or higher education institutions as young adults. In fact, as this study highlights, during their schooling experiences, they
face varied social ills in one way or another. Moreover, the sociocultural and historical perspectives paint a paradoxical picture in which Black men are both lauded as role models, but also vilified as hypermasculine beings prone to criminality and misogyny. These complexities, at the very least, bear the need for examination. Thus, as we call for Black men to re-enter our schools as teachers, it is crucial that we gain an authentic understanding of their racialized and gendered experiences in order to holistically support their return to the school system.

The literature has begun to capture the varied experiences of Black male teachers in general education (Brockenbrough, 2012; Brown, 2009a; Lynn, 2006; Scott & Rodriguez, 2015). Here, teachers reported bouts with Black male stereotypes, where, for instance, they were not acknowledged for their intellectual acumen (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015), but more for paternalistic ideals of what it meant to have Black men as part of a teaching staff (Brockenbrough, 2012; Brockenbrough, 2015). For example, some Black male teachers reported being heavily relied on to act as the disciplinarians in their schools to handle behavioral issues in general and troubles with minoritized boys, in particular (Brockenbrough, 2015).

In light of these concerns, it would follow that the literature should expand to make the Black male special educator central to its investigations. As attempts are made to dissect and remedy the issues that plague minoritized special education students, it is worth wondering whether the experiences of Black male teachers in general education are exacerbated in the special education context. For example, if there is a heavy reliance on Black male teachers to serve as disciplinarians in schools, is this even more the case for Black male special educators where minoritized boys are disproportionately involved in
disciplinary activities (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014)? One might also wonder whether the stigma that special education students often face (Annamma, Connor & Ferri, 2012), brings more challenges to Black male special educators, and if so, in what ways?

This study, therefore, aimed to peel back the layers of what Black male special educators are experiencing and what they bring into the profession from a perspective that considers the interconnected aspects of their identity. From this standpoint, teachers were considered in totality; they were brought into the conversations as experts, not only of their own experiences, but also what happens in society to those who are marginalized (Harding, 2009). A holistic view of these teachers’ lives was the focus, and thus the hope was to provide knowledge about what is happening with this subgroup of our teaching force, in order to create a more robust picture within the literature.

**The Conceptual Framework & Research Objectives**

In order to guard against static and essentializing notions of what it means to be a Black male special educator, it was important to employ the use of a frame that allowed flexibility both in how one chose to identify oneself, as well as elasticity in the roles those identities played (or did not play) in relationships with students, teachers, administrators, parents and other vital players in the schooling context. Intersectionality provided such a framework that allowed analysis to be rooted in the interlocking aspects of identity while making space for how different contexts shaped those identities.

**Intersectionality as the Conceptual Frame**

Collins (2015), defined the concept as follows: “The term intersectionality references the critical insight that race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability
and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (p.2). Thus, while this study began with the notion that two aspects of identity, race and gender are, due to socio-historical factors, distinct yet inseparable (Crenshaw, 1991), intersectionality as a framework allowed the space for other identity markers to surface within the research. In this manner, participants were able to define themselves and their own experiences. It erased the need to take on, what Collins (1991) referred to as the, “either/or dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric masculinist thought” (p.225). The danger in this frame of thinking, Collins asserted, was as follows, “The emphasis on quantification and categorization occurs in conjunction with the belief that either/or categories must be ranked. The search for certainty of this sort requires that one side of a dichotomy be privileged while the other is denigrated” (p. 225). As this study endeavored to reach its aims, the focus was on obliterating such binary and hierarchical notions of being and allowing the space for differences to be recognized, even as areas of convergence were highlighted.

Along these lines, intersectionality as a conceptual frame was also useful in that it allowed for within-group differences as it acknowledged that social identities intertwine to produce qualitative differences in the ways individuals make meaning of their experiences (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). This helped to ward off the inclination toward essentializing the group in question. It also aided in keeping the questions in this study open as the links between the individual, the teaching act, society, power structures, and systemic factors were explored (Collins, 2015; Garcia & Ortiz, 2013). In this light, the framework helped interrogate the categories people assign to themselves, the ones society
places them in, as well as the power and authority those categories have in shaping outcomes (Artiles, 2013).

Yet another critical aspect of intersectionality lies in its feminist epistemological roots (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1991). Intersectionality probes the Eurocentric, patriarchal ideologies and ways of being that make it possible for male privilege to prevail in society. Consequently, as race and gender were probed, the duality of functioning as a man who is also a racialized other within a society where male privilege is a norm, and in a profession where colleagues are predominantly White and female (Brockenbrough, 2012; Lynn & Jennings, 2009) was a curious point of exploration and analysis. Yet, while this study’s primary intent was not to critique patriarchal and masculinist forms of being as they played out in the work of Black male special educators, awareness of these ideologies was maintained and brought out in analysis as the data called for such an examination.

As stated by Harry (1996), “In qualitative research, the researcher is seen as the research ‘instrument’” (p. 292). Consequently, as a former NYC public school special educator, and a member of a marginalized group as a woman of color, this framework also allowed the space for me to creatively position myself within the research as an outsider-within (Collins, 1991). This lent a level of informed subjectivity (Harry, 1996) and reflexivity to the research act (Guba & Lincoln, 2005), with the aim of increasing the validity of this qualitative study. It also acknowledged the interpersonal dynamics embedded in the relationship between researcher and participant (Garcia & Ortiz, 2013).
Purpose

Special education, by its very nature, serves those who society often places on the margins (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2012). This places the field in a position of social responsibility, charging it with a particular obligation to honor the voices of other marginalized members by authentically engaging them in the discourse that surrounds their work. The goal in doing so in this study was not to posit a “fix-all” solution for the underrepresentation of Black male teachers, or the prevalence of poor outcomes for Black students in general, or Black male students in particular. Rather, the goal was to begin to expand special education discourse so that, as a pathway toward enacting change, we courageously face the work of preparing special educators from marginalized groups with a more nuanced, informed and identity-responsive perspective. Additionally, teaching is a socially mediated act (Gee, 2000) and with our country’s rich, yet complicated socio-historical record, failing to engage in a critical examination of the social contexts and identities of all the stakeholders involved in educating our youth would be negligent at best. Consequently, the aims of this study were:

- To honor the voices of Black male special educators and examine their racialized and gendered identities as a way of understanding how they make meaning of their schooling and teaching experiences;
- To recognize Black male special educators as a source of pedagogical knowledge and expertise;
- To seek to understand Black male special educators’ experiences as a means for improving not only how we serve special education students in urban settings, but also how we prepare the special educators who serve them.
**Research questions.** In light of the contextual picture painted above, this study sought to answer the following research questions:

- Meta-question: What roles do race and gender play in the pedagogies of Black male special educators?
  - Sub-question 1: What roles do race and gender play in the identity construction of Black male special educators?
  - Sub-question 2: What roles did Black men’s race and gender play in their decision to become teachers and, more specifically, special educators?
  - Sub-question 3: How are Black male special educators going about realizing the aims that drove them to become special educators?
  - Sub-question 4: In what ways have Black male special educators been able to realize the aims they set for themselves within their pedagogical practice?

**Terminology**

Language is especially powerful, as is clarity in using it. Therefore, I find it of critical importance to make clear my thinking behind my use of some terms within this work.

**On the term Black.** Race, in truth, is a concept, a construct with no true biological or scientific basis (Spring, 2012). Consequently, the term Black is one that is admittedly difficult for me to use because of its foundations of fabricated and oppressive difference, as well as its damaging implications on legal, political and social levels. Nonetheless, it is indeed a social construct, which, as a result of our country’s socio-historical record, has much meaning and significance in how we operate in society. So while I do not find race to be “real” in the biological sense, its ubiquitous presence in our
country as a lens for determining identity forces me to face its existence as part of our collective reality.

**On Black vs. African-American.** Though Black and African-American are often used interchangeably, I personally conceive of Black as a race and African-American as relating more so to ethnicity. That is, individuals may self-identify as Black racially, but not African-American ethnically. Therefore, as this study is focused, in part, on the role of race, I use the term Black. Wherever African-American is used, it is to mirror the term used in any literature cited herein, or how a participant has chosen to self-identify.

**On minoritized vs. minority.** Minoritized is used throughout this work in reference to “non-White” people in order to push our thinking around the term “minority” and its reference to numerical representation. This problematizes using the word “minority” as a marker for those who are positioned on the margins of society as “the other” and thus, often subjugated and viewed as outside and below the standards of the dominant group along the lines of race and class. For further discussion of the term minoritized, see de Finney, Dean, Loiselle and Saraceno (2011) and Mukherjee, Mukherjee and Godard (2006).

**Identity-responsive.** I make use of the term identity-responsive as a way of pushing the boundaries of the cultural-responsive (Gay, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2009) that is called for from teachers who work with students from CLD groups. While I fully support the importance and salience of culturally responsive practices, in the context of this study and in the greater context of education, I find that an identity-responsive approach is more inclusive and holistic in its consideration of the individual. Just as the researcher is the instrument in qualitative studies (Harry, 1996), the teacher and students
are the true instruments in any learning environment. This calls for the individuals involved in that learning environment to be considered in totality. This includes, who they say they are, who society says they are, as well as the tensions and convergence that may exist between the two conceptions.

Therefore, I use the term not only to refer to those markers of identity assumed by the individual, but also those that are societally and contextually perceived (Gee, 2000). My stance is that this provides a richer milieu from which to draw as we consider the totality of who people are as they step into classrooms. I feel this is exceptionally important in special education where dealing with a very sensitive aspect of identity, i.e. dis/ability, is central to the field’s purpose and function.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

This study, as is further discussed in the subsequent chapter, employed grounded theory methodology. Some traditional grounded theorists advocate performing the literature review after data collection and analysis so as to adhere to the inductive nature of the method and avoid going into the research with preconceived theories regarding the area of focus (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003; Charmaz, 2006). However, it was unrealistic to assume that I could go into this work completely neutral (Trainor & Graue, 2014). It was also not completely desirable, as becoming versed in the literature as a researcher served the aim to expand the discourse in the field from an informed perspective.

I conducted a comprehensive electronic database search (i.e. EBSCO, Proquest, Google Scholar, etc.) using various combinations of the following keywords: African-American, Black, special education, male, gender, and teachers. I refrained from using the term minority, so as not to capture studies that focused on other minoritized groups (i.e. Latinos, Asians, etc.) I selected studies where Black men were not only the subjects of the study, but the foci were also on some aspect of racial and gender identity in teaching. I perused reference lists of studies that were most closely aligned to these foci in order to pick up on studies that may have been missed in the electronic search.

Additionally, while it can be largely trusted that dissertations are conducted with rigor, I omitted them from this review, as they lack the peer review characteristic of journal articles. However, I did make extensive use of the references listed in two dissertations published on Proquest within the past eight years (Brockenbrough, 2008; Pabon, 2013). These dissertations not only analyzed the work of Black male teachers through some combination of ethnicity, race, and gender, but also have been the basis for
subsequent articles published in the field, some of which are included in this review. Nonetheless, I ultimately chose peer reviewed studies where Black male teachers working in schools predominated by children of color, were central to the studies’ research questions. However, there is one exception to these inclusion criteria, which is further discussed below. Moreover, so as to capture as many studies on the topic as possible, I included studies regardless of the grade levels or geographic setting (e.g. urban, suburban, rural) that the teachers worked in. This resulted in a review of 18 articles.

A thematic analysis of the studies selected for this review showed that much of the literature could be categorized under three thematic foci: recruitment and retention (n = 3); pedagogy and practice (n = 5) and; masculinity and role modeling (n = 6) (Pabon, 2013). Therefore, the body of literature on Black male teachers will be discussed through these themes. The recruitment and retention theme is the only subsection where, in addition to peer reviewed studies, there is a discussion of various initiatives to attract more men of color into teaching. They are included because they add context to the teacher diversity discourse as it applies to Black male teachers, and are therefore germane to the focus of this study. After each theme is reviewed, a summative analysis of the literature within each theme will be presented. To close this chapter, the studies are discussed in totality with an eye towards the implications that these works had on this study.

**Recruitment and Retention**

In 2015, U.S. Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, held a town hall meeting at the all-male institution, Morehouse University, one of the country’s historically Black
college and universities (HBCU). He did so alongside Morehouse alumnus and famed director and actor, Spike Lee (Webb, 2011). This town hall meeting was held to encourage the male undergraduate students present to pursue teaching careers through the TEACH campaign. The campaign reflected a five-year national initiative to recruit, train, place and develop 80,000 African American male teachers by 2015 to address the small portion of the teacher workforce that this group encompasses.

Other initiatives similar to the TEACH campaign (Webb, 2011) have been put in place to address barriers for Black male students to enter the teaching force, such as poor educational experiences, other career options, and standardized testing (Madkins, 2011). For example, the Call Me MISTER program in South Carolina, whose acronym stands for Men Instructing Students Toward Effective Role Models launched in 1999 (Jones & Jenkins, 2012; Smiles, 2002). There is also the Honoré Center at Southern University in New Orleans and the Black Men Teaching Initiative in Pennsylvania. There are also programs aimed at supporting Black male teachers likely to leave teaching, such as the Teacher Quality and Retention Program run out of Washington D.C., and the Boston Teacher Residency Male Teachers of Color Network (Reckdahl, 2015). Yet another program was offered by Bethune-Cookman College, an HBCU, called Project MODEL or Males of Diversity Exhibiting Leadership where the focus was to train Black men to become special education teachers in elementary and preschool settings (Basinger, 1999). According to Basinger (1999), this program, along with another similar program at the University of South Florida, was initiated to combat the disproportionality problem in special education.
A Quantitative Lens on Recruitment and Retention

While these initiatives that have been taking place over the past 18 years demonstrate great promise and success, it is worthy to ask what kind of research has been done to evaluate efforts to recruit and retain Black male teachers. My search revealed two quantitative studies focusing on this question, both of which produced mixed results. In a quantitative study to identify which elements impact African American male teachers’ choice to pursue the teaching profession, Brown and Butty (1999) surveyed 140 of the approximately 717 African American male teachers in the Prince George Public School System in Maryland over the years between 1993 and 1998. The specific variables they examined were, background, undergraduate college experience, qualification and motivation. They were also interested in whether the variables with the greatest predictive value in their analysis, align with those cited in the literature.

The researchers employed three different logistical regression analyses to achieve their ends. Due to missing data, only 67 of the 140 teachers were included in their statistical models. Findings from the first analysis showed that the only significant predictor of African American male teachers’ educational choices was their motivation to teach, which was “…defined as the desire to impart knowledge…” (p. 289). This factor predicted the likelihood of a participant’s decision to pursue a graduate degree in education, as opposed to one in a non-education field within five to seven years of the investigation. The second analysis showed no significant predictors around teachers’ motivation to work in public schools as a teacher or administrator after 10 years. In the third analysis, one variable, the participants’ undergraduate major, was a predictor of
whether the Black men would be working in public schools as a teacher or administrator in 10 years.

The authors faced some challenges as they compared their findings to what comparable literature highlighted regarding the educational and career aspirations of African American male teachers. They found literature that corroborated the need for more minoritized teachers due to the changing demographics of schools in urban settings and a particular need for Black male teachers to serve as role models, particularly for minority male students. However, the literature was scant in its direct discussion of African American male teachers’ educational and career goals. Nonetheless, they cited the importance of their study’s role in improving administrators’ effectiveness in recruitment and retention efforts. The authors were also transparent about the limitations of their study, including missing data and the fact that the participants were new teachers working in a suburban school district, making it difficult to apply their results to African American male teachers in other geographic areas or those with more longevity in the profession.

In another quantitative study, Lewis (2006) surveyed 147 of the 225 African American male teachers in urban districts in Louisiana over the 2000 to 2002 school years. The instrument used was adapted from another study in order to find out which recruitment efforts were the most effective in motivating African American males to enter teaching, as well as which retention efforts were effective in motivating them to stay in the profession.

Standard descriptive statistics were used and findings indicated that a family member, followed by a high school teacher were the most influential people in
participants choosing to enter teaching. Additionally, it was found that helping young 
people, needing a job, and the ability to make contributions to humanity, were the top 
three responses in regard to what they valued most in recruitment efforts. Of note, was 
also the fact that salary ranked last and individual social status ranked eighth out of 11 
factors. When asked what could help improve recruitment efforts for African American 
males teachers in their school districts, the themes that emerged were: recruiting from 
HBCUs; providing higher salaries, better benefits and working conditions; allowing 
current African American male teachers to serve as recruiters at job fairs; using the 
media; and providing equal opportunity based on qualifications and not merely social 
capital. In terms of retention, the top three reasons participants chose to remain in the 
profession were job security, contributions to humanity and short/long term goals. Also 
of note was the fact that administrative support ranked fifth, while rounding out the final 
tenth and 11th spots on the list were parental support and salary, respectively. 

The author urged that while these findings may not be generalizable to other 
districts or even to all African American male teachers within the three districts in his 
study, district leaders would be well advised to: involve family members in the 
recruitment process, underscore the societal contribution of ushering young people 
toward success as a recruitment strategy, provide mentoring support through the 
probationary period until teachers become permanent employees in the district in order to 
encourage job security, and expand opportunities for African American male teachers to 
attain administrative positions. In terms of research, Lewis suggested repeating his study 
on a larger scale to gain a greater understanding of what influenced African American 
education majors to become teachers. He also posited that a systematic review of the
literature, as well as more empirical studies, should be performed on recruitment and retention strategies for African American male teachers.

**A Qualitative Look at the Recruitment Pipeline**

Graham and Erwin (2011) sought to fill this gap in the recruitment and retention literature by seeking out “the first-hand, detailed accounts and experiences from African-American males that describe how they perceive power, race, and racism in their educational experience and the influence these experiences have on their perception of the teaching profession” (p. 402). To achieve this end, the researchers conducted a phenomenological study with 63 high achieving 11th grade African-American boys in a large urban school district in North Carolina. The participants engaged in a variety of activities that included: providing a perceptual analysis inventory which collected demographic and qualitative data (e.g. age range, grade point average, mother and father’s education level, desired career and current interest in teaching), constructing a circle map, sketching an artistic drawing of a classroom teacher, and participating in focus group sessions and interviews.

Analysis of these activities resulted in "136 statements of these African-American male students’ experiences in public schools” (p. 405), which then were given 43 formulated meanings which clustered around three themes: negative perceptions of teachers and teaching, schools as oppressive institutions and, African American men are nonconformists. Additionally, the second theme was comprised of three subthemes: teachers devalue experiences of African American males, labeling and stigmatizing and disrespect by White parents.
Consistent with literature they reviewed, the first theme highlighted that the majority of the students in their study perceived teaching as “woman’s work” (p. 406) and held mostly negative perceptions of teachers in general. Further, only 25% of the students indicated they would consider teaching as a career if they were able to do so on a full scholarship that paid for all their college expenses. In the second theme, the African-American male students demonstrated a lack of desire to return to schools at any point in the near future because they felt teachers devalued their experiences. A participant stated, “we’re Black. After you see a teacher treat you the way you been like going through school, you don’t even want to be a teacher. What’s the point? Why would you want to become what you hate?” (p. 406)? Additionally, they spoke to their experiences as the sole African American in their classrooms and were thus, uninterested in consciously placing themselves in that type of environment in their careers. Contrary to findings in prior studies (Brown & Butty, 1999; Lewis, 2006), they asserted that the influence they could potentially have over a child’s life was not worth the effort of having to deal with the pressures from White parents they were sure they would experience as Black men.

The final theme spoke to African-American men and their inclination towards nonconformity. The students strongly felt that Black men would want to teach curriculum that White people do not want Black students to obtain, and for this reason, they did not foresee teaching as a viable career option. One student stated:

The White man don't want us where they are. Like they want us below them. They don't want to see us succeed. They don't really want to see Black men teaching cause they know we'd let [students] learn about slaves, and what White people did to us, and we'd teach more about Black inventors and Black history cause we don't really do that [in this school]. The last time [I learned about] something like that was middle school. They know that's something we can use in
life, and they don't want that. Black men motivated, educated, inspired? They're afraid of that (Graham & Erwin, 2011, p. 409).

The authors concluded that K-12 schools need to examine critically how well their policies and practices “ensure students truly feel valued, respected, and included throughout their educational experience” (p.412). They also suggest that K-12 schools and schools and colleges of education at four-year institutions forge tighter partnerships to strengthen recruitment, teacher preparation and retention efforts for Black men.

Summary

The literature has demonstrated that calls for more Black men in teaching have trickled down from the federal level (Webb, 2011) to the district level (Brown & Butty, 1999; Lewis, 2006). Moreover, it appeared that these efforts were holistic in that they seemed to address not only recruiting and retaining Black male teachers, but also the essential components for developing Black men professionally once they are in the classroom.

It also seemed that initiatives to get more Black men in the classroom, like the Call me MISTER program, saw success as a result of consistent and increased funding over time (Jones & Jenkins, 2012). However, what the studies also suggested was that HBCUs (Basinger, 1999; Brown & Butty, 1999; Clemson, 2002; Lewis, 2006; Webb, 2011) and urban high schools (Smiles, 2002) are great grounds for recruitment efforts. Despite critiques of the role modeling concept (Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010), further discussed below, recruitment efforts should strategize around Black men who have a desire to contribute to the intellectual development of youth in their communities (Brown & Butty, 1999) and give back to humanity (Lewis, 2006). These men can then, once in schools where minoritized students predominate, play a hand in shifting these students’
experiences (Graham & Erwin, 2011). In turn, this can help improve Black male students’ views of teaching and help improve the teacher pipeline for this group.

Similarly, retention efforts should focus on providing solid mentorship as a means of providing support to teachers as demonstrated by Lewis’ (2006) study as well as the conference component in the Call me MISTER program (Reckdahl, 2015). This latter aspect of the program provided a shared space for participants to connect and grow in their pathways toward the classroom, again, strengthening the pipeline between postsecondary institutions and school districts.

**Pedagogy and Practice**

Overall, the studies within this theme reflected Black male teachers’ need to bring students’ lives into the classroom with great care and empathy, alongside a deep desire to bring critical ways of thought to their students. In fact, this critical thought was often mirrored by the researchers themselves, who seemingly went into their research understanding the need for a critical lens. For example, in Lynn’s (2002) study, he employed a qualitative critical race method defined as, “a framework for conducting research on the work and lives of marginalized people that illuminates social inequalities” (p. 123). He conducted 30-minute interviews with 36 Black male teachers working in Los Angeles Unified School District to find out, “the extent to which Black men acknowledged and were critical of structures that impeded the academic progress of African American students” (p. 123). Essentially, Lynn wanted to see how much these teachers’ identities were connected to macro level concerns around social justice and enacting social change.
He found that the majority of the teachers owned a responsibility in acting as change agents in their communities and that this responsibility was closely linked to their race and gender. They therefore felt a need to act as role models and felt their identities not only “shaped their teaching in immeasurable ways” (p. 126), but that they were also endowed with an ability to have a more profound level of understanding of their students’ needs. For example, one participant stated the following:

[My identity] provides the impetus for me to come into an environment like this and try to impact change in our community. It’s my way of being able to have what I see as some significant impact in change for our future as a community (p. 125).

Lynn, therefore surmised that Black men who teach in urban communities do so in a manner that is aligned with critical race theory, in that teaching becomes a vehicle for fighting structural and institutional racism. However, these teachers did so with a sense of realism as they realized the limitations embedded in wanting to make changes in something they did not directly control. Teaching however with a sense of social responsibility, was their way of playing their part in cultivating progress in their communities and enacting educational care.

**Illuminating Black Male Styles of Pedagogic Performance**

This educational care is at the heart of the work of many educators of color who serve marginalized students. For example, literature has demonstrated how the term “other-mothering” aptly describes the tradition and approach toward child-rearing in African-American culture that has made its way into classrooms and the act of educational caring by Black female teachers (Thompson, 1998). In his qualitative study, through observations and interviews of three participants in a large California urban school district, Lynn (2006) set out to see the extent to which Black male teachers who
have an explicit commitment to serving African American youth, exemplified the attributes of culturally relevant female teachers. Employing the method of portraiture, Lynn arrived at three distinct themes for each participant. For the elementary school teacher, Mr. Jamison, the theme was “Building on Students’ Culture”, where the teacher saw importance in drawing from his students’ personal experiences in order to build cultural competence and hook them into curriculum that presents information outside of the children’s contexts. In doing so, his own educational context played heavily into how he managed his classroom. Schooled in a strict Ghanaian boarding school, Mr. Jamison’s classroom management style was reflected by words like order, discipline and organization. He admittedly developed a style that was more teacher centered and the researcher noted that this produced a class of second graders who were well mannered and highly engaged in lessons. Recognized by colleagues for his strong classroom management skills and sought out by parents for the same reason, Mr. Jamison saw much success.

The middle school special educator in the study, Mr. Kashari, had a similar commitment to cultural relevance. He began teaching through an invitation from another Black male educator to teach at his current school and work with some of the more challenging students. The theme ascribed to him was “Teaching for the People” where it was the notion of shared experiences from growing up in the same community and what Mr. Kashari termed, “’2000 relevant’” materials that came through as the hallmarks of Mr. Kashari’s pedagogical approach. When observing Mr. Kashari working with special education students who were predominantly Black boys who had proved to be difficult to handle in others’ classrooms (including the classroom of another Black male teacher), the
researcher noted that he would have assumed the students were part of the general population if he was not made aware of their special education status. Whereas in the other Black male teacher’s classroom, the researcher was concerned about the lack of support and resources available to the teacher, in Mr. Kashari’s class this concern was absent.

The high school history teacher, Mr. Imani, was ascribed the theme, “Teaching as an Act of Freedom”. For him, teaching his students was about empowering them. Therefore, similar to Mr. Kashari, he used curriculum as a vehicle to teach them aspects of Black history they might not otherwise receive. Drawing on his prior work as an activist and community organizer, he saw it important to provide students with historical knowledge that was often obscured so that they would be better equipped to survive in society, which he deemed an “‘aggressively hostile context’ (p. 2514).

Lynn (2006) noted that while each teacher in this study took different approaches, they all saw it necessary to incorporate explicitly ways of overcoming race and class barriers into their classroom discourse. They all invoked their own lived experiences and a certain level of knowledge of and respect for “the street (p. 2519)” as a means of connecting with their students. Through sharing these experiences in his study, Lynn asserted,

By examining rather deeply the practices of Black male teachers who embody many of the characteristics of culturally relevant teachers, this study has begun to shift the conversation about teaching as a profession that is not only raced but also gendered in ways that significantly impact the teaching and learning process, particularly in poor urban schools (p. 2519).

Filling a similar gap in the literature, Brown (2009a) focused his ethnographic study on nine African American male teachers in a large urban metropolitan city in the
Midwest and their work with African American male students. He analyzed their pedagogic performances through two conceptions: physical performance, that is, style of interaction; and theoretical performance, which took students’ socio-cultural contexts into account.

Brown (2009a) arrived at three styles of performance: Enforcer, Negotiator, and Playful. For the enforcer style, similar to Mr. Jamison in Lynn’s (2006) study, key phrases that captured these teachers’ performance were: clearly defined expectations all students had to follow, discipline, and order. For the teachers whose performance invoked playfulness, there was a carefree approach to their teaching where conversations in the classroom flowed freely, ranging from sports to popular culture. These teachers believed that African American male students needed a space to laugh, joke and vent freely. Their classrooms became “a place for students to cathartically release tension and share aspects about themselves that other teachers silence and/or censor” (p. 428). Like Mr. Kashari in Lynn’s (2006) study, Negotiators regularly used discussion, counseling techniques and questioning as a means of drawing out solutions to problems African American male students were facing that prohibited them from completing their academic tasks. In contrast to employing strict expectations, these teachers were in constant negotiation of expectations in order to come to attainable goals with students.

In light of these three very different pedagogic performance styles, Brown thought it important to highlight that his findings countered the logic around African American men serving in essentialized role-modeling capacities for African American boys. He surmised that educational policy makers’ and practitioners’ attempts to “identify the one single method or panacea needed to intervene for African American male students” (p.
432) was one possible reason why African American male teachers were thought of in a “role modeling” capacity. He also asserted that this came from oversimplified explanations for why African American males are underperforming in schools. While he did not discount the importance of race and gender for his African American male participants’ work with African American male students, he pointed out that there was still much work employed on the part of the teachers to maneuver through ambiguities and pull from a variety of beliefs and practices in order to see success. As a result of the variation embedded in his findings, he argued, “Thus, by carefully examining the complexities of African American male teacher performance within urban educational settings, policy-makers, practitioners and researchers can move beyond flat and simplistic narratives that too often consume educational discourse” (p. 433).

**Different Ways of Achieving the Same Aim**

Brown (2009b) furthered this line of research in a study of the social justice orientations of seven African American male teachers in a large urban public school district. Again, using ethnographic interviews to explore the political and racial discourses from which his participants based their pedagogical decisions, he coded his data using key concepts from four orientations common to Black political and educational thought including: Black functionalism, liberalism, nationalism and critical theory. Essential to his analysis was the concept of nation language, his theoretical lens, which Glaude defined as “the racial and political discourse of a shared community used to understand their collective experiences, struggles and identities” (as cited in Brown, 2009b, p. 475).
Black functionalism centered on the idea that African Americans must master the normalized language of the dominant class while holding on to their cultural norms in order to gain success in this country. Brown shared the thinking of one of his participants by stating the following: “However, he argued that the added burden of Black male teachers is actually teaching and showing students how to balance their identities at home with the expectations of the White mainstream world” (p.480). Black liberalist orientation was also concerned with African American males’ capacity to adjust in society. However, that concern was coupled with a desire to critique racism, but also see African Americans participate in diverse cultural contexts in order to be successful and to uphold America’s multicultural democratic ideal. Students should know that they are an integral part of U.S. history and therefore reclaim an American identity.

As described by Brown (2009b), Black nationalism actually countered liberalism in that nationalists take the stance that African Americans need to be completely self-reliant and break their dependence on White America’s institutions. Curriculum, then, should focus on the rich African American historical record and develop a primary concern for the well-being and politics of the African American community. In a similar fashion, Black critical orientations focus on how constructions of race, class and gender shape the experiences of African Americans. These constructions then, require governmental restructuring in order to shift power relations in a more equitable fashion. Within this conceptual frame, teachers saw fit for pedagogical approaches to shift from direct instruction and a focus on following directions, which tends to reproduce class difference, to focusing on building self-sufficient and critical thinkers.
Similar to the findings in Brown’s (2009a) study, Brown (2009b) found his participants’ pedagogic performances were multifaceted in their expressions of social justice orientations. Furthermore, individual teachers not only drew from multiple, but also competing theories, to make meaning around the educational needs of African American students. Additionally, the researcher found that all teachers drew from a functionalist approach as they considered what African American males needed in order to adapt within the U.S. social context. In light of this, Brown further critiqued the public discourse around African American male teachers serving as role models by stating,

Oftentimes such discussions assume that African American male teachers possess a single set of discourses and practices that would have a significant impact on the ‘troubled’ African American male. In other words, the African American male teacher is constructed as a monolith, without much recognition to the varied perspectives and beliefs that he might employ to work with African American male students (p.489).

With a similar bent toward a need for dismantling the construction of the Black male teacher monolith, Lynn and Jennings (2009) examined what was unique about the pedagogies of African-American male teachers, particularly as they relate to their work with African American students. Using narrative data and engaging in portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997) methodology to engage this line of enquiry, the researchers selected two male teachers in a school in a working class African American community in South Central Los Angeles. These two teachers, as they found through short interviews, employed culturally relevant teaching practices and had an expressed commitment to “help children develop a critical consciousness while attaining academic success” (p. 183).

Like Mr. Kashari’s need to keep curriculum relevant to students’ lives in Lynn’s (2006) study, Lynn and Jennings (2009) found that both teachers “use their students’
lives as texts through which to build curriculum in the classroom context” (p. 189). One teacher merged his math instruction with the Black experience in the U.S. to bridge the gap between content and how students could use math to improve their lives. The other participant, through his accounting class, was resolute in making sure students knew the importance of budgeting and how crucial having resources and utilizing them properly was in leading fulfilling lives and building community wealth for African Americans. Both teachers also focused on the importance of responding to student needs, particularly as it related to their lives in economically depressed and violence-ridden communities. Similar to teachers in other studies (Lynn, 2006; Brown, 2009a), one teacher spoke intimately about his commitment to sharing his experiences growing up in a community ridden with gang-related activity and how he was able to rise above extraordinary challenges, gain an Ivy League education, and become a successful businessman prior to teaching.

For these Black male educators, teaching was both a political act and a personal one, which Lynn and Jennings (2009) likened to the practices and beliefs of Black feminist/womanist educators and critical pedagogues. They created a safe space for their students to express concerns and grapple with larger societal issues as they relate to the livelihood of African Americans. Again, in a connection to Black feminist/womanist and critical race teachers, the authors wrote that participants used their classrooms as a space to “promote community healing” (p. 192). The authors stated that pedagogies that have been created and directed from the margins “offer a unique contribution to teaching” (p. 174) but have been largely unexplored in mainstream educational research and therefore, deserves more focus.
Summary

One consistent thread throughout this theme was the use of “students’ lives as text” (Lynn & Jennings, 2009, p. 189). It seemed that most, if not all, teachers felt it important to connect, on personal and curricular levels, to students’ lives outside the classroom. It was also evident that teaching was not only a political act, but a very personal one as well, and teachers saw it important to develop a critical consciousness in their students (Lynn, 2002; Lynn & Jennings, 2009). This involved pushing students to be critical consumers of their environments in order to overcome the challenges they faced in their communities (Brown, 2009b; Lynn, 2006;). At times it was explicit that race and gender played huge parts in this aspect of their work (Lynn, 2002), other times, it was evident in the undertones of the teachers’ commentary on their work in the classroom and its connection to social justice aims for students of color (Brown, 2009b; Lynn, 2006).

There was a variety of teaching and management styles present in all the participants, ranging from the very strict (Lynn, 2006) to more carefree dispositions (Brown, 2009a). This spoke to the need to resist impulses toward essentializing Black men in particular (Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010), and perhaps marginalized groups in general (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015). Also interesting to note was the level of care taken in classroom discourse where often, all students’ experiences were up for discussion (Brown, 2009b; Brown, 2009a; Lynn, 2006; Lynn & Jennings, 2009). Brown (2009a) referred to this as a Negotiator performance style where counseling techniques were used and Lynn and Jennings (2009) wrote that classrooms were used as spaces to “promote community healing” (p. 192). This connected with the healing aspect of the African
American oral tradition (Banks-Wallace, 2002) and spoke to the qualities of the discourses Black male teachers are finding success with in their classrooms.

**Masculinity and Role Modeling**

The studies within this theme problematized the expectations that are often held of Black male teachers. For example, the call for more Black men in teaching, as the above literature has demonstrated, is often coupled with a rationale that is couched in providing same-sex role models for students. To this stance, Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2010) offered countering arguments. In a case study analysis of one teacher, drawn from a larger study with 65 elementary school teachers, the authors investigated the issues embedded in using the role-modeling ideal as a way to address the male teacher shortage and the underachievement challenges experienced by Black male students in urban schools. A large part of their critique was captured in the following assertion,

“There has also been a decided failure to attend to how gender intersects with race, class sexuality, and other social variables, with the burden of responsibility for effecting change falling on the shoulders of the individual teacher rather than on the system that produces the structural inequality in the first place (p. 39).

Their participant, Andrew, was an African Caribbean man who worked for eight years as an elementary school teacher and youth community coordinator in the neighborhood in Toronto where he was raised and went to school. Similar to the participants in Brown’s (2009a; 2009b) and Lynn’s (2006) studies, Andrew was committed to social justice issues and felt it important to connect to minority students’ lives outside the classroom, embracing what the researchers called, “grassroots activism” (p.48). As such, he placed a greater importance on the intimate knowledge of students’ lives (i.e. the convergence of their social, cultural and economic backgrounds) over a teacher’s influence being tied to an emphasis on race and or gender.
The researchers also highlighted a need to resist homogenizing impulses along the lines of race and gender. They saw this notion reflected in Andrew’s account of his schooling experience where he spoke to the impact shared language, culture, and history can have in fostering relationships between teachers and students. He shared how a male Trinidadian teacher he had as a youth enacted a style in the classroom that represented what he was accustomed to at home. Andrew also went on to express that he felt there was an overemphasis on race in the discourse on improving urban schools and that more focus needed to be placed on community involvement. In terms of gender, he felt male teachers needed to employ a critical pedagogy in order to help boys dismantle negative ideologies around masculinity and he used his understanding of generational ties (i.e. connections through popular music) to facilitate that work. What is important to note, is that the researchers consistently highlighted that Andrew’s focus on race, and gender, in this latter instance, did not rely solely on just one aspect of identity. This, they felt, connected to their larger stance and message of including not only multiple aspects of identity when considering teachers’ potential to positively influence students, but also looking at the structural inequalities with which those multiple identities must contend.

The authors continued this line of research with yet another case study with two Afro-Caribbean elementary school teachers in Canada, also drawn from a larger study with 65 elementary school teachers (Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2010). Through examining the male teacher shortage, they sought to take an in depth look at the racial and gendered experiences of teachers as it relates to male privilege and the extent to which their gender impacts their relationships with students of the same gender. The basis of their argument was founded in two core assertions. First, that male teacher
recruitment requires an analysis of the culture that disparages teaching by deeming it women’s work. Second, that the role modeling push around the call for more men in the teaching profession needs to follow the lead of feminist and minority concerns around the issue. These concerns, according to the researchers, are, “motivated by a need to redress fundamental structural and economic inequalities that have contributed to the marginalization of these targeted populations in terms of both their access to and participation in education and the labour market” (p. 250).

By invoking feminist, queer and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, the authors worked to expand the discourse around same-sex role modeling in teaching in order to shatter normative discourses around gender, which reduce gender-identity to sex-role stereotypes (i.e. women are nurturers). They therefore included one male teacher and one female teacher to probe the subtler aspects of male privilege. As this present study focused on the perspectives of Black male teachers, I include here the findings from their African-Caribbean male participant who found the role-modeling ideal challenging.

This teacher, referred to as Elton, did believe that majority of the time, he had a positive influence on the “troublesome” Black boys who are often brought to him because he is a man, and more specifically, a Black man. However, he did feel that the role-modeling ideal placed on him a great deal of pressure to monitor his own conduct. Ironically, while Elton did express a desire to challenge societal norms around gender, he also expressed essentialist notions of masculinity. For example, the researchers reported that he felt that Black boys were more energetic than other boys. His rationale came from a socio-historical perspective where he felt that because men were often placed together on the basis of their strength during the enslavement era, that this notion of being
more physical has carried on through the generations from that period. Elton also invoked notions of “nagging and controlling female authority figures” (p. 259) who were often oppressive in their interactions with boys. In mentioning this, he seemed to place gender as superior to the effect of race in transforming students, particularly boys, in his function as a role model.

The researchers’ implications from the study were that it is of great import to include the voices of Black teachers in the discourse around the male teacher shortage to engender a more nuanced analysis of the issue. On this, Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2010) wrote, “The inclusion of such voices, along with employing analytic frameworks capable of addressing the politics of such intersectionality, has important implications for policy, particularly as it relates to troubling the current calls for more male role models in elementary schools” (p. 260).

**Problematizing Myths About Black Men**

Brockenbrough (2012) similarly, through sociologically based critique, probed the call for an increase in the recruitment and retention of Black male teachers to serve as role models for struggling Black youth. However, he did so by problematizing popular perceptions of Black men as classroom patriarchs whose primary function was to serve as surrogate fathers for Black children and particularly Black boys. The author recognized that the literature, i.e. the studies previously discussed (Brown, 2009a; Lynn, 2006) has begun to critically examine the pedagogies and role-modeling practices of Black male teachers. However, he saw a need to explore “…how these men negotiate their relationships with colleagues and administrators in a predominantly female profession” (p. 2).
Utilizing life history narrative inquiry, and Black masculinity studies as a conceptual frame, Brockenbough (2012) conducted two in-depth interviews and two focus groups with 11 middle and high school teachers working in a large urban center on the east coast. There were two premises within the framework that were essential to his study. One was the “unique psychological, emotional, and spiritual toll of Black male marginality on Black men” (p. 5). The second, which he asserted was rooted in Black feminist scholarship, was a “critique of patriarchal regimes within Black social contexts” (p. 6).

Both premises very clearly came through in his findings and were evident across the three themes that highlighted participants’ engagement with gender politics in the workplace: “participants’ inattention to male privilege, conflictual encounters with women colleagues and administrators, and their desire for more male-centered spaces and interactions within the profession” (p. 13). Due to the rather charged language used to describe the findings, I thought it necessary to quote more heavily from the study to illustrate the poignancy of Brockenbrough’s discoveries.

With the first theme, the author found that while there was a strong awareness of systemic racism among his participants, more than half of them did not perceive male privilege as a source of power in their lives. This in turn colored their experiences of gender power dynamics in the profession, as illustrated by the second theme. Again, more than half of the participants shared “perspectives on the excessiveness and illegitimacy of women administrators’ authority, the usefulness of masculinist posturing to counter that authority, and the challenging nature of working specifically with Black women administrators and colleagues” (p. 25). This was demonstrated as they defended
feelings of emasculation from female authority and expressed a need to reaffirm their masculinity “in the presence of female power run amuck” (p. 25).

In order to overcome these gender based power dynamic issues, eight participants expressed a need for more male-centered spaces in schools to facilitate more interactions with other male educators and a desire to work with male administrators. This need was expressed both in the interviews and via feedback on the focus groups he conducted with the participants. These spaces “were conceived as potential escapes from women in the workplaces as well as opportunities to bond with and possibly support other male and Black male teachers” (p. 28).

With such palpable findings, one of Brockenbrough’s concluding thoughts was that while his study was committed to critiquing patriarchal gender norms, such an approach may not be adequate. In regard to this reflection on his work, he wrote,

This is not to say that a critique of patriarchy should be abandoned or accorded less priority; rather this is an appeal for future scholarly analyses and support efforts focusing on Black male teachers to wed a critical stance against patriarchal gender ideologies with an attention to the unique professional and psychosocial challenges that may affect Black men in the profession (p. 30).

Answering his own call to examine the nuances of Black male teachers’ professional challenges, in a later article, Brockengrough (2015) posited the question, “In particular, how do widely circulating constructions of authoritative Black patriarchs shape what is expected of Black male teachers as disciplinarians, especially in urban classrooms with predominantly Black student bodies” (p. 500)? To dissect this question the author again conducted extensive one-on-one interviews and two focus groups with 11 Black male secondary teachers working in an urban school district on the east coast.
Low financial resources characterized this district, as did high dropout rates, high teacher turnover and low performance on high-stakes testing.

Of the two major findings that emerged in the study, one was that participants were critical of the inordinate assignment of disciplinary responsibilities because of their gender and race. One teacher, for example, shared that it was common for him to be interrupted during a lesson because someone, typically a white female colleague, wanted to send a boy of color to him for disciplinary purposes. The author wrote this of another participant, “In Karl’s view, his colleagues’ overreliance on his disciplinary talents revealed a disregard for his own workload and failed to recognize his strengths in other aspects of teaching” (p. 513). Extending the discussion from collegial interactions to parent perceptions, yet another participant shared that “…assuming the disciplinary prowess of Black men” (p.514), it was common for parents to “vie for spots for their children in Black male teachers’ classrooms” (p. 514).

The other major finding was that some participants struggled with the expectation that they needed to adopt authoritarian disciplinary roles, simply because they were Black men. This was especially troubling for those who preferred a more laissez-fair type of approach in their classroom disciplinary styles, similar to the Playful theme that emerged in Brown’s (2009a) study. This chosen style resulted in one participant sharing that he felt marginalized as White colleagues suggested that with his style of teaching, he would be better suited for the suburbs or a magnet school, implying that he should work with students who were more mild-mannered.
Gender, Social Roles and a Quantitative Lens

The foregoing finding is particularly interesting in light of a quantitative study conducted by Eichinger (2000) in Southern California with 89 female and 43 male special educators. Using five surveys and conducting $t$-tests and one-way ANOVAs, the researcher focused on the importance of considering gender and social role orientation when examining the work of special educators. Social role orientation was defined as the “behavioral repertoire of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine traits” (p. 398). Positing that special educators need to possess a wide range of traits, the study’s frame was therefore centered on behavioral flexibility theory. This theory asserted that the integration of both masculine and feminine traits would enable a person to be more responsive in a wider variety of settings.

There was only one significant finding among the men in Eichinger’s (2000) study, which was that those with a more balanced social role orientation expressed more satisfaction than did those who were undifferentiated or expressive (which was deemed a feminine trait). While the study did not mention the race of the participants and these findings spoke to heteronormative notions of gender performance (Brockenbrough, 2015), what these findings imply is that gender plays an integral role in special educators’ job satisfaction. They also suggest that, for men in particular, having to adhere to traditionally masculine traits as special educators (i.e. authoritative classroom managers) could have damaging effects on their job satisfaction. While this quantitative study focused on special educators, this had clear connections with Brockenbrough’s (2015) work as his participants shared that the pressure they felt in having to adapt to patriarchal
authoritarian expectations was a “notable source of stress, anxiety, or frustration in their professional experiences…” (p. 507).

This expectation was even expressed through coaches brought in to the school to support the teachers. In this case, it was a Black female coach who urged the participant to adopt a more stringent disciplinary style because of his race and gender. The suggestion was couched in the belief that students were expecting the participant to be stern because they lacked Black male presence in their lives. While the teacher was understanding of the cultural context that was underlying these patriarchal disciplinarian expectations, he was troubled nonetheless because they did not coincide with his natural disposition and management style. Additionally, this participant spoke of this same difficulty during his preservice teaching experience where a Black female mentor teacher encouraged him to take on a firmer disciplinary approach as well. This finding begs the question, how are Black men faring as they are prepared for the classroom?

**Black Men and the Pre-Service Experience**

Scott and Rodriguez (2015) sought to address this question in their phenomenological study of three African American male pre-service educators (two at the elementary level and one middle school special educator) in an economically and educationally impoverished region of Southern California. In looking at stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) and its effect on participants’ schooling experiences and motivations to teach, they found that participants faced significant challenges, which were expressed through three themes.

Their first theme centered on dealing with stereotype threat, which the authors explained in the following manner, “The theoretical focus of the stereotype threat
hypothesis is to provide an explanation of how social stereotypes of a group have an influence on the academic performance and intellectual ability of individual group members” (p.693). Similar to the sentiments expressed in Brockenbrough’s (2012) study regarding relations with female colleagues and administrators, the preservice teachers in Scott and Rodriguez’s (2015) study reported feeling isolated from the White female students who predominated their programs. As opposed to shedding light on experiences with authority figures on the job as in Brockenbrough’s (2012) study, these participants shared experiences around university faculty’s stereotypical thinking. For example, the authors stated, “The negative stereotypical views held by university faculty reveal low expectations and lack of support in African American students’ academic abilities” (p. 702).

With sentiments akin to the White supremacist notions of Black male intellectual inferiority previously noted (Booker, 2000), the participants also expressed that they felt they were stereotyped and viewed as not being masculine because of their inclinations toward pursuing academic success. Along these same lines, they reported feeling that they were discredited because people assumed they were not in their programs due to intellectual ability. This led to the second theme of “grappling,” which left them in the position of having to play a balancing act where on one hand they felt like they had to constantly be on the defense against stereotypical perceptions, but on the other hand, they felt inclined to be even more persistent in their paths toward the classroom.

In a connection to the recruitment and retention literature (Reckdahl, 2015; Smiles, 2002), the final theme that emerged spoke to the value of role modeling in these teachers’ lives. They all expressed that becoming a role model for African-American
youth was a significant motivation for them to become teachers. This was particularly the case for the special educator whose attention deficit disorder diagnosis made him want to serve other students who, like him, may not ever encounter a teacher who had a similar background and had to journey through school with a disability label. Put simply, the participant stated, “Yes, I feel that I can be more relatable [to special education students]” (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015, p.706). Additionally, the study revealed that participants’ exposure to African American teachers as youth, and particularly male teachers, motivated them toward the teaching profession. This connects with the participants in Lewis’ (2006) study who cited high school teachers as sources of motivation for their desire to enter the teaching profession.

Overall, Scott and Rodriguez (2015) found that there was a relationship “between a high sense of racial identity and academic persistence” (p. 707). This connected to their persistence in pursuing careers to serve as role models, not as a way to solve issues like underachievement for Black boys, as Martino and Rezai-Rashti (2010) asserted much of the role modeling discourse implies, but to overcome, and protect others from the strain of stereotype threat in academic settings. Lastly, though participants did not claim that race had a direct impact on their decision to teach, Scott and Rodriguez’s (2015) analysis suggested that because “being African American and enduring countless forms of racism encouraged them to pursue teaching careers” (p. 709), race played an indirect role in their decisions to teach.

The authors then, similar to Brockenbrough (2012), called for the field to include more spaces where African American male preservice teachers not only feel empowered to participate in discourse in the field, but to also feel that their voices are validated.
This, they posited, will inform teaching practices and teacher preparation initiatives, and also help ascertain the factors that lead to greater support in this group’s career aspirations. In terms of teacher preparation, they stated the following, “Teacher education programs must be ground zero in modeling critical pedagogy that recognizes the voice of color and the social context of lived experiences to foster and achieve social justice” (p. 712). Finally, they indicated that their findings also spoke to a need for diverse teaching populations in order to expose students to diverse perspectives, which included how youth are socialized in terms of gender norms.

**Summary**

Consistent throughout the masculinity and role modeling literature is a feeling of pressure on Black male teachers. There was pressure to perform under the role modeling expectation (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010), pressure to conform to heteronormative ideals of Black masculinity (Brockenbrough, 2015), pressure to overcome the pitfalls of stereotype threat (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015) and pressure in dealing with women in positions of power and authority (Brockenbrough, 2012). This points to what Brockenbrough aptly suggested, which is a need to examine the “unique professional and psychosocial challenges that may affect Black men in the profession” (p. 30).

Also important to note was that while two studies in this section of the review were based in Canada (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010; Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010), the findings still connected to domestic issues in a very palpable way. In particular, the authors’ discussion of the politics of intersectionality as they critiqued the role-modeling discourse, demonstrated, as did the other studies, a need to consider multiple aspects of identity as we prepare Black men for the classroom. One difference however was that
teachers in the Canadian context seemed to privilege gender and other factors over race, while participants in the U.S. were either inattentive to issues around male privilege (Brockenbrough, 2012) or seemed driven by interlocking aspects of their gender and racialized identities (Brockenbrough, 2015; Scott & Rodriguez, 2015).

Lastly, it seemed that Brockenbrough’s (2012) finding that Black men in teaching need male centered spaces is a helpful consideration in addressing the issues that came up across these studies. Certainly, this sentiment was echoed by Scott and Rodriguez (2015) as they called for Black male voices to be given space and validation in education discourse. This is important not only for research in this area, but also as a support mechanism for teachers in the field.

**Discussion**

It is well known that research questions should determine the methodology used in a study. In this literature, most of the studies were largely split between a narrative/phenomenological approach (Brockenbrough, 2012; Brockenbrough, 2015; Lynn, 2006; Lynn, 2002; Lynn & Jennings (2009), Scott & Rodriguez, 2015) or case study methodology (Brown, 2009b; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010; Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010). This implies that much of the inquiry in this line of research was well-suited for the nuanced conclusions that qualitative work can produce.

Additionally, while Brown (2009a) mentioned use of the constant comparative method in his analysis, he did not link this approach to grounded theory methodology. Therefore, this present study filled a methodological hole by employing grounded theory techniques, as will be discussed in the next chapter, but will also converge with the current literature base as the study will also invoke narrative thinking and concepts.
From a methodological perspective, yet another gap that might be worthy to fill in this line of research is not only more quantitative work, but also more mixed-methods studies. In this way, analysis can cast a wider net by including more participants, while coupling this work with qualitative methods that can get at the nuances of Black male teacher experiences—nuances that these studies indicate are very crucial in this line of research.

Yet another gap this study filled was in its exploration of the special education context. While a couple of studies included, at most, one special educator (Lynn, 2006; Scott & Rodriguez, 2015), the majority did not include any at all. In fact, Lynn (2006) stated the following, “…I did not want to choose more than one candidate who taught special education or who was not African American because my study was not exclusively about Black males in special education or foreign-born Black educators” (Lynn, 2006, p. 2504). One could infer that this implied that incorporating more special educators or foreign-born Black males could skew findings. This could have also implied that investigations that are exclusively about foreign-born Black males and Black males in special education are needed.

It is also interesting to note that while a range of theoretical frameworks were employed across all studies, feminist epistemologies seemed to be employed the most (Brockenbrough, 2012; Brockenbrough, 2015; Lynn, 2006; Lynn & Jennings, 2009; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010; Rezai-Rashti & Martino, 2010). This connects to this current study’s use of intersectionality as a conceptual framework, which has its epistemological roots in feminist scholarship (Collins, 1991; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991).
The studies, overall, pointed to a strong need to guard against essentializing the Black male experience and more specifically, the Black male teacher experience. To this end, it was important for me to hold both my own assumptions, as well as knowledge from these studies, at arm’s length, in order to allow the intricacies of my participants’ experiences (Brockenbrough, 2015) to truly come through in both data collection and analysis. To achieve this end, intersectionality as a conceptual framework, as previously discussed, was a highly useful tool, as were the methodological approaches that were utilized, which comprise the focus of the following chapter.
Chapter Three: Methodology

The researcher, in turn, may be seen as a bricoleur, as a maker of quilts, or, as in filmmaking, a person who assembles images into montages (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 4).

The layered nature of intersectionality as a conceptual framework, one could argue, implicitly requires a methodological approach that is fluid and allows for the intricacies of the framework to come through in data collection and analysis. As the above quote suggests, the work of a qualitative researcher involves using methods that allow for a weaving together of potentially disparate data (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Through this weaving together, the goal of the research is not the production of an objective reality, but rather that the contexts and events the researcher is exploring reflect visible patterns (Engward, 2013) through the researcher’s and participants’ shared meaning-making (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

Furthermore, when a researcher is driven by the nuances embedded within a particular phenomenon, qualitative methods are desirable. Trainor and Graue (2014) convincingly stated the rationale behind this view of the research method,

The justification for the use of qualitative methodologies in special education research is inextricably linked to the types of questions qualitative research best answers. Research questions that attempt to answer how or why a process or phenomenon occurs within complex contexts, where variables are difficult to measure, are particularly well-suited to qualitative methods of investigation (p. 268).

Therefore, it is with these concepts in mind, as they link with the research questions, aims and purpose, that methods from the qualitative tradition were employed within this study.

On Using Grounded Theory

assumes a philosophical position that human behavior is determined by external stimuli, and that it is possible to use methods of quantitative research to observe and measure social phenomena” (p. 37). This approach essentially presumes that there are concrete facts that can be collected and analyzed in an inductive manner through a rigorous coding process in order to explain social truths. It also “favors deterministic explanations, and emphasizes generality and universality” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 126).

Though Glaser and Strauss developed the method to depart from positivism, Glaser’s background in this tradition kept him anchored to the idea that the data itself could reveal theory, where the researcher is passive in the process (Engward, 2013). For Glaser, constant comparison was the hallmark of the inductive coding process. Coding was rigorous and grounded in the data so as to maintain a strict distance between the researcher and the data as analysis moved toward theory construction (i.e. to the abstract). Strauss & Corbin (1990) then advanced the method as a process where theory is interpreted by the researcher and therefore, the researcher takes an active role in the coding process, implying that the researcher’s findings are a product of their own background and experience and participants’ interaction with the researchers’ inductive inquiry (Engward, 2013).

Charmaz (2006), whose approach to grounded theory was employed most during analysis in this study, saw grounded theory through a constructivist lens which “places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data” (p. 130). This is in contrast to the objectivist approach which adheres to “the positivist convention and thus attends to the data as real in and of themselves and does not attend to the process
of their production” (p. 131). Constructivism is therefore woven throughout her coding process, which allows for the researcher to define what is happening in the data in an open manner. Charmaz therefore saw grounded theory as a method that “can complement other approaches to qualitative data analysis rather than stand in opposition to them” (p. 9).

Following this line of thinking, which sees the true nature of qualitative research as one that inherently makes use of multiple methods (Charmaz, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), in this study, grounded theory was applied and complemented by elements of narrative inquiry. The rationale for doing so is further explicated below; but beginning with grounded theory, Cresswell (1998) captured the reasoning behind the decision to undergo this type of approach,

…the intent of a grounded theory study is to generate or discover a theory, an abstract analytical schema of a phenomenon, that relates to a particular situation. This situation is one in which individuals interact, take actions, or engage in a process in response to phenomena (p. 56).

Through this quote one can begin to see how the openness of grounded theory is coupled with a concentrated bent. Whereas ethnography generally asks, “what’s going on here?”, remaining open to whatever the research site reveals, grounded theory brings a focused flexibility which allows for breadth without losing hold of details that emerge (Charmaz, 2006).

According to Engward (2013), “…grounded theory is useful for researchers inquiring into phenomena where there is minimal previous research” (p.38). Therefore, exploring the phenomena of race and gender as they connect to Black men teaching in the field of special education is a prime process through which to employ such a methodological approach. Through this thinking, I sought to capture both the variability
and specificity of men who comprise such a slight, yet integral component of the teaching force.

With Black men encompassing such a small part of the teaching population, the question of generalizability was yet another aspect of the research that needed consideration. Though there are arguments regarding the limited generalizability of qualitative work, in this respect, Strauss and Corbin (1990) stated the following, “If the data upon which it’s based are comprehensive and the interpretations conceptual and broad, then the theory should be abstract enough and include sufficient variation to make it applicable to a variety of contexts related to that phenomenon” (p. 23). With this thinking in mind, the goal was to employ grounded theory techniques in order to produce findings that led to a substantive theory (Engward, 2013), further discussed below. This theoretical statement was crafted to capture what was germane to the practice of being a Black male special educator, not only in other schools within the particular urban setting in this study, but also comparable schools in similar localities. This explains the necessity of thick and rich description in qualitative work (Charmaz, 2006), which I endeavor to provide in the following chapter. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge the limitation of exploring one single context, particularly when an important aspect of this study is to guard against essentializing the group in question.

**On Using Narrative Inquiry**

As this study tapped into both the biographies of Black men and their practical experiences in the teaching profession, the research design invoked the African-American oral tradition (Banks-Wallace, 2002) vis-a-vis narrative inquiry concepts (Cresswell, 1998; Xu & Connelly, 2010). Since race is central to the line of questioning in this study,
and also to my own identity as a researcher within this work, it was important to be responsive to these identities within the research design. Stories and storytelling are key aspects of qualitative research and they are also a core component of the African-American oral tradition (Banks-Wallace, 2002).

It has been argued that the act of storytelling has not only shaped the African-American experience in this country, but Gates also suggested that using these stories to answer epistemological questions plays a pivotal role in the survival of African Americans (as cited in Banks-Wallace, 2002, p. 412). Moreover, the act of storytelling creates a connection between the teller and the listener (Banks-Wallace, 2002). It is through this connection that I sought to realize the aims of this study to honor the voices of Black male special educators and provide an avenue for them to enrich the discourse in the field.

With honoring voice being such an integral component of the purpose of this study, it was imperative that this should be reflected in the research design so that the research act would speak to the identities of both the researcher and the participants. Herein lay the utility of invoking the African American oral tradition through narrative inquiry concepts. The essence of the African-American oral tradition is founded in an African worldview built, in part, on the prominence given to the spoken word (Alkebulan, 2013). As Hamlet (2011) stated, “The Africans believed in Nommo, which means the generative power of the spoken word. Nommo was believed necessary to actualize life and give man mastery over things” (p. 27). This power of the spoken word linked to the goal of giving voice to the often unheard as a form of empowerment. From a methodological standpoint, on voice, Guba and Lincoln (2005) stated the following,
“Today voice can mean, especially in more participatory forms of research, not only having a real researcher—and a researcher’s voice—in the text, but also letting research participants speak for themselves…” (p. 209). As such, this lens informed my line of questioning (see data collection description below and interview guide attached) as I delved into the biographies of the participants and their pedagogical experiences.

Furthermore, by employing these concepts in the design, while building theory, I was able to remain rooted in the practical experiences of the participants (Xu & Connelly, 2010). As such, analysis, and therefore findings, drove toward theory, while having great implications for the concrete act of what it meant for these participants to be practitioners in special education. Thinking narratively while employing grounded theory methods helped ensure that the intersectional nature of identity remained at the fore of the research act, and also helped maintain the delicate balance between the broad and the specific, breadth and depth, the personalized and generalized.

Additionally, the fluid and iterative process inherent in these methods also allowed for my experience to converge with participants in a way that did not compromise the research process. As stated by Charmaz (2006), “…we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. We construct our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices” (p. 10). As a former New York City public school special educator, I claimed an outsider-within status (Collins, 1991) that allowed me to build rapport with participants, have intimate knowledge of their teaching contexts, but also remain true to my role as a researcher. In light of this, my positionality will be further discussed below, as I have highlighted it as a significant component of this study.
Study Design

Setting

The study took place in New York City, home to the largest public school system in the U.S. According to the Independent Budget Office of New York City (IBONYC), the system is responsible for educating a student population of 1,041,437 and a teaching population of 73,373, as of the 2011-2012 school year (Roy, 2014). While the exact number of Black male special educators was not reported, with all things being proportionate, this group comprises approximately .01% of the total teaching population and 5% of all special educators. According to another report by the IBONYC (Chowdhury, Johnson, Roy, Smith, Subramanian, & Wilks, 2013), 66.9% of special education students are boys, while 31% are Black and 14% are White.

Also important to note is the structure of special education in New York City. District 75 serves students with: autism spectrum disorder, more substantial cognitive delays, sensory impairments, severe emotional challenges or multiple disabilities. As opposed to a physical locality, schools that serve these students are located throughout the five boroughs of the city. Additionally, funding structures, as part of the city’s 2012-2013 special education reform (NYCDOE, 2012), allotted more money for students who spent more than 60% of their school day in integrated co-teaching (ICT) settings (classrooms with one certified general and special educator) as compared to students in self-contained settings (classrooms with one special educator, typically no more than 12 students and the mandated number of paraprofessionals). As Table 1 below will demonstrate, the teachers in this study, with the exception of one, all taught in co-teaching setting, a setting the district seemingly pushed to increase in its schools in order
to increase the inclusion of students with disabilities and support students ending up in the least restrictive environment.

**Recruitment**

Purposive sampling is a hallmark of qualitative research (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). In contrast to probabilistic sampling where the primary goal is to generalize to the population under examination and answer questions with a predictive bent, purposive sampling lends itself to questions of insight that a particular group holds (Merriam, 2009). There are many techniques that fall under the umbrella of purposive sampling (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). For example, one approach is homogenous sampling, which has a “purpose to select a sample of similar cases so that the particular group that the sample represents can be studied in depth” (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003, p. 179). In contrast, there is maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002), where findings can be considered more substantiated and “conceptually dense” (Merriam, 2009, p. 79) as they come from a wide range of participants who represent the phenomenon in question.

Based on the criteria set in the previous section, my sampling strategy encompassed qualities that blended both of the aforementioned approaches. In terms of homogenous sampling, beyond racial and gender commonalities, participants also taught in the same type of setting (i.e. co-teaching and self-contained). In terms of maximum variation sampling, as also previously mentioned, it was desirable for dissimilarity to come from the amount of years that each participant has spent as a teacher in the system. In this way, as the results will explicate, participants’ motivations to pursue special education as an area of expertise, was partly driven by the time at which they entered the
system. In this manner, to a degree, participants spoke through the lens of different phases of changes that have occurred within the school system. Additionally, they worked in three different boroughs, which helped capture some variation in experience through the different teaching contexts across the expansive school system.

Convenience sampling is not recommended as the sole basis for sample selection because, as the term implies, basing selection on ease of access, rather than other, more stringent parameters, can lead to data that lacks richness (Merriam, 2009). However, as a point of departure, I initially employed convenience sampling by selecting three Black male special educators with whom I was acquainted, as well as three who were acquainted with other professional colleagues of mine. While I attempted to employ snowballing or networking techniques (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003; Merriam, 2009) to gain access to other participants until I met my original goal of 10 participants, I was unsuccessful in this endeavor. I was able to get three strong referrals who were quite interested in taking part, but were unresponsive when I attempted to set times to interview. In an effort to not prolong the recruitment phase, I settled at six participants.

It was important then, to go to great lengths to guard against attrition. I therefore made sure all participants were aware of the time commitment upfront so that they were able to not only plan accordingly, but so that they could make an informed decision as to whether they wanted to take part. In appreciation of the teachers’ time and dedication to the study a $20 donation to the teachers’ classrooms was offered, in accordance with New York City Department of Education guidelines for conducting research.
Participants

I recruited six, Black, male, certified special educators working in New York City secondary public schools. To ensure that all participants had a solid base of experience as teachers, all participants had a minimum of three years of teaching experience in the public school system. While there was no preference in terms of age, or the upper limit of years in the system, it was my hope to select teachers who represented a complete range of teaching experience (i.e. some who were relatively new to the system with three to five years of experience; some who were established in the profession with six to ten years of experience; and a couple who were considered veterans in the field). As Table 1 illustrates below, I ended up with participants who mostly fell into the established category and worked across three different boroughs in New York City. Additionally, I strictly recruited participants who worked in either self-contained or co-teaching classroom settings.

Data Collection

Interviews provided the source of data for this study. In order to meet the goal of giving voice to Black male special educators and remain rooted in narrative thinking and African-American oral traditions, interviewing was a potent way of eliciting information on participants’ biographical backgrounds and the process involved in their work as educators. Seidman (1998) captured the essence of why interviewing is a powerful tool in the educational research act in the following assertion, “If the researcher’s goal, however, is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry” (Seidman, 1998, p. 4). Seidman developed a three-step interview protocol, which he
called “phenomenologically based interviewing” (p. 9) and explained in the following manner:

In this approach interviewers use, primarily, open-ended questions. Their major task is to build upon and explore their participants’ responses to those questions. The goal is to have the participant reconstruct his or her experience within the topic of study (p.9).

### Table 1

**Participant Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Borough Taught</th>
<th>Grade(s)</th>
<th>Special Education Setting</th>
<th>Content Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calvin</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Manhattan</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>ICT(^1), SETSS(^2)</td>
<td>English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>History, Math</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwame</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>7(^{th})</td>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rashid</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Self-Contained</td>
<td>History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Bronx</td>
<td>Middle School</td>
<td>ICT, Self-Contained</td>
<td>Literacy, Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Brooklyn</td>
<td>8(^{th})</td>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Math</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 ICT – Integrated Co-Teaching  
2 SETSS – Special Education Teacher Support Services – a special educator works with small groups of special education students in the general education setting or in a separate location

This approach connected, rather cohesively, the phenomenological aspect of grounded theory methodology (Cresswell, 1998) with the essence of the African-American oral tradition and narrative inquiry. As Banks-Wallace (2002) stated, “In particular, the use of data-collection methods grounded in the oral tradition facilitates the bridging of differences and community building among participants and researchers…” (p. 424).

In accordance with the foregoing principles, the interview guide (see Appendix A) provided a common focus for the interviews, while allowing individual experiences and
perspectives to emerge (Patton, 2002). Through the interviews, I was able to build rapport (Fontana & Frey, 2005) in a manner that did not sacrifice neutrality. According to Patton (2002), “Neutrality means that the person being interviewed can tell me anything without engendering either my favor or disfavor with regard to the content of her or his response” (p. 365). Patton went on to differentiate between rapport and neutrality by positioning the former as a stance taken with the person, whereas the latter is the stance taken with the content of what the person says.

Striking a balance between rapport and neutrality was crucial in ensuring that I not only captured information that I found pertinent to the study, but that I also honed in on the aspects of participants’ experiences that they felt were most pertinent to the focus of the study. In this way, the conceptual frame of intersectionality remained as a strong part of the data collection process whereby participants not only spoke on race and gender as it related to their identity construction and work as educators, but also other aspects of their identity as they saw fit. Additionally, one group interview was incorporated to help triangulate (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) data by enriching the individual interviews and adding rigor to the research design. The focus group was also a space for: collective meaning-making, reflection for both researcher and participants and, member checking (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, Guba & Lincoln, 2005). To achieve these ends, details of the interview process are further explained below. I also performed a member check (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) via email to pose a question to participants, post-analysis, to clarify and confirm an idea that seemed to emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). This will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.
The individual interviews and focus group. Seidman’s (1998) protocol called for three 90-minute interviews where the first focused on life history, the second on the details of the participants’ experience in the focus area of the study, and the third to reflect on the meaning of their experiences. Invoking Denzin and Lincoln’s (2005) metaphor of the qualitative researcher as a bricoleur, I slightly refashioned the protocol as follows:

- **Interview One, Life History (beginning March - May 2016):** This interview captured the biographies of the participants and focused on answering sub-questions one and two, namely, what roles race and gender played in the participants’ identity construction and their decision to get into teaching (and more specifically, special education). This allowed for biographical storying (Banks-Wallace, 2002) to take place and help contextualize subsequent interviews. Here, employing the open-endedness of Seidman’s (1998) technique and using intersectionality as the conceptual framework allowed for other aspects of identity to be highlighted.

- **Interview Two, Details of the Pedagogical Experience (May 2016 – October 2016):** Here, the focus was sub-questions three and four around the role of race and gender in the participants’ pedagogical goals and methods of achieving their goals.

- **Interview Three, Reflection on the Meaning, The Focus Group (November 2016):** Here, reflection on the prior interviews was the center of the conversation. Due to scheduling challenges, just four out of six of the participants were able to take part. I shared a brief summary of preliminary findings with the group prior to the
conversation as a way of debriefing and member checking (Fontana & Frey, 2005). This interview, which took a great conversational bent among the participants, provided the space for the group to collectively story (Banks-Wallace, 2002) and make even deeper meaning of the pedagogical experiences brought out in prior interviews. This was the great benefit of the focus group, where with little intervention on my part, the conversation organically flowed and centered around some ideas that were not fully explicated or explored in the interviews. However, one downside was that though it seemed that all participants were in agreement with one another’s thoughts, there were times when one participant dominated the conversation.

Seidman (1998) called for each interview to last 90 minutes. However, he also stated that while this choice in timeframe was not absolute, it was likewise important for the researcher to decide on a specified length of time before the interview process begins. Hence, in an effort to ensure commonality of focus across the interviews, while simultaneously ensuring that ample and rich data are collected, the protocol was designed to anticipate at least 60 minutes of dialogue, but no more than 75. All interviews were digitally recorded and sent to professional transcriptionists. The transcripts were then analyzed using Atlas.ti software. Responses from member-checks via email were incorporated as quotations in the following chapter.

Data Analysis

Employing the constant comparative method essential to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I compared data at every stage of analysis across interviews of all participants. Using Atlas.ti software, for each interview phase I
developed an initial set of codes, which I created using gerunds to the greatest extent possible (Charmaz, 2006), as I went through each interview transcript. In an effort to stay true to the roots of grounded theory, at this stage I attempted to stay as grounded in the data as possible (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and yielded 97 codes from the biographical interviews, 81 codes from the pedagogical interviews and 40 codes from the focus group. After coding each data set, I exported the codes from Atlas.ti to a spreadsheet. I then perused the codes to identify patterns among them, making the naming process embedded in coding incredibly important, as Charmaz (2006) stated, “Coding should inspire us to examine hidden assumptions in our own use of language as well as that of our participants” (p.47). Consequently, once I had the codes grouped, I examined each code group and named them according to the pattern I saw.

For example, in the first set of interviews, the codes Detailing experiences as an athlete, Athlete as an aspect of identity and Connecting life to experiences as an athlete were gathered under the code group Athletics as a Precursor to the Classroom. This process produced nine code groups in each of the first two sets of interviews and six code groups from the focus group. Once I organized the code groups in the spreadsheet, I returned to Atlas.ti to group the codes accordingly. I then used the software to run reports which displayed the codes and quotations within each code group, in essence, refashioning the transcripts through the coding structure that was emerging.

At this point, I read through the code groups and associated codes for further patterns that might connect each code group in order to further create families. While the initial codes and code groups remained as close to the data as possible, my own
interpretations about the patterns that emerged from the data formed the bridge between the code groups and the families that were formed (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005). However, my interpretations were driven by the study’s focus on voice. I therefore pulled from a group of in-vivo codes (Charmaz, 2006) as I named the families. According to Charmaz (2006), “In vivo codes help us to preserve participants’ meanings of their views and actions in the coding itself” (p. 55). Therefore, these codes were direct quotes that that struck me as necessary to keep intact during initial coding, which I amassed in Atlas.ti. In essence I matched what I saw emerging within the families with an in-vivo code I thought captured the substance of the pattern.

This process was executed within each set of interviews so that there were three families within the biographical and pedagogical interviews and four families from the focus group interview. At this level of analysis, cross-cutting comparisons were made to find the commonalities across the families in order to produce four themes. Staying with the in-vivo coding process at the family level, the thematic level moved the focus from “what” the data was saying to “why” and “how” (Charmaz, 2006) and ultimately led to construction of a theoretical statement. Ultimately, the theoretical statement was a substantive theory in that it addressed, “delimited problems in specific substantive areas” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 8). That is, as opposed to explaining a conceptual area of study which might lead to a formal theory, it described patterns throughout and within a particular set of data focused on a particular theme (Engward, 2013). Therefore, this statement was derived to explain what was happening with these particular participants as it pertained to the focus raised herein, as opposed to generalizing to a larger context.
Figure 1 below is a Coding Map which provides a visual exemplar (Harry, Sturges, & Klingner, 2005) of the entire data analysis process. Following the analytical process previously outlined, the movement in analysis allowed an inductive and constructivist approach toward building theory. In this fashion, meaning making (i.e. interpretation) was considered a product of both the researcher and participants who were both contextually situated (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005). As stated by Charmaz (2006),

Because constructivists see facts and values as linked, they acknowledge that what they see—and don’t see—rests on values. Thus, constructivists attempt to become aware of their presuppositions and to grapple with how they affect the research. They realize that grounded theorists can ironically import preconceived ideas into their work when they remain unaware of their starting assumptions. Thus, constructivism fosters researchers’ reflexivity about their own interpretations as well as those of their research participants (p. 131).

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

My connection to the experience of being a minoritized, female, New York City public school special educator, by my estimation, required me to explicitly incorporate points of reflection into the research design. Additionally, as identity was at the core of this investigation I found it critical to maintain an awareness of my own identities and how they engaged with the research process. This thinking was captured aptly by Trainor and Graue (2014),

Who we are, our identities, contribute to our positions and the vantage points from which we view a research problem. Furthermore, the extent to which a researcher who is a former teacher views teacher interview data sympathetically, or as an insider, is related to the extent to which her teacher-identity functions centrally and in concert with her other identities (p. 271).
THEORETICAL STATEMENT

```
"What It Looks Like to be Your Authentic Self"
"You Just Wanna Do More Work on the Ground"
"Am I an Overseer or Am I a Liberator?"
"I Think That's What This Is About, Leading by Example"
```

Themes

```
"What It Looks Like to be Your Authentic Self"
"You Just Wanna Do More Work on the Ground"
"I'm Still Laying my Instincts About What I Know"
```

Families

```
"Am I an Overseer or Am I a Liberator?"
"I Think Culture Is That Joy Place We Need to Bring to the Classroom"
"It's About Structure, Institutions, Culture, History"
```

Code Groups

```
African American in America: Critiquing the Systems and Structure of Education
Family Makes Me, Community Makes Me, Schooling Makes Me, Postsecondary Schooling and Vocational Training
Athletics as a Prerequisite in the Classroom
"You Just Wanna Do More Work on the Ground"
"Decoding a Special Educator as a Means to an End"
"Working Beyond Education"
```

```
Identifying Layers, Urgency and a Call to Action
Navigating the Teaching Profession
Developing Pedagogical Tools
"I'm Going to Know Them as a Person"
"The Teacher is the Core"
"Critical Consciousness is Critical"
"We [BME] need to build... We need to know each other by name"
"I play in the context of the game, which is pretty much created and played by White people"
"Culture is the Core"
```

```
Black Historical Context
On Being a Black Man and Teaching Lessons from the Field
How Black and Brown Students Need to be Taught
The System, Breaking it Down to Re/Build Recruiting and Retaining BME into Teaching
```

n = 24

Initial Codes (Interview One)

```
```

n = 218

Initial Codes (Interview Two)

```
```

Initial Codes (Focus Group)

```
```

Figure 1
Coding Map

Though these black male special educators sometimes experience their race and gender as the reason why the full spectrum of their talents and skills are often undervalued, they persevere due to a desire to use education as a platform to challenge the system. Special education as an area of expertise, however, is not as much of a driving force, as is remaining rooted in their socio-historical legacies and a strong sense of self, in order to serve as transformational leaders for students of color.

This was vital so that I could guard against projecting my own preconceived, identity-based assumptions and perceptions onto the work (Charmaz, 2006). I found reflexivity was also important in order to position myself, with transparency, squarely within the research so that I did not have to hide behind false notions of neutrality and objectivity (Trainor & Graue, 2014). Unlike quantitative designs where instruments like surveys can be used to somewhat distance the researcher from the participants, as Harry stated (1996), “In qualitative research, the researcher is seen as the research ‘instrument’; hence self-awareness and explicit examination of the researcher role are crucial” (p. 292).

I have chosen this topic because it is near and dear to me both professionally and personally. However, I did not want my closeness to the topic to cloud my vision as a researcher and therefore compromise the validity of my findings (Patton, 2002). In light of this, I made use of observer comments and memos throughout the data collection process to provide a space for reflexivity (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) so that I could reflect and capture my own thoughts around what was emerging (Charmaz, 2006). As stated by Guba and Lincoln (2005),

Reflexivity forces us to come to terms not only with our choice of research problem and with those with whom we engage in the research process, but with ourselves and with the multiple identities that represent the fluid self in the research setting (p. 210). Therefore, while analytic memos served to provide space for thoughts about the coding process, reflective memos (Charmaz, 2006) allowed me the space to grapple with my own identities, particularly my racial, gendered and professional identities, as they connected to my work throughout the study.

Here is an excerpt from an analytical memo I crafted as I coded the first set of interviews:
So the same is holding true, in terms of not wanting to lose richness as I move from the code group level to the family level. What has helped me to ensure that my code groups, to begin with, are rooted in the data, is reading the quotes within each code group as a story. I ran a report that allowed me to look at the code groups at the quotation level with a holistic view. I figured skimming in this way, would help make sure the code groups were truly capturing the essence of the story woven together by the men. With the exception of one code group, all seemed to be fitting.

I realized after my quotation skims, that my original code group, Postsecondary Schooling Has Marginal Impact, was not quite true to the data. I was analyzing the data with a preconceived notion that their college experiences did not influence their decisions to teach. In this way, I hooked on to one piece of what they were saying, but neglected to capture the greater part of what they conveyed. In truth, not only was there impact from their college experiences, but each participant seemed to have some sort of awakening on a sociocultural level upon going through their postsecondary schooling, an awakening that very much informed their identities. And so this category turned into Postsecondary Schooling and Sociocultural Awakening. I think this sheds light on how important it is for teachers to reflect on their own schooling trajectories. One participant even commented on this.

In this particular memo I was able to capture not only my thinking process as I coded data, but I was also able to begin interpreting what the patterns were saying. This ultimately helped in the analysis as well as the writing phase as I presented my results.
Chapter Four: Results

The goal of education is to adapt to the society’s needs. If we’re not teaching students things that are problematic in the world, then we’ve completely destroyed what education is supposed to be. We’re in a crisis, people of color. Put that in there…. You hear what I’m saying? We’re in a crisis. ~Kwame, 29

I begin chapter four with this quote for two reasons, which fold into one goal. The first reason is embedded in the quote itself, “…Put that in there.” I not only “put that in there,” but I put it up front as a demonstration of the urgency these men spoke with as they discussed their work as special educators. The second reason collapses into the first, as well as the purpose of this study, namely, voice. With voice as such an integral component of this study, although qualitative methodology allows space for the researcher to be a part of the research process, I made sure to incorporate the Black male special educators’ voices to the greatest extent possible.

To describe the results of the study, I start with the theoretical statement I have constructed to answer the meta-question of the study: What roles do race and gender play in the pedagogies of Black male special educators? I then share the themes that emerged, which support the theory and answer the sub-questions:

- What roles do race and gender play in the identity construction of Black male special educators?
- What roles did Black men’s race and gender play in their decision to become teachers and, more specifically, special educators?
- How are Black male special educators going about realizing the aims that drove them to become special educators?
- In what ways have Black male special educators been able to realize the aims they set for themselves within their pedagogical practice?
Typical of the open nature of qualitative research, the data not only answered the questions well, but also ventured beyond them. Therefore, as the chapter is structured thematically, the themes are explicated through the code groups that arose in analysis in order to link the interpretive nature of the results with the data as closely as possible. This helped me “preserve and present the form and content of the analytic work” (Charmaz, 2006, p.151) as I discuss the results.

Theory: Identity x the Black Male Special Educator

It was clear that race and gender played significant roles not only in the pedagogies of the Black male special educators in this study, but also as strong driving forces behind their need to effect change in their communities and in their students’ lives. Race and gender were also integral in the examples they set for colleagues, as well as in their goals to move the needle on systemic change. That driving force was very clearly rooted in a strong sense of self that resulted from the knowledge they built about their sociocultural and historical legacies. This was a consistent thread that connected all these educators in a very palpable way.

As such, I constructed my theoretical statement as follows: Though these Black male special educators sometimes experience their race and gender as the reason why the full spectrum of their talents and skills are often undervalued, they persevere due to a desire to use education as a platform to challenge the system. Special education as an area of expertise, however, is not as much of a driving force, as is remaining rooted in their socio-historical legacies and a strong sense of self, in order to serve as transformational leaders for students of color.
To demonstrate how this theoretical statement came to be, I have structured the chapter around the four themes that arose from the data. At the family level of coding, described in the previous chapter, I looked for the in-vivo statements that seemed to not only answer the sub questions most acutely, but also captured the overall patterns of the data. Therefore, the themes I constructed were: “What it Looks Like to be Your Authentic Self,” “You Just Wanna do More Work on the Ground,” “Am I an Overseer or am I a Liberator?,” and “I Think That’s What This is About, Leading by Example.” The subheadings within each theme are code groups that emerged in analysis and are therefore employed to deepen the discussion of each theme while keeping the discussion close to the data.

”What it Looks Like to be Your Authentic Self”

“I was just searching. I was just always searching. Searching for myself.” ~Vincent

Regarding Black identity, W.E.B. Dubois (1995) wrote, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (p. 45). Freire (2010) also spoke to this as he stated, “The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically” (p. 48). In a similar fashion, these Black male educators all spoke of this process of coming to know themselves in a world that would rather not see them be their best selves. Yet, despite the societal strain they all spoke to and recognized as ever present in their lives as Black men, they seemed to ground themselves in a historical context to create and express their most authentic selves. This, they manifested in a manner not unlike DuBois’ (1995) assertion that, “The
history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,— this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (p.45).

Whether it was Kwame, Francis, or Vincent who identified as African, or Calvin who declared himself a Pan-African, or Stephen who asserted he was an African-American, it was clear that there was a thread that wove throughout their self-declarations and that thread was, as Calvin put it, “a trans-national Black identity.” Even though Rashid referred to his identity in what might be considered abstract terms, further discussed below, he, in a rather strong and passionate manner, consistently connected his identity to a rich socio-historical context that connected to the other educators who explicitly identified with African, or Pan African ideals. Indeed, all of the men spoke to having a connectivity to a collective consciousness of sorts which situated them “as parts of a larger African community in spite of and in resistance to political and cultural hegemony which represents these populations as bounded ethnic entities” (Lake, 1995, p. 22). This collective consciousness was mediated by family and reinforced by their negative experiences at school.

Schooling schooled me. It was clear that these men’s families made a large impact on their identities in some way. For example, when Calvin spoke about his maternal grandfather, he spoke of distinct principles he received from him:

So, you know, he, he was-- you know, he was born in 1919, so he had that Garvey-ite Pan-Africanism. In terms of his orientation out of Harlem. You know. Culture. And cultural renaissance. And, and-- So. The-- that, that piece, I think-- you know, that was instilled in me.

Vincent, similarly, talked about his father’s impact on his identity development and consequently, how he views himself in the world:
This is my father coming in and instilling this world view to me. It's even scientific where it says I'm an African man or just an African, everything about me is dominant. My eyes are brown; that's dominant. My nose is big; it's dominant. The curl of my hair, the level of the curl is the tightest strand. Everything is the dominant gene. It's like I'm the majority. Everything comes from me.

Stephen attributed some of his identity development to the literacy habits his mother instilled in him:

*I mean, in middle school, I read this book that I loved that I don't think I would give-- it's probably not middle school appropriate. Makes Me Wanna Holler, by Nathan McCall. Like my mom just fed me with all of this Black literature.*

Though it was clear that the home was a major source of their foundations as (Pan)-African men, they all shared a consistent and prevalent connection to schooling as a major contributor to their identities.

Kwame spoke vividly of his elementary school experience in school when he moved to Missouri from Trinidad and Tobago. He referred to his schooling in Trinidad as the “highlight of his educational career.” He described it as a time where he did well in school because of the tight structure and strong connections between home and school. Teachers and parents had a true partnership and this translated to academic achievement for him and his brothers. In contrast, his schooling in Missouri was referred to as his “dark ages of education” largely due to the culture shock of being in a school that was majority White, both in terms of the teaching and student populations. He did not have even one teacher of color, after coming from Trinidad where people of color are the majority on the island. While it is likely that the culture shock and transition to a new place, without his parents no less, contributed to his negative experience there, he also recalled facing racist practices at the school. For example, he distinctly remembered always being removed from the classroom for reasons he deemed biased:
But there was a level of always feeling victimized. Well not victimized, but—yeah, I always felt targeted, actually. So I felt as though, typical things that the average kid would do, my—my punishment always seemed to be a little bit more harsh. And it turned me into an angry person.

He went on to tell the following story:

Kwame: I remember-- 4th grade teacher, Ms. Arnold. I remember-- I think I may have had my head down, and I was told to leave the classroom, and I said, you know, I'm not leaving. And I kept my head down. And then eventually, it wasn't a dean, but like a principal came to get me. And I remember just having this rage and just like-- just flipping the desk over and just leaving the classroom. And then the desk actually hit Ms. David in her shin.

Fenton: Wow. Wow. So what happened as a result of that?

Kwame: Suspension.

Rashid spoke of his experience attending racially diverse, but predominantly White, secondary schools. As an athlete, he was often among a particularly racially diverse group of students where he faced racist remarks that made a profound impact on him. Each time he faced racist commentary from his peers, it fueled a desire to be able to respond from a knowledgeable place:

But I was like, yo like-- or they'll say stuff like, yo so then why is it, you know, Black people, so much poverty, like all that. Like, you know what I'm saying? Like they used to kinda like blame it on intelligence. You know what I mean? Like, certain dudes, you know what I'm saying. And, I-- I didn't wanna get mad anymore. Like, I was like-- I wanna-- I wanna kill them with knowledge.

These experiences, coupled with the influence of a Black male teacher in high school, Mr. Carmichael, urged him to study Black history in order to make sense of his experiences and position himself to “kill them with knowledge:”

I remember walking to the-- so it was like you were walking to the, from the practice to the train. And like, we-- we was like-- the kid was talking about like, yo, why do you think there's no Black quarterbacks? Or Black pitchers in baseball? Or, you know what I'm saying? Or, or, or presidents? Or governors like that. Saying all of that type of s--t. And like, that was like a moment when like I started reading like chapters out like The Miseducation of the Negro. That was 10th grade. Like something told me to watch Roots, when I was in 10th grade. And I watched it when I was younger, but I was like, you know I wanna watch this again. Like you know what I'm saying. And, for like two weeks
straight like I was mad at everybody. You know what I'm saying? After watching that and then going to school in that environment.

Mr. Carmichael, he credited for introducing him to books like *Native Son*, by Richard Wright and *Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DuBois, “He introduced me to-- introduced me to the double veil or the double consciousness.” And then, the double consciousness came to life in a whole new light, “So I'm in school, I'm like. It's like almost like a-- it's like a whirlwind. It's like-- and then I'm hearing this and then it's like-- the shit is in my face.” Nonetheless, despite these trying times, he seemed to value these experiences:

> Like, it's in my face. Like I'm dealing with seeing everything that if I went to school in my neighborhood I would have never had seen. And, while I'm in there...my basketball coach, Irish guy. Rick Murphy. Like, he's like a father figure, to me. Like, you know what I'm saying?”

For Francis, as a child of two Haitian immigrants, incidents with fellow Black Caribbean and Black American peers, impacted his sense of security around his identity. He shared, “The most powerful story I have is being called an African booty scratcher when I transferred to this school, or Haitians have Aids.” These kinds of experiences had him on the defense, as he described it. Indeed, he became so preoccupied with protecting himself from insults, that he stopped focusing on his learning. But then a switch happened,

> “When I transferred to the new school, the most profound experience I had was I walked into the school, two girls came up to me. I think one girl was Evelyn and I think the other was like Mariel, a Spanish girl and a Black girl. They said, ‘His skin color is beautiful. I really like your skin.’ Once they said that, it was an a-ha moment. It built confidence.”

Though these peer-related experiences made a profound impression on his sense of self, Francis also reflected on the racial make-up of his teachers and how it created a “white is
right” mentality within him that shifted when he ended up at Crispus Attucks, a high school run predominantly by Black educators:

No, no, students was predominantly Afro-Caribbean, but I think a lot of it must've came from my K through 8 experience. All my teachers were White, White females, to be exact, for the most part. All the administrators for the most part were White. I think psychologically at that place, if you look at it, every single day, the person that's teaching you. The person you're gaining knowledge--demeanors. Oh, sit this way. Do this right. Do that. Oh, my gosh, you're off. What do you think you're going to internalize? How do you think you're going to behave? Ain't nobody told me I was special. No one told me I was unique. Ain't nobody told me I was beautiful. When I went to Attucks, my teacher told me I was beautiful. If I would've got that for the first six years of my life, my confidence in myself could be completely different.

These types of K-12 experiences ultimately made these men make very distinct decisions, both consciously and unconsciously. These choices seemed to center on the identities that they were, in many ways, co-constructing with society, as they aimed to move toward a level of self-actualization that was authentic. Stephen, for example, attended a university in Vermont where minoritized students made up 4% of the student body, and 3% of that population segment was composed of international students. There, he found himself taking on the role of a campus activist. As a result of this decision, he wound up on academic probation and eventually back home to the Bronx after two years.

Stephen: A couple of incidences on campus. Kid threw a confederate flag out the [dorm] window. Let's go talk to him. Alright, we go talk to him. This guy, was from Pennsylvania. His friends call him Hillbilly Jim or whatever. He likes country music. So he thought it was funny. You know, part of the joke. And, that turned into-- it wasn't anything like, critical, but it was an issue on campus. I remember-- we said, alright, fine. So we wrote on a sheet, "By any means necessary". You know. Then the-- the majority population, they get upset. And then, you know. [It] becomes a thing. So, guy says, oh someone in class, these kids don't understand, you know, what it is to be a minority. So, a bunch of us, we go to this class, the president's gonna give us an opportunity to talk. I need to be doing papers, I need to be doing this, but I'm not.

Fenton: You're like an on-campus activist.
Stephen: Yeah. Which-- which was-- which would have been fine, year three. You know, but this is year one. And I'm just kinda, you know, bulls---ting for lack of a
better-- like--
You know, I'm not, I'm just really not taking care of business.

Calvin, due to his racially diverse neighborhood in northern New Jersey, had a very diverse experience throughout his schooling. However, during his junior year in high school, he noticed a stark difference between the honors classes he was accustomed to taking and the class he actively chose to switch to out of a need to be among peers he identified with racially. There was less rigor in the spaces where Black students predominated in the classroom. Honors classrooms, where he was accustomed to learning, were the exact opposite; but he was always one of few Black students.

This then produced a desire to attend one of the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU),

... I've always been hyper-racial-- radicalized, you know, conscious. That's why I didn't want to go to any school but a HBCU... That's what I thought in my mind at 18... I felt like all the Black males there would be like me.

Calvin made a point to mention that this desire didn’t come from feeling like an outsider. With his experiences as an athlete and living in the predominantly Black part of his town, needing to “fit in” was never the issue. He also shared that he never dealt with people perceiving him as “acting white” because he was always in honors classes. Additionally, his parents and brother went to HBCUs, so there was a legacy attached to his decision to attend one himself. Yet, he sought a certain level of tight student camaraderie along racial and gender lines, “So, I don't know. I think-- I think I've just wanted to feel like I'm in honors classes, but I'm with Black people.” In choosing Morehouse, his goal, in part, was met, “Well I got that experience, but everybody obviously wasn't like me. And, you know, I was opened towards the diversity of the Black community.”
**African man in America.** Coming to terms with society’s gendered and racialized notions of them has been a significant component of these educators’ identity construction. In his discussion of this, Kwame evoked the notion of the Black tax (White, 2015), the idea that Black people have an added pressure to prove themselves in certain contexts, and therefore have to work twice as hard, in order to be on par with White people. On this matter, he posited the following:

> And I think— I think for me, because there are so many stereotypes of being a Black man in America, there are certain ways that I present myself to the world that I’m just adamant about illuminating. So, you know— People of color are usually not typically considered intelligent, there’s like this ceiling. And— so just, making sure when I’m in a certain setting, speaking to show my intelligence. So— but it— it’s almost just like you’re proving yourself, to a certain extent. So there’s a level of not being yourself when you’re around— certain settings.

But Kwame goes on to speak about moving away from feeling a need to prove stereotypes wrong and therefore having to present a facsimile of his true self:

> But I’m moving away from that now. The more and more I’ve become more—more of a, more—cultured, and just kind of accepting who I am, it really is starting to become like f—k a stereotype. And I feel as though the message becomes more meaningful. Similarly, as a result of moving away from societal expectations and stereotypes,

Vincent voiced a sentiment that captured the essence of what shaped the way he actualized himself in the world:

> We’re the original beings. It’s one of those – we’re the closest thing to God walking the earth. We’re the original beings. Science proves it. It’s not even like I’m sitting here preaching. There are labs that sit there and break the science down right to the DNA. That’s what I am. On that level, I feel like I’m a gift to the world. Who I identify myself with now, I identify myself as a young African man in the United States and trying to show other young African men and women how to maximize themselves in a place that’s against them. We call it fighting the good fight.
**Identities beyond race and gender.** Outside of race and gender, these men had other ways of identifying themselves that are important to underscore, particularly as the aim was to guard against essentializing Black male identity. For example, Rashid said,

“I think-- I think I have-- I have two identities. I think I have like mentor. And then, but at the same time learner.” Like where I feel like a lot of younger kids would look up to me as like a mentor. They’d see me in that light and-- And like if they have a question or like-- some kids call me the preacher... But then on the other side, when I say learner, is, like-- my old coach-- we always meet up from time to time-- Just to eat and talk and he-- he's in like his 50's. Like, know what I'm saying? And he always talks to me from a different angle. Like, know what I'm saying? Kinda like the angle that I talk to the kids from.

Calvin also incorporated another component into his Pan-African identity. As Lake (1995) posited, “Race has always been inextricably linked with class and, accordingly, has impacted upon the material, sociocultural, and psychological economies of African people” (p. 23). In a manner akin to this line of thinking, Calvin considered class to be a prominent part of how he identified himself,

*I'm very-- I'm very class conscious, too. Very, very class conscious... I can't really say when I was like started thinking like this, but I've always just questioned like, why are people poor? Or why is certain labor not valued? Like, why do people like look down on somebody that's a janitor? Or, look down on the person that-- I'm like, they're working too.

Though a connection with his African ancestry was a central part of how he self-identified, Kwame was hesitant to box himself in with typical labels and categories:

*I would say a cultured man. I think that's being-- knowing about my-- my historical lineage and then having a sense of pride in it... So just being-- having this like, non-resistance of-- it's okay to be an African. It's not like-- it's not taboo. Because, when you ask me about my core, I can't understand my core if I don't understand my lineage, and I think that's very-- very, very, very, very, very important to me. I think, with that being the core of who I am, then these things naturally stem off. Like this-- this, this natural intelligence. This-- this understanding that-- this, this-- this determination. Because of being aware of my lineage, and the plight, there's really no barrier that I can't. ... so, there's-- this drive-- there's a drive inside of me now, that I just keep thinking every day, is what am I doing that's establishing some generational things to have. So, to give you like a specific characteristic, it's not that it's difficult, but the thing that just
keeps coming to me is that, I try to live my life every day, how can I make-- or how can I make myself more culturally aware, providing for generations after me. If that makes sense.

These sentiments around needing to provide for succeeding generations connected these men and their drive to enter the classroom. There seemed to be an urge to be more active in their pursuit for social justice so they could be part of the solution where matters of inequity were concerned. As the following theme will demonstrate, teaching was a prime way to channel their energies in a constructive manner that would help them fulfill their long term goals and actualize themselves professionally with an approach that was aligned with the men they had become.

“You Just Wanna do More Work on the Ground”

And I'm like you know what, this-- I could sit back and complain, complain. Or, talk about corruption, corruption, corruption from the bleachers. Or I could get in the game and-- and be right there. ~Rashid

Exploring how they identified themselves helped lay the ground work for understanding the extent to which these educators’ racialized and gendered identities influenced their decisions to become teachers, and more specifically, special educators. In terms of special education, the certification area was a means to an end for most of the participants. They entered the NYC public school system at a time where certain certification areas were in demand in New York City and therefore the alternative certification programs they entered were only offering tracks toward high needs areas like special education. Vincent, as a veteran teacher, was the only exception, as he was motivated by his older brother who he defined as mentally retarded and later on his son, who was diagnosed with autism. Though Francis did not actively choose special education, he was intrigued and invigorated by the challenge he knew it would come
with, “I know it’s difficult, but something about being able to manage that was challenging to me. That comes with the competitive economics side and me feeling like I could be able to get results there that I wanted.”

Though no one explicitly stated that it was their identity as a Pan/African man that led them to teaching, it was clear that a combination of their racialized and gendered experiences throughout their own schooling, as well as a need to “get in the game,” as Rashid stated above, was what helped drive them to teaching. These experiences and their drive, in fact, not only led them to the profession, but were also what helped them persist despite the challenges they faced and continue to endure.

Similar to Rashid’s sentiments, Calvin expressed a pressing need to break out of the isolation he felt in his rural college town in Pennsylvania as he pursued his graduate degree in history. Further, he wanted to begin applying the knowledge he was gaining about Black identity in an international sense, to his local context, so he returned to his home in New Jersey, “So, you know, you want-- you just wanna do more to work on the ground. So, that's what I was kinda yearning for. So that's why I went back to Watertown.”

For Rashid, his experience volunteering with a city councilman showed him the efficacy of using his voice in certain spaces. While he originally planned to open an athletics based non-profit to serve his community, becoming privy to certain political circles with the Councilman opened his eyes to ways he could position himself that he had not previously considered, “But he-- he basically played a part in me, like, I think like gaining some trust in the system.” With a recommendation from the Councilman, he applied to the alternative certification program that got him into the classroom. The
historical knowledge he built as a result of his schooling experiences drummed up great emotions and he seemed to want to put those emotions to constructive use, “So, if I got all these feelings in me, let me channel it and get up in there—And be the person in there that’s gonna speak his mind.” Like Rashid, some of the participants were influenced to “get up in there” and “do more work on the ground” by someone in their community or social circle, while others were motivated by family.

**Family makes me, community motivates me.** Kwame had both male and familial influences on his decision to teach. Primary was his visit to the HBCU his cousin attended:

> Yeah, so, from middle school, when I did the college tour and my older cousin was at Jackson to become a teacher— It was always this, well I can do that also. I knew that I always wanted to get into teaching.

He was also influenced, however, by a middle school male teacher of color, Mr. Williams:

> And he was this-- he taught history. And he would-- he has like two earrings in his ears. You know, and at that time, as a kid, you know all you see is the visual. So to see him there, I was just like, I think I want to become a teacher also.

In Stephen’s case it was his ex-history teacher turned principal who invited him to serve as a school aide, a school support position, which turned into him becoming an unofficial dean, of sorts, at his new school. After Stephen spent a year as an exterminator upon returning home from college without a degree, he took the position and has been working in a school ever since:

> And this is sort of, probably where I would not ever say I was a school aide, because my principal really instilled a lot of confidence in me and gave me a lot of responsibility. So I co-taught two classes. And taught a summer class—summer school class under the guise of my principal. And one of the classes was with my then girlfriend, now wife, and it was New York City Culture. Which was a m-- a mimic off a class that I took at the College of New Amsterdam (CNA).
And I just-- I felt like when I took the class, this is learning. Like, reading, experiencing it, writing about it, reflecting. You know, having these discussions. And so we did it with high school kids. And, took them to the Met. We took them to Ground Zero. We took them to the Staten Island Ferry. You know, and coupled it with some sort of literature. And it was a great experience.

The culture he was able to create with the students made him want to re-create that in an entire school building, which meant becoming a principal. He knew however, “I can-- I can't be a leader of teachers if I haven't actually taught.” So after finishing up his Bachelor’s degree at CNA, with two years of working in a school under his belt, he got into an alternative certification program to continue his teaching journey.

Though Kwame was sure he would be a teacher at some point, it was never his primary plan, “Teaching was just more of a give-back. Cause I never looked at it as a financial opportunity. To-- to- to sustain.” What also factored into his decision-making process was the knowledge that there were not many men of color in classrooms.

Because I did know that there was a deficit of-- of Black males in teaching. And every young Black male in teaching, I-- I remember significantly-- significantly. And I always said oh-- I remember being like, oh I want to be like that.

As Kwame alluded to the fact that there are few Black men in the teaching profession, he also seemed to hint at strategies for overcoming this gap. This notion of what needed to be done to address this problem adequately was a great subject of discussion, particularly during the focus group.

**Recruiting and retaining men of color into teaching.** When we gathered, the conversation naturally flowed toward the dearth of Black male teachers. The starting point, however, was not the gap itself, but rather students’ experiences. Rashid stated, “They don’t trust the system, so therefore they don’t want to be a part of it.” He drew attention to the fact that, although the draw to education for the men in this study, and
others, may be to facilitate societal change from within the system, some minoritized men of color seem to become averse to seeking out careers that, by their estimation, operate within systems of oppression (Graham & Erwin, 2011). However, even when Black men do decide to get into the field, Francis went on to state that it was insufficient to assume that any Black man would do. There seemed to be a certain quality he felt these men needed to have in order to be effective:

Sometimes, they may see it like, yeah, there’s more black men getting into teaching, which is excellent, but they have to be able to articulate and understand why they’re needed and understand that it’s because, although they are Black men and that is extremely important, it’s that there’s another layer to teaching now. You have to be willing to grow as a teacher and deepen your understanding for what it actually is to transfer knowledge to somebody else. I think that some people would be – I know people all the time that are like, yo this dude should get into teaching. Yo, this dude should get into teaching, but there are also some people that have the culture. You know that this person, they have the potential, but do they have a growth mindset?

In addition to attracting a certain type of man into teaching, Vincent spoke with his fellow educators about the benefits and stability that comes with teaching and how this could be a selling point of the profession:

It’s a path and it’s like I said. At the barbershop just explaining to them dudes yeah the money is not flashy but over the years you’re positioning yourself where you’re good, and you talk about the property, you talk about different things, and you talk about – it’s public knowledge. Look at the salary scale and I beef about it. Look, there’s firefighters making this, and I have to wait until year twenty-two, but we have July and August. It’s just that conversation and from there, it gets deeper and deeper.

While the literature spoke about salary as a deterrent (Brown & Butty, 1999) Vincent felt otherwise, though it is worthy to note that the starting salary for a teacher in New York City is $54,000 (NYCDOE, 2017), as compared to the national average of $36,441 (NEA, 2013). However, Kwame, during his individual interview, did assert an opinion more aligned with the literature:
I was always aware that teachers make okay money. I mean, teachers would message that to you even as a kid. ‘Like you know, we don’t-- we only make but so much.’ And that’s the one thing I did like about Mr. Williams’ class is-- these were the types of conversations we were having. We would look at salaries. And, when you graduate college, especially as a male. I mean, there’s a sense of pride, but there’s-- there’s the more importance of you making real money. Especially coming from a lower middle class-- or, at times, below the poverty line family. You wanna, right away, make a substantial amount of money. And I knew teaching wasn’t that.

Nonetheless, salary was not a major component of these educators’ conversations, individually or as a group. One surprising finding that did seem to serve as a major pull to the classroom was athletics. Four out of the six participants were athletes during their time in school and the idea of being able to remain involved in athletics and apply the lessons they learned through sports in their profession, seemed to serve as a draw to teaching.

**Athletics as a precursor to the classroom.** Though it was Francis’ direct experience in a school that helped move him towards applying to an alternative certification program, one can easily trace back his journey to the classroom to sports. When he was cut from the basketball team at the small liberal arts college he attended in Massachusetts as an Economics major, it had a major impact on him:

*I entered there – one of the most difficult challenges was I played sports for a long time in my life. Entered the college as an athlete, and then I got cut early on. That what was tied to my identity my entire life, so when I got cut, I was lost. A lot of times, how I developed relationships was through that. How I connected to a network was through that. How I stayed motivated was through that. When I was cut, from there, I kind of lost myself. Through that, I had to discover different things.*

His relationship with a Black male economics professor helped him overcome this challenging time:

*Black economics professor, Professor Simpson. That relationship, that comfort, that father figure, that connection, but also the most fun thing was, regular talk,*
he just believed in me. When he speaks about me, when he speaks to me, he speaks as if I'm somebody special. That felt good. It was not no bull---t. He speaks to me as if I'm special, and he believes it. That was – I couldn't let that down.

Francis began post undergraduate life as a personal banker. He hated it and resigned after three months. This led to volunteering at a high school where his friend worked and helped him learn a great deal in a short space of time:

...and there was one teacher I got connected with, a Black dude by the name of Robert Brown. He was a phenomenal math teacher, on point, high energy. I was with him for three weeks, and he taught me a lot about the nuances of being a teacher.

While at the school, he found himself getting deployed to a White female teacher’s classroom because she had trouble managing the classroom. His presence and natural abilities with the students quickly changed the culture of the classroom and he felt really successful as a result. He then began substituting as a third grade teacher and this is what solidified things for him. He had discovered that “different thing” he needed after being cut from his basketball team. Substituting connected him back to his student experience at Crispus Attucks high school, and, like Stephen, he wanted to be a school leader, but:

...I know in order to get to that point, I got to put myself from 9 to 5. It sparked that because it always made me go back to my Attucks days. I was like, I want to be like those dudes. I want to do what they did. That was such a powerful experience; I want to be a part of something like that. Now I'm starting to think I want to create something like that.

Vincent’s connection to the classroom via athletics was more direct. His relationships with his high school basketball coach, and then his college basketball coach, opened his eyes to teaching as a career:
That really shaped me. I always had good relationships with my basketball coaches. When I got back to Kennedy [Community College], I did 16, 20 credits and then transferred into Kings College. I had a good relationship with the basketball coach over there, and at that point, I was 21, 20, and I was like, ‘So, you got three daughters, and you're a teacher in the day and a coach at night. How do you make ends meet?’ He sat me down and explained it to me. He was like, ‘Look, I got my master's. I got this. I got that. I'm at the top end of my scale. I work with these – I work these hours so now in the evenings, I can hustle and do the coaching thing. In the summers, I got time to do this with my family.’ From there, it shaped me. I realized right away that I was like, okay, I can have all of those things I want in life and a career. I was like, I think I want to teach. After speaking with the chair of the education department, he was able to switch his major from computer science to education:

At that point, I took the classes and was like okay. I started realizing right away that education was $.--.t. I realized that it was-- The foundations of education class made you realize why education was created. The purpose was served 200 years ago. It was for the pre-industrialization stage where people would go into factories to work. Your children have to go somewhere. You wanted to keep them somewhere to get ready to go to the factories eventually. You realize okay, this is the model we're still using today, even though we're way past the industrial stage. Despite disheartening discoveries about the education system, he decided to persist for two reasons, “Oh, because it was doable. It was something I was like, oh, – it seemed very attainable at the time. I had enough people around me letting me know, encouraging me that there's children out there that needed to see me.” Additionally, his Africana studies minor contributed to his thinking at the time:

Once I got into education, that's when I really started focusing on Africana studies. ...[You] just got to learn about your own like-- The core curriculum in community schools really turned me off. Everything was Greco-Roman. Everything was Eurocentric. The s- -t annoyed me and made me like want to protest. But all the professors were Greco-Roman, so they were just teaching what they knew. So it made me search. Once I got into the Africana studies department, it like opened my world to like, what I always felt was there, but I just needed concrete evidence.

In addition to advice this evidence he was gaining from his coursework, coupled with advice from coaches, it was also his fellow teammates that influenced his decision:
I was fortunate that I was a member of the men's basketball team at Kings College, and most of the members on the team were teachers, education majors. The ones that graduated became teachers. They would always come back, and they were always giving us tidbits on the game of basketball but also on the career side, as well. The impact – the life lessons that we're learning while being on the team, we're going to be applying them right away as soon as we get out into the workforce with the students.

This sense of support that he received from his teammates connected to a larger conversation the men had in their focus group and discussed during individual interviews. There seemed to be great value in the fraternal connections Black men shared that many of them outlined as a solid way of retaining men of color in the profession, as this type of collective supports their psychosocial well-being (Brockenbrough, 2012).

“We need to build...We need to know each other by name.” In order to stand a chance of actualizing change and helping other men of color who enter the profession to remain in the profession, the participants spoke of the need to create spaces and networks for male educators of color. This was especially apparent during the focus group where the men instantly connected and shared stories and ideas in a very fraternal and jovial fashion. It was during the focus group that Francis said the following about retaining Black male teachers:

Going back to what you were saying about teacher retention, I think the way you retain and recruit teachers, or especially men of color, is you have to get them in a space where they can do s--t like this. We’re not allowed to be. Those systems are in place. Real talk, if two Black men are talking in the school, there’s all of a sudden a negative thought about that. There’s nothing wrong with us actually sitting and politicking. I think where there’s no design, there’s no support... There’s nothing in place for us to actually just be, to do us and be us. There’s none of that there.

During his individual interview, Stephen also spoke to the importance of this type of space. He developed this type of network informally, on his own. But he also commented on his participation in a newly formed program in New York City which, in
part, provided mentorship to new male educators of color as they enter the public school system:

*I think that space is needed highly, so I have it in this informal way. It was nice. One of my buddies, we did [the program] together. I just remember the feeling we both had. We went to the first meeting. This is ridiculous. Look at this. This is nice. It’s nice to see. It’s a good place to just have a space, a home almost, or a headquarters. You know?*

Calvin also spoke to this need of having male centered networks in the profession because his position was that, “There’s strength in numbers.” He felt that it was important that male educators of color get together and take responsibility for building these networks, “I think we need to start something. We need to get together. We need to build. There needs to be more of us. We need to meet regularly. We need to know each other by name, see each other face-to-face.” But as he spoke on this, he was also sure to offer critical commentary on the aspects of society in general that he felt contributed to why those spaces were virtually non-existent and perhaps in a more pronounced way for those from marginalized groups:

...that’s part of the problem, I feel like, with our society in general now is a big lack of community. We’re all atomized. We’re all out alone. That’s a problem just with American society, period, right now. It’s just we don’t have structures, and it’s very strategic as to why, because they don’t want us to be. They don’t want us unified... Then it’s going to start stirring up trouble.

This idea of “stirring up trouble” seemed to be a consistent one the men all grappled with, but also saw as a necessary component of serving as agents of change. They all seemed to suggest that, in building the type of knowledge they thought was important and using teaching as a form of activism, they knew there would be challenges. However, as the following theme will demonstrate, this did not deter them in pursuing
their goals and doing so with a socially conscious lens on society, the school system and themselves.

“Am I an Overseer or am I a Liberator?”

Francis, Kwame, Rashid and Stephen all had goals to become administrators. Calvin sought to use his voice through writing and activism while Vincent had his eyes set on community building through property ownership. Though there was both overlap and divergence among their goals, the greatest common denominator among all these educators was the lens through which they navigated the profession to reach their goals. They each spoke intently and intensely about the education system, with a profound need to keep a critical gaze on it, challenge it, and manipulate it in order to assert themselves in an authentic fashion. They made close connections to schools as microcosms of the greater society and therefore saw no real separation between what they saw in their classrooms and what they saw beyond school walls. As such, this critical eye was one they seemingly carried with them everywhere.

Their goals then, were pursued with conscious efforts to ground themselves in a deep and rich socio-historical context and driven by a fierce need to break the mold of what society and the field of education expected of them. This influenced their pedagogical practices as well as the way they interacted with administrators, colleagues, parents and students. However, the students, ultimately, were the goal and they knew they all played a vital role in leading them toward a more liberated and critically conscious way of being if their students were to stand a chance against the oppression they faced. As such, there was this undertone of tension between actualizing themselves as either a “liberator,” one who took a transformative approach in their work as an
educator, or an “overseer,” one who upheld the status quo. This meant a bit of subversion was necessary as they enacted this “liberator” approach which was embedded in their desire to encourage students to question everything.

**Critical consciousness is crucial.** Thinking critically was a significant aspect of these educators’ lives both inside and outside of the classroom. They were acutely aware of systemic issues that stemmed from the country’s history and constructed the marginalization that they experienced and that their students endured. As Calvin stated, "It's about structure, institutions, culture, history. That's what it's really about.” This awareness of the cultural and historical underpinnings of the structures and institutions through which they moved, pushed them to have to manipulate their way through to their goals. They seemed to all concede to the fact that there was a cost to walking with the awareness they had.

Francis moved through with the understanding that, “I play in the context of the game, which is pretty much created and played by White people.” He adapted a mindset that tapped into military science as a way to navigate towards his goals:

*We can look at military science or we can look at Brown versus Board. Before Brown versus Board there was X amount of Black principals in certain Southern states. After Brown versus Board, there was only one in certain states. That's not by accident. That's a strategy put in place that is waging a war.*

For him, setting clear cut strategies, of both an overt and covert nature, were what he found necessary to be a “liberator.”

Calvin took to using his voice through activism and writing as a way to approach his work as an educator in a transformative fashion. Though he felt the weight of structural constraints that came with teaching in a large urban public school system,
getting his special education students to write about their lives through memoir, inspired him to use writing as his vehicle of choice to serve as a change agent in education:

*I think the goal of the writing is to – we need more teacher voices to speak about what is actually going on in school buildings and explain to people how schools work, what’s going on, what the needs of the students are, what the needs of teachers are. All that conversation is controlled by corporations at this point, and you’re not hearing teacher voices. That’s number one. Number two is with teacher voices, we also need to hear radical teacher voices. There are teacher voices out there, but some of the teacher voices are still in the 20th century box of what education should be. It’s not, in my personal view, what I think 21st century education needs to transition to, and not only just education in isolation, but the implications and the ramifications for the larger society.*

For Calvin, a large part of this work dealt with the removal of standardized testing and being a part of shifting the conversation toward envisioning an educational landscape devoid of tests, but rich with feedback for students, which he felt was way more valuable in their academic achievement and growth. This, he felt, would also combat the false idea that a meritocracy exists, “*It’s starting to blow up the notion that this thing is a meritocracy, which it never has been. Nobody wants to say that. Nobody wants to attack the nationalist myth. Nobody wants to attack the lie.*”

**Culture to the core.** Kwame was very big on culture serving as the centerpiece for his life as an African man and his work as an educator. He even cited his focus on culture as central to his work with special education students, “*I think, for me, special ed students were actually – I think because I lead with culture, special ed students were actually easier to relate to, or connect to, or teach with.*” In essence, he found more freedom to allow culture to drive instruction within the expectations that were held of him as he worked in self-contained classrooms as compared to general education settings. The culture piece, then helped him connect with special education students in an effortless manner, which then made a positive impact on instruction. Nonetheless, he felt
culture was something no one can divorce themselves from when they step in the classroom. Consequently, he thought it should precede the focus on instruction. In this way, instruction would become easier to enact in all classrooms, general and special education alike:

Culture is part of the learning process. That is why I value it. When you’re talking about – there’s something specifically about Black and brown boys and girls. You’re talking about a traumatized group, whether we want to acknowledge it or not. The only way that you can really acknowledge trauma is through joy, too, at the same time. I think culture is that joy piece that we need to bring into the classroom.

Similarly, Vincent spoke about culture as an essential part of teaching in the urban context of Brooklyn, New York, which is also part of connecting to the community. This is what he not only felt his students needed to see, but also, fellow colleagues:

It's culture and community and then deciding what your objectives are as a community. How do you see yourself in that community? You can’t be a teacher in theory and be outside of the community. We have Google. We don't need you. We got information. You got to be able to be inter-personal. This teaching thing is different than it was 15 years ago... In a classroom of 30 kids, you have 4 or 5 kids that don't need you. You can put them in front of a computer, and they will be fine. For your 25 other kids, man, they need you more than they need their parents.

Stephen saw independence as a crucial component of the culture he needed to create with his students. Particularly since, as special education students, there’s a dichotomy of perhaps having internalized a limited sense of what they can do and who they can be, while in many instances society may look upon them as adults and, therefore treat them as such:

We’re talking about independence being expected of them. If I talk about what’s being projected onto them, s--t, I got kids in there about to be grown-ups according to some society, in a year and half. Depending on how fast my boys grow, people are going to see them as grown men. You got to start – I’m not explicit about that with them because that’s not for them to know right now, but I do want them to start to be independent, start to be able to do things.
He therefore took every opportunity he could to model this for his students. Stephen, along with the other participants, clearly saw themselves as leaders for their students and defined their success, in large part, through the changes they saw in their students. This idea of leadership formed the final theme which illustrated how these educators were faring in their pursuit of their professional goals

“I Think That’s What This is About, Leading by Example.”

In terms of the concrete goals they have set for themselves, Kwame and Rashid are currently enrolled in educational leadership programs at the master’s level to fulfill their aims of stepping into administrative roles. Francis and Stephen, who also have their eyes set on becoming administrators, are in the process of positioning themselves to continue their studies or step into some educational administrative role other than serving as a principal. Calvin has been a part of a writing collective to further his activism in education, while Vincent has been actively continuing his work in the classroom while he seeks out community building opportunities through property ownership and management.

They are, thus, experiencing varying manifestations of success in the goals they have set for themselves. However, they share a certain sense of success in terms of the way they have been able to develop themselves as teachers, which is aligned to their self-development as Pan/African men in society at large. The proof of their success lies, not just in their pedagogies, but in the students themselves. Their commitment to sharing themselves with their students and challenging systemic expectations as they do so, has given them a great sense of pride and triumph in their journeys as Black male special educators.
Developing purposed pedagogy. A huge part of these educators’ work lay in shifting the “how” of their educational practice, that is, their pedagogical approach. The goal was to steer away from the standards that they were fed as they entered the profession, while subverting the current expectations that they were held to. Kwame stated:

*I think it developed because I realized in order for the topic to be – when I first came in it, it was just more like content. ‘These are the things I need to focus on.’ I did not have a successful year in my eyes of what I really wanted to tap into. I think the more I got away from these forced standards, and just started looking like what are the things that are impacting me, and try to bring that into the classroom, those things developed. There’s a comfort level. Then once I brought myself into the classroom, that’s how those things developed.*

This evolution of his practice has become an embedded part of his practice that he can tie into content, but for Kwame, it is much deeper than that. Reminiscent of Emdin’s (2016) reality pedagogy, which the author defined as, “an approach to teaching and learning that has a primary goal of meeting each student on his or her own emotional turf” (p.27), Kwame asserted the following:

*I think within the last two years, I’ve implemented more – connected science to more social justice issues, right? So like Flint Michigan, right? Water crisis, but water crisis particularly in third-world countries. So I think because I’m naturally an activist, now I’m just using science as a way to tap into human rights or social justice issues – that Black component. To me, if I’m not impacted by those things, I’ll probably never even think about bringing them into the classroom. It’ll probably just be like making sure it’s inquiry based, content. It’s really important to me to be up-to-date. Even just being in gentrified Brooklyn, and just looking at the economy of food now and how food gets to us, like the business side of it, these are the – being a Black man living in Brooklyn, these are the things that I bring into the classroom now.*

Though Calvin also considered himself an activist, he made it clear that his *conscious* approach in the classroom was driven by his passions. The more he centered his work on his passions, the more he successful he felt as an educator:
My unconscious choices in terms of how I run a class, or discipline a class, or structure a class, or choose literature for a class, it’s not a very conscious thing at all. I come in the class, and I feel – and I really operate on, ‘What do I feel like teaching today?’ What am I inspired to teach today?’ That’s kind of how I operate. I’m not trying to be a rabble-rouser. I’m not like, ‘Oh, I need to try and do something, or do this, or subvert this.’ I don’t operate like that. I’m in there, and I’m doing what I feel.

As the special educator who pulled students out to work in a small group setting, Calvin also acknowledged that he was able to enact more freedom in his pedagogical choices as a result. He did not have to play the “enforcer” or strict “classroom manager” roles that were often expected of teachers in larger settings. This freedom stayed with him, however, beyond his time as a resource room teacher and became permanent part of his pedagogy and content:

I also kind of was opted out of that to a degree because I was in the resource room from the get-go. Then resource room, then transfer high school, you’re talking about two, three kids on a given day, so I don’t have to be a classroom manager. When I wrote that first piece that I wrote, Test Day, that’s what I wrote – or, no. This is my second piece. It hasn’t come out yet. It’s going to come out in September. But I wrote, I was more tutor than classroom manager. I didn’t have to do that. I didn’t have to do that work. I think that is critical in shaping how I thought about the kids, too. In many respects, on a lot of days, you’re sitting there like they got some boring-ass work from some class or whatever, and they’re like, ‘Calvin, I ain’t trying to do it.’ They’re chopping it up with me. We’re talking. We’re talking about life. I’m getting to know them as a person. You got to do it. Your pedagogy has to do it. That’s why I’m such a firm believer in memoir writing in the English class.

Building rapport was essential and like Calvin, the other educators seemed to see this as the way to impart the knowledge they had to share, but also learn from their students as well. Post-analysis, I recognized that students’ special education status did not seem to play a huge part in this process. Consequently, I sought to check with participants to establish clarity on their positions around students with special education labels.
Gaining clarity on the special education context. Through the member check process (Charmaz, 2006), I sent an email to participants to elicit clarity on the extent to which special education labels impacted their work with students. The question arose as I recognized, post-analysis, that special education did not seem to be very central to these educators’ discussions about their work. While all the participants were certified special educators who worked with special education students, they all had varying levels of involvement with the composition and planning of their students’ Individual Education Plans (IEP). Therefore, I used the member check to determine whether this was due to my own error in not pursuing this line of questioning enough during interviews or whether the participants chose to place greater emphasis on other aspects of their students’ identities. To this end, I posed the following question, to which three out of six participants responded: How does the special education placement of your students fit into your views around race, gender and your pedagogical practice?

In his response, Kwame probed the validity and reliability of disability labels for his students:

Due to students of color quickly being identified as LD and ED, I’m usually very hesitant or reluctant to believe in some of the diagnoses. I sometimes don’t utilize the students’ IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) and just use my own assessment of what I think my students’ needs are. It’s not to say that I don’t consider students’ IEPs. I just rely on my own acumen and create my own plan for what I feel the student needs. I feel like once I start looking at IEPs, I will start putting them into boxes. I also feel like things like ED might just come from cultural expressions and not because the student has actual ED. I only look at extreme cases of ED or extreme cases of academic delay. Other than that, I rely on my own skills to provide my students with what I think is best for them.

Kwame also shared that from his own schooling experience in Trinidad and Tobago, he may have exhibited some behaviors that some might have considered a manifestation of dyslexia, but he was always at the top of his class and he always had parents who could
advocate for him. He implied that a combination of parents not being in positions to advocate for their children and cultural incongruence could result in improper labeling of students. Therefore, it is his own expertise that he trusts more than anything else.

On the contrary, Rashid stated that he took his students’ special education labels into account a great deal, particularly due to Black boys’ disproportionate presence in special education, which he attributed to, “…bias, cultural differences, cycle of poverty or inequality, along with several others.” Nonetheless, he still situated his approach to working with these students in the greater social context:

While I’m aware of this I attempt to equip my students with skills that are unique to their experience and culture but offers them the same opportunity to achieve greatness as students who are not marginalized. We live in a world where minority students and even high performing students of minority races can feel inferior. My goal is to make them very aware of the world that they live in but to believe that greatness is holistically available to everyone even if the odds seem to be stacked against you.

Rashid’s sentiments demonstrated just how central the students and their success were to his approach in the classroom. For him and the other participants, much of what they did pedagogically was truly student-centered and seemed to connect to their own positionality as men who were once in the same seats as their students. To this end, students were not just at the core of their efforts as educators because they were taught to embody this type of approach, but because it was the natural expression of who they were as educators and agents of change.

**Students are the goal.** It was clear, that in defining their success, the students were anchored in their discussions and it was not just their pedagogy, but also the curriculum itself, that was important. The curriculum, especially as it pertains to special education students due to the significant variance in skill levels, did not allow much room
for inserting the types of values they found important. However, the more they were able
to finesse the curriculum to give students what they found was most valuable for them,
the more they were able to feel accomplished. To these ends, Rashid expressed the
following:

_I want them to know that it’s from a Euro-centric perspective, and I emphasize
that a lot, but I also tell them, don’t walk around not liking somebody because
they’re White or they’re someone of a different ethnicity, because that’s limiting
you, as well. There was a time when people traveled, and these labels didn’t
really impact you. It was more of your nationality. You’re from here, I’m from
there. Some Blacks were in Spain, like the Moors. It came down to more of a
religious kind of thing, or where you were from, not necessarily a racial construct._

Rashid also saw himself as a leader, whose responsibility it was to help his students
become leaders and this was part of how he defined his success:

_I speak to them about – by basically trying to stay focused. I tell them, I don’t
expect you to be at the level I’m at, because you’re younger, but just think about
those things. I try to be an example for them. …I said it, because I’m human too,
and I know my own personality. I also let them see that, although I’m the leader
of the class, I’m trying to turn all of them into leaders, too, and I have their
respect._

Francis began his career focusing on building relationships, as opposed to
focusing on curriculum or mastering content. This was a big part of his focus due to his
experience as an athlete, “I came from a background of coaching basketball, and I used
my ability to coach kids to do things. I’d really use whatever content I had as a platform
or stepping stone to prep them for life.” Eventually, he turned a critical eye toward
curriculum and this helped push his success with students:

_I’ve definitely shifted towards really thinking about any curriculum I deal with has
to be more on the conceptual level or inquiry-based level. However, I do strongly
believe that being a 21st century learner and being in a society that has a lot of
tests or examinations that allow people to function, it is my duty to teach kids of
African descent or Black and brown kids around or about tactics to help them
execute exams, but also understanding that those exams are still just low bars. It’s
the conceptual thinking and the inquiry that will get them to become high level thinkers. I think right now when I teach, I want them to be able to identify big ideas critically to look at situations that surround them.

This connection to the world was crucial in defining what success looked like. It was this idea of passing on knowledge to students around how they should navigate the world considering the oppressive circumstances they will likely face. This was a clear thread that wove through these educators’ work and their quest for social justice.

Summary

These Black male special educators clearly used education as a platform to challenge the system. Special education as an area of expertise, though important, was not central to their work. Instead, it was a rootedness in their shared socio-historical legacies and an ever-developing strong sense of self, that pushed them to position themselves as transformational leaders in education.

Racialized and gendered experiences contributed to their need to actualize their identities in a manner that was authentic to who they wanted to be. Family and schooling contributed greatly to these identities. Many of their schooling experiences left them feeling marginalized, especially throughout their pre-college years. However, they also recounted experiences with educators of color, and more specifically, male educators of color, that were edifying and therefore monumental in who they became as they grew as men and educators.

As men who identified as African and Pan-African, they made conscious efforts to move away from a need to have to “prove themselves,” and toward a place where they could walk in their self-designed and historically informed truths with pride and dignity. Their identities, however, were not just centered on race and gender, but they also
connected, in an abstract sense, to who they wanted to be for students and future
generations and what they wanted them to be aware of in order to assert themselves
successfully in society. This was achieved through historical knowledge that they were
conscious about building as they matured. While learning about their histories often
drummed up anger, they found activism as the way to overcome that anger.

This need to serve students as a form of activism helped them to channel their
anger into something productive and constructive for youth, while using education as the
vehicle. Family influences, along with experiences with male educators of color and time
spent working in schools, deepened their need to extend their reach, and becoming
certified special educators was how they fulfilled that need. Athletics also served as a
thruway to the classroom and a powerful way for them to serve as leaders and motivators
for youth of color. In some ways, special education made this goal easier, in some ways,
it was fairly inconsequential, as they endeavored to reach their goals in the field,
regardless of the context of their teaching.

Though their goals in the profession were varied, there was great convergence
where challenging the status quo was concerned. Critically examining society and one’s
place in it was central to their efforts toward their goals and their use of teaching as
activism. Infusing their pedagogies with deep cultural and community connections was
valued as a driver of instruction, in a system where the pervasive thought was that
instruction should drive culture. That is, the system operated with the understanding that
imposing strong instructional strategy and accountability would create a culture of
achievement. Meanwhile, these men operated with the idea that co-creating a strong
culture with students would help instruction to flow with ease and, therefore, result in
academic achievement. Consequently, much of what they did in the classroom and the ways they went about attaining their goals went against the grain of current expectations of them as male educators of color.

It was clear that a large part of how they earmarked their success was through their students. However, this was not in terms of typical student attainment (i.e. academic achievement), but more so as their students evidenced transformative ways of thinking. This need for change both within themselves and their students was reflective of Freire’s (2010) manifesto for the oppressed who wish to enact social change where he stated, “On the contrary, the more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can better transform it” (p. 39). It was as if these men innately felt that the more knowledge they gained about the system, at the micro (schools) and macro (society) levels, the more they would be able to challenge the status quo successfully. Therefore, it was through their pedagogical approaches, where their passions came out in curriculum and where shifts toward critical thinking occurred for students, that they saw themselves as successful in meeting their goals as educators. For them, it was about helping to create the next generation of leaders who can carry the torch of challenging systemic barriers that marginalized them in order to enjoy a more self-actualized existence.
Chapter 5: Discussion

*We work in a system right now that has been failing kids. At this point in time, I have to identify that there’s been a war against us for a long time. We may not name it that, but that’s what it has been. When people are failing out of school, they’re most likely to go to prison or more likely to fall in X, Y, Z, then it’s a war… In any war, they strategize how to advance. That’s what it is. How are we advancing? There are tactics to use systemically to disenfranchise people that look like us in the educational landscape.* ~Francis

While this study’s focus was race and gender and the roles those identities played in Black male special educators’ pedagogies, what came to the fore, no matter which educator I spoke to, was the idea of challenging the system. As Francis stated above, all of the men in this study, from a rich socio-cultural and historical knowledge base, asserted that inequities in education existed, not by happenstance, but by design. This purposed fashioning of our current system, consequently, produced in them a need to be purposeful in their actions toward challenging, fighting and transforming the education system within their spheres of influence.

Race was at the center of their thinking regarding their work as teachers. This was due to the racist ideologies they surmised were at the crux of this designed inequity. In this way, their thinking was reflective of critical race theory (CRT). CRT, which began with legal scholars, assumes that racism is endemic in this country and therefore legal discourse and policies that drive the various social systems are not neutral, nor can they adequately battle centuries of racial oppression for minoritized people (Brown & Jackson, 2013). The Black male educators in this study were quite aligned to critical race theorist Bell (1995) when he stated:

> We emphasize our marginality and try to turn it toward advantageous perspective building and concrete advocacy on behalf of those oppressed by race and other interlocking factors of gender, economic class, and sexual orientation. When I say we are marginalized, it is not because we are victim-mongers seeking sympathy in return for a sacrifice of pride. Rather, we see such identification as one of the only hopes of transformative resistance strategy (p. 902).
Indeed, these educators used the privileges they were able to gain in spite of being marginalized and were persistent in not only identifying oppression, but also in situating themselves in it and using education as a site of resistance (Freire, 2010).

This resistance did not preclude their gender. Yet gender seemed to serve as more of an undercurrent to the extent that it could not be disconnected from their race (Collins, 1991), especially when external sources made it central to their interactions. When they felt someone was treating them in a stereotypical fashion due to their gender (and race), they would adjust and respond as they saw fit. For example, consistent with Black male teacher stereotypes, there were times when they felt boxed in as classroom managers or felt a need to downplay their masculinity for others’ comfort. Nonetheless, it seemed what was of greater consequence was that they grounded themselves in what they felt was the enormously rich socio-historical context of Africans in the diaspora. This context was one they felt was crucial in knowing how to successfully combat the ills of the system and actualize oneself despite the oppression that comes with being a marginalized other (Brockenbrough, 2012) in society.

They infused this rich socio-historical knowledge into their pedagogical stances. In this manner, their actions toward social change through education were reminiscent of critical pedagogy (CP). On CP, Giroux (2010) stated the following, “Critical pedagogy attempts to understand how power works through the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge within particular institutional contexts and seeks to constitute students as informed subjects and social agents” (p.717). Where CRT rejects neutrality, CP follows suit. Giroux captured the thinking behind this connection when he stated, “Education cannot be neutral. It is always directive in its attempt to teach students to
inhabit a particular mode of agency…” (p. 718). In this manner, if education exists within racist structures, these educators understood the extent to which they were the “‘hosts’ of the oppressor” (Freire, 2010, p. 48) and therefore took up, with urgency, the responsibility to act as liberators and change agents on behalf of their students and future generations.

To frame these ideologies, consistent with the literature reviewed in chapter two, I will discuss the overall findings of this study in the context of the following thematic foci: recruitment and retention, pedagogy and practice, and masculinity and role modeling. In addition to the lens of intersectionality as a conceptual frame, I will employ CRT to discuss the implications for policy, practice and research. I will also posit recommendations and close with a discussion of the limitations of this study followed by researcher reflections and a concluding statement.

**On Recruitment and Retention**

In terms of recruitment and retention, both the literature and this study, primarily through the focus group data, shed light on factors that deter men of color from becoming educators, facets of the field that help attract them, and actions that could help them remain in the profession. Beginning with the deterrents, Graham & Erwin (2011) spoke with African-American male high school students to ascertain their perceptions of teaching as a career option and discovered three themes: negative perceptions of teachers and teaching, schools are oppressive institutions and African-American men are nonconformists.

The latter two themes aligned quite closely with this study’s participants’ notions around teaching as they consistently spoke about the oppressive nature of schooling from
a teacher’s perspective. For example, during the focus group, Francis candidly stated the following about his perception of how minoritized students’ viewed what happened to them in schools, “I think a lot of the time they fight us because they know that the system that we’re teaching them is bull---t. It’s not even that they fight you just because.”

Aligned with Freire’s (2010) notion of oppressors not wanting the oppressed to take ownership of their liberation, he also spoke on how this oppression impacts educators, “There’s this system in place to hold us back from taking ownership of the level of learning that our kids can have.”

In this same vein, Kwame also stated:

...and I think part of that is because there’s this cookie cutter way. The expectation is that everyone should be following that way. The way that the Black man teaches is not valued. Whether it’s how he approached the lesson, whether it’s the language or the discourse, and I think it’s really undervalued a lot of times.

Quite similarly, the students in Graham and Erwin’s (2011) study said they felt teachers devalue African-American male students’ experiences and that the students end up getting labeled and stigmatized as a result. This stigmatization has also been reported in research through Scott and Rodriguez’s (2015) study of African-American preservice teachers and their experiences in their teacher preparation program, as well as in special education literature (Annamma, Connor & Ferri, 2012; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Skiba, et al, 2006).

Correspondingly, Rashid highlighted that many men of color do not want to consider teaching as a profession due to a lack of trust they have built when it comes to interfacing with institutions which have largely served as racist and oppressive systems. (Graham & Erwin, 2011). For many, this hurdle may not only be insurmountable, but one
they have no interest in dismantling. However, some men, like the ones in this study, overcome this hurdle in order to share knowledge that might help others become more empowered.

Aligned with this was Brown and Butty’s (1999) finding that the only significant predictor of African American male teachers’ motivation to teach was “…defined as the desire to impart knowledge…” (p. 289). Though the researchers’ study did not specifically state that their participants had the desire to impart the critical lens utilized by the educators in this present study, they still demonstrated a common desire to build knowledge and share it with young people.

Consistent with Brown and Butty’s (1999) research, was the finding that all participants in this study, with the exception of one educator, were influenced by a family member or male teacher in their decision to pursue a career in teaching. Brown and Butty’s findings were also aligned with the participants’ appeal to helping young people, needing a job, and the ability to make contributions to humanity, as aspects of their decision-making processes. The participants also supported Lynn’s (2002) findings that Black men see teaching as an opportunity to engage in remedying social, political and economic barriers that preclude Black people from attaining success. Therefore, they tend to teach with a social justice orientation (Brown, 2009b) in order to fight racial inequality.

Brown and Butty (1999) also found that a better salary was one of the factors that Black male teachers cited as something that could contribute to making the profession more attractive for Black men. The present participants’ commentary on this aspect of the profession was mostly scant. However, the above average salary scale in New York City
(NEA, 2013; NYCDOE, 2017), as previously mentioned, may have contributed to this. What was not scant, however, was their discussion around the need for more male educators of color to build a network as they engage in the work of acting as agents of change.

This sentiment was also held by Brockenbrough’s (2012) participants, who expressed a need to have male-centered spaces to support their continued work as educators. If the fluid and cathartic manner in which these men spoke during the focus group was any indication of the need for these collectives within the field, then the time to create these spaces is long overdue. The men bonded instantly and spoke with candor and passion that was present in the individual interviews, but was more pronounced when they came together. Perhaps most striking was the way their conversation not only went beyond my research questions, but also flowed toward solution-based thinking. They shared ideas in a way that seemed to flow creatively and freely as a result of being in a shared and safe space with others that could identify with their experiences. This spoke volumes to clear actionable ways of creating viable pathways for minoritized men to reach the classroom and to help them grow and sustain themselves in the profession for the long-term.

Implications

The charge of structural racism with society has been levelled by many scholars, not the least of these being James Baldwin, one of the leading Black writers of the 20th century. In many ways, Calvin evoked Baldwin’s (2015) sentiments:

*There is a reason no one wants our children educated. When we attempt to do it ourselves, we find ourselves up against a vast machinery of racism which infects the country’s entire system of education. I know the machinery is vast, ruthless,*
cunning, and thinks of nothing, in fact, but itself, which means us, because we are a threat to the machinery” (p.143).

Yet, despite this ostensible threat that these Black male special educators seemingly pose as they seek to dismantle inequities in education, they persist. This persistence has great implications for policy and practice.

Some literature has asserted that since many men presume that teaching is “woman’s work” (Graham & Erwin, 2013), they do not pursue the profession. However, the educators in this study, in concert with much of the literature on Black male teachers, did not see this as a major deterrent. The implications, on the contrary, were that it was their experiences within the educational system that prevented them from seeing teaching as a desirable career choice. P-12 schools have been sites of oppression and marginalization (Freire, 2010), creating a lack of trust and disdain for returning to schools in a professional capacity. This implies that their public school experiences need much attention in order for recruiting men of color to prove fruitful.

When they do overcome these prohibitive outlooks, it has largely been through direct connections to other educators who help them begin to view schools in a different light. Yet, many men who choose to major in education, ultimately, do not end up in the profession (Lewis, Toldson & Moore, 2013). For those who do persist, it is the desire to help other minoritized students have a better experience that serves as a significant motivating force. In this manner, a bent toward activism and pursuing social justice through education is seemingly responsible for ushering them to the classroom.

Once the men are in the profession, there is still the question of retention. Though they are able to overcome their negative experiences within education to pursue their careers, this does not preclude them from experiencing marginalization, stereotypical
views and oppression. It seems that to help alleviate these taxing occurrences, the ability
to convene, collaborate and support one another in their efforts can go a long way in
ensuring that they endure in the profession.

*Mending the K-16 pipeline.* To these ends, an appropriate recommendation
seems to revolve around strengthening the K-16 pipeline. There is much research on the
negative outcomes that minoritized boys are prone to undergo as they progress through
the K-12 system (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams,
2014; Skiba, et al., 2006; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). If they are able to make it to
postsecondary schooling, they still face hurdles around academic achievement, stereotype
threat and inferiority complexes (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015). Tending to the pitfalls of
minoritized boys’ P-12 trajectories is an essential component in addressing these issues in
a proficient manner. For some researchers, this requires attending to the systemic and
structural mechanisms that have created inequities for this group (Rezai-Rashti &
Martino, 2010). Nonetheless, there are also measures that ought to be taken in the
transition process between secondary and postsecondary enrollment.

For those male students who enter postsecondary school majoring in education, it
appears policies that incentivize the completion of their degrees might prove fruitful.
This could include offering tuition assistance, intensive advisement, financial assistance
with certification exams and professional development, in concert with the local school
district, for those students who can commit to working in the school system for a certain
timeframe (e.g. three years). The incentives would then need to be coupled with local
school districts committing to pre-service supports which take on an apprenticeship
model where minoritized male students work directly with other minoritized male
educators for the duration of their studies and during their first two years in the classroom. In this manner, at a practical level, colleges and K-12 schools can tap into the positive influence that minoritized men can have on one another as they progress through the profession.

Additionally, education departments should seek intra-campus partnerships with other majors like African-American studies, sociology, political science, etc. where students who possibly have a social justice orientation (Brown, 2009b) might be prone to considering a career in education. Education could be a prime field for these social science majors to apply their knowledge. Additionally, this could mean creating new degree tracks where studying Black history, social and political issues can be linked with studying education to connect with the activist orientations that many minoritized male educators seem to assume. Further, these programs would do well to employ critical pedagogy, CRT and other frameworks that invite people to probe systemic inequalities and oppression in a constructive manner. As these young men move through these degree tracks, they should be afforded the opportunity to create spaces where they can unpack their own K-12 experiences, alongside current educators in the field, and spend time unpacking their teacher identities before they get in the classroom.

This type of holistic preparation connects to the significant knowledge base the participants in this study had on these matters. Consequently, providing this type of knowledge taps into the expertise of current teachers and empowers them to expand their reach in supporting and creating transformative spaces for minoritized men. These spaces could also include the pre-service teachers serving as mentors for minoritized boys of color in the schools where they work as apprentices. Ultimately, this would mean
direct mentorship for both K-12 students and preservice teachers, collective spaces for the mentor teachers, as well as spaces where current teachers can convene with their apprentices. In an effort to address the entire pipeline, the students, apprentices and mentor teachers could also convene to work through both issues and successes as they pertain to their experiences that are unique to their identities as they move through the K-16 to career pipeline. Additionally, the current teachers should receive added compensation and professional support to remain grounded in effective and reflective practices as they engage in this work. As Vincent stated, “*What worked for me was explaining my own narrative to other Black men.*” This model places Black men as the vital resources they are in engaging other Black men along the entire educational spectrum.

**On Pedagogy and Practice**

Consistent with the research, the educators in this study employed varying approaches to working with their students (Lynn, 2006), nonetheless, they all found it necessary to use teaching as a way to battle racial and socioeconomic barriers. Their lived experiences were key in not only developing this approach throughout their life trajectories, but also in delivering this frame of thought to their students. The participants’ work as educators was closely aligned with Banks’ (2010) equity pedagogy, which the author stated was evident “…when teachers modify their teaching in ways that will facilitate the academic achievement of students from diverse racial, cultural, gender, and social-class groups” (p. 23). Furthermore, consistent with CRT and critical pedagogy frameworks (Bell, 1995; Brown and Jackson, 2013; Freire, 2010; Giroux, 2010) these teachers’ pedagogical stances seemed to assert that teaching in a public school context,
particularly in an urban context like New York City, was inherently a political act. As I will highlight later, it appeared that the special education context did not seem to contribute directly to this positionality, as they seemed to make no differentiation between their special education students and the rest of the students they served. It seemed that through teaching, these educators not only helped students find their way toward liberation from oppressive and marginalized ways of living and being, but that they were able to make teaching a liberating act for themselves as well (Freire, 2010).

The educators in this study aligned with a few of the social justice orientations that Brown (2009b) examined as he spoke with the Black male teachers in his study. The Black liberalist orientation was inherent in their pedagogical styles in that they actively critiqued racist practices and infused their teaching with this critical consciousness (Lynn & Jennings, 2009). However, where this orientation departed from the styles described by the participants in this study was where it concerned developing an ability to adjust in society. In this manner, the participants were more aligned to the Black critical orientations where the focus was not on adjusting to society along the lines of race, gender and class, but that there needed to be deep governmental restructing in order to shift power dynamics. Like the Black male educators in Brown’s (2009b) study, the participants saw fit for pedagogical approaches that created spaces for critical thinking and probing societal norms and ills. When it came to curriculum, the participants were aligned with Brown’s (2009b) Black nationalists prototype where they also demonstrated a desire to push curriculum toward a focus on the African/American socio-historical record and help students develop a primary concern for the well-being and politics of their own communities (Freire, 2010).
Though never explicitly stated, the curriculum choices of the teachers in Brown’s (2009b) study were inherently aligned with culturally relevant pedagogy (Lynn & Jennings, 2009) and critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2010), which they recognized as essential in responding to the trauma that their students faced operating in marginalized communities. In this way, they contradicted the ‘Black male teacher as authoritarian’ stereotype and, as indicated in Lynn and Jennings’ study (2009), employed Black womanist ways of providing educational care by using classrooms as spaces of healing. As a result, though one cannot discount the role of their gender in how they enacted this type of practice in their classrooms, they still navigated the profession with an awareness that pulled from the friction that comes with functioning as a racialized other (Brockenbrough, 2012). There was a tension present in their pedagogies that stemmed from their meaning-making processes as they situated themselves as Pan/African men and the ways in which they enacted that meaning in the institutional structures of education.

This tension in their pedagogies can be likened to the socialization processes they have undergone through their schooling trajectories. The process fits within the triple quandary framework which posited that “… low-income African-American populations negotiate three distinct yet interrelated psychological realms of lived experience (Tyler, Boykin, & Dillhunt, 2005, p. 293). Though not all of the participants came from low-income households, the socialization process captured by this framework is still quite fitting.

The three realms of the triple quandary framework include the mainstream realm whereby all individuals in the United States have a tendency toward cultural themes
which are rooted in a European code of being. For the participants, this meant that they had acute awareness of the dominant culture (Delpit, 1988) in greater society, as well as its presence in schools (Asante, 2009). The second realm was referred to as the minority realm, which is where oppression and racial discrimination permeate the experiences of African-Americans. This second realm is where the tension began to build as these teachers developed a need to resist. Here is where words like “war,” arose in the participants’ discourses. The final realm was the Afro-cultural realm, where cultural themes originate from a West African worldview, begin to surface. This includes communalism, “defined as a predisposition toward the fundamental interdependence of people” (Tyler, Boykin, & Dillihunt, p. 294). Here is where the participants begin to channel their “fight” in a constructive way by tapping into their sociohistorical legacies and therefore engaging critical pedagogies (Freire, 2010; Giroux, 2010) that uplift their students and simultaneously uplift their own ways of knowing, being and thriving.

**Implications**

There are implications here for both research and practice. First, Black male educators have common experiences and common motivations that drive their work in the classroom, but they do not approach that work in one particular fashion, nor do they stick with one way of being as they engage in that work. There are many successful practices that have developed from great Black educators over the years. While there is a rich body of literature on these practices (Siddle-Walker, 2001; Siddle-Walker, 2000) how often are teachers of color getting to engage with this literature as they prepare for the classroom?
On being prepared for the classroom, Francis stated the following, “I think first and foremost, we have to redesign how we’re taught to teach. I think even the way we’re taught to teach can be very limiting and not really transformational.” He also asserted:

...I studied Dr. Lyles because he was a character. He was a father and a teacher at the same time, so he understands that. Hearing his narrative and hearing his story will actually drive me and push me forward – understanding that. We don’t have that. There’s no Black library of Black male teachers in which you can go back and look at oh, this guy taught in this school. He taught science. We don’t see s--t like that. There’s no coffee book of Black male teachers and pictures of them with a quick page that tells you about them.

The implications here are that not only are teacher preparation programs in need of major change in how they prepare minoritized teachers for the classroom, but again, there needs to be more connectivity between preparation that incorporates a lens on identity and the success that occurs on the ground in schools with educators from marginalized groups.

Through Black male scholars like Brown (2009b) and Lynn and Jennings (2009), literature has demonstrated that Black male teachers have unique contributions to the profession that require a very nuanced approach. There are many layers to understanding their work, through which frameworks like intersectionality (Collins, 2015) and CRT (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Lynn, 2002) become especially useful. Examining their contributions in a productive and transformative manner problematizes the “troubled Black youth” and “Black man as an endangered species” narratives common in popular discourse (Ferguson, 2001; Noguera, 2008). It is true that Black boys and men face significant challenges at the crossroads of their race and gender, particularly in places like the special education context where Black boys are disproportionately represented (Annamma, Connor & Ferri, 2012; Skiba, et al, 2006). However, as intersectionality implies (Collins, 2015), there are many layers embedded in how they navigate the
oppressive conditions they have to endure. There are other aspects of identity like
ethnicity, nationhood, class, etc. that traverse one another and whose crossroads may also
be sites of both oppression and resistance.

This type of complexity calls for research to bend and shape itself to suit the
multifaceted nature of examining Black male teachers in any context. It also calls for
those who work with Black male teachers in the field to become more adept at
responding to the needs that arise from these complexities in order to support the growth
of these educators while tapping into their ever-growing expertise in their craft (Tatum,
1992). To this latter point around expertise, the implications are that there are not enough
spaces where their voices are heard and their insights garnered to move the needle on
what generally accepted, successful practices and pedagogies look like. For if they were,
there might not be as much tension as there appears to be for these men as they actualize
their talents and move toward fulfilling their professional goals.

There are also implications for the special education context. The participants
seemed to make little distinction between what happens as a result of their work as
special educators and what happens when they are working with students who are not
directly a part of that context. In fact, it seemed that their work in special education
classrooms informed their work in general education spaces. This implies that perhaps
there needs to be less division between general and special education so that there is more
knowledge sharing between the two, particularly since the two contexts operate within
one system. This is even more pertinent since the literature has indicated that the
differences between LD and reading difficulties can be blurry (Lyon, 1995) and that there
are socio-cultural implications associated with the LD label (Sleeter, 2010), as well as global differences in the way this condition is construed (Grunke & Cavendish, 2016).

While it is beyond the scope of this discussion to review the extensive literature on the debate concerning the nature of LD, it is important to acknowledge that many students identified with LD do have specific learning needs that are best addressed by specialized instructional approaches (Berkeley, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2011). Additionally, one cannot discount the fact that all of the participants worked with students with high incidence disabilities, (e.g. learning disability (LD), emotional disturbance (ED), other health impairment (OHI)). However, if the participants had been working in spaces like New York City’s District 75, which serves students with more severe disabilities, the special education context may have been more central to their work and therefore the results of this study. Nevertheless, the participants’ expertise in the overall environment of New York City public schools may imply that the divide may be less apparent than research and practice often assume. The contextually situated, holistic view of students that these educators demonstrated, was not just an essential component of their pedagogies, but also one that more educators should be exposed to.

**Gaining expertise from the experts.** It seems that if one wants to know how to best educate minoritized students, they should consult minoritized teachers as the experts on such an endeavor. This is not to posit that minoritized educators have the monopoly on knowledge of how to successfully educate students with whom they have cultural and/or racial congruence. However, there still needs to be more investigation with these teachers in order to balance the discourse and problematize some of the issues that produce their minimal presence in the body of literature that exists. Moreover, it seems
that while Black male educators are indeed gaining more traction in education discourse (Brown, 2009a; Brown, 2009b; Lynn 2002, Lynn & Jennings, 2009; Brockenbrough, 2015; Brockenbrough, 2012) they are not nearly as present in the research and the places where major decisions are made for minoritized students as they should be. With voice as a guiding force of this study, it is important to underscore here, the force of hearing from those who have gained valuable professional knowledge and hold personal knowledge of what it means to be a marginalized student.

There needs to be increased research that employs critical frameworks like intersectionality and CRT to probe the experiences of Black male educators in the field. In this manner, the dominant, essentializing narratives around this group can be shattered and there can be a more nuanced approach to researching this group and as a result, a more nuanced view of their experiences and ways of growing as pedagogues can be consulted. As Francis stated:

*I think the major thing is that we have to redesign. Everyone says universities and teaching colleges need to be redesigned anyway. In regards to being a Black male, you need to be really tailored. Number one, you have to be connected to your past experiences. Number two, not only do you need to understand the content, understand the basics because they are extremely important – I wouldn’t take that away. However, I think that looking at the kid holistically and actually studying other Black people – I think one thing – we come from a people that I think thrive off of understanding who has done things before us.*

As with the previous recommendation posited herein, this would involve engaging minoritized teachers in general, and minoritized male teachers in particular, in both research and the design of teacher preparation programs that prepare teachers for urban school spaces. It would also involve these programs employing the literature on Black teachers from education historians (i.e. Siddle-Walker, 2001) to understand the best practices that minoritized teachers have found successful for minoritized students
over time. For example, the practices of the participants in this study were very well aligned with Siddle-Walker’s (2001) discussion of the effective practices of Black teachers in the segregated south. This included practices like forming professional coalitions of Black teachers, utilizing deep connections to the communities in which the teachers worked and linking curriculum with student needs. To these ends, it seems that there needs to be less division within education in order to build a greater knowledge base to best serve students, particularly those from marginalized groups.

**Breaking silos between special and general education.** In addition to tapping into the expertise of Black male educators, the field would also do well to probe the divide that seems to exist between special and general education. This would involve more knowledge sharing between the two facets of the field both in K-12 schools and in the academy, particularly as it applies to education of students with high-incidence disabilities. Drawing from the CRT framework, DisCrit was introduced by scholars who wished to challenge the intersections of race and dis/ability. Annamma, Connor and Ferri (2012) asserted that, “DisCrit explores ways in which both race and ability are socially constructed and interdependent” (p. 5).

Making this framework central to how practitioners are exposed to special education could help dismantle the notion that special educators are the only ones who need to concern themselves with special education (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2012) while also expanding special educators’ perceptions of how concepts of race and ability intersect for students with disabilities. This framework could help address the issues of misdiagnosis that discourage educators like Kwame from fully utilizing IEPs, while
highlighting the ways to actually re-conceptualize dis/ability for those who do go through their school trajectories with special education labels.

Additionally, blending DisCrit with the notion of the negligible presence of special education in the participants’ larger conversations on race and challenging the status quo through their work as educators, calls to mind the notion of a master status. Sociologist Hughes (1945) stated:

The most striking illustration in our society is offered by the Negro who qualifies for one of the traditional professions. Membership in the Negro races, as defined in American mores and/or law, may be called a master status-determining trait. It tends to overpower, in most crucial situations, any other characteristics which might run counter to it (p. 357)

This concept begs the question whether the “invisibility” of high incidence disabilities bestows the racial part of one’s identity with the “master status” to the point that these special educators did not see it necessary to center students’ special education status as part of their pedagogical choices. It suggests that, even with the knowledge that minoritized students are disproportionately labeled (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2012; Harry & Klingner, 2014), these educators consider the race-based oppression their students will face as more pressing than the issues they face donning disability labels within the school system. This is particularly the case since students will have to deal with oppression as a result of their race both within schools and in greater society, whereas they will likely deal with oppression from their disability status mostly within schools.

To probe this line of inquiry, research should seek to understand how the intersections of race, gender and disability impact both students as well as the teachers who work with them. This is particularly helpful in the New York City public school
context where classrooms with general and special education students are a major part of the system’s design. This research could inform how special education looks on the ground as well as help in breaking the silos between special education and general education.

**On Masculinity and Role-Modeling**

They think it’s only because you’re Black... ~Vincent
...not because you’re skilled. ~Francis

The question of the Black male teacher serving as a role model for troubled Black boys in schools has been probed by the research. Rezai-Rashti and Martino (2010), for example, problematized this notion of homogenizing Black men. They also highlighted that since systemic issues have caused the underachievement issues that Black boys face, insinuating that Black men can solve the problem through role-modeling is faulty at best. Similarly, the men in this study did not cite role modeling as the sole reason that they got into teaching, nor as the reason they stay. While they did own that they felt the need to serve as leaders for their students, they saw this leadership through the lens of presenting a critical examination of society as often as possible, as the way to achieve that aim. This connected back to Rezai-Rashti and Martino’s (2010) work where they highlighted the need to consider teachers’ multiple identities and how those identities contend with structural inequalities.

Brockenbrough (2012) did this work and used his study as a “critique of patriarchal regimes within Black social contexts” (p. 6). While he unearthed tensions around gender dynamics between his Black male participants and their White female administrators/colleagues, the participants in this study did not speak to these issues in the same way. Brockenbrough’s (2012) findings centered on issues around an inattention
to male privilege, the need for more male-centered spaces and conflict with female counterparts in schools. The participants in this study did acknowledge a need for more male centered spaces, however, only one participant, Francis, spoke about gender dynamics in the workplace. Francis’ contention connected to Brockenbrough’s (2015) study *Emasculation Blues* where his participants felt the weight of “conflictual encounters with women in the workplace” (p. 3). For Francis, he felt the need to tone down his masculinity, particularly when working with White colleagues, so as not to mistakenly come off as abrasive or aggressive. This stemmed from his knowledge of stereotypical views of Black masculinity and a desire to prioritize his message being received well in order to protect his professional reputation.

Yet another aspect of the masculinity and role-modeling literature was “the Black man as classroom manager” stereotype (Brockenbrough, 2012). During this study’s focus group, the men highlighted that they are often valued for their classroom management skills, but the problem was not just in the fact that the breadth of their expertise as teachers began and ended with this skill. They problematized this further by stating that this was not really valued as a skill they actually worked hard to develop. Rather, this skill was taken for granted and it was assumed that it was something they innately knew how to do as a function of their race and gender. They also probed the language of “managing a class” and tied it to the “overseer vs liberator” paradigm that was revealed in analysis, whereby they often felt that the classroom management skill was something that became part of an “overseer” role that was expected of them. Consequently, similar to Brockenbrough’s (2015) and Eichinger’s (2000) studies, this gender based expectation was a source of stress for them.
This connected to Scott and Rodriguez’s (2015) finding where their participants found stress in having to consistently “grapple” with the balancing act of feeling the need to be on the defense against stereotypical perceptions while also focusing on honing their crafts. Nonetheless, their participants, like the ones in the present study, persisted. They did so not out of a need to serve as role models (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010) per se, but to protect others from the strain of facing stereotypes and other effects of marginalization in academic settings. In this manner, just as Scott and Rodriguez’s (2015) analysis suggested, while their participants did not assert that race had a direct impact on their decision to teach, it did seem to play an indirect role in their decision-making processes; the same was true in this study as well.

**Implications**

These issues point to what Brockenbrough (2012) aptly suggested, which was a need to examine the “unique professional and psychosocial challenges that may affect Black men in the profession” (p. 30). Part of that work can be done in the academy, as Scott and Rodriguez (2015) recommended, “Teacher education programs must be ground zero in modeling critical pedagogy that recognizes the voice of color and the social context of lived experiences to foster and achieve social justice” (p. 712). Not only does this require problematizing the ‘Black men as role-model paradigm’, which is embedded in the call for having more Black men in classrooms, but it also necessitates richer investigations around Black male identity and its expressions throughout the K-16 trajectory.

Without a critical (Bell, 1995; Freire, 2010; Giroux, 2010) and intersectional (Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1991) view of these issues, one could argue that structural
inequalities will persist. The policies that provide the engine for the educational system to run, therefore need to be informed by research which takes identity into account. Schools also need to be aware of how interlocking identities contend with systems of oppression and how this plays out in classrooms for both teachers and students (Collins, 2015; Freire, 2010).

Identity-responsive research and practice. The kind of awareness needed goes beyond recognition of surface-level cultural characteristics. In order to fully embrace the complex nature of Black male identity and how it actualizes in the teaching context, it is important to take an identity-responsive approach. This approach holds roots in the feminist epistemologies of intersectionality (Collins, 2015) while acknowledging that teaching is not only a socially mediated act (Asante, 2009; Gee, 2000), but that an individual brings their entire self to this act. Therefore, it is of great import that one considers not only students holistically, but teachers as well.

In this light, identity responsiveness probes the call for teachers who work with CLD groups to engage in culturally responsive practices (Gay, 2002; Irvine, 2000) by asking the same from researchers who study minoritized populations in education and those who prepare teachers for the classroom, particularly in urban spaces. Identity responsiveness pushes the notion of cultural responsiveness which, one can argue, makes one unconsciously attribute this approach to one that is only necessary in the urban context (i.e. contexts where minoritized students predominate) and therefore not find it applicable in other contexts. One could also assert that culture is but one aspect of a person’s identity and therefore limits one’s view of who a person is.
An identity-responsive approach posits that scholars and teachers not only need to consider the identities of the researched, or the students that they might work with, but also their own identities and how they converge and/or diverge from the identities of others. In the case of research, this opens up the space to release lines of investigation from essentializing Black men, or other marginalized groups. It pushes the researcher to consider identity construction both from the individual’s standpoint and the viewpoint of society and then examine both the tensions and areas of opportunity that exist at that intersection.

Including more Black male educators’ voices in research can also impact practice in that it can highlight ways in which teacher education can be more responsive to identity. As teachers are asked to be culturally responsive (Gay, 2002; Irvine, 2000) when working with students from CLD groups, an identity-responsive approach pushes the envelope of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) by extending it to consider teachers’ entire identity as they prepare for the classroom. In this way, the sociocultural, contextually complex nature of this group’s identities and how they impact their teaching are considered (Gee, 2000). Not only are teacher education programs able to do a more holistic job in preparing teachers for the classroom, but in turn, teachers can learn how to be more sensitive to these aspects of students’ lives as they move into the classroom to work with the school system’s most vulnerable populations. As hooks (1993) stated, “Professors who embrace the challenge of self-actualization will be better able to create pedagogical practices that engage students, providing them with ways of knowing that enhance their capacity to live fully and deeply” (p. 22). Therefore, this approach is not
only useful for minoritized groups, but all groups, since identity is something that is applicable no matter what culture, race or creed one comes from.

Additionally, this type of approach helps to problematize popular assumptions and stereotypes about Black male teachers and consequently their roles in schools (Brockenbrough, 2015). Notions of Black men not having strong intellectual acumen (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015) or primarily serving as disciplinarians in schools (Brockenbrough, 2012) can be unpacked and dispelled. This is important work not only for the Black men themselves, but also for the professors who prepare them and the colleagues who will enter the teaching force with them.

Lastly, for administrators who operate school buildings and are charged with the responsibility of serving as teacher mentors and leaders of schools, they too will need to attend to the needs of their staff in a more holistic fashion. Through specially designed professional development and within education administration programs, current principals and aspiring principals alike, with an identity-responsive approach, will be able to prepare for these roles by probing their own identities. In so doing they can critically examine how their identities intersect with the identities of others (i.e. teachers, students and parents) as well as the systems in which those identities operate. Through this type of engagement on the ground and through research, an identity responsive approach can address the spectrum of issues as they manifest throughout the educational system from top to bottom.

**Limitations**

The primary limitation of this research was that there were only six people involved in this study. The original aim of the study was 10 participants and I will never
know if the additional four participants would have made a difference in the findings. This is particularly the case as I consider the special education context in New York City public schools, which as aforementioned, includes District 75 where students with more low-incidence disabilities are educated. One could surmise that by including men of color who teach in this sector of the system could have changed the discourse and centered it more directly on issues that pertain directly to special education.

Further, sampling bias could also be a factor to take into account since the participants came through personal connections. This could have produced a rather select group who shared similarities which contributed to the convergent findings among them. To address this, my focus was on keeping my discussion of the findings firmly contextualized. As Patton (1999) stated, “The problem is not one of dealing with a distorted or biased sample, but rather one of clearly delineating the purpose and limitations of the sample studied…” (p.1198). In this manner, the hope was to minimalize any bias that may have occurred.

Yet another limitation was that the study took place in a singular setting. While New York City is the largest public school system in the country and findings in this setting could have implications for other large urban systems, they are not all created equal. To this effect, it might be helpful to pursue this type of research in other settings that are both similar and dissimilar to New York City. In this way, a collection of a richer set of data could lead to more insightful and nuanced results.

Nonetheless, one could make the argument that with Black male special educators comprising such a small segment of the teaching population, larger sample sizes or collection across a wide range of settings may not be completely necessary within one
single study. Additionally, generalizability was not necessarily the goal of this work. The hope was to gain as much richness as possible through data collection to create a theoretical statement that could serve as a springboard to push the discourse around the matters raised herein. At the very least, the data led to a theoretical statement that answered the research questions but also provided understanding and insight well beyond the confines of those questions.

Another limitation is that I only spoke with Black men to gain their perspectives. It might have been helpful to speak with others with whom they work to gain their input, particularly as it pertains to working with students. However, by speaking solely with Black men, it placed them as the experts of their own experiences. Additionally, this allowed me to meet a major aim of the study which was to insert Black male educators’ expertise into the discourse where their voices are often not heard.

**Researcher Reflections**

This study took place in a setting that I am familiar with on many levels. I was educated in NYC public schools, I taught there, and have a son who is being educated there. This could call into question my ability to remain neutral (Patton, 2002). However, it significantly helped me in terms of my rapport and the openness with which the participants shared their experiences. There were times when I wondered if my gender was a barrier to their willingness to be open with me, particularly as it pertained to their experiences with female teachers and administrators. This was especially present in my mind as the majority of the studies in this line of research were conducted by Black men. To this end, I wondered if survey data might have been a helpful addition to the research design. However, I feel confident that my participants divulged what they needed to
considering the focus of the study and the questions that were posed. I also felt that the focus group truly allowed for information to arise that did not surface in the individual interviews. This was evident in the synergy that organically occurred within their collective conversation. This synergy helped bring about findings that went beyond my questions, but linked rather tightly with the current discourse in the literature around recruitment and retention.

I also made a concerted effort not to take for granted our shared experience and cultural/racial connections. As Delgado-Gaitan (1993) reflected in her work, “Sharing the same ethnic background as the participants does not necessarily make the researcher more knowledgeable about the meanings of the participants’ feelings, values and practices” (p. 391). To this end, I was conscious of probing the participants, not unnecessarily, but just to ensure that I did not presume understanding. This was particularly challenging, however, because I identified quite significantly with many of their experiences, viewpoints, perceptions and approaches to their work as educators. Awareness of my positionality and role as a researcher, therefore, became that much more imperative for me, in a manner which Delgado-Gaitain expressed when she stated, “The role of the researcher in relation to the researched is particularly significant when disenfranchised communities are attempting to exercise their own power” (p. 409).

Though I was able to remain neutral while participants shared their experiences with me (Patton, 2002), I was very pleased to see the extent to which their socio-historical knowledge and critical mindsets were infused in their practices. Knowing that schools are not often receptive to critical stances and that this often causes significant burnout for teachers who come to this work with a critical eye, it was refreshing to see
that these men not only persist, but did not show any signs for exiting the profession. This left me to ponder my own work as a teacher educator and researcher and someone who supports the presence of more quality minoritized teachers of color in public schools both in New York City and beyond.

Their voices, though they were likely not aware of this, served as encouragement for me to further this type of research and continue urging teachers to place a critical gaze on the nation’s school system(s). Considering the fears among marginalized groups that are being engendered due to the present political climate at the federal level, it is even more pertinent for teachers to use their positions in schools and in communities as sites of resistance. The educators in this study called to mind the work of Asante (2009) who stated, “Education is fundamentally a social phenomenon whose ultimate purpose is to socialize the learner; to send a child to school is to prepare that child to become part of a social group” (p. 39). Further, Asante noted, “Schools are reflective of the societies that develop them (i.e., a White supremacist-dominated society will develop a White supremacist educational system)” (p.39). To these ends, these men gave me hope that with resistance and an informed critical perspective, teachers can serve as agents of change within their spheres of influence. With this resistance to the oppression and White supremacist ideals (Asante, 1999) their students experience both in society and in school, teachers can create a better climate on the ground for students, their families and their communities.

**Conclusion**

With federal policies that are increasing fear toward “the other” (i.e. immigrant and religious groups who have been marginalized) and indicating a move toward
increased privatization of education, the present political climate leaves much room for worry regarding the present and future state of our country. Critical pedagogy, the framework that the participants in this study seem to be heavily aligned with, offers promise in that it makes, “the distinction between systematic education which can only be changed by political power, and educational projects, which should be carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them” (Freire, 2010, p. 54). This means that marginalized people cannot rely on systems to change, it is through active engagement in their own “educational projects” that they can begin to turn oppression on its head.

Studies like this and my own positionality as a minoritized female researcher and teacher educator, are the types of projects that can lead the intellectual efforts necessary to support active social change. It is through engaging in dialogue and pushing that dialogue into spaces where it is often not heard, that the work can begin. As Freire (2010) stated:

It is only when the oppressed find the oppressor out and become involved in the organized struggle for their liberation that they begin to believe in themselves. This discovery cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere activism, but must include serious reflection: only then will it be praxis (p. 65).

By making their teaching sites of resistance, these men engage in a pedagogy that is dialectical. It uplifts the students with whom they work and edifies their own stances as minoritized men who have to navigate multiple systems of oppression. In the spirit of hooks (1994), they consciously enact a sense of “liberatory education that connects the will to know with the will to become” (p. 19). Their sheer sense of will in gaining a solid socio-cultural knowledge base and using that knowledge to frame their passions for
becoming transformational leaders in education imbues the system with a sense of hope that is not only necessary today, but shows promise for tomorrow.
References


**Appendix A: Interview Guide (Brockenbrough, 2012; Patton, 2002)**

In order to meet the goal of giving voice to Black male special educators and remain rooted in narrative thinking and African-American oral traditions, this interview guide (Patton, 2002) lists open-ended questions for each phase of the interviewing process. The questions are designed to provide a common focus across all interviews, while encouraging a conversational tone through which each participant can reconstruct their experiences and share their perspectives freely (Patton, 2002). Follow-up extensions to the questions are provided in bullets as a safeguard, if necessary, to help ensure that the stories that emerge remain aligned with the study's focus, but also capture depth within the topics that will be explored.

**First in-depth Interview Guide: Focused Life History & Background**

1. **Background**

1) How long have you been teaching and in what geographic locations and schools have you taught?

2) Tell me about your education history.

   . K-12 experiences

   . Undergraduate institution major(s)/experiences

   . Graduate institution, degrees, experiences

   . Pre-service teacher training

   . Teaching certification(s)

3) Tell me about how you got into teaching.

   . Entry to teaching/when the decision to teach was made
. Other career considerations

. Why special education

4) What responses did you receive from others (family, friends, etc.) when you decided to become a special educator?

II. Identities

5) This study is focusing on the experiences of black male special educators, however I do not want to assume that you identify yourself with these labels. What do you consider to be the main features of your identity (i.e. race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, sexuality, etc)?

. Relationship between these identities

. Relationship between identities and worldview

Is there anything else we haven’t covered in the topics discussed so far that you think I need to consider? Explain.

6) Is there anything else we haven’t covered in the topics discussed so far that you think I should consider? Explain.

Second in-depth Interview Guide: Details of the Pedagogical Experience

1) When we last met you noted [identities from prior interview] as the main features of your identity. How have these identities influenced your decision to teach and your experiences within the profession?

. Teaching practices (i.e. pedagogical stance, curriculum design, classroom management, instructional strategies, etc.)

. Relationships and interactions with students (by race, gender, grade, etc.)

. Relationships with colleagues and administrators
2) Tell me about the goals you set for yourself as you entered the profession.
   . Evolution of goals as career has progressed
   . Influence of [identities from prior interview] on goals
   . Methods for actualizing goals

3) What types of support networks have you had access to and do they provide support
   that is specific to the goals you set?
   . Support networks’ responsiveness to needs as a [identities from prior interview]
     special educator
   . Support structures or networks not currently in place that would be beneficial for
     [identities from prior interview] teachers/special educators

4) Is there anything else we haven’t covered in the topics discussed so far that you think
   I should consider? Explain.

Third in-depth Interview Guide: Collective Reflection and Meaning-Making, The
Focus Group

This interview opened up with a brief overview of preliminary findings and an open
discussion of participants’ thoughts on the findings and how reflective they were of their
experiences.