

White Folks Teach, Black Men Police: Black Male Teachers as the Regulators of Student Behavior

by Christopher J. Cormier - January 26, 2022

Historically, Black male teachers have been treated as foreigners in a majority-White, female profession. Research shows that Black male teachers are often viewed as intellectually inferior school support staff whose role is to serve as disciplinarians and coaches but not to teach pedagogical content. It is vital that Black male teachers be given more respect. In this commentary I provide a personal narrative of my experiences as a Black male teacher in relation to Wolf Wofensberger's social role valorization theory, which purports that society values groups based on their perceived societal value. Using Wofensberger's theory will allow for better exploration the devaluation of Black male teachers based on the roles they are expected (e.g., support staff, cultural broker) and not expected (e.g., developer of school curriculum) to play in public schools. The ultimate goal in this commentary is to shed light on the unfortunate circumstance that in U.S. the archetype of the teacher is still a White woman and that Black men who work as teachers are asked to convenience these teachers at the expense of themselves and students' needs.

In television, film, and nearly every other cultural representation of what it means to be a schoolteacher in Western societies, a White woman is typically depicted. Her age may vary widely, but her race and gender do not. Yet school districts, teacher education programs, and even policy officials acknowledge the need for a more diverse group of teachers, particularly Black men. For the measures put in place to serve this need to succeed, however, it is vital to address the unique and challenging working conditions that these men often endure. Recent scholarship has highlighted that the experiences of Black men in public schools play a significant role in their choice to either leave or stay in the profession. What is it about these experiences that becomes so taxing in a field that many enter because they are passionate about educating students, as their years of investment in certification reflect? How can a local public school become such a toxic work environment that Black men have pitifully low retention rates, even in the midst of general agreement that their participation is vital to the well-being of the system?

The complex history of race and gender in U.S. society provides answers to such questions. Schools are microcosms of society; race and gender identity, and their intersections, are overarching constructs that exist within, not apart from, school cultures operating from White-dominant ideologies (Starck et al., 2020). Black male teachers' content-area expertise is often questioned by their White colleagues (Cormier et al., in press), and instead of being seen as content experts, they are seen as role models; this often complicates our understanding of what it means for Black men to serve as teachers (Brown, 2012; Lynn, 2006).

A large body of scholarship documents that Black men are often used in public schools as schoolwide disciplinarians (for examples, see Brown, 2012, and Cormier, in press). It also shows that colleagues and others frequently assume that Black men go into teaching because they want to be disciplinarians and role models rather than because they are interested in teaching pedagogical content. This combination of roles does not seem to accrue to any other group. White men's gender presumably suits them just as well as Black men to these roles, and they do not fit the archetype of the White female teacher either. Yet, they do not face negative assumptions about their intellectual capacities to teach. The impact of these conditions is the crux of this brief exploration of the issues that Black men who are teachers face in schools.

I worked as a special education teacher in Title 1 schools in the United States for six years. It was clear to me throughout that my racial and gendered identity as a Black male—and a fairly dark-skinned one to boot—had supported a problematic assumption in the hiring process that I would serve as a role model and disciplinarian for students other teachers found troublesome. This translated into significant extra work. In addition to managing the academic and social needs of my own students, I had to deal with young people I did not know just popping up in my classroom, sent to me by their teachers for discipline. I faced a dilemma in these situations: Do I allow the kids to come to my room and sit quietly, or do I send them away? Most of the time, they would have had to do nothing, as they rarely had work with them. Should I send them back to their classes, explaining that I am currently in the middle of instruction? What would happen to them if I sent them back?

I did not always ask what they did to get sent out, but when I did, it usually involved a misunderstanding. Most of the time, I could perceive that the students, most of whom were Mexican American, had experienced a cultural disconnect with their teachers, and this compounded my distress. Only White women sent students to me in this way. Because such cultural clashes with authority figures naturally cause children distress, a student whose behavior had been reasonable in their own classroom might well be disruptive in mine. The children who came to my class in this way needed to be able to process what had happened, and most were angry. I could not counsel them while teaching my class. Besides, doing so would have gone beyond both my job description and my expertise. These encounters were one of the reasons that I decided to leave teaching and become a researcher, hoping I could provide solutions.

SOCIAL ROLE VALORIZATION: BLACK MALE TEACHERS AS DEVALUED VESSELS

Wofensberger's (1983) social role valorization theory offers insight into the experiences of Black male teachers expected to be disciplinarians and role models, but not teachers. While the tenets of this theory have shifted since its earliest development, the core of it has remained the same—which is that society values some groups over others, and those who are valued are often provided vast benefits. In this case, White teachers are a group valued over Black teachers. White female teachers receive the benefit of off-loading

onto Black male teachers their responsibility to maintain classroom order, to practice culturally responsive pedagogy, and discipline their own students. White male teachers receive the benefit of not being the target of such off-loading.

Given that society generally values White men over White women, Wolfensberger's (1983) theory might suggest that White male teachers would also receive the benefit of off-loading a distasteful part of their job onto Black teachers, even as White female teachers protect their relationship with their more highly valued White male colleagues by not sending students to disrupt their classrooms. It is possible that some White male teachers send their students to Black male colleagues. However, the gendering of discipline—reflected in the fact that Black female teachers are not typically the target of White female teachers' off-loading—likely explains why I never experienced this myself or have observed it in my research. To admit to needing such help might damage White men's male privilege.

The stereotype of Black men in society as combative, angry, and unapproachable and Black fathers as harsh disciplinarians (Brockenbrough, 2015) that forms the basis of their diminished role as professionals reflects the lower value that society places on them. Society's negative stereotypical perceptions of Black men in general bleed into their professional identities and their professional roles. As Pabon (2016) highlighted, policy makers and school administrators who describe Black male teachers as filling a gap for Black boys who are being raised without fathers support the stereotype. The narrative is predicated on deficit understandings of Black students, families, and communities. It supports White teachers' and administrators' belief that Black male teachers are "best" suited to "fix" the behavior of these students; this removes a burden from White teachers so they can teach their classes. In the process, they make it difficult for Black male teachers to teach, thereby implying that these are not real teachers anyway. Yet, as I found, ironically, the White teachers who lack critical cultural competence may cause a good deal of the problems they call on their Black male colleagues to solve. While genuine behavior problems exist, cultural misunderstandings can explain all or most of the disconnect in many cases.

A FEW FINAL THOUGHTS

It is unfortunate that in U.S. schools, White teachers' convenience is placed above the needs of students. What I have coined as the *glass classroom effect*, in which Black male teachers are hypervisible for everything they do except for actual teaching, is doing significant harm.

Culturally responsive pedagogy is the clear solution of the glass classroom effect. Such teaching would dispense with the deficit view of Black students and give them the instruction they need—not least by refraining from interfering with the teaching of their Black male teachers and by including their Black male teachers as intellectual equals in shaping curricula.

I believe, in line with the work of Derrick Bell (1992), that Black men who are teachers will not be valued for their intellectual abilities or included as full members of the educational team until the interests of the White school system align with the interests of Black teachers. In other words, until the White system is desperate enough to value Black men as teachers, Black men will continue to be used as disciplinarians and seen as sources of convenience for their White colleagues. Given that White students are an increasingly shrinking part of the national public student body, and given increasing teaching shortages, that day may be soon.

References

- Bell, D. (1992). *Faces at the bottom of the well: The permanence of racism*. Basic Books.
- Brockenbrough, E. (2015). "The discipline stop": Black male teachers and the politics of urban school discipline. *Education and Urban Society*, 47(5), 499-522.
- Brown, A. L. (2012). On human kinds and role models: A critical discussion about the African American male teacher. *Educational Studies*, 48(3), 296-315.
- Cormier, C. J., Scott, L. A., Powell, C., & Hall, K. (in press). Locked in glass classrooms: Black male special education teachers socialized as everything else but educators. *Teacher Education and Special Education*.
- Lynn, M. (2006). Education for the community: Exploring the culturally relevant practices of Black male teachers. *Teachers College Record*, 108(12), 2497-2522.
- Pabon, A. (2016). Waiting for Black superman: A look at a problematic assumption. *Urban Education*, 51(8), 915-939.
- Starck, J. G., Riddle, T., Sinclair, S., & Warikoo, N. (2020). Teachers are people too: Examining the racial bias of teachers compared to other American adults. *Educational Researcher*, 49(4), 273-284.
- Wolfensberger, W. (1983). Social role valorization: A proposed new term for the principle of normalization. *Mental Retardation*, 21(6), 234-239.

Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: January 26, 2022

[Purchase Reprint Rights for this article or review](#)