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Teacher Education and Black Male Students in the United States

H. Richard Milner IV,[1] Ebony McGee,[2] Amber Pabon & Ashley Woodson[1]

1) School of Education, University of Pittsburgh, United States of America.
2) Peabody College, Vanderbilt University, United States of America.

Date of publication: October 15th, 2013
Edition period: October 2013 - February 2014

To cite this article: Milner, H.R., McGee, E., Pabon, A., & Woodson, A. (2013). Teacher Education and Black Male Students in the United States. *Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research*, *3*(3), 235-263. doi: 10.4471/remie.2013.15

To link this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.447/remie.2013.015

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REMIE – Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research, Vol. 3 No. 3 October 2013 pp. 235-263

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H. Richard Milner IV
University of Pittsburgh

Amber Pabon
University of Pittsburgh

Ashley Woodson
University of Pittsburgh

Ebony McGee
Vanderbilt University

Abstract

Teacher education programs in the United States (U.S.) struggle to prepare teachers to meet the complex needs of elementary and secondary students in public schools - especially those of color, those living in poverty, and those whose first language is not English. In this article, we argue for focused attention on preparing educators to teach African American male students as these students face particular institutional challenges in successfully navigating the U.S. public school system. Drawing from the significant body of research on teacher education and teacher learning for equity and social justice, four Black teacher educators discuss challenges they have faced in classes designed to prepare teachers to teach Black male students. Through an analysis of commonalities in their experiences, they propose means for teacher educators to foster greater understandings of the heterogeneity found among Black male students so that teachers can craft more responsive and responsible educational experiences for Black males.

Keywords: Equity, educational improvement, social justice, school improvement, teacher professional development.

2013 Hipatia Press
ISSN: 2014-2862
DOI: 10.4471/remie.2013.15

Hipatia Press
www.hipatiapress.com

REMIE – Multidisciplinary Journal of Educational Research, Vol. 3 No. 3 October 2013 pp. 235-263

Formación del Profesorado y Alumnado Masculino Afroamericano en los EEUU

H. Richard Milner IV
University of Pittsburgh

Amber Pabon
University of Pittsburgh

Ashley Woodson
University of Pittsburgh

Ebony McGee
Vanderbilt University

Resumen

Los programas de formación del profesorado en los Estados Unidos (U.S.) trabajan para preparar a maestros y maestras que cumplan con las complejas necesidades del alumnado de primaria y secundaria de las escuelas públicas – especialmente aquel de color, que vive en la pobreza, y que su primera lengua no es el ingles. Este artículo, se centra especialmente en la preparación de los y las educadoras ya que los estudiantes afroamericanos tienen que hacer frente a retos institucionales específicos para que puedan tener éxito en el sistema de educación pública de los EEUU. Basándose en investigaciones científicas previas relacionadas con la formación del profesorado y con el objetivo de fomentar la equidad y la justicia social, cuatro educadores afroamericanos, debaten los retos que tienen que afrontar en la formación del profesorado. A través de un análisis de las características comunes en sus experiencias, proponen medios para promuevan una mayor comprensión de la heterogeneidad que existe entre los estudiantes afroamericanos chicos para que los maestros y maestras puedan llevar a cabo experiencias educativas responsables y. que den respuesta a la situación de los alumnos afroamericanos.

Palabras clave: Equidad, mejora educativa, justicia social, mejora escolar, formación del profesorado.

2013 Hipatia Press
ISSN: 2014-2862
DOI: 10.4471/remie.2013.15

Hipatia Press
www.hipatiapress.com

Throughout the United States (U.S.), traditional and non-traditional teacher education programs[1] struggle to prepare teachers to meet the complex needs of pre-kindergarten through grade 12 (P-12) students - especially those of color, those living in poverty, and those whose first language is not English (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Milner & Smithey, 2003; Sleeter, 2001). Reasons for this ongoing struggle include, but are certainly not limited to, growing disjunction between the experiences of teachers and their P-12 students; rapidly changing sociocultural landscapes in P-12 public schools; and instructional practices and experiences teachers encounter in their preparation programs. Each of these contributing factors is complicated by the reality that some teacher educators are underequipped to successfully prepare teachers to teach for diversity and equity in P-12 classrooms (Merryfield, 2000; Milner, 2005). In this paper, we present and explore the experiences of four Black teacher educators as they work to promote dialogue on race in their respective teacher education classrooms with a goal being to build knowledge about the ways in which race manifests in the lived and learning experiences of P-12 students. We derive from commonalities across these experiences key features of what teaching and learning about equity can look like and point to tensions teachers experience as they grapple with themes of social inequity.

As African American researchers and teacher educators who practice within a social justice framework, we are committed to understanding challenges that many of our teachers face in their work with P-12 students. We theorize in reference to a particularly vulnerable population, Black male[2] students, recognizing that this poses strengths and limitations for analysis. We firmly agree that teacher education must be more responsive in meeting the needs of teachers who will work with students from a range of backgrounds. We argue for focused attention on African American male students for reasons outlined in the next section. To be clear, we do not intend to suggest a strategy that will guarantee pedagogical effectiveness in

preparing teachers to teach marginalized students or African American male students in particular. We share personal and professional narratives of our experiences in teacher education classes we have taught to shed light on (1) the kinds of challenges we have encountered with teachers in our work to help them understand race and racism both in society and education, and (2) the kinds of knowledge teachers need in order to meet the needs of African American male students in the P-12 classroom.

To contextualize these narratives, we first discuss aspects of knowledge established in the literature that teachers should be exposed to, that is, pedagogical knowledge, content knowledge, and racial and cultural knowledge. We then provide a snapshot of Black males in education and the U.S. We then share our four personal and professional narratives guided by the following two interrelated prompts: *What representative experiences have we had that shed light on tensions and challenges we experienced with our teachers in the classroom as we work to promote dialogue related to themes of race and racism in society and education? What necessary knowledge is required to shepherd teachers in meeting the needs of African American male students they might encounter in P-12 classrooms?* We conclude the article with a discussion of a core theme that emerged across all four of our narratives.

What Teachers Need to Know

We argue in alignment with much of the literature on teacher practice that teachers' prior beliefs and experiences impact how they provide and shape opportunities for P-12 students to learn in school (Howard & Terry, 2010; Milner, 2010). What teachers know or come to know influences what happens in the classroom, including how they evaluate and make curricular and instructional decisions, interact with students, manage the classroom, and assess their own and their students' learning and progress. This is true for teachers as well as teacher educators. Moreover, experiences teachers

take into the classroom are filtered and framed by their beliefs about themselves and others, and also what they encountered in their various training programs. Unfortunately, at times, teachers' beliefs are in conflict with the experiences of and best practices for diverse learners. Consequently, there is dissonance between teachers and students, which inescapably influences what and how P-12 students learn. It is recognized that teachers must have content knowledge (the knowledge of what they teach) as well as their pedagogical content knowledge and convergent knowledge between their content and how to convey that knowledge in mathematics, language arts or social studies to P-12 students (Shulman, 1987).

Research and theory have identified a need for cultural knowledge (Foster, 1997; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995). By cultural knowledge, we mean the information derived from experiences, traditions, and social relationships that students and teachers possess that is directly related to various aspects of their identity including race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. We argue that the development of cultural knowledge bears the potential to transform teachers' practice in meaningful ways. The reality of race and diverse racial experiences should be an integral part of the cultural knowledge introduced to teachers, as argued by pioneers in the study and conceptualization of race through their scholarship (Dubois, 1903; Woodson, 1933). For several decades, research related to race, racism, and culture has been prevalent in teacher education (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Foster, 1997; King, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1999). In its simplest conceptions, research has suggested that teachers need to build knowledge about and be aware of the racial and cultural backgrounds of students in order to address the range of needs students bring to school. Accomplishing this racial and cultural form of knowledge construction in teacher education has been extremely complex – perhaps more difficult than that of subject matter and pedagogical content knowledge. For instance, Cochran-Smith (1995) maintained that she had "become *certain only of uncertainty* [our emphasis added] about how and what to say, whom and what to have student

teachers read and write, and about who can teach whom, who can speak for or to whom, and who has the right to speak at all about the possibilities and pitfalls of promoting a discourse about race and teaching" (p. 546). Cochran-Smith articulates concerns with how to develop curricula and related experiences in teacher education that can successfully prepare students to understand issues of race and racism as they related to the P-12 classroom.

Teacher educators face particular challenges in working to develop cultural knowledge for themselves and their students. First, it is likely that they've had little if any preparation for such work in their formal training. Second, student responses to cultural and racialized curricula experiences in teacher education vary. For instance, consistent with Cochran-Smith's (1995) research, Milner and Smithey (2003) found student responses to race-central discussions, assignments, and activities on a classroom level ranged from students' being receptive to them and reporting new levels of insights and consciousness[3] for their P-12 student needs, to students' being resentful and not understanding why or how such foci are necessary. Brown's (2004) explanation of the lack of interest, growth, and understanding among teachers in developing racial and cultural knowledge is consistent with the research of Banks (1995) and Irvine (1992). Brown insisted,

> Resentment is frequently reflected on teacher evaluations, whereas resistance is apparent in inadequate pre-class preparation, reluctance to engage in class discussions and activities, and a lack of commitment to required cross-cultural interactions and research (p. 326).

But cultural knowledge is an essential component of supporting teachers' ability to connect with students, and to construct curriculum and instructional practices consistent with the needs of all learners (Gay, 2000; Howard & Terry, 2010). Racial and cultural congruence and incongruence often were used as frames to discuss the complexities embedded in preparing teachers to meet the needs of *all* students in urban schools (Irvine, 2003;

Milner, 2010). In other words, because White teachers and students of color possess different racialized and cultural experiences and repertoires of knowledge and knowing, both inside and outside the classroom, racial and cultural incongruence may serve as a roadblock for academic and social success in the classroom (Irvine, 2003). However, as Gay (2000) explained, "similar ethnicity between students and teachers may be potentially beneficial, but it is not a guarantee of pedagogical effectiveness" (p. 205). If teachers from any ethnic, cultural, or racial background can be successful with any group of students when the teachers possess (or have the skills to acquire) the knowledge, attitudes, dispositions, and beliefs necessary to meet the needs of their students (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Milner, 2010), then teacher educators need to be aware of the types of concepts and practices that facilitate meaningful change and development in these areas. Research on these concepts and practices is almost non-existent. Ladson-Billings (2004) argues that "almost [no literature] exists on teacher preparation specifically for African American students" (p. 8). In the next section, we describe Black male students, suggesting disturbing continuity in the trends shaping their daily lives, with explicit reference to the juxtaposition of their graduation and incarceration rates.

Black Male Students, Society, and Education

The social group that bears the labels "Black" and "male" encompasses individuals who are African or of African descent, but of diverse religious, sexual, and cultural identities, and from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Still, structural forces of racism, poverty and heterosexism allow us to discuss the experiences of Black male students in terms of obstacles that members of this group disproportionately face. In the U.S., Black male students in urban schools are among the most vulnerable students in the public education system. They face systemic and institutional challenges to successfully navigating the public education system and, as a

result, are often at risk for failure early in their educational careers (Ferguson, 2001; Fashola, 2005; Foster & Peele, 1999; Noguera, 2009). Data on academic achievement indicates that Black male youth in urban school districts are performing significantly lower on National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) examinations relative to their white counterparts (Lewis et al., 2010). African American fourth grade males scored approximately 27 percent lower than White males in reading, and 39 percent lower in mathematics. This gap continues to widen through middle school: approximately 90 percent of Black male youth did not achieve proficiency in reading and math on NAEP exams, while 33 and 44 percent of their White counterparts achieved proficiency in reading and math, respectively (Table 1).

Table 1
Proficiency Rates in 2009 on National Assessment of Educational Progress

	4th grade reading	4th grade math	8th grade reading	8th grade math
Black Male	11%	14%	8%	10%
White Males	38%	53%	33%	44%

In high school, Black male youth are less likely to take advanced placement tests, graduate on time, or enroll in four-year universities relative to Black females, Latinos, and Whites (Lewis, Simon, Uzzell & Horwitz, 2010). Holzman's (2010) research on national high school graduation rates reveals that only 47% of Black males earned high school diplomas in 2008 compared to 78% of White males.

School-based discipline

One catalyst for the academic failure of Black male students in urban schools is their disproportionate subjection to school-based discipline that excludes them from instructional learning time (Ferguson, 2001). Labeled as troublemakers (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010), Black male youth are often perceived by school personnel as embodying characteristics that are maladaptive and thus are subject to redress through removal from regular classroom settings. Black male youth are more frequently disciplined for minor infractions by subjective and/or questionable criteria (Ferguson, 2001; McCarthy & Hoge, 1987; George, Noguera, Skiba et al., 2002; Wald & Losen, 2003), whereas White males are disciplined for more objective infractions. Black youth are also more likely than White students to be the targets of discipline procedures. Although they represent only 17% of the total U.S. student body population, Black boys make-up 34% of those suspended (NAACP Legal Defense Fund, year, 2005; Stanczyk, 2007; Wald & Losen, 2003). Furthermore, students who have been repeatedly suspended and expelled from school are more likely to end up in youth detention centers, the juvenile justice system, and the prison industrial complex (Wald & Losen, 2003). Undereducated and over-disciplined by schools, Black males are being ushered into state and federal detention at alarming rates. Alexander (2010) explained:

> More black men are imprisoned today than at any other moment in our nation's history…We may wonder aloud [as Secretary Duncan seemingly did in his Teach campaign speech] "where have all the Black men gone?" but deep down, we already know. It is simply taken for granted that, in cities like Baltimore and Chicago, the vast majority of young black men are currently under the control of the criminal justice system or branded criminals for life (p. 176).

Black males are overrepresented in school suspension rooms and off-campus suspension sites. Their physical segregation from traditional sites of learning in schools often functions as a first stop on the school-to-prison pipeline (Pabon, 2013a). The alarming overrepresentation of Black males in the prison industrial complex fuels a greater sense of urgency to the Black male educational crisis. The problems outlined above reflect broad and dire structural and institutional problems. They also serve as the backdrop of many Black male students, lived experiences and, as such, elements of their cultural knowledge. If pre-service teachers are unaware of concepts like the discipline gap and the school-to-prison pipeline as it pertains to Black male students, it is reasonable to conclude that teacher educators have not adequately prepared them for teaching Black male youth, and that teachers will be unlikely to disrupt the cycle that keeps Black male youth at the bottom of various social hierarchies.

In Search of Answers: Reflecting on Practice

The aforementioned statistics highlight the disproportionate representation of Black male youth among the underserved and excluded within U.S. public schools. When contrasted with the lived experiences of the nation's teachers, the majority of whom are middle-class, white and female (Cross, 2003; Irizarry, 2010), educational theorists face a staggering disjunction between the social worlds that Black male students and their teachers inhabit. This disjunction, referred to as the "demographic imperative" (Banks, 1995) encompasses the *difference* between the social and cultural experiences of students and teachers, as well as the continued disparity "in educational outcomes and conditions for pupils with and without advantages conferred by race, culture, language, and socioeconomic status" (Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2008, p. 42).

We argue that the functions of the demographic imperative pose significant moral dilemmas for teacher educators and teacher education

programs. It is undoubtedly true that teacher education programs throughout the United States operate with limited resources. In the context of high stakes testing, decreasing federal funding, and the competing needs posed by various social groups, shifting any focus away from subject matter knowledge and classroom management threatens established conventions regarding how to improve educational outcomes. In light of these realities, educational theorists must not only ask the extent to which the problems of racism and racial inequity necessitate a response, but the practical forms that such responses could possibly take. There are no easy answers. But research in critical race theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), multicultural education (Banks, 1995; Sleeter, 2001) and social justice pedagogy (Chapman & Hobbel, 2010) suggests that the aforementioned disjunction can be traversed in meaningful ways.

Previous successes in this area have heeded ongoing calls for developing teachers' cultural competence, sociopolitical consciousness, critical thinking and sociohistorical empathy as a means of fostering the dispositions necessary to facilitate teacher knowledge construction that might inform practice. In discussions with Milner, the first author of this manuscript, about preparing teachers, we asked ourselves the following:

1. What representative teaching experiences have we had that shed light on the tensions and challenges of promoting dialogue related to themes of race and racism in society and education?
2. What necessary knowledge is required to shepherd teachers toward meeting the needs of the African American male students they might encounter in P-12 classrooms?

The authors, all African American teacher educators and researchers, identified commonalities within our personal narratives and experiences in teacher education programs that illuminated key elements of productive dialogue about race, racism, and racial identity in their classrooms. Each author contributed a reflection on practice providing the potential for better understandings and transformation in teaching Black male students.

We focus in this work on the latter function of the demographic imperative, specifically the ways of thinking that help teacher educators prepare teachers to navigate difference, diversity, and inequity. We maintain that more can and should be done to understand how teachers understand those who are Black and male, with emphasis on our role as teacher educators in developing and/or redirecting these interpretations. What follows are each of our four reflections on practice organized to include: 1) a brief personal history, 2) an anecdote from our teaching, and 3) a discussion about our insights on knowledge and practice.

Milner's Story: A Need to Centralize Race

"Can We Get Over Race, Please?"

I was born and raised in the South. Although my parents did not have college degrees, I grew up with many material possessions and was expected to attend college. My family was not rich, but I did not know what it meant to not have clothes to wear or food on the table. Race and conversations about race became common in my family as far back as I can remember. I recall how one of my White classmates called me a nigger once when I was in the fourth grade and how my parents, mostly my father, had a very frank discussion with me about race and, in particular, how racism worked both on the individual and systemic levels. In high school, I recall how one of my mathematics teachers literally taught to the "White side" of the classroom and how all the Black students in the class would discuss the teacher's actions but never complained about it. My personal experiences with race and education shaped my work to build and develop intercultural competence among my students in higher education.

Having worked as a professor for nearly a decade, I taught in a private, predominately White, setting. I worked with both undergraduates and

graduate students preparing teachers to teach and preparing graduate students, mostly at the doctoral level, to do research.

I had somewhat gotten used to my teacher education students querying me about my credentials, about whether or not I had taught before and for how long, and even about my family background. However, I was a bit caught off guard the third time I taught a required secondary education course because it felt as if the students gathered before and after class to protest the focus of the course. I did not apologize for emphasizing issues of race as the class covered the different themes of the course. My curriculum and instructional practices were deliberately shaped by and infiltrated with race. For instance, when the class talked about curriculum development in their subject-matter areas, the classroom experiences were developed so that students were guided to consider the complexity and centrality of race and racism in curriculum development.

Many of the students in the course, all but three of whom were White women, were not happy about the emphasis on race. They were explicit: "Why do you make everything about race?" "I thought this class was supposed to prepare me to become a teacher. I don't see how race and racism relate to this course." Even more troubling for many of my students was my direct emphasis on the educational experiences and needs of African American males in public school classrooms. Clearly, my own racial, ethnic and gender background and reality played an enormous role in how I taught this class. When race was covered more generally, students frowned; some questioned the relevance of such a focus while others defaulted to a place of silence. When I facilitated and guided the discussion to include African American males, though, it appeared that an even deeper sense of frustration and silence permeated and penetrated the room. When a student said, "Kids are just kids. I don't think it's useful for us to 'essentialize' them," I began to examine my positionality. As an assistant professor on a tenure-track early on in my career, my concerns were deep rooted and multifaceted. On the one hand, I questioned if I had allowed the students to push me (or as I felt, bully

me) away from a focus that I knew to be gravely important for their own work as teachers and also their students. I wondered if I should allow the students to force me to compromise my own convictions around what it means to teach all students well [due to their authority and power]. My experiences seemed to serve as the crossroads in my praxis.

At the beginning of the course, the students, that semester, were loud and clear in their feedback. The themes of the student feedback were powerfully influential to me. One student wrote:

> The professor is smart and knows a lot about teaching. I learned a lot. However, he focused too much on race, on African American students, and on African American male students particularly. This course was supposed to be about teaching *not* race!

The students as a whole insisted that I must have had an "agenda" because I found it important to focus on race in a course that they thought was "about teaching." They struggled to understand how central and salient race and teaching were.

As an African American male teacher educator, my pedagogical agenda, in the students' view conflicted with theirs: I wanted my students to learn the content and themes of the course and to gain insights about the interrelated nature of race to the other content of the course. The irony is that the students in the course never thought about how their agendas as White women could be very much in conflict with their African American male students; yet, their students would not have the power address their agendas in teaching evaluations, as did the student teachers in my course. Besides, in the students' views, they had a right to contradict me and my curricula and pedagogical decisions because the class was about teaching not race.

However, after several weeks, the students seemed to "give in" a bit. Students shifted their protest and dismay to conversations that seemed to be enlightening. They students started reflecting about their own schooling experiences and offering insights about what they were reading and

observing in schools as practicing teachers/observers. It was only through hard work and dedication that I felt I was able to move them from provide a space where students did not feel I was bullying them, to one in which they came to realize that each of them (including myself) was learning and developing greater intercultural competence.

My evaluations from the course at the end of the semester allowed me to engage in introspection. The response, "I was forced to think about issues I had never considered in the past. I learned SO MUCH," was common and quite consistent from the students. My being an African American male teacher educator richly shaped what I decided to teach and what the students were exposed to, and my presence helped shape the students' intercultural competence through the crossroads experiences of the course. Further, my experiences and pedagogical approach clearly contributed to the students' building and shaping of intercultural competence, and the students' interactions and experiences in my course.

Pabon's Story: A Need for Knowledge of Theory

"When do we stop learning about urban education theory and start figuring out how to implement teaching strategies in our classrooms?"

I am a Black woman teacher educator. After teaching teachers for several years at northeastern universities, I was baffled by the seemingly constant request to abandon the study of theories on race, class, and gender in the urban school context in lieu of teaching methods. I share here a story of my own pathway to becoming a teacher, teacher educator, and researcher to contextualize my reflection on practice.

I was raised in Southern California to a working class family that had migrated West in the 1930s to escape the Jim Crow South. During my own teacher education, I conducted an auto-ethnography that taught me much about my past. In an interview of my grandmother Hazel, I learned that my

great-grandmother Charlie had also been a teacher. However, when Charlie came to Los Angeles from rural Arkansas, she was denied a teaching position as a result of racially discriminatory hiring practices within the school district. Despite her degree qualifications, Grandma Charlie spent her remaining years as a housemaid and Sunday school teacher.

Learning about the legacy of teaching in my family imbued within me a deeper sense of purpose. I entered the English language arts classroom with a moral imperative to empower students through knowledge of self and to teach students how to read the word and the world (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Further, I began to conceptualize an emerging theory of teacher education for working in urban schools that privileged understanding one's own personal narrative and of sociopolitical contexts of race, class and gender towards the development of a philosophy of teaching and pedagogical skill.

My experiences teaching predominantly African American students in high poverty schools in Brooklyn, New York strengthened and developed this theory. I took notice of the particular challenges facing Black male youth and the lack of institutional knowledge to support their needs. Observing English language arts classrooms in which writing prompts, reading assignments and discussion foci had no cultural relevance to the lives of Black male students was, in this researcher's eyes, a grave injustice and one outcome of the underdevelopment of theoretical understandings about teaching in urban schools. What made these circumstances more troubling was that, although I considered the lack of engagement by some Black male youths as reasonable opposition to ineffective instruction, these young men stood the most to lose. Too often, I witnessed how students missed out on appropriate literacy instruction and were then *schooled out* (Pabon, 2013b) through remediation, special education and/or disciplinary action.

As I reflect back, I maintain that teacher education curricula must include the teaching of critical social theory and require teachers to engage in inquiry of their own personal narratives. Teachers need to explore who they

are, where they come from, and why they want to teach in urban schools. Further, teachers need to read scholarship from the vast body of research on teaching Black male students (i.e. Arnetha Ball, Gloria Ladson-Billings, David Kirkland, Pedro Noguera, H. Richard Milner and Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz) and have opportunities to employ these strategies in their practicum experiences.

Recently, a White male pre-service teacher approached me after my course had ended with a concern. He had begun to notice that that he was having difficulty connecting with African American male students in his practicum experience. "They don't seem to like me. And I'm torn because if I try to act to hard, they'll challenge me but if I'm not stern enough, they'll walk all over me." The student was, on one hand acknowledging his privilege as a White male and on the other hand, grappling with the limitations his identity posed in a classroom of the Black male youth he was responsible for teaching. The beauty of his struggle is that his process of developing a philosophy of teaching Black male students began with observation, critical self-reflection and a call for help.

It is moments like this that speak to the power of teaching critical social theory in the urban school context to teachers as students draw upon scholarship that reifies their everyday experiences in the field and challenges them to examine the intersections of their personal histories and identities. Teacher education that challenges new teachers to examine their own narratives and grounds them in theoretical knowledge of how to reach and teach Black males is essential if we are serious about improving the educational conditions of this population.

Woodson's Story: A Need to Address Popular (Mis)-Representations of Black Males

"I'm obviously not racist because I voted for Barack Obama."

All but one of my uncles have spent at least a night in jail, over half have spent a year or more. Formal education often lost out to the need to work, and work for the uneducated often needed to be supplemented through participation in various underground economies. My fifth grade crush, a charming flag football prodigy with a light brown Afro, is currently in prison for double homicide. By ninth grade, I was a bit more discerning: my Homecoming date just finished his sentence for armed robbery assault and battery. As I grew older, I noticed there was often someone missing from school, the basketball game, or the family reunion. This someone was almost always Black and almost always male. These stories led me to explore demography and conditions of the prison industrial complex, and the near constant recommendation that improvements in P-12 education might reduce incarceration rates. So I began to teach, then to study, then to educate teachers. Eventually, I was assigned to teach a social foundations course at a Midwestern university.

It seemed that no matter what readings or reflections we work through together, mid-semester I was always greeted by a handful (or more) of White teachers who insisted that racism is an obsolete social variable. They argued eloquently that racism has not influenced their thinking or being in any meaningful way. As evidence of this, they would describe their admiration for various Black public figures.

These descriptions often reference prestigious Black male artists or athletes, and more recently, politicians.

> But I listen to T.I. all the time, so I feel like I'm past racist. I love Black music, you know, Black culture and stuff.
>
> How could LeBron James be my favorite player if I'm racist? How could I even watch basketball?

My White students were resistant to my response that the Black male body has been the object of White gaze and source of amusement since auction blocks graced the public square. They dismissed my examples of the

minstrel show, the public nature of lynching, and the historical representations of Black masculinity in pop culture and pornography. They maintained that their contemporary appreciation for Black cultural expression is distinct from past exploitations. In some ways they were right.

In other ways, their post-racial stance left them unable to account for the responses of educators and administrators when the Black male body isn't filtered through the public relations department of a record label, a staff of referees, or a team of speechwriters and image consultants.

I usually asked, "What happens when a Black male P-12 student adopts T.I.'s 'I don't' give a fuck' swag and refuses to engage your history lesson? Or when the size, style and spontaneity that make Lebron James such an incredible player manifest in a Black male student in your mathematics classroom? What happens when a charismatic Black male student emerges as a classroom leader, but leads in a direction that you don't want the class to go?"

They already knew what would happen: the disproportionate removal of Black males from the classroom and the perpetuation of a pernicious achievement gap. As a class, we began to explore the thin line between admiration and fear, and the Black male student's place within it. This was a particularly complex conversation because the forms of Black male expression with which my white students were often most familiar – those that are commercially successful – caused considerable tension in the classroom.

During a recent lunch meeting, a white male intern shared the concerns of his white female mentor teacher over the use of obscene language in her classroom:

> Teacher Intern: She just feels like they all talk like rapists. It's fuck this, fuck that, n-word, n-word, and they're not even sixteen.
>
> Me: What do you think?

> Teacher Intern (shrugging): I guess I'm just more used to it, you know, because I listen to rap and stuff. But it's scary. It's scary that this is really real.

And the realness of it all is what all of my students need to see: how racism, poverty, and compulsory heterosexuality converge to shape the spaces that Black male students inhabit, and the difficulty of reaching in and out of those spaces. My concern is that my students sometimes deny that these spaces exist because the media has allowed them unprecedented access to a particular rendering of Black culture and Black males' lives, without consideration for Black masculinities and experiences that aren't mass produced to meet consumer demand. Lacking the knowledge and skills necessary to negotiate this complicated reality, they might remain incapable of responding to students in all of their dimensions, and sacrificing the needs of students to resolve their own dissonance.

McGee's Story: A Need to Disrupt Deficit Views of Black Males

"How do I teach Black males when they have so many deficiencies?"

Several years ago, I was assigned a course that focused on social and philosophical dimensions of education which had traditionally been taught by faculty who focused on philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, John Locke, Jean Piaget, and John Dewey, to name a few. I postulated that these philosophers could only take us so far in understanding the contemporary challenges of education. Therefore, we studied these traditional philosophers alongside W.E.B. Dubois, Carter G. Woodson, Paulo Freire, Angela Davis, and George Santayana. The latter group set a solid foundation for exposing the educational disparities leading to disparate outcomes for marginalized students. This focus became a salient marker for comprehending school learning and participation of the teachers in the course.

When it came to examining the experiences and challenges of

underrepresented P-12 students, I greatly accentuated the plight of Black male students. This emphasis emerged from the shared, very real concerns among this class of mostly White, female, middle-to-upper-class teachers about their fears and perceived inabilities to effectively teach students from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds. And while these teachers were particularly worried about teaching low-income, Black male students, they almost demanded that I provide them with a scripted blueprint for teaching Black males. I pressed back, demanding that they read and critically analyze a diverse set of readings for specific gendered and raced student populations (Black males, Latina females, Native American males), which complicated their notions of a predetermined and packaged rubric that would serve all historically marginalized students. The teachers essentially wanted me as their professor to give them a script to *fix* the Black students they might be required to teach at some point in their future.

An enduring aim of my instruction was to make apparent the strengths and achievements of some Black male students amid inequities of access and opportunity. In addition, I provided accounts of Black male achievement that collectively defied racist societal views of their competence and worthiness and that of their families and communities. I attempted to shift the conceptions of deficit these students had about Black male students.

As a class, we interrogated why Black males were relegated to the margins of many of our nation’s educational institutions. I provided articles that paid close attention to the policies, theories, and practices that shape Black male (dis)engagement within the educational system, including the systemic disservice of Black males in special education. As I was frequently challenged by assumptions of my student teachers in the course, I deliberately examined and compelled them to interrogate questions like: what does a teacher see when he or she looks at a Black male student? Some saw a menace to society while other teachers saw students full of promise and possibilities. My goal was to help the students teachers continually bear witness to the promise and positive possibilities of the Black male students

they would teach, while understanding the realities of their existence. A strength they developed through my course was in their ability to investigate race, ethnicity, and social inequalities in America from a wide range of perspectives, and to critique the American social, cultural, and educational climate and its contributions to disparities that confront Black males students.

Reflections and Conclusions

This paper developed as an attempt to identify key features across stories of successful practices in teaching teachers about diversity and equity. The narratives above provide insight into the ways in which classroom discourse can be attuned to the needs society's most vulnerable students, including but certainly not limited to the needs of Black male students. While we maintain critiques about the public education system and its failure to adequately educate and support Black male youth, we remain optimistic of the possibilities that both teacher education and professional development can provide in improving the educational experiences of this population. Although our paths in teacher education have been varied, we believe that our narratives represent common and complex issues and provide a valuable basis from which to advocate for ways to prepare teachers to better assess and meet the needs of all students. The maintenance of a mostly White teaching populace requires engagement of both intellectual understanding of inequities that impact Black male students, as well as transformative self-reflections that lead to a change in critical consciousness. Based on our analyses of the four narratives, we highlight a core theme that seems particularly useful for teacher educators to consider.

Recognizing the Call for Help

As noted, teacher educators must confront their own ignorance and the potential of student resistance when working to develop cultural knowledge

base that incorporates the lived experience of Black male students. This includes developing instructional models in which Black male issues, novelists, history, culture, art, communities, role models, inventions, and innovators are intertwined throughout a full-bodied curriculum. But in addition to providing resources, we argue that teacher educators must also *be* a resource on issues of inequity. It is likely that our students view us as a resource on issues of race in part because we are Black. But it is erroneous to presume that an educator is equipped to teach all students simply because they hold a marginal status in society. It takes effort to learn the patterns of behavior, prior experiences and expectations of students for educators of all backgrounds. We highlight in the above stories not only the importance of providing diverse social identities for teachers to learn from and with, but also the commitment to inclusion, the facilitation of open communication, the embrace of constructive and democratic conflict, and the use of curricula derived from multiple sources of knowledge.

We also argue that teacher educators must recognize when their students "call for help" on issues of race, racism, and cultural diversity. We define the "call for help" as instances in which teachers communicate feeling overwhelmed, confused, or even angry in response to issues of inequity in their social world or classroom. Serving as a resource for teachers includes being able to identify moments when managing these responses requires additional pedagogical support. The call for help manifested in the second and third stories in a readily identifiable way, when a student approached an instructor and asked for direction in negotiating their relationships with Black male students. But it can emerge in other forms as well. For example, as evident in the first story the call for help can be communicated as overt resistance to a particular subject matter. In the fourth story, the need for intervention was expressed as teachers' fears of certain students. By recognizing moments when teachers require or request further guidance on these issues, we support the development of knowledge…

Undoubtedly, our racial biographies have shaped our experiences as

teacher educators, which highlight the distorted or naive ways some of these teachers think about race, racism, and racial inequities. As the goal of this article is to brainstorm towards the development of teacher education models that specifically address the education of Black males, we propose that teacher education programs find new directions in which teachers can become the forerunners of directly addressing and valuing the heterogeneity found in Black male students and other diverse student populations of color. More research in this area is desperately needed as the current approaches do not help prospective or practicing teachers gain the essential skills needed to best serve Black males, who are the recipients of an education that stereotypes, undermines, and minimizes the educational and life values of their very existence. Forging healthier and more complete educational experiences and outcomes for teacher educators and their Black male students is vital for the future of teacher education.

Notes

[1] In the U.S., teachers are prepared in both traditional and nontraditional programs. By traditional programs, we mean those that are sponsored by universities across the country, either at the graduate or undergraduate level. By nontraditional programs, we mean alternative teacher education programs such as Teach for America or Teach Tennessee. Whether traditional or nontraditional, teacher preparation plays a critical role in how teachers are educated to respond to the needs of P-12 students.
[2] Although "Black" is not a monolithic racial category, the United States federal government categorizes all people of African descent as Black/African-American. We use the term Black and African American interchangeably to denote all people of African descent.
[3] Clearly, it is not enough for teachers in teacher education to learn about race and to develop expanded insights about racism in teacher education classrooms. These issues must also be considered in field placements, such as student teaching and practicum opportunities.

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H. Richard Milner IV is Helen Faison Professor of Urban Education and director of the Center for Urban Education at the University of Pittsburgh.

Amber Pabon is Assistant Professor in the department of Instruction & Learning, School of Education, at the University of Pittsburgh.

Ashley Woodson is Assistant Professor in the department of Instruction & Learning, School of Education, at the University of Pittsburgh.

Ebony McGee is Assistant Professor in the Department of Teaching & Learning, Peabody College of Education, at Vanderbilt University.

Contact Address: Direct correspondence to the authors at Center for Urban Education, University of Pittsburgh, 5806, Wesley W. Posvar Hall, 230, South Bouquet Street, Pittsburgh, PA (United States of America) - 15260. E-mail address: rmilner@pitt.edu.