

Scholar Perspectives

Navigating the Blues: The Resistance and Identity Evolution of Black Male Educators as Shapeshifters in Education

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Abstract: Recent studies have underscored the critical impact of Black male educators on educational outcomes, notably enhancing both student academic performance and their future aspirations (Hart & Lindsay, 2024). Despite their considerable influence, these educators face significant challenges, including a notable underrepresentation in teacher training programs (National Teacher and Principal Survey, 2021) and the highest attrition rates in the educational workforce (Snyder et al., 2014; The Education Trust, 2015). This article centers on those Black male educators who persist in the profession, exploring their resilience and patterns of retention. It delves into their lived experiences and the evolution of their identities within the educational sphere, employing Clyde Woods' (2017) "blues epistemology" as a conceptual framework. This qualitative approach situates African American identity within a context of resistance to systemic oppression. The article investigates the ways in which these educators navigate their roles, emphasizing the interplay between their identity, resistance, and retention. It seeks to shed light on how these educators continually adapt and reshape their identities in response to the unique challenges and demands they encounter in the educational landscape. By doing so, the article contributes to broader discussions on equity, justice, and liberation in education, offering valuable insights into the mechanisms of resistance and the ongoing journey of identity transformation among Black male educators in the workplace.

Keywords: Black male educators, educational outcomes, resilience, retention, identity

The educational landscape in the United States has long been marked by systemic inequities and challenges, particularly for Black male educators. Despite representing a crucial element of diversity within schools, Black male educators constitute only 2% of the teaching workforce (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This underrepresentation highlights the need to understand their unique experiences and the systemic barriers they face. This phenomenological study delves into these experiences, exploring how Black male educators navigate identity conflicts and resist oppressive structures, aligning their actions with the principles of "blues epistemology." Research consistently shows that Black male educators play a vital role in fostering inclusive and supportive educational environments. They often serve as role models, particularly for Black students, and contribute to a more culturally responsive pedagogy (Milner, 2012). However, the professional journey of Black male educators is fraught with challenges. Studies indicate that they are often pigeonholed into roles as disciplinarians or athletic coaches, limiting their professional growth and reinforcing racial stereotypes (Brooks, 2016). This study aims to illuminate these challenges and the strategies employed by Black male educators to overcome them.

The significance of this study is underscored by the broader context of educational inequity. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2019), schools with a higher percentage of Black students are more likely to have inexperienced teachers and fewer resources. This disparity not only affects the quality of education that Black students receive but also places additional burdens on Black male educators who often find themselves in these under-resourced environments. Understanding their experiences is crucial for developing policies and practices that support both educators and students. Blues epistemology, a framework rooted

in the historical and cultural experiences of African Americans, provides a lens through which to view the resilience and resistance of Black male educators. This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of lived experiences and the ways in which individuals navigate and resist systemic oppression (Moten, 2003). By applying this framework, the study captures the depth and complexity of the participants' experiences, highlighting their strategies of resistance and survival within the educational system.

This study also employs a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of the participants' experiences. Through in-depth interviews and focus groups, the narratives of Black male educators reveal the personal and professional challenges they face and the strategies they use to overcome them. By synthesizing key themes from these interviews, this manuscript aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Black male educators navigate identity conflicts and systemic barriers. The insights gained from this study are intended to inform educational policy and practice, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and inclusive educational system.

Review of the Literature

The literature on Black male educators consistently reveals the unique challenges they face, including racial isolation, high expectations to serve as disciplinarians, and the burden of being role models for Black students (Goings & Bianco, 2016). These challenges are compounded by systemic racism and implicit biases within educational institutions (Brown, 2012). Researchers have noted that Black male educators often experience a dual pressure to

succeed and to represent their race positively, a phenomenon that can lead to significant stress and burnout (Dancy, 2014).

Despite these challenges, the presence of Black male educators is crucial in providing culturally relevant pedagogy and mentorship, which can significantly impact the academic and social outcomes of Black students (Lynn, 2006). Studies show that Black male educators bring unique perspectives and teaching methods that resonate with students of color, fostering a more inclusive and supportive learning environment (Howard, 2013). Furthermore, their presence challenges prevailing stereotypes and provides positive role models for all students, contributing to a more diverse and equitable educational landscape (Milner, 2015).

Travis Bristol's research highlights the systemic barriers Black male educators face, such as racial discrimination and lack of professional support (Bristol, 2015). Bristol & Mentor (2018) further elaborate on how institutional practices often marginalize Black male teachers, limiting their career advancement and professional development opportunities. These systemic issues not only hinder the professional growth of Black male educators but also affect their ability to positively impact their students. Jupp and Lensmire (2016) emphasize the importance of racial literacy in addressing these challenges. They argue that educators and policymakers need to develop a deeper understanding of race and its implications within educational settings. This racial literacy is crucial for creating environments where Black male educators can thrive and where their contributions are valued. Kohli (2018) also underscores the need for critical racial awareness in teacher education programs, suggesting that without it, efforts to diversify the teaching workforce will remain superficial and ineffective.

The work of Brockenbrough (2015) explores how Black male educators navigate their professional identities within historically white institutions. He notes that these educators often engage in acts of resistance to counteract the marginalization they experience. This resistance is not only a means of survival but also a way to challenge and transform oppressive structures within the educational system. Similarly, Lewis (2006) discusses how Black educators use their cultural knowledge and experiences to resist and navigate systemic barriers, contributing to a more inclusive educational environment. Siddle-Walker (2000) provides historical context to these challenges, highlighting the long-standing struggles of Black educators within the American educational system. Her research shows that despite the desegregation efforts of the mid-20th century, Black educators have continued to face significant obstacles. This historical perspective is crucial for understanding the contemporary experiences of Black male educators and the systemic nature of the barriers they encounter.

Goings & Bianco (2016) highlight the critical role of mentorship and support networks in the professional development of Black male educators. They argue that these support systems can help mitigate the effects of isolation and discrimination, providing Black male teachers with the resources and encouragement they need to succeed. Similarly, Bridges (2011) emphasizes the importance of professional communities that support the unique needs of Black male educators, fostering their growth and resilience. Thomas & Warren (2017) discuss the impact of culturally responsive teaching practices on the experiences of Black male educators. They argue that these practices not only benefit students of color but also validate and support the professional identities of Black teachers. By incorporating their cultural knowledge and experiences into their

teaching, Black male educators can create more engaging and relevant learning environments for their students. Simmons et al. (2013) highlight the psychological toll of systemic racism on Black male educators. Their research shows that the constant need to prove oneself and counteract negative stereotypes can lead to significant stress and burnout. This psychological burden underscores the need for systemic changes that support the well-being of Black male educators and recognize their contributions to the educational system.

A unique aspect of this manuscript is its exploration of Black male educators as "shapeshifters" within the educational system. This concept refers to the adaptive strategies these educators employ to navigate different roles and expectations in response to systemic pressures. While previous research has touched on the resilience and resistance of Black male educators, there is limited exploration of how they consciously and strategically modify their behaviors and identities to fit various contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by providing a deeper understanding of the shapeshifting phenomenon and its implications for Black male educators.

The narratives of Black male educators reveal a complex interplay of identity, resistance, and resilience. By understanding and addressing the systemic barriers they face, educational institutions can create more inclusive and supportive environments. This, in turn, will not only benefit Black educators but also enrich the educational experiences of all students. The concept of Black male educators as shapeshifters adds a unique dimension to this study, highlighting their adaptive strategies in navigating oppressive structures. This phenomenon has been underexplored in existing literature, indicating a significant gap that warrants further investigation.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in "blues epistemology," a theoretical framework that emphasizes resilience, resistance, and the articulation of lived experiences of Black individuals facing systemic oppression (Moten, 2003). Rooted in the cultural and historical experiences of African Americans, blues epistemology draws on the rich tradition of blues music and its role in expressing and coping with the hardships of life. This framework underscores the importance of storytelling, emotional expression, and the resilience embodied in the blues tradition, offering a lens through which to understand the experiences of Black male educators.

Blues epistemology provides a unique perspective on the adaptive strategies employed by Black male educators, framing these strategies as acts of resistance and survival. It acknowledges the ways in which these educators navigate and resist systemic barriers, drawing parallels between their professional experiences and the historical struggles depicted in blues music. By viewing their experiences through this lens, we can better appreciate the depth of their resilience and the cultural significance of their actions.

Furthermore, blues epistemology emphasizes the importance of community and collective experience. This aspect of the framework highlights how Black male educators draw strength from their cultural heritage and their connections with others who share similar experiences. It situates their personal narratives within a broader communal context, illustrating how individual acts of resistance contribute to a collective struggle for justice and equity. This

communal perspective is crucial for understanding the solidarity and support networks that sustain Black male educators in their professional journeys.

Finally, applying blues epistemology to this study allows for a deeper exploration of the "shapeshifting" phenomenon. This concept refers to the adaptive strategies Black male educators use to navigate different roles and expectations within the educational system. Blues epistemology provides a framework for understanding how these educators modify their behaviors and identities in response to systemic pressures, highlighting the resilience and creativity involved in such adaptive processes. By examining their experiences through this lens, we can gain new insights into the complexities of their professional identities and the strategies they employ to thrive in challenging environments.

Methodology

Phenomenological Inquiry

This study employs a phenomenological approach to capture the essence of the lived experiences of Black male educators. Phenomenology, as described by Creswell (2013), seeks to understand how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences. It is particularly suited to exploring deep, complex experiences and uncovering the meanings that participants attach to them. Von Eckartsberg (1998) emphasizes the importance of describing the lived world of the participants in a rich, detailed manner, allowing researchers to grasp the core of their experiences. Wertz (1984) adds that phenomenological inquiry involves immersing oneself in the participants' world to understand their subjective experiences. This method requires a deep engagement with the participants' narratives, focusing on their personal stories and the meanings

they ascribe to their experiences. Vagle (2014) further elaborates on the iterative process of phenomenological research, which involves moving back and forth between data collection and analysis to refine and deepen the understanding of the phenomena under study.

Study Context

The context of this study is the educational landscape of the United States, specifically focusing on various educational settings where Black male educators work. These settings include rural, urban, and suburban schools, where the challenges of systemic racism and educational inequities are particularly pronounced. The study aims to explore how Black male educators navigate these environments, focusing on their experiences of identity conflicts and systemic barriers.

Participants

The study involved nine Black male educators working in different educational roles, including teachers, administrators, and educational leaders. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. This diversity allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the challenges and strategies employed by Black male educators. The educators ranged in age, years of experience, and geographic location, providing a broad spectrum of insights into their professional journeys. Each participant was invited to share their experiences through in-depth interviews and focus groups. This combination of data collection methods allowed for a rich, multifaceted understanding of their experiences. The interviews provided detailed personal narratives, while the focus groups facilitated discussions and reflections on common themes and shared experiences.

Data Collection

Data collection involved conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with the participants. The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling participants to express their thoughts and experiences freely while ensuring that key topics were covered. Each interview lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The focus groups were conducted with groups of three to four participants, fostering a collaborative environment where educators could discuss their experiences and reflect on shared challenges and strategies. These sessions lasted approximately two hours each and were also audio-recorded.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved coding the interview and focus group transcripts using both etic and emic approaches (Lett, 1990). The etic approach involved applying pre-determined codes based on existing literature and theoretical frameworks, while the emic approach focused on identifying themes and patterns that emerged organically from the participants' narratives. The coding process was iterative, involving multiple rounds of analysis to refine and deepen the understanding of the data. Initially, open coding was used to identify broad themes and patterns in the data. This was followed by axial coding, which involved grouping the initial codes into more specific categories and subcategories. Finally, selective coding was employed to identify the core themes that encapsulated the essence of the participants' experiences. Given that we used a phenomenological method, we found it critical to employ bracketing (Tufford & Newman, 2010), or setting aside our assumptions of the participants' experiences. Bracketing

allowed us to focus on the participants' perspectives without being influenced by our preconceived notions. This process involved being constantly aware of our own biases and assumptions and deliberately setting them aside during the data collection and analysis phases.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity, as described by Hopkins (1989), involves being aware of one's social location and how it influences the research process. In this study, reflexivity was crucial for ensuring that the researchers remained focused on the participants' experiences rather than their own interpretations. The researchers engaged in regular reflexive journaling and discussions to maintain awareness of their biases and ensure that the participants' voices were accurately represented.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. Participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks before giving their informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and ensuring that all data were securely stored. The researchers also obtained approval from the relevant institutional review boards before commencing the study.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study employed multiple strategies, including member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing. Member checking involved sharing the preliminary findings with the participants to verify the accuracy and resonance of the

interpretations. Triangulation was achieved by using multiple data sources (interviews and focus groups) and analytical methods (etic and emic coding). Peer debriefing involved discussing the findings and interpretations with colleagues to ensure rigor and credibility.

Limitations

The study acknowledges several limitations. The sample size, though sufficient for phenomenological research, may not capture the full diversity of experiences among Black male educators. Additionally, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the possibility of bias, as participants may present their experiences in a particular light. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Black male educators and the systemic challenges they face.

Findings

Navigating Identity Conflicts

One of the predominant themes that emerged from the interviews was the challenge of navigating identity conflicts. Participants frequently discussed the tension between their professional roles and their personal identities as Black men. "I always felt like I was walking on eggshells," explained Malik, a high school teacher with ten years of experience. "There were so many people waiting for me to make a mistake or say the wrong thing". This feeling of heightened scrutiny was a common experience among the participants. "As a Black man in education, I felt like I had to be twice as good to get half the recognition," stated Jamal, an

elementary school principal. This sentiment highlights the pressure Black male educators feel to constantly prove their competence and worth in historically white educational environments. Another participant, Darnell, a middle school science teacher, described the internal conflict he experienced. "I had to navigate my identity as a Black man while also trying to fit into the historically white culture of the school. It was like I had to wear a mask every day just to be accepted". This metaphor of wearing a mask captures the emotional labor involved in maintaining a professional facade while grappling with personal identity.

Systemic Barriers

The participants also highlighted various systemic barriers that hindered their professional growth and effectiveness. These barriers included discriminatory policies, lack of support, and limited opportunities for advancement. "I was often overlooked for promotions despite my qualifications and experience," noted Andre, an assistant principal. "It felt like my contributions were not valued in the same way as my white colleagues". Several educators pointed to the lack of professional development opportunities tailored to their needs. "The training sessions were not relevant to the issues we faced as Black male educators," explained Terence, a high school math teacher. "We needed support in dealing with racial biases and creating inclusive classrooms, but those topics were rarely addressed". Discriminatory policies also posed significant challenges. For example, Jeffery, an elementary school teacher, recounted how dress codes disproportionately targeted Black students. "The school had strict rules against cultural attire like durags and bonnets, which unfairly penalized our students. I had to constantly advocate for changes to these policies".

Acts of Resistance

Despite these challenges, participants demonstrated resilience and engaged in acts of resistance to counteract systemic barriers. Malik shared a powerful story of challenging discriminatory dress code policies at his school. "I stood up in a staff meeting and questioned why we allowed hats with fish hooks but banned bonnets and durags. It led to a policy change that allowed our students to express their cultural identity". Christopher, another participant, described his efforts to implement more inclusive teaching practices. "I always felt like the curriculum didn't reflect the experiences of our Black students. So, I started incorporating more culturally relevant materials and created lesson plans that resonated with them". This proactive approach not only improved student engagement but also fostered a more inclusive learning environment. The participants also highlighted the importance of mentoring and supporting other Black educators. "I made it a point to mentor new Black teachers and help them navigate the challenges we face," said Jamal. "It's important to build a community where we support each other and share strategies for success". This sense of solidarity and mutual support was a recurring theme in the narratives.

Faith and Spirituality

In addition to the predetermined themes, several new themes emerged organically from the participants' narratives. One such theme was the role of faith and spirituality in sustaining resilience. "My faith has been a source of strength for me," shared Darnell. "It helps me stay grounded and focused on my purpose, despite the challenges" .This connection to spirituality provides a coping mechanism and a sense of purpose.

Family Support

Another emergent theme was the impact of family support. Terence discussed how his family's encouragement played a crucial role in his career. "My family has always been my biggest cheerleaders. Their support gives me the motivation to keep going, even when things get tough". Participants frequently mentioned how their families' encouragement helped them persevere through difficult times. "My wife and children have been my rock," shared Jeffery. "Their unwavering support gives me the strength to face the challenges at work". The strong family bonds provided a source of emotional resilience and motivation. This highlights the importance of a strong support system in fostering resilience and perseverance.

Self-care and Mental health awareness

Participants also emphasized the need for self-care and mental health awareness. "I've learned to prioritize my mental health," noted Jeffery. "Taking time for self-care and seeking professional help when needed has been essential in managing the stress of my job". This theme underscores the significance of addressing mental health issues and promoting well-being among educators.

Mentorship

The role of mentorship emerged as a crucial theme. Participants stressed the importance of having mentors who understood their unique challenges. "Having a mentor who had gone through similar experiences was invaluable," said Terence. "They provided guidance, support, and a sense of camaraderie". This highlights the need for mentorship programs that specifically support Black male educators.

Specialized Networks

Participants also highlighted the importance of creating supportive networks among Black male educators. "We need to support each other and share our experiences," said Jamal. "Building a network of Black male educators has been essential for my professional and personal growth". These networks provided a space for mutual support, sharing strategies, and collective advocacy.

Community Involvement

Finally, participants discussed the impact of community involvement. "Engaging with the community and building relationships with parents and students outside of the classroom is vital," shared Terence. "It helps create a sense of trust and collaboration". Community involvement not only supported student success but also fostered a more inclusive and supportive educational environment.

The findings of this study provide a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of Black male educators, highlighting their resilience, resistance, and adaptive strategies. The narratives reveal the complexities of navigating identity conflicts, systemic barriers, and acts of resistance. By employing a phenomenological approach and incorporating blues epistemology, the study offers a unique perspective on the challenges and triumphs of these educators.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight the complex interplay of identity, systemic barriers, and acts of resistance experienced by Black male educators. These educators navigate identity conflicts and systemic obstacles while employing adaptive strategies that align with the principles of blues epistemology. The concept of Black male educators as "shapeshifters" emerged as a critical theme, showcasing their ability to adapt to varying roles and expectations within the educational system. This adaptive behavior is essential for their survival and success in historically white educational environments.

The participants' experiences of navigating identity conflicts resonate with the broader literature on racial identity and professional roles. Jupp and Lensmire (2016) emphasize the importance of racial literacy for educators, which involves a deep understanding of race and its implications within educational settings. This study supports their findings by demonstrating how Black male educators must constantly negotiate their identities to fit into professional spaces that often marginalize them. The pressure to conform to stereotypes, such as the disciplinarian or the "angry Black man," underscores the need for increased awareness and training on racial biases within schools (Brown, 2012; Howard, 2013).

Systemic barriers, such as discriminatory policies, lack of support, and limited professional development opportunities, were significant challenges identified by the participants. These barriers align with the findings of Bristol (2015) and Goings & Bianco (2016), who highlight how institutional practices often marginalize Black male teachers. The

participants' accounts of advocating for policy changes and inclusive practices demonstrate their resilience and commitment to creating equitable educational environments. These acts of resistance are crucial for challenging and transforming oppressive structures within the educational system (Brockenbrough, 2015; Lewis, 2006).

The role of mentorship and support networks emerged as a vital theme, echoing the findings of Goings & Bianco (2016) and Simmons et al. (2013). Participants emphasized the importance of having mentors who understand their unique challenges and can provide guidance and support. This underscores the need for targeted mentorship programs that cater specifically to the needs of Black male educators. Additionally, the significance of family support and faith in sustaining resilience highlights the multifaceted nature of coping strategies employed by these educators (Dancy, 2014; Lynn, 2006).

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of Black male educators, emphasizing their resilience, resistance, and adaptive strategies. The concept of shapeshifting offers a unique perspective on how these educators navigate systemic barriers and identity conflicts. Future research should further explore this phenomenon and its impact on the well-being and career progression of Black male educators. By addressing the systemic issues highlighted in this study and supporting the diverse needs of all educators, we can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive educational system (Kohli, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Implications

The findings of this study have significant implications for educational policy and practice. One of the primary implications is the need for increased representation of Black male educators at all levels of the education system. Research indicates that having diverse educators can positively impact student outcomes, particularly for students of color (Milner, 2012; Lynn, 2006). Policies aimed at recruiting and retaining Black male educators are essential to address their underrepresentation. These policies should include targeted recruitment efforts, financial incentives, and support networks to ensure that Black male educators feel valued and supported in their roles (Goings & Bianco, 2016).

Professional development tailored to the unique challenges faced by Black male educators is another crucial implication. The study highlighted the lack of relevant professional development opportunities that address issues of racial bias and cultural competence. Incorporating training on implicit bias, culturally responsive teaching, and racial literacy into professional development programs can help create more inclusive and supportive environments for Black male educators (Jupp & Lensmire, 2016; Kohli, 2018). Such training should be mandatory for all educators to foster a deeper understanding of race and its implications within educational settings.

Policy reform is also necessary to address the systemic barriers identified in the study. Discriminatory policies, such as dress codes that disproportionately target Black students, need to be revised to promote equity and inclusion (Brown, 2012). Additionally, the implementation

of restorative justice practices over punitive disciplinary measures can help create a more supportive school environment (Howard, 2013). Educational institutions should actively involve Black educators in the policymaking process to ensure that their perspectives and experiences inform policy decisions (Bristol & Mentor, 2018).

Finally, the establishment of mentorship and support networks for Black male educators is vital. The study underscored the importance of mentorship in navigating professional challenges and fostering resilience. Educational institutions should develop structured mentorship programs that connect Black male educators with experienced mentors who understand their unique experiences (Goings & Bianco, 2016; Simmons et al., 2013). Additionally, fostering a sense of community among Black male educators through support groups and professional networks can provide the necessary emotional and professional support to help them thrive in their roles (Dancy, 2014; Bridges, 2011).

By addressing these implications, educational policymakers and practitioners can create a more equitable and supportive environment for Black male educators. This, in turn, will not only benefit the educators themselves but also enhance the educational experiences of all students, particularly those from marginalized communities.

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