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Vance Vaughn
University of Texas at Tyler

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A Struggle to Bridge the Gap: Promoting African American Males in Teacher Education

Vance Vaughn, The University of Texas at Tyler

After serving 22 years in public education as a classroom teacher, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent, I am in awe over the small number of African American males as public school teachers. My classroom teacher experience was ephemeral as I was promoted to educational administration after five and one-half years. As the only African American male teacher in a high school with over 3,600 students, hundreds of whom were African American male, I was an anomaly in that environment. African American male role models were drastically needed and sought after mainly because campus data reported African American males ranked first in number of discipline referrals, number of suspensions, expulsions and academic failures. Few African American males are classroom teachers in this country. One can find those who are teaching in urban school districts (Lynn, 2002). Sports and entertainment fans inspect the performance of many of the “brothers” on the college and professional levels. But, in the context of classroom teaching, “brothers” are difficult to locate. Unfortunately, some African American men, although they are certified, are choosing not to teach in public schools.

African American Males and Education

Research notes African American males do not select teaching because of the lack of academic encouragement (even from their parents), racelessness (achiever-isolation or the fear of being labeled by others as “acting white”), absence of role models, the low status of teaching, and too much education for

the return. Teaching is viewed by African American males as “work” where teachers have to “put up with,” “go through a lot,” and take “crap” from students.

Murrell (1994) found that African American males have been categorically underserved by public schools, and part of the reason this has occurred stems from an insufficient and incomplete knowledge base about these students. Murrell suggested that some non-minority teachers have a difficult, if not impossible time, dealing with African American males. Specifically, he analyzed the discourse patterns and speech events that evoked qualitatively different learning experiences for African American male students in urban middle schools. In his study, he found that the way these non-minority teachers in the study responded to and dealt with African American male students was unacceptable to the students. Because these non-minority teachers did not understand how African American males were reared, their communities, their dilemmas, or their concerns, they had a difficult time relating to these students.

Although the diversity of students has dramatically increased, the cultural capital needed for success continues to be dominated by the White society. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1999a) described the inequalities that lie below the visible surface of a covertly oppressive educational system when they stated, “Knowledge of White middle-class language, concern for academic success, and the ability to deport oneself in a “courteous” manner all contribute to one’s advantage at school” (p. 299). African American males who refuse to engage in achiever-isolation (isolating oneself from the cultural group to avoid ridicule when achieving academically), but strongly grasp their cultural identity may consider teaching a Euro-American profession.

Gordon (1994) suggested that we imagine a gifted African American male going from kindergarten to twelfth grade without ever having an African American male teacher as a role model or even seeing an African American male teacher in the classroom. This experience, undoubtedly, would have a negative impact on the African American’s male’s decision to teach school. African American male teachers can serve as role models for African American students and serve as a source of support.

The research literature concerning African American males and education is primarily based on how to educate the African American male (Tatum, 2006), the dilemmas of the African American male (Power, 1988), African American males in urban teaching positions (Lynn, 1999; 2002), and why minorities, and African American males in particular are not entering teacher education programs (Graham, 1987; Haberman, 1998). Research studies have been conducted on the need for minority teachers in public schools (Su, 1997). Lacking though, is literature on why African American males who are certified to teach are not teaching.

Method

This study was a qualitative narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry was the primary design of this study in order to illuminate the voices of African American males who are certified to teach, but who are employed in other professions. The participants for this study were twelve African American males in the State of Texas who had been certified as teachers by the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) but had chosen not to teach. From their voices, others may understand the factors that influenced them to earn teaching credentials but to enter occupations other than teaching.

Four of the participants had never taught before, and eight participants had taught and left the profession. Face-to-face, semi-structured interviews were conducted with these men. The interviews were scripted, taped, and the tapes were subsequently transcribed

for an accurate story of why they earned teaching credentials but chose not to teach. Several questions were asked of the participants in order to begin discussion and conversation. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggested asking questions backward, forward, inward, and outward for a more thorough overview of the participants' experiences. In keeping with this recommendation, the participant narratives were guided by—but not limited to, and the data was filtered through the lens of the following two questions:

1. Why did you choose to obtain teacher certification?
2. Why did you choose to leave the teaching profession, or never enter?

Data collected were critical life experiences that provided reasons why the twelve African American males earned teaching certifications and why they are choosing not to use them. Data were analyzed continuously (Marshall & Rossman, 1989). From this qualitative narrative inquiry, commonalities, themes and patterns were discovered.

African American Males Speaking Out

After just one year of instructing, assigning and collecting homework, averaging grades, and administering consequences for inappropriate student behavior, one participant considered teaching, “*too stressful*”, especially when his wife and daughter were “*much more important*” than a teaching job. He needed more money to support them. Eventually, he exited the teaching profession in route to making more money. This participant explains why he left teaching.

I left the teaching profession so that I could make some money to take care of my wife and baby daughter. I was never the type that depended on someone else to do things for me. I wanted and needed to take care of my family, and I could not do that with the money I was bringing home each month. The job was not paying enough. I could not survive on the money I was bringing home to take care of us. It was not enough. I started working part-time while I was teaching, but teaching took up so much time with grading papers, preparing lessons for class, dealing with discipline problems that I was too stressed out and tired of the job. I became discouraged because we were still suffering financially at home. If the pay was ok, I could have dealt with the work and stress.

One participant taught for nine years before he finally decided he “*had enough*.” He was “*tired of struggling financially*” and decided he would find other ways to make a living. He stated...

Schools do not pay money. Money is the reason I left. If I were making a decent, comfortable, and respectable salary, I would still be teaching today. I was making no money. I could barely make if from paycheck to paycheck and from month to month. We got paid once a month, and I could not pay my bills, I needed more money than what I was making. The money that I could make was predetermined each year. I was financially locked in, and my wife wanted some of the nicer things in life, and I could not do it with the teaching salary that I was making.

Upon completion of his engineering degree, one participant worked as an engineer and eventually retired so that he could teach school. He had a passionate desire to teach. However, when he accepted a teaching job, the pay was low so he began working as a pastor and managing a radio station. When the three jobs became too difficult for him to handle, he terminated the one that was the most stressful and the most underpaid. He offered the following:

I left the teaching profession because I was teaching, pasturing a church and managing a radio station all at the same time. I had to let something go, and teaching was doing the least for me so I decided to quit teaching. I choose not to teach because of the money. In a capitalistic society, money is important. The money was a major issue in deciding to teach or venture into another profession. If you do not have the money to do things, you cannot live a comfortable life. When I finished college, there were friends of mine who went into teaching. When I started my engineering job, I was making approximately \$10,000 more than they did. It made economic sense to me to go into engineering as opposed to teaching.

Money was important to one participant when he completed college. He knew he had to support himself financially, and he knew that his salary as a police officer in a large city was more than what he would make as a beginning teacher. When asked if the teaching salary had been \$40,000 a year when he earned his teaching certificate, would he have entered the teaching profession, his reply was, "Yes." His frustration was obvious as he continued...

When I first got out of college, I took a job with the City of Dallas as a police officer. When I took the job as police officer, I was making more money than a teacher who had been teaching school for five or six years. Finances were important to me at that time because I was beginning to live on my own and acquire the things that were necessary to live a comfortable life in Dallas. A career as a teacher would not have provided me with the things I needed and wanted. As I have grown in my current profession and gained experience with the department, my salary has increased. Now, it becomes a matter of finances. My lifestyle, my needs, wants, my family, and my financial obligations will not allow me to accept a job as a teacher because the pay is so low so, even now, it is still a matter of finances.

Watching his mother struggle financially for over thirty years and wondering how she would make ends meet when she retired caused one participant to seriously ponder leaving the teaching profession in search of a financial opportunity elsewhere. He did not want his salary to be "frozen." He wanted to be able to work overtime so that he had an opportunity to increase his salary. Very emotionally, he explained...

Watching my mother teach for almost thirty years and still struggling has been difficult for me. I ask myself, "How can a profession as important as teaching pay so little?" My mother is almost at retirement, and she is scared to death about how she is going to live. I do not want to be that way. It is ridiculous. I left because of the pay. I left because of the money that is involved. The job was not paying enough. Teaching has too many limitations and not enough money. It is difficult to move up in the rankings. The salaries are too low. When my salary was announced at the beginning of the school year, I knew that that was what I was going to make for a year. I could not work outside that box. I could not get any overtime. My low salary was frozen. I wanted and needed something better. I wanted to be able to improve my salary each month, and the standards made me feel not respected. The conditions that teachers work under made me feel like I was nothing, and people were not satisfied with what I was attempting to do.

Some of these men really wanted to teach school. They had a passion for teaching. When asked why he left the teaching profession, one participant sadly responded:

I chose not to teach because of financial reasons. I could make more money in industry, and at the time, I really needed the money. I left the teaching profession because I had the opportunity to go into industry and increase my salary substantially. The industry paid my health and life insurance, and they provided me with incentives and benefits that the schools did not and could not provide. At the time, my oldest daughter was entering college, and my son was going to college the next year. We needed the money so I left the teaching field and entered industry. I wanted to teach badly, but we needed the money. The opportunity was there so I took it. It was a great move for me, and my income rose eighty percent. If I was making that kind of money in teaching, I never would have given it a thought to leave, but I could not pass up the opportunity.

Another participant never mentioned money and/or finances as being the reason why he left the teaching profession. However, he was aware of the low salaries of teachers, and he did not enter college with the intent to teach school. He accepted a teaching position because he could not find a job anywhere else. Moreover, when asked what experiences he faced in the educational setting that might have guided his attitude toward not teaching, his reply was:

When I was growing up, teaching was not on my mind. I did not want to teach. The black students that I knew and hung around with in college either knew teachers or had relatives who taught school, and they would tell me the horror stories about the discipline that teachers had to deal with, and I believe this sort of turned me away from wanting to teach at that time, and money was an issue. I knew teachers made little money, and I did not want to have to deal with all those problems associated with teaching for the small amount of money teaching pays.

According to another participant, he never used his teaching credentials. He loves his current job working with a major industry, and what was more important to him was he loves the money he makes. He offered the following:

I never left the teaching profession. I never entered. I have a relative who lives in Fort Worth who works for General Motors. This relative has worked for General Motors for a long time. He was able to get me a job there. When I started working for General Motors, my salary was a lot higher than what I would have been making as a teacher. I could not turn down that opportunity. I wanted the money and starting out young and wanting things, money was probably the greatest influence in why I took that job. If I did take a teaching job, my salary would be lowered tremendously.

As interesting as one participant's story was, the final analysis was that there was not enough money in the teaching profession for him to want to teach. I asked this participant why he left the teaching profession. He replied...

I did not leave the teaching profession; I never entered the teaching profession. Two months after I graduated from Texas College in Tyler, Texas, I was drafted to fight in the Korean War. I spent two and one-half years in the service, and when I returned, I really did not think about teaching. I never wanted to teach, but I went to Texas Southern University on a GI program and earned a master's degree. I decided to try to get a job teaching, but no one would hire me because I had no experience in teaching. With a master's degree, and no experience, it was tough to get a teaching job because of the problem with salaries. The schools would settle with someone with a bachelor's degree because they could pay them less. I got married and needed to work. My mother-in-law and sister-in-law were teachers, and they wanted me to teach. I looked for a short time, and I even substituted for a while. I was never promised a job after that. I took a job at the post office and never looked back. I

never applied for many jobs as a teacher. I never really wanted to teach school. I got the teaching certificate because at the time it was understood that students who graduated from Texas College got a teaching certificate. You have to want to teach and love to teach. You have to be patient. I did not have the desire or the patience. Teaching is a tough profession, but it is the least respected, least supported, and most underpaid. Principals are afraid of superintendents, teachers are afraid of principals, parents are afraid of teachers, and students are not afraid of anybody. If I had been a teacher, I would have been a keeper instead of a teacher. I did not want to be a keeper, so I did not pursue teaching.

I asked this participant what a “keeper” was, and his reply was, “*A keeper is one who works for the money, and not because of the love for children and learning.*”

Implications of the Findings

The implications of the findings of this study are important and can be of assistance to educators in attempting to diversify the teaching profession. There are four implications from analysis of the data. First, consideration to increasing teachers’ salaries is needed in order to retain African American males in the teaching profession. African American men who are certified to teach school are leaving the teaching profession because they are not paid enough money for them to take care of their families and pay bills in the manner they prefer. Therefore, when the African American males do become certified, for whatever reason, they do not enter the profession, or they leave the profession because of the low pay. This trend indicates that the underrepresentation of African American males in teacher education will continue unless the teachers are paid salaries that are competitive with other professions.

Second, unless the issue of recruiting and retaining African American males is addressed, students will continue to lack needed role models in K-12 education. As long as African American males are dropping out of the teaching profession, they will not be seen in the classrooms as role models. African American students prefer having African American males as role models because they viewed these African American teachers as their supporters and people in whom they could relate. African American students are also known to be more relaxed and comfortable around African American teachers (Gordon, 1994). Needed African American role models will not be provided unless ways are found to recruit and retain African American males for the teaching profession.

Third, the perception of teaching as a second-class profession needs to change. These participants viewed the teaching profession as a second-class profession at this time. Although, historically, the teaching profession was seen as a very important and highly respected job or career, some of these participants earned teaching certificates only in the event they could not find a higher paying job.

Fourth, the negative aspects of teaching need to be addressed in order to attract and retain African American male teachers. The teaching profession, as perceived by these participants, carries with it a negative image. Participants in this study view the teaching profession as plagued with discipline problems, low pay, and extensive work. Some of these participants can tolerate the discipline problems and the excessive workload; however, none of the participants would tolerate the low salaries.

What Does The Future Holds for African American Males?

The question remains, Do schools want African American males as teachers and role models for its students? If that answer is yes, their actions must line up with their words. Demographics are changing in the United States, African American male role models are

needed, and the ratio of African American male teachers to African American students is not proportional (Wilder, 2000). African American males are seriously underrepresented in teacher education programs (Gordon, 1994). During the 2000-2001 school year in Texas, there were 275,103 teachers in the public school classrooms, and of this number, 62,414 were men. In general, men are not entering the teaching profession as often as females. In particular, African American men are not entering the teaching profession as often as any other group. Only 5,590 of Texas teachers were African American males (B. Webster, personal communication, September 12, 2001).

According to Myers (1994) only a small number of African American males are entering colleges and universities, and many African American males who are entering colleges and universities are choosing fields other than teaching in which to earn degrees (Kirby et al., 1999; Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2000).

As we approach the end of another decade, many states are standing at a crossroads. In one direction lies a future that follows the path of the current courses of action. In the other direction lies a future that follows a new path. Some states are following a new path by supporting their people by providing opportunities for educational advancement through high quality programs. "Closing the Gaps by 2015" is one of the programs that Texas is implementing to improve the educational system in the state (The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, 2000).

Part of closing the gap will require greater numbers of faculty—including African American males—as there is a major teacher shortage that exists in the United States today, and no state is exempt from this ubiquitous experience inflicted upon school superintendents, principals, personnel directors, and classroom teachers. Also, closing the gap will require creativity in utilizing resources and recognition of the need to reach every student. When these students graduate and become successful in the workplace, they will serve as role models for younger students to follow. This will promote the value of education for future students. There is a need for younger students to have role models and the need to promote the value of education. Who will be the faculty and, especially, the minority faculty in the year 2015 standing in front of the classrooms in our country as role models promoting the value of education? African American males need to be part of that faculty.

Things to Consider

Based on the findings, the emergent themes, and analysis of the data, schools that wish to attract and/or retain African American males in the teaching profession must address the issues of financial compensation and knowledge and benefits of the teaching profession. Schools must consider increasing teachers' salaries, communicate the need for African American males, counteract the negative stereotype, and communicate the benefits that are available. African American males need to be the target audience.

Consideration to Increase Teachers' Salaries. From a little red, one-room school house that was occupied by one race of children to a metropolis of major urban, major suburban, central city, independent town, non-metro fast growing, non-metro stable, rural, and charter schools, the educational system has grown. The demand for equality and capable teachers has also grown. TEA (2001) publicized the fact that most teachers in Texas are female, white, hold a bachelor's degree and have 11.9 years of experience. The average salary for Texas teachers in 2001-2002 was \$39,122. This statement, alone, explains why African American males leave the teaching profession for other employment opportunities. The low beginning salary of \$26,240.00, which is the legally mandated

minimum salary set by the 79th Third Special Legislative Session for Texas would be of particular concern for these twelve African American males when comparing these salaries to other professions they could enter as college graduates. The data suggested that if nothing is done about the current teaching salaries, African American males may continue to leave, or never enter the teaching profession. If they continue to leave or never enter the teaching profession, under representation of African American males in teacher education will continue. According to this study, eleven of these participants see their financial needs as more important than the need for African American males as teachers in the classrooms. This implies that attracting African American men to the classroom as teachers is not enough. Teacher salaries have to be raised to a level that would make the teaching profession much more attractive to these men, and hopefully, cause them to remain in the profession. In closely examining the priorities of these African American male participants, this study supports the need to seriously consider the hope of financial reward in education. Concomitantly, this study reinforces the need to increase personal satisfaction that educators feel and communicate about the teaching profession. In addition, this study supports that the prestige of the educational profession must be improved in order to sustain African American male teachers.

With increased accountability and standards, the need for increased salaries may be intensified. Accountability and standards are major topics and major concerns as a result of the No Child Left Behind Law of 2001. Although these accountability and standards issues are not driving these twelve participants away from teacher education, these participants expressed a concern that increased standards and accountability are causing highly capable high school graduates to not consider the teaching profession as a choice for them. Innovations and recruitment programs without raising teacher salaries are not the key to retaining African American male teachers. In addition, if we are ever to retain African American males in the classrooms, the push to raise test scores, to institute competency tests, and to increase teacher standards without addressing the root cause of the reason these African American males are leaving the teaching profession may not yield long-term benefits in achieving retention. In short, with increased emphasis on accountability and standards, increased attention to salary increases is needed.

Districts that can afford to pay high salaries might attract African American male teachers leaving rural districts with fewer African American male teachers unless increases in salaries for all districts occur. When African American males do enter the teaching profession, they may be attracted to the higher salaries offered in the larger cities or to the wealthier suburban school districts. When this occurs, the smaller and rural school districts are left with no or few African American males as teachers. Local school districts can choose to pay salaries above the state minimum salary scale. They may also offer more attractive incentives which might attract African American males to their districts. This competition among local districts causes those districts that cannot compete because of their financial weakness to go without quality teachers and African American male teachers, in particular. This misdistribution of teachers is caused by salary discrepancies. Therefore, it is important to raise salaries for all districts so that African American males will be represented in both rural and urban areas.

Knowledge and Benefits

Benefits of the teaching profession need to be more widely communicated. Although teaching is not necessarily a lucrative field financially, good fringe benefits are usually provided, and the rewards derived from helping young people grow and develop into productive citizens are enormous. The benefits of teaching in Texas include a 10-month contract (187 days) paid over twelve months,

with personal and sick leave days, retirement and healthcare packages, holiday and summer vacation time accrued as well as the provision of professional development and family and medical leave. When African American males begin to make career choices, they should consider the rewards of the entire package of teaching and not just the annual salary. Teaching is a valuable profession for African American males to contemplate as we enter the new millennium. These benefits should be communicated.

The need for African American male role models in K-12 education should be clearly communicated and addressed. Wilder (2000) asserted that because African American male students do not see African American male teachers in the profession, many times from PK through graduation, they do not see the teaching profession as a viable career option for them. In other words, they need to see African American men as role models in classrooms and not in prisons. If teaching salaries are not increased, the African American men who are currently in the teaching profession might decide to exit the profession in search of higher paying jobs.

Ways need to be identified to portray teaching as a first-class profession and counteract the negative image of the teaching profession. This study supports Gordon (1994) that there are still African American men who view the teaching profession as a “second-class” profession. Six of the twelve participants in this study entered the teaching field as a “second option.” They did not want to teach, initially. They chose teaching as a second career to “fall back on.” This implies that these participants view teaching as something they can do if their first choice of profession falters. One way for policymakers to counteract the image of teaching as a second-class profession is to pay teachers as professionals.

Recommendations for Practice

Parents of African American males could help their sons understand that although the teaching profession does not pay salaries that are competitive to other professional occupations, the intrinsic rewards of the teaching profession are well worth the time and energy spent earning credentials to teach. Parents could illuminate to their sons that teaching requires having a love for and a desire to help them learn. They could help their sons understand that the job of teaching and caring for children means more than a paycheck. Teaching and caring for children are worth the discipline problems and hard work associated with the teaching profession.

From the data collected in this study, high school counselors might counsel African American males into the teaching profession by sharing with them that although salaries are not competitive with other professions, African American males are needed in the teaching profession as role models, not only for African American males, but also for other children. High school counselors have the opportunity to guide African American male students into the teaching profession by sharing with them the importance of becoming a teacher. They could tell the African American male student that although the salaries will not be competitive, and financial and material gain will not be substantial, their contributions to the profession and to other students will certainly benefit the school district in which they teach.

Public school administrators should approach their school boards with the idea that attention should be given to providing financial rewards and incentives to retain teachers in their school districts and in the teaching profession. These administrators should stress to their school boards the importance of salaries for the retention of African American males as teachers.

Colleges and universities faculty and administration should stress, through their recruitment programs, the extra benefits that are associated with the teaching profession. In their catalogs, they should highlight the time teachers have in the summer to return to

school, vacation holidays that are associated with the school year, weekend time when teachers are not usually required to teach, and job security in that when the economy is suffering the teachers continue to teach. The teaching profession brings with it an array of extra benefits that other professions lack. These extra benefits should be highlighted in colleges and universities catalogs. Colleges and universities should stress the importance of African American male retention in teacher education because of the lack of role models and the need for African American teachers by offering tuition reduction for those who are interested in entering teacher education programs.

Finally, data from this study supports the need for legislators to consider financial rewards, through policy, for those in the teaching profession. For example, legislators should create policy to increase the teacher pay scale, provide signing bonuses for first year teachers, provide Christmas bonuses for those in the profession, offer longevity pay for those who remain in the profession, develop higher salary scales for masters and doctoral degrees, establish incentives for teachers who remain in the teaching profession, and/or provide attractive retirement benefits for teachers who retire from the profession. In addition, legislators through policy should consider continuing an increase in salary for each year teachers teach rather than terminating the salary schedule after twenty years of teaching.

African American male teachers, who once were predominant in classrooms filled with mostly young black males have become such a rarity that school districts fight over the few who graduate each year from colleges and universities. One participant stated that he went to the school district “*to be employed as a custodian*”, but was hired to “*re-enter a teacher education program to become certified to teach.*” He already owned a bachelor’s degree in mathematics. The reason he cited for this phenomenon was to “*fill quotas.*”

In our society—a society plagued by capitalism, materialism, socialism and the politics of difference, these societal concerns, coupled with single-parent homes, alcoholism and drugs, drive-by-shootings, substandard housing, and welfare, education for African American males is increasingly more important and necessary than ever before. A good solid education will prepare our African American male students to compete in society and to make a viable contribution to our world, which in turn, benefits the whole society. African American male teachers are needed who can motivate and educate minority students to meet the challenges of competing for fair housing, fair education, and fair job opportunities that exist in America.

Unless African American male students choose teaching, our African American youth could complete a PK-12 academic program and never encounter an African American male teacher. Before desegregation, there were many African American male teachers in Black schools. These teachers had a tremendous impact on the lives of many black children, and any teacher holds power that can positively or negatively affect children. The twelve African American males in this research study chose not to teach. Our nation’s schools seek to prepare African American male students for the challenges of adulthood and to enable them to become productive, capable, and respectable men. If schools do not recruit and retain African American males to meet the challenges of a career in teaching and to take advantage of the vast opportunities and rewards of the teaching profession, then many African American males will not serve as role models for African American students to become a leading force in the coming decades. In short, the gap will not be closed, but widened.

The missing link in education is the African American male teacher. There are programs and initiatives on the national, state, and local levels that promote the recruitment and retention of African American males to the teaching profession. This present study

supports that the issue of increasing salaries is important in initial recruitment and retention efforts while ongoing attention to improved working conditions is vital in retention. The choice to address these issues is ours.

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