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The Esoteric Relationship Among Black Teachers: A Collaborative Autoethnography Exploring How Schools Work as a Disservice to Black Teachers

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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. We feature a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. Our scope and sequence focus on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.

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The Esoteric Relationship Among Black Teachers: A Collaborative Autoethnography Exploring How Schools Work as a Disservice to Black Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Black female educators, although disproportionately represented within U.S. public schools, face intense and challenging working environments throughout various teaching workforces. While navigating through school environments cultivated of racialized harm, forced compliance, lack of support for Black students, uncomfortable situations, taking on extra roles and duties, challenges, and anti-Blackness, Black educators' pedagogical experiences are shaped through their identities and teacher experiences- some that were altered from various encounters. Through asking questions, we highlight four Black women educators' experiences in school settings, their engagement with disservice, and their perspectives. Utilizing collaborative autoethnography as a qualitative method, this study allowed researchers to work in unison to share their personal experiences and professional, relational, and sociocultural identities through further elaboration and utilizing the Black feminist thought framework. Our analyses show how Black educators contribute to teaching by identifying salient themes reflected in each participant's responses. This study has implications for teaching and teacher education.

Introduction

Since the implementation of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954), American public schools have had the challenge of recruiting and maintaining teachers of color (Carr, 2022; Grooms et al., 2021). Almost 80% of public school teachers identify as white, while 6.7% identify as Black/African American (NCES, 2020). Between 1988 and 2018, the number of teachers of color increased faster than that of white teachers, but they left teaching at a higher rate than the average (Carr, 2022). Research has found that teachers of color leave at higher rates than white teachers (RAND, 2021; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2019; Ingersoll et al., 2019). When examining the job satisfaction of Black teachers, the research found that it was decreased by racialized school environments, where they encounter isolation, stress, and microaggressions based on race (Frank et al., 2021; Grooms et al., 2021).

Black educators' pedagogical experiences are significantly shaped by their teacher identity and teaching experiences (Wandix-White, 2020). Often occupying multiple roles within education, Black educators, including teacher assistants and paraprofessionals, have been described as exhibiting authentic care (Matteucci et al., 2017), being agents of change (Lynn, 2002), storytellers (Williams, 2018), othermothers/parents (Brown et al., 2018), and role models (Maylor, 2009). Specifically, Black female educators are recognized within all these categories as being both highly visible and invisible within educational contexts. Many Black educators are committed to creating successful academic and social learning experiences for their students, particularly for Black students. The role of Black educators' identity in the manifestation of such elements varies based on their reflections on their past selves, their current self, and their socialization within society and the field of education (Labissiere, 2023).

Unfortunately, schools can sometimes function as a disservice to Black educators by not providing them with the support and tools needed to thrive in such environments. This conflict often results in educators having to "weigh their personal and professional values and then choose, rearrange, control, or integrate them into a subjective solution while responding to the professional codes and feedback of their organizational context" (Steinberger & Magen-Nagar, 2017, p. 37). For Black educators, responding to the "professional codes" in the context of U.S. public schools involves navigating educational spaces in which Black students and teachers endure unsafe schooling, racialized harm, institutional racism in action, acts of dismissiveness in school settings, and adults engaging in violence towards Black students (Boutte & Bryan, 2021; Johnson et al., 2019; McKinney de Royston et al., 2021). The well-documented American history of racism and anti-Blackness lays the foundation for such adverse outcomes and the complex social, political, cultural, and personal contexts Black teachers experience.

Anti-Blackness plays a profound part in the experiences of Black educators and students (Coker et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2000; Greene et al., 2006; Marcucci, 2020). Dumas (2016) and others explain anti-Blackness as psychological and physical assaults on Black bodies, wherein they often experience excessive and persistent surveillance, and the mutilation of Black men, women, and children (Alexander, 1994; Patterson, 2018; Tillet, 2012). Scholars have documented evidence of these experiences and their social and educational impacts on Black citizens in general, and on students specifically (Grant et al., 2020; Logan, 1954; Seaton & Douglas, 2014).

These challenges have a long-standing historical context within Black lives, dating back to the slavery era and denying education to Black Americans (Bartz & Kritsonis, 2019; Grant et al., 2015; Kelly & Roberson, 2023). During slavery, Black Americans were eager to learn, write, and read, using literacy as a pathway toward freedom (Stovall & Sullivan, 2022). The Jim Crow era enforced racial segregation and discrimination, again denying Black Americans educational rights (Walsemann et al., 2022). Furthermore, the devaluing of Black lives has been an unlikely byproduct of the education system, which emphasizes the disproportionate harmful practices and policies that Black students and Black educators face daily.

Despite negative experiences in numerous academic settings, Black female educators who remain in their teacher roles, are committed to helping students grow through the esoteric relationship between Black students and themselves. Black educators are positioned to develop such a relationship with Black students, as they are engaged in improving their well-being and sense of belonging and interrupting experiences of anti-Blackness (Stovall & Sullivan, 2022).

Another connection between the relationship is the familiarity that Black educators bring to schooling atmospheres, allowing these educators to explore more than academic content with their students and all that they encounter (Griffin & Tackie, 2017). We therefore understand the impact, the added value, and the benefits to social and emotional development that Black educators provide by being the teacher in the classroom (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). Duncan (2022) states how vital Black educators are, as they have an essential role in assisting students in navigating through the very systems that were not developed or designed for their success. We further understand the significance of Black educators as they are influential in causing positive long-term effects for Black students (Gershenson et al., 2022). The long-lasting benefits when students and teachers share similar race are impactful by fulfilling various roles such as mentors and advocates (King, 1993; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Pitts, 2007). However, research suggests similar race students are not the only beneficiaries because there are benefits for all students when there is a Black teacher in the classroom (Quiocho & Rios, 2000). By understanding the magnitude of these experiences and the role such instances play, educators can build a learning environment conducive to learners.

The experiences in school spaces profoundly impact Black educators in innumerable ways. Black educators are in workplaces where they are undervalued and silenced within an overall unwelcoming atmosphere (Dixon et al., 2019). This study examines how four Black women's teaching experiences from K–12 to the collegiate level tell the story of the disservice to Black students and educators through collaborative autoethnography. Our goal is to enlighten others about the various factors contributing to a distinct disadvantage for Black students and educators, and we wish to provide a reminder of the work that remains to ensure that schools become places of equal opportunity and achievement. What follows is a summarization of literature about the historical and contemporary roles of Black educators in schools. To guide our analysis, we draw on Collins's (2022) Black feminist thought (BFT). Upon explicating the findings, an examination of the authors' combined experiences is rendered, followed by our discussion section, which describes how the findings relate to current literature and future implications for the experiences of Black educators in schools.

Literature Review

Role of Education for the Black Community

As a result of the discrimination and prejudice Black people have endured throughout American history, access to high-quality education is imperative if we are to overcome the cycle of inequity that has plagued our communities for generations (Kelly & Roberson, 2023). Education allows Black people to challenge stereotypes, acquire cultural capital, and actively participate in the broader socioeconomic landscape (Williams, 2005). Moreover, education has been a catalyst for dismantling inequality and promoting social justice (Duncan, 2022). Therefore, by helping narrow the opportunity gap by equipping Black people with the skills and knowledge necessary, education is an essential instrument in the pursuit of educational equity and racial progress. However, by

design and from inception education has been a disservice to Black students throughout American history. Systemic racism has resulted in unequal access to quality schools and teachers, a lack of culturally relevant curricula, and a disproportionate number of disciplinary actions based on subjective reasonings, resulting in educational outcome disparities (Feagin & Barnett, 2004; Williams et al., 2023). Therefore, acknowledging and addressing these historical disparities is essential to achieving educational equity for Black students.

Since the first ships transporting Africans arrived in North America, Black educators have instructed Black students in the name of emancipation (Duncan, 2022). During the era of chattel slavery, enslaved Africans understood the significance of being able to read and write to acquire their physical and intellectual freedom (Williams, 2005). During Reconstruction, Black New England and Northern women migrated to the South to teach newly freed slaves (Perkins, 1984). These educators saw their work as a political statement against the South's power structure before the Civil War and the strict school standards that slavery put on children (Duncan, 2022). At the same time, hostile attitudes toward the education of Black Americans found *de jure* and *de facto* attempts to covet their educational opportunities. Nevertheless, the collective commitment to education within the Black community can be seen throughout American history.

The Black community's dedication to education can be understood as their belief that education is the means to achieve racial progress. While enslaved, Africans witnessed the impact of education firsthand, observing that educated masters and mistresses gained positions while the uneducated remained poor and powerless (Williams, 2005). Thus, the profession of teaching as the lever for formal education became highly regarded in the Black community. Black teachers were esteemed leaders in the Black community, particularly Black women (Peters, 2019). Before *Brown v. The Board of Education* (Warren & Supreme Court Of The United States, 1954), teaching was primarily the responsibility of Black women, who taught and nurtured an important segment of the Black community, their children (Tillman, 2004). A shared commitment to education by the Black community has been crucial to the advancement and development of Black Americans in the United States. The Black community is now able to comprehend their cultural contributions to American society, work towards socioeconomic mobility, and advocate against inequity by empowering themselves to challenge discriminatory structures, all thanks to the access to knowledge provided by education.

Black Teachers' Success with Black Students

Historical research provides evidence that for Black Americans, the pursuit of knowledge never needed the authorization of the U.S. government. Even though there were many regulations intended to prevent Black people from studying, the evidence indicates that enslaved Africans were secretly educated and built formal and informal education centers on plantations despite the risk of punishment (Williams, 2005). Post-enslavement saw Black Americans engaged in a collective movement to educate themselves, seeking help from the Freedmen's Bureau, Northern philanthropic agencies, and other white groups. Initially, and perhaps most importantly, they relied on their own efforts (Anderson, 1988; Tyack & Lowe, 1986). During this time, most of the South's Black educators worked in Black schools instructing Black students (Tillman, 2004). These teachers saw the potential in their Black students and were therefore committed to their educational success. Even 100 years post-emancipation, Black teachers' commitment to racial uplift through education can be seen in how Black teachers helped to build and operate schools, secured funding and other necessary resources, worked with and for the Black community as advocates for the education of Black children, and in their epistemology of cultural ethos (Brown et al., 2018; Tillman, 2004).

Research has examined the benefits of same-race teachers for Black students. Finding policies and procedures that help students from historically underserved racial and ethnic groups is essential if schools are to make progress in closing the opportunity gap. Placing students with a teacher of the same race or ethnicity has gained much attention as one way to do so (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Recent research has found that Black teachers generally describe Black students as less likely to disrupt class or externalize problem behaviors and have higher ratings of Black students' academic performance (Redding, 2019). Compared to white educators, studies have also shown that Black educators boosted the academic performance of their Black students (Carver-Thomas, 2018), had higher expectations for their Black students (Gershenson et al., 2016), and were less likely to suspend their Black students (Holt & Gershenson, 2015). Black teachers are so essential for Black student success that causal evidence shows that Black students who have at least one Black teacher in elementary school are 13% more likely to graduate high school and 19% more likely to enroll in college than their peers who are not assigned to a Black teacher (Gershenson et al., 2022). These benefits, research finds, positively affect both academic and behavioral measures of

success. These studies suggest the importance of student–teacher racial/ethnic matching in improved academic outcomes for Black students.

However, it should be noted that, like Milner (2006), our goal is not to engage in what Gay (2000) calls “professional racism” (p. 205); however, there is no denying the dire need for more teachers from underrepresented minorities. Still, the idea that doing so will automatically raise the achievement of pupils of color is both false and perhaps harmful. Black teachers, like their peers, enter K-12 classrooms with aspirations of progressing academic performance for their students (Brown et al., 2018). In essence, research suggests that Black teachers provide invaluable educational experiences to Black children (Duncan, 2019). However, it is not enough to simply increase the number of Black educators in pre-K through 12 classrooms. Black teachers often have distinctive goals, missions, decision-making, and pedagogical styles that are important to understand (Milner, 2006). Therefore, it would seem incumbent for researchers to examine how the pedagogy of Black teachers positively impacts Black students.

Culturally Relevant Teaching and Black Female Teachers

The positive effects of culturally relevant practices on students’ sense of belonging, engagement, and achievement are well-documented. Research on the effectiveness of culturally relevant teaching of Black teachers indicates that Black teachers attempt to create classroom environments in which the teacher makes establishing trusting, healthy relationships and a community of learners a priority (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). By doing this, teachers encourage students to develop a sense of interdependence and to rely on and support each other instead of emphasizing individual competitiveness or meritocracy without diminishing the significance of individual responsibility (Ladson-Billings, 1992). Culturally relevant teachers foster a more engaging and inclusive classroom environment by incorporating their students’ cultural experiences and backgrounds into their education. Black students benefit from these strategies because the material is made more accessible and relevant to their lives. Because of her deliberate use of culturally relevant techniques, the Black female teacher in Duncan’s (2020) study was able to bring her Black students’ experiences into focus and aid in forming their critical consciousness. As a result of the knowledge that their Black students would face adversity unbeknownst to white students, Black female teachers use culturally relevant teacher practices to equip Black students with higher-order thinking skills that they need to traverse socially unjust societies.

Therefore, contrary to widespread belief, culturally relevant teaching approaches favorably affect Black students’ social and emotional development and improve their academic performance. Again, the point is not to argue that only Black teachers use culturally relevant teaching practices. Research has shown that irrespective of race, a teacher can engage in culturally relevant teaching practices (Ladson-Billings, 1992). However, what the literature has presented is that teacher training for more meaningful educational experiences for Black students needs to be examined (Milner, 2006). Yet the literature suggests that Black female teachers tend to engage with culturally relevant teaching without training. Their use of culturally relevant teaching comes from a long-standing cultural tradition of racial uplift through education that comes as a result of continued institutional racism and biases, as well as Eurocentric curricular frameworks that marginalize and often omit the significance of Black experiences to American history.

School Disservice to Black Students and Black Female Teachers

Black women educators have long been a driving force in the fight for racial equity, from enslavement to segregation to the Civil Rights Movement. Without the formal designation of the term, Black women educators have been pioneers for culturally relevant teaching practices for centuries, greatly shaping the educational experiences of Black students by fostering cultural and racial pride, a capacity for critical thought, and academic success. Yet Black female teachers do this because the American education system was not initially intended to facilitate Black success (Tyack & Lowe, 1986). Therefore, Black female teachers who have experienced and witnessed this disservice to Black students, like their predecessors, use culturally relevant teaching practices to help mitigate their discriminatory effects.

Throughout American history, schools have done a disservice to Black students. Black students confront obstacles in schooling that create opportunity gaps that often lead to lower academic outcomes. Over time, scholars have offered a variety of reasons for Black students’ lower educational outcomes, starting with cultural deficit theories based on assumed deficiencies in Black people and Black culture (Spencer, 2012). However, research shows

Black academic performance is incongruous with cultural deficit theories (Evans, 2005; Jeynes, 2015). The discrepancy in educational outcomes between Black and white students serves as evidence that the U.S. public school system has consistently let down this marginalized community (Ladson-Billings, 2006). These achievement gaps that result from opportunity gaps for Black students compared to their white peers have been and continue to be researched in the literature.

Educational Redlining

Additionally, systemic racism has fueled the practice of redlining neighborhoods that, for Black children, fuels a vicious cycle of decline for which they are often blamed (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Black children who live in neighborhoods steeped in almost inescapable poverty are exposed to poor living conditions that set the stage for their underachievement. Children in impoverished neighborhoods often have under-resourced school districts that perform poorly compared to affluent schools. In 2009, American schools with fewer than 10% of students in poverty ranked first among all nations on the Programme for International Student Achievement tests in reading, while those with student populations more than 75% in poverty scored alongside nations like Serbia, which ranked fiftieth (Darling-Hammond, 2012). These impoverished school districts have lower academic achievement and graduation rates than those with more affluent student populations (Duncan & Murnane, 2016).

Inadequate School Funding

The research shows that inadequate school funding systems, discriminatory disciplinary patterns, and implicit bias are all factors that work against Black students in American schools. School funding is connected to property taxes, and if a neighborhood is poor, it typically spends fewer local dollars per pupil. If they are underperforming, which low-income schools typically are, they receive lower state funding, which leads to uneven allocation of resources (Darling-Hammond, 2012). However, the funding disparities between predominantly marginalized and low-income and white and affluent schools are not a recent phenomenon; it just presents a telling story about the value placed on education between different racial groups (Ladson-Billings, 2006). In addition to Black student damage, because of budgetary constraints, Black female educators may have fewer opportunities for professional development and fewer resources for their classrooms. When added to the stress of meeting high academic requirements, these obstacles can make it harder for Black female teachers to maintain jobs in underfunded classrooms over the long run.

Disproportionate School Discipline

School discipline policies, frequently characterized by racial biases, also play a vital role in Black student underachievement and the retention of Black female teachers. Black students often are victims of deficit-based school discipline policies (Williams et al., 2020). Their overrepresentation in school discipline is a common thread in rural, suburban, and urban schools, and the traumatization of disproportionately disciplined Black students beyond disengagement with their education should not be understated (Williams et al., 2022). Black educators who work in these atmospheres may find it emotionally draining and experience racial battle fatigue due to the disproportionate use of harsh disciplinary measures against their Black students (Krull & Robicheau, 2020). These acts lead to stress responses, often resulting in fatigue and isolation (Krull & Robicheau, 2020).

Implicit Bias

For Black students and Black female teachers, bias can make the schooling experience difficult. Unconscious prejudices and preconceived notions about people based on their ethnicity or gender can affect discipline rates; student relationships with content, teachers, and their peers; hiring practices; evaluations; and interactions with co-workers (Monroe, 2005; Staats, 2016). A study out of Stanford University found that even when Black and white students behave the same, Black students are responded to more punitively (Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015). Microaggressions, stereotyping, and failure to recognize or reward the accomplishments of Black educators can all contribute to an intimidating and unpleasant work environment (Dixson et al., 2019). A teacher's feeling of community and opportunities for professional progress are both hampered by such biases. This could leave Black educators feeling undervalued and unsupported, which increases teacher turnover (Dixson et al., 2019).

In essence, history shows that for Black students, schools must decide how, not whether, they will underserve their students (Darling-Hammond, 2012). Black female teachers, initially as victims of and now witnesses to this disservice, come to acknowledge that Black students, regardless of constitutional decree, continue to be denied the full rights of citizenship, and without schooling, they would be relegated to enslavement again (Duncan, 2020; Tyack & Lowe, 1986). Just as they did not want to experience anti-Blackness themselves, Black teachers do not want their students to share these experiences in their education (Stovall & Sullivan, 2022). Because of this understanding, Black female teachers in the United States identify strongly with teaching and view it as a part of the community and a way to give back (Ladson-Billings, 1995a). Therefore, they arguably pioneered culturally relevant education long before the term existed (James-Gallaway & Harris, 2021). In doing so, they help Black students become empowered to be agents of change who can acknowledge structural problems, deconstruct historical injustices, and stimulate social activism. Black female teachers have a history of actively promoting social justice, encouraging a profound awareness of structural disparities, and inspiring a commitment to deconstructing oppressive structures.

Theoretical Framework

This theoretical framework explores the lived experiences, perspectives, and activism experienced by Black women (Collins, 1990; Collins, 2022). BFT challenges traditional feminist paradigms by exploring the intertwined challenges Black women experience through the intersection of race, gender, and class. Situated within this intertwining, Black women educators face various challenges, leading them to encounter a conglomerate of disservice in educational spaces. BFT uses the sharing of stories and establishes a connection to other Black women with parallel experiences to gather a better understanding (Clemons, 2019). Hill-Collins (2015) contends that BFT is multilayered and intended to delve into Black women's expositions of our social worlds. In encountering these challenges, schools, as political institutions, must aim to significantly reduce and ultimately eliminate the racism experienced within the current system. By using BFT, we aim to reveal connections and insight as we critically analyze experiences of oppression.

Methods

Collaborative Autoethnography

Our study aimed to understand how a group of Black women who were enrolled or employed at different levels in higher education experienced a disservice as teachers in American public education through collaborative autoethnography. Haeffner et al. (2022) state the importance of autoethnography as it postulates a realistic way to not only collect personal reflections but also to analyze self-reflection. To this end, the study uses collaborative autoethnography (CAE) as a qualitative method by having researchers work in unison to share their personal experiences and professional, relational, and sociocultural identities (Chang, 2013).

Positionality

Participant 1 is a doctoral student in her late thirties with an emphasis on urban education, with K–12 teaching and administrative experience for close to two decades in the American South. Participant 2 is a doctoral student in urban education in her mid-twenties whose K–12 and early college experiences took place in the Midwest and the South. Participant 3 is a doctoral student and educator in urban education in her early forties. Participant 3's K–12 experiences occurred in the south-central and southern United States. Participant 4 is a current professor in her late forties who teaches pre-service teachers. Her K-12 experience occurred in the mid-Atlantic and southeastern regions of the United States. All participants identify as Black women.

Data Collection

Each member of the collaborative autoethnography was asked to respond to five prompts using a form to collect responses. The guiding questions were:

Black education experience

1. In your experience as a teacher, do you feel you got the adequate support you needed?
2. How has the treatment in educational spaces impacted you as an educator?
3. What challenges have you faced in the teacher workforce being a Black woman?

4. As a Black educator, do you feel the need to advocate for Black students? Why?
5. Have you felt the need to change anything about yourself (voice level, hair, clothes, etc.) to fit into educational spaces?

Capturing the authentic responses of each author was imperative. A two-step process was employed to analyze perspectives. Emic (insider) data was open-coded to reflect each individual's responses. Each member wrote their reflection about their school experience in K-12 spaces and beyond. To create the collaborative narrative/story, the themes that emerged from the open coding of the individual narratives/stories were analyzed. Then, open coding was used to assess the collaborative narrative data in order to identify themes that formed and identify parallels and differences in the conceptual or theoretical frameworks founded on social, historical, and collective settings, as well as our shared experiences. After completing the reflection, the responses were uploaded to a shared drive for all members to read and analyze the other's responses. The two overarching themes were identified as *lack of support* and *experiences with racism*. Below are the responses to the reflections.

Findings

Our Shared Reflections

This study examined how Black female educators experienced disservice as teachers in American public education. The authors found that there were external encounters that impacted them internally. The external issues were from administrators, teachers, parents, and students. They focused on lack of support, pedagogical issues (method-teaching style and practice-supporting students), and microaggressions from administrators, fellow teachers, parents, and students. These external encounters impacted how the authors confirmed or changed how they interacted both physically and socially in the school environment.

Lack of support

The Black female educators responded to a question about having adequate support at their schools:

Participant 1: The majority of my experiences have been unsupported due to various reasons.

Participant 2: The most challenging aspects of my teaching career and the most blatant lack of adequate support I received came when dealing with behavior concerns with Black students (mine and others).

Participant 3: I think if I am looking at this, as if like, did, I get adequate support from the administration, I would have to say no.

The educators stressed how the lack of support impacted their instruction by often isolating them or having to put in the extra effort to make sure they had the resources and other tools needed to successfully teach on a regular basis.

Pedagogical Issues

A common theme expressed by Black educators was the discrepancies in teaching styles and abilities. The educators indicated that their way of teaching was not accepted or was discussed as if it were not a conducive approach to teaching and learning.

Participant 2: I often bumped heads with my colleagues (and administrators) who subscribed to worksheet-driven instruction while I was focused on creating hands-on, interactive, and inquiry-based lessons and experiences. I was bullied into complying with the "sit and get" style of teaching the designated "good teachers" around me were practicing.

Participant 2: In short, the culturally responsive behavior management techniques I employed were looked down upon by my colleagues and administrators. My positive approach (although more effective) was seen as "treating students special" because I treated them with respect and dignity.

Microaggressions

Participant 1: Some of the most heartbreaking challenges have been when a student told me I wasn't human because I was Black.

Participant 1: Another challenge was when one of my students raised her hand to express to me that her dog was named the 'n' word with a hard r because of the dog's black fur.

Participant 4: I once had to remind a student that I was the teacher of record for the classroom.

Parental Microaggressions

Participant 1: It was once challenging when students were removed from my class because their parents did not want a Black teacher teaching their child.

Participant 1: I had challenges with my parents as they did not respect my position or made up things about me like I was conspiring with a Black father to help him get his biracial daughter because I was Black, and all Black people are connected (their words).

Administrative/Peer Microaggressions

Participant 1: Although those were jaw-dropping, one of the most heartbreaking was when my non-Black partner teacher accused me of cheating on the 5th-grade math tests because my students were scoring well. She went to the testing coordinator to let her know her feelings. I was labeled an angry Black woman after that occasion after passionately expressing myself then and at team meetings.

Participant 2: As a Black and female teacher, I have experienced negative treatment from colleagues and administrators. I have often been ignored, ostracized, and gaslit, especially after confronting those who have projected negative stereotypes onto me as a Black woman. This is hard to explain as the reason that I know that the negative treatment I received was because I am Black is because I have also witnessed non-Black educators do egregious things and receive no consequence or sympathetic response.

Disciplinarian/Black Child Whisper

Participant 1: Being the only Black teacher on my campus, I was often looked at as the 'savior' or a fixer for all Black behavior issues not actually creating plans to service and help these students.

Participant 2: I was often the only Black educator on my grade level which made me the designated "disciplinarian" for Black students other teachers couldn't "control."

Participant 3: I feel that I have often been deemed as the spokesperson for all Black everything, so I made it a point to step in for discipline or really try to understand what is going on with a student. I tried to be there for the students like other teachers showed up for various students.

Changing to fit in

Participant 1: I have changed my hair color due to a fight with the district about natural hair color.

Participant 3: I had to make sure that I was dressing business casual to be a teacher's aide, which was not the worst thing in the world.

Participant 4: I paid attention to what I would wear or how many times I changed my hairstyle during a semester.

Changing voice level & tone

Participant 1: I have also become quiet in meetings or other teacher workplace gatherings because sometimes I was deemed too loud or that I had a take-over spirit.

Participant 2: When I was younger, I tried to fit into those societal standards. However, as I have gotten older, I do not wish to conform anymore. My tone of voice, however, has taken practice to tone down. I have been accused of being "argumentative" when I push back against practices and policies that I deem unfair. I have learned how to "pick my battles" and speak in a way that I can be heard better. I also know that because I am a Black woman, people's selective perceptions of me will always be a factor. No matter how "nice" I am, when I push against the status quo, I am deemed a threat.

Participant 3: I have had to change primarily my voice level, as well as my voice sound The thing I had to change the most was my voice level and how my voice sounded. I made sure that I code-switched quite frequently, especially when I was a teacher's aide with the white male teacher versus when I was a teacher's aide with the Black female teacher.

Advocate Aide Black Children

One of the foundational parts of teaching is building relationships with students. However, Black female teachers are often criticized for their interactions with their Black students.

Participant 2: Black students are left to fend for themselves in a school system that is not set up in their favor. If Black teachers don't advocate for Black students, who will? Families need as much support as possible. Unfortunately, not all Black teachers can or will be advocates for Black children. This is a double-edged sword at times because I have been pitted against other Black teachers who "don't feel the same way" as I do about the treatment of Black students.

Participant 3: As a Black educator, I undoubtedly feel the need to advocate for Black students. . . . I feel like Black students are very misunderstood a lot of the times because they don't have the language to articulate themselves but they're also because they are not taught how to engage in the face of the white gaze for the betterment of themselves. As much as I do not like it, schooling was not intended for the advancement of Black students and then with the 1954 Supreme Court case victory schooling again was not intended for the advancement of Black students contrary to popular belief.

Participant 1: I never wanted students to feel like they were annoying, isolated, or bored in my space. I made sure to create lasting & meaningful relationships along with engaging material, and great classroom management to help students. I always made it a point to uplift Black students, take extra time with them, listen to their issues with my partner teachers, create high expectations for them, and believe in them because not only did I lack that in school, but it was very visible that Black students were still getting the short end of the stick.

Participant 4: Yes, because if I don't who will? I see it as paying it forward. Someone advocated for me.

Turning Points and Fueling Passions

The previous reflections collected from the four participants highlight their varied yet similar experiences within education. Participants reflected on various ways they did not receive the support they needed in the classroom and how their experiences with racism influenced their advocacy for Black students. All teachers need support. For Black educators, the kind of support necessary for them to be effective with Black students requires the ability to be freely and authentically themselves. Although our reflections indicated that our experiences with lack of support often fueled our passions and desires to become better educators, these dynamics should not exist. Black educators want to thrive in their classrooms. Unfortunately, the current social and professional constraints experienced by Black and female educators relegate them to simply being Black bodies in a classroom to discipline Black students (Lynn, 2002; Sandles, 2018; White, 2010). Combined with navigating a school system not designed for the success of Black citizens, it was challenging for the authors to bring their full selves as educators and as Black women due to the shared experience of tone policing. Tone policing, as articulated by Oluo (2018), is a communication practice that prioritizes the comfort of those with privilege over those with marginalized identities. Often viewed as a form of microaggression, tone policing of Black women exhibits itself as an attempt to control the emotional expressions of Black women in lieu of understanding the message being communicated. In a "catch more

flies with honey” manner, when Black women express themselves in ways that threaten what white language patterns embody, they are quickly shut down and relegated to stereotypes about Black women as angry or aggressive.

Many Black and female educators have expressed similar experiences, and this is yet another example of how white standards of womanhood are pitted against Black female educators in an effort to devalue their contributions (Onwuachi-Willig, 2018). The themes indicate the resulting pedagogical and personal shifts the authors engaged in due to experiences they had. Their experiences with a lack of adequate support in the classroom fueled their passion for teaching and creating change in the education system. Similarly, their experiences with discrimination and racism drove their advocacy stances for Black learners.

Discussion

This study aimed to examine the self-reflections of four Black women educators through collaborative autoethnography. This research provides insight into the various challenges Black female educators have historically endured and are currently experiencing in U.S. public schools. An analysis of their reflections revealed two overarching themes through their responses: 1) lack of support and 2) experiences of racism. These themes were broken down into nine sub-themes: 1) pedagogical issues, 2) microaggressions (parent, student, and administration), 3) disciplinarian/Black child whisperer, 4) changing to fit in, 5) changing voice level & tone, and 6) advocate for Black children. These findings present both scholarly and practical understandings of the implications of how such contexts play out in the experiences of Black and female educators. First, this study underscores how teacher identity can influence teaching experiences (Wandix-White, 2020). For some Black women, navigating their professional roles as educators in white-dominated school systems relegates them to enduring a strategic balancing act. This balancing act often pits them against their white dominant institutions and their authentic selves. The authors voiced numerous instances of clashes between their teaching styles and those of their campuses. Their culturally relevant pedagogical practices were misunderstood and devalued. The authors also revealed anti-black sentiments exuded by students, colleagues, parents, and administrators. The racist and otherwise harmful comments and stereotypes projected onto them created feelings of isolation and rejection.

In contrast, these experiences helped shape them into the passionate and committed educators they are today. All authors expressed their commitment to advocating for Black students as a result of the discriminatory experiences they endured as teachers. Managing their own social acceptance and marginalization motivated them to be supporters of Black students who may be experiencing the same challenges. Extending previous research on the experiences of Black and female educators, this study renders visible the continued efforts still needed in today's schools to create environments where not only all students, but all teachers matter.

The use of collaborative autoethnography allowed the authors to not only tell their stories but to “allow readers to feel moral dilemmas [to] think with our story instead of about it” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 735). Concerning the research questions about the support, adverse treatment, challenges, and advocacy for Black students, their collective reflective responses presented these Black female educators’ identities and how their positionality influenced how they viewed their pedagogical practices and professional responsibilities. Concerning the first research question which inquires about the adequate support they received: lack of support was evident for all of the participants. The teachers emphasized how their instruction was negatively impacted by the lack of support, as they frequently felt alone or had to work extra hard to ensure they got the materials and other tools they required to teach effectively regularly. In response to the second research question regarding how treatment in educational spaces impacted them as educators: various forms and degrees of microaggressions were reported. These findings suggest that Black educators are not only contending with discriminatory institutional inequities but individual ones as well. The psychological and emotional toll these aggressions had on each participant varied; however, these events did not deter them from their passions as educators, it seemed to fuel their passions even more. These microaggressions fall in line with the other challenges they faced in the teacher workforce being Black women. Their reports about the disparaging remarks and treatment experienced from colleagues, students, parents, and administrators place them in a compounding matrix of racial slights that seek to disparage and discourage them. Additionally, regarding the research question which asked them if they felt the need to change anything about themselves (voice level, hair, clothes, etc.) to fit into educational spaces: there was a unanimous expression of the ways in which their authentic selves were not accepted. Weighing the potential costs and benefits of changing to fit into their white-dominated educational spaces caused emotional stress for the participants. Seemingly insignificant factors such as hair color and voice level/tone placed increased stress on these educators. Finally, addressing the

final research question referring to their need to advocate for Black students: this desire rang true and was expressed in the ways each participant advocated to reduce the racial stress Black students could face by either being the protector or preparing their Black students with skills to endure. All participants displayed increased care towards their Black students in an effort to support them in the ways they had been let down in their own educational journeys.

Drawing from the theoretical framework of BFT (Collins, 2022), the framework allows us to understand better how Black female educators can experience oppression in schools. Notably, when teacher identities counter the hegemony of whiteness in schools, they face formidable pedagogical, social, and professional challenges. Dismantling this complex web of oppression requires the lens of BFT to identify and understand such outcomes. Unfortunately, in the classroom, though beneficial for students, many Black female educators experience racism and dehumanization as educators in a white-dominated school system (Stovall & Mosely, 2023). Anti-Blackness continues to play an active role in white supremacy in schools (Brown & Brown, 2020; Dumas & ross, 2016). Black educators often experience isolation, exclusion, microaggressions, and otherwise discriminatory working conditions, which create social and professional challenges that can thwart their desire to stay in the classroom (Duncan, 2019; Milner, 2020). As integral as Black educators are to the schooling environment for the success of not only Black children but all children, it is imperative to reduce the occurrence of covert and overt manifestations of racism so they may be able to remain in the classroom where students need them most.

Conclusion

It is important to acknowledge that every scientific study has some limitations, and ours is no exception. However, the findings of this research have significant implications for school administrators and teachers. Black female teachers have a crucial role to play in the education of Black students and the students that are within their classrooms. Regrettably, the educational system often fails to provide these teachers with the necessary support, and they frequently encounter gendered and racialized microaggressions. Consequently, they operate in unhealthy environments, leading to job dissatisfaction and high attrition rates among Black female teachers. This attrition rate adversely affects the quality of education received by Black students. It is therefore vital that school administrators and educators establish a supportive and welcoming environment for Black female teachers.

It is essential for school administrators and educators to recognize the importance of Black female teachers and their contributions to the educational system. This could include providing mentorship opportunities, creating professional development programs that address the unique needs of Black female teachers, and implementing policies to address discrimination and harassment. Schools should create an enabling environment for their success and provide the necessary resources to help them achieve their goals.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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