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# From Boys to Men: Black Male Meaning-Making in Educational Ecosystems

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Abstract:
Black male educators remain underrepresented in U.S. K-12 schools, and their experiences as students and teachers are shaped by intersecting social, institutional, and historical conditions. This qualitative study examines how Black men make meaning of their experiences within educational systems throughout their lives, including schooling, teaching, and post-classroom engagement, providing context for ongoing discussions of Black male educator attrition. Guided by African American Male Theory (AAMT) and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this study uses semi-structured interviews with five former Black male K–12 educators connected to an Afrocentric, community-based cultural platform. Analysis identified six interconnected themes: personal growth and healing; disruptors of adverse patterns; vulnerability, fetishization, and care; polarizing experiences and stereotypes; community and healing; and the implications of historical misunderstanding. These themes were examined across ecological levels to situate participants' meaning-making within individual, institutional, community, and sociohistorical contexts. Findings illustrate how Black men make meaning of their experiences as students and educators and how this meaning-making shapes their engagement with education before and after K-12 service.

Keywords: Black male educators, interpretative phenomenological analysis, teacher attrition, community healing, African American Male Theory

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## Introduction

Research has provided numerous reasons why Black male educators are an invaluable asset to educational environments (Bianco et al., 2011; Brown, 2013; Callender, 2020). Black male educators frequently find problematic perceptions with intersectionality between gender, race, and personal interests (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010). Brown (2013) discusses the psychological harm that Black male educators experience: the "burden of having to deflect and defend against the deficit, stereotypical beliefs held by many in their programs about people of color" (p. 337). Stereotypes, both empirical and conceptual, impact the development of Black males. Swanson et al. (2003) reiterate that Black males "are probably the most highly stigmatized and stereotyped group in America" (p. 609). The complications of conceptual and societal stereotypes of Black men render Black educators as being both the problem and the solution, resulting in lasting harmful aftereffects (Milner, 2016; Johnson et al., 2019). Milner (2016) reports on Black male culturally responsive practices in education, revealing themes that vary from the logical direct benefit for Black (mostly male) students and their social success to the acts that Black male educators take to challenge student pedagogical experiences. Black male educators consistently critique literature that enforces limits on their expectations, disrupting the perpetuated monolithic stereotypical views of Black male educators (Milner, 2016).

In the context of the U.S., race and education are interconnected; social, political, and economic effects on education for Black males are inseparable from the influences that shape American society (Brown & Donnor, 2011). From an ideological viewpoint, Weiler (1989) posits that the teaching profession became an extension of the home, where women were naturally positioned as nurturing caregivers, thereby contributing to the gendered composition of the teaching workforce, in which men remain a minority. Black men represent less than 2% of teachers in public schools and face feelings of alienation even before entering the classroom within teacher preparation programs (Walker et al., 2019). Brown and Donnor (2011) expound on the interconnectedness of race and education: "The racial injustice experienced by Black males is symptomatic of the unequal and unjust arrangements of power and privilege in America" (p. 30).

This study shifts the focus from loss to transformation. Rather than asking only why Black male educators leave, it examines how they understand the ecosystems of the K–12 education systems and how it both shaped their entry and exit. This study engages with Black educators presently participating in the fabric of radical healing after leaving the classroom, exploring the inclinations of Black male educators regarding serving the community to disrupt pervasive stereotypes. Afrocentricity is the centrality of African interests, ideas, and perspectives in social, historical, behavioral, and economic narratives (Asante, 2020). Healing for the Black community from racial trauma is often communal and can be exhibited most visibly through the arts. In this study, FLY, the centered community platform, engages in social sculpture and utilizes art and artists to empower people. Social sculpture includes public exhibitions, workshops, youth programming, and community-based art engagement.

Participants have interacted with FLY in at least one of the following ways: maintaining an artist studio space, collaborating (including mentorship) with an artist within the community, volunteering services for more than one public event, visiting the community platform consistently over a span of ten years, or having been employed by the community platform. In addition to the community connections to FLY, participants also worked on a component of radical healing. Mr. Ayers describes his current occupation as a Mindful Meditation Teacher and

likes to refer to it as follows: "I help people steal their mind." Mr. Ayers is a published author and an advocate of mental wellness. Mr. Biggers attributes himself to be a "community art-a-vist" where he uses art as social sculpture. Mr. Lott founded a non-profit organization that creates opportunities for Black men to participate in group therapy sessions, with the underlying goals for others to find a sense of belonging and meet new people with similar shared experiences. Mr. Carter founded an after-school youth program where he taught kids how to ride and participate in flatland BMX competitions. Mr. Clinton describes his current occupation as a Creative and Hospitality DJ and prides himself on creating environments where people can let loose and be themselves, which he calls movement-based healing.

Grounded in African American Male Theory (AAMT), which emphasizes the ecological and sociohistorical contexts that shape Black male experiences, this study examines how individual, institutional, and societal forces interact to influence both classroom experiences and post-service trajectories. This study provides a more nuanced view of attrition, detailing the participants' interactions with healing and ongoing commitment to education outside traditional school settings. It questions deficit-based narratives and offers a study grounded in the meaning-making processes of Black male educators. The following research questions guided the study: (a) How do former Black male educators describe how their experiences throughout schooling and as classroom teachers impact their withdrawal from the teaching force? (b) How do former Black male educators explain and interpret experiences within the ecological system of K-12 public education? (c) How do former Black male educators perceive and manage engagement within the community post-service? By analyzing these questions within an ecosystem, this study redefines attrition not just as departure but as a way to closely examine these unique individuals' perceptions of their experiences within K-12 education environments that have significantly shaped them.

## Literature Review

### *Desegregation and Historical Displacement*

Based on the grounds of the 14th Amendment and equal protection under the law, the landmark cases *Brown v. Board of Education* of Topeka I and II sought to end the unfair conditions of "separate but equal" and succeeded, requiring the end of state-mandated racial segregation in public schools, setting off a revolution in civil rights law (Bell, 1980). Before desegregation, approximately 82,000 Black teachers were teaching two million Black students in mostly segregated schools; afterward, with the integration of public schools, the number of Black educators decreased significantly (Tillman, 2004). During the decade following the transition from segregated to integrated schools, approximately 38,000 Black educators were dismissed, and an estimated 32% decrease in Black teacher employment occurred (Tillman, 2004; Thompson, 2022). The effects of the displacement tactics exercised on Black educators as a response to Brown are long-running and remain evident in the present day (Peters, 2019). The response to the federally mandated integration of schools drastically reduced the number of Black educators, and the education system has yet to recoup the proportions of Black educators to Black students that once existed (Peters, 2019; Tillman, 2004).

### *Racialized and Gendered School Ecologies*

The teaching force in America consists of roughly 80% White females (Ingersoll et al., 2019), leaving Black boys most likely at the receiving end of cross-gender and cross-racial supervision, rendering Black boys vulnerable and responsible for carrying the burden of generalizations onto African American males made by the dominant majority (Sleeter, 2017; Swanson et al., 2003; Toldson, 2011). The marks of long-term co-racial schooling environments can be harmful to Black and Latino students, most noticeable in contrast to the outcomes that are exhibited when Black and Latino students experience racial matching in schooling environments. In a comprehensive literature review, Redding (2019) found that Black students who experience teachers of the same race or ethnicity are at an increased likelihood of being assigned to a gifted and talented program, are at a lowered risk of exclusionary discipline, exhibit improved attendance, and are at a reduced risk of dropping out of school. These disparities are not merely statistical outcomes but are produced through discretionary discipline, racialized interpretations of behavior, and tracking and placement practices that shape Black boys' academic pathways (Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Redding, 2019).

### *Black Male Preservice Teachers and Professional Socialization*

In-service teachers of color and those in university teacher preparation programs are rarely offered the community needed and the culturally relevant pedagogy essential to their success, often finding themselves alienated and in environments solely focused on the success of their White counterparts (Kohli & Pizarro, 2016; Sleeter, 2017). Bristol and Goings (2019) suggested that focus should be placed on the experiences of preservice teacher preparation programs, including redesigning the program curriculum to include coursework that allows preservice teachers to reflect on their social location, with attention paid to privileges (Bristol & Goings, 2019). Teacher preparation programs should address racial identity, provide opportunities to discuss race and its implications in the field, and foster environments for students of color to connect with other students of color (Vasquez, 2023). Black men are barraged with counterproductive stereotypes about themselves; Milner (2016) discusses this as a need for teacher preparation programs to confront these ideologies embedded in teacher education.

A counterexample to this can be seen in a 2020 participatory action research (PAR) study conducted by Davis et al. (2020) at Bowie State University, the oldest historically Black university in Maryland. As part of the study, fifteen Black male teacher candidates participated in a Summer Undergraduate Research Institute (SURI). The experience demonstrated evidence of gained knowledge about educational research, and participants considered it a safe space to explore their unique identities and be themselves. In addition, Black male teacher candidates built meaningful relationships with university faculty and peers. The experience also offered valuable insights into graduate school and career options at a pivotal moment before entering a teaching workforce predominantly composed of White women (Davis et al., 2020). Programs that offer this sort of exploration help address retention challenges for Black male educators by preparing them to work in environments where they are a minority (Bristol & Goings, 2019).

Another critical factor attributable to the success of Black male educators in teacher preparation programs is the availability of mentors and Black male faculty as role models (Brooks et al., 2013; Hall & Rowan, 2000; Johnson et al., 2019). Black men are not monolithic; however, in schooling, Black men rarely have the chance to explore other Black men's identities and lived experiences (Davis et al., 2020). Teacher preparation programs serving Black male preservice teachers must be intentionally designed to address their unique experiences and

challenges in the teaching profession, including the gendered and racialized aspects of the career (Goings & Lewis, 2020). This includes providing mentorship opportunities for men of color, which support preparation for the intersections of race and gender they will encounter in their future workplaces (Bristol & Goings, 2019).

### *Stereotypes and Role Expectations of Black Male Educators*

Stereotypes affect Black male students in the same manner as those that affect Black male educators. Johnson et al. (2019) offer the following: "Deviance, lawlessness, and immorality commonly attributed to young Black males produce a metanarrative many role model and mentoring programs adhere to" (p. 425). This ideology of the Black male educator as the disciplinarian of the Black male youth has professional implications. Johnson et al. (2019) explain how supporting the stereotype highlighted above regarding Black male youth and then tasking Black male educators as the proprietors of 'fixing' the problems associated with the stereotypes upholds and perpetuates the stereotype, resulting in the socialization of the stereotype. This paradigm paints Black male educators as both the problem and the solution, enforcing that Black males must be controlled or, by their own nature, will be dangerous (Johnson et al., 2019). These stereotypes not only shape perceptions of Black male students but follow Black male educators into teacher preparation programs and professional settings, influencing how they are evaluated, what roles they are expected to fulfill, and how their professional identities are constructed within schools (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Brockenbrough, 2014; Kohli, 2018; Johnson et al., 2019; Sleeter, 2017).

### *Negotiating Racialized Experiences*

Black male educators develop coping mechanisms to face negative stereotypes placed upon them. These stereotypes often translate into patterns of behavior and treatment on the part of the dominant group. Boundary heightening is a phenomenon that describes the experiences of numerical minorities in a workplace (Kanter, 1977). Boundary heightening includes exaggerating cultural differences, reinforcing minorities as "other," limiting access to organizational knowledge for minoritized workers, and testing minorities with loyalty for inclusion or exclusion purposes (Kanter, 1977). Bristol and Goings (2019) conducted a study to build on previous research regarding Black male teachers experiencing boundary heightening in the workplace. Bristol & Goings (2019) presented three main findings: (a) Black male educators were presumed either incompetent or overqualified; (b) often Black male educators negotiated their boundaries, lowering them for the comfort of their peers; and (c) Black male educators often had to cross their boundaries to speak their truth in uncomfortable situations. Over time, the accumulation of boundary heightening, stereotype negotiation, and constrained professional roles erodes job satisfaction and contributes to Black male educators' decisions to exit the profession (Bristol & Goings, 2019; Goings & Lewis, 2020; Ingersoll et al., 2019).

As a counter response to these experiences, Black male educators can gain significant benefits from affinity groups. Affinity groups are spaces that affirm culture and provide community strength to confront social injustices (Kohli, 2019; Mosley, 2018). Affinity groups could offer Black male preservice teachers the opportunity to be vulnerable, increase social-emotional well-being, and co-develop practical tools to prepare for upcoming school-based challenges (Bristol et al., 2020). Affinity groups are not limited to benefiting Black men while in teacher preparation programs; they are also recommended for Black men in school leadership to

support the implications of practice (Bass, 2020). For Black men becoming educators, affinity groups are not simply a place to be seen; they are also an opportunity to build collective knowledge and develop the skills needed to navigate teaching as an extreme minority, while making sense of their experiences (Noonan & Bristol, 2020).

### *Racial Trauma and Community Healing*

Racial trauma is "related to real or perceived experience of racial discrimination" and extends to physical threats, humiliation, shaming events, and witnessing harm to other people of color (Comas-Díaz et al., 2019, p. 1). Racial trauma was conceptualized by Carter (2007), who reasoned that the unintentional or intentional systemic effects of racism across cultural, institutional, and individual levels have significant psychological impacts, a form of trauma. Radical healing from racial trauma requires elements of liberation, Black psychology, and intersectionality anchored by five components: (a) collectivism, (b) critical consciousness, (c) radical hope, (d) strength and resistance, and (e) cultural authenticity and self-knowledge (French et al., 2020). Radical healing not only emphasizes moving beyond traditional aspects of psychotherapy but also focuses on helping the individual as well as dismantling the systems that contribute to race-based trauma (French et al., 2020).

Healing for the Black community from racial trauma is often communal and can be exhibited most visibly through the arts and expressions of Afrocentricity. In this study, FLY, the centered community platform, engages in social sculpture and utilizes art and artists to empower people. FLY serves a predominantly Black local community through art, engagement, and direct action. The platform highlights Afrocentricity, which pulsates throughout community programs.

## Methodology

### *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Theoretical Framing*

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is concerned with the detailed examination of personal lived experiences and seeks to provide an insider's perspective (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Larkin et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2022). A person's culture, values, and beliefs influence how people relate to events, objects, and people based on the context in which they appear to them; IPA aims to connect them. Together, IPA and AAMT provide a framework for understanding how individual meaning-making is shaped within broader ecological systems.

This inquiry relied on AAMT, a multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary approach that theorizes about the experiences of African American boys and men, capturing their spiritual, psychological, social, and educational development (Bush, L. & Bush, E., 2018, 2013a, 2013b). Tenet one of AAMT implores that the individual and collective experiences, behaviors, outcomes, events, phenomena, and trajectories of African American boys and men's lives are best analyzed using an ecological systems approach. The IPA methodology employs an interpretative, double-hermeneutic process in which participants make meaning of their experiences and the researcher engages in sense-making of that meaning. IPA and AAMT work together to situate this method of interpreting first-person data within the ecosystem of K-12 public education, with Black male educators at the core (Bush, L. & Bush, E., 2018, 2013a, 2013b).

### *Participant Selection*

I used a purposive sample to recruit five self -identifiied former K-12 Black male educators connected by FLY, the local art and cultural identity community platform centered in this study.

**Table 1**
*Participant Association with FLY*

| Psudonym | Association with FLY |
|---|---|
| Mr. Ayers | Visitor<br>Volunteer<br>Partnership with resident artist |
| Mr. Biggers | Visitor<br>Volunteer<br>Former exhibit artist<br>Former resident artist<br>Curriculum developer |
| Mr. Lott | Visitor<br>Volunteer<br>Former exhibit artist<br>Former resident artist<br>Employer |
| Mr. Carter | Visitor<br>Volunteer<br>Partnership with resident artist |
| Mr. Clinton | Visitor<br>Volunteer<br>Former employer |

**Table 2**
*Participant Demographics: age, duration, and current occupation*

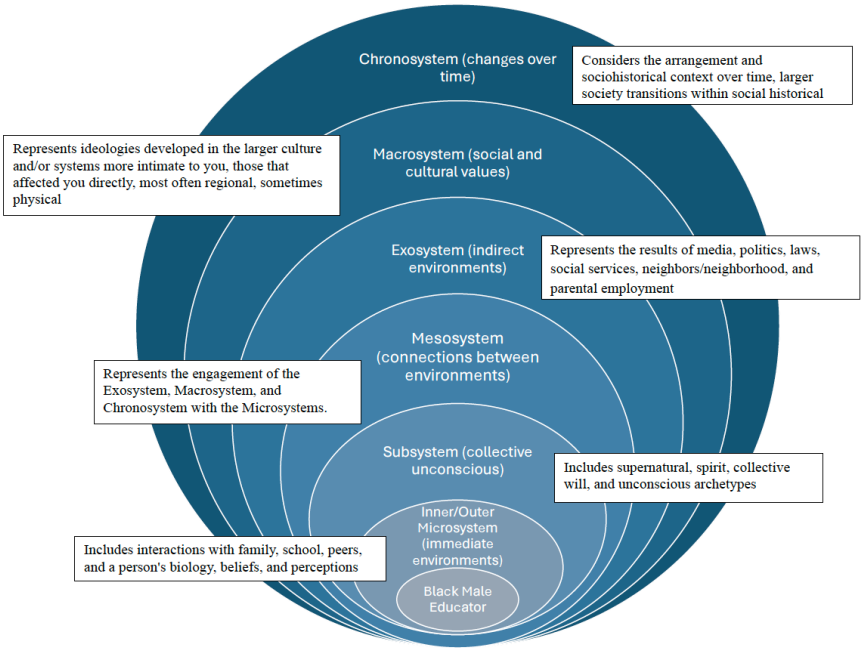
| Pseudonym | Age | Years of K-12 Teaching | Current Occupations |
|---|---|---|---|
| Mr. Ayers | 41-44 | 6 years | Mindful Meditation Teacher |
| Mr. Biggers | 41-44 | 18 years | Artist<br>Professor<br>Community Activist<br>Creative Director |
| Mr. Lott | 37-40 | 9 years | Educator Program Manager<br>Founder of Non-Profit Organization |
| Mr. Carter | 29-32 | 6 years | Practicing Visual Artist<br>Professional BMX Rider<br>Electronic Bicycle Sales Representative |
| Mr. Clinton | 37-40 | 5 years | Hospitality DJ<br>Creative |

### *Data Collection*

I interviewed the participants in a one-on-one setting using a semi-structured interview. The interviews were 30 minutes to 90 minutes in length, audio-taped and transcribed by me. Guided by AAMT and Bronfenbrenner (1999)'s *process-person-context-time* (PPCT) model, 11 interview questions were developed to intentionally connect participants' schooling, teaching, and post-teaching experiences across ecological systems (Bush, L. & Bush, E., 2018, 2013a, 2013b and Bronfenbrenner, 1999).

**Figure 1**

*AAMT African American Male Ecological Systems Model (Bush, L. & Bush, E., 2018, 2013a, 2013b)*




### *Data Analysis*

I utilized the step-by-step process for IPA analysis outlined by Smith et al. (2022) consisting of six steps: (1) reading and re-reading, (2) exploratory noting, (3) constructing experimental statements, (4) searching for connections across experimental statements, (5) naming, consolidating, organizing the personal experimental statements, and (6) working with personal experimental themes to generate group experiential themes. Due to the idiographic nature of IPA studies, I analyzed each participant in full individually before moving on to the next participant analysis (Smith et al., 2022).

Steps one through five were repeated rigorously for each participant, resulting in robust Personal Experiential Themes, PETs. I then engaged in step six, working with personal experiential themes to generate a set of Group Experiential Themes, GETs. A replication strategy was employed during cross-case analysis, first examining themes within one case and then comparing PETs across additional cases to identify recurring patterns (Miles et al., 2020). Smith et al.'s (2022) guiding questions were used for analysis.

Throughout the analysis, I interpreted the themes within AAMT's ecological systems framework, ensuring that individual experiential accounts were understood in relation to person, context, and systemic influences. As a result, I organized themes into a table (Table 3) of master themes within AAMT's ecological systems model, renamed from the original experiential themes identified in the PETs and constructed to represent Group Experiential Themes (GETs). The GETs table (Table 3) presents emergent themes alongside the ecological contexts in which they occurred, allowing the study to link participants' meaning-making to the AAMT framework guiding the inquiry (Smith et al., 2022).

Esposito and Evans-Winters (2022) describe member-checking as "the process of sharing analysis with participants" (p. 153). Member-checking was exhibited within the study; each participant received a copy of their PETs. The iterative nature of IPA studies involves the back and forth within the analysis; transparency, coherency, and resonance were attributes maintained in this study.

### *Privacy and Ethical Considerations*

The study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) prior to data collection. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary, and pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality during the qualitative component of the study.

### *Positionality*

As a Black female educator, I situate this study in the academic advancement of education as a vehicle for social action. I maintain close ties to FLY as a former participant in its developing artist and mentoring program, which informed both my interest in this study and access to participants. I approached this study with care, humility, and a commitment to conducting research with, rather than on, my community (Mobley, 2019).

While my experiences with Black male educators have been shaped by support and collaboration, I remained attentive to how these relationships may influence interpretation through ongoing reflexive practices. Stake (1995) cautions that even with accurate descriptions, "observational interpretation of those phenomena will be shaped by the mood, the experience, and the intention of the researcher" (p. 95). I also recognize the privilege of institutional access and research resources that make this work possible. This research aims to increase the number of Black male educators by recognizing and prioritizing their needs.

## Findings

### *Group Experiential Themes*

The Group Experiential Themes, GETs, included six emerging themes, summarized as follows: personal growth and healing; disruptors of adverse patterns; vulnerability, fetishization, and care; polarizing experiences and stereotypes; community and healing; and implications of misunderstandings.

**Table 3**

*Group Experiential Themes (GETs) situated in the AAMT African American Male Ecological Systems Model (Bush, L. & Bush, E., 2018, 2013a, 2013b)*

| Group Experiential Themes (GETs) | Placement within the AAMT African American Male Ecological Systems Model |
|---|---|
| African Americans are historically misunderstood and underrepresented; this has harmful implications for Black males as children and as educators. This includes the long afterlives of slavery, Jim Crow, *Brown v.* | **Chronosystem:** Considers the arrangement and sociohistorical context over time, larger society transitions within social historical context |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Board of Education*, desegregation, racialized school discipline, and current policy backlash against equity and race-conscious teaching. | |
| Community and healing are inseparable; communities of shared experiences assist in the healing of minoritized communities | **Macrosystem:** Represents ideologies developed in the larger culture and/or systems more intimate to you, those that affected you directly, most often regional, sometimes physical |
| Black men in America share polarizing experiences of being unseen/invisible and experiencing hyperawareness/surveillance. This also includes the larger cultural beliefs that affect people's lives, such as anti-Black racism, stereotypes about Black men, and dominant views of education and professionalism | **Exosystem:** Represents the results of media, politics, laws, social services, neighbors/neighborhood, and parental employment |
| Black men are vulnerable in predominantly White spaces, which can leave room for fetishization and denote the amount of care a Black man can potentially receive. | **Mesosystem:** Represents the engagement of the Exosystem, Macrosystem, and Chronosystem with the Microsystems. |
| Black male educators are disappointed in K-12 education systems and see themselves as disruptors of adverse experiences for students of Color. | **Subsystem:** Includes supernatural, spirit, collective will, and unconscious archetypes |
| Participants are reflective, mindful, and aware of their personal healing and how the aforementioned interacts within the K-12 education ecosystem. | **Inner/Outer Microsystem:** Includes interactions with family, school, peers, and a person's biology, beliefs, and perceptions |

### *Personal Growth and Healing*

The GET Participants are reflective, mindful, and aware of their personal healing and how the aforementioned interacts within the K-12 education ecosystem represents the Inner/Outer Micorsystem layer. This layer is situated to represent the participants' personal self-awareness, personal behavior adaptations, and responses within the K-12 educational ecosystem. This includes interactions with family, school peers, and their own personal beliefs and perceptions. Participants consistently described changes in self-perception, personal healing, and

day-to-day relational approach with students and colleagues, which aligns with microsystem-level belief, behavior, and proximal interaction.

Participants provided intimate and personal testimonies of how they adapted to become better people and help others as an extreme minority on campuses. Mr. Carter found himself as a rarity, as a Black man, on one campus, in which he describes the population as "a school that was taught and ran entirely by Black single mothers and fatherless children." Mr. Carter shared how he responded to this odd reality:

> It was so bad, I was like, the only way I'm gonna f******* fix this shit or be equipped to either survive or help these people, not just the kids or even the mothers. I end up reaching out to my dad and rekindling our relationship, and we're cool to this day.

Mr. Carter attended to his own personal growth by addressing his own childhood traumas, elaborating on them as such:

> I had a chip on my shoulder, and I was like, I can't battle them without going back on myself and fixing this chip on my shoulder. . . I talked to my mom about the situation, job, relationships, whatever. Then I'll talk to my dad, and not everybody actually has that. Another thing about it, too, was that some of the kids, whose parents were deceased, so they had no chance of that type of reconciliation that I had a chance at.

Mr. Clinton demonstrates personal growth in his treatment of others. From his close recollection of the Columbine school shooting to the consistent occurrences of school shootings happening nationwide, he has taken a keen look at how he treats others, particularly students, and changed accordingly:

> Columbine was a couple of years before that, the beginning of sophomore year (referring to the 911 attack), and with some of the stuff happening not too far from where I was in (redacted State), there were people that I went to school with that had parents that worked in the military. You have to be kind, especially with the students. I'm saying I never really had any side eyes for anybody that I work with, but especially for the students, just making sure that you keep that in mind and you're not taking out the stuff that you got going on with you out on other people, especially the young impressionables. So, it just kind of altered my approach to communication and being careful with my communication.

Mr. Ayers also considers his six years spent in the classroom as healing for him and his evidence of readiness to move on from the classroom. He describes this as such:

> You know. My six years in the classroom. The reason why I'm at such peace to transition out is that I've been able to go back and heal the boy who was hurt when I was in elementary school. Yeah, definitely, definitely. I mean, so there's been a lot of shedding.

Mr. Biggers utilized his experiences as a classroom teacher to grow his personal understanding of history to better assist his Black and non-Black students in cultural competency. This is reflected in this statement:

> I don't know how to beat around to say this, but I would get the White kids coming to my class because they want to learn exclusively from me, because they knew I was not only a Black teacher, but I was a Black teacher who knew what he was talking about. I knew a lot about history because I had taken it upon myself to learn about all things, and to really learn about all culture, and to really push my understanding so I could better inform them of what my experience was.

He described this shift as follows:

> I was actually so active that the school, before I took the job at (redacted University), had created a new position for me, where I was going to become a Dean of culturally responsive pedagogy. I was going to still do studio art, but I was going to work under the DEI office as a Dean of culturally responsive pedagogy, and that came out of those conversations I was having with the head of school. In the summer of 2020, I was on calls with him every single day throughout the summer.

### *Disruptors of Adverse Patterns*

The GET Black male educators are disappointed in K-12 education systems and see themselves as disruptors of adverse experiences for students of color, is stationed in this layer to represent the participants' collective will to interrupt adverse experiences for students of color within the K-12 education ecosystem.

This theme was positioned within the subsystem because participants described an internally shared, collective consciousness as Black male educators that shaped how they chose to respond within schools. This placement is supported by participants' repeated emphasis on shared responsibility as Black men and educators, including language of collective obligation, standards, and moral burden that extended beyond individual classroom practices. While their actions occurred in school settings (microsystem) and institutional spaces (mesosystem), the motivating force described in interviews was a shared sense of responsibility rooted in collective identity, aligning with AAMT's subsystem emphasis on spirit and collective will.

Participants described actions taken to interrupt patterns they perceived as harmful. Mr. Clinton found the need to disrupt adverse patterns by becoming a safe place for students who looked like him. Teaching at a suburban campus, most of the students were non-Black, and he recognized the need to offer Black students, particularly Black male students, a place where they could be their full selves, "They could let loose a little bit more and be more who they were instead of feeling the need to perform."

Reflecting on his own schooling, Mr. Clinton recalled that "it always kind of seemed like we had to overcome a barrier before anyone would acknowledge that you were intelligent." Mr. Carter subscribes to holding high expectations for himself, which mostly began in elementary school as an identified gifted and talented student. He was afforded many opportunities through accelerated academics that contributed to the success of his life. However, he often felt that when applying those same high expectations to his students, he was faced with challenges. An example of the impact of his high expectations is below:

> When you have low expectations from the parents and from the school, it makes you look like a bad teacher because you're not willing to cave, coddle, and condense things for

> children because you know that they're capable of more than the system, and even sometimes their parents understanding of what they're capable of.

Mr. Ayers attributes his experiences as a student in his K-12 environment as a source of trauma. As a direct result of the deep desire for care that he lacked as a child in school, he changed his approach to the students he served. This was captured below:

> I didn't have teachers who cared enough to ask what happened, right? It was always why you do this, why you do that, why you do this so. Because I never got that as a student during the traumatic years of my life . . . my empathy for them was different. I never asked why would you do that? My question was, what happened?

Lastly, most of the participants were concerned to some degree about the efforts of K-12 education systems to teach African American history. Mr. Ayers offered: "The biggest thing I didn't learn through my K through 12 years was Black education and Black history." Mr. Biggers referred to African American history as having "been stripped away from us in all ways." Mr. Carter's reflection captures the emotional burden embedded within this collective disruption that Black male educators feel regarding disrupting adverse patterns for students of color. His words are below:

> If you're somebody that is an upstanding Black man in this country, which typically are most educators, Black male educators are, there is an unattainable level of standard that we're held to, that we're just supposed to be like these gods. But without reward.

### *Vulnerability, Fetishization, and Care*

Moving farther away from the core, the next layer is the mesosystem. The mesosystem is the space where the outer layers engage with the inner layers. This engagement represents bidirectional movement and how the responses to the engagement show up (Bush, L. & Bush, E., 2018, 2013a, 2013b). This theme is situated within the mesosystem because participants describe how their internal identities and collective consciousness interacted with institutional norms in predominantly White educational spaces, producing experiences of vulnerability, fetishization, and differential care.

The GET, Black men are vulnerable in predominantly White spaces, which can leave room for fetishization and denotes the amount of care a Black man can potentially receive, has been situated in this layer. Mr. Carter had the most encounters with fetishization, as the youngest and 'edgiest' of the participants, he described himself as a "foreign object" on his former campus. The concept of fetishization was alluded to at many points in the conversations, first at the beginning of the interview: "Even in the safety of the education system, there's still the physical fetishization of the Black man." He further expounds on the experience, "There is this deep love, sometimes fetishization, of you, but not an understanding of how to respect you. There's not an understanding of you."

Participants described vulnerability as both a childhood experience in predominantly White schooling environments and an adult professional reality in similar spaces. Mr. Lott had the most intimate experience of vulnerability as a Black student in a predominantly White K-12 education ecosystem. Growing up in the southern region of America, he discusses racism and how he normalized it at an early age:

> I normalized whiteness and microaggressions or macroaggressions because at that point I normalized the language of White educators. And how they spoke at me and not to me. . .

> I don't think I'm crazy, but you teach Black people how to be small around White people. Really (inaudible) tried to teach you how to shrink.

Mr. Biggers echoes some of the same experiences in K-12 educational systems as a student regarding being vulnerable and at the receiving end of racial harm. He explains below:

> Predominantly, I had White teachers growing up like, even throughout college, I've always had White teachers, with a few Black teachers sprinkled in. Because of that, that affected me as a student in terms of my psychology. . . if a teacher were to say something to me that was racially charged, I wouldn't even know. . . When I look back on my education and there are some things that were pretty racist, about the things that the teachers were doing and saying, that I just became aware of as I got older. . . I understood, or I thought, that all adults are supposed to protect children, right? No matter what.

Mr. Lott attended a Historically Black College and University, HBCU, for undergraduate studies, which he considers a pivotal point in his life, recounted here: "A pivotal turning point was going to a historically Black university. Yeah, and being able to be empowered by people that look like me because I don't think (redacted hometown) provided that for me." He describes the experience below:

> I remember leaving college and going to work in a predominantly White-dominated space. And I just remember looking around, looking for someone who looked like me. When I wasn't able to, I felt vulnerable and unprotected… so it also made me have to pivot. I felt very performative in my early years after college because I was trying to understand how I fit in the world.

Mr. Biggers recounts how he reclaimed his Blackness and dissociated with old beliefs and narratives regarding how he should behave in predominantly White spaces. He discusses the evolution process behind this, on compartmentalization for access to resources, but then ultimately accepting that it is not worth it, and that he will show up undeniably himself, as a Black man. His feelings are captured below:

> I used to be in a place where I thought I could somehow compartmentalize it, and for lack of a better term, sometimes I'd water my Blackness down a little bit, trying to get into a certain scenarios and systems and trying to be accepted so that you could then take whatever resource were there and then move on. But I think now just as a full 44-year-old adult male. Who is a parent. Who has a family. Who is thinking about how I should behave in spaces I live? I literally can't even, if someone got mad at me and said you're fired because you're doing this. So what. So be it. You don't want to accept me because of my Black, my Black ass. I'm showing up as I am. I can't undo that. Nobody asked any other culture to undo what they do as a culture to show up in a space.

Mr. Lott recounts his first encounter with vulnerability and a group of White women in a K-12 educational ecosystem. To further substantiate his anecdote, I will offer the following

explanation from Mr. Lott regarding the hierarchy of receiving care in the K-12 educational ecosystem:

> At another charter school, predominantly White, I really saw this fake savior complex and I saw how education is where mediocre White women go to be great. I saw that over and over again. I also saw how there was also a need for Black unity within school systems, because when a Black woman cries like she is not heard or seen, matter of fact, she's almost considered some type of threat, she's considered an issue. But when a White woman cry it was like the world stops to go cater to this woman. They coming up with all type of plans to ensure her success, but for any other group it was like why are you even trying, just say this teachers not capable, and if a Black man cry God forbid. That n**** gotta go.

### *Polarizing Experiences and Stereotypes*

The GET, Black men in America share polarizing experiences of being unseen/invisible and experiencing hyperawareness/surveillance, is situated in the exosystem layer. This theme is situated within the exosystem, as this layer reflects the effects of broader societal influences, such as media, politics, and laws. Participants' descriptions emphasized surveillance, public perception, and racialized narratives that preceded school-based interaction and shaped how they anticipated being seen and interpreted. The theme encompasses the participants' feeling as though all eyes are on them or that they are completely dismissible by society. Mr. Lott captures the polarizing experiences of being a Black man with one, straight forward sentence, "I know who I am in the world. I know how the world sees me."

For Mr. Clinton, this hyperawareness resulted in being more cautious and aware of himself on his previous campus. He describes it below:

> I felt like when I was going to work that I at all times had to conduct myself as if I was being recorded just in case. That way these videos, where even when just a student got his phone tucked underneath the desk. . . I was aware that was possible to be happening at any time. I just tried to make sure that everything I said, even the situations where it was only just one or two people around it was above all respectful.

Mr. Clinton then begins to express the differences in how people respond to him as a Black man. Despite not normalizing racism growing up, he still had to maintain an awareness of self because of how others perceived him. Mr. Clinton offers more insight on what this looks and feels like, "That's the two roles that I get as this type of person, are that I am the most threatening thing in the room, or I'm invisible." Mr. Lott alludes to the disadvantages of stereotypes associated with Black male educators, convinced that they add more responsibility to their roles, "The roles that are added to you just because you are a Black man in the education space is crazy." Mr. Lott also expands on the concept of being hyper-watched and the misinterpretations of his emotions and disposition: "The other part of it is them being afraid, they don't know if I'm angry, or my emotions cannot be anything other than happy. . . If I'm not smiling, it's like they don't know how to take me."

Later in life, as a Black male educator, Mr. Biggers continued to face challenges based on his appearance and stereotypes. He conveys the nuances of an interaction with a student through the anecdote below:

> Not necessarily when I was at the charter school, but when I was in independent schools, I was always being challenged on basis of intellect. I was always being challenged on the basis of how I appeared in spaces. I had really long dreads when I first started working there. And I would routinely get students coming up to me not understanding that I was a teacher for some reason, and I mean I have a very, very, very messed up incident where a student came to me and was like, 'what's up, Lil Wayne?' in the hallway. I got down on one knee, it was a small kid, too, he wasn't even in the upper school. And I got down on my knee and I said, 'hey, come here, young man', I said, 'do you talk to all of your teachers that way'? And he turned completely beat red, and he knew that he had messed up at that point.

He elaborates below:

> By being empowered to say this is how I'm going to show up and this is how I'm going to speak to you, and I am educated, but I also listen to hip hop, and I also have these dreads, and it doesn't give you the right to reduce me down to this. And so I showed up in those spaces so much that my students start to respect me.

Mr. Biggers also speaks to the frustrations that are experienced while in these spaces, and notes how they are systemic problems that he can't solve but can only impact with his presence. His frustrations are captured below:

> Just speaking up for yourself or being told that you are aggressive because you tell your students, 'hey, you need to get to class on time'. When that's just a very normal thing to communicate, you know, so that became clear to me when I started hearing stuff like that over and over again. But it became clear to me that there is a big systemic problem that I need to figure out how, not to resolve, but try to, like, push against with my presence. . . I've had friends say, why are you working at that White school? Why are you doing this? But when I realized what I was there for, that it was more than just like me showing up to be an art teacher, then I got the language to say I'm there because they don't have anyone like me, you know what I mean? They need. They need me. Believe it or not. And there are kids that look like me, that need me. You know what I mean?

### *Community and Healing*

The GET, Community and healing are inseparable; communities of shared experiences assist in the healing of minoritized communities, has been situated in the macrosystem layer, which represents the ideologies that have developed in the larger culture and /or systems. This theme is situated within the macrosystem because participants articulated a shared ideological belief that healing and community are culturally inseparable within the African American experience. Participants framed community not merely as social support, but as a necessary condition for healing. Participants' language framed this relationship as a shared belief and cultural orientation ("go hand in hand," "true healing," "sense of belonging"), reflecting ideology rather than isolated coping.

Community played important roles in the journey for participants; whether it was the FLY community or affinity groups on campus, these spaces encouraged progress of healing for them as Black men. Mr. Ayers attributes his wellbeing to finding community in FLY as he was on a healing journey, he describes his experience as follows:

> My own healing journey, I was seeking out community, and so my community dynamics changed, and I went on a search to find another place, another group of people that understood the journey I was on. And met some amazing people that have studios at FLY, and that has led to me changing my whole career path because of the work that I've been able to be a part of down at the FLY.

Mr. Lott asserts that looking for a community is part of the African American experience: "I'm saying Black people always looking for a sense of belonging." He discusses the impact of affinity groups on a previous campus within a predominantly White campus staff:

> Man, we used to have this group. . . an affinity group affinity group with Black male educators, and we met once every couple months. And that was extremely important for me staying in education because it gave me space to network and explore other opportunities for development. I just feel like it made me understand that I wasn't alone in the things that I was feeling.

Mr. Carter explains his view on the relationship between community and healing as follows: "I think that it is one of the largest sources of healing if utilized in, I would presume, its natural and healthy sense. Especially when it comes to child development and education." Mr. Ayer views the relationship between community and healing as such: "Community and healing go hand in hand. I don't think a person can really experience true healing without community." Mr. Clinton also speaks of the importance of shared experiences within the relationship between healing and community, particularly in the ability of shared experiences to help you feel less alone. "Having a community of people and people around that have been through similar things is soothing, and it can lead to the healing process." Mr. Biggers conveys the same impetus on shared experiences within community and approaches the relationship as if they are in a perfectly symbiotic form, that one can't exist without the other. He describes his viewpoint on community and healing as "I think that… community is only built when healing takes place."

### *The Implications of Misunderstandings*

The last and outermost layer of this ecosystem is the chronosystem. The layer considers the arrangements of and how the socio-historical context changes over time, capturing larger society transitions within the socio-historical context (Bush, L. & Bush, E., 2018, 2013a, 2013b). The GET, African Americans are historically misunderstood and underrepresented; this has harmful implications for Black males as children and as educators, is situated in this layer. Placed here as it arranges how participants located their experiences within enduring historical narratives about Black men that predate and outlast individual school settings. The theme engages with the perpetual misunderstanding of Black men in America and the harmful implications resulting from this context over time. Mr. Carter considers that various supervisor and peer interactions within the K–12 ecosystem could better support Black male educators through a deeper understanding of Black men. He elaborates: "I believe if schools would have a

better understanding of Black men, they would be able to correctly ascertain their value as a teacher."

Mr. Ayers discusses the implications of being a Black male educator and the potentiality of losing your authenticity. He stresses the importance and the need for Black male educators to possess a full knowledge of self. His reflections are below:

> In that pursuit of that climb, you lose, you lose yourself. I mean, I've seen it. I've seen it. It's like I didn't want to be that. I didn't want to be that. Everything that I am, everything that I am becoming, everything that I have desires to fulfill are my own doing, by my own thoughts. Being a Black man isn't easy. Being a Black educator isn't easy. But when you know who you are, you know the way you have to navigate the world, to actually be seen not just by the color of your skin, but to be seen for who you really are, you. You have to think like that. And. We cannot change the world of education, without first changing ourselves.

Black men in America being misunderstood can be attributed to the lack of Black history education and to the lack of accessibility to common concepts within Afrocentricity. Mr. Ayers reflects on the impact of not seeing a Black man in the classroom growing up: "Most of us grew up never seeing a Black man in the classroom, so why would we become one, why would we want to pursue that?" His reflection underscores how historical absence functions as a chronosystemic force shaping aspirations across generations. Mr. Carter offered the following towards the discussion of implications that Black male educators face from a lack of misunderstanding, beginning with his beliefs about the understanding of men:

> If I'm not mistaken, your study is about the lack of retention of Black male teachers. I think in the education system, I think that actually comes from a lack of understanding of men, the value of men, the way that men love, the way that men educate, the way that men are perceived by children. Especially Black men. Especially Black men in a country that has a high single-mother rate, a high non-nuclear family rate.

Mr. Carter concludes this discussion with how the continued misunderstandings of him, as a Black man, impacted him personally. He describes his feelings below:

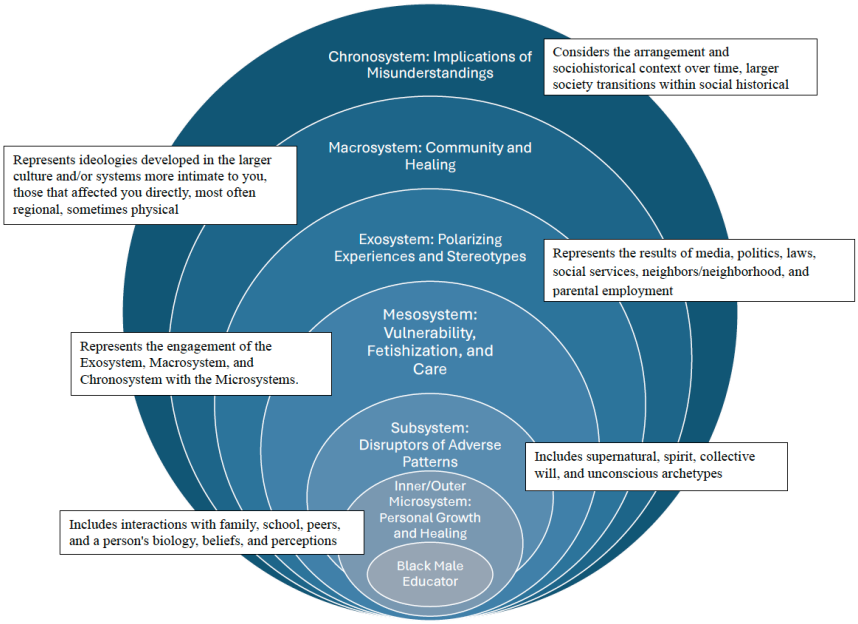
> How can that not? How can that not affect the way that you teach, the way that you're perceived? . . . especially when it comes to the evaluation of Black male performance where you have historically, great historical resistance to this particular person's existence.

## Discussion

Figure 2 illustrates the ecosystem of K-12 education, summarizing the findings and their interactions within the AAMT ecological model. This, along with Table 3, will be used to discuss the study's findings further.

**Figure 2**

*Ecosystem Model for Black Male Educators in K-12 Education*




### *Sociohistorical Misunderstanding and Attrition*

Black male educator attrition in this study is best understood as a product of the sociohistorical misunderstanding of Black men. Bush (1999) conveyed that there is a need to examine sociohistorical development conditions that shape Black manhood, beginning with dismantling the narrow deficit-based lens through which Black boys in education are often examined (Brown, 2013; Bush, L. & Bush, E., 2018; Goings, 2015; Howard, 2013). In this study, the chronosystem provides a lens through which to interpret attrition as an outcome of these enduring conditions.

Participants in the study describe experiences of feeling vulnerable in predominantly White environments, including those in K-12 education systems. Mr. Ayers captures this by explaining, “Most of us grew up never seeing a Black man in the classroom, so why would we become one, why would we want to pursue that?” This absence reflects broader patterns of interconnected inequities in race and education, in which the experiences of Black male educators are shaped by the unequal distributions of power and representation in America (Brown & Donnor, 2011). These conditions are further reinforced in course materials, which do not authentically include all social groups, and curricula in both K-12 and university teacher-preparation programs, and are often Eurocentric and White-dominated (Abo-Zena et al., 2019; Milner et al., 2013; Sleeter, 2017). This theme highlights how this continued sociohistorical misunderstanding and underrepresentation of Black men in America contribute to the harm they face as students and educators. Taken together, these findings suggest that attrition is influenced more by the outcomes of ongoing sociohistorical misunderstandings and underrepresentation rather than a simple matter of individual choice.

### *Access, Care, and Misunderstanding in K-12 Education*

Research finds that Black men must be able to see themselves represented as effective educators in order to choose the vocation of teaching (Jones et al., 2019). The desire to counter their own experiences, to provide positive experiences for Black students, and to pursue social justice often influences the pathway to becoming an educator among Black men (Simieou et al., 2023). One participant addressed this finding directly, explaining that the lack of Black male educators he encountered growing up lowered his chances of seeing himself as an effective teacher. In contrast, another participant described the positive influence of the only Black male teacher he encountered during his schooling. Access to Black male teachers and mentors shaped how participants saw themselves in the world, particularly as educators. Effective mentorship of Black male students in higher education programs takes note of personal stories and offers a way for Black men to become their own authors while enhancing, reframing, and transforming their perspective and understanding of their story (Jones et al., 2019).

Teaching is considered part of nurturant care, which includes occupations that provide face-to-face services that strengthen the physical, cognitive, or emotional skills of those they serve (Budig et al., 2018). In a qualitative narrative inquiry and longitudinal study, Brooms and Wint (2021) concluded that Black boys place primacy on care through school-related relationships, and caring for others and being cared for are critical to their well-being. Black male educators are integral to this work of care and are often misunderstood and misinterpreted when exhibiting care in education (Bass, 2020). Bass (2020) asserts that the capacity of care and the type of care Black men exhibit in education depend on prior experiences as Black men and are influenced by their culture.

The participants did not express feelings of being unwanted, but rather of being misunderstood, underutilized, and unable to reach their maximum potential due to regularly occuring barriers. Mr. Biggers reflects this here:

> We're so busy always repairing ourselves, repairing the community… If you're always patching and trying to do something that requires so much of your energy, when do you have time to experience joy?

These layered accounts of access and care further clarify how sociohistorical misunderstandings function within K-12 ecosystems, ultimately shaping the attrition of Black male educators.

### *Identity, Healing, and Community Engangement Beyond the Classroom*

While participants ultimately withdrew from the classroom, their experiences do not reflect disengagement from education or community. Instead, participants described ongoing involvement through community-based spaces that support healing, cultural affirmation, and collective growth. These post-service experiences highlight how participants make meaning of their trajectories beyond K–12 systems, demonstrating that leaving the classroom represents not an end, but a shift in how they enact their commitment to education and community.

These experiences also remained connected to earlier dynamics of care, where care was not only prioritized but critical to the well-being of Black boys as students (Bass, 2020). Mr. Lott described a perceived hierarchy of care within school systems, in which emotional expression by White women was institutionalized and protected, while similar vulnerability from Black educators was penalized, The participants spoke of care often, describing the lack of care received or juxtaposing the amount of care they received to a person of a different ethnicity and gender.

These experiences can also be further understood through identity. Black radical identity involves Afrocentricity and reflects positive thoughts about being Black and other Black people,

considering race an important aspect of identity and valuing the ability to appreciate and tolerate others' cultures (Johnson & Carter, 2020). Black racial socialization involves the awareness of oppression and the maintenance of racial-cultural pride transmitted by parents, family, and community (Johnson & Carter, 2020). Communalism represents connectedness with other Blacks and a communalistic orientation (Johnson & Carter, 2020). Bush, L. et al. (2006) ascribe to the characteristics of collective will as the common culture of identity that a community creates based on generally accepted truths, beliefs, and values.

Expanding on this, the phenomenology of Black consciousness has particular significance for Black male educators (Gordon, 2023). Gordon (2023) advises that “Black Consciousness is not premised upon biology or birth but social and political location” (p. 75). Situated in a dialect of freedom, Black Consciousness can be viewed as political through opposition (Gordon, 2023). Gray and Johnson (2023) attest that “Black knowledge is never just [a] given. It is lived. It is worked out. It is worked for.” (p. 88). Likewise, through the exploration of Ida B. Wells, Gray and Johnson (2023) captured the spirit of Black phenomenology, describing the anatomy of the Black spirit as moving: "It breathed. It kept breathing, even as Black breath was being siphoned from Black flesh with lynch rope.” (p. 99). The subsystem component within the AAMT ecological model allows for considering the influence of the phenomenology of Black consciousness and its interaction with the supernatural spirit, providing an undercurrent for other systems in the model (Bush, L. & Bush, E., 2018, 2013a).

These theoretical understandings are reflected in participants’ post-service engagements. The participants each had unique and positive interactions with the FLY community, a social sculpture community based in Afrocentricity. Participants described FLY as grounding, healing, and a place where they can flourish. In addition to being connected to the FLY community, the participants were proactive in improving their mental well-being, personal growth, and healing. Mr. Ayers captures the importance of community for wellbeing, “...so that they can actually teach from an authentic place… Not from a place of need.” The participants also maintained awareness of oppression and struggle while being steadfast in racial-cultural pride. This was reflected in how participants embraced their Blackness and accepted all that comes with being viewed as a Black man in America, both the good and the bad.

## Conclusion

This study examined the perceptions of Black male educators who chose to leave the teaching profession and are now involved in aspects of radical healing and Afrocentricity. Overall, the findings indicate thatthese educators’ decisions to exit the classroom stem from ongoing misunderstandings and their effects. These misunderstandings are rooted in sociohistorical conditions and manifest in daily interactions within K-12 education systems, influencing how Black male educators are viewed, supported, and evaluated. Therefore, school districts and campuses should make a deliberate effort to better understand and support Black male educators in their important roles in K-12 education ecosystems.

In addition to addressing the curriculum, in-service teachers and school leaders need further education on the unique needs of Black boys and how best to support them in school. Professional development focused on deepening awareness of implicit and racial bias should be developed and incorporated as district requirements. Districts should also implement policies that facilitate the formation and sustainability of affinity groups for Black male educators,

recognizing these spaces as important sources of professional support, collective care, and retention.

To increase and retain significantly more Black male educators and reduce persistently high attrition rates, additional research focused on the perceptions of Black male educators who have left the teaching force is warranted. Future research should continue to examine the perceptions of Black male educators who have exited the profession across different regional contexts to better understand how local conditions shape these experiences. Qualitative studies conducted across multiple regions would further illuminate how local educational ecosystems and sociohistorical contexts interact with the experiences of former Black male educators.

Additionally, studies should explore the experiences of Black male educators who remain in K-12 systems and have demonstrated sustained success, examining how they navigate and respond to the challenges identified in this study. Research should also investigate community-based spaces that support educators of color, including those akin to FLY, that are rooted in Afrocentricity and art-based social sculpture. Ultimately, this study underscores that Black male educator attrition is not a withdrawal from education, but a deliberate response to persistent sociohistorical misunderstandings embedded within K–12 ecosystems.

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