

# “Are you sure you know what you are doing?”— The Lived Experiences of an African American Male Kindergarten Teacher

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As of 2012, data indicate that only one percent of public school teachers are African American males. Numerous reports urge decision makers and higher education professionals to aggressively recruit and retain African American males as teachers in an effort to improve the academic outcomes of African American children in our educational system (Huntsman & Howell, 2012; Lewis & Toldson, 2013). Unfortunately, the voices of male teachers have been under-studied in educational settings, particularly those of African Americans. The purpose of this article is to explore the lived experiences of an African American male kindergarten teacher as to help us understand why African American males rarely choose teaching as a profession. Using a single case study, the researchers and a male African American kindergarten teacher examine these experiences through a racial microaggression taxonomy. Findings revealed that this African American male teacher may be a victim of a cycle of institutional tensions that include microaggressions, as well as an overcomer within the cycle of personal triumphs. Recommendations are provided to improve the experiences of African American male teachers.

**Keywords:** African American male teacher, microaggressions, pre-service teaching, in-service teaching, Early Childhood Education

Few studies have documented the lived experiences of Pre K-2 male teachers in preservice and inservice early childhood (Haase, 2010; Jones, 2008; Lynn, 2006; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009; Warin, 2006). In this article, we attempt to fill this void by addressing the demographics of teachers by gender, race, and area of specialization (i.e., early childhood education). Our ultimate goal is to draw attention to the issues and needs for African-American male teachers, the most underrepresented teachers in American public schools; to support them in the field and find ways to increase their presence; and show that the presence of African American males in the teaching profession is invaluable.

The undocumented voices of African American male teachers within the field of early childhood can be attributed to several factors. First, there are few men in the field of education. Research consistently reveals that less than 25% of teachers (out of 3.5 million public school teachers) in the United States are male (Aud et al., 2013; NEA, 2008), and that this percentage decreases in the field of early childhood education. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010), only 3-5% of teachers of young children are male, and the percentage of male teachers *decreases*

*more drastically* when race is added. Only 1% of teachers are Black males, which equates to approximately 35,000 teachers in our public schools, with most being at the middle and high school levels (Aud et al., 2013; Lewis, 2006; Lewis & Toldson, 2013). Second, studies are rare regarding the experiences of male teachers, particularly Black male teachers. Given their minuscule presence, the unheard voices of male teachers in early childhood can be attributed, in part, to both female-dominated and White female-dominated classroom environments (Lewis & Toldson, 2013; Milner, 2010), gender and racial stigmas and suspicions regarding Black males (Brown, 2012), and low pay among teachers (Aud et al., 2013). Finally, the voices and impact of male teachers who work with young children have been under-studied, overlooked, and even trivialized in educational theory and research. This is thought to be due, in part, to the constituency of early childhood scholars and practitioners who prefer to keep both teaching and early childhood as women's work (Carrington & McPhee, 2008). These trends and ideas need to be further explored considering the potential benefits of having African-American males in early childhood.

Researchers have outlined several reasons why more male teachers are needed in early childhood. Specifically, the research has shown that African American male teachers have the potential to transform the dismal educational trends associated with many African-American students, such as low achievement, poor test scores, suspension and expulsion, and dropping out of schools (Brown, 2012). Thus, the inclusion of more males in the early years has the potential to benefit society, the profession, and children. By having more male teachers in early childhood, it can help dismantle the hegemonic forces that limit occupational choices for women and men in society (Mukuna & Mutsotso, 2011); and it can significantly impact society's perceptions of gender-specific occupations. This is a complex dynamic that could have a positive effect on paradigm shifts in philosophy, theory, research, and policy. Also, more occupational choices emerge for men when dominant ideologies of gender and occupations decrease.

One way to combat dominant ideologies is when individuals cross over into gender-imbalanced occupations. The education profession could benefit from an increase of males in early childhood by bringing new perspectives and opportunities to the field, and children could benefit from the presence of male teachers. Researchers suggest that effective male teachers serve as role models to both boys and girls. While their presence can have a positive impact on improving the overall academic plight and behavioral expectations of boys (Martin, Marsh, Cheng, & Ginns, 2010), their presence also has benefits for girls in the same or similar ways. By having male teachers in early childhood, boys and girls could learn to abandon socially constructed ideas of gender-specific occupations (Piburn, 2010).

### **Why More African American Male Teachers are Needed**

Amidst the debates, dialogues, and discussions on male teachers and their benefits in school settings (Lewis & Toldson, 2013; Lynn, 2006; Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2011), little attention has been given to African American male teachers and their potential benefits to children. Although research has shown that 10% of students in K-12 settings are African American males, it should be noted that only 1% of these teachers are African American males (Aud et al., 2013), and even fewer African American males work within the early year context.

The lack of research on African American male teachers and the marginalization of African American male teachers who work within the early childhood domain call for further examination of this phenomenon. Though there are only a few research studies that have documented the lived experiences of males in the field of early childhood, these studies have elevated the voices of White American males and international Eurocentric males while excluding the voices and lived experiences of African American males (see Friedman, 2010; Haase, 2010). This exclusion has created a gap in research and policy on the lived experiences of men in the field of early childhood education. However, President Obama created initiatives that call for the presence of more African American male teachers (see Huntspan & Howell, 2012). Presently, we are unsure of how these initiatives impact the number of African American male teachers in early childhood.

The purpose of this article is to explore the lived experiences of an African American male kindergarten teacher and the effects of microaggressions on his experiences before, during, and after pre-service teaching and eventual teaching experiences in Early Childhood Education at a predominantly White public university in the Southeastern United States. First, we provide a brief review of the literature to establish a rationale for why African American males may not choose teaching as a profession and we identify barriers that may preclude them from becoming teachers. Secondly, we draw from the microaggression taxonomy described by Sue, Bucci, Lin, Nadal, and Torino (2007b) to provide a thorough examination of the experiences of this African American male kindergarten teacher and to describe how microaggressions serve as a rationale for the underrepresentation of African American males barriers to entering in the profession.

### **African American Males' Plight to and in the Teaching Profession**

The history of African American male teachers is mainly rooted in the history of two groups – White male teachers and African American female teachers (Brown, 2012; DuBois, 1903; Friedman, 2010; Haase, 2010). This noteworthy connection yields an unbalanced understanding of the African American male teacher, which limits our understanding of why African American males rarely choose teaching as a profession.

However, contemporary researchers (e.g., Kunjufu, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Mezuk, 2009; Losen, 2011) suggest that there is a nexus between African American male students' school experiences and their virtual non-existence in the teaching profession; and it is well documented that K-12 schools have not been a welcoming and nurturing space for African American male students. In fact, schools have been hostile places for many Black males, and this lack of cultural responsiveness to this group has painted bleak and distorted images of the academic and professional trajectories for this population at all grade levels, even before school begins. Among them are disproportionality, high school dropout rates, suspension and expulsions, special education, and the underrepresentation of African American males in gifted and advanced education classes (Ford, 2010, 2001, 2013; Kunjufu, 2007). More daunting is the chilling phrase about African American males, which is often viewed as reality, that is, Black males are 'convicted in the womb' (Upchurch, 1997).

The structural and institutional inequities faced by African American males in K-12 settings are not just limited to those spaces. Such inequities continue within higher education and the social arena, thus resulting in a lower percentage of African American males graduating from college and obtaining a degree, as compared to their White counterparts (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). This, too, has an effect on the shortage of African American males entering the teaching profession.

The macro-level devaluation and marginalization of African American males within public schools and higher education (K-16) provide a clearer understanding of why few males from this population desire to select teaching as a profession. Entering a profession that has degraded, undervalued, and marginalized African American males is not a welcoming and inviting profession in which to work. If a more diverse teacher population is to be realized, more effort must be made to provide a welcoming and affirming space for African American male students (Harper & Davis, 2012).

The *Call Me Mister*, *Griot Program*, and *Ready to Teach* programs (see Baskerville et al., 2008; Lewis, 2006) were designed to address the critical shortage of African American male teachers. However, few studies (Baskerville et al., 2008; Jones & Jenkins, 2012) have documented the effectiveness of these programs relative to recruitment, retention, and outcomes. While these initiatives should be applauded for responding to the underrepresentation of African American males in teaching, they may have overlooked structural and institutional barriers that have contributed to or exacerbated this condition. Such barriers manifest themselves in the form of national assessments such as the Praxis exams that serve as gatekeepers to the teaching profession (Nettles, Scatton, Steinberg, & Tyler, 2011). Likewise, the roles that African American males are expected to perform could also become structural barriers.

### **Problematizing the Expectations of the African American Male Teacher**

When African American males enter the teaching profession, they are faced with challenges that occur partly because of how they have been positioned within education and the larger society, especially, media and social media. Brown (2012) suggests that African American male teachers are mainly viewed as coaches and disciplinarians, not teachers in the classroom. Lynn (2006) challenged traditional notions of African American male teachers (e.g., role models) by enabling them to examine their perspectives about roles and identities in the classroom. Martino and Rezai-Rashit (2010) warn against the homogenization of African American male teachers because it limits the diversity and number of African American males who enter the profession. Brown (2012) argues that such deficit notions encourage African American men to be viewed as “pedagogical kinds” or “a type of educator whose subjectivities, pedagogies, and expectations have been set in place prior to entering the classroom” (p. 299). Additionally, when unable to live up to these majoritarian, distorted, and one-dimensional expectations, they are not considered to be the ‘right kind of men’ for the profession.

To debunk such distorted and negative notions, the image of African American male teachers must be reexamined. Examples of successful African American male teachers capable of providing appropriate academic support to all students is an important area to consider while

expanding the research on ways African American male teachers can impact the educational outcomes of the students they teach (Howard, 2012).

### Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in racial microaggressions. Sue et al. (2007a, 2007b) define microaggression as racial putdowns towards African Americans and other marginalized groups. Oftentimes these acts can cause its victims to experience feelings of isolation, exclusion, and rejection. Racial microaggressions have been extensively studied, examined, and connected to the lived histories and experiences of people of color in extant educational and legal research. This research has been contextualized within predominantly White institutional settings, including public schools, colleges, and universities (Ford, Trotman Scott, Moore, & Amos, 2013; Jay, 2009). Some researchers have classified microaggressions in two forms—non-verbal/verbal and non-visual/visual—and they suggest that these behaviors could be covert or overt in manner (Sue et al., 2007).

Sue and Constantine (2007) assert there are three variations of microaggression experienced by and geared towards marginalized groups — microassaults, microinsults, and micro-invalidations. *Microassaults* are explicit, offensive acts of racism (i.e., name calling) that is designed to do harm to people of color. For example, on college and university campuses African American students may be referred to as “Affirmative Action beneficiaries,” and may be given lower grades on academic assignments than their White counterparts. *Microinsults* are culturally insensitive and demeaning comments/statements about the cultural heritage or identity of racial minorities. In such case, African American males may be asked about how they were admitted to a prestigious, competitive, or Predominantly White college or university, since so few attend these institutions. *Microinvalidations* are “words and actions that convey rudeness, insensitivity or demeaning attitudes toward the racial or ethnic heritage or identity of people of color” (Sue & Constantine, 2007, p. 138). For example, African American males may be overlooked and/or ignored in class when they attempt to contribute, and they may be questioned about whether they should be in a given course or class.

On the other hand, Sue and colleagues (2007a, 2007b) identified nine themes, which they associate with various types of microaggressions (see Sue et al., 2007a, 2007b). These themes are as follows: (1) ascription of intelligence; (2) second class citizen; (3) pathologizing cultural values/communication styles; (4) assumption of criminal status; (5) alien in own land; (6) color-blindness; (7) myth of meritocracy; and (8) denial of individual racism (see Sue et al., 2007a, 2007b).

Because little is known about African American male teachers who matriculate through predominantly White pre-service teacher education programs, those who work in the teaching profession, and those who work with young children, their lived experiences must be documented, barriers that hinder their progress must be identified, and mainstream ideologies that marginalize them must be debunked. In this study, we used a microaggression taxonomy to examine the context of experiences encountered by an African American male early childhood education teacher. The three research questions which guided this study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of an African American male kindergarten teacher before, during, and after his pursuit of post-secondary education at a Predominately White Institution (PWI)?
2. How have these lived experiences affected him as an aspiring teacher, pre-service teacher, and a professional teacher in the field of early childhood education?
3. How has an African American male been positively portrayed as he overcame structural and institutional barriers that could have negatively impacted his professional future?

## **Method**

This qualitative case study was used to capture the unique voice of an African American male kindergarten teacher, while also capturing the authenticity of his pre-service and in-service teaching experience. Case studies enable research participants to share experiences and phenomenon in which they live in personally enriching ways (Delamont, 2012). As aforementioned, the voices of African American male teachers have been excluded from extant literature, privileging the voices of individuals from dominant culture groups in pre-service and in-service teaching.

### *Participant*

The participant was a 26 year-old African American male kindergarten teacher, whom we refer to as “Henry.” Henry was enrolled in an early childhood education program at a PWI in the Southeastern United States. At the time of this study, 2% of the university’s students were African American and less than 1% were African American faculty. Henry worked at a predominately African American Title I school in the same geographical region. He taught two years in this setting; and also served as an assistant football coach at a nearby high school. Henry openly expressed his commitment to improving the lives of students. According to him, his desire to do so began during his high school years.

Convenience sampling was used to select Henry. Henry and the second author had a collegial relationship prior to the study. They attended the same district-wide professional development meetings, and their conversations always focused on topics relating to education and sports. Henry volunteered to share his experiences with us and he gave us his written consent to share his experiences in a scholarly work. Henry was the only African American male kindergarten teacher in his school district. The other researcher in this study, also an early childhood teacher, taught at the same school.

### *Data Collection*

To explore the lived experiences of the participant, we used a qualitative semi-structured interview approach. Semi-structured interviews were used because they provide very flexible and reliable data (Delamont, 2012) and they allowed the researcher to interject questions into the interview process based on the participant’s responses.

Both researchers interviewed the participant. Two interviews were conducted and tape-recorded in the school setting where he taught. The first interview was conducted to establish a trusting, respectful, and professional relationship with the participant and to clarify the goals of the research study. The second interview was designed to gather data to co-construct a narrative relative to his experience in a predominantly White female pre-service teacher education program and the teaching profession at large. This interview was conducted in the same format three weeks after the initial interview. Each interview lasted approximately 75 minutes. As a way to member check and to ensure trustworthiness, the research participant received by mail a copy of the interview transcripts and was asked to confirm the accuracy of his statements. These methods enabled us to triangulate the data sources and engage in inductive reasoning.

### *Data Analysis*

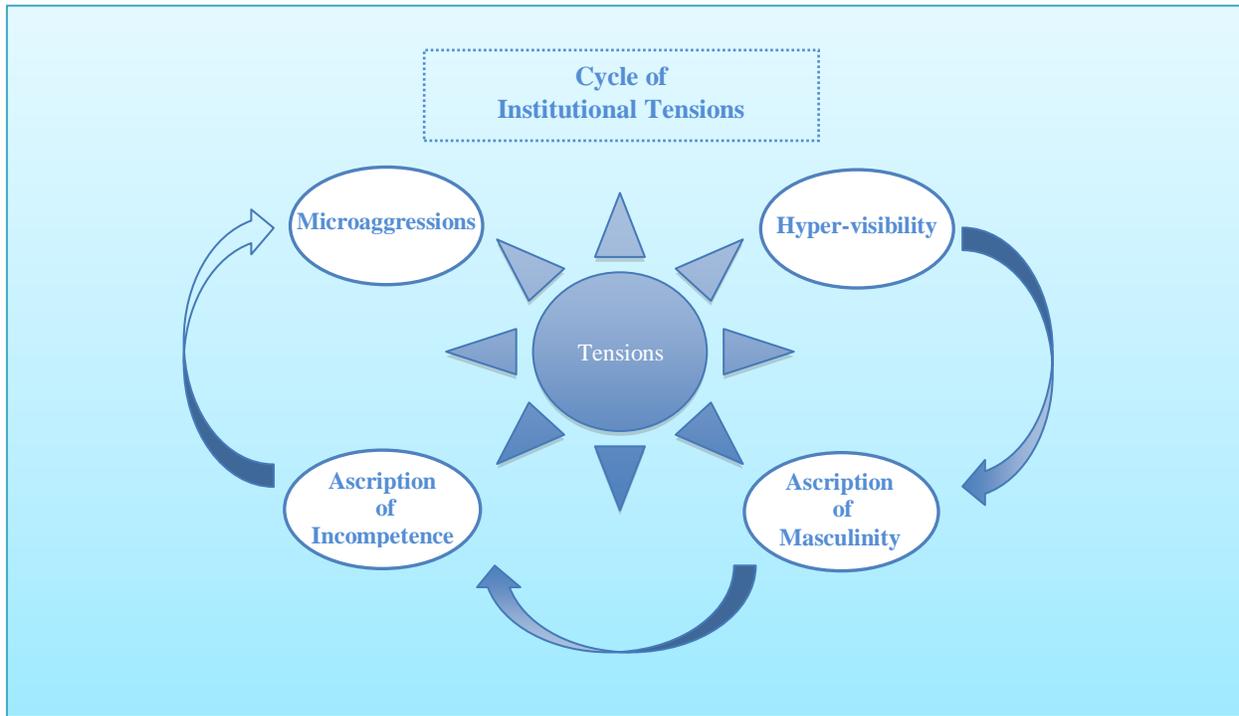
Data were analyzed independently by each researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the Henry's experiences throughout his matriculation at a PWI. Based on interview data and written interview notes, codes and patterns were identified (Delamont, 2012) and the researchers constructed central themes essential to the scope of this study to arrive at answers to the research questions. In order to do so, each researcher read and re-read transcripts and interview notes twice, focusing on specific details relating to the research participant's lived experiences in pre-service and in-service teacher education and ways he dealt with these experiences. The interrater reliability was 100% for our analysis. Thereafter, a qualitative data analysis software tool (ATLAS.ti) was used to assist in the management of codes.

## **Results**

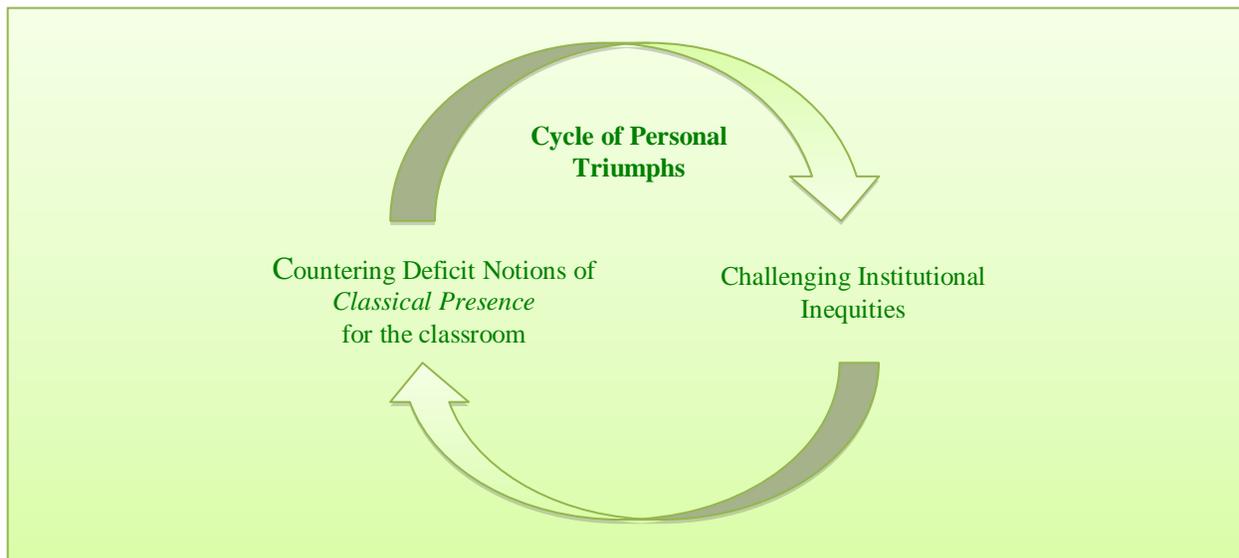
There were a number of tensions that emerged during Henry's experiences, as a result several themes emerged from the data. Based on these themes, we constructed two cycles (see Figures 1 and 2). We refer to one of the cycles as the "Cycle of Institutional Tensions" (see Figure 1). Within this cycle, we used the work of Jay's (2009) concept of hyper-visibility as a theme. Jay's concept (2009) suggests that the racial identity of people of color is always at the forefront of their lived realities to explain these experiences. Although Jay (2009) describes hyper-visibility from a racialized perspective, we suggest that Jay's theory of hyper-visibility could be further expanded to support other identified forms to include gender - other identities can cause individuals to become hyper-visible in any given context. Such was the case for Henry. And, we added two ascriptions — 'ascription of masculinity' and 'ascription of incompetence' — to the microaggression themes. We describe 'ascription of masculinity' as assigning a lack of masculinity on men who teach or desire to teach young children; whereas, we describe 'ascription of incompetence' as assigning a lack of competence and/or efficacy on men who teach young children.

Moreover, because it was our goal to reframe the ways of knowing and understanding African American males, we thought it was appropriate to highlight a few triumphs to celebrate Henry's successes. We refer to this as the "Cycle of Personal triumphs" (see Figure 2). This is an important concept because most research has focused on the collective deficits of African American males (Ford, 2010).

**Figure 1. Cycle of Institutional Tensions**



**Figure 2. Cycle of Personal Triumphs**



To further investigate the “Cycle of Institutional Tensions” and “Cycle of Personal Triumphs”, we organized central themes (see Figure 3) to analyze these experiences.

**Figure 3. Central Themes for Cycle of Institutional Tensions and Personal Triumphs**

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## Central Themes

### *Cycle of Institutional Tensions*

### *Cycle of Personal Triumphs*

<p>1. <i>Experiencing Hyper-Visibility</i> African American males may be hypervisible in predominantly White female teacher education program at PWIs.</p> <p>2. <i>Experiencing Microaggressions</i> African American males may be victims of institutional inequities in the forms of gender and racial micro-aggressions that exist in PWIs and predominantly female schools.</p>	<p>1. <i>Challenging Institutional Inequities Within PWIs</i> African American males are courageous as they challenge institutional inequities that exist in PWIs.</p> <p>2. <i>Moving Beyond Mr. Classical Presence</i> African American males are successful in countering the deficit notion of <i>the classical presence for the classroom</i> (e.g. mentors, coaches, father figures, etc.) and are proven to be effective teachers.</p>
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For clarity, we discuss each theme individually and provide evidentiary support that was shared with us by Henry. In so doing, we realized that several examples extracted from Henry's experiences could be placed under more than one of the proposed themes. However, we hesitated to do so in our effort to avoid redundancy and to be more concise in our analysis.

### **Cycle of Institutional Tensions**

#### *Theme 1: Experiencing Hyper-Visibility*

One situation that is experienced frequently by Henry is what Jay (2009) refers to as hyper-visibility. Henry's racial identity was always at the forefront of his experiences:

When my mother and I decided to visit the university's campus to explore my options for playing football and majoring in Early Childhood Education, it was an interesting experience. When I stepped onto the campus to take a tour, I was really not in the mood to tour, but my mother insisted. I was concerned at first because within my 50 member tour group, my mother and I were two Black people out of the four black people in our entire tour group. I felt uncomfortable because we were the only Blacks... I felt we stood out within the crowd. I wasn't sure this would be the place for me.

Henry vividly described how he felt as one of the few African Americans within his group. Despite these feelings, Henry still made the decision to attend the university and major in Early Childhood Education.

In addition to disclosing experiences related to race, Henry also shared an experience where administrators questioned his presence at early childhood professional development sessions because he was a male:

When I attend district professional development sessions, I am always questioned about why I attend early childhood professional development sessions. I stick out because I am a man. On one occasion, I was even directed to attend the professional development session for physical education teachers. I guess this happens because people expect me to be a P.E. teacher.

In this situation, Henry's gender was continuously placed at the forefront in traditionally female spaces.

### *Theme 2: Experiencing Microaggressions*

When Henry entered the classroom of his first early childhood course, the White female professor questioned whether he was in the right course. In this course, the majority of students were White female early childhood preservice students. Henry recounted:

When I attended my first early childhood course, I was asked by my white female professor, "Aren't you in the wrong class?" I had to convince my professor that I was enrolled in the course. I sat down and I noticed I was the only African American male. The class was full of white female Early Childhood majors.

When asked how he really felt about the incident, Henry retorted:

I was used to people treating me like this because I was the only African American male in the Early Childhood program...but this was strange... I thought this was going to be one of those classes...a class where the professor doesn't like black males.

Evidence of acts of gender- and race-related microaggressions were evident during Henry's first year of teaching. For example, there was a parent who was in disbelief that a Black male (Henry) was his child's teacher. Henry shared this incident:

During an Open House night in my first year of teaching, I was greeted by a parent at my classroom door looking for his child's kindergarten teacher. He [the parent] stated, "I am looking for Mrs. Jones, the kindergarten teacher." I replied, "I am Mr. Jones, the kindergarten teacher. The parent just stood in disbelief and said, "That can't be possible. Are you sure you know what you are doing?"

Henry said the parent began to question his efficacy, which, according to him, was most likely because he was a Black male. This action is what we refer to as microaggression 'ascription of incompetence.'

As stated earlier, microaggressions are racial putdowns that devalue people of color (Sue et al., 2007). These "put-downs" became evident throughout Henry's experiences.

I was enrolled in a Creative Experiences course. Again, I was the only African American in the course. The rest of the students were White females. The professor gave a writing assignment that required us [the class] to reflect on a topic from the course. One of the White female students asked if it were possible to reflect and write on the field experiences we did during the semester. The professor willingly agreed. I decided to consult with the White female student. We both wrote our reflections on our field experiences. I made every effort to make sure my paper was perfect before I gave it to the professor. When I received my paper, I was surprised. I got an “F”. The White female student with whom I consulted with got an “A”. I was upset so I went to the Dean to protest my grade. As a result, the Dean agreed with me. My grade changed.

Henry reflected on this experience:

I had a course under this same professor before and I failed. I just thought she hated me because I was Black.

### **Cycle of Personal Triumphs**

#### *Theme 1: Challenging Institutional Inequities Within PWIs*

We revisit the incident where Henry received an “F” on an assignment in a Creative Experience course. Henry was courageous as he challenged his professor:

I was really upset with the grade I received. I scheduled an appointment to meet with the Dean to challenge the grade. I knew something was not right about this situation. The Dean asked the professor to change the grade I originally received.

Further, he made crucial adjustments to change his academic and personal trajectories:

My GPA was not high enough to enter the early childhood program at first; however, I took courses during the summer to improve my grades so I could enter the professional program.

#### *Theme 2: Moving Beyond Mr. Classical Presence*

Henry was not only viewed as a mentor of young children, but a teacher who was highly qualified and competent within his professional space. He stated:

I am not only a mentor and a coach, but I am also a successful teacher who is able to teach my students how to read and write so they are prepared for the rest of their lives. I spend hours preparing lessons that meet the individual needs of my students. I use a lot of technology to engage my twenty-one African American students... I am always proud of the progress they make on school-wide and district-wide assessments.

## Discussion and Implications

The findings of this study supports the extant literature on African American males and African American male kindergarten teachers in many ways by suggesting that structural and institutional barriers that hinder the academic and professional plight of African American males extends beyond the K-12 educational contexts (i.e. higher education and professional spaces). However, these findings also expand the literature by specifically naming those barriers (i.e. racial and gender microaggressions and hypervisibility) within these spaces, while providing a deeper social justice and critical investigation (not frequently sought after) for why few African American males enter early childhood.

As stated earlier, there is an urgent need for more African American males to enter the teaching profession. However, the campaign for more African American males to enter the teaching profession has consistently disregarded the structural and institutional barriers (e.g. hypervisibility, microaggressions, etc.) that hinder this reality. These barriers have created tensions within this African American male's pre-service and in-service experiences and have produced unwelcoming and uncomfortable feelings within him. Such uncomfortable feeling is oftentimes one from so many African Americans in similar situations where they have been minoritized or *hyper-visible* (Rodgers & Summers, 2008).

Moreover, racial and gender microaggressions also contribute to such unwelcoming and uncomfortable feelings as they occur day-to-day in overt and covert ways. In many cases, the experiences that Henry encountered were racial and gender microaggressions. This notion was clearly seen in the professor's reaction to Henry's entrance into the classroom comprised of White female preservice teachers. Stereotypically, men are not expected to teach young children. As Carrington and McPhee (2008) point out, this touches on the feminine domain of early childhood education. When men defy societal expectations, such as moving into predominantly female professional spaces, this deification oftentimes leads to biased actions and reactions towards them. Additionally, Foster and Newman (2005) assert that men who are interested in early years teaching are oftentimes victims who are regarded as 'perverts', 'homosexuals,' and 'dangers to children.' When the aforementioned reactions and stereotypes are coupled with racial issues, the problems become more complex and entrenched with the interplay of race and gender—in this case, African American male. If Henry were a White male, his presence may have been better received in a predominantly White female space. While we understand it is rare to have males, especially African American males, in early childhood classes. We also recognize that there are very few African American men in the field of education, regardless of grade level (Aud et al., 2013; Brown, 2012). Therefore, such suspicions of males and the inequitable treatment of this population who attempt to become a part of the field, is one reason why few men pursue careers in education.

The challenges and setbacks of African American males relating to female (both Black and White) dominance in both pre-service and in-service teaching is not surprising since research in teacher education (e.g. Haase, 2010) continuously report female dominance in the field of early childhood education. Based on our findings, we also suggest that such challenges and setbacks occur because societal expectations view teachers of young children as nurturers. This explains the difficulty that men have, especially African American men, when working with young

children in early years settings. Men are rarely seen as nurturers compared to women, regardless of race (Carrington & McPhee, 2008). Further examination of such phenomenon is needed and could aid in dismantling the leaky pipeline towards the educational profession (Bianco, Leech & Mitchell, 2011), while also challenging dominant ideologies about who should and can work with young children.

African American males bring a multiplicity of talents and abilities to the classroom from which all children can benefit. However, they must be viewed beyond the prevailing deficit expectations (e.g., coaches, mentors, and disciplinarian) for them as teachers (Brown, 2012). While traditional ideologies dominate educational discourses concerning men who teach, they hinder the positive views of men as pedagogically competent and effective teachers. We suggest that these men possess what we call a 'classical presence for the classroom'. This is consistent in several research studies (Brown, 2012; Rentzou & Ziganitidou, 2009). However, Henry counters such stereotypical notion. Furthermore, we theorize that the lack of appropriate positioning of African American male teachers could affect African American men who desire to teach. Though we believe that African American men can be viewed as effective disciplinarians, mentors, coaches, and father figures, we also believe they can be viewed as effective teachers who promote academic achievement.

Although the literature has unremittingly focused on the negative outcomes of African American males in education and society, it should also focus on the negative outcomes when African American men are absent from the education profession as well as the positive outcomes of African American males when they exist in the education profession. Henry's transformational approach yielded positive results. He could have easily abandoned his studies due to academic deficiencies and personal, structural and institutional challenges. However, he was an overcomer.

The findings of our study implies that pre-service teacher education programs should explicitly address issues of equity and diversity (i.e. race and gender) within preservice education curricula, as to help dismantle negative stereotypes and microaggressions (both racial and gender) towards men in general, but African American males who desire to teach young children in particular. Also, preservice education programs may need to better support African American males who desire to become teachers of young children by providing them opportunities to partake in male teacher support groups. School districts should also provide professional development sessions on equity and diversity issues as to better support, recruit, and retain African American male teachers.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

We acknowledge that there were two limitations to this qualitative case study. First, there are few previous qualitative studies (Lynn, 2006) on African American male kindergarten teachers, thus limiting the knowledge base on African American male kindergarten teachers. To date, there are no quantitative studies on African American male kindergarten teachers. We encourage further qualitative and quantitative research on African American male kindergarten teachers as to capture their lived experiences and to come to an understanding of why few African American males choose early childhood as a professional option. Second, we acknowledge that more questions could have been included within our semi-structured interviews as to provide more details of the in-service teaching experiences of our research participant.

We encourage future research to focus more on in-service teaching experiences of African American male kindergarten teachers. We also implore scholars to conduct research on ways African American males can be seen as effective teachers instead of mentors and coaches and victors instead of villains. The construction (and reconstruction) of positive images of African American males as teachers of young children helps to dispel prevalent and prevailing myths about which these men are, and to increase awareness of their positive professional contributions to the early childhood field. We hope to contribute additional studies that are essential to portray African American males as needed and positive educators who have committed themselves to children's academic and social development. This, alone, counters negative media portrayal of these men--an idea that aids in creating non-discriminatory spaces for them in society and professional spaces in general.

### Conclusion

Throughout this study, we called for a closer examination of the racialized and gender realities and experiences of an African American male who desired to work in the field of early childhood education. We engaged in this research to understand and hopefully improve the pre-service and in-service teaching experiences of men, particularly African American men, who are (or desire to become) early childhood teachers. Also, we noted inequitable systems and institutional inequities in the forms of gender and racial microaggressions, which oftentimes victimize African American men. These barriers continuously widen the gap between those who teach and those who do not by gender, race, or a combination of both. And, given the experiences shared by our research participant (Henry), we recommend that higher education and P-12 administrators become more cognizant of African American males' experiences within predominantly White pre-service teacher education programs and public schools, and examine ways to make their experiences more equitable in these spaces.

### AUTHOR NOTES

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