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## "The Road Less Traveled: Why Black males Choose Alternative Routes that Lead to Education"

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## **The Road Less Traveled: Why Black males Choose Alternative Routes that Lead to Education**

Students in elementary schools are often asked what they want to be when they grow up. Doctors, lawyers, and firemen are often mentioned as the celebrated career paths many expect to take. Unfortunately, for Black males, teaching is not a path many choose. Some of the reasons include a lack of respect for the profession, low salaries, few mentors in the education field, societal images of Black males in sports/entertainment, and family expectations. While these rationales were provided by participants in this study, they can be generalized to Black males in the U.S. population, as is reflected in earned degrees. Black males trail most other ethnicity/gender categories in earned degrees the field of education (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022).

If it is important to recruit and retain Black males into the education profession, changes must be made in the perception of the career, and practices must be intentional to actively drive more to the field. While many Black males eventually do become educators, they matriculate to education as a profession through Alternative Certification Programs (ACPs) at much higher rates than through traditional, university-based preparation programs (Underwood et al., 2019). While ACPs provide a springboard to increasing the quantity of Black male teachers, the question becomes why Black males who enter education choose the ACP route, as opposed to tradition routes to the profession. Moreover, if there are barriers to the traditional route, these impediments need to be understood.

Historically, education careers have been dominated by females. When analyzed demographically, White women serve as the overwhelming representation of educational professionals at all levels in the field (Kids Count Data Center, 2022). In recent years, more female minorities have entered the teaching profession; however, when it comes to black males, the numbers are extremely small. The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) described the teacher workforce as 76% female, compared to 24% (decrease from 25%) of males. In 2020, male students in US public schools made up 51% of all enrolled students (Kids Count Data Center, 2022). Broken down by race, 79% of the 2017-2018 teachers in public schools were White. This number compares to 7% percent Black and 9% Hispanic (The National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). These numbers validate the work to be done to increase diversity.

While the statistics describe the teachers in the field, they do not highlight the routes chosen to the positions. When it comes to men, ACP is the dominating path followed because traditional education is not their first choice (Ingersoll et al., 2019). The reality that education, statistically, is not the first choice of Black males prompts questions about career choices and how and when individuals choose them. Because certification rules dictate that alternative education certification candidates are college graduates, individuals who utilize alternative certification to move to an educational career do so after graduation. These path choices lead to two driving questions: What about the education career leads Black males to the field; and why are there higher rates attained through alternative programs?

Leaders and practitioners in traditional programs need to understand how to recruit, retain, and graduate certified Black male teachers to be prepared to enter the education field. Programs, such as *Call me Mister*, have taken the charge to be intentional in their recruiting. As a successful program, *Call me Mister* may have attributes that other programs need to replicate.

This qualitative study aims to understand and highlight Black male ACP graduates, their choices, and their understanding of how increased quantities of individuals can be drawn to the field.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Diversity in the Teacher Workforce**

Student enrollment demographics in the American education system have become increasingly diverse (Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Partee, 2014). Recruitment and retention of highly qualified, culturally competent teachers have become a priority (Boser, 2011; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Teacher preparation programs graduate predominantly White, middle-class females into a profession serving culturally, linguistically, ethnically, racially, and economically diverse students (Ladson-Billings, 2005; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). The disproportionality of ethnically diverse teachers highlights the need to evaluate diverse teacher candidates' recruitment and retention (Sleeter, 2017; Terrill & Mark, 2000).

While many teacher education preparation programs express a commitment to recruitment strategies to increase pre-service teachers of color, limited financial resources are barriers to program implementation (Goe & Roth, 2019). Goe and Roth (2019) cited additional institutional factors impacting pre-service teachers of color recruitment and retention. These factors include: limited mentoring and support options, lack of K-12 and community college partnerships, lack of diversity at the institution, and limited role models in the field of education.

Other research (Dixon et al., 2019; Ingersoll & May, 2016; Jackson & Kholi, 2013; White, 2018) suggested that teachers of color often leave the profession prematurely. Contributing factors to general teacher attrition include retirement, funding, and school culture and climate (Ingersoll, 2015). Teacher turnover is more prevalent in high-poverty, high-minority schools where teachers of color are twice as likely to be placed (Ingersoll & May, 2016). Additionally, culture and climate issues, such as lack of resources and dysfunctional organizational structure, are exacerbated by racial inequities and tension experienced by teachers of color (Dixon et al., 2019; Ingersoll & May, 2016; Jackson & Kholi, 2016; White, 2018).

It is critical to address the recruitment and retention of teachers of color. More than 50% of students in the U.S. are students of color, while 76% of their teachers are White (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). Researchers (Dixon et al., 2019; Goe & Roth, 2019; Ingersoll & May, 2016) have detailed the benefits (e.g., increased academic achievement and socio-emotional health) of having teachers of color. Furthermore, Partelow et al. (2017) noted that White students and teachers benefit from teachers of color because of increased opportunities to discuss race, class, privilege, and stereotypes. Mitigating disproportionality in the teaching workforce's racial makeup is especially beneficial to Black students, particularly Black male students who are most vulnerable to inequitable opportunities and exclusionary discipline practices (Grace & Nelson, 2019; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2018). Lastly, Goings and Bianco (2016) asserted that lack of exposure to teachers of color, in tandem with repeated encounters with microaggressions perpetuated by a predominantly White education field, discourage students of color from pursuing careers in education.

#### **Barriers to Entering the Teaching Profession for Black males**

Research (Grace & Nelson, 2019; Noguera, 2008) has emphasized the importance of recruiting and retaining Black male teachers. Yet challenges persist in K-12 and undergraduate landscapes that deter Black males from entering the teaching profession (Goings & Bianco, 2016). Documented challenges in recruiting Black males to the teaching profession include the meager K-12 schooling experiences which include low graduation rates (Schott Foundation,

2015), disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates (Grace & Nelson, 2019), and persistently low academic performance in comparison to peers (Bowman et al., 2018). These factors negatively influence perceptions of Black males of the education system and thoughts of a career in teaching (Goings & Bianco, 2016). In addition to negative schooling experiences, findings from Goings and Bianco (2016) listed low expectations, limited access to Black male teachers, and microaggressions as factors that deter them from pursuing a career in education. While a percentage of Black males do succeed in K-12 and go on to college, experiences as preservice teachers present new challenges in entering the teaching profession.

Themes that emerged from challenges faced by Black male pre-service teachers include reports of isolation, stereotype threat, and racial microaggressions throughout their higher education experiences (Carr, 2002). Carr (2002) found challenges associated with being a Black male pre-service teacher, including finding support and encouragement, dealing with financial barriers, and coping with others' perceptions of Black male pre-service teachers. Despite feelings of isolation and fear, the participants in Carr's study overcame those feelings due to a greater calling to be positive role models and the need for students of color to have teachers who demonstrate high expectations.

Scott and Rodriguez (2015) studied African American academic persistence and career aspirations in education. They revealed oppressive and degrading conditions throughout the participants' higher education experiences. Responses from participants underscore some of the barriers Black male pre-service teachers have to overcome to succeed. The barriers include racial microaggressions fixed into the ethos of higher education, faculty abuse of power and privilege, messages of low expectations, inferiority and rejection, and Whiteness as the norm (Scott & Rodriguez, 2015).

Similarly, Pabon et al., (2011) sought to investigate the challenges of sustaining campus-based initiatives to recruit and retain black male teachers for the urban classroom. Several challenges were noted including navigating coursework and teacher development and a knowledge gap in culturally relevant pedagogy and curriculum (Pabon et al., 2011). The ability to work collaboratively with campus-based support such as tutors, academic advisement, financial aid, and guidance and counseling was found to be vital to tending to the needs of candidates.

Walker et al., (2019) contended student access to teachers from similar racial and ethnic backgrounds is essential to the global economy. While Black male teachers benefit students from all backgrounds, entering the teaching profession remains significantly challenging for Black males due to their K-12 and undergraduate experiences. With this reasoning, Walker et al., (2019) urged school administrators and educator preparation programs to create healthy environments to better retain Black males as pre-service teachers.

### **Experiences of Black male Teachers**

Research (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Thomas & Warren, 2017) suggested that Black male educators are sought after in a field where they represent only 2% of the teaching population. Despite a demonstrable need to increase the number of Black male teachers in education, conditions in the field remain disconcerting (Bryan & Browder, 2013; Goings & Bianco, 2016; Thomas & Warren, 2017). In examining the discursive strategies and tactics implemented by a Black male teacher navigating the challenges of the field, Thomas and Warren (2017) found evidence of a racially hostile and marginalizing professional learning community. Likewise, Bryan and Browder (2013) explored an African American male kindergarten teacher's

experience to understand factors that impact African American males choosing education as a career. Findings suggested that perceptions of structural and institutional barriers such as racial and gender microaggressions and hypervisibility hinder African American males' academic and professional journeys, providing a context for why African American males do not enter or remain in education.

Additional research describes the adverse experiences of Black male teachers. For example, Bristol and Goings (2019) investigated boundary-heightened experiences of Black male in-service teachers. Themes that emerged from this study included: a perception colleagues viewed Black males as either incompetent or overqualified; a realization of the importance of lowering the boundaries between themselves and colleagues, but only superficially attempting to engage with colleagues, and the need to proactively respond to colleagues whom they believed erected boundaries and created hostile workplace environments. (Bristol & Goings, 2019). Bristol and Goings (2019) argued that additional efforts are needed to support Black male in-service teachers as recruitment efforts alone are insufficient.

In addition to navigating the perceptions of racial microaggressions and hostile educational environments, Black male teachers must also contend with added expectations placed upon them in the role. Lynn (2002) examined the perspectives of Black male teachers in schools. Findings revealed that Black male teachers have responsibilities as role models and their ability to relate to Black youth (Lynn, 2002). While the commitment to Black students' success is noted as a factor that pulls Black males into teaching, additional research reveals a need for Black male teachers to be more than just role models for Black children (Brown, 2009; Jackson et al., 2013; Lewis, 2006).

A persistent feature of the role-modeling discourse places Black males in the role of disciplinarian. Brockenbrough (2015) studied the perspectives of 11 Black male teachers working in a predominantly Black urban school district with a discipline-intensive institutional culture. In this environment, the participants struggled with or became frustrated by the authoritarian disciplinary personas expected of them (Brockenbrough, 2015).

Jackson et al. (2013) explored the significance of viewing Black males as the cure-all for schools' educational and social issues. With the facts surrounding disproportionate dropout and expulsion rates for students of color, the authors depict the intricate and contradictory discourses which position Black male teachers as both the crisis and the savior in education (Jackson et al., 2013). Brockenbrough (2015) challenged the notion of Black male teachers as 'other fathers,' indicating the need to consider how Black male teachers cope with the pressures to serve as role models, father figures, and disciplinarians for Black students. In addition to deciding to take on multiple roles in a financially limited career path, Black males must weigh these additional responsibilities as well in considering the education field.

### **Alternative Teacher Certification Routes and their Impact on Teachers of Color**

Traditional teacher certification programs are university-based undergraduate or postgraduate programs that consist of coursework and clinical training through student teaching (Podolsky et al., 2019). Different agencies, including universities, school districts, for-profit, and nonprofit organizations, offer alternative certification programs for future teachers to enter educational careers (Bullough, 2016; Podolsky et al., 2019). Alternative certification programs provide different pathways to teaching. Participants in these programs serve as full-time teachers while taking the course work in the evenings, without any student teaching clinical experiences (Podolsky et al., 2019). The percentage of teachers who enter the profession through alternative

certification routes is increasing (Torres & Chu, 2016). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2022), 18% of public school teachers entered the profession through an alternative certification route (McFarland et al., 2018).

Researchers contended that traditional university-based teacher preparation programs are insufficient in producing diverse, highly qualified candidates needed to teach in hard-to-staff schools resulting in alternative certification pathways (Torres & Chu, 2016). However, critics of alternative teaching certification pathways assert that the brevity of training results in an inadequate job of preparing teachers with the necessary knowledge and skillset, causing inconsistent student outcomes (Bowling & Ball, 2018). Still, others recognize alternative programs as a permanent fixture in U.S. education, thus, forcing the debate about their effectiveness and consideration of how to best support teachers from alternative programs (Fraser & Lefty, 2018; Pankowski & Walker, 2016; Rose & Sugrue, 2020).

Alternative teacher certification programs have been touted to attract a more diverse pool of candidates to the extent that some states have enacted alternative certification legislation specifically related to recruiting and retaining teachers of color (Rafa & Roberts, 2020). Teachers of color are also more likely to enter teaching through alternative certification pathways (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Carver-Thomas (2018) noted this as essential information, as the quality of alternative certification programs varies, and "alternatively certified teachers are 25% more likely to leave their schools than their traditionally-prepared counterparts, exacerbating shortages of teachers of color and contributing to school instability—often in the neediest schools" (p. 3). This study aims to investigate why Black males enter and remain in the teaching profession and what role, if any, the alternative certification process played in their decisions.

### Research Questions

The following questions guide the analyses:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** Why do Black males join the teaching profession?

**Research Question 2 (RQ2):** Why do Black males choose an alternative education route to become a teacher versus a traditional path?

**Research Question 3 (RQ3):** What contributes to Black males remaining in the teaching profession?

### Method

In this study, the researchers employed a qualitative interview approach (Kvalve, 1996; McNamara, 1999) to deepen their understanding of the participants' experiences and rationale for choosing the alternative certification route over a more traditional path.

### Study Context and Participants

This study sought to understand the perspectives of Black males that have entered the field of education through non-traditional routes. It sought to highlight their rationale for not choosing education as a first option, what eventually led them into the field, and finally how colleges and universities could potentially enhance recruitment. The limited number of traditional students of color enrolled in the researchers' college provided the motivation behind the research.

The researchers emailed principals in three school districts to recruit participants for the study. After receiving names from the principals and contacting potential teachers, a total of 10 Black male educators participated in this study. All participants were in the education field for at

least three years, and seven of the 10 participants had five years of experience. Six of the educators were still in the classroom, two were serving in supervisory roles, and two were administrators. Alternative Certification programs included district-level programs, regional service centers, and independent programs from a large southwestern state in the United States. Education credentials held by the participants were six with bachelors-only, three with a master's degree, and one with a doctoral degree. Additional demographic information is summarized in Table 1.

*Table 1*  
*Black Male Participants' Demographics*

<b>Student</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Experience</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Current Position</b>
George	31	4	Bachelors	SPED teacher
William	33	3	Bachelors	5 <sup>th</sup> -grade teacher
Dalfred	37	6	Masters	Principal
Corey	35	3	Bachelors	SPED teacher
Ronald	40	5	Bachelors	History teacher
Terrence	42	9	Masters	Technology Sup.
Kendall	45	15	Doctorate	Principal
Brandon	32	7	Bachelors	ELA teacher
Charles	41	8	Masters	Curriculum Specialist
Derrick	40	6	Bachelors	SPED teacher

### **Data Sources**

Individually conducted interviews by the researcher with each participant comprised the data for the study. One interview was held for each participant and transcripts were provided to each for clarity of their voice. The interviews lasted roughly one hour with each participant. Each interview with participants followed the same semi-structured protocol developed with specific considerations given to understand the social, academic, and practical experiences that influenced the decision to seek an alternative certification route. After conducting the first phase of interviews with practicing black male administrators, the researchers adjusted the protocol to get the most details and overcome the assumption of shared experiences.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using a multistep process. The researchers began the analysis by bracketing their own experience, creating an audit trail for the methodological decisions informing the study and writing memos on the conceptual framework and researcher's background. First, thematic analysis began with listening to the interviews, transcribing and then reading the transcripts. The researchers made decisions about which themes were incidental to the phenomenon and which were essential and were relevant across all participants. Second, the researchers used in vivo coding to lift and utilize the researchers own words as analytic units. It involved looking for words or phrases that stood out in their emphasis of their experience (Saldaña & Omasta, 2016). The initial codes included ACP preparation, gender in the field, mentors, negative experiences in practice, and retention in education. Impact on students were examined across the participants to identify patterns. The last level of analysis combined and examined the patterns that led to an alternative path, what prepared them for the classroom and helped retain them in the profession. Member checks were employed for each participant to

review demographic information, basic transcripts of their interviews and a narrative vignette that provided an analysis of their experiences. Only two of the participants responded to the offer and opted to review their narrative vignette. The lack of response could have been related to their busy schedules and a passive form of approval. Both participants that did respond believed it adequately provided their perspectives.

### **Findings**

Data Analysis yielded four themes that align with the research questions: (a) why not education as an original path, (b) why education was a choice, (c) why an alternative certification program, and (d) retention in the profession.

#### **Why Not an Original Path**

Education was not the first choice for any of the participants. When probed about their rationale for not choosing education initially, two areas dominated the majority of the responses: community expectations and teacher salaries.

With regard to community expectations, education, while deemed a respected profession, was not a professional vocation identified as one for young black men to desire. When asked about their choices one of the participants shared,

When I was growing up, it was reinforced that I would be a doctor, a lawyer, fireman, and professions like these. They were seen as respected positions and most of the men that were in these jobs got the most respect in my neighborhood.

This sentiment was echoed by another educator when he shared his experience in the school for career day,

Teaching just wasn't a profession that was highlighted at my school. We always saw professional from other fields that we should aspire to be when we grew up. We would hear the difference these other careers were making in the community and how they need more of us to go to school to become professionals. Teaching was never a career field that was emphasized. We saw a few male teachers here and there, but they were just teachers in our eyes.

This comment of "just teachers" echoed the sentiment of participants. The teachers they were exposed to were not held at the same lofty level of other professions. Teaching was not highlighted as a viable and respectable career path for any of them to follow. One educator summed it up,

There were so few males when I was coming up, I didn't think it was a good field to enter in the future. I mean we saw the coaches and some of our history or health teachers, but it seemed like the men that were really respected and made the most money were not teachers in my neighborhood. I want to make a lot of money in my job and I didn't see teaching as an avenue to make that happen when I was younger.

This remark informed a component in responses across the interviews. Education salaries have always been historically less than other "professions." The pace of salaries in the field has continuously been at or below average middle-class salaries for individuals choosing the career path. The lack of social mobility in career earnings was a predominant theme in the participants making their initial choice of a viable career. One of the educators who was a principal commented,

When I went to college I knew I wanted to do something that would allow me to not only take care of myself but also my family. With the salaries I knew some of my teachers



were making, it wouldn't provide me with the lifestyle I thought I desired. Truly, until I got into administration I was really living paycheck to paycheck as a teacher.

The lack of lifestyle affordability led to one participant leaving the field initially. He shared his experience below.

I always envisioned myself coming to work in a suit, driving a nice car and getting whatever I wanted to within reason with my job. When I came to teaching from the business world, I was in for a rude awakening with the low salary. I went from making \$50,000 a year to \$31,000. It was a huge adjustment for more work. I wasn't ready for the change and had to go back to the business world before coming back to education for good.

The salary issue as a theme expanded from the participants to their families as one participant shared,

When I met my wife and told her I was a teacher, I almost felt there was a look of disdain in her face. She made me feel as if I wouldn't be able to take care of her as a potential partner. I later learned her father shared the same thoughts.

Another participant provided his thoughts on what he did to have the lifestyle he wanted as a teacher,

I knew I wasn't going to make a lot of money as a teacher, but I wanted to do it after not enjoying working at the plant 12-hours a day. I'm a hustler and I can always do more to make money. When I first started teaching, I coached, I taught in the after-school program, and even had a part-time job on the weekends. I hate that I had to do so much sometimes but I know the life I want to live. The side jobs helped me keep up.

Many individuals that decide on education as a career path have to find creative ways to overcome the financial barriers of the profession (Chen et al., 2020). Unfortunately, perceptions and realities of the financial hardships many teachers face continue to be a barrier to entry to the profession. Fortunately, for many, other factors determine the ultimate career-path decision.

### **Why Education as a Choice Now**

Despite perceptions and realities associated with financial aspects of the profession, the participants shared their reasons for choosing education as their current career path. The motives centered on three areas: a childhood mentor, making a difference, and the relationships with students.

Eight of the 10 participants mentioned a male mentor in their journey who made a profound impact. For four of the participants, it was a junior high or high school coach. The others mentioned a math, history, or English teacher pushing them to achievement, or administrators that were strong, but nurturing. One reminisced about the coach who impacted much more than sports,

My high school coach was one of the toughest on all of you. He expected the best not only on game day but also in practice and most importantly in the classroom. He let us know that sports are just a part of who we are but our education could take us anywhere we wanted to go in life. He demanded respect and always let us know how much he cared for each of us on the team.

Another teacher remarked how a teacher on his campus functioned as a model for him,

Every day, I knew that I was going to see him dressed impeccably in a suit. Teaching English, he demanded that we spoke properly in his class. For example, don't end a sentence with a preposition when you are talking. Simple things like this stuck and made

we want to be my best and represent my best all the time. All of the students respected him and many students always wanted to be in his class. Selfishly I wanted to because he provided a great example for me that I didn't have at home. I, in turn, in my life, try to do the same with my students. You never know who is watching and using you as an example to follow.

Knowing the power of their presence on the campus was instrumental. Interestingly, the participants did not speak of being the disciplinarian on the campus but rather more of a father figure for many of the students. They knew they were an extremely small part of the teaching force but used this to their advantage to reach the students. One teacher shared it this way,

When I first got to my school, I noticed a lot of students weren't in dress code. This simple rule got many of them pulled from class for the day into in school suspension or detention. I talked to the principal because I recognized the instructional time students were losing from a discipline rule. From talking to some of the young men, I found that many didn't have belts or the proper polo or even jeans sometimes. They would note some wear too small or had holes and they were embarrassed to wear what they had. This made me reach out to my fraternity to see how we could assist. After having a clothes drive we were able to provide the young men discreetly what they needed to be in code. They wanted to follow the rules but were too afraid to ask for help.

Providing an avenue for students to discuss personal things is one way a male presence can benefit because male students may not communicate with female teachers in the same manner. Another teacher provided an example of starting a young men's group on campus,

We wanted to reach out to the leaders on campus to see if we could make a difference. We wanted the smart leaders, the athletes, the gang members and any other students that could make an impact from other students watching them. We met with these students bi-weekly to discuss character, their futures, current situations, and any other topics. We taught them how to wear ties and let them display one Friday each month and let them be a presence at different campus events. At the end of the year each young man was gifted suit. This was an experience many of them never forget.

These types of interventions tell the story of individuals who not only realized their "status," but utilized that position to make a difference in the students' experiences. This was a guiding factor that motivated the decision to choose education. Moreover, the existence of the factor represented a more mature, experienced understanding of their status as educators and black men.

## **Why ACP**

### ***Fast Track to Certification***

When inquiring about ACP as an option, eight of the 10 identified completing the certification in a short period as a leading factor in their decision. The ability to know they would be done in a year was enticing. One participant shared his thoughts succinctly,

Leaving the business field, I knew I would not only need transition, but I would also need to have an avenue quickly because I had a young family to raise. I didn't really have the time to go back and complete another degree or an expensive post-baccalaureate program because I have responsibilities.

Because the majority of the participants had families, there was a need to be able to provide for others during the career shift. The ACP route, with its comparative brevity of duration, was appealing to most. One of the administrators highlighted,

When I decided to go into education, I was excited and ready to jump in to get started. My wife had concerns because I did well in my previous career but she knew how frustrated I was and supported the change. When I told her I found a program that would allow me to work and be done in a year, she was fully behind me. Without the support and ability to essentially jump right into the career, I don't know if I would be in it today.

The time of completion is a factor once someone has completed a degree and started a completely different career and has a family to support. Knowing this is a major draw, leaders of any alternative certification program need to consider program length. Also, as the last participant shared, the ability to immediately start working played a huge role as well.

### ***Immediate Job***

For participants established in other careers, the ability to start working in a new career immediately attracted them to education. Most traditional programs require completion of multiple classes prior to the prerequisite of testing, and unpaid internship prior to landing a teaching position to earn income. Despite the perception of traditional programs housing superior pedagogical instruction, the time and prerequisite barriers limit enrollment because there is the perception of a less-obstructive path. One of the teachers stated plainly,

It was a no-brainer for me when my current school district said I could start working now while I'm in the program. I was struggling just losing my job in my originally chosen field because of layoffs. I needed money now always wanted to work with kids. Their program gave me the opportunity to get trained, get certified, and get paid at the same time. This was something I couldn't pass up at this time in my life and I don't regret it because now I'm in a career that I love.

Most participants in ACP programs are transitioning careers. Maintaining an income-producing job while completing ACP requirements is attractive to candidates in transition situations.

In addition to the opportunity for immediate income, the on-the-job training aspect of ACP programs played a role for participants. The ACP programs were able to bring life to theoretical aspects because the participants were applying theory in their work experience. Many traditional programs may provide field experiences in short periods prior to the extended internship experiences; however, these designs are lacking when compared to the responsibility of a class of students. This format presents anxieties related to lack of preparation for some, but it also provides a direct mentor experience, if structured appropriately. The participants felt their ACPs did a good job preparing them. One participant shared,

I was nervous when I first started because I didn't know anything about teaching except experiences mentoring students. Being in the Alt. cert. program where I could ask questions, have someone come into my classroom and give feedback, and just have others to bounce ideas around while I was working was invaluable to me. I honestly don't know if I would have succeeded without the support system I had around me in my program. I didn't feel alone because others were experiencing some of the same things I was in my first year. I do wish I could have had more ideas to pull from that I probably would have got in a program in college, but I think living it really had a profound effect on me in making everything make sense for me in the classroom.

This example provides vital information for those leading traditional programs. Not only were the experiences important, but also were the integration of mentors and support in a beginning teacher's experience.

### **Retention in Profession**

Regarding their retention, three factors emerged to the participants' perseverance in the field when analyzing their responses: (a) student success, (b) upward mobility opportunities, and (c) strong mentors in the field. The dedication of the participants was evident in their availability to their students because they see themselves as role models and father figures. This mindset carried over when it came to desiring success for the students they worked with. William, a fifth-grade teacher, related,

I'm one of two males that students will see in this school with the other one being the PE coach. I know students won't see many people that look like me in their classroom.

Unfortunately, I may be the only one students may see in their educational career.

Knowing that, it makes me even more invested in them succeeding and knowing what it feels like to have support from a black male not only in educational studies but also life lessons. I see it as a responsibility for me to be there for these kids when some others can't or won't in their lives. I wouldn't call it a burden but I know just from talking to some parents how much a profound difference it is for the students to be in my class.

Dalfred, a principal, provided his perspective,

You can see the students in a black male's class and their excitement in our schools because it's almost like they were gifted an award their classmates didn't get that year. Just having the presence in the classroom makes a profound difference for the students.

We see it not only in much better behavior, but more importantly in their educational success. It's almost like the students know they have something special and they take advantage of it, particularly in the younger grades.

In addition to student success. Participants identified their presence as a mitigating factor in the lives of their students. This identification played a role in the decision to persevere in education. Moreover, this self-understanding led to other opportunities in education. After serving three years or more in the classroom, most of the participants recognized they could make a difference beyond the classroom. George, one of the SPED teachers, shared his thoughts,

I love teaching in the classroom and it's why I'm still here now; however, sometimes it can get frustrating to see some of the things done from the district and school administration level that are not in the best interest of the students we serve. I realized quickly the best way to make a difference is to further my career to be able to move up at the right time to impact change. The things learned in my graduate classes help me see the school from a different perspective than my own classroom experience.

Kendall, a principal, shared,

Once I got into the field I didn't look back and wanted to learn all that I could to be the best I could be. I do feel like my additional perspectives in graduate school gave me an understanding I did not receive in my ACP program and provided a key to open up to other experiences and opportunities. In the district I work, there are not a lot of males in the classroom or in administration. I knew I could have staying power in serving the students and the school as a whole. Serving at multiple levels has kept it exciting and making impacts on multiple levels have been powerful in my education career.

The resonation of the difference their presence makes in the classroom, in administration, or more importantly as educators in their communities is a theme that recurred. That presence and the importance of the obligation to find and be a mentor became a talking point. Charles shared his thoughts,

When I started my career, I had a principal that refused to let me fail. This made the difference with me staying in education. I already felt at a deficit coming in from an ACP

so I was unsure how it would be. Mrs. Jackson was the support I needed at the beginning and help set the foundation I have today. She would come by my class daily, provide feedback weekly, and always made me feel like her job was to help me grow and be the best teacher I could be for my students. Her positive feedback and support is something I practice now with beginning teachers. She is also the one that encouraged me to go to graduate school.

Terrence shared his experience in having a black male role model in the district to support him, Being in a smaller district, a lot of the black makes tend to get to know one another quickly. Thankfully, I met one of my fraternity brothers that worked at the district level as an Assistant Superintendent. His mentorship has been invaluable with me. Just to know I have someone at that level with his experience to bounce off ideas and provide guidance really makes a difference. I didn't even think about getting a master's degree until he told me how I could advance and receive additional skills to my educational toolkit. I think everyone needs a mentor to make sure they know they aren't alone in this journey.

These experiences illustrate a pathway for future educators and programs to produce educators that will contribute, thrive, and be role models.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Educational leaders continue to address the issue of maintaining a qualified and large applicant pool to impact students. Educational leaders and policymakers must confront issues of low salaries, the stress of the job, standardized test requirements, lack of appreciation, lack of consistent mentorship and a host of other factors that impact the attractiveness of a public education career. In addition, school leaders and policymakers must be intentional and creative to make a diversified teaching force a reality. Increasing diversity in the school system will be critical in meeting the needs of today's diverse student body, especially when one considers that 76% of teachers in public schools represent middle-class and White backgrounds, and the vast majority of that number is female (Bonner, et al., 2018; NCES, 2022).

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