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Exploring African American Men's Characterizations of Their K-12 Teaching and Learning Experiences in a Large Urban School District

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Abstract

Black male students experience exclusionary discipline and are placed into special education programs at higher rates than other male students. This separation from educational spaces suggests a disconnect between teachers and Black male students. The purpose of this study was to explore the urban public school learning experiences of African American male graduates as they recall them. Additionally, the purpose was to advance teaching practices effective at meeting the needs of Black male students in the general education classroom. The researcher also drew upon the teacher preparation experiences of teachers of Black male students to determine the extent to which they felt prepared to work with Black male students.

Problem

According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (2014), African American male students are suspended and expelled at higher rates than other ethnic groups of male public school students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Researchers note disproportional rates of school discipline for African American male students are a decades old phenomenon. Fenning and Rose (2007) wrote that “the overrepresentation of ethnic minority students, particularly African American males, in the exclusionary discipline consequences of suspension and expulsion has been consistently documented during the past three decades” (p. 536). Research further suggests that one consequence of these exclusionary discipline practices, suspension and expulsion in particular, is the increased likelihood of African American male students' contact with law enforcement (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechold, & Cauffman, 2014).

Suspension and expulsion data are alarming for African American male students, as well as the data and scholarship on African American male students in special education. African-American males, specifically comprise approximately 12% of all students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) while representing 8% of the total public school population (U.S. Department of Education, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Aim

The purpose of this research brief is to succinctly present data and scholarship on the disproportionate representation of Black male students in school discipline and special education pipelines. Additionally, the researcher will present a synopsis of the research conducted and implications for further research informed by the public school experiences of four Black male graduates of a large urban school district.

Research Findings

The findings reached in this study are based on interviews with four African American male graduates of a large urban public school system. The findings are also based on interviews with

six public school teachers of African American male students. Each of the four African American male graduates and four of the teachers agreed to a single semi-structured interview. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. At their behest, two of the teachers met with the researcher in a small focus group. The focus group lasted approximately one hour.

The voices of all participants, all of whom are connected to a large urban public school system, all contributed to the findings. The researcher found, based on the experiences of the participants:

- The quality of African American males' learning experiences is largely contingent upon the teachers themselves, the level of classroom distractions, their individual level of engagement, the teachers themselves, the teachers' responsiveness to the students' learning preferences, their experiences with school discipline, and the curriculum.
- The most critical qualities requested of urban teachers are high levels of relatability, high levels of responsiveness to students' learning styles and needs, and the setting and maintenance of high academic standards and expectations along with provisions of support, race or gender of the teacher notwithstanding.
- Teacher preparation programs do not adequately prepare teachers for working with African American male students, which may affect why this population of students' experiences in school discipline and assignment to special education are at higher rates than male students of other ethnicities.

Research Implications

Potential areas for further research include how current Black male students in urban public schools describe effective teachers and teaching practice; what motivates teachers to implement or avoid culturally responsive classroom practices; and Black male students' perceptions of the effectiveness of Black male teachers (since each student participant recommended more access to Black male teachers).

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Author Information and Biography

Dr. Stephen Flemming graduated in 2018 with his Doctor of Education degree with a focus on Educational Leadership and Administration from Drexel University's School of Education. Dr. Flemming is in his 12th year as a public schoolteacher with the School District of Philadelphia. He is also an adjunct professor at Delaware County Community College and is in his 20th year as a Sunday School teacher at his local church. Dr. Flemming's research has focused on effective practices for meeting the needs of Black male students in urban public schools and the extent to which teacher preparation programs have prepared teachers to work with Black male students. Dr. Flemming is also a Philly sports fan, particularly the world champion Philadelphia Eagles, an avid reader, Tweeter and an occasional Blogger.