

# The Lion Tells His Side of the (Counter)Story: A Black Male Educator's Autoethnographic Account

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*While many initiatives have emerged to increase the presence of Black males in schools, there is still little known about our experiences. Through the use of autoethnographic vignettes and counterstorytelling, I highlight the successes and challenges Black male educators may face during the hiring process as well as in the classroom. While this account cannot be generalized for all Black male educators, this study emphasizes the important role they play in the lives of their students. I conclude the article with an argument for the use of counterstorytelling in research as a transformative and therapeutic method for Black male educators and scholars to analyze their experiences and challenge deficit narratives.*

*Keywords:* African-American male teachers, autoethnography, critical race methodology

*Until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.*  
-African Proverb

If stereotypes are to be believed, the fact that I grew up with a single mother in a poverty-stricken community would suggest that I would not go to college and become a teacher. Fortunately, I did not fall victim to the pitfalls that await Black men throughout the United States. During my childhood, family and friends recounted stories describing the struggles of Black men. For example, my uncle, who had a history of incarceration, always preached to me that I had to be smarter, work harder, and stay out of trouble in order to be successful in society, as he believed the odds were always stacked against Black men. My best friend always commented that we could never go to the north side of our hometown because Black people were not welcomed there. Although I did not understand the meaning of my uncle's teachings and best friend's cautionary advice as a child, their words, along with others' stories, shaped my perception of what it meant to be a Black male in America and the potential consequences of being Black.

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This study employs the use of autoethnography to disrupt the unfairly believed and “trusted” stereotyping and typecasting of Black males. While media accounts promote a singular and myopic portrayal, besieging such males as criminal, unskilled, and problematic, it is important to begin disrupting these damaging and often misguided depictions. Moreover, I share my story in an attempt to present the type of positive account I yearned for as a child. According to an African proverb, until the lion tells his side of the story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. By sharing my story, I am, in essence, challenging the hunter’s tale by explaining the lion’s story.

This autoethnographic account was inspired by Lynn’s (2006) portrait of Kashari Rogers, a young Black male educator. Lynn’s ability to communicate Rogers’ journey to becoming an educator and how his pedagogical strategies inspired his Black students to excel provided me one of my first opportunities to see my own reflection in scholarly literature. Therefore, I write this piece not only to highlight my experiences as a Black male educator, but also to inspire and encourage other Black males to share their journeys as Lynn’s work inspired me.

Scholarly literature has focused on Black males; however, a substantial amount of this literature describes us from a deficit perspective (Brown, 2011b). The preponderance of the literature focuses on our overrepresentation in special education classrooms (Kunjufu, 2005). Moreover, research contends that Black males are underrepresented in gifted and talented programs (Ford & Grantham, 2001) and higher education institutions (Harper & Griffin, 2011). The limited opportunities in K–16 institutions undermine efforts to increase workforce opportunities for Black males. As a result, some Black males engage in destructive behaviors (e.g., involvement in illegal drug distribution) as a means to survive, which consequently leads many into the prison system while destroying their homes and communities in the process (Harmon & Ford, 2010). Unfortunately, in most accounts of Black males, the story stops here.

While strategic and systemic barriers certainly exist for Black males in society, there are many who are able to navigate the educational system successfully, but their stories are often silenced. Moreover, society’s obsession with Black male athletes often leaves the far-reaching accomplishments of Black teachers in the shadows. Therefore in this article, I seek to break through the wall of silence and provide an account that explores the culturally rich lived experiences of a Black male educator.

First, I provide a brief analysis of the research examining the experiences of Black male teachers. Second, I provide a description of critical race methodology and autoethnography, which methodologically anchor my account. Third, through the use of autoethnographic vignettes (Johnson, 2013), I provide an analysis of my teaching experiences. Forth, I argue for the use of storytelling, specifically autoethnography and critical race methodology as a transformative tool for researchers from marginalized groups to challenge existing stereotypical narratives. Lastly, I discuss the implications of this study and the need for more literature discussing the experiences of Black male teachers.

### **Experiences of Black Male Teachers**

The United States teaching profession is experiencing a shortage of Black male teachers (Bryan & Ford, 2014; Johnson, 2014). Currently, only 2% of the teaching workforce is comprised of Black males (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). This is a dismal statistic as the majority of our nation’s largest school districts have a majority-minority student population. Although the national number of Black male teachers is low, understanding

their experiences “can provide rich illustrations of the intricacies of what teachers know, what they believe, and how they conceptualize their role and responsibility as teachers” (Brown, 2011a, p. 364). However, several scholars (Brown, 2011a; Lynn, 2002, 2006) note that there is a lack of research examining the experiences of Black male teachers. Furthermore, there are limited first person accounts written by Black male teachers about their experiences as educators. The consequence is that researchers, practitioners and policymakers fail to hear the unique perspectives these individuals bring to teaching while reflecting on their own practices, feelings, and beliefs.

For some Black male teachers, being an educator provides an opportunity to impact students who come from similar environments (Brown, 2011a). Milner (2012) concluded that teachers serve multiple roles such as parent, life coach, and friend. Furthermore, Black male teachers in particular are likely to see the opportunity to teach as a means to change the trajectory for Black children and communities. While scholars contend that Black male teachers will benefit Black children, Bryan and Ford (2014) argue that White children equally benefit from having Black teachers who disrupt “stereotypical notion[s] regarding Black men in general” (p. 159).

Lynn (2002) found that many of his study participants, Black male teachers in Los Angeles, felt they had a responsibility to help Black youth from underserved communities and believed that teaching Black children would have a positive impact on the community at large. These individuals considered their work as teachers paramount to creating change. Unfortunately, the accounts of committed and successful Black male teachers in the literature are small in number. Therefore, it is necessary to hear more stories of the impact Black male teachers have on their students, schools, and communities.

While there are similarities, Black male educators’ experiences are not monolithic (Foster, 1997; Lynn 2002). Furthermore, the use of a single narrative devalues the varying life experiences that Black male teachers bring into the classroom and their teaching. For example, Brown (2011a) concluded that his study participants’ teaching strategies and philosophies were directly impacted by their “experiences and affiliation with different formal and informal institutions” (p. 373). In sharing my experiences, I hope to further diversify the literature on the experiences of Black male teachers.

## **Methodology**

### **Autoethnography**

Autoethnographic research employs characteristics of both autobiography and ethnography traditions (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Autoethnographic writers “retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and or possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 8). Moreover, Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) argue that autoethnography allows the researcher to disrupt and challenge the ways in which traditional research silences the researcher’s voice in the name of “objectivity, control, and predictability” (p. 35). While analyzing their experiences, autoethnographic writers reflect on the ways others experience similar cultural occurrences. Furthermore, autoethnographic writers can further problematize their experiences while simultaneously gaining deeper insights through the use of incorporating existing literature into their stories. The goal of this article (and all autoethnographic writing) is to “produce analytical,

accessible texts that change us and the world we live in for the better” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 40).

Autoethnographic writers and supporters contend autoethnography can be a therapeutic tool for scholars and useful within the qualitative paradigm (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011). However, autoethnography has been criticized because of the reliance of self as the main source of data (Holt, 2003). In Holt’s (2003) critique of the peer review process of his autoethnography, Holt found that “the majority of the reviewers’ comments were directed at making the autoethnography more realist, which would then enable them to evaluate it using more established, acceptable, and accessible criteria” (p. 25). Despite these criticisms, autoethnography provides the writer an opportunity to engage in a “socially-just act” (Ellis & Brochner, 2011, para. 39). For this reason, using autoethnography along with the counterstorytelling component of critical race methodology provides me with an opportunity to not only engage in the therapeutic aspects of writing, but to analyze and critique the ways in which race plays into my narratives.

### **Critical Race Methodology**

This paper also employed critical race methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical race methodology is derived from critical race theory (CRT), which explores the centrality of race in various aspects of life, including education and law (Davis, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Moreover, Lynn (2006) argued that CRT provides a theoretical foundation for researchers to conceptualize how race and racism influence research and society. Critical race methodology in education seeks to confront, question, and redefine conventional “research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experience of people of color” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26). Through the use of counterstorytelling, which presents the stories of groups of people whose stories have been traditionally silenced, critical race methodology challenges “objective” and “neutral” master narratives of storytelling typically used to marginalize, typecast and oppress people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical race methodology aligns with my epistemological view of race as a central construct in examining and understanding the world around me. Furthermore, I argue that stories are critical to providing deep insight into the ways people of color methodically navigate their environments. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) describe three different forms of counterstories: personal stories, other people’s stories, and composite stories. For the purposes of this article, I will use personal stories from my experiences as a teacher. Personal stories are used because they provided me the space to draw on my personal experiences dealing with injustice and racism while also allowing me the opportunity to incorporate the voices of those individuals who served significant “roles” within my story. Both critical race methodology and autoethnographic methodologies are useful, as both methods allow the researcher to treat research as a means to advocate for social justice (Ellis et al., 2011; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Furthermore, both methods provide an analytic lens to share my stories and experiences as a Black male educator in a manner that challenges the master narrative that claims Black males are not contributing members of society.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

In the tradition of autoethnographic research, I am the subject under study. As a result, I use personal narratives to explore my experiences. At the time of writing this article, I recently transitioned from being a music and special education teacher for middle and high schoolers in an urban school district to a position mentoring and supporting aspiring educators at a higher education institution. During my tenure as both a music educator and special education teacher, I obtained a master's degree and was a full-time doctoral student. I worked on my degrees while teaching full-time because I wanted to be able to directly apply the theories I learned in school in an actual classroom setting.

In order to provide useful data for this study, I kept an electronic reflection journal during the 2011–2013 school years. Every day I wrote an entry that included the various experiences I had throughout that day. I also wrote commentary about interactions between myself and various students and staff. To craft these counterstories presented, I used my journal entries that described various experiences I had as a teacher along with personal reflections I wrote in my journal based on various epiphanies I reflected on as a Black male educator throughout my career. I wrote narratives with rich descriptions of the people and places to contextualize my experiences. In order to ensure the reliability of my accounts, I spoke with close colleagues who had a deep understanding of my various experiences. Because of these dialogues and the resulting revisions of my narratives, I am able to present my experiences in the most meaningful manner possible. Furthermore, pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the people and institutions mentioned in my accounts. These narratives, my journal entries, and other data archives (e.g., past emails, teaching documents, journals, etc.) that I included in my journal provide the foundation for this analysis.

When telling my story, I contemplated employing various methodologies to share my experiences. Again, I must stress that in no manner can my story be generalized for all Black male educators. However, I hope that from my accounts the reader may gain insight into some of the successes and triumphs as well as trials and tribulations of being a Black male educator. In the next section of this paper, I present my personal narratives using a layered account approach that “focus[es] on the author's experience alongside data, abstract analysis, and relevant literature” (Ellis et al., 2011, para. 20). Specifically, autoethnographic vignettes (Johnson, 2013) were used, and relevant literature was weaved throughout. The section that follows presents two vignettes that provide insight into my experiences as a Black male educator.

## **Findings**

### **Vignette 1: You Don't Really Want To Hire A Black Male Teacher...Do You?**

After several years as a music education teacher in an urban school, I wanted to explore the challenge of working in a new school. To my luck, I found Community High School (CHS), a private school I believed to be a perfect fit; I attended a similar high school as a student. After an initial phone interview, I was invited to CHS to meet and interview with the academics department chair, Mrs. Jones. I also took a tour of the school. Throughout the interview, I was able to build a rapport with Mrs. Jones, and we engaged in a very positive conversation.

After leaving the school, I received an email a couple days later stating that I was selected to move on to the second stage of the hiring process, which would consist of an all-day

interview with various school-based communities (a diversity group, administration, content area teachers, and admissions officers). When I arrived for the second interview, everything seemed to be going well. Around this time, I also started my doctoral program and felt confident I would get the position. At the end of the long, laborious day of interviewing, I was able to meet with Mr. Paul, the principal, for a one-on-one interview. This meeting would change my entire perspective on the school and the principal's ideology.

Mr. Paul began the interview by providing me with information about the school and his vision for its future. He then asked me questions about my teaching philosophy. After I described my philosophy, he asked me questions about my doctoral work. I explained that I was majoring in urban educational leadership and wanted to conduct my dissertation on the overrepresentation of Black boys in special education. After explaining the research and researchers I had been reading, Mr. Paul stopped me in mid-sentence and inquired in a sarcastic tone, "How is your degree in urban education going to be useful here at CHS anyway?"

While stunned by his remarks, I gathered my thoughts for a few seconds and assertively responded, "Based on that question Mr. Paul, I first need to ask, how are you defining urban?" Mr. Paul began to stumble over his words and had a look of confusion. Frustrated, I stopped him mid-thought and replied,

Well, your school is located in a major industrialized U.S. city, and by definition in Webster's dictionary, your school would fall within the context of an urban school. However, Mr. Paul, it appears that you are really asking how my degree that you believe deals with Black and Brown children can be useful in a private school with a majority White population. Do I understand you correctly?

After my statement, silence fell over the room as the conversation had taken a drastic, unexpected turn; race had entered the room. After five seconds (which felt like five minutes), I said to Mr. Paul, "My doctoral work will benefit all children at your school. I'm an educator who has high expectations for all students and my research can benefit the school, particularly when it comes to addressing learning styles of students as well as diversity initiatives." After this comment, Mr. Paul nodded his head and gave a very condescending grin, which alerted me that this school was not the right fit for me.

While data suggests there is a shortage of Black males in education, it doesn't reflect the difficulties many of us face in trying to find employment in the field. In my experience, I was more than qualified for the position; I possessed a master's degree as well as certification in special education and music education. However, Mr. Paul had preconceived notions about how a degree in urban education would be useful in an elite private school.

Two weeks after the interview, I received an email stating I was not selected for the position. While not surprised, I yearned to find out why I was not selected. After talking with my mentor and contemplating calling for a week, I decided to call Mrs. Jones, who originally sent the rejection email. I left a voicemail asking her for more information about why I was not selected, so that I could improve my interviewing skills for the next job I applied to. After a week, I received an email from Mrs. Jones that confirmed some of my assumptions. In my journal entry that day, I recounted Mrs. Jones' email:

I'm not surprised she [Mrs. Jones] took so long to respond, but I can't believe she had the nerve to put the search committee's thoughts in writing! Mrs. Jones first commented that

everyone on the committee was impressed with my ability to interact with the students and “read the room.” She also commended me for my ability to think quickly and respond to the needs of the children. She even commented that I would be a “good role model, especially for boys.” However, Mrs. Jones mentioned CHS’ major concern was that I had relatively little experience teaching at the high school level (which is not true). Also, she had the audacity to say that I lacked “formal training” with diversity initiatives and programs. She then mentioned the committee’s concern that I might not be able to handle being in a doctoral program full-time and teaching full-time (even though I’m already doing this). Lastly, she ended the email informing me that the committee was not convinced my goal was to be a music educator, rather they believed my goal was to work in urban education; however I never would have applied for this job if I wasn’t interested in being a music educator!

After receiving this email, I sat and gazed at the computer for a couple of minutes in complete shock. My mind was racing. Some of the thoughts that ran through my head (in a loud frustrated inner voice) that I later wrote feverishly in my journal included:

1. How can CHS say I can’t work on my doctorate degree and teach full-time? Do they not realize I taught last year and went to school full-time and excelled at both?
2. Why did my interest in urban educational leadership have such negative connotations? When I apply for future jobs at schools, should I remove the ‘urban’ from my resume so they only see my major as ‘educational leadership’?
3. Did they not want to hire me because I was a successful Black man? Was Mrs. Jones or Mr. Paul somehow threatened by me as a Black man? If I were a White male in the same doctoral program, would they have challenged me?
4. These people say they have formal diversity training, but why is their staff only five percent minority? More importantly, is diversity training the new threshold for being able to exclude qualified applicants of color who can ultimately bring in the diverse perspectives they pay top dollar to be “trained” to cultivate in their current faculty and staff?

This experience provided me with several learning opportunities. First, I made a conscious decision that I would not disown my degree program to make others feel comfortable; my goal is to help all students. Second, I decided that my teaching talents would potentially be better appreciated in schools with a Black and Brown student majority. Though this incident occurred several years ago, I continue to ask myself what really happened at CHS. Initially, I was outraged; I could not grasp how they could state outright that they believed my career aspirations would somehow get in the way of teaching. I then transitioned from outrage to trying to understand what *really* happened.

This situation was a classic example of a racial microaggression in which “covert or subtle racism goes unnoticed” (Allen, 2010, p. 126). Specifically, I experienced what Sue et al. (2007) describe as a microinvalidations, which “exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings or experiential reality of a person of color” (p. 274). Although it may have been unintentional, Mrs. Jones and the search committee sought to impose their belief that I would not be able to handle the responsibilities of teaching and going to school full-time when

my record proved the contrary. Furthermore, because of the pervasive deficit narratives used about Black males, I will always have to wonder how my race impacted their decision.

When unpacking the underlying meaning of CHS's response to me, it is quite evident that Mrs. Jones actually sent the email in an attempt to help me. However, while trying to provide help, she ostracized and marginalized my career aspirations. Also, the search committee lacked insight that many first-generation doctoral students of color like myself often work full-time while completing doctoral studies because of high rates of debt from undergraduate programs (Gardner & Holly, 2011) and lack of access to teaching assistantships (Fedler, Stevenson, & Gasman, 2014). Therefore, my reality of needing to work to provide for my family negatively impacted my job candidacy.

Unfortunately, society embraces negative narratives about Black males that describe us using a deficit framework. This framework assumes that in order to achieve in school, we have to view success as 'acting white' (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). However, when we do go to college, earn a degree, and contribute to society, we become *too* educated and, subsequently, are considered a threat and somehow overqualified and potentially unemployable. This leaves Black male educators facing a tough question: Where do I go from here? After this experience, my answer to that question was to teach at a school with a Black student and staff majority. I believed I would be able to escape the racial microaggressions I encountered at CHS while also providing Black students with the skills to combat these type of encounters. When I took my next teaching position at a majority Black school, my encounters with a student named Ashley would impact and confirm my passion for teaching and working with Black children.

### **Vignette 2: You Incurrible...Get Out of Class Ashley!**

I was excited to teach in a new environment on the first day of the 2013–2014 school year. After a summer of fun, I was ready for the school year to begin. When the bell rang at Safe Campus Middle School (SCMS), signaling the start of the school year and the first class, I began to walk the halls because I was on hall duty. To my surprise, I heard a teacher yelling, "Get out of class, Ashley!" Shortly thereafter, I saw a short young girl with a caramel complexion and puffy ponytail burst out of the class and slam the door. As a concerned teacher, I went up to her and asked, "Are you ok?" Ashley replied in a loud tone, "I would be OK if this incurrible loud mouth [expletive] teacher would just stop worrying about what I'm doing and just teach the kids." I stopped and stared at Ashley for about two seconds. I was shocked she used 'incurrible' in her sentence; I was not expecting that from a middle school student. She then sarcastically said to me, while simultaneously rolling her neck, "Whatcha looking at? Can you just bring me to the principal's office?" I replied, "Ashley, there is something special about you. I don't know what it is quite yet, but you have the potential to do great things in this world." I then added, "I'm going to make sure you do well here. You are too bright not to be sitting in that class." Ashley looked at me, rolled her eyes, and began walking to the principal's office.

For the rest of the day, I kept thinking about the encounter and how Ashley used incurrible in her sentence. Because this was a new school, I went around to various teachers and began asking about Ashley's academic history. Most of the words used had negative connotations. All the teachers believed all Ashley wanted to do was disrupt the classroom because she had nothing else better to offer. However, in the back of my mind, I knew there was more to Ashley. Furthermore, throughout my career I enjoyed working with students who had a troubled reputation like Ashley. I always believed that through setting high expectations,



fostering a positive relationship, and providing my ear to listen and understand their lived experiences, I could help them make a turn for the better in their academic and social lives. For me, working with Ashley was not just a requirement of my job, but also a fulfillment of my calling as an educator.

A week or two after our first encounter, I found Ashley in the hallway and asked her to come by my classroom. When she arrived, I handed her a red spiral notebook and said:

All of my students in my class write in their journals about what's going on in their lives or anything they have on their mind. All I do is read it and provide questions and comments. Think of this like an ongoing dialogue between you and I.

In her normal, snide tone, Ashley replied, "What you mean, Mr. G.? I'm not even your student. You teach a special education class and I'm in the regular class." "You are one of my adopted students. I see you have a lot of potential and I don't want you to waste it. I look forward to reading your work," I replied forcefully.

For the first week of journaling, Ashley didn't write much, but she would always bring me her journal every day. One day, I gave her the following prompt: What is life like for you at home and at school? This particular question resonated with Ashley as the next day before the school day even began she came in to discuss her response to my writing prompt. After our conversation, I quickly went to my journal to write about Ashley's journal entry:

Finally journaling is starting to work with Ashley. I am starting to understand why Ashley operates the way she does. Ashley mentioned that her home life is not the best. In fact she described it as "hard." She discussed her mom as having a girlfriend who bosses her around. To make matters worse, her friends are involved in destructive activities and Ashley doesn't want to get involved, but feels the peer pressure. Ashley explained that when she comes to school she wants to get away from the home madness, but feels unwelcomed at school from constant badgering from "these catty female teachers" who remind her of her mother's girlfriend. Ashley knows she is smart, but doesn't believe her teachers see her brilliance so she just "gives them what they want" and disrupts class to get kicked out.

As an educator, I was excited that Ashley opened up to me and hurt that this was her lived reality. Tillman (2006) shares a similar experience in her research where she attempted to become an *indigenous-insider*. However, she still knew that, to some extent, she was an outsider as a researcher. In my situation, although I could not relate to Ashley's experiences (i.e., I am not a teenager, female, nor have I experienced living in a household with a same-sex relationship), I attempted to understand her to the best of my ability. Furthermore, I appreciated that she was willing and comfortable enough to speak with me about her life.

The next time I saw Ashley, I noticed a neon blue cast on her arm. When I asked what happened, Ashley went on to explain that she was hurt in a fight with her friends afterschool. I was then ready to take back the journal because she hurt her writing hand, but Ashley told me, "Don't worry, Mr. G. I will do my journal. I will make a way!"

I did not believe she was going to write in her journal, but the next day she brought her journal in. When I turned to the page, I could clearly tell by the sloppy, chicken scratch-like

handwriting that she actually wrote the entry with her non-dominant hand. In my journal that day, I described Ashley's journal comments:

I can't believe Ashley wrote a response. Although the writing is barely legible, Ashley continues to amaze me with her insight. She mentioned that she appreciates writing these journals even though I am "aggravating at times." She also sees that I'm just trying to support her, which is different for her because she's never had a male teacher care. It was interesting for her to explain how hard it was for her to open up because most "Black dudes" she encounters are solely interested in developing a sexual relationship with her. But this saddens me to think that if I had never reached out to her she may only have a negative image of Black men. This is why we need more of us [Black men] in the classroom. We have to change this narrative.

In Johnson's (2014) autoethnographic account of his teaching experiences he believed his students only saw a Black man sitting in front of them. He explained that his students could "only see the man in the mirror, not what is behind me that pushed me forward" (p. 186). When initially working with Ashley, I too believed she only saw a Black man but could not see my true desire to show her the gifts she had to give the world. However, as our relationship grew, Ashley was able to see behind my mirror and I was able to see behind hers. I believe my ability to just listen to Ashley was critical to our relationship. However, when reflecting on this experience in my journal, I wrote, "Am I only able to reach Ashley because I am Black? Would she be willing to open up with someone of another race? How does being a Black man impact my interactions with Black children?" Unfortunately, I will never be able to fully answer how being Black played a role with my interactions with Ashley.

While increasing the amount of Black male educators in schools is a pressing issue, the stark reality is that 83% of the teaching workforce is White (NCES, 2012). Therefore, it is critical that school districts provide all teachers with training on how to establish meaningful relationships with Black students so they feel comfortable enough to engage in a conversation with and support a student like Ashley. My relationship with Ashley also showed me how important having Black men in classrooms can be for Black girls. For Ashley, our relationship was her first experience having a positive relationship with a male.

As Evans-Winters (2005) notes, "The intersection of race, class and gender has a direct impact on African American female students' experiences" (p. 26). Through Ashley's reflections and our interactions, I was able to view how she understood the aforementioned intersection. She was very aware of how her gender impacted her ability to interact with males. It is my hope that all educators take the opportunity to understand how both their male and female students experience the world as learning this information can better inform teaching practices and policy decision-making and implementation (Warren, 2014).

### **"A Mixed Blessing": A Discussion of (Counter)Storytelling In Research**

In Atkinson's (1997) critique of narrative research, he called the growing popularity of narrative analysis a "mixed blessing" (p. 327). On one side of the argument, using narratives can bring voice to those marginalized individuals who remain silenced (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Soloranzo & Yosso, 2002) as well as bring attention to issues within society that remain unexplored in scholarly literature. Bochner (2001) further argued that narratives and storytelling

in research are beneficial because researchers can use “stories to make theoretical abstractions” (p. 132). However, on the other side of the argument, scholars such as Atkinson (1997) argue that narration and personal narratives must be used within a particular context. In essence, Atkinson sought to place parameters around narrative analysis and storytelling to provide a determination of the types of *acceptable* forms of narratives and stories. However, it is these types of parameters that continue to keep certain individuals’ (i.e., members of marginalized groups) stories from being shared.

As an educator, I found that stories were a useful method to make an abstract concept tangible for my students. At the foundation of these stories was an understanding of the prior knowledge my students brought into the classroom. This meant that I could present stories in a manner that would allow students to make connections from their lived experiences. In research, I would argue that the use of personal narratives and stories can provide the reader an opportunity to step into the lived experiences of others to gain an understanding of their success stories, cultural values, and traditions as well as the struggles they overcome. This is important as life experiences heavily influence the ways in which we see the world. Furthermore, as researchers, our previous experiences often influence the topics we choose to investigate.

Storytelling occurs in every aspect of our lives and impacts the ways we view our own reality as well as the realities of others. For example, when media outlets continually report on the low academic scores of Black youth without reporting any positive stories, it shapes the perceptions everyone has about the abilities Black children bring into the classroom. As a result of marginalized groups of people not having control over the outlets that share the stories told about their reality, these “majoritarian” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) accounts become embedded in society’s historical record. In the education field, these one-sided stories have contributed to the negative perceptions of Black children and teachers (Milner, 2012).

### **Implications and Future Research**

While many national agencies have called for an increase in Black educators, an important question for potential Black male teachers should be, what happens once Black males enter the teaching profession? Having literature that describes the experiences of Black males is a critical component to answering this question. The counterstorytelling used in critical race methodology and personal narratives used in autoethnography serve as a framework for Black male educators to begin to tell their own stories. If Black male educators are not given the opportunity to share their stories of success in education, who will tell them? Leaving the telling of our stories to others has already had severe consequences, such as the perpetuation of stereotypes that describe Black educators as only having the ability to motivate and teach Black males (Brown, 2009).

Studies exploring the experiences of Black male educators are important; the findings can provide various educational stakeholders valuable information. For instance, through observing and interviewing Black male educators, stakeholders can begin to understand some of the pedagogical and psychosocial strategies they use to benefit their students. Additionally, if stakeholders on a national level truly want to address the shortage of Black male teachers, they must begin by asking current Black male educators about the types of incentives, supports, and training they find important to staying in the profession. Using that information, stakeholders can then create programs and policies that will support Black male educators who seek to enter the profession. Lastly, more studies are needed that use Black students’ voices to articulate the

impact Black male educators have on their academic and social development. These types of studies may provide a more nuanced understanding of the impact Black male teachers have on student learning.

### **Conclusion**

The process of writing this account was both challenging and liberating. By recounting my personal experiences, I was able to experience the therapeutic aspect of sharing my story using an autoethnographic approach (Ellis et al., 2011). Similar to autoethnographic methods, critical race methodology allows writers from marginalized groups to speak up and out against the traditional stories told about their existence (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). I present my accounts in this article to highlight my experiences as a Black male teacher in hopes that it may help other Black male teachers who are trying to conceptualize their experiences. I aim to highlight another, more positive, side of the Black male experience, one that defies stereotypes and serves as an inspiration for young Black males. As the opening African proverb contends, hearing the lion's story provides more insight into what really happened during the hunt.

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