

Reviewing the Mental Health Awareness of African Americans Male Educators

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Abstract: African American males comprise less than 2% of America's teaching force (Borowski & Will, 2021). Although that percentage may be considered small, the impact of African American male educators is essential, especially in Title I schools where the minority is African American students (School Poster Prints, 2025). African American male educators comprise many roles in the school setting that sometimes cause them to be mentally drained from all that is required. Instead of coming across as weak or incapable, African American male educators tend to push their strength to show others that they can do it all, when that is not always the case. Aside from their professional life, the concept of being the strong one also reigns supreme in their personal lives, as they go home to their families who expect just as much from them as their job (Bristol & Mentor, 2018). While continuing to push through, African American male educators tend to neglect themselves, resulting in a downward spiral of their mental health. With very few resources or people to talk to, African American male educators often hold things in and suppress their mental health needs.

This literature review explores the lived experiences of mental health awareness among African American educators. First, the African American Male Theory will be espoused. Second, the experiences of African American Male Educators, including those of pre-service teachers, will be highlighted. Third, the importance of culturally relevant teaching will be explained, followed by the impact of racial bias and factors that affect African American male teaching. Finally, mental health and the resilience of African American males will be explored.

Key Words: African American Male Educators, Mental Health Awareness, Title I Schools

African American Male Theory

Bush and Bush (2013) defined African American Male Theory (AAMT) as a theoretical framework that can articulate the position and trajectory of African American boys and men in society, based on pre- and post- enslavement experiences, while considering the spiritual, psychological, social, and educational development. Building upon the ancient and current African worldview and Bronfenbrenner's (1986, 1989, 2005) work, AAMT suggests that African American boys and men exist in a symbiotic and bidirectional relationship with other beings, matter, concepts, and phenomena. Thus, AAMT provides a conceptual framework that can be used to describe and analyze the interrelated structures, systems, and processes that occur in these dynamic and multidimensional environments that influence the development, experiences, outcomes, and trajectory of African American boys and men (Spencer et al., 1997; Swanson et al., 2003). The environmental factors affecting African American boys and men are numerous and differentiated, so AAMT uses multidisciplinary and trans-disciplinary approaches. Like Critical Race Theory (CRT), AAMT views racism as an omnipresent force in society. AAMT is particularly interested in how racism has an impact on the lives of African American boys and men. Moreover, AAMT is interested in understanding how being male and of a particular class may gain some African American boys and men privilege in some spaces, and, thereby, scholars of AAMT seek to be in dialogue with such perspectives (Abdulla, 2012; Cannon, 1988; Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000; Pellerin, 2012).

AAMT intends to undermine oppression through explicitly investigating, exposing, and correcting those practices, policies, programs, systems, concepts, and institutions that promote its continuation (Young, 1990). Nevertheless, AAMT is not a reactionary theory. The aim is not to respond to cultural hegemony and racism but, instead, to explicitly account for it, as AAMT draws upon the historical and current culture, consciousness, and community to determine what is and strive to achieve social justice for African American boys and men. It is important to note that even after 40 years of research, there is still no theory that has emerged as the foundation and frame to explain the lives of African American boys and men (Bush & Bush, 2013).

The Experience of the African American Male Educator

African American male's experiences in public education vary, but many are negative (Bristol & Mentor, 2018). African American male educators reported that their colleagues expect them to be disciplinarians primarily and that educating students should be secondary (Bristol & Mentor, 2018; Brown & Butty, 1999; Lindsay & Hart, 2017). They claimed their colleagues only contacted them for help with discipline, and they never sought their assistance for curriculum-related questions (Brown, 2012; Bristol & Mentor, 2018). African American male educators often feel inferior when it comes to their work and can sometimes go unheard in their profession. When African American male educators have to go into society and their personal lives, they often can feel the everyday pain but often neglect their feelings to show strength for their loved ones and others (Ray, 2023). They may face assumptions by their colleagues that they will be better equipped to handle disruptive behaviors in the classroom because of their race. This expectation is grounded in the historical narrative that presents African American boys as fatherless troublemakers and underachievers (El-Mekki, 2018).

Many African American male educators are attracted to the education field because of their positive experiences with their African American male teachers. Subsequently, their experiences served as an influential factor in becoming educators themselves (Fray & Gore, 2018). While positive experiences motivate African American male teachers to follow suit, some negative experiences have also motivated them to be the teachers they wish they could have experienced in school (Fray & Gore, 2018). The cultural background and experiences experienced throughout life allow African American male teachers to enhance their connectivity with African American students, which is subsequently pivotal to student outcomes. African American male educators' professional success positively impacts themselves and their students.

When African American students have an African American teacher, they are more likely to be in gifted programs (Grissom et al., 2017), disciplined less frequently (Butler et al., 2012; Lindsay & Hart, 2017), have increased standardized test scores, and graduation rates (Gershenson et al., 2017). Furthermore, African American male teachers play a critical role serving as father figures in teaching positions and improving overall academic outcomes (Brockenbrough, 2012; Irvine & Fenwick, 2009).

Although inequitable schooling experiences for African Americans are well documented, understanding and responding to the systemic challenges African Americans, particularly African American males, encounter while navigating through the U.S. education system has been a recurring theme in educational research (Milner et al., 2013). With African American male educators being represented the lowest among educators, there is a desperate need in the teaching profession for them. The African American male pipeline to the teaching profession is ultimately controlled by low high school graduation rates (Pabon et al., 2011) and inadequate college preparation. Thus, opportunities to increase African American male representation within the teaching profession are lost even before college begins (Bianco et al., 2011). Equally, the lack of African American male representation as role models decreases the likelihood for minority male students to pursue higher education or seek careers in education. The declining number of African American teachers has become even more surprising given the increase in culturally and linguistically diverse minority student populations (Dilworth, 1989; Smith et al., 2004). As the student population grows, African American male educators must be included to promote a healthy climate for all students, especially those who look just like them. Finding innovative ways to ensure African American male educators have what they need without feeling burned out or less than them is a means of ensuring a successful impact in education. One must look at cultural barriers as well from society that, for years, have added to the inadequacy of African American male educators.

African American Male Preservice Experiences with Stereotypes

Scott and Rodriguez (2014) focused on the experiences of African American male preservice teachers concerning stereotype threat, marginalization, and the influence of role models within educational settings. While they did not explicitly address mental health awareness in African American male educators, they touched upon themes that are closely related to mental health, such as the psychological impacts of stereotype threat and the emotional toll of marginalization.

Scott and Rodriguez's (2014) participants expressed feelings of anxiety and pressure to prove their academic abilities due to pervasive negative stereotypes. This constant need to validate their presence and capabilities can lead to significant stress and mental health challenges. The experiences of microaggressions described by the participants can contribute to a hostile educational environment, which may negatively affect mental well-being. One participant reflected on feeling like "a fly in the ointment," highlighting the emotional distress caused by being subjected to racial biases and discrimination.

The research conducted within the Scott and Rodriguez (2014) study reveals that participants developed coping mechanisms to handle the stress associated with their experiences. For instance, Vincent mentioned the importance of having a support group to share feelings and vent frustrations, indicating that social support plays a crucial role in managing mental health challenges. African American male educators need support more than anything. The presence of supportive role models was identified as a significant factor in the participants' academic persistence. Positive relationships with mentors can enhance emotional well-being and provide a buffer against the adverse effects of stereotype threat and marginalization. While this study does not explicitly focus on mental health awareness, the insights gained from the participants' experiences underscore the need for greater awareness of mental health issues among African American male educators. Recognizing the psychological impacts of racism, stereotype threat, and marginalization is essential for developing supportive educational environments. In summary, the article highlights significant factors that affect the mental well-being of African American male educators, suggesting a need for further exploration and support in this area.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

Hayes et al. (2014) explored the teaching perspectives of two exemplary African American educators from Mississippi. The study's objective was to explore the philosophies of two African American male teachers regarding the successful teaching of African American children in hopes of providing a valuable source of knowledge on the effective schooling of African Americans and other students of color, which is rooted in critical race praxis and transformative pedagogy.

Hayes et al. (2014) used in-depth interviews and applied notions of culturally relevant teaching to guide the understanding of successful teaching and the selection of participants. By doing so, it was found that the two African American male teachers' teaching approaches were centered on helping their students develop critical thinking skills, mentoring, and changing attitudes, and that they viewed their role as educators as a means to provide their students with the tools to resist racism and succeed in a dominant White society.

The study's results show that Hayes's (2014) teaching approaches are rooted in critical race praxis and transformative pedagogy, which provides a valuable way of gauging innovative approaches to schooling and education of African Americans and other historically disenfranchised communities. The study also found that their approaches help extend understandings of culturally relevant teaching by providing further detailed descriptions of the frame of reference that exemplary African American teachers typically enact in their classrooms.

Furthermore, Hayes (2014) found that the successful approaches of African American teachers demonstrate that the persistent racial gaps in school discipline, educational opportunities, and attainment levels are not natural or inevitable, but rather a result of societal choices. The study also concluded that the perspectives of exemplary African American male educators on the successful teaching of African American students can inform policy, teacher education, and education reform. The teaching approaches provide a valuable source of knowledge on the effective schooling of African American and other students of color and a framework for understanding how to teach African American students successfully.

Factors that Affect African American Male Teaching

Manchanda et al. (2023) explored the factors that influence African American men teachers' decisions to enter the teaching profession, finding that positive exposure to teaching and early teaching experiences are key influences. The study found that various factors contribute to African American men entering the teaching profession, including early experiences in education, role models, and exposure to ineffective classroom teachers. African American male educators are typically motivated by a desire to make positive social change and to help others, particularly African American students.

The stated purpose of the study was to examine why African American male teachers choose a career in teaching by analyzing their personal and professional trajectories and their self-reflections on career decision-making. The study answered research questions: What factors motivated African American men to enter the teaching profession? How did these factors differ between teachers who transitioned careers into teaching, compared to those who went straight into the teaching profession?

The study found that participants had various reasons for choosing to enter the teaching profession, including positive exposure to teaching and early teaching experiences. Direct experiences in teaching took place at different developmental phases for the participants. When these experiences were successful before entering the profession, it helped participants develop self-efficacy and positive outcome expectations. Ultimately, participants' decisions to become teachers were influenced by a combination of factors, including early exposure to teaching, societal context, self-efficacy development, and the presence of role models, particularly men of color. The study also found that the participants saw themselves as role models and mentors for their students and were motivated by a desire to impact their students' lives positively.

In conclusion, understanding the factors that motivate African American men to enter the teaching profession is crucial for creating effective recruitment and retention strategies. Positive exposure to teaching and early teaching experiences are key influences on African American men teachers' decisions to enter the teaching profession. Early experiences in education are important, and role models influence African American men to pursue a career in the teaching profession.

Racial Bias

Starck et al. (2020) investigated teachers' explicit and implicit racial biases, comparing them to adults with similar characteristics. They find that both teachers and nonteachers hold pro-White explicit and implicit racial biases, with negligible or insignificant differences between the two groups. The study's objective was to understand teachers' role in perpetuating racial inequality in schools.

Starck et al. (2020) employed data from two national data sets to investigate teachers' explicit and implicit racial bias, using measures such as feeling thermometers and the Implicit Association Test (IAT). Linear regressions were also used to examine the effect of occupation on implicit and explicit bias. The study also uses dummy codes for categorical covariates and standardizes continuous covariates. The study includes self-reported measures of gender, education level, age, race, ethnicity, and political identification as covariates.

Starck et al. (2020) found that both teachers and nonteachers hold pro-White explicit and implicit racial biases and that the differences between them are negligible or insignificant. It also found that teachers have lower levels of implicit and explicit racial bias compared to nonteachers, although the differences are slight.

The results of Starck et al. (2020) show that both teachers and nonteachers hold pro-White explicit and implicit racial biases, with negligible or insignificant differences between the two groups. The study concluded that if schools are to promote racial equity effectively, teachers should be provided with training to either shift or mitigate the effects of their own racial biases. Teachers' racial attitudes largely reflect those held within their broader society, and providing systematic education and training to reduce racial bias may be an effective way to help teachers and schools promote racial equity. Structuring educational settings and interactions with students to mitigate the potential effects of teacher bias on student outcomes may be beneficial.

Mental Health in African American Male Educators

According to Motley and Banks (2018), trauma accounts for 41 million emergency department visits, 2.3 million hospital admissions, and 192,000 deaths across the nation every year. Because of this, trauma has been identified as a significant public health and medical issue. African American males ages 18 and older are at a noticeably high risk for trauma exposure. Studies have shown that over 50% of African American males have been exposed to trauma in some form, including direct exposure, witnessing a traumatic event, and learning of a tragic event concerning a family or friend (Motley & Banks, 2018). In addition to experiencing trauma, African American males are more likely than their White counterparts to be victims of homicide (Motley & Banks, 2018). They are roughly three times more likely than White men to be victims of a nonfatal injury by firearm. Many African American males go on with their lives without lasting adverse outcomes after experiencing a traumatic event; however, others may experience traumatic stress reactions that lead to deleterious mental and/or behavioral outcomes (Motley & Banks, 2018). Research has found an association between trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and violence perpetration (Motley & Banks, 2018). Since African American males are more likely to experience exposure to trauma, they are more likely to require mental health services. Despite this, African American males are less likely than their White counterparts to use professional mental health services, even after adjusting for socioeconomic and clinical factors (Umeh, 2019). The cycle of trauma that encompasses the lives of many African American men aged 18 and older poses significant social and economic costs to the victims, their families, society, and the healthcare system (Motley & Banks, 2018). Mental health treatments, such as cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, are effective in treating and reducing the rates of deleterious mental and behavioral outcomes for African American male trauma survivors (Motley & Banks, 2018). This is why it is important to address trauma and provide mental health access to African American male trauma survivors, as it will create a healthier and thriving society (Motley & Banks, 2018).

Mental Health and Burnout

African American teachers experience burnout at significantly higher rates than White teachers — 63% compared to 55%, according to the 2023 State of the Teacher report (RAND, 2023). The report shows that burnout overall has decreased for White teachers, while increasing for African American teachers. One cause of the mental burnout of African American educators is that African American teachers serve multiple roles in a school, not just doing daily tasks, African American teachers overwhelmingly serve as disciplinarians, especially for African American and Brown students, or they are responsible for making connections between African American families and the school community (RAND, 2023). Although serving in these multiple roles can be beneficial to the students who look and relate to them, it can be detrimental to their mental health. The relationships they build with their students cause them to play the role of disciplinarians and guidance counselors, all while stressing about their original role as a teacher (RAND, 2023).

Another source of burnout experienced by African American educators is the compensation they receive for the many roles they have to play (RAND, 2023). Low salary is another noted source of stress that these educators experience. The State of the Teacher report found that 35% of African American teachers cite this as a source of job-related stress, compared to 26% of White teachers (RAND, 2023). African American and Brown teachers want a competitive salary and a salary that they can live on to provide stability for their families. Doctors and lawyers are vital to society and are paid accordingly; however, teachers are not, especially African American teachers (RAND, 2023). The high turnover rate among African American educators directly results from burnout and low salary stress. One response to ending these two factors is that schools need to be honest with African American and Brown teachers that they will be in the minority among the teaching staff, and the preparatory programs need to prepare them to cope with that. Mental health must be addressed within the school, which allows teachers to decompress and process the stressors of the educational system. Support groups that do not focus on academics, but where teachers can get together and talk about what is happening in the classroom and problem solve together, are most necessary (Pottiger, 2023).

Resilience in African American Male Educators

A study by Anderson and Gordon (2022) focused on how African American male educators often feel isolated, particularly in predominantly White institutions. This sense of isolation can contribute to mental health challenges, as these educators may struggle with feelings of belonging and validation within their professional environments.

Anderson and Gordon's (2022) study participants expressed frustration with being perceived primarily as disciplinarians or "the muscle," rather than being recognized for their teaching capabilities. Such stereotypes can lead to stress and anxiety, impacting their mental well-being as they navigate these expectations. Many African American male educators in the study felt a strong responsibility to advocate for their students and challenge injustices within the education system. This advocacy can be emotionally taxing, particularly when they witness disparities in treatment and outcomes for their students. The emotional labor associated with these responsibilities can affect their mental health.

The article highlights the resilience of these educators in the face of systemic challenges. While resilience is a positive trait, it can also mask underlying mental health issues if individuals feel pressured to demonstrate strength without adequate support continuously. The historical context of African American education and the ongoing impact of systemic racism can contribute to stress and mental health concerns for African American male educators. Understanding this context is crucial for recognizing the mental health challenges they may face. While the article does not directly address mental health awareness, it provides insights into the factors that can affect the mental well-being of African American male educators. The themes of isolation, stereotype threat, emotional burden from advocacy, and the cultural context of their experiences suggest a need for greater awareness and support for mental health issues within this demographic. Addressing these challenges could lead to improved mental health outcomes and overall well-being for African American male educators in K-12 education.

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