

# Research on Black male teachers, then and now

In 1994, I was teaching elementary school at a charter school in Harlem. At the same time, I was working on Master's degree at Teacher's College, Columbia University. During the day, I was working hard to meet the academic, social and emotional needs of about 30 mostly poor Black and Brown students in a school led by a group of friends with a paternalistic view of the children, their families and their conditions. I recall being at odds with teachers who professed that "many of these children will be dead or locked up by the time their teenagers". I recall teaching third graders about the legacy of slavery, Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party's 10-point program. So, of course, I was also at odds with the administration. They wanted to know why I insisted on politicizing the children. I reminded them, as I had learned through my reading of Freire, "everything is political and that Black children needed to know their history".

I left my third grade classroom in Harlem and headed to 120th and Amsterdam where I took classes with some of the brightest minds in the nation. I was introduced to critical pedagogy and to the literature on urban schools. It's where I was introduced to the work of Lisa Delpit and Gloria Ladson-Billings. Lisa Delpit addressed the fundamental issue of facing African American teachers: How do we as African American teachers advance an agenda for Black education in professional communities committed to the continued marginalization of these children and their communities? As an African American teacher, I took a stand on behalf of African American children. Delpit's (1995) work spurred me to want to know more about what other teachers like me were experiencing. I began to read narratives about teachers of color. Enter Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994). I read, and re-read *The Dreamkeepers* (1994). I shared it with parents in the school where I taught. The book, with its focus on the effective practices of mostly African American women teachers who were successful teachers of African American children, provided me with emotional and intellectual sustenance. I was assured that what I was doing in my classroom was aligned with best practices for teaching African American children. I also knew, at that point, that I wanted to conduct research on African American teachers.

I went on to teach in the Chicago Public Schools to fulfill my five-year teaching obligation as a Golden Apple Foundation Scholar of Illinois. It became abundantly clear to me that while teaching was my calling, in one sense, I had developed a strong interest in research. After only two years, I found myself back in academia. While in my doctoral program, I began systematically studying the literature on African American teachers. I was reading the work of scholars such as Michele Foster, Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, Sabrina Hope King, Michael Fultz, Joyce King, Annette Henry and others. It is beyond the scope of this viewpoint article to perform a substantive review of this work. I have done this elsewhere (Lynn, 2002, 2006a, 2006b). While there was a good amount of research conducted on African American women, there was very little written about African American men in the classroom. I vividly recall the portraits of the Black male teachers in Michele Foster's (1997) seminal work *Black Teachers on Teaching*. I decided then that I would commit to studying



and writing about this unique and significantly understudied population. What I did not know at the time is that I was charting new territory. That was in 1999. In that year, I published an article as part of a special issue of the *Journal of Negro Education* edited by Robert Cooper. The article, written in a collaboration with a teacher and a school principal at small mostly Black private school in the “Black Beverly Hills” section of Los Angeles also known as Baldwin Hills, described the “prophetic practices” of an African American male middle school teacher working with African American students, Kamal Hassan (Lynn *et al.*, 1999). That same year, I was fortunate to publish another piece where in the journal, *Urban Education*, which used critical race theory as a lens to analyze the perceptions of mostly Black teachers on their work and lives. The article, “Toward a Critical Race Pedagogy” (Lynn, 1999) was an effort to re-conceptualize pedagogy as it relates to race. It garnered a good amount of attention and has been reprinted a few times. I have had the good fortune to written many more articles on the subject in the past two decades.

Reflecting over these past two decades, I was not fully aware that I was entering into such uncharted territory. As I entered the academy in 2001, I was sometimes referred to as “the lead researcher” on African American male teachers. In fact, for a period, I was the only researcher in the USA whose research focused on African American male teachers. Nearly two decades later, research on African American male teachers has become more commonplace. A number of scholars, such as Edward Brockenbrough, Donald Easton-Brooks, Reitumetse Mabokela (along with co-author Jean Madsen), Chance Lewis, Rich Milner, Ivory Toldson, Anthony Brown, Thurman Bridges, Wilbur Parker, Amber Pabon, Julius Davis and others have established strong reputations for conducting high quality research on Black male teachers. This research examines a number of issues such as pop culture, gender, sexuality, masculinity and race and the way it connects to the work and lives of African American male teachers in a variety of contexts. The research on African American male teachers is diverse today because it draws on a number of epistemological and methodological frameworks.

I’m proud to have played a role in developing the next generation of scholars like Julius Davis, Thurman Bridges and Wilbur Parker. I brought Thurman to the University of Maryland from Virginia where he was working as a middle school teacher. After I left Maryland for Chicago, Thurman continued to thrive while working under the stewardship of scholarly giants like Tara Brown and Patricia Hill Collins. I served on the dissertation committees of Julius Davis and Wilbur Parker. All of these gentlemen work at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Thurman and Julius are tenured. Wilbur who worked for many years at the National Board recently began his academic career – also at an HBCU. For many others, I have reviewed their work for journals or reviewed their dossiers for tenure and promotion. I have co-authored conference presentations. I recall serving on a panel many years ago with Rich Milner and Chance Lewis on the topic of Black male educators. Chance Lewis and I have also co-presented on the topic at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

Today, a new area of research is emerging; research that explores perspectives of Black male teachers with origins outside of the USA. Researchers such as Audrey Osler and Christine Callender have conducted research on Black women teachers in the UK for decades. Only recently has Callender begun to turn her attention to male teachers. Other scholars, such as Wilbur Parker, are examining the experiences of African male teachers in the USA. I am reminded of my own research with a teacher from Ghana who drew on his own cultural reservoirs to help his African American students see the link between African and African American culture. I recall how he drew on his own schooling experiences in a very competitive boarding school in Ghana to set high standards for his own students in

urban Los Angeles. I did not know, at that time, that telling this teacher's story would lead others to see this is a valuable and worthwhile area of investigation. As my soul continues to look back in wonder at "how I got over", I am gratified to know that I have contributed to the development of this exciting, robust and rapidly growing area of study.

**Marvin Lynn**

*School of Education, Indiana University South Bend, South Bend, Indiana, USA*

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