Pathways to Teaching: An Examination of Black Females' Pursuits of Careers as K-12 Teachers

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Abstract
White, female, middle-class teachers dominate the education field. As a result, Black female teachers are underrepresented in the teaching field. Statistically, Black female teachers represent 7.7% of the United States teaching force, while White female teachers make up over 60% of the American teaching workforce. With the aim of diversifying the teaching pool, this phenomenological study explored the lived K-12 and collegiate educational experiences of Black female in-service teachers in order to gain insight about their vocational choices to become educators. Constant comparative data analysis revealed four major themes. The results of this study have implications for teacher education programs and educational policy.

Introduction

Black teachers are disproportionally underrepresented within the American K-12 public school system. In fact, over the past years, the number of Black teachers has drastically declined (Ingersoll; 2011; Milner & Howard, 2004). This alarming decrease is portrayed by the current number of African American teachers within American public schools. Although African Americans comprise 12% of the general U.S. population, African American teachers make up only approximately 8% of the teaching force (NCES, 2010).

Considering that there are over 3 million public school teachers, 8% is a particularly alarming percentage. In contrast to the minimal presence of Black teachers, presently, the education field is dominated by White, middle-class teachers (NCES, 2010), particularly White female teachers (Landsman & Lewis, 2011). Although teaching is a female-dominated profession, the Black female population is not proportional to that of the White female population. In fact, Black female teachers represent 7.7% of the United States teaching force, while White female teachers make up over 60% of the American teacher workforce (Lewis & Toldson, 2013). This disproportionality, which engenders the existence of a largely homogenous teaching force, is problematic considering an increasingly diverse student population (Madkins, 2011; Vilegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012).

        In order to advocate for a more diverse teaching force, the purpose of this study is to examine the K-12 and collegiate educational experiences of Black female in-service teachers in order to gain insight about their vocational choice to become classroom teachers. Providing a vehicle for the dissemination of their authentic, lived educational experiences, this study adds to the body of literature on Black female educators and informs research on teacher education programs and educational policy in hopes of increasing the overall number of teachers of color.

Literature Review

Presently, a large number of Black students are taught by a predominately White, female, monolinguistic, middle-class teaching force, a teaching force in which many teachers indicate they do not see color and advocate for a colorblind classroom (Landsman & Lewis, 2011). While this view of the classroom is often held with the best of intentions, not seeing color suggests one does not acknowledge students, their individual cultures, dialects, environments, backgrounds,

heritage, and different learning styles. Though race is not the determining factor of whether a White or a Black teacher can properly educate a Black student, acknowledging or denying a student's cultural background may impact how well that student performs in the classroom (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). In short, diversifying the teaching force permits the recognition and inclusion of diverse cultures and learning styles within the classroom.

Substantiating this claim, Hale-Benson (1986) asserts, "one's culture affects one's cognitive processes" (p. 21). Her theory of knowledge is based on the importance of culture and its major role in how one acquires knowledge. Villegas and Irvine (2010) also posit the shared cultural experiences of teachers and students of color have the potential to improve academic outcomes and school experiences of these learners. If fact, research shows that racial pairing (Dee, 2004) positively influences the academic outcome of Black students (Dee, 2004; Eddy & Easton-Brooks, 2011; Evans, 1992; Pitts, 2007). These claims do not suggest the presence of a Black teacher alone will improve the academic performance of Black students, nor do they argue that a White teacher is incapable of improving the academic achievement of Black students. Instead, they assert the importance of a teacher's cultural competency when teaching Black students (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). The ability to assist students in making connections between culture (home) and curriculum (school), increasing their academic standing, is the primary focus. While not all Black teachers will share the same cultural background, knowledge and experiences as their Black students, many Black teachers, more so than White teachers, are familiar with the unique cultural norms and practices of the Black community (Villegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012).

The need for this research lies in the existence of a largely middle-class, homogenous teaching force and an

increasingly diverse student population (Madkins, 2011; Vilegas, Strom, & Lucas, 2012). In fact, there exists a racial/ethnic gap between students and their teachers, an enduring gap which continues to widen (McNulty & Brown, 2009). With a predominately White and female teacher workforce (Landsman & Lewis, 2011), this study acknowledges the need for more teachers of color inside U.S. public school classrooms and advocates Black teachers, particularly Black female teachers, are needed in K-12 classrooms to serve as role models, connect curriculum and culture, and fill vacant teaching positions in many high-poverty, ethnically-diverse urban schools with high teacher-turnover rates (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton, & Freitas, 2010).

As noted, Black teachers are disproportionately underrepresented in the American teaching force when compared to their White counterparts (Madkins, 2011). With an increasingly White, female, and middle-class teaching force and an emergently diverse student population, the current homogenous teaching workforce must be more reflective of both a diverse student population and the American society. This study examines a particular subgroup (Black female in-service teachers) that would potentially assist in diversifying the teaching field, affirming that in order to increase the pool of teachers of color, knowledge must be gained regarding their pathways into the K-12 classroom.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes social-cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994) to examine the lived K-12 and collegiate educational experiences of Black female in-service teachers in order to gain insight regarding their decision to become educators. Social cognitive career theory (SCCT) posits that one's measure of self-efficacy, expectation of outcomes, and representation of goals are factors, which guide career selection (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). More

specifically, social cognitive career theory emphasizes the relationship between variables (e.g., self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and goals) and how these variables interact with other features of a person and his or her environment (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, social support, and barriers), resulting in the maturation of career interests (Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1996; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). According to SCCT, interest in a career may develop when a person experiences desirable outcomes and gains skills and competencies while engaged in the career or participating in activities related to the career. Conversely, a person may reject a particular career or develop decreased interest when experiencing negative professional outcomes. Through these experiences, an individual pursuing a career route may have positive or negative outcome expectations. Therefore, an individual's knowledge, mental schema, and experiences associated with a particular field constitute critical information towards their decision to adopt that career as a profession of choice.

Methods

Research Design
The study took place in the southeastern region of the United States. Phenomenology was employed as a methodological approach, used to investigate the lived educational experiences of Black females who chose teaching as a profession (Creswell, 2013). A phenomenological study was selected because this method uses in-depth, explorative interviews in order to gain a deep understanding and uncover the essence of participants' experiences (Patton, 2002). The following research questions were posed in order to uncover the essence of the phenomenon:

What are the K-12 and collegiate educational experiences of Black female in-service teachers?

Considering Black female in-service teachers' K-12 and collegiate educational experiences, how do these

educators describe their decision to enter the teaching profession?

Participants

Pseudonyms were used for all six participates in this study. The study used purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants. From the head researcher's contacts, one Black female teacher was initially recruited for this study. Using the contacts of this initial participant, other Black female educators from the same school district and surrounding district were requested as participants in the study. Though all six participants taught in the same major city, one participant taught at a private school, while the remaining five participants taught in different public schools within the same district. In order to participate in the study the participants had to be a Black, female in-service teacher. In addition, teachers' years of teaching experience was also a notable criterion. Participating educators had to occupy the classroom for at least 3 years and no more than 10 years. Teachers with a minimum of three years teaching experience were solicited because often, new teachers leave the classroom within three years of entering the profession (Brill & McCartney, 2008; Donaldson, 2012; Duarte, 2000). A maximum of ten years of teaching experience was selected for participants because within one decade teacher education programs, teacher licensure requirements and the education field as a whole may drastically alter, which directly and indirectly engenders local, national and international policy changes (Bales, 2006; Schuster, 2012; Yong, 2010). Narrowing the scope of the study, teachers who went through an alternative certification program were not solicited because of the study's focus on teacher education experiences in college that served as a direct route into the classroom. Table 1 provides information about the six Black female participants.

Table 1: Black female in-service teachers' information

Participant	Grade Ban	Content	School type
Tami	4th	General	Private
Ashley	7th	Science	Public
Tyra	9th	Mathematics	Public
Megan	9th	Social Studies	Public
Kimberly	10th	Biology	Public
Crystal	12th	English	Public

Data Collection

The first author gathered all data. In order to collect data, the educators participated in one in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured interview, which lasted between 60-90 minutes. During data collection, participants were permitted to divulge as much or as little information as they deemed necessary. After the data were transcribed, member checking was utilized to ensure accuracy of data (Charmaz, 2006). Participants reviewed their transcribed interviews, offering clarification and additional insight.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed by the researchers using a constant comparative coding method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Specifically open and axial coding were applied when reading transcripts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Throughout this process, data was constantly compared with data, data with codes, and codes with codes. To this end, categories were formed from codes and themes from categories.

Investigotor triangulation was utilized to enusure the quality and validity of data analysis (Denzin, 1978). Before

critically analyzing and interpreting the data, the researchers individually read the transcriptions in their entirety, acknowledging and rejecting all preconceived ideas and biases. The researchers each evaluated the data, independently constructing codes that were represented in the data. Next, the researchers compared their analyses and determined commonalities among their respective codes. Collectively, the researchers grouped the existing codes to develop categories. Finally, categories were used to solidify major themes. These themes were discussed until consensus was reached.

Findings

When analyzing the data, certain categories emerged which ultimately formed into themes. As stated, numerous codes were initially identified. From these codes, eight categories were developed. Through this coding process, analysis began broad and increasingly narrowed (inductive data analysis) as certain ideas were consistently mentioned in all interviews. At the end of the process, four major themes emerged from the data: 1) effective and/or ineffective teachers shaped Black females' ideas of classroom teachers; 2) positive and negative student-teaching experiences offered real-world classroom scenarios; 3) the absence or presence of institutional support affected Black females entry into the classroom; and 4) a love of school, working with kids, and teaching influenced Black females' career path.

Effective and Ineffective Teachers

All six participants recounted their positive and negative experiences with classroom teachers (i.e., effective and ineffective teachers) and how exposure to these different teaching styles affected their classroom practices and their desire to enter the teaching field. Tami spoke of her discontent for her fourth grade teacher and how her teachers'

ineffectiveness compelled her to become the quality teacher she was denied during primary education. She explained:

I didn't really like my fourth grade teacher…. She's [was a] witch and it's funny because   I am a fourth grade teacher now. You never forget negative experiences so I don't think   that anything hindered [my pursuit of teaching] because if anything that just motivated   me   to do a much better job than I felt like I had when I was in that grade.

Tami's feelings towards her detached and unfriendly fourth grade teacher resemble the sentiments of many of the participants in this study. Crystal recounted her equally disconcerting experiences in K-12 education. She narrates how her White male teacher failed to create a safe and equitable learning environment that promotes student success. Crystal described her experiences in the detailed account below.

I remember one time in six grade I was sitting by a heater and it started to like smell smoky or something, and the kids were like oh my gosh Alicia your weave is on fire. My teacher, granted I didn't wear weave, but my teacher didn't say anything to back me up. Another time, a student called me the "n" word and I was like where is the response. The teacher did nothing, and I was like this isn't how it's supposed to be.

Similar to Tami, Crystals' negative educational experience served as a catalyst, also compelling her to become an effective teacher once entering the classroom. With her experience with an ineffective teacher in mind, she further explained how as a sixth grade student she conceptualized her future role as a classroom teacher. She firmly stated, "I don't care if you are Black, or White whatever, stand up for somebody, and I was like man I want to be that teacher in high school whose student can look upon and be like I can

trust her; I can relate to her let me go talk to her about something."

Tyra, having a more positive frame of reference, expressed how her teacher shaped her ideas of an effective classroom teacher. Through interactions with her twelfth grade teacher, Tyra saw first-hand an appropriate teacher disposition. Tyra's teacher displayed compassion, empathy, and an ability to identify with her students, directly and indirectly promoting active student learning and engagement. Her teacher's actions and demeanor assisted in Tyra's development and pursuit of a teaching career. Tyra description of her teacher captures elements of an effective teacher:

[My twelfth grade teacher] always just made [learning] fun. She took special interest in the kids that generally people would just let them sit in the back of the classroom and not do anything. There was something about her that made everybody even the most obstinate student engaged, enjoying and comply so and that's what I wanted to do. Like when I decided I was going to be a teacher. Well, I want to be like her.

Student teaching experiences also shaped Black females' outlook of the teaching field.

Student Teaching

As a requirement of teacher education programs, student teaching offered real world, hands-on application. Beyond textbook knowledge, pedagogical practices and student behavior revealed the authentic experiences of classroom teachers, which prepared the participants in this study for their future profession. All the participants expressed the importance of their student teaching experiences and how these experiences framed their understanding of the teaching profession. Kimberly recounted a negative encounter with a student that caused her to rethink her decision to become a

classroom teacher. She said, "When I had to [serve my] internship, this girl called me a bitch. I was like I don't know about this, but [her words] kind of made me rethink [teaching], that one little girl. I mean you don't expect that. [Student teaching] made me think this is what I'm about to be dealing with because that was the demographic I wanted too…." This authentic exchange between Kimberly and her student showed Kimberly the often unmentioned realities of teaching. In addition to disseminating content knowledge, Kimberly quickly learned how teachers also have to manage student behavior. This revelation was achievable through intensive, realistic, and high quality student teaching experiences in settings where Kimberly was able to connect theory and practice and interact with diverse students, leading her to question and truly consider her place within the education field.

Megan's real-world student teaching experience also aided her in adopting the role of a classroom teacher, helping her decide whether teaching was an appropriate career route. She taught classroom lessons, interacted with students, and received positive feedback from cooperating teachers. During student teaching, Megan was able to hone and perfect her skills and competencies as a classroom teacher. Experiencing positive outcomes while student teaching, her hands-on classroom experiences solidified her career route. Megan explained what drew her to the classroom by outlining her student teaching experiences. She said:

[Student teaching] went great and I got positive reinforcement, positive feedback from everyone, from the teacher in that classroom. I did a lesson there, and I saw success and so then I said it's affirming I have been successful from here on out in every lesson that I have done. I said obviously this must be right, stick with it.

Institutional Support

All of the Black female teachers spoke about the absence or presence of institutional support during their college years and how these factors either assisted or delayed their matriculation through their teacher education program. The level of institutional support influenced the length of time it took Black females to gain entry into the classroom. Crystal specifically experienced great difficulty in gaining entry into the classroom. Primarily, lack of adequate teacher preparation prevented her from initially passing the teacher licensure exam. Rather than experiencing continual support from numerous institutional entities after facing a grave impediment such as failing a state certified standardized test, Crystal had to rely on her own abilities. She had to take the exam three times before passing. If it were not for her perseverance, she would not have become a teacher. In her interview she described her ordeal: "No, I didn't. I didn't pass it [the state exam] until like the fourth time. But nobody took me under their wing and said you know what she's not passing let's see what's going on. I had to figure it out on my own."

In contrast to Crystal's institutional experiences, Tyra experienced great support with her teacher education program, which assisted her in obtaining her career aspiration as an educator. With a small cohort of pre-service teachers, Tyra received personalized attention from qualified and engaging instructors. The content and pedagogical knowledge she gained during her program helped her see success as a classroom teacher. Tyra summarized how institutional support during her teacher education program made a difference in her persistence toward certification. She stated:

I had an excellent pre-service teacher. My professors had written books about reading workshops and writing workshops…. So first of all, they were personable in my cohort. We were small and we were just really close so I

would say the relationships that I made with my classmates kept motivating me to stay with it, my peers and excellent professors and then seeing the success when I would do a lesson.

Love of School, Kids and Teaching

The last theme was a love of school, students, and teaching. Unanimously, all the participants expressed how school and teaching played an important role in their lives at an early age, influencing their decision to enter the classroom. They all greatly valued school and desired to impart knowledge to others. Many of the participants often commented that they were "good at school," meaning they made good grades, had friends, assisted others in their academic endeavors, participated in extracurricular activities, and held positive relationships with their teachers. This initial love for K-12 education and the teaching profession materialized into a college major and ultimately into the title of a classroom teacher. Associating positive experiences with school, participants naturally gravitated toward a familiar profession in which they had already experienced positive outcomes. Megan's remarks convey the shared opinion of the group. She emphatically declared:

I loved school. Like I remember being excited to go to school. Loving learning I loved going to school, working with the kids. I love it. So I think that that when I was going between business and you know education. I was like I can make a kid love to go to school and so I chose education.

Discussion

The findings in this study illustrate the positive and negative K-12 and collegiate experiences that either assisted or hindered Black females' pursuit of teaching careers. As indicated by the findings, both effective and ineffective teachers shaped Black females' ideas of classroom teachers.

With appropriate teacher dispositions, effective teachers offered a positive image of the teaching field and gave their Black female students a positive role model to emulate, affirming Black female students' presence within the field of education. In contrast, the disposition and actions of ineffective teachers labeled Black female students as outsiders, positioning them at the peripheral of the classroom. Although all six participants recounted negative experiences within the confines of the K-12 classroom, Black females, as future classroom teachers, were indirectly inculcated with knowledge regarding effective classroom teaching and instruction. In turn, the Black female teachers in this study adopted and modeled the pedagogies of their past effective teachers, possessing an acute awareness between highly-effective practitioners and ineffective classroom teachers. This particular finding suggests the presence of more highly effective, qualified K-12 teachers who possess a positive teacher disposition and can present the profession through an authentic and candid lens may assist in increasing the number of Black female K-12 teachers.

One aspect of Black females' teacher education, whether positive or negative, that seeks to prepare them for entry into the classroom is student teaching. Student teaching offers exposure to everyday classroom issues. As pre-service teachers, these young women become more familiar with teaching diverse groups of students through their student-teaching experiences. The findings of this study support the effectiveness of student teaching as a prerequisite for classroom teaching. In fact, considering the great benefit many teachers in this study received from their student teaching experiences, it is recommended that the student-teaching model should be extended beyond a mere one semester, offering intensive, realistic, and high quality experiences in settings where pre-service teachers can connect theory and practice and interact with diverse

communities. Through these prolong and authentic interactions with all school stakeholders, pre-service Black female teachers can be better prepared for the classroom, engaging in real-world, problem-solving dilemmas.

From a policy standpoint, more institutional support within teacher education programs is needed in order to increase the pool of Black female teachers. Lack of institutional support, a common theme in many of the interviews, also greatly obstructs the pipeline from teacher education program to K-12 classroom. With little or no support in higher education, the number of Black female teachers will either remain constant or will gradually decline. More support at the collegiate level is needed to reverse this enduring trend, support primarily in the area of state standardized tests. Despite noted evidence confirming standardized tests are biased against people of color (Santelice & Wilson, 2010) and empirical research documenting the low performance of people of color on standardized tests (Steele, 2003), these assessments are still used to dictate entry into teacher education programs and teacher licensure. If the instrument used to measure pre-service teacher competency will not alter, then teacher education programs and teacher educators must change their methods, implementing more proactive and responsive measures to assist Black female pre-service teachers in gaining access to the K-12 classroom. Though state standardized exams promote a one-size-fits-all approach, teacher education programs should not conform to this course of action. Instead, teacher educators and teacher preparation programs must develop multifaceted channels to aid their students, particularly those with the greatest need.

All six of the participants mentioned a fondness for school and working with children even at a young age. Unfortunately, many participants in this study were advised against teaching. Needless to say, their initial love for teaching needs to be nurtured rather than extinguished in order to

truly diversify the current homogenous teaching force. While Black female students should be informed about the realities of teaching, they should not receive a biased, one-sided explanation that misrepresents the teaching field. Rather, they should be well informed, knowledgeable about the challenges and successes of classroom teachers. If Black female students are not allowed to adequately explore the teaching field, their career interest and aspirations may be narrowed, and they may never realize their potential as highly-effective classroom teachers.

Limitations

In this qualitative study, the interviews of six Black female in-service teachers were examined, constructing four major themes. While empirical generalization is not the goal of this qualitative study, we recognize that our small sample size is a limitation that confounds the generalizability of this study (Flick, 2014). Although the experiences of the study's participants cannot be generalized to all Black female classroom teachers, the Black female teachers in this study do offer a rich, contextual understanding of their K-12 and collegiate educational experiences and how their educational paths may have influenced their decision to enter the teaching profession. Suggestions for further research include increasing the study's sample size and the inclusion of quantitative data to both enrich and expand on the current findings.

Conclusion

If the status quo is maintained, meaning minimal actions are performed to diversify the teaching field, the teaching force will remain largely homogenous: White, female, middle-class, and monolinguistic. For the sake of all students who enter schools with differing forms of capital, diversifying the teaching force must become a top priority. Irrefutably, the

differing perspectives and experiences teachers of color bring to the school setting are invaluable, affirming their needed presence in culturally and linguistically diverse school contexts. Through our investigation of Black females' K-12 and collegiate education experiences that led them to the classroom, we hope to further the dialogue on how best to recruit and retain teachers of color.

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