11-18-2022

Working for Justice: A Black Educators Journey of Supporting Black Males in an Urban School District

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A Dissertation in Practice Submitted to the Graduate School at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education in Educational Practice

December 2022

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Acknowledgments

This study would not have been possible without the motivation and encouragement that I received from friends and colleagues who worked side-by-side during my 25-year journey in education. I thank them for their kind words of inspiration, life experiences, and guidance in this project. Furthermore, I am grateful for their support.

I am most appreciative of the love and support of my wife, Dana Davis-Cunningham, my children, grandchildren, and my parents, Lawrence and Shirley Cunningham, who has always been the driving forces behind all of my accomplishments and the voices that kept me on task to commit myself to work with children in the field of education. I also appreciate the contributions made by students, staff, parents, and community members that gave me the experiences I gained as a teacher, principal, and virtual school coordinator, so I am writing this dissertation.

Abstract

This autoethnographic dissertation focuses on my journey as a Black male educator and administrator working in an urban school district. I highlight some of my accomplishments and challenges in dedicating my life to the field of education in the same urban school district that I attended from kindergarten to twelfth grade. This dissertation points out how my journey allowed me to support students, mainly Black boys, who faced challenges in a school district that I know very well. I have increased my, and hopefully others, understanding of the challenges Black male students and Black male administrators face in an urban school district where overt and covert oppression occurs, sometimes as unspoken conditions. In addition, this dissertation positions me to immerse myself in the study by sharing the experiences I gained during my 25-year journey as a teacher and administrator.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I - Introduction

> As we stand at the crossroad of time, our choice must be for more remarkable development and improvement on a level we have not previously contemplated.
>
> -Andrew Young, "Black Futurists in The Information Age"

> I honestly believe you have to love your students, respect them, and appreciate their culture.
>
> -Jawanza Kunjufu, “A Talk With Jawanza”

Background

My experience as a Black male teacher and administrator allowed me to see that this is one of the most essential roles in the field of education in any school district in America. The way of life for Black males in America seems to be one in which he is called "mister" but is treated with "meager" regard. The result is placing Black males at the lower stages of society and experiencing underachievement in almost all aspects of life (Jenkins, 2006). In public schools, the African-American child is programmed with the pioneering fantasy of the "American Way of Life," but this culture offers them few chances to accomplish this goal (Perkins, 1975). Regardless of the number of reports that state that our educational system isn't working, most students make it through with the aptitude to further their education or go out into the world of employment and start a family. However, a large number of students are getting lost in the system. These students are not working and learning to the degree that they can. Some earn high school credentials and can hardly read, write, or do basic math calculations. These are students

who can learn if put into an accurate environment. Unfortunately, that environment isn't a contemporary school setting (Loveless, 2022). In numerous public, private, and Christian schools throughout the country, Black boys tolerate educational environments that disseminate the stereotype of their hypothetical intellectual insufficiencies and label their attitudes and actions in the classroom as challenging (Little & Tolbert, 2018). Most people like to think that United States K-12 schools, workplaces, and courthouses are pillars of justice. Still, statistic after statistic all point to a disaster among the young African-American men of the U.S. This catastrophe starts in homes, expands to K-12 educational experiences, and leads straight to the cycle of incarceration in progressively high numbers (Lynch 2015). As a Black male raised in an urban community and overcoming the challenges of attending urban schools, I understood the plight of Black males and why it was so important to me to become an educator focusing on ways to aide Black boys to overcome the challenges and struggles they face in an urban school setting.

This autoethnography dissertation provides information on how I advocated for Black boys' facing challenges during my journey as an African-American male teacher and administrator while overcoming my own barriers as a Black male in the educational system. For Black boys, race has been the persistent lens that has molded their quantifiable reality in numerous aspects of their lives, particularly their educational experiences (Little & Tolbert, 2018). The descriptions created of Black men in our society often restrict them to environments shaped by athletics, crime, drugs, and academic failure. We have helped develop this negative portrait in education through various research emphasizing remediation and disadvantage (Fries-Britt, 1997). Viewpoints on Black male hopelessness and underachievement are demonstrated by the numerous publications that highlight their educational background in inadequately resourced

and culturally unresponsive K-12 schools (Noguera, 2003). Kunjufu (1995) points out how Black boys stop caring about school around the end of elementary school. He shared his view of how teachers stop their efforts to encourage and promote achievement among Black males as early as fourth grade, thus inciting indifference and disengagement among those students. These things helped me better understand how I had to continue developing the knowledge, skills, and strategies that made me a better Black male educator. After reading many publications by Dr. Kunjufu, I was motivated to work on behalf of Black boys because he identified the systems limiting them from succeeding in society. His work also gave me a better understanding of the challenges that other Black males and I faced growing up in an urban community. This motivation to support Black boys and other students started from the experiences I gained as a student at Harris-Stowe State College.

I can recall walking down the hall of Harris-Stowe State College (now Harris-Stowe State University) and being stopped by the counselor, Mr. Wayne Thomas (who now goes by Ajuma Muhammad). He invited me into his office to talk about a program he was putting together for Black boys. Then, he began questioning my knowledge of Black History. I answered his questions with favorable responses, and he then asked me to support him in a program he designed, The Association of African-American Role Models. I agreed because it was an opportunity to give back to my community and be part of a system to change the problems I saw systematically destroying Black boys. I felt honored to participate in such a program and to be selected by a Black male who expressed that I carried myself in an honorable manner. His thoughts of me reflected on my parents, who raised me to understand the challenges of being a Black male and how to overcome the challenges faced by Black men in America. Overcoming challenges was instilled in me by my parents by ensuring that positive Black male and female

images were always placed before me. I woke up listening to Black-Talk-Radio in the morning (the voice of Richard "Onion" Horton) and went to sleep listening to Black-Talk-Radio at night (the voice of Bob Law). Being involved with this program allowed me to serve as a mentor and role model for at-risk Black males by instilling in them self-pride through the use of Black history and the power of the Black male voices that inspired me as a young adult. Black boys must be educated on the importance of who they are from a historical and cultural perspective (Muhammad, 2013). Equipped with the knowledge of the significance of African-American historical and cultural perspective allowed me to play an instrumental role in inspiring a former gang member (Corey Goodman, now Sultan Muhammad) to use this perspective to change his life and leave the gang culture and become an author and gang violence prevention specialist by telling his story to youth facing life challenges growing up in an oppressed society. I felt inspired by the work that I did with this young man because it was proof that using African-American historical and cultural perspective was a solution to making a positive impact on the lives of at-risk youth of color, and it gave me a strategy to work from as a Black male moving into the field of education.

Harris-Stowe administrators permitted Mr. Muhammad to hold his program in a classroom on campus. We began working with boys who lived in Laclede Town, a housing development that was once located directly across the street from the former one-building campus. In this classroom, my journey in the field of education started during our first session of The Association of African-American Role Models program. A gentleman who had become a long-time mentor of mine (as well as Mr. Ajuma Muhammad), Mr. Ahmad M. Mahdi, presented a lesson on "EDUCATION." He stated that the **E** in education means out, **EDUC** is a Latin word meaning to lead out, and the suffix **TION** means movement or motion. He concluded by saying

that "EDUCATION" is a movement or motion that leads to the best out of an individual. I always felt that meaning explained so profoundly by Mr. Mahdi was a sign from the Creator telling me to switch my undergrad major to Elementary Education. I did it the very next day. I knew I had made the correct decision after reading Jawanza Kunjufu's book, Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys, where he points out how Black male teachers made up 1% of teachers in America. I knew then that I would never have a problem getting a job as a teacher. The shortage of male teachers in elementary schools has been an ongoing issue for policymakers and school districts in the UK, USA, Canada, and Australia, and as schools have become more culturally diverse, so have concerns that the teacher labor force should mirror the communities it serves (Callender, 2020). Therefore, I was excited about the new choice of a college major, Elementary Education. It made me feel good to be part of an exclusive group of Black males who are much needed in the educational system's critical years of children's lives. I received good support and comments from my college counselor and instructors for my new college major at a college known for producing educators.

Elevated by Black Female Administrators

As I reflect on my educational journey, the one thing that comes to mind is that my first job offer and each of my promotions from a teacher aide to the role of a school administrator came from the hands and voices of Black female administrators. I received lots of mentoring and guidance from Black males, but Black females gave me the offer to move up in this profession. In 1990 I worked at an Army Aviation building as a college student. I was a mentor in the Association of African-American Role Models Program mentoring at-risk youth during that time. One of the mentee's mothers worked as an administrative assistant to the superintendent in a small county school district called Wellston. She noticed the work I did with

her son and asked me to apply for a teacher aide positon in this district. After applying, I was offered my first job in an educational system as a teacher aide by the principal (Mrs. Dalton) of an elementary school that went from kindergarten to fifth grade. This was a part-time position where I worked three days a week as an aide in a remedial math classroom. I was intrigued by this position because I worked with a fascinating teacher named Mrs. Brantley, the wife of Tuskegee Airman Mr. Charles Brantley. Working in this environment gave me the foundation for developing adequate teaching skills and being a positive role model to students in this predominantly African-American-populated school. African-American male educators are the primary source of helping students in urban schools acquire skills to succeed by acting as role models. Unfortunately, this assertion presents African-American male teachers as a cure-all to improving urban schools while ignoring the historical and contemporary contexts that complicate their school roles (Pabon, 2016). Nevertheless, I was glad that I had the opportunity to implement many of the skills I acquired from being a mentor to at-risk youth and the teaching and learning skills I received from my college courses. This part-time position allowed me to serve as a substitute teacher in a more prominent urban school district east of Wellston.

As I served as a substitute teacher in the lager urban school district just east of Wellston, I was given the opportunity to be promoted from a part-time teacher aide to a long-term substitute math teacher in a middle school setting. During my second visit to this school, I was approached by Principal Terri Johnson, who offered me the job as a long-term substitute teacher for six months. She told me that I was offered the job due to three things that impressed her. First, I wore a shirt and tie; I used the words yes-sir and no-sir as well as yes-mam and no-mam when I spoke to students and staff. Second, she was also impressed by how I encouraged students to be and do their best. She mentioned that teaching came naturally to me and wanted me to continue

to be present for her students, mainly Black boys who needed the image for their survival. Third, I was glad I could continue using techniques I acquired as a mentor working with at-risk youth. Finally, understanding the effects of oppression on inner-city youth while I was seeking my degree in education allowed me to understand the importance of empathizing with the children I served. Display empathy and not sympathy to our Black boys by giving them high praise and positive confirmation daily, even when they don't appear open to it (Muhammad, 2013). This skill I used the most to build positive relations with students and keep them working on the task. I believe that the topmost dynamics are teacher expectation, tracking, parental involvement, student self-esteem, curriculum, learning styles, the unfairness of testing, and peer pressure (Kunjufu 1989).

In 1994 I conducted the first half of my college-required student teaching in the same building where I received my long-term substitute teaching position. At this time, the school was no longer a middle school; it had reopened as an elementary Magnet school focused on science and mathematics, servicing Pre-K to 5th-grade students. I recall standing on the playground during lunch recess and hearing my name called over the intercom, asking me to report to the main office. At that time, Principal Marion Cotter informed me that she would recommend me for hire as a Title I Math Teacher for the 1995-1996 school year. I was pleased that this was the third female principal who took an interest in my teaching ability and was a Black male teacher who could positively impact students. I found three things true during my first year working in this Magnet school environment. I first discovered the low percentage of Black males working at the elementary level. According to Dr. Kunjufu, some schools do not have Black men serving as teachers. If there is a Black male in the building, I'm going to bet he works in maintenance first, a safety officer second, a P.E. teacher third, a principal or assistant principal fourth, and a

classroom teacher last. If that male figure serves as a classroom teacher, he's working at a high school first, middle and junior high second. You can calculate the number of Black males who teach at the elementary school level (Kunjufu, 2018). Secondly, I discovered that many students assigned to special education were Black boys. Dr. Kunjufu also asks why white females are transferred to special education at least and Black males are assigned to special education substantially (Kunjufu, 2018). He also points out that Black boys represent 85% of the Black students in special education. In 1964 the developed federal law did not design special education to be utilized in this manner (Kunjufu, 1989). The third discovery was the power of computer-based learning and how it can be used as an interactive instructor-less educational process. Many examples show that Black children can participate as equals and surpass others in their mastery of technology when exposed to state-of-the-art equipment. Performance and a given ability are not restricted to electronic games; it consists of computational skills, desktop publishing, multimedia production, and artistic portfolio expansion (Jenkins & Om-Ra-Seti, 1997).

This first year of teaching allowed me to see how placing Black boys in special education with one method of teaching can be used to oppress and limit them from using various teaching and learning styles. For example, a fourth-grade teacher walked into my small classroom and asked me to complete paperwork on an African-American student. I pulled up the reports from his math data profile, completed the paperwork, and returned them to her. The next day she came and slammed it on my desk and stated that I had filled it out wrong. She mentioned that it was wrong because I gave him Cs and Bs, and he did nothing for her utilizing her textbook teaching style. I showed her the results from his computer-instructed lessons, and my hands-on approach proved that he could do math once presented with a new teaching style. I wondered how many

more children, mainly Black boys, were railroaded into special education due to her textbook-only teaching method.

Unfortunately, Principal Marion Cotter passed a few years after I began teaching in this Magnet school setting. The district hired another female principal (Betty Parnell) in her place. Mrs. Parnell saw something in me that I did not see, the ability to lead schools as an administrator. Even though she did not promote me, she recommended I participate in the Urban Teachers as Urban Leaders Program to acquire the skills to become a school administrator. I appreciated two gentlemen who ran this program for their wisdom and knowledge as Black male leaders, Dr. Lynn Beckwith and Dr. John Ingram. After preparing me for the role in the administration, they recommended me to the next female principal (Mrs. Gloria Shelton), who promoted me to an assistant principal. After working closely beside her in 2003, she prepared me for the role of an elementary school principal by ensuring I fully understood all of the duties and responsibilities of a school leader in a Gifted and Talented Magnet school environment.

After interviewing for the principal's position in 2004 with 13 members of this urban school district central office staff, I received a call from Mrs. Gloria Shelton (new Associate Superintendent) offering me the job as the principal of the Gifted and Talented Magnet school where I served in the role of assistant principal. I was elated to receive my first school principal position as a Black male at one of the top-performing elementary schools in the district and the state. This school had high-performing students, lots of parental involvement, and predominantly white staff. This was my first time addressing Black male students' oppression in a leadership role. A policy stated that if students were not performing academically, they could be placed on probation and reassigned to another elementary school in the district. During a staff meeting, teachers identified 12 students who they wanted to be reassigned due to their behavior. Once the

names were given to me, I placed all 12 names on the blackboard. I then asked the staff to look at the racial makeup of the students. I then asked if we put these students out, what does it say about us as a school? They agreed that this would have made the statement that this school was racist because we would have put out 9 Black boys, 1 Black girl, and 2 Caucasian boys. Afterward, I was asked to take the names off the board because the students were on task academically and they had not committed a Type I Offence. We further discussed how we could support each of the students.

Black males must be given special attention and focus because they have been given negative attention and focus in the media under the system of oppression in which he lives. Ignoring Black males' needs endangers our people's survival (Mahdi, 2018). The culturally responsive power of care guides teachers and administrators to think through their demonstration of care holistically in a student-centered way from multiple perspectives of students' academic, social-emotional, and general well-being Gay (2010). I felt good because I could stand up for African-American students who were about to become victims of racism at the hands of educators. Standing in for absentee African-American fathers and acting as exemplars of Black manhood, Black boys will adopt the resilience, grit, and willpower to achieve in school (Pabon, 2016). As a consequence of standing up for these students, I was reassigned to another elementary Magnet school as principal. I was excited because this was a school in one of the oldest Black communities at a school that was the oldest school in the district with predominantly Black students and staff that I could relate to because we had more in common, and this allowed me to continue the role as a school leader.

Problem Statement

I began to reflect on the several things that I discovered in education which were the limited number of Black male teachers at the elementary level, a large percentage of Black boys assigned to special education classes, and the power of computer-based learning on Black boys, which was proven to me as a way that educators could use this in preventing Black male students from entering special education in such an alarming rate. Focusing on my experiences as a Black male administrator, which resulted in having my administrative position taken away from me with no justification after fifteen years as an administrator making a positive impact on students' lives, mainly Black males, is why I decided to write this autoethnography dissertation. Matched with children who are considered well-off, poor children are excessively exposed to hostile social and physical surroundings. Low-socioeconomic status neighborhoods are more likely to have poor social, public, and local services. (Jensen, 2009). Ask teachers in unsuccessful schools why children from low-income homes usually don't succeed, and they will often blame students' poverty, criticize the violence in the neighborhood, clarify ways students lack motivation, or point fingers at parents' negligence. Their reasons, in other words, amount to stories and accounts of excuses. To these educators, it's all about the difficulties inherent in disadvantaged students' situations. Eventually, all we educators have are our stories or their outcomes. Those who don't get positive results sometimes stick to their stories about why success escapes them. The educators who get positive results point to the numbers and say, "We did it" (Jensen, 2009). Working with staff, parents, and community partners who had the same goal in mind, which was to educate all students by eliminating barriers of oppression, was the driving force that motivated me to work diligently on behalf of all students, mainly for those Black boys who ended up in jail, dead or as school dropouts.

There is little documentation or celebrations of the historical influences, experiences, and successes of Black educators and school leaders, who, for the most part, have led successfully in highly challenging, racially discriminatory environments (Smith, 2021). This statement of Smith, along with understanding and experiencing the plight of Black male development, is another reason I decided to write this autoethnographic dissertation. Severe endangerments like homelessness, suspension, early parenthood, and a lack of academic self-assurance threaten to disrupt poor young Americans' pathways toward high-school graduation (Sebenius, 2016). In addition, the underachievement, absence of inclusion, and regressive development of Black men who are part of the society in America, and mainly those in the educational system, has once again surfaced as a movement that demands immediate attention (Jenkins, 2006). As an educator and administrator of urban school districts, you must juggle these problems and internal situations while being held accountable for internal and external factors. I also had to maintain my sanity as a Black male dealing with these situations and separating them from my life when I went home to be an influential husband and father by not allowing my job to affect my home.

The increasing Black male attainment will require an organized and continuous collaboration between adults within the school community and the village (Wynn, 2007). Then, there is the confidence that Black males can succeed through self-consciousness, community partnership, identification of the enemy, economic collaboration, and commerce, followed by a readiness to serve those who look like us. It's time out for countless speeches (Muhammad, 2013). I was proud that I could use the experiences I gained in education, community involvement, and home values instilled in me by my parents to address some of the issues that I was aware of that affected me as a Black male educator and students, mainly Black males struggling in the educational system of an urban school district.

Rationale for Study

African-American male educators and school building-level leaders serve as protectors and defenders in maintaining the village of students and the community. They especially do so in a progressively pervasive social context and public demonstration against Anti-Black racism, as well as the disintegrating stability of public education. Unfortunately, this is a significantly under-researched area, which largely remains missing from the research and scholarship on educational leadership research, theory, and practice (Smith 2021). This autoethnography aims to give my personalized account of how I utilized the skills I learned as a college student working with Black male development programs. It will show how I developed strategies to work for justice in schools and the struggles and joys I experienced. One will see how my passion for being a Black male educator and school leader caused me to stand on my faith when I had to deal with unexpected challenges of just doing my job. This autoethnography allowed me to share my educational experiences from an inside perspective. My involvement, trials, and achievements will be given a voice so that others dealing with students who are encountering stress in the educational system in America will see how being an effective role model as a teacher and administrator who understands the culture of all children, mainly Black boys can help students achieve success in education. This autoethnography study will also show how I faced and overcame one of the biggest challenges in my career. Being removed from the role of a school administrator and going back into the classroom as a teacher after helping students, mainly Black boys increase student enrollment, student achievement, and the graduation rate in a low-performing, once unaccredited urban school district that gained its accreditation from the work I did with helping them increase the graduation rate and student enrollment.

Significance of Study

Many of the lessons African-American male educators bring to the classroom go far beyond academic content and pedagogy. Their unique skills create a rich curriculum responsible for student success in ways that can't be graded or easily measured. Using methods beyond traditional teaching and learning, African-American educators can provide hope, inspiration, advice, compassionate listening, and, sometimes, tough love to make a change in the lives of their students (Callahan, 2020). Black students from low-income families who have a Black educator, male or female, for at least one school year in elementary school are less likely to drop out while attending school and more likely to enroll in college (Callahan, 2020). This dissertation will provide insights into how I continued the course of action by providing support for all students, mainly those from low-income households dealing with oppression in an educational system, as I was forced out of the role of administration as a Black male school leader. I will speak to how one can benefit internally by maintaining faith in doing what's suitable for children, no matter the cost.

The focus of the Study

A widespread discourse among educational stakeholders has recently proposed that African-American male teachers are the key to helping Black male students in urban schools and, in particular, improve their skills to succeed by acting as role models (Pabon, 2016). Educators must remember that as African-American and Hispanic students transition from elementary to middle school and through high school, planning for the real world. Educators must respond to minority students' questions about their racial and cultural individuality and how society will reply to them because of their race and culture (Kuykendall, 2004). This study carefully focused

on several areas to give an accurate picture of what I experienced as a teacher and administrator supporting the Black boys in a Midwest urban school district. The focal points are the social oppression of Black males in education, Black male development, and Challenges faced by Black male educators.

1. **Social Oppression of Black males in education:** This describes how the reality of institutional oppression in our culture and our school environments must not be overlooked. It can be indirect, but it is inescapable. The fact of it can encourage educators' behavior and organizational standards that only reinforce underachievement, low motivation, and poor school and life accomplishments in many African-American and Hispanic students (Kuykendall, 2004). Some Black boys display disobedient and destructive conduct in school. Sometimes they are only orally abusive. The result is typically the same: suspension, expulsion, assignment to special education, or referral to an alternative school or juvenile detention (Porter, 1997). I witnessed less empathy for students, mainly Black males and those such as myself, who had to suffer consequences as I supported them by overcoming the oppression obstacles caused by the misunderstanding of their behaviors. I felt that my education journey was to advocate for children, mainly Black boys, oppressed by those whose responsibility was to educate them with equity and respect.

2. **Black male development:** This section points out how it was vital for me to get a strong foundation on the development of Black boys, which helped me become a better educator and administrator. If Black boys are to subsist, it will take a different way of thinking, another value system, and a different methodology in human relations to get them out of

this dilemma they are in today. It will call for a different kind of education than what is offered today (Mahdi, 2018). African-American males belong to a demographically recognizable subgroup. However, they face unique obstacles, require gender and culturally responsive strategies, and demand a specific focus within school communities to escalate their levels of academic achievement, high school graduation, and college enrollment (Wynn, 2007). Understanding the plight of Black boys early in my career equipped me with tools to better support them and was the driving force motivating me to stay in the field of education in an urban school setting. This was the ingredients that allowed me to make a difference in the lives of students who may not have escaped an oppressive educational system as I did. I used this knowledge to educate me on how I should empathize with children who were victims of oppression in education and society as a whole.

Challenges faced by Black male educators: This focal point explains the difficulties associated with the administrative role of Black school administrators are often a unique set of problems that deal with race, attitudes, organizational structure, and policies (Echols 2006). The training and hiring of principals is characteristically a personal and political process that varies from school to school. In theory, district superintendents do the hiring. But sometimes, an outgoing principal strongly influences tapping his successor. At times school boards and community sentiment hold influence (Barshay, 2020). For Black school leaders, leadership is inevitably enacted within environments that challenge or attempt to define you based on racial stereotypes, baseless assumptions, or ignorance (Smith, 2021). I highlight how I was an administrator who was oppressed for standing up for oppressed students and how my demotion felt like a Black-on-Black crime because it came from an African-American male authoritative in a high

administrative positon after receiving my promotion from the level of a substitute teacher to a school principal from Black female administrators.

Definitions

Autoethnography: This is a highly personalized type of writing and investigation where the author uses their involvement to cover the understanding of a specific subculture.

Culturally Responsive: Awareness of one's cultural identity and views about difference and the ability to learn and build on students' and their families' cultural and community norms.

Impact: Is having a substantial effect on someone or something

Oppression: Is the state of being subject to unfair treatment or control.

Resilience: The capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

Reflective Journal: This is a written personalized record of explanations. They are more than written interpretations but also influence and create the culture studied and the journal's author.

Servant Leadership: A leadership philosophy built on the belief that the most influential leaders strive to serve others rather than accrue power or take control.

Trauma: A deeply distressing or disturbing experience.

Urban Schools: These are schools in large, closely populated areas with various populations. The schools that offer urban education experiences often have a high enrollment rate and a complex bureaucratic system.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This autoethnography study offers a personal account of how a Black male administrator worked for justice and faced challenges and success from his experiences, skills, and strategies developed as a college student, teacher, and school leader. In this chapter, I have chosen to review literature that supports my dissertation in the best possible manner. First, I investigate the literature concerning the oppression of Black children in education. I then examine the literature from authors who focused on Black male development and ways to implement skills and strategies to effectively educate them without damaging their identity due to their cultural background. I chose these authors because their work helped shape my thinking and gave me the mindset to effectively work with students, mainly Black boys, who were victims of oppression in an urban school system. The last set of literature comes from authors who focused on Black male educators' challenges.

As I write this autoethnography, I am documenting my experiences as a Black male teacher and administrator who strived to positively impact students' lives in an urban school district and highlight how I dealt with my challenges as a Black male educator. My goal is to point out how improving the way effective teaching and positive relationship building occur to support low-performing students in urban school settings needs to be given more attention to how this model must be duplicated to impact students who have been falling behind for decades. I am also expounding on the power of relationship building in education and how students can thrive in such settings when supported by staff that displays cognitive empathy towards them and their situations. Finally, I also share my personal story as a Black male administrator and the challenges I faced while supporting students, mainly Black children dealing with life challenges in an urban school district.

Addressing Oppression of Black Children in Education

The driving force behind my writing this dissertation came from the frustration I got when I witnessed students being oppressed, mainly at the high school level. Some administrators and other staff had a system of throwing students out of school or denying them access to enroll if they were high in age (17-20) and had few credits. Some students had 20 credits or more out of the required 24 credits and did not graduate on time. The most shocking was the number of students who had been in high school for 3-4 years and had failed 17-20 courses with no intervention in place to address them, failing numerous classes. Perkins (1975) described this treatment as the oppression of Black children. He pointed out how a system of oppression prevents children in urban school districts from attaining their true abilities. Perkins explained how the school system programs them with the fantasy of the "American Way of Life," but the community they grow up in offered them few chances to accomplish this goal. These oppressive forces from the school system and the community caused them to end up in what he classified as the Street Institution, where they developed skills to deal with oppression. One of Perkins's (1975) most meaningful points of oppression is the environment that white America created for Black people was founded on fear, anxiety, frustration, and death. It was an environment that denied the humanity of people and then attempted to make these same people dependent upon the mercilessness of their oppressors. In such a desensitizing environment, those who are its victims take out their frustrations and anxieties on members of their group. This form of oppression coming from some members of a district I worked in went against the grain of my thinking and the love I developed for myself and the students of color I was responsible for educating due to the awareness of the struggles of Black folks and the impact that oppression had on our race as a people and the skills that I developed from my home as a child along with the

ways of addressing racism and oppression from the African-American Role Model program as a college student drove me to challenge this oppression that I chose not to be part of in the career field that I decided to dedicate my life as a Black male.

Sebenius (2016) pointed out that risks like suspensions, low expectations of students, and a lack of academic confidence disrupt poor students attempting to graduate from high school. Facing this type of adversity, students needed social support from mentors to re-engage in education. Although she pointed out that the federal government can see health care as a basic need, mentoring should also have been a basic need for students, mainly those dealing with life challenges. According to Jensen (2009), policymakers, schools, and teachers sympathized with children growing up in poverty but were unaware that poverty diminished their chances of success. However, research has changed the mindset of those responsible for educating children about poverty by clearly outlining data and studies on the complications of living in poverty and evidence of schools succeeding in teaching disadvantaged students from low-socioeconomic families. This evidence showed no excuse for failing children or oppressing those responsible for educating them. Jensen (2009) also mentioned that poverty involves a complex array of risk factors that adversely affect the population in a multitude of ways. He highlights four primary risk factors afflicting families living in poverty: emotional and social challenges, acute and chronic stressors, cognitive lags, and health and safety issues.

Mahdi (2018) narrowed his focus on oppressed Black boys growing up in America. He felt that Black boys will never be liberated if we send them to school with those who oppress them. He pointed out how research shows that Black boys represent 50% of the nation's dropout rate. Addressing this oppression will take a different way of thinking, another value system, and a different approach to human relations to get them out of today's society's predicament. It will

take another type of education than what they are receiving today. He explained how those who don't recognize that Black boys are in grave trouble in a system of oppression are out of touch with reality. They are not educated on what it takes to teach Black boys properly. Jenkins's (2006) Perspective of Black boys in the education system is that reversing the adverse conditions facing Black males requires converting a broad array of social, political, economic, psychological, and educational problems deeply entrenched in the very power structure of America.

On the one hand, society promoted rhetoric of concern and desire to lift Black males but, on the other hand, performed a policy of oppression, prejudice, and disrespect. Wynn's (2007) research on educating African-American males shared how Black boys with the same social framework of reference often struggle in classrooms. They were the students most likely to be punished and go through an educational institution that failed to confirm their cultural contributions or connect them to their historical past. It does not matter where they live; Black boys suffer from a cultural divide in the educational system. Jenkins' (2006) Perspective of Black boys in the education system is that reversing the harmful conditions facing Black males requires converting a broad array of social, political, economic, psychological, and educational problems deeply entrenched in the very power structure of America. On the one hand, society promotes rhetoric of concern and desire to lift Black males; on the other hand, it applies a policy of oppression, bigotry, and disrespect.

Kunjufu (1989) understood that addressing the problems that cause oppression is embedded in communication with educators and students. Addressing the issue should have been done by using questions to get input from them. He used a theoretical paradigm developed by Barbara Sizemore. It first began with identifying the problems. Then you asked why did the

problem occur? Next, you create a solution to the problem, and lastly, you decide how to implement the solutions to solve the problem. He felt that whatever solutions were chosen, we must no longer afford to respond with short-term answers to disasters but with long-term, highly established plans that demand excellence from our youth. He even pointed out how The National Association of Black School Educators (NABSE) felt that we made plenty of explanations about why Black children are not academically performing on task. We need consultants who worked in effective schools or programs, have studied these strategies, or have effective practices and models.

Barzon, Osher, & Fleischman (2005) solution to addressing Black children's problems dealt with educators acknowledging the strengths and managing the various learning needs of our growing multicultural, multilingual student population requires significant alteration of our current school practices. The culturally responsive education practices identified could have helped in creating a learning atmosphere that promoted success for all students. In addition, educators should have been aware of the cultural swings that immigrant students, or other students with minority family and community cultures, must make as they travel between school and home. They also agree that the most effective method is making classroom Instruction more compatible with the cultural value systems of a mixed student population.

Noguera (2003) highlighted how addressing the dire conditions of schools seemed to have been a blaming game for policymakers. He felt they knew very little about the lives of students who attend failing schools and the complex nature of the problems they attempt to address. Some saw themselves as above and beyond the fight to address the issue. The solutions they offered to failed or impoverished schools include policy publicity stunts or more testing, charter schools, vouchers, and school choice. He also recognized that the educational problems

of inner-city schools facing poverty could not be solved without addressing the financial and social conditions in the school's location. It's neither fair nor realistic to expect schools to increase academic performance and focus on educating students when they have many unmet needs unrelated to academics. These unmet needs affect children's ability to learn. He understood that all schools cannot be treated the same when we know that all schools or students' lives are more complicated for some children than others. Noguera also pointed out how "urban" and "community" are less connected to geography and spatial proximity and more to individuality and perception of interest. Knowing that urban schools in America disproportionately educate Black children, the urgency to address concerns relating to race is of the most importance.

Loveless (2019) suggested that if parents saw their children struggling in school or believe they could have benefited from a different environment than they were in, there were a few options they could have investigate that may have been a better fit. The first suggestion was to talk with the school to see if they could have pinpointed the exact problem if it wasn't readily apparent. By doing that, they could have gained better insight into what needed to be different for their child.

Edwards (2014) showed how Maryville University's innovative Young Scholars Program attempts to solve a historical defect in gifted education where students lack diversity. By a wide margin, high-ability minority and low-income students go unrecognized as contenders for advanced programs. The chance to participate, however, could have made a substantial difference in their lives by providing pathways to college and future success. Unfortunately, the problem of inequality was severe in the St. Louis area. Black students, especially Black males, were underrepresented in most school gifted programs by more than 50 %.

Little and Tolbert (2018) talked about how Black boys have to tolerate educational environments that publicize the stereotype of their supposed intellectual insufficiencies and label their attitudes and actions in the classroom as challenging. From preschool to college, deficit-based narratives, fueled by historical racist and sexist stereotypes, contend that African American males and young boys are deviant, disengaged, and disruptive, not disciplined, not intelligent, complicated, confrontational, threatening, and challenging to educate.

Ah Lim & Rumberger (2008) understood that addressing the dropout catastrophe involves a better understanding of why students drop out. Although dropouts themselves report multiple motives for leaving school, these motives did not reveal the underlying causes, especially numerous influences in elementary or middle school that may influence students' attitudes, behaviors, and performance in high school before dropping out.

Harper (2016) Talked about secure relationships and responding effectively to the needs of students; parents and school personnel must first recognize the student behaviors that result from exposure to violence and trauma. She explained that once the adults in a teen's life have determined that a student has experienced trauma, parents and students must collaborate with teachers to create healthy environments for teens to cope appropriately at home and school.

Darling-Hammond (1998) discussed how educational experiences for minority students have remained considerably separate and unequal. Two-thirds of minority students still attend schools that are mainly minority, most of them located in urban cities and funded well below those in neighboring suburban school districts. Moreover, schools educating more significant numbers of students of color had fewer resources than schools serving majority white students. On an intra-state basis, many states with essential inequalities in educational expenses were large

industrial states. Many minorities and economically deprived students in these states were located in property-poor urban school districts.

Black Male Development

Akbar (1982) said that to develop Black boys' minds, we have to teach them knowledge of self. Once they know who we are as a person, we must teach them who they are as a tribe. A tribe represents a community. He explains that knowledge of oneself as a tribe gives a person strength to cultivate their identity. Tribal knowledge gives a person the power to move against oppositional forces attempting to destroy them as a person and as a race or group.

Gilson (2006) saw alternative education as a system believing that all people can be educated. Therefore, it is in the utmost interest of society that educational opportunities are given to allow each person to find a learning environment in which they can thrive. Through this involvement, individuals obtain the general education that prepares them to be included in the community. I often observed how the virtual school program under my Leadership for four years as an alternative education model using computer-based learning was a nontraditional approach to teaching and learning that allowed urban school students the opportunity to thrive at their own pace in a small classroom or home environment. Gilson (2006) provided seven characteristics of the mark of successful alternative educational programs. First, they are small in size and created by those who will operate them with a low teacher-to-student ratio. Secondly, they take their character, theme, or emphasis from the strong points and interests of the educators who developed them. Thirdly, the staff chose to work in such an environment and was given input from staff who participated in the interview process. Fourth the fourth characteristic is that the students and their families chose to attend the alternative school. Fifth, students in these settings work specifically with their classroom teachers, who address their critical needs. Sixth, the

school district superintendent maintains self-sufficiency and protects the integrity of the school. Seventh, all schools were relatively free from district interference, and the administration shielded them from central school officials' burdens. I found most of these characteristics of alternative school settings to be true in the development of Black boys who could not function in a regular school environment when I served as an administrator in the alternative school settings.

Muhammad (2013) provided 101 prevention and intervention strategies for addressing the educational needs of Black boys. He felt teachers should have high expectations for Black boys regardless of their personal or family situation. In doing this, they must be persistent and mandate excellence. Those responsible for Black boys' education should empathize and not sympathize with them by giving them praise and positive affirmation daily, even when it appears they are not interested in being praised. It seems that Mr. Muhammad believes in the phrase reach one, teach one in the manner in which he suggests that schools should develop monthly lectures where members of the professional community speak to Black boys, introduce them to careers, and give them hope and encouragement.

Carson (2022) pointed out that if we do not meet the educational needs of children in the first five years of life, they will fall behind even before kindergarten. Access to high-quality early childhood education offers excellent opportunities to reduce the achievement gap for Black children later in life. Research showed that early education leads to better results in school and life. Children who attend high-quality prekindergarten educational programs were more likely to read on grade level, graduate, and be successful in their careers.

Sherrington (2018) spoke on classroom assessment and how too much of it fails to prioritize learning. He believes there’s far too much emphasis placed on accountability at the cost of education. Many commonly used methods do nothing to cut the workload for educators.

Putting so much power on data, we risk losing sight of where it came from in the first place, that is, what it tells us about how much students understand and where they're struggling. Changing some aspects of the assessment process can make it more meaningful and take some of the workload burdens off educators. Assessment must to provide enough detail to inform teaching and to learn directly. This is what drives student outcomes.

Kracher & Herrera (2007) felt that implementing school-based mentoring programs that address the specific needs of youth of different ages will be a significant next step in realizing the potential benefits of this approach to promoting positive youth development. They point out how research suggests new and additional mentor training, staff support, and paring efforts, such as summer interactions, may be necessary if School-based mentoring is to maximize its potential. While Faggella (2017) Mentioned how one-to-one mentorship allows all students to meet with a devoted teacher or school leader each week as part of their academic and personal development. Students meet with the same mentor year after year, giving them a sense of continuity and allowing mentors to know students deeply.

Dynarski, Gleason, Rangarajan, & Wood (1998) identified programs to help students stay in and complete school and normally deliver services to alleviate the influence of negative issues. These programs can support counselors' efforts to learn about personal and family problems afflicting students and connect the students with communal services to address the issues. They can help develop curriculum and instruction approaches that better garb students with different learning styles or who need more flexible scheduling to do their educational assignments. Finally, they can attempt to produce a family-like context where staff becomes

mentors to students, providing encouraging messages about their futures and strengthening them in their accomplishments.

Wright (2019) discussed how educators can make the learning environment a more welcoming and supportive educational space for Black boys. He also points out how the way language is used plays a significant role when teaching students, mainly boys of color. Teachers must be conscious of the activities and material used to engage Black boys and understand how they can cultivate these interests in a supportive manner. He stressed the importance of learning about Black boys' more significant structural encounters, including the systemic racism that disturbs family income and wealth, access to resources, representations of people of color in the media, and the likelihood of participation in the criminal justice system.

Kuykendall (2004) laid out her strategies for reclaiming Black and Hispanic students. She explained how to cultivate tremendous gratitude for cultural diversity and differences among students and an understanding of how educators form expectations that lead to student failure. She also addressed institutional barriers and school-related obstacles that prevent long-term success while providing powerful strategies for dealing with the discipline of Black and Hispanic students.

Ambonisye (2017) felt that there should be much concern about the School-to-Prison Pipeline, and rightfully so. Our children are arrested, incarcerated, and imprisoned at an amazingly disproportionate rate compared to every other race. No doubt, racism- and capitalism-driven systems exist that support and profit from jailing our children. They get sucked into this pipeline; that’s one thing. We served our children up for the prison-picking is quite another. I’m humbly asking us to consider that the pipeline starts at home. People believe schools send our children to prison, but parents are roughly 87% responsible.

Harper (2016) talked about how exposure to and fear of violence, such as gun violence, domestic violence, or physical bullying, can traumatize students and impact their social and emotional behavior at home and school. To ensure that students who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events receive appropriate academic support and counseling, parents, caregivers, and school personnel must understand how to recognize the effects of trauma on adolescent students and collaborate to assist the student in their healing.

David Shih (2017) believed that African-American benefits are not only controlling on campuses but are unquestionably oppressive. He felt that students of color can profit from diversity training and curricula, but the results are not even and may have the opposite desired effect. This is because most initiatives were not designed for African-Americans or to decrease discrimination against them. He expressed how he does not unavoidably see a course intended for people who are culturally incompetent as motivating Black students." Mandatory courses on "cultural competency" often further defame and segregate students of color. Frail multiplicity policies fail to modify today's status quo because they exchange necessary commitment for symbolism and good intentions.

Besides Porter (1997) spoke on the misdiagnosis of Black boys in American classroom settings, he understands how important it is that people observe false needs as real needs; this way, people will feel that development is being made in society. The inexperienced, unsuspecting public will come to believe that the problem solved by the product always occurred, but the public is ignorant of the problem's existence. This type of ignorance allows evil to flourish for years. He also felt that multiculturalism is a joke because whites never planned to include the oppressed in anything except that part of life designated for the oppressed conquered

society. Inclusion brings about power, and power leads to self-determination, while self-determination leads to the freedom of the oppressed.

Gay (2010) explained how culturally responsive teaching can be used to intensely impact the academic achievement of African-American students and other disregarded students. Her book completely clarified culturally responsive education and how it can positively impact African-American students' lives. She showed how the achievement of students of color continues to be disproportionately low at all levels of education.

Challenges Faced By Black Male Educators

Callahan (2020) pointed out how Black men make up only two percent of the country's teaching force, but their presence in the classroom improves student outcomes. For example, she highlighted a study by the Institute of Labor Economics found that low-income Black students who have a Black teacher, man or woman, for at least one school year in elementary school will less likely drop out of high school and more likely to go to college. While only seven percent of teachers nationwide are Black.

Smith (2021) described the reality of educational leadership as understood and experienced by Black male school principals and school leaders specifically to consider the extent to which a model of race-critical, culturally relevant, and responsive approaches to school leadership, as well as an intrinsic sense of community and civil rights activism and advocacy, positively supports students holistically. He expanded on the understanding of models of critical race leadership and interrupts the normative educational leadership that ill-serves significant sections of our student populations and communities. He pointed out that African-American school administrators, in particular, lead differently than White school leaders. For example,

African-American principals are more likely to prioritize community engagement than their White peers.

Militello et al (2007). Understood that there is no more significant way for a school system to express how they value their leaders than to invest in the ongoing professional development of principals and assistant principals and establish clear career paths for advancement. Policymakers, school boards, superintendents, and communities who invest in the professional development of school leaders will need to find ways of organizing the role to increase the likelihood that their investment will pay dividends in terms of school volume and student achievement. They also know that it is time to get rid of the warped psychology of the education community that buys into the belief that secondary school leaders continue to fail, but the systems that should be there to support them are exempt from accountability.

Irvine (2018) identified the causes behind the disappearing Black educators; the drop in the number of college students announcing teacher education majors; (2) the decrease in black college students; (3) the spreading career options for blacks, especially black females; and (4) teacher capability tests. Policymakers, school systems, and teacher educators should investigate these declining numbers and their contributing factors. Similarly crucial will be the ability of all teachers and principals-black and white-to teach effectively a progressively multiethnic school population.

Callender (2020) explained how her work is one of a few studies investigating the racialized and gendered experiences of Black male educators. She examined how Black male educators are categorized and constructed in white education spaces. She used interviews and documentary data to illuminate the institutional process of overt and covert racism.

Pabon's (2016) study used life history methods to obtain a group of Black male educators' narratives to shed light on their experiences working in urban school classrooms. This study aimed to broaden one's understanding of teacher education, teaching, and retention of Black male educators. In addition, she showed how a widespread discourse among educational stakeholders has recently pointed out that Black male educators are the key to helping Black male students in urban schools and, specifically, cultivate skills to succeed by acting as role models.

The study of Barhay (2020) highlighted how African-American administrator candidates are less likely to be tapped while women's promotions are held off. She shows how educators who run schools in the U.S. are not part of a diverse group. 90% of school leaders are white, while only 11% are Black. Black principal candidates were 18 percent less likely to be promoted to the principal position than equally qualified white candidates. Black principals are often better at hiring and retaining Black teachers. That can decrease teacher turnover at schools in Black communities, where many classrooms are run by young, inexperienced teachers who are persistently coming and going, which leads to low student achievement.

Burns (2022) talked about his passion for becoming a teacher. He shared how many school districts claim they want more Black male educators; when studies confirm our positive effects on students, we remain some of the least respected personnel in American education. He pointed out how it is well documented that Black educators are seen as disciplinarians and teachers second. We are often placed into teaching electives, introductory courses, and remedial classes. Our colleagues view us as overseers of the school-to-prison pipeline responsible for monitoring behavior and punitive discipline rather than transformational teachers and school leaders.

Gibson (2022) pointed out how Black males in educational leadership positions need strategies to remain genuine, make cultural influences to staff and students, and be free to speak to stakeholders without fear of rebuke. He provided insight on the issues tied with being a Black male administrator in the American public school system and provides strategies for success.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided literature addressing Black students' oppression in education and various authors' solutions for managing it. I then presented literature from authors who focus on Black male development and how they have developed strategies being used to educate students nontraditionally. I also provide literature on challenges faced by Black male principals. Many reports have been written on how our educational system isn't working. Most students make it through with the aptitude to go further in education or into careers and start a family. Many students, however, are lost in the educational system. These students aren't progressing at an appropriate rate. Some receive high school diplomas and do not perform academically on grade level. Students can learn in the correct educational environment beyond a traditional school (Loveless, 2022). Jensen (2009) Suggested that there is hope for educating all students. He understands that intervening early in students' lives can be a powerful method of reducing the impact of poverty and oppression. Educators and policymakers must stop the cycle of blaming and resignation by accepting a new approach to assist students fulfills their life goals and potential.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

Purpose of Study

This dissertation exemplifies an administrator's personalized account of navigating the system in an urban school district while serving as a teacher and a school leader while overcoming challenges as a Black administrator. The position will be closely studied from the inside to examine better, review, and identify its workings, limitations, and rewards. The experiences I have come across, the difficulties faced, and the successes derived from understanding the culture of all students, mainly Black boys, using effective teaching and leadership skills and multiple educational experiences. Exploring my academic career from an autoethnography lens provides additional insight and data on my career journey in education. This qualitative research positions me to share and analyze my experiences in an urban school district where I sought to bring humanistic values to an oppressive educational system that did not serve the needs of all students. Autoethnography is a fascinating and hopeful qualitative means that give voice to personal experience to spread sociological understanding (Wall, 2006). Evolving the limits of qualitative research is the methodology of autoethnography (Wall, 2006).

Autoethnography is an evolving qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a tailored style, reflecting on one's experiences to share knowledge about an individual (Wall, 2006)—for example, transmitting how I maintained my faith of not being removed from the role of an administrator when there was talk or gossip that it would happen during a time when I was told that I was not going to return as a principal of a particular elementary school. This example is the purpose of developing a self-narrative research study that is an autoethnography research method. Autoethnography also recognizes the complicated connection

between the individual and the educational environment (Wall, 2006). I feel that using autoethnography is the most effective method of sharing my experiences of what occurred in my educational career. Therefore, this viewpoint must be embraced to understand this dissertation better.

Methodology

Autoethnography acknowledges methods of conducting investigations and representing others and recognizes the investigation as a civil, socially-just, and socially-aware action (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

Autoethnography has the potential to reward a person by allowing them to reflect on and have compassion for the story being told. In addition, by interpreting a social or mutual account of an experience, some may become attentive to events that have not been understood before, making autoethnography an appreciated form of investigation (Mendez, 2013). As a teacher and administrator, I chose autoethnography as a research method. It allowed me to share the experience of the impact that teaching and serving as a school leader had on my life while helping students, staff, parents, and community partners for 25 years as an employee of an urban school district.

Autoethnographers deal with individuality, allowing explanations to direct what they record and their findings. They then check with and sometimes link their findings to more recognized research familiar to them. Autoethnography aims to design a model of social practices that makes these practices well known to social outsiders. Social practicing is achieved through heavy, vibrant, and tangible descriptions, providing individuals with a sense of experiencing what has occurred (Adams, Ellis & Jones, 2017). In my actual study, I increased

my knowledge and hopefully others' understanding of working, collaborating with others, and relying on the experiences I gained as the research tool. My experience as a teacher, principal, and Virtual Service Learning Coordinator was actively involved in the day-to-day activities, including teaching, recruiting, and enrolling students, maintaining data, training and conducting staff observations, and working closely with community partners and parents.

Autoethnography is known to have a strong focus on the self. Some struggle to accept autoethnography as a vital investigation method (Mendez, 2013). There has been a returning fight for those involved in assessing qualitative research. Autoethnography has no precise guidelines or standards to follow since it can be approached using various genres (Mendez, 2013).

Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience (“auto”) to describe and interpret (“graphy”) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (“ethno”). Autoethnographers believe that personal experience is filled with political/cultural norms and beliefs, and they involve rigorous self-reflection, typically referred to as reflexivity, to identify and cross-examine the connections between self and social life. Autoethnographers aims to show people their struggles' purpose (Bochner & Ellis, 2006).

In my particular study, increasing my own, and hopefully others, understanding of the teaching and learning process, as well as supervising others by using stories I gained over the years as the researcher, helps me relay the message of my educational journey. The challenges and experiences I faced in education are my study's central motivation. I believe studying a lived experience can add great detail to the abundance of qualitative research focusing primarily on the spectator's point of view.

Data Collection

Self-study research has an energetic objective. It adds worth to the investigator's audience and produces storybook descriptions. In true-life studies and self-descriptions, investigation data collection is significantly different. The gathering of data and the examination methods should be selected to match the specific evaluation interims of its main assessment questions and the resources on hand. The practical assessments should use the existing data and fill holes with new data. The strengths and weaknesses of the data collection and analysis method should be selected to complement one another (Peersman, 2014).

Data gathering began my first year of teaching using journals, yearbooks, newsletters, photos, and news articles I maintained as a teacher and principal. I developed notes containing data on student enrollment, daily attendance, and yearly graduation rates. Data was also kept on my yearly evaluations and feedback from classroom observations and building walk-throughs done on me by my former supervisors. I never thought this information would serve as valuable data for my dissertation. During my educational leadership course work at the University of Missouri St. Louis, I was introduced to the methodology of autoethnography as a possible research method for my dissertation. I began journaling and documenting the experiences, activities, and events of this urban school district's students, staff, parents, and other programs and activities. My journaling was accomplished daily, detailing my summarization of the day's events and conversations.

Maintaining a daily reflective journal was started as a way of monitoring skills I needed to improve and highlight the things I did well. I would then capture this information and place some of it into a Microsoft PowerPoint Presentation to share the program's successes with others.

I also felt that maintaining data and reflecting on various activities and events would be a tangible way of showing how supporting students without damaging their self-esteem and having knowledge of their culture played a significant role in helping an urban school district regain full accreditation in 2017 and lost in 2007. I also share information about the challenges I faced as an administrator and how I overcame them with faith and resilience. This data collection also allowed the study's design to be valuable in its creation and provided the opportunity to analyze and derive meaning from these sources of information.

Data Analysis

In this autoethnographic dissertation, the stories will be from my perception from my memory, reflective journal, as well as from observations and conversations I had with individuals. As you read, I am the primary source of data. The experiences in this autoethnography center around me and my relationships with students, teachers, parents, administrators, and stakeholders. The collections of stories and conversations are recounted from memory, observations of conversations, dialogs, and data from my personal reflective journals. These self-observational and reflective journal data connect the past sentiments of my 25 years of experience serving as a teacher and administrator in education. The supporting stories for this autoethnography dissertation detailed incidents from my memory. My insightful, reflective journal highlighted incidents that were essential to me, addressing the oppression of students, mainly Black boys, and the challenges of Black males in an urban educational setting. The stories I use in Chapter 4 are connected to the literature in Chapter 2 from the focus points of addressing the oppression of Black children in education, Black male development, and challenges Black Male educators face.

Limitations

Black males make up only 2% of the U.S. teaching force, but their existence in the classroom increases academic results for students (Callahan, 2020). As a member of this exclusive group of men, it has completely invaded my perspective as a Black male educator. This reminds me that I must be aware of my thoughts and prejudices. I must remind myself that every Black male in this 2% had or will have the same experiences that I had. Everyone may not see the oppression in the same manner as I did, and if so, they may not be willing to address it as I did. Therefore, even though my story is applicable, I should not assume it is. The choice of autoethnography allowed me to stay focused on my account and experiences, keeping the focus of the study on me and how I was affected by life challenges as a Black male educator and how I saw oppression carried out in a field that I dedicated my life to as a career choice. However, I feel it is essential to leave it up to my readers to generate their understanding of my experiences and relate to my story on a personal level. Readers of this dissertation will have to form their meaning and decide the relevance to their experiences and how this relates and impacts them.

Ethical Considerations

Throughout this study, I maintained honesty by using autoethnography for this qualitative research. Some names are not mentioned in this study to secure some degree of anonymity; this is an essential criterion of my research. I recognize that my recalling accounts and expression of the events are personal and may not reflect what other peers or colleagues experienced. The stories I share come from my experiences as a teacher and school administrator and how I felt about the joy and pain of the incidents. I also share how I dealt with each situation. There are initials used for two individuals. I use their stories to show the reality of challenges faced by students and adults in school systems and how important it is for us as teachers, administrators

and school personnel and policymakers to strive to eradicate problems affecting both adults and children in educational systems we are responsible for maintaining daily.

Chapter 4

My journey in education as a teacher and school administrator will allow me to share stories in this autoethnography dissertation showing how I maneuvered through an urban school district as a Black male educator facing joy and pain as I supported struggling students along the way. This reflective dissertation helped me to see the potential in every student I encountered. All children can thrive in education, no matter where they start, live, or who they are (Wooley-Wilson, 2018). I am reflecting on the challenges I faced as an administrator and how my faith in God was my shield and buckler for dealing with and overcoming these challenges.

This chapter will highlight the faith and reliance I faced as an administrator and how it motivated me to support several Black male students as they faced life challenges. In addition, I am sharing stories to show how our challenges helped me deal with Black male development, oppression, and attack on Black male leadership.

When My Faith Was Tested

As I highlighted in the introduction, my career as an educator started in 1995 as an elementary school teacher in a Magnet school setting with a culturally mixed student and staff body. After serving in this role in the exact location for eight years, I was then promoted to assistant principal in 2003 in another Magnet school with an emphasis on Gifted and Talented students in an environment where students were achieving on a high level with lots of parental involvement where the student body was culturally mixed with predominantly white staff. I was then promoted to the principal of this school in 2004. In 2005 I was moved to what was classified as a MEGA Magnet school in the historic African-American neighborhood (the Ville) in St. Louis. This school had a 100% Black student body with predominantly Black staff. I was pleased

that my role as a Black male teacher and administrator was respected and valued by the school district, and these positions allowed me to be a positive role model for all students, mainly Black boys who needed that image of a Black male educator. The Black male must be given exceptional attention and focus because he has been given negative attention and focus in the media under the system of oppression in which he lives. Ignoring the Black male's needs endangers our people's survival (Mahdi, 2018).

After serving as a teacher and administrator in elementary schools, my ability seemed to be respected by the district, and I was assigned as the principal of an alternative school in 2010 after the closing of the last MEGA Magnet school in this urban school district. This alternative school housed more than 150 middle and high school students assigned here for committing a Type I Offense in a regular or Magnet school setting. All the skills that I developed as a college student working with youth development programs were being tested, and my teaching and administrative skills that I developed over the past 15 years. I had to be creative in developing a program to address the needs of these students with severe behavior problems and working with most of the staff that did not want to be here but was placed there due to not being successful in other schools in the district. After running this school for one year, the staff and I were reassigned to move the middle school portion of the alternative into a traditional middle school setting as a school-within-a-school model. A school-within-a-school is a separate and autonomous school formally sanctioned by the board of education and Superintendent. It plans and runs its educational setting, has its staff and students, and receives separate funding. Although it must negotiate the use of common space with a host school and defer to the building administrator on matters of safety and building operation, the school-within-a-school report to a

district official, not the principal (Dewees,199). Due to the uniqueness of this school, I made sure I had input on how we would design it to work for both schools.

I had to work with a principal who was upset because an alternative school was moving into what he considered his building, not the district. We had to ensure that we staggered the starting and ending times to maintain the separation of the students from each school. We developed a plan to conduct professional development with both schools at times to build a better working relationship for the staff in the building. Due to the student population of each school being predominantly populated with Black students, mainly, Black males, I had to share with my Caucasian principal co-worker several times how speaking to the Black male students in a hostile and demanding manner was an ineffective approach. Those who try to destroy the Black male know that it is far more likely that the male species will resist domination and resist it violently. As such, the Europeans have waged an all-out assault on the Black male, destroying his spirit and potential through miseducation (Mahdi, 2018). I was pleased that we made it work as principals collaborating effectively with each other on an educational concept that was new to each of us.

I successfully mastered this task due to the positive evaluation and feedback from the Network Superintendent who supervised me then. I was then given a call from the Human Resources Director informing me that I would be reassigned to another school. Although she did not tell me at the time where I was going, she joked with me, saying to be prepared to take on a school in the mid-city location. Several weeks later, I received an email by mistake stating that I would be assigned to an elementary school. I then received a call from the Human Resources Director, who officially appointed me to an elementary school, one of three that housed preschool through eighth-grade students. This school sat in the center of two low-income

housing developments with many under-served families. I returned to my first love of education, elementary school. This school was one of few that operated with the support of a Task Force which acted as an advisory board. Advisory boards are significant, accomplished professionals offering recommendations and providing insight for implementing curricular, assessment, research, occupational, marketing, and fund or friend-raising initiatives (Gentry, 2018). I was told that the district had to choose a principal who could work with this Task Force and be sensitive to the needs of the students, staff, and families of this community. This is why the district chose me to serve in this role. Working with this Task Force strengthened my skills in building excellent community relations in utilizing outside resources to help enhance the teaching and learning process for students, staff, and parents. In addition, the funds raised by them were well managed and spent with input from students and staff to address their educational needs.

I was pleased because I had an opportunity to provide adequate resources for students who lived in oppressive situations. This could be seen in the first semester of my assignment to this school by increasing the preschool enrollment from 40 to 80 students, which caused the then governor, Jay Nixon, to hold a press conference at our location, highlighting our success. In addition, I developed a partnership with Maryville University to start the Innovative Young Scholar Program, which identified underserved students as gifted and talented. The problem of disparity is severe in the St. Louis area. Black students, especially Black males, are underrepresented in most school gifted programs by more than 50 percent (Edwards, 2014). These were a few noticeable things that were done and highlighted in the media, which pleased the Task Force and the parents whose children benefited from these initiatives. However, due to the positive comments from my Network Superintendent and members of the Task Force, I was

still under the impression that I was appreciated and respected by the district for my dedicated work.

The test of my faith came when the district's Superintendent visited me and informed me that I would no longer serve as the school's principal as of June 30, 2014, and I was not told if I would be reassigned as a school administrator. This came as a shock to me because there was no acknowledgment that I had done anything wrong. I was not placed on a Professional Improvement Plan, nor did I violate any district policies. All administrators face trials in obtaining success. The difficulties associated with the administrative role of Black school administrators are often a unique set of problems that deal with race, attitudes, organizational structure, and policies (Echols 2006). After reflecting on my work and realizing that I did nothing wrong, I realized that I was now a Black male administrator facing oppression at the hands of an African-American man serving as a school district leader. Next, I relied on the spiritual guidance I gained from being raised in the church and studying men of faith from various walks of life. The first test came when one of my longtime educational mentors shared a conversation with a central office staff that mentioned that I would be sent back to the classroom as a teacher. At that time, it seemed like a clear glass shield dropped over me, representing some form of protection. I comforted that individual by saying, "No, that will not happen." I further tested my faith by arranging a meeting with the Superintendent to clarify my next steps. Instead, I would remain an administrator or be reassigned as a teacher. During that meeting, he did not meet with me right away. Instead, he had me wait in his lobby for several hours before meeting with me. I spent the time reading educational magazines and checking emails from my phone. When I got the chance to meet with him, he never answered my concern about being reassigned

as a school administrator. Instead, he informed me that he would meet with me in August for my next assignment.

To strengthen my faith, I spent the month of July reading, running, and praying. The scripture that allowed me not to worry came from the Bible, Isaiah 45, which says," I will go ahead of you and make the crooked places straight." This gave me faith that I would return as an administrator, not a teacher. Many friends encouraged me to leave and take other administrative jobs outside the district. I refused and kept my faith. Finally, in August, I got a call from the Superintendent asking me to meet with him. He assigned me as an administrator on a special assignment working out of the district's Human Resources Department to resolve problems of principals in the district. I never got an explanation of why I was removed from the role of an elementary school principal. I accepted the new position and was thankful for maintaining the administrator title.

My faith continued to be tested regarding the reality of losing my salary. As I was assigned to this position, a new Director of Human Services was appointed to this office. He informed me there would be a loss in my salary of $10.000. I accepted it and listened to that voice that said, "It will not be this way for long." I also thought this was some personal action taken towards me for reasons I never knew. After four months of building a great working relationship with the new director, he assigned me as the Virtual School Coordinator, working with students who had dropped out of school to get them to return and those who were possibly dropouts due to failing their high school courses. This position gave me the responsibility to supervise four sites and nine employees. As I prepared to take on this new position, I went into the employee's system to access my files and discovered a $20,000 increase in my salary, placing me $10,000 ahead of my salary as an elementary school principal. The increase in salary and

the new administrative assignment reinforced my strong faith and the words of Isaiah 45," I will go ahead of you and make the crooked places straight." This was done by returning me to the administration role as a servant leader for students, staff, parents, and community partners.

Black men have the capacity to care and often care deeply. However, Black men's ability to manage and approach caring is influenced by their prior experience *as Black men (Smith, 2021).* School leaders must be inspired by a set of deep personal values and beliefs, by a core of academic and social values that can provide a rudder. They must view their assignment more as a mission than a job (Militello et al, 2007). All administrators encounter problems in obtaining success. The problems associated with the principalship of Black principals are often an exclusive set of problems associated with race, attitudes, administrative structure, and procedures (Echols, 2006). Black male school administrators are an anomaly that should not be ignored, downplayed, or appeased but instead explored for strategies of resilience in an environment where their speech is regulated (Gibson, 2022).

Support Them No Matter What Happens In

After reading the works of Robyn Harper on how community violence impacts teenagers' lives, it reinforces the works that I studied in the past of men like Jawanza Kunjufu, Naim, Akbar, and Michael Porter. When a child experiences a traumatic event, such as witnessing violence, the brain initiates a stress response, a response originally developed for survival needs that trigger behavioral changes. For example, a child who has encountered trauma may display "fight or flight" behaviors (Harper, 2016). I highlight this because it relates to many students I worked with over my 25 years in education. I also emphasize how I supported two Black male students who faced traumatic life experiences when I took on my new role as the Virtual School

Coordinator in an urban school district after facing my challenges as a Black male administrator. Supporting students was a constant reminder of why I got into the field of education. This was part of my daily motivational journey. I was elated to do this because saving them was like saving an extension of myself and a race of oppressed people.

I can recall sitting on my sofa relaxing and watching the evening news when the reporter reported on a shooting that just took place in a north St. Louis city neighborhood. The reporter mentioned that a man walked out of the house and shot a relative of his in front of other family members and community neighbors. When I heard the victim's last name, I associated the neighborhood and the last name with a student that attended one of our virtual school sites. The next day I stopped by to see if this family was related to our student, whom I will identify as J.D. The program facilitator stated that J.D. was not at school, and several students told her that his brother was murdered yesterday by an uncle as he watched it happen. I then informed my staff of the incident and developed a plan to support the student. Next, I met with our school counselor, and we developed a plan to see how we could support this student. I made sure that she reached out to the family to see how we could support them as they dealt with this family trauma. She also made sure that our staff was aware of the situation, and she gave us tips on how to address the issue in a manner in which we were to continue to educate him by understanding the trauma he encountered. I ensured that our next staff member was dedicated to focusing on how we handled this situation. Since the virtual school program operates as a school within a school, I made sure that the principal and her school staff were aware of the situation because this student came from her school due to failing courses, and we agreed to have him enrolled with us so that he would not be a potential school dropout. He also communicated with her staff and associated

with students from the larger school settings as we operated collaboratively in the same building.

Two days later, one of our virtual school facilitators called me to come to the school. She informed me that J.D. was at the front door of the school building and the school safety officers refused to let him into the building because he had the odor of marijuana on him. When I arrived, J. D. was pleased to see me. First, he said," Mr. Cunningham, please tell them to let me into the building so I can go to class." I then asked the safety officer to step into the building to meet in his office to speak to J.D. in private. Once we got into the office, J.D. did admit to smelling like marijuana. He then shared with us that he was not high; the odor was on him because the friends who brought him to school were smoking and were his only transportation to get him to school. He also told us that he needed to complete his assignments utilizing the online program to get his credits to graduate. In addition, he mentioned that he wanted to be in school to get away from his home for a while to get his mind off of what happened to his brother. I then asked the safety officer if we could spray Febreze air freshener on J.D.'s. clothing and send him to class. J.D. and the officer agreed, and he went to class with a smile. I then contacted my virtual school counselor, informed her that J.D. was back in school, and asked if she could stop by and check on him. I was pleased when I saw that J.D. used the program in an effective credit recovery manner to get the 24 credits to graduate at the end of that year, 2018. This incident reinforced the value of supporting students, and having a support system plays a valuable role in helping students succeed in education as they deal with trauma and challenges in their lives. I was more excited when I got a call from J.D.'s mother asking for several more graduation tickets. She shared with me that this was her first child to graduate from high school, and she wanted as many of her family members to be present. She also mentioned that this graduation

motivated her two daughters, who were placed in an alternative school setting to complete their classes so they could graduate from high school.

My compassion for embracing students during a traumatic experience came from my experience in working with students as a mentor while seeking my undergraduate degree. This compassion deepened while serving as an administrator in an alternative setting allowed me to understand better how crime affects those oppressed living in urban communities that are oppressed, having Black males develop into manhood inadequately. This recalls the support given to a student I will identify as Y.A., who was enrolled into a virtual school program as a middle school student due to committing a Type I Offence. The district's Innovative Pathways Program supervisor asked me to sit in on a hearing of Y.A. to see how we could find a suitable educational placement for him due to the nature of his offense. As I entered the meeting, the supervisor introduced me to Y.A. and his family: his mother and father and his older brother, who served as an interpreter for the parents. I was impressed with his brother, who stated that he was a college student attempting to serve as a positive role model for Y.A. He shared with us how his family moved to the U.S. from Kenya and that his parents did not speak English, and their main concern was getting support from the Innovative Pathways Program to address the negative behavior of Y.A. In addition, the supervisor shared her fears for Y.A.'s safety due to his misleading his peers by telling them that he was from Haiti and that he belonged to a Haitian gang known for committing the crime in many urban cities. Y.A. mentioned that he had the students believe he was part of a Haitian gang. In addition, he was being bullied due to his foreign accent and being bussed to the school because his original middle school was closed. After listening to both parties, I supported the family by placing him in the virtual school program, comprised of a very small building with only two classrooms. This setting allowed him

to be closely monitored in a small classroom environment. I worked closely with the instructor to ensure he received adequate support to complete his 8th-grade coursework using an online curriculum. After monitoring him closely, I discovered that he was academically on task and completed his online courses, so I encouraged him to take two summer classes, which allowed him to enter high school with .5 credits toward his freshman year credits.

Y.A. completed his assigned time at this virtual school site under the guidelines of the program facilitators. *I met with him and his parents and walked them through the process of applying for a Magnet School. With my guidance, they followed the process, and he was accepted during his first year of high school. After one year of being in a Magnet School, he began to exhibit negative behavior by getting in trouble and not following the directives of the school administrators. I arranged a second meeting to address the behavior of Y.A., and his family asked if he could return to the virtual school program to complete his course online using the online program due to his showing success in that school setting. He returned to the virtual school program and completed his sophomore and junior years. To keep him occupied and out of trouble, I assigned him to a staff member who assisted him in finding a part-time job using grant funds from a collaboration I built with the school district and the Board of Alderman of the City of St. Louis. As he began improving academics, he encountered trauma from a near-fatal stabbing during his senior year and was left in the street to die. A few weeks later, I was contacted by Y.A., and a young lady presented information showing that he was placed into her custody as a foster child due to his traumatic experience being done by a close family member. For his safety, I removed him from the virtual school program site and placed him at our community partnership program, the Workforce High School, held at SLATE (St. Louis Agency on Training and Employment). Y. A. completed this program successfully by gaining the 24*

required credits he needed to graduate. He also received support from our virtual school facilitator, mentors of SLATE, and close monitoring from his foster care parent, which led him to graduate on time with his cohort peers in 2018. In 2020 I attended an event at a well-known St. Louis downtown hotel, and Y.A. served as a valet parker and expressed an interest in getting into real estate. I then connected him with an organization with which I built a partnership, known as the Somali Business Group, so that they could assist him in getting into the real estate field. In my last communication with Y.A., he informed me that he was working in the real estate field.

Exposure to and fear of violence, such as gun violence, domestic violence, or physical bullying, can traumatize individuals and impact students' social and emotional behavior at home and school. To ensure that students who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events receive appropriate academic support and counseling, parents, caregivers, and school personnel must understand how to recognize the effects of trauma on adolescent students and collaborate to assist the student in their healing (Harper, 2016) Seeing the pain and trauma of these boys made me empathize with them and their horrific experiences. Their experiences caused me to seek ways to support them better, and it started with me re-reading many of the books and articles I had that gave solutions to addressing the trauma faced by these boys and other students. Their experience was a driving force for me to become more of an advocate for Black boys. The work that my staff and I did to support these two students aligns with the statement of Robyn Harper. As an administrator, the experience of working with several alternative school settings allowed me to see many students, mainly Black boys dealing with stress that seems to start from home or their neighborhoods which carries over into the school environment. Stress can be defined as the physiological response to the awareness of loss or control resulting from an adverse condition or person. However, the acute and chronic stress that children raised in poverty experience leaves

an overwhelming imprint on their lives. Acute stress refers to severe contact with such trauma as abuse or violence, whereas chronic stress refers to high stress over time (Jensen, 2009).

These boys had dealt with the trauma that came directly from their homes, and I knew that I had to play an active role in giving them the best support possible, or they might have fallen into the school-to-prison pipeline or death. The School-to-Prison Pipeline doesn't begin at school. It starts at home. The reason it's incorrectly named and defined is that school is where parents' lack of prioritizing the preparation of their children comes to a head. This is where the non-structure of the home clashes with the school's structure. Depending on how parents respond to structure, it can get pretty ugly. Schools have rules to establish and maintain order. Schools have to have order, or they will not be schools. Teachers are in charge of their classrooms because they are responsible for teaching students. Parents' overarching responsibility is to send a child prepared for learning (Ambonisye, 2017). Understanding that the School-to-Prison Pipeline of some student's starts from home is why I provided many opportunities to collaborate effectively with parents, the school, and community partners. Another way of encouraging students to do better is why I, as the school administrator, would hold morning meetings when I served as the principal in the elementary schools and the alternative middle and high schools I was responsible for maintaining.

I would speak to their strengths. Speak to their rational strengths. Give them logically, and give them understanding. Speak to their sentiment and emotion; speak to their moral strengths. The power of resilience is when you teach strength to human beings. Therefore, educational systems should be made to speak to the strengths of Black boys (Akbar, 1982). My role in supporting students with challenges was an opportunity to show how much I cared about them and wanted them to escape the pitfalls of life that come from being an oppressed people.

Black men can care and often care deeply. However, Black men's capacity to manage and approach caring is influenced by their prior experience *as Black men*. Another core tenet of the BMC framework is that caring is often proved by Black men as much as by others, just differently at times. Their culture influences the caring exhibited by Black men (Smith, 2021). I was aware that focusing on the stress and pain of others could become a stress on you as a person. To avoid this, I began focusing on my well-being. I ran or walked daily, meditated, and read positive affirmations to keep my mind as stress-free as possible. I knew that speaking to their strength was an effective method because I learned the power of this by speaking to my strengths as a Black male facing challenges as an educator and administrator in an urban school district that deals with things private and suburban school administrators may not have to deal with in their school environments.

When I Would Do Good, Evil Would Appear

On April 19, 2018, I received an email from the Chief Human Resources Officer asking me to come to his office. This date remains so clear to me because it was my birthday. When I arrived in his office, I could tell he was very nervous and somewhat jittery. I took it as though he was overworked because it was at the end of the day. He stopped the meeting before it began by telling me to meet with him on the following day, April 20, at 8:00 a.m. I arrived at his office at 8:00 a.m., and he came in a few minutes later. He began the meeting by explaining that my job title as the Virtual School Coordinator for this urban school district will be eliminated as of June 30, 2018. I was shocked to hear this news for the first time. He asked if I had a question. I then said, "No, I have a comment." I then stated, "The district is cutting the position that allowed me to increase the district's enrollment of students, increase the graduation rate over the last four

years, and cut the cost that the district was spending from $198,000 per year to $46,500 per year" on an online program for school dropouts and potential dropouts. He stated, "I don't know that decision was made at the level above me." I then shared with him that this was a personal attack against me because I saw no reason to eliminate the position when I had no poor-performing evaluations since I served as a teacher or administrator. I then pointed out that I was not on a Performance Improvement Plan (PIP) and was never informed that I did anything wrong related to my performance as an administrator, which would have led to an Employee Relations hearing. He stated again, "this decision was made at a level above me. I closed the meeting by stating," that's fine. I want you to know that the same man who came into this meeting is leaving this office unbroken and where God wants me to be is where I will be". He stated," I expect nothing less of you."

As I left the office of the Chief Human Resources Officer, I went to the office of the Superintendent and respectfully asked his secretary if she could schedule a meeting with me to meet with the Superintendent. She did so, and I returned to my office, trying to analyze the situation. I then spoke to my immediate supervisor and a former supervisor, who said they would look into the situation. After they investigated, they both returned and shared that they did not know why the position was being eliminated, which shocked them. Several days later, I met with the Superintendent, and he told me that he was taking the program in a different direction and that it was no personal attack against me. However, I felt he was not being truthful and honest by not giving me the real reason behind his decision nor offering me another administrative position, many of which were open for the 2018-2019 school year. The meeting ended, and I returned to conducting my duties as the Virtual School Coordinator by not allowing this decision to have a negative impact on me as a school leader. I continued to serve the students, staff,

parents, and community partners in the best possible way, and I was so proud that we ended the year with one of the second-largest graduations in the district, with a graduating class of 181 students. I also reflected on how my staff and I positively impacted students' lives by meeting them where they were and supporting them in overcoming many obstacles that would have prevented them from graduating high school.

A year after being removed from the role of an administrator and reassigned as a classroom teacher, I was able to reflect on what occurred with me, and I was able to determine that this was the social oppression of children, mainly Black students, in education and an attack on Black male leadership for making a positive impact on the lives of Black students in an urban school district. When I took on the position as the Virtual School Coordinator in 2014, the district was classified as unaccredited. I was appreciated as a leader in this role because I saved the district thousands of dollars by reducing the cost of working with the virtual school program from $198,000 to $46,500 per year with site licenses to serve 1,100 students. This was in the best interest of the district at that time. We also increased student enrollment, graduation rate, and student performance, which helped the district gain its accreditation in 2017. In 2018 the decision to eliminate the position I held as the Virtual School Coordinator with no justification occurred. I was not given anything in writing that justified my position closing. In 2019 the contract with the company I utilized ended, and the district went with another company paying them $500,000. I discovered this after reviewing the Board Docs of the school district. I also discovered that the company they chose was one that I spoke with and showed no interest in them after several meetings because they could not provide services that included career and technical courses that were provided by the current company as well as many other much-needed services that we were getting at a much affordable price. The company I utilized had

Angel Donors pay for a large portion of our program through a grant. I was well convinced that the district made a decision that was not in the best interest of students because the evidence was proven when the graduation rate of the virtual program decreased tremendously and a large number of students were failing courses utilizing this new virtual school vendor. Clearly, the district was practicing oppression on urban school students, mainly Black students, who benefited the most from a video-based online program that brought many of them success. Clearly, those in the top administrative positions cared more about lining the pockets of a vendor than supporting the academic needs of students who achieved the most, Black children. I was convinced when I spoke with an attorney about another situation, and the first thing he said was, "You were standing in the way of someone's money. I've seen this happen many times".

After more reflection, I knew that this elimination of my former position was not only about money and taking care of a vendor at the expense of Black children. It was also a personal attack on Black male leadership that fought for the rights of administrators who were sometimes oppressed by the system. In 2013 I became the president of the administrative union, which supported principals, assistant principals, and other central office staff serving in a supervisory role. A few union representatives and I ensured that our rights were not violated, that we had input on salary decisions, and that the district treated us respectfully. During that time, I can recall supporting several administrators on Professional Improvement Plans (PIP) and receiving inadequate evaluations from their Network Superintendents. These were individuals that I felt the district wanted to remove from leadership for one reason or another, and the use of a PIP was not put in place to help them improve but put in place to remove them from their leadership position. Eliminating my administrative position benefited the district in several ways. In other words, this is an example of what is called" killing two birds with one stone." What caused me

the most pain is that this form of oppression and attack on Black leadership came from the approval of a Black superintendent. To me, this mirrored Black-on-Black crime. The district did not know that in 2017 I started an educational consulting business, and the national union office stated that if the members chose me to remain president, I could because I was the head administrator of an educational company. I remained president while serving as a classroom teacher and remain in that position. So looking back, the only ones who suffered were children of this urban school district, mainly Black children.

Educational outcomes for Black and Hispanic children are much more a function of their unequal access to critical educational resources, including skilled teachers and quality curricula. The educational system in the U.S. is one of the most inadequate in the industrialized world, and students regularly receive dramatically different learning chances based on their socioeconomic status (Darling-Hammond, 1998). It was clear that my removal as a school leader had to do with not allowing an online educational company to take on the contract from the previous company that had it for three years. This new company contacted me several times, and I turned them down because they did not offer as much as the current company and they could not answer several questions I asked about what I saw as hidden charges. Once I was removed, this company was hired at the cost of $453,300 more than what the district was paying (according to the district's Board Docs system). There has been a substantial decrease in minority teachers and principals, primarily Blacks. The recent decline has been so severe that individuals have referred to these groups as "endangered species." The diminishing Black workforce can be attributed to various political, economic, demographic, and sociological factors affecting Black teachers and Black principals (Irvine, 2018). Eliminating my administrative position and reassigning it to a Caucasian female is a true example of a district endangering a Black male administrator. School

districts must support non-traditional, culturally responsive teaching methods, generate spaces where educators of color can feel safe and supported, and train other educators to develop school environments free from bias and microaggressions (Burns, 2022).

My Return Back to the Classroom

As I returned to the classroom as a 5th-grade science teacher after having my administrative position as the Virtual School Coordinator eliminated for no justifiable reason, I had to put my personal feelings aside about what happened to me and focus on being the best teacher for students and colleagues for staff. The advantage of being a former school administrator was that I knew what was expected of me as a teacher from the many classroom observations and walk-throughs I did in traditional and alternative settings. I began by taking a self-inventory to determine my strengths in teaching. After researching various teaching styles, I decided to utilize the kind I was very familiar with, integrating technology into the curriculum. Using integrated technology skills is what I did in my first nine years of teaching, and it allowed me to capture students' interest and keep them engaged in the lesson. The use of technology allowed me to introduce students to far more practical concepts than only getting them from a textbook. Students could use resources that we did not have physical access to in a brick-and-mortar setting by obtaining them from their assigned iPads, computers, or laptop. We used an interactive simulation program in math and science called Gizmos. This program allowed students to use the discovery learning technique with content aligned to the Missouri State Standards. Teen Kids News and DOGO news were used to introduce them to literacy. They were engaged in project-based learning, which kept them informed of current events and gave them solutions to addressing world issues that affected them as students. I used Google Maps to allow

them to visit places worldwide and in spaces, they may never have a chance to visit or see. Microsoft PowerPoint Presentations and YouTube videos were used to introduce them to various concepts, events, and lessons to keep their attention and address things they noticed and interested them. Many of the tasks were assessed in a friendly online game called Kahoot that kept them thinking in a quick and fun manner and allowed them to compete with each other in a non-threatening way.

I experienced joy from working with students, staff, parents, and community partners who supported me in my transition back into the classroom. However, I also experienced the frustration that teachers complained about, such as too much assessing and testing students from the district level. It seemed students were burned out with these mandated assessments, and teachers were burned out on assessing them on something they had not had the opportunity to teach based on a pacing chart they had to follow. Changing some aspects of the assessment process can make it more meaningful and remove some of the workload burdens off teachers (Sherrington, 2018). In addition, there was a minimal alignment of the curriculum with the standards that students were being assessed on, and very little differentiation taking place and training provided to teachers to address this matter. To address the lack of differentiation, I was able to pilot an adaptive learning program called Istation. I discovered this program as I reflected on my first three years of teaching with a program called Computer Curriculum Corporation (CCC). This program personalized instructions for students and identified their weaknesses and strengths in mathematics after using it ten times. Due to the improvement in technology, Istation updated the program by identifying a student's weakness in math and reading after 30 minutes of using it in each subject. They also incorporated writing and science to give the students a whole curriculum experience. Not only was I able to use the program with

my 5th-grade students, but I was also allowed to train other teachers on how to use the program, and it was piloted in the whole school from PreK-5th grade as well as used with students who were in an alternative program that was assigned to this Magnet elementary school.

I was pleased to work with administrators, teachers, and support staff in implementing a positive school culture. They welcomed me with open arms and assisted me with getting back into the practice of being a classroom teacher. They even picked my brain on issues that dealt with administration and allowed me to share my perspective on addressing situations from a former administrator's lens. In addition, the school truly focused on views of working together as a family and as an effective team. There is a saying that says, so goes the principal, and so goes the school. Setting the tone of a positive school culture was seen in the leadership of this school principal, who supported and encouraged her staff to meet the needs of their students. I knew that her leadership was the driving force that allowed me to get over being forced back into the teaching field after serving 15 years as an administrator. Being in this school helped me realize that the life challenge I faced in my educational career was a blessing in helping me retire and pursue a career in consulting with the company I started in 2017.

Chapter 5

Black males represent less than 2% of teachers in the U.S. School districts say they want more Black male educators; while many studies confirm Black male educators' positive effects on students, we are still classified as some of the least respected employees the American educational system (Burns, 2022). I decided to do this study after 25 years of experience in education as a teacher and administrator focusing on my last four years in administration as a coordinator of a virtual school program and the impact that I made on the lives of students in an urban school setting. This study has given me the passion for continuing to echo my experiences in the hope they will help others and eliminate the overt and covert oppression placed on students of color and Black educators who dedicate their lives to education. Knowing my uniqueness helps me understand my experiences and the memories I hold close to my heart.

Serious life challenges like homelessness, suspension, early parenthood, and a lack of academic confidence threaten to derail poor young Americans on their path toward high-school graduation (Sebenius, 2016). Sharing stories of students, staff and parents has been a rewarding endeavor as an educator and an administrator. I want this dissertation to speak to educational policymakers by sending the message that we must change traditional practices that harm those who need us the most, as well as those who have committed their time and effort to make a positive impact in education. I wanted to tell these stories to highlight how we can help children and adults overcome the negative experiences of an urban school district.

This journey of walking through my educational experiences has taken me to depths of myself, of which some I had forgotten and others that I enjoyed experiencing. I would never have thought that I would ascertain so much about myself while benefiting from the findings when I

decided to use the method of autoethnography. I now understand why I was blessed to get into education despite many people telling me this is a low-paying career. The cost of supporting others has paid off tremendously for me. Having taken this path in education, I realize that the career choice I chose as an undergraduate student at Harris-Stowe State College (now Harris-Stowe State University) has genuinely shaped my being a teacher and administrator. It has been the driving force of all I did as I facilitated student learning and directed staff to be the best they could be for students, parents, and the community. I hope those who read my dissertation embrace and be more supportive of Black male educators so they can continue to be significate role models in the lives of all students, mainly Black boys who need them the most. At the state level, our lawmakers must develop policies to support the staffing, retaining, and professional training of educators of color. At the school level, administrators must be educated on the value of respecting Black male educators as intellectual and professional leaders, not seeing us as security. We are more than a single, separate muscle; we are the brain. Instead of reducing Black male educators to managers who keep Black children in line, administrators would do better to value their craft and learn from their non-traditional, culturally responsive methods (Burns, 2022).

Summary

Parents and school personnel must first recognize the student behaviors resulting from exposure to violence and trauma to develop these secure relationships and respond effectively to the student's needs. Next, once the adults in a teen's life have determined that a student has experienced trauma, parents and students must collaborate with teachers to create healthy environments for teens to cope appropriately at home and school. Finally, parents and teachers should provide students with opportunities (Harper, 2016).

This autoethnographic dissertation presented my personal accounts of my journey in education. The intention was to show the power of supporting all children, mainly Black boys in urban school settings, as well as Black male teachers and administrators who make a significant difference in the lives of Black children, according to studies and my own experience. In addition, my dissertation was designed to show the value of Black male educators who commit themselves to work. We must be valued not just for our color but for our positive impact and the ability to make once supported and allowed to serve without intentional challenges and barriers.

A qualitative research approach was used for my dissertation. It was conducted using autoethnography, which involves me describing and systematically analyzing my personal experiences as a Black male educator and administrator. This qualitative research is a flexible method that allowed me to share what I experienced in my educational career, my challenges, my victories, and my support for Black boys as a Black male who was raised, taught, and served as an administrator in an urban school district which I attended as a Black male growing up in an urban community.

The literature review explores what I recognized as Challenges facing Black male principals. I then examine the literature from authors who focus on Black male development and ways to implement skills and strategies to effectively educate them without damaging their identity due to their cultural background. I also reviewed some literature on the oppression of Black children in education. Finally, I investigated the literature on autoethnography, a growing form of research that speaks to a reader from the individual perspective of the researcher. This study was done to contribute to the body of research where the educator and administrator is the researcher who writes about a specific community within the researcher's society. In addition, this study was conducted to give a "voice" to my educational experiences. I hope teachers, school

leaders, parents, and community members who dedicate their lives to education will do much as possible to eliminate oppressive educational systems that impact all children, mainly those of color.

For this study, I reflected on supportive data from my experiences, notes from my journals, photos of educational activities, newsletters, and evaluations of my educational performance as a teacher and administrator. The supportive data also consisted of reports and school data that I was responsible for maintaining. I also use notes from students and staff commentary relative to their perspectives as they participated in the schools I worked in as a teacher or administrator.

Findings

My findings allowed me to get a better understanding of myself and how I react to life challenges. It made me look at how my spirituality plays a role in keeping me grounded in my faith in a higher being. I also got a deeper understanding of the role of Black male educators and how much we have in common working in educational systems. Rather it is public, private, or charter schools, we are all looked at in the same manner. My findings also indicate that we must focus on how schools consciously and unconsciously oppress children, mostly Black boys, as they educate them daily. There must be an understanding of Black male development and effectively use the findings to educate them without damaging their self-esteem and hindering their creative learning styles. This autoethnography describes how providing the proper support from the school, family, and community partners can help successfully educate those who need the support to overcome challenges in an urban school environment. Reflecting on my 25 years in education and practices in this urban school setting has allowed me to utilize the work of men like Ajuma Muhammad, Mychal Wynn, and Ahmad Mandla Mahdi and understand education's

plight from the eyes of men like Useni Eugene Perkins, Jawanza Kunjufu and Pedro Noguera. Their work provided me with the necessary research to conduct my autoethnography dissertation. Reflecting on the work of these men allowed me to give open space for others to see that supporting Black boys with suitable substance will positively affect them and help change the negative trends they set in society. Reflections directed me to investigate my thoughts to remember and designate how my experiences enabled me to involve the views of students, parents, educators, and community partners. This autoethnography would not have been complete without their thoughtful explanations and experiences.

Conclusion

In Chapter 1, I laid the foundation for my autoethnography study by focusing on my career journey as an educator while supporting all students, mainly Black boys in urban school districts, after understanding their plight as well as the plight of Black males in education. I then talk about how the experience I gained working in a male development youth program as an undergraduate student in an HBCU gave me my foundational expertise, passion, and knowledge of working to address the issues faced by Black boys in the urban educational system. I share how these skills allowed me to build a systematic caring and supportive role I would implement as a teacher and administrator. I then discuss how addressing the challenges faced by Black boys in education can be done with adequate support. Critical supporters must not be afraid to honestly identify and call attention to the system's failures, whether related to unresponsive leadership or the poor quality of teaching. In addition, critical supporters must demonstrate active support for change and improvement, and given the sorrowful plight of many schools, they must be open to considering various innovative strategies (Noguera, 2003).

After carefully analyzing this study, I discuss how Black boys face overt and covert social oppression from those responsible for educating them. I honestly believe you must love your students, respect them, and appreciate their culture (Kunjufu 1995). Researchers love promoting the racial gap based on income, marital status, and parents' educational background. Seldom, if ever, do they research the impact of love and high expectations (Kunjufu, 2014). This study shows how students not only want to know how much you know; they want to know how much you care. This study showed me that understanding students' cultural backgrounds and not judging them but embracing and supporting them could positively impact their lives as they face unexpected challenges in an urban school setting. Using methods that exceed modern teaching and learning, Black male educators can provide hope, motivation, advice, empathetic listening, and, sometimes, tough love to make a difference in their student's lives (Callahan, 2020). This support allows students to think critically, which is not always easy. I learned that as a teacher and an administrator, you must have a passion for working with students, staff, parents, and community partners in bringing out the best in youth by keeping them focused on the importance of education. Using autoethnography, I constructed my thoughts and told a story from a personal perspective. The process of probing into oneself and the lives of others is not easy but a most productive and rewarding one to get your audience to see things from the participants' perspective. The most complex task I had in writing this dissertation was keeping the focus on me. I believe this was due to how much I care for others.

Discussion

When deciding on the topic for my research project, I focused on my many years of experience in education, mainly around technology usage in classroom settings and how it was

used to support students who struggled with behavior and academically. The knowledge that drove me to the topic was my work as an alternative school principal and my position as the Virtual School Coordinator. Therefore, I was also intrigued when I read the article titled **Why Students Drop out of School: A Review of 25 Years of Research**. Many of the reasons I read about in this article reinforced the experiences I witnessed of students, mainly high school students, who dropped out, were thrown out, or cleverly escorted out and denied access from enrolling in some schools for reasons that made no sense to me. I was also captivated by the article, **The Home-to-Prison Pipeline** (Ambonisye, 2017). She allowed me to see how school dropout sometimes starts in the home and how it is overlooked by parents who want to blame schools and society and not accept their role in allowing students to become dropouts. Finally, the work of Dr. Jawanza Kunjufu has always fascinated me. I was pleased to read another article he wrote titled **Over 100,000 African-Americans Are Now Homeschooling Their Children**. He points out how African-American parents successfully educate their children from home, and this teaching and learning process has closed the achievement gap for black students in reading and mathematics. This inspired me to see how close the achievement gap can start from home when caring and knowledgeable parents take charge of their children's education.

After twenty-five years of experience in education as a teacher and administrator, I am always looking for ways to improve myself. I am mainly looking at how to keep up with the changes in education related to technology because we are in an ever-growing technological society where Black boys are leading the charge with technical skills that are not tested nor evaluated in classroom settings. Skills such as making Tik-Toks and Youtube videos. I feel schools are not moving fast enough to keep up with the students who have passed them up in some technology areas. Students' technological skills can be seen in how they have mastered

video gaming skills beyond many of the concepts taught in most school settings, be they public, private, or charter. I spent lots of time studying adaptive learning technology programs and how they are designed to capture the attention of struggling learners and help them to improve academically at their own pace. These programs also keep the students involved in classroom learning, leading to fewer or no behavior problems for most students assigned to such a program. Evidence of this was presented to me since the beginning of my teaching career, and it impressed me more as the Virtual School Coordinator. I saw how technology programs and focusing on students' social and emotional behaviors, mainly Black boys, are several solutions for helping them overcome life challenges in society and the classroom. I also attribute the success of working with challenging students to the support I received from building relationships with community partners in each school I worked in as a school leader. A community school is a school environment and a set of organizations connecting a school, the families of students, and the surrounding community. A community school is distinguished by a unified focus on academics, the development of students, support for families, health and social services, and community expansion (Blank, Jacobson, & Melaville, 2012). This collaboration could be seen in the relationship built with the **St. Louis Community College Harrison Education Center.** They invited our students to participate in sessions conducted by motivational speakers and the access they provided by allowing them to utilize their building to take the ASVAB and Accuplacer tests, which are required tests for students to take before graduating high school. Sharing resources, knowledge, and responsibility, community schools can address problems related to economic hardship and create necessary conditions for learning by focusing on a single access point of public schools to effectively target their efforts (Blank, Jacobson, & Melaville, 2012). This type of support can be seen in the partnership we developed with **SPRINT,** which

resulted in the district receiving 1,200 electrical devices (cell phones and iPods) each year to address the online connection or lack of connection by some of our students. This free service allowed our students with online challenges to work at their own pace anytime. This support was a direct tribute to the increased graduation rates. This also came about due to a relationship and partnership I developed with the St. Louis City Board of Alderman. Keep in mind that this support and relationship was formed pre-COVID-19.

Dropping out of high school is an important economic and social problem. More highly educated workers have seen their incomes rise, and less-educated workers have seen their incomes fall. Moreover, many youths who drop out are from low-income families and may maintain a cycle of poverty. Without completing high school, most remain at the bottom of the economic ladder (Dynarski et. al, 1998). Understanding why students drop out and their consequences were the driving force behind my study. This journey allowed me to see the negative and positive outcomes of supporting students to overcome the challenges that most experienced from being raised in poverty. In addition, this research has opened my eyes to how many factors hinder students in a public urban school district when attempting to raise them above poverty. According to Dynarski et. al, programs must provide services designed to help students perform better in school and stay in schools, such as intensive instruction, attendance monitoring, and follow-up, small-school settings, counseling and mentoring, links with social-service providers, and education in life skills and conflict resolution. As the program administrator, I ensured that we provided adequate services for students by working collaboratively with our virtual school facilitators and community partners for those students we graduated from 2015-2018.

Implications

My study shows the importance of Black male educators in the field of education while they are the lowest number of educators in the teaching force. Learning this as a college freshman was why I enrolled as an Elementary Education major. Black men make up only two percent of the country's teaching force, but their existence in the classroom advances student outcomes (Callahan, 2020). Black male educators are the key to helping Black male students in urban schools and inspiring skills to succeed by acting as role models (Pabon. 2016). This dissertation shows how I was the Black male role model as a teacher and administrator supporting Black boys facing challenges in an urban school district.

This dissertation also highlighted the challenges Black male educators and school leaders faced. African-American administrator candidates are less likely to be appointed. Black principal candidates were 18 percent less likely to be promoted to the principal position than equally qualified white candidates (Barshay, 2020). It is time to eliminate the distorted psychology of the education community that buys into the acceptance that secondary school leaders continue to fail, but the systems that should be there to support them are excused from accountability (Militello et al, 2007). My study highlights how I was demoted as a school leader with no justification while having the position retitled and replaced by a Caucasian female.

In my study, the research shows how I recognized the effects of oppression of children in urban schools, mainly Black boys, and how I supported students who were being oppressed while battling the barriers that were set up for me as a Black male administrator. Policymakers, schools, and teachers sympathized with children raised in poverty but were unconscious that poverty lessened their chances of success. However, research has changed the mindset of those

responsible for educating children about poverty by clearly outlining data and studies on the difficulties of living in poverty and confirming that schools succeed in teaching disadvantaged students from low-socioeconomic families (Jensen, 2009). Involving community organizations eliminates society from blaming schools when the problem of educating and preparing children for college, the workforce, and life is a job that includes all stakeholders. The change occurs when all stakeholders understand their value and how utilizing the skills of our students productively benefit everyone. My study has implications of changing how we view students of poverty and providing them with access to practical teaching tools and opportunities to develop job-related skills as high school students, allowing them to become productive citizens beyond their low economic status.

My study presented stories of how I supported several students dealing with life crises while attending an urban school district. When it comes to helping students succeed, experts in education and members of nonprofits embrace the notion that a broad web of formal and informal role models is needed (Sebenius, 2016). This research shows the importance of utilizing staff members within the school district and those from the community to mentor struggling students. Mentoring allows the staff to be more than employees. Mentoring also allows them to be front-line heroes, saving our students from daily challenges that hinder them from graduating. Serious risks like homelessness, suspension, early parenthood, and a lack of academic confidence threaten to derail poor young Americans on their path toward high-school graduation (Sebenius, 2016). I used this study to show how caring individuals play a critical role in the experiences that students get in school; it is as vital to the curriculum as reading, writing, and mathematics.

My dissertation showed how my leadership skills were used to collaborate with others as a Black male administrator placed into several alternative settings and how I had to rely on understanding Black male development and oppression in education to make it work in a non-traditional school setting. The "Small school," a type of environment within a school, employs faculty and staff brought in from elsewhere in the district rather than the larger school (Dewees 1999). For example, the virtual school programs were set up in four district high school settings. This model benefited many registered students in the regular high school setting, mainly Black boys who failed one or more courses. They came to one of the virtual school program locations in the building to make up for their failed course(s) while maintaining their status as an enrolled student in the larger school setting. In addition, the district benefited by sharing staff in both the larger and smaller school environments to address students who were falling behind and those who could not effectively work in a regular classroom setting sometimes made up of large class sizes.

The final implication of this autoethnography research paper, which I share through the stories I provide the importance of embracing students who deal with the trauma imposed on them from various communities with challenges that come from growing up in poverty. Keep in mind that I highlight my challenges as a Black male administrator and do not lose or ignore the challenges faced by both, Black males and boys in an urban school environment that implemented overt and covert oppression. Historically underserved students are more likely to witness and experience violent acts firsthand in their communities and face a greater risk of exposure to violence (Harper, 2016). The statements of Harper are daily for many of the students we served in the Virtual School Program. Students who are exposed to and fear violence, such as gun violence, domestic violence, or physical bullying, can traumatize individuals and impact

students' social and emotional behavior at home and school. To safeguard students who have experienced or witnessed traumatic events and receive appropriate academic support and counseling, parents, caregivers, and school personnel must understand how to recognize the effects of trauma on adolescent students and collaborate to assist the student in their healing (Harper 2016). Understanding trauma was my main reason for sharing the stories of students who were faced with such situations due to their negative ways of being raised in communities that have a powerful impact on them negatively, which causes them to struggle with achieving the skills they need to graduate high school.

Next Steps

I was fortunate to learn about autoethnography and its use as a research method. Autoethnography relies heavily on up-close, personal experience and possible input, not just observation, by researchers skilled in autoethnography (Genzuk, 2003). I plan to use all the educational experiences I gained over 25 years of working with students, staff, parents, and community partners to support schools in preparing students for this 21st Century's world impacted negatively by education and facing ongoing trauma. As of July 1, 2020, I retired as an educator and administrator to pursue my dream of consulting with school districts on how to use adaptive learning programs and focus on the trauma that comes from adverse childhood experiences to educate students better. I also assist with writing grants to get funding to help schools with program implementation.

Despite the many reports that our educational system isn't working, most students make it through with the ability to further their education or go out into the world of jobs and develop a family. A large portion of students, however, are getting lost in the system. These children aren't

working and learning at a rate they can achieve. Some receive high school diplomas and can barely read, write, or do simple mathematical equations. Yet, these children can learn if put into the correct environment. Unfortunately, that environment isn't a traditional school setting (Loveless, 2019). My goal is to utilize my company (Virtual School Coaching & Consulting, LLC) to address the needs of students who do not fit into the traditional school setting as well as those who want to stay in a traditional school setting by using online programs which helps improve the teaching and learning process that's failing our children. Unfortunately, some youth, especially those of color, remain disadvantaged and marginalized in these traditional education structures. There are still documented inequities in the educational experiences and opportunities for underrepresented youth, severely impacting their access to resources allowing them to participate on an even playing field with their more advantaged peers. I'm hopeful that digital tools and innovation will serve as an equalizer in this regard and even the playing field for the Black youth. (Woolley-Wilson, 2018). Based on my research and experiences with several innovative programs, I found out that this can be done by what is known as adaptive learning and STAR (Skilled Through Alternative Routes). Adaptive learning systems personalize instruction to student's individual learning needs and abilities, and STAR provides them with hands-on job-related skills.

According to the Opportunity @ Work (2021) website, people classified as STARs (Skilled Through Alternative Routes) are young adults at least 25 years old who graduated from high school and have skills but don't hold a four-year college degree. Many STARs enrolled in college but didn't finish their degree due to family or financial situations. Others have a two-year community college degree or received technical training through workforce programs, online credentialing services, or certification programs. Still, others are self-taught or develop their

skills on the job or through military service. I am very familiar with STARs through my work with The OML Project, which has prepared individuals to get their A+ Certification, Cisco Networking Certification, and certification in Cyber Security. The Opportunity @ Work (2021) website also mentions how STARs are one of our country's most excellent undervalued resources. They represent an enormous group of talented workers with the skills and potential to surpass others at in-demand jobs, but they never get the chance to show what they can do. Instead, they are the invisible casualties of America's broken labor market, where employers screen for a college degree to streamline their applicant pool. Most importantly, the site points out that when employers screen out applicants without a four-year degree, they exclude 68% African-Americans, 79% Latin and 73% Rural Americans, and Two-thirds of America's veterans who don't hold four-year degrees but gained valuable technical and soft skills during their service. Understanding the need to fill STAR jobs is one of the reasons I developed my business, Virtual School Coaching & Consulting, LLC, which allowed me to show school districts how programs like the Acellus Learning System have the career and technical courses that prepare students for these STAR jobs as they work on taking the required courses to graduate high school.

Enclosing I hope that others can learn from my experiences, especially those in education who are responsible for educating children who are in oppressive situations. By sharing resources, expertise, and accountability, community schools can address issues related to economic adversities and generate necessary conditions for learning by focusing on a single access point of public schools to effectively target their efforts (Blank, Jacobson, & Melaville, 2012). Building better relationships with schools as community partners is the only way I see America addressing the need to close the achievement gap, reduce crime and school dropout

rates, and overcome the digital divide of underserved communities. In addition, the vision of a community school must be at the heart of evolving place-based projects, including Promise Neighborhoods, Choice Neighborhoods, cradle-to-career programs, and P-20 networks integrating educational opportunities from preschool through college (Blank, Jacobson, & Melaville, 2012).

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