

The Trauma of Black Males Within the Education System

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Abstract

This research explores the systemic trauma experienced by Black male students in the U.S. public education system. Three themes were identified: racialized discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice as a mitigation strategy, and the underrepresentation of Black male educators. The paper goes on to examine how practices at City Middle School could be aligned with research, emphasizing the need for culturally sustaining, trauma-informed, and equity-driven approaches. It then explores implications for future research and transformed practice, calling for systemic reforms that prioritize restorative justice, increase Black male educator representation, and dismantle structures that perpetuate educational trauma for Black boys.

Keywords: racialized discipline, school to prison pipeline, restorative justice, black male educators, educational trauma, culturally responsive pedagogy, racism in education

The Trauma of Black Males Within the Education System

This project explores the research of systemic trauma experienced by Black male students in the U.S. public education system, focusing on the interconnected forces of racialized discipline, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the underrepresentation of Black male educators. Grounded in both empirical literature and the lived experiences of the author as a Black male educator, this study critically examines how exclusionary discipline policies, implicit bias, and a lack of culturally responsive support contribute to academic disengagement and emotional harm. Drawing on a comprehensive review of qualitative and quantitative research, the paper highlights restorative justice as a promising intervention to counter punitive practices, emphasizing the need for culturally sustaining and equity-centered implementation. Additionally, the study addresses the transformative role of Black male educators, while interrogating the structural barriers that limit their presence and impact. An action plan tailored to a local middle school context is included to bridge research and practice, offering concrete strategies to disrupt cycles of trauma and promote healing-centered, inclusive education. This work contributes to the broader call for systemic reform that affirms the identities, potential, and well-being of Black male students.

Focal Problem

This research examines the deep and lasting trauma experienced by Black male students within the U.S. public education system, a trauma that stems not from isolated incidents but from entrenched patterns of systemic racism. Black boys are routinely subjected to exclusionary discipline practices, denied access to culturally affirming pedagogy, and often misidentified as behavior problems rather than learners with potential. These patterns reflect an education system that too often criminalizes Black childhood and fails to create conditions that support Black male

students' academic and emotional development. Disproportionate suspension and expulsion rates, heightened surveillance, and implicit bias contribute to chronic stress, disengagement, and internalized feelings of inadequacy. Instead of fostering a nurturing environment, schools frequently become sites of racial trauma for Black male youth. This project seeks to critically analyze how institutional practices perpetuate that harm and to explore solutions through affirming, trauma-informed, and justice-centered educational approaches.

Context

Local Connection

In my own classroom experiences as a Black male educator, I have seen how school environments often fail to serve Black male students equitably. The disciplinary practices I have observed are frequently punitive and inconsistent, disproportionately affecting students of color. Moreover, the absence of culturally responsive teaching methods and the near invisibility of Black male teachers means many of these students lack mentorship, representation, and the affirmation they need to succeed. This lived reality shapes the urgency of my inquiry.

Regional Connection

In Washington State, the racial disparities in school discipline are well-documented. State data show that Black students, particularly boys, are suspended and expelled at significantly higher rates than their white peers. At the same time, regional efforts to diversify the educator workforce have fallen short, with recruitment and retention strategies failing to adequately address the racial mismatch between teachers and students. Conversations around the school-to-prison pipeline have gained traction, yet comprehensive reforms are lacking in most districts.

National Connection

Nationally, research has confirmed that Black male students are among the most marginalized in K–12 public schools. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Black boys are suspended at nearly four times the rate of white boys. This disparity begins as early as preschool and persists throughout their educational trajectory. Compounding the issue is the severe underrepresentation of Black male educators—who make up only about 1.3% of the national teaching workforce. This underrepresentation denies Black male students access to adult figures who may share their cultural experiences and offer both academic and emotional support. Together, these patterns reveal a crisis in equity and representation.

Importance

To Me

As a Black male educator, this issue is both professional and deeply personal. I have lived through the same systems of exclusion my students now face, and I carry the responsibility to disrupt them. My identity and lived experience give me insight into the emotional toll that racialized discipline and cultural invisibility can have. This work is my effort to create classrooms where Black male students are not just seen, but valued and affirmed.

To My Students

My students deserve an educational experience that uplifts rather than marginalizes them. Too often, Black boys are written off before their potential is even explored. By understanding the structures that harm them, I can better equip myself to advocate for practices that affirm their identities, restore their agency, and cultivate their academic excellence. This project also gives students the language to name their experiences and imagine a future where school is a space of safety and empowerment.

To My Community

Educational outcomes for Black male students reflect broader systemic inequalities that continue to affect Black communities. Schools are not just places of learning—they are pipelines to opportunity or systems of containment. Addressing these inequities is a community imperative. By lifting up the experiences of Black male students and educators, this research contributes to the collective goal of building equitable, just, and liberatory school environments for all.

Purpose

The purpose of this project is to examine how school systems both reproduce and can potentially interrupt the cycle of trauma that disproportionately affects Black male students. Specifically, this project aims to identify the root causes of racial disparities in school discipline, evaluate the significance of Black male educator representation, and explore the implementation of restorative justice as a healing alternative to punitive discipline. Through a critical review of existing literature, I hope to sharpen my own pedagogical practices while also advocating for systemic changes in education policy and school culture. The insights gained from this research will inform my work as an educator committed to equity, and serve as a guide for transforming my classroom into a space that affirms and uplifts Black male students.

Focal Questions

The intersection of my personal identity, professional experience, and academic inquiry compels this research. As a Black male educator working in a public middle school, I have directly witnessed the disproportionate discipline Black boys receive, the absence of culturally responsive practices, and the lack of adult role models who reflect their identities. These patterns are not coincidental—they are systemic and deeply rooted in the historical design of American public education. This project seeks to interrogate how schools often perpetuate trauma for Black

male students through exclusionary policies and cultural erasure, while also exploring pathways toward healing and transformation. Grounded in both empirical research and lived experience, this study poses the following focal questions:

1. According to the research, what systemic barriers contribute to the underrepresentation of Black males in the teaching profession?
2. According to the research, how does racialized discipline contribute to educational trauma for Black male students?
3. According to the research, in what ways does the presence of Black male educators influence the academic and social outcomes of Black male students?
4. According to the research, can restorative justice practices mitigate the negative impacts of exclusionary and punitive discipline policies?

Literature Review

This is a literature review of the research on the trauma of black males within the education system. The educational experiences of Black male students in the United States are often shaped by systemic factors that advances their academic and emotional struggles. These students frequently face educational trauma caused by racialized discipline practices, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the underrepresentation of Black male educators. Racialized discipline disproportionately targets Black male students, pushing them out of schools and into the criminal justice system, while the lack of Black male educators leaves students without role models who can relate to their unique experiences. These factors create a cycle of disengagement and marginalization that can have long-lasting effects on both their academic success and mental health.

The relevance of this topic extends to educators, policymakers, and school administrators who seek to create more equitable and supportive environments for Black male students. Understanding how racialized discipline, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the underrepresentation of Black male educators contribute to educational trauma is critical for addressing these issues within the educational system. For educators, the importance of this issue lies in the ability to foster environments that support the success of all students, particularly those who face systemic barriers. For policymakers, it is essential to understand how current practices add to racial disparities in education and how policies can be implemented to mitigate these challenges.

This literature review explores these key issues by first examining the impact of racialized discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline. This section will highlight how biased disciplinary practices disproportionately affect Black male students, leading to exclusion from school and involvement in the criminal justice system. Next, the review will discuss restorative justice as a mitigation strategy, exploring how restorative practices can address the racial disparities in discipline and offer a more inclusive and supportive approach. Lastly, the paper will focus on the role of Black male educators, investigating how the underrepresentation of Black male teachers results in the educational trauma of Black male students, and how increasing their representation can provide essential support and mentorship. By examining these interconnected issues, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing Black male students and offer potential solutions to improve their educational outcomes.

Racialized Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Racialized discipline refers to the disproportionate disciplining of Black male students through exclusionary practices, such as suspensions and expulsions. These practices are not only punitive but directly bolsters the school-to-prison pipeline—a cycle that pushes students out of schools and into the criminal justice system, with long-lasting academic and emotional consequences. This issue is particularly concerning for Black male students, who are disproportionately impacted by these disciplinary measures, resulting in academic disengagement and heightened involvement in the criminal justice system.

Research has consistently demonstrated that Black male students experience disproportionately harsh disciplinary measures compared to their peers, a pattern that has been linked to implicit biases, structural inequalities, and broader systemic factors within education. Dutil (2020) enriched this body of research through a quantitative analysis of national school discipline data, drawing from longitudinal datasets provided by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. Examining disciplinary records from over 5,000 public schools across multiple states, Dutil's (2020) study found that Black male students are three to five times more likely to face suspensions and expulsions than their White peers, even after accounting for socioeconomic status and behavioral history. These findings align with broader trends in school discipline research, which suggest that punitive disciplinary policies disproportionately affect students of color, often reinforcing negative racial stereotypes that frame Black male students as disruptive or threatening.

Building on the literature that highlights how exclusionary discipline practices shape Black male students' trajectories, Zimmermann (2024) shifted attention to the early roots of these disparities by examining how racialized discipline unfolds in early childhood classrooms. Using an ethnographic research design, Zimmermann (2024) conducted 18 months of participant

observation across two racially diverse preschool classrooms, engaging with a total of 36 students and four early childhood teachers. Her study meticulously documented how Black boys, in particular, are disproportionately identified as disruptive through a process she terms “looking for trouble”—a pattern in which teachers anticipate misbehavior based on racialized expectations, interpret minor behaviors as threats, and respond with heightened disciplinary scrutiny. Rather than reflecting objective misbehavior, these interactions often stem from teachers’ implicit biases and emotionally charged interpretations of intent, which cast Black boys as inherently problematic. This process begins as early as age four or five and contributes to a cumulative disadvantage that mirrors patterns observed later in K–12 settings. Zimmermann’s (2024) findings underscored that the racialized discipline pipeline begins far earlier than commonly acknowledged, reinforcing the urgent need for anti-bias training and culturally responsive practices even at the preschool level. Her work expands the current discourse by showing how discipline disparities are not only a high school issue but are deeply embedded in the foundational years of education—years that are critical for shaping a child’s self-concept, sense of belonging, and early relationship with schooling.

Expanding the analysis of systemic bias in school discipline, Owens (2022) offered a critical framework by conceptualizing schools as “racialized organizations” that structurally and behaviorally reproduce inequality through both individual and institutional mechanisms. Utilizing a large-scale quantitative dataset from the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection, Owens analyzed discipline records from over 30,000 public schools, which focused specifically on Black and Latino students in grades 6–10. Her study employed multilevel modeling to investigate how teacher perceptions, school demographics, and institutional policies interact to produce racial disparities in discipline. Owens (2022) found that Black male students

are significantly more likely to receive exclusionary discipline not only because of individual teacher biases, but also due to organizational norms that implicitly encourage harsher responses to behaviors perceived as threatening when exhibited by students of color. Importantly, even in schools where individual teachers reported lower levels of implicit bias, disciplinary disparities persisted—highlighting how institutional culture and racialized expectations operate independently and collectively to shape outcomes.

Owens' (2022) study reinforced the argument that racialized discipline is not merely the result of isolated prejudice, but rather an embedded feature of school systems that structure differential treatment through policies, leadership practices, and collective norms. This dual-layered analysis of both bias and organizational structure adds further depth to the conversation by demonstrating that reform efforts must address not only interpersonal educator training but also the racialized logics embedded in school systems themselves.

The literature also highlighted the long-term consequences of these disparities, with studies indicating that exclusionary discipline disrupts students' academic trajectories, weakens their engagement with school, and increases their likelihood of future involvement in the juvenile justice system. While much of the existing research attributes these patterns to educator bias and rigid disciplinary policies, some scholars argue that these explanations fail to fully capture the structural conditions that shape school discipline outcomes. The intersection of poverty, trauma, limited mental health support, and the lack of culturally relevant pedagogy may further promote the disproportionate punishment of Black male students, complicating the broader understanding of how racialized discipline manifests in different educational settings. Future research should continue to explore the interplay between structural inequalities and disciplinary outcomes,

particularly in schools that serve predominantly low-income and minority communities, to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that sustain these disparities.

Further complicating this issue, Mallett (2016) employed a systematic review methodology, synthesizing empirical research, policy analyses, and case studies to critique the shift from restorative to punitive disciplinary practices in schools. His analysis draws on quantitative studies that document racial disparities in school suspensions and expulsions, as well as qualitative research, including interviews and case studies, that illustrated the lived experiences of Black male students subjected to exclusionary discipline. Through this mixed-methods approach, Mallett (2016) identified how these policies exacerbate educational trauma, severing students' connections to the school environment and increasing their risk of contact with the juvenile justice system. While his findings underscored the harmful consequences of punitive discipline, further research is needed to determine whether restorative practices are consistently and effectively implemented in schools. Institutional barriers such as limited resources, insufficient staff training, and administrative resistance may prevent schools from fully integrating restorative justice principles, raising questions about whether the failure lies in the approach itself or in its inconsistent application.

A growing body of research has underscored the direct and systemic link between exclusionary school discipline and juvenile justice involvement, reinforcing the argument that punitive practices disproportionately harm marginalized students. Wald and Losen (2003) built upon this discourse as they conducted a policy analysis and review of empirical research that examines how suspensions, expulsions, and other exclusionary measures function as mechanisms for funneling students into the criminal justice system. Their research synthesized quantitative data on suspension and expulsion rates, highlighting the disproportionate impact on Black male

students, and qualitative case studies that illustrate how these disciplinary practices serve as gateways to incarceration. Unlike Mallett (2016) and Singletary (2020), who focused on the psychological and emotional consequences of punitive discipline, Wald and Losen (2003) extended the conversation by situating exclusionary discipline within broader structural inequalities, arguing that these practices reinforce cycles of marginalization and create long-term barriers to success. While their findings emphasized the systemic nature of these issues, further research could examine counterarguments that question whether suspension alternatives, restorative justice programs, or community-based interventions might reduce students' criminal justice involvement. Additionally, exploring the specific conditions under which these interventions are most effective—such as school funding, administrative support, or community engagement—could provide a more nuanced understanding of potential solutions to the school-to-prison pipeline.

Deepening the conversation on the impact of racialized disciplinary practices, recent research has turned toward examining their psychological and emotional consequences, particularly for Black male adolescents who are disproportionately targeted by exclusionary discipline. Singletary (2020) extended the structural critique offered by Mallett (2016) by being focused on how these policies manifest as personal and collective trauma in the lives of Black male students. Through a qualitative research design, Singletary (2020) conducted in-depth interviews and ethnographic observations with a purposeful sample of 46 students—10 Black males and 36 Black females—between the ages of 14 and 18, all of whom attended two public charter high schools in a Midwestern urban area. Participants were selected based on self-reported histories of trauma and exposure to school-based discipline, with support from school administrators.

The study revealed that for Black male students in particular, repeated disciplinary encounters not only disrupted academic continuity but also contributed to a profound sense of alienation, learned helplessness, and internalized despair. These emotional responses were found to be closely linked to long-term mental health challenges, including chronic anxiety, depression, and disengagement from school. Singletary's (2020) ethnographic observations further illustrate how school environments often reinforced feelings of devaluation and criminalization, especially when teachers and administrators fail to recognize or respond to students' emotional and cultural needs.

By emphasizing the mental health dimension of the school-to-prison pipeline, Singletary expanded the conversation beyond policy critique, urging educators and researchers to consider how discipline practices impact students' sense of self, safety, and belonging. However, the study also raised important questions about the availability and effectiveness of trauma-informed care within schools, particularly those serving high populations of marginalized students. Future research should explore whether culturally responsive mental health interventions, school-based trauma recovery programs, or restorative practices can mitigate these effects and rebuild trust and engagement for students most impacted by racialized discipline.

Expanding on the discussion of the psychological impact of racialized discipline, recent research has begun to explore how gender differences shape students' experiences of school punishment and trauma. Crosby et al. (2023) enhanced this discourse by conducting a qualitative study that examined the intersection of race, gender, trauma, and school discipline among Black students. Their study is based on a purposive sample of 36 Black female students and 10 Black male students, all of whom were enrolled between September 2015 and June 2016 at two public charter high schools in an urban Midwestern metropolitan area. The student populations at these

schools were predominantly African American and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, reflecting the broader demographic composition of the surrounding community.

To better understand how trauma and exclusionary discipline shape student experiences, school administrators assisted in recruiting students who had self-reported histories of trauma and traumatic stress. Participants ranged in age from 14 to 18 years old and spanned grades 9 through 12. Using in-depth qualitative interviews, Crosby et al. (2023) explored how school disciplinary practices, including suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement, contributed to psychological distress and educational disengagement, particularly for Black male students. Their findings suggested that while both Black boys and girls experience the harmful effects of racialized discipline, Black boys face more frequent and severe punitive measures, increasing their risk of educational alienation, mental health struggles, and future involvement in the juvenile justice system.

Building on the discussion of trauma and racialized discipline, Marraccini et al. (2023) offered a trauma- and equity-informed framework for understanding the impact of the school-to-prison pipeline on Black male students, with a particular focus on suicide prevention and mental health outcomes. Their study employed a systematic review methodology, synthesizing existing empirical research, policy analyses, and psychological studies to examine how exclusionary disciplinary practices contribute to psychological distress and increased suicide risk among Black male students. By integrating findings from quantitative studies on school discipline disparities and qualitative research on student mental health experiences, Marraccini et al. (2023) argued that addressing trauma within educational settings is essential for breaking the cycle of exclusion and criminalization that disproportionately impacts Black male youth.

A key component of their analysis is the need for equitable, trauma-informed support systems within schools. Their framework emphasized early intervention, culturally responsive mental health services, and restorative disciplinary practices as crucial steps toward reducing the emotional and psychological toll of punitive discipline. However, while their study presents a promising approach, it leaves open important questions about the practical implementation of trauma-informed strategies in schools. Specifically, how can schools balance the need for trauma-sensitive practices with maintaining discipline and academic rigor? Furthermore, what role can administrators and policymakers play in ensuring that trauma-informed interventions are effectively integrated into existing school structures without undermining broader educational goals? Future research should explore these tensions by examining case studies of schools that have successfully implemented trauma-informed disciplinary policies, as well as assessing the long-term academic and behavioral outcomes for students who receive these interventions.

As research continued to highlight the psychological toll of racialized discipline, scholars are increasingly calling for mental health-centered interventions to support Black male students. Walker (2021) advanced this discussion by examining how the mental health needs of Black male students are frequently overlooked in schools where punitive disciplinary practices are prevalent. Using a qualitative research approach, Walker conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 Black male high school students and 10 school counselors from three urban public high schools with high suspension and expulsion rates. The study explored how exclusionary discipline exacerbates stress, anxiety, and feelings of alienation, revealing that many Black male students perceive school discipline not as a corrective measure but as a systemic practice that disregards their emotional and behavioral needs. Additionally, school counselors reported feeling

limited in their ability to provide adequate mental health support due to resource constraints and institutional pressures to prioritize punitive measures over restorative interventions.

Walker (2021) argued that addressing these issues requires a fundamental shift in school discipline policies, advocating for restorative justice practices, increased access to trauma-informed mental health support, and culturally responsive interventions. However, while Walker's (2021) findings reinforced the urgent need for mental health-centered reforms, they also raised important practical and policy-related concerns. Specifically, how can schools—particularly those in underfunded districts—implement such comprehensive changes without significant increases in financial and structural support? Future research should examine the feasibility of large-scale policy reforms, including federal and state funding initiatives that could support schools in adopting restorative disciplinary models and mental health programming. Additionally, comparative studies between schools that have successfully integrated trauma-informed disciplinary practices and those that rely on punitive measures could provide valuable insights into the long-term academic and psychological benefits of such interventions.

Together, these studies provided a comprehensive view of the far-reaching effects of racialized discipline on Black male students, demonstrating how exclusionary discipline contributes to a cycle of trauma that limits both academic and emotional development and reinforces patterns of marginalization. The research highlights how disciplinary disparities are not isolated incidents, but rather systemic issues rooted in historical and structural inequalities within the education system. Black male students, who are disproportionately subjected to suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement, often experience heightened stress, disengagement from school, and an increased likelihood of contact with the juvenile justice system.

Rather than solely documenting these disparities, it is critical to examine the underlying mechanisms that perpetuate them, including inadequate school resources, lack of mental health support, and entrenched racial biases in disciplinary decision-making. These studies collectively emphasize that punitive discipline is often implemented in schools with fewer support systems, where teachers and administrators may lack the necessary training to address student behavior through more holistic approaches. Additionally, research underscored that Black male students frequently encounter a school climate that views them through a deficit-based lens, reinforcing patterns of exclusion rather than addressing their educational and psychological needs. Future research should focus on how these structural barriers sustain racialized discipline practices and explore the broader systemic forces that shape educational inequities, providing a deeper understanding of the long-term consequences for Black male students.

Restorative Justice as a Mitigation Strategy

One of the most promising frameworks for addressing the educational trauma Black male students experience is restorative justice (RJ). As a mitigation strategy, RJ seeks to interrupt the cycle of punitive discipline and racialized punishment by shifting the focus from control and exclusion to accountability, healing, and relationship-building. Rather than responding to misbehavior with suspensions or expulsions—practices that disproportionately affect Black boys—restorative justice offers a structured, equity-oriented alternative that prioritizes dialogue, community, and the repair of harm. In this section, I explore how RJ operates as a tool for addressing racial disparities in school discipline and examine the conditions under which it can be implemented effectively to reduce trauma and promote belonging for Black male students.

Restorative justice (RJ) has gained increasing traction in schools as a means of addressing disciplinary issues in a more equitable, inclusive, and supportive manner. Instead of

relying on punitive measures such as suspensions and expulsions, RJ emphasizes repairing harm, restoring relationships, and fostering a sense of community among students. This approach holds particular promise for Black male students, who are disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline practices. RJ offers an alternative framework that could help break the cycle of trauma caused by racialized discipline, providing Black male students with the opportunity to engage in a constructive process focused on healing rather than punishment.

Research on restorative justice (RJ) in schools has consistently highlighted its potential to mitigate racial disparities in discipline, particularly for Black male students who are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary punishment. Payne and Welch (2015) expanded this body of research through a quantitative analysis of national school discipline data, examining how schools that implement RJ practices compared to those that rely on traditional punitive measures. Using data from the U.S. Department of Education's School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), their study analyzed a sample of over 3,000 public schools across various demographic and geographic contexts. Their findings indicated that schools implementing RJ practices reported lower suspension and expulsion rates, particularly among Black students, suggesting that these approaches foster accountability without reinforcing cycles of alienation and criminalization.

In addition to the statistical analysis of disciplinary outcomes, Payne and Welch's (2015) study incorporated survey responses from school administrators, providing insight into how RJ is perceived and implemented at the institutional level. Their findings suggested that when RJ is fully integrated into a school's disciplinary framework, it can help disrupt racialized patterns of discipline by emphasizing conflict resolution, community-building, and student accountability within a supportive environment. However, the study also identifies significant challenges in

large-scale RJ implementation, including insufficient staff training, resistance from educators accustomed to punitive models, and a lack of financial resources. These challenges raised important questions about whether schools, particularly those in underfunded districts, have the capacity to sustain RJ programs effectively.

While Payne and Welch's (2015) research highlighted the promise of RJ as a tool for reducing racial disparities in discipline, their findings suggested that the success of these initiatives depends on institutional commitment, adequate training, and administrative support. Future research should explore how schools with limited resources navigate RJ implementation and whether policy reforms, increased funding, or professional development programs could help ensure that RJ practices are consistently applied and accessible to all students.

As research continues to explore alternatives to punitive disciplinary practices, restorative justice (RJ) has emerged as a promising approach to reducing racial disparities in school discipline. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) provided a comprehensive meta-analysis of quantitative studies on the effectiveness of RJ in U.S. K-12 schools, synthesizing data from over 30 empirical studies that examined its impact on suspensions, expulsions, school climate, and student behavior. Their findings indicated that schools implementing RJ practices experienced significant reductions in exclusionary discipline, particularly among students of color, who were disproportionately targeted by punitive measures. The analysis further highlights that RJ fosters a more positive school climate by encouraging collaborative problem-solving, strengthening relationships between students and educators, and promoting community-building as an alternative to punishment.

While Darling-Hammond et al.'s (2020) research underscored the potential benefits of RJ, it also raises important questions about its limitations and challenges. Their findings

suggested that RJ is most effective when consistently applied and fully integrated into a school's disciplinary framework. However, inconsistencies in implementation, training, and institutional support can undermine its effectiveness. Additionally, their study points to the complexities of engaging students, particularly Black male students who may have experienced repeated disciplinary harm and developed deep-seated mistrust of school authority figures. If RJ is not properly facilitated, students may be reluctant to fully participate in conflict resolution processes, limiting its potential impact.

These findings emphasized the need for further research on the conditions that make RJ successful, particularly in schools serving historically marginalized communities. Future studies could explore how factors such as school leadership, teacher buy-in, and resource allocation influence the effectiveness of RJ programs, ensuring that these practices are equitable, sustainable, and responsive to the unique needs of Black male students.

While restorative justice (RJ) is often framed as a transformative alternative to exclusionary discipline, recent research has questioned whether RJ practices are being implemented equitably across racial lines. Davison et al. (2021) examined this issue using analyzed administrative data from a large urban school district that adopted RJ district-wide between 2008 and 2018. Using a longitudinal dataset of over 90,000 students across 100 schools, the authors applied difference-in-differences regression models to evaluate changes in suspension rates before and after RJ implementation, disaggregated by race and gender. Their findings revealed a complex picture: while overall suspension rates declined after the adoption of RJ, racial disparities persisted and, in some cases, even widened, particularly for Black students. The study indicated that White students experienced greater benefits from RJ implementation, whereas Black students continued to be disproportionately subjected to exclusionary discipline.

This suggests that without explicit racial equity components built into implementation, RJ may reproduce the very disparities it aims to dismantle. Davison et al. (2021) argued that schools must attend not only to how RJ is implemented but for whom—emphasizing that a colorblind approach to restorative practices risks reinforcing the structural inequities embedded in school discipline systems. Their research introduces a necessary caution: while RJ holds promise, its success depends on addressing the racialized norms and practices that may limit its equitable impact.

Adding to the critique of restorative justice (RJ) implementation, Romano and Almengor (2021) explored how racial dynamics in predominantly White-led schools undermine the equity potential of RJ practices. Through a qualitative case study of two majority-White middle schools in the northeastern United States, the authors conducted extensive interviews with 28 educators and administrators and observed RJ circles and staff training sessions over the course of a school year. Their findings revealed that while school leaders often embraced RJ rhetorically, they frequently lacked the racial reflexivity necessary to confront how White supremacy and implicit bias shaped disciplinary practices. In many cases, educators implemented RJ as a technical fix—focused on behavior management—without engaging in the critical self-reflection required to understand how their own racialized perspectives influenced who was perceived as "disruptive" or deserving of restorative support. The authors argued that this superficial implementation leads to the co-optation of RJ, allowing it to function within existing racial hierarchies rather than challenge them. This research complicates the assumption that RJ is inherently equitable, showing that without explicit efforts to build racial consciousness among White educators, RJ risks reinforcing the very inequities it seeks to resolve. Romano and Almengor's (2021) work underscored that racial reflexivity must be a foundational component of RJ training and

practice—especially in schools where educators may not share the racial or cultural backgrounds of their most marginalized students.

As discussions of equitable discipline practices evolve, researchers have emphasized the importance of culturally responsive approaches to education, particularly in the implementation of restorative justice (RJ) in diverse school settings. Ladson-Billings (1995) introduced the concept of culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), a framework that emphasizes the importance of teaching practices that affirm students' cultural identities and connect learning to their lived experiences. In the context of RJ, CRP is essential for ensuring that restorative practices are not only equitable but also effective, particularly for Black male students who are disproportionately subjected to punitive discipline. Ladson-Billings (2014) later refined this concept, advocating for culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP), which extends beyond cultural relevance to actively preserving and nurturing students' cultural identities within the school environment.

Ladson-Billings' (2014) work is based on qualitative research methods, including ethnographic observations and interviews with teachers in urban schools, which examined how educators implement culturally responsive teaching practices. Her findings suggested that when students see their cultural knowledge reflected in the curriculum and disciplinary practices, they are more engaged in learning and less likely to experience alienation within school environments. This perspective is particularly relevant to RJ, as it suggested that restorative practices must be embedded within culturally sustaining frameworks to truly support Black male students and other marginalized groups. However, while the integration of CRP and CSP into RJ aligns with its goals of inclusivity and equity, structural barriers may limit its effectiveness in under-resourced schools.

Ladson-Billings' research raises critical questions about how schools, particularly those with limited funding and institutional support, can consistently implement culturally sustaining practices alongside RJ. Future research should examine the structural and systemic changes necessary to integrate this model into all classrooms, including teacher training, curriculum development, and policy reforms that prioritize culturally responsive discipline strategies. Without these foundational supports, RJ may struggle to achieve its full potential in reducing racial disparities and fostering inclusive school climates for Black male students.

With research on restorative justice (RJ) in schools continuing to evolve, scholars have increasingly emphasized the need for systemic integration rather than isolated implementation. Brown (2021) highlighted this shift by advocating for a systems approach to RJ, particularly in the post-COVID educational landscape, where schools are grappling with increased student trauma, widening academic disparities, and heightened behavioral challenges. Rather than treating RJ as a standalone disciplinary alternative, Brown (2021) argued that it must be embedded within broader educational policies and systemic reforms to ensure that it effectively supports the long-term well-being of Black male students.

Brown's (2021) research employed a mixed-methods approach, combining case studies of school districts that have implemented RJ at a systemic level with quantitative analysis of student discipline data post-COVID. Drawing from interviews with school administrators, teachers, and RJ coordinators, the study examined how schools that fully integrate RJ with student support services—such as mental health programs and culturally responsive teaching—see more sustained reductions in exclusionary discipline and improvements in school climate. Additionally, Brown's analysis of district-wide data on suspensions, expulsions, and academic

performance suggests that when RJ is aligned with other equity-focused policies, its impact is more pronounced and enduring.

However, Brown's (2021) systems approach raises critical challenges regarding its feasibility within the current educational framework, which often prioritizes standardized testing, rigid behavioral codes, and punitive discipline policies. If schools remain structured around high-stakes accountability measures that reinforce exclusionary practices, can RJ be meaningfully integrated into these environments? Future research should examine the institutional barriers to systemic RJ implementation, exploring whether policy shifts, funding reallocation, or leadership buy-in are necessary to reconcile RJ with existing school priorities and performance metrics. Understanding these tensions will be essential in determining whether RJ can function as a transformative force within education or if it will remain a peripheral intervention in a system that continues to emphasize punishment over student well-being.

Restorative justice (RJ) continues to be explored as a transformative practice in schools, and for this reason, researchers have examined its potential to move beyond discipline and serve as a tool for student empowerment and critical engagement. Hoyte et al. (2019) investigated how integrating RJ with culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies can create spaces for Black male students to engage in meaningful discussions about race, justice, and equity. Their study suggested that when RJ is embedded within culturally sustaining pedagogies, it allows Black male students—who are often marginalized in traditional educational settings—to critically engage with their identities and lived experiences in ways that foster academic and personal growth.

Hoyte et al. (2019) employed a qualitative research design, conducted focus groups and in-depth interviews with teachers, RJ facilitators, and students in urban high schools that have

implemented both RJ and culturally sustaining practices. Their findings indicated that when educators intentionally incorporate discussions of racial identity, systemic inequities, and historical context into RJ circles and conflict resolution processes, students demonstrate increased engagement, critical thinking, and a stronger sense of belonging. However, the study also revealed that many educators lack the necessary training to facilitate these conversations effectively, which can lead to surface-level discussions that fail to address deeper systemic issues or, conversely, discussions that unintentionally alienate students or reinforce existing power dynamics.

This raises an important challenge: how can teacher training programs equip educators with the skills needed to navigate these complex conversations while fostering a positive and inclusive classroom environment? Hoyte et al. (2020) argued that without adequate professional development and institutional support, educators may struggle to fully integrate culturally sustaining RJ practices in ways that are both impactful and sensitive. Future research should explore the development of teacher preparation programs that center racial literacy, trauma-informed facilitation, and culturally responsive conflict resolution, ensuring that RJ is not only implemented as an alternative disciplinary approach but also as a means of empowering students to engage in critical dialogue about their identities and experiences.

The integration of critical race theory (CRT) into RJ practices further ensured that these practices are not just fair but transformative for marginalized Black male students. Dixon and Anderson (2018) examined this intersection, arguing that CRT provides a necessary framework for understanding how race, systemic inequities, and power dynamics shape educational experiences. Their study explored how educators who incorporate CRT into RJ are better equipped to address the root causes of discipline disparities, rather than merely treating them as

isolated behavioral issues. By embedding CRT within RJ, schools can shift disciplinary practices from individual blame to a broader critique of the structural barriers that contribute to the marginalization of Black male students.

Dixon and Anderson (2018) employed a qualitative case study approach, conducted classroom observations, teacher interviews, and analysis of RJ implementation strategies in three urban high schools with diverse student populations. Their findings suggested that when educators explicitly incorporate discussions of systemic racism, historical injustices, and power structures into RJ circles, Black male students are more likely to engage in meaningful dialogue and feel a sense of empowerment within their school communities. However, their study also revealed significant institutional resistance to CRT-based approaches, with some educators expressing concerns about pushback from administrators, parents, and policymakers who view CRT as too politically charged for school settings. Additionally, many schools lack adequate training and professional development opportunities to help educators effectively merge CRT with RJ.

This raises an important question: are educators and administrators in schools truly prepared to adopt CRT within the framework of RJ, or will institutional opposition limit its transformative potential? Dixon and Anderson (2018) suggested that without explicit institutional support and structured training, efforts to integrate CRT into RJ may remain fragmented or superficial. Future research should examine how policy reforms, teacher preparation programs, and administrative leadership can influence the successful implementation of CRT-based RJ practices, ensuring that they are not only theoretically sound but also practically viable within diverse school contexts.

The discussion on restorative justice (RJ) and culturally responsive discipline continues to evolve, and scholars have emphasized the crucial role of teacher education in shaping equitable disciplinary practices. Gay and Kirkland (2003) argued that developing cultural critical consciousness in preservice teacher education is essential for ensuring that educators can effectively implement RJ in ways that genuinely meet the needs of Black male students. Their study examined how teacher candidates who engage in critical self-reflection and cultural analysis are better equipped to understand the systemic factors influencing student behavior, allowing them to approach discipline as an opportunity for growth, learning, and community building rather than punishment.

Using qualitative research methods, Gay and Kirkland (2003) conducted case studies of teacher education programs with predominantly White, middle-class, monolingual preservice teachers who have had limited exposure to culturally diverse communities. Through classroom observations, reflective journaling, and in-depth interviews, their findings highlighted that educators who actively develop critical consciousness are more likely to recognize and challenge their own implicit biases, adopted more inclusive disciplinary practices, and created classroom environments that affirmed Black male students' identities and experiences. However, their study also underscored that fostering critical consciousness is a long-term process that requires ongoing professional development, mentorship, and institutional support. Many preservice teachers initially struggled with discomfort or resistance when engaging in discussions about race and systemic inequities, which can impede their ability to fully integrate culturally responsive RJ practices into their teaching.

This raised an important question: how can teacher education programs balance the urgency of addressing racial disparities in discipline with the need for comprehensive and

sustained professional development? Gay and Kirkland (2003) suggested that teacher preparation programs must go beyond surface-level diversity training and instead embed critical consciousness work throughout the entirety of teacher education curricula. Future research should explore effective models for integrating long-term professional development in cultural competence and restorative discipline, ensuring that educators are not only introduced to these concepts during their training but also supported in their continued growth throughout their careers.

The research overwhelmingly supported the idea that restorative justice has the potential to mitigate the harmful effects of racialized discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline for Black male students. When combined with culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogies, as well as critical race theory, RJ practices can serve as a powerful tool for transforming educational environments. However, for RJ to be truly effective, it must be implemented within a broader systems approach that addresses the structural inequities facing Black male students. Schools, policymakers, and educators must work together to ensure that RJ is not a temporary fix, but a sustained and integral part of a more equitable and supportive educational experience for all students.

The Role of Black Male Educators

The underrepresentation of Black male educators in the U.S. education system is a persistent theme in research on racial disparities in education, particularly concerning its impact on Black male students' experiences and outcomes. Studies that examined this issue highlighted how Black male educators provided culturally relevant mentorship, challenged deficit-based narratives about Black masculinity, and fostered affirming learning environments. Research also explores how the presence of Black male teachers influences disciplinary outcomes, academic

engagement, and students' sense of belonging in school settings. However, while their role is often framed as uniquely transformative, literature also interrogates the systemic barriers that limit Black male educators' entry into and retention within the profession. These barriers included hiring biases, workplace isolation, and a disproportionate expectation to serve as disciplinarians rather than instructional leaders. Examining these structural challenges provided a more nuanced understanding of how the limited representation of Black male educators shaped the broader educational landscape and impacts both students and teachers within these systems.

Building on the discussion of Black male educators' influence in the classroom, Lynn (2006) examined how these educators employ culturally relevant pedagogical practices to engage Black male students and foster a sense of belonging. Through a qualitative research study, Lynn (2006) conducted in-depth interviews and classroom observations of four Black male teachers working in urban schools with predominantly Black student populations. His study explored how these educators drew on their personal experiences, cultural knowledge, and shared racial identity to create affirming learning environments that resonated with Black male students. The findings suggested that these teachers intentionally integrate Black cultural references, affirm students' lived experiences, and employ instructional strategies that challenge traditional Eurocentric curricula, all of which contribute to higher levels of student engagement and participation.

Lynn's (2006) research underscored the transformative potential of culturally relevant pedagogy, particularly when implemented by educators who share racial and cultural backgrounds with their students. However, his study also raised critical questions about the broader applicability of these teaching strategies. Specifically, can educators in predominantly white schools successfully implement culturally relevant pedagogy, or do they face additional

resistance and structural challenges in doing so? Additionally, to what extent can these practices be institutionalized and scaled across all schools, particularly in districts with limited diversity in their teaching staff? Future research should explore how school demographics, teacher training programs, and administrative support influence the effectiveness and sustainability of culturally relevant pedagogy beyond urban, majority-Black educational settings.

The research continued to examine the role of Black male educators in fostering culturally responsive learning environments, in which scholars have also explored the barriers these teachers face in entering and remaining in the profession. Pabon et al. (2011) investigated the systemic challenges that deter Black males from pursuing and sustaining careers in education, particularly in urban schools with predominantly Black and low-income student populations. Using a qualitative research design, they conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 Black male educators across various school districts, alongside an analysis of teacher retention data to identify patterns in workforce disparities. Their findings highlighted key barriers such as racial discrimination in hiring and promotion, workplace isolation, and a lack of institutional support, all of which contributed to low recruitment and high attrition rates among Black male teachers. Many participants reported being positioned as disciplinarians rather than instructional leaders, reinforcing racialized expectations that limit their professional growth and impact on pedagogy.

While these barriers are well-documented, Pabon et al. (2011) emphasized the need for a broader examination of intersecting systemic issues, such as economic inequality, limited access to higher education, and the disproportionate financial burdens placed on Black men pursuing teaching degrees. Addressing these challenges requires an institutional commitment to

dismantling barriers that extend beyond hiring practices, including policies that support Black male educators in career advancement, professional development, and leadership opportunities.

Expanding on this discussion, Pabon (2017) further explored the impact Black male teachers have on their students, arguing that their presence in schools is uniquely beneficial to Black male youth, particularly in fostering academic engagement, mentorship, and positive identity development. However, his research also raised critical questions about the systemic expectations placed on Black male educators. While they play an essential role in supporting Black students, should the burden of addressing racialized discipline disparities, mentorship gaps, and culturally relevant teaching fall solely on them? Pabon (2017) suggested that broader systemic reforms are necessary to ensure that all teachers are equipped to meet the needs of diverse students, rather than relying on a small subset of educators to address deeply entrenched racial inequities in education. Future research should explore how schools can implement structural reforms that distribute the responsibility of culturally responsive education across all educators, to ensure that Black male teachers are supported rather than overburdened in their roles.

While the presence of Black male educators is often heralded as a solution to address racial disparities in education, Martino (2015) offered a critical interrogation of this assumption by examining the limitations of role modeling as a framework for educational equity. Conducting a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with 12 Black male teachers working in urban Canadian schools, Martino (2015) explored how these educators experience the burdensome expectation to serve as role models who can singlehandedly resolve systemic inequities. His findings revealed that while many Black male teachers are deeply committed to supporting their students, the institutional reliance on role modeling often obscures the need for broader systemic

reforms. Participants reported that their presence was frequently viewed as a symbolic solution to racial disparities, without accompanying efforts to address structural issues such as curriculum bias, discriminatory discipline policies, and racialized organizational cultures. Martino (2015) argued that positioning Black male educators primarily as role models risk reinforced deficit narratives about Black students and places an unfair emotional and professional burden on teachers who are themselves navigating hostile or unsupportive institutional environments. His study calls for a reframing of equity efforts: rather than to rely on the individual identities of Black male teachers to drive change, schools must be engaged in systemic transformation that dismantles the racial hierarchies embedded within educational institutions. This critique complements broader research in this review by emphasizing that while increasing the number of Black male educators is crucial, it must be part of a larger commitment to systemic change rather than a substitute for it.

Continuing the examination of how problematic expectations shape the experiences of Black male educators, Pabon (2014) critically interrogated the "Black Superman" myth that positions Black male teachers as individual saviors of Black male students. Through a qualitative study involving semi-structured interviews with 15 Black male teachers working in urban public schools across the northeastern United States, Pabon (2014) explored how societal and institutional narratives imposed extraordinary and unrealistic burdens on these educators. His findings revealed that Black male teachers are often celebrated not for their instructional expertise or leadership capacities, but for their perceived ability to "fix" systemic racial inequities through mentorship and role modeling alone. Participants reported feeling isolated and overwhelmed by expectations that they would manage the discipline, academic engagement, and emotional well-being of Black male students without adequate institutional support or structural

change. Pabon (2014) argued that this "Black Superman" narrative ultimately reinforced deficit-oriented views of Black students—suggesting that without extraordinary intervention, they are destined to fail—and absolves schools from confronting the systemic racism embedded in curricula, disciplinary policies, and hiring practices. His research complemented Martino's (2015) critique of role modeling by emphasizing that true educational equity cannot rely on symbolic representation or the heroic efforts of individual teachers; it requires a fundamental transformation of the policies, practices, and cultures within schools themselves. Together, these studies highlight the urgent need to shift from narratives of individual responsibility to systemic accountability in addressing racial disparities in education.

Building on the discussion of the pressures and expectations placed on Black male educators, Brockenbrough (2014) explored how these teachers navigated the racialized politics of school discipline, particularly in urban educational settings where punitive disciplinary practices are deeply entrenched. His study highlighted how Black male educators are often positioned as advocates for their students, using their roles to challenge exclusionary discipline policies and promote restorative practices as more equitable alternatives. Using a qualitative research methodology, Brockenbrough (2014) conducted in-depth interviews with 11 Black male teachers working in urban public schools. Through narrative analysis, the study reveals that these educators frequently draw on their personal experiences with race and schooling to resist deficit-based narratives about Black students and support discipline strategies rooted in care, accountability, and community.

The teachers in Brockenbrough's (2014) study described regularly intervening on behalf of students facing harsh disciplinary action, often mediating between students and administrators or advocating for alternatives to suspension and expulsion. However, while these educators play

a crucial role in promoting more just disciplinary practices, the study also illuminated the institutional limitations they face, including lack of formal authority, insufficient administrative support, and isolation from broader policy-making processes. Many participants expressed frustration with their schools' resistance to restorative approaches and reported feeling burdened by the expectation to "fix" racial discipline disparities without meaningful systemic change.

Brockenbrough's (2014) findings raised important questions about the extent of influence Black male educators can exert in school systems that continue to prioritize punitive discipline models. While their advocacy is often powerful at the classroom level, the broader institutional resistance to change, combined with inadequate support structures, can hinder their efforts to transform school discipline practices at scale. This suggested a need for further research into how school leadership, policy frameworks, and district-level reforms can amplify the voices of Black male educators and embed restorative practices into schoolwide disciplinary systems—ensured that their work is not only recognized but also structurally supported.

Extending the conversation on the positionality and impact of Black male educators, Woodson et al. (2020) examined how these teachers navigate and exert leadership within predominantly white educational institutions, where racial and cultural norms often marginalize both educators and students of color. Their study centered on the ways Black male educators challenge dominant narratives about Blackness and masculinity, offering alternative models of leadership and identity that positively influence Black male students. Through a qualitative case study approach, the researchers conducted interviews with six Black male teachers working in majority-white K–12 schools across the United States. The study also included analysis of classroom practices and leadership roles, capturing how these educators use their personal and

professional experiences to advocate for equity, support Black students, and disrupt normative expectations around race and gender in schooling environments.

The participants in the study consistently described feeling a dual responsibility: not only to educate, but also to act as cultural brokers and advocates within systems that often resist change. Their efforts included mentorship programs for Black male students, culturally responsive teaching practices, and engagement in school-wide equity initiatives. However, despite their commitment and visible impact, the study revealed that these educators often operated in isolation, lacking the institutional support or collective momentum necessary to challenge systemic racism at the organizational level. Many expressed feeling tokenized or expected to represent the entire Black community, which placed additional emotional and professional burdens on their roles.

While the presence of Black male educators in leadership positions can have transformative effects on students and school culture, Woodson et al. (2020) cautioned against viewing their impact as a substitute for broader systemic change. The study raised critical questions about whether the efforts of individual teachers can meaningfully shift entrenched racial and cultural biases within predominantly white institutions without a coordinated commitment from administrators, colleagues, and district leadership. Future research should explore how institutional cultures can evolve to support—not isolate—Black male educators, and how collective action across school communities can drive sustainable and equitable transformation.

Continuing the exploration of the impact and limitations faced by Black male educators, Jeter and Melendez (2022) focused on the broader consequences of their underrepresentation, particularly in relation to the academic outcomes and school experiences of Black male students.

Their study highlighted the positive influence Black male teachers have on student engagement, academic achievement, and school connectedness, reinforcing the need to increase their presence within the profession. Using a mixed-methods approach, Jeter and Melendez (2022) combined quantitative analysis of student performance data with qualitative interviews of both Black male students and teachers across multiple urban and suburban school districts. The quantitative component analyzes academic achievement indicators such as GPA, attendance, and standardized test scores. While the qualitative portion draws from interviews with 20 Black male educators and 25 Black male students, offering rich insight into how representation shapes student identity, motivation, and aspirations.

Their findings confirmed that Black male students often perform better academically and report stronger feelings of belonging when they are taught or mentored by Black male educators. Students in the study emphasized the value of shared lived experiences, cultural understanding, and the ability of Black male teachers to act as role models who provided both academic and social-emotional support. However, the study also delved into the intersectional barriers that limit the recruitment and retention of Black male teachers, including economic pressures, racial and gender stereotypes, limited access to teacher preparation pathways, and a lack of institutional support once in the profession.

While increasing the number of Black male educators is a critical goal, Jeter and Melendez (2022) argued that representation alone is not sufficient without addressing the systemic inequities that restrict access to and success within the teaching profession for Black men. Their research invited further inquiry into how race, gender, and class intersect to shape the experiences of Black male educators, and what targeted supports—such as mentorship, financial incentives, culturally responsive teacher education, and leadership development—are necessary

to sustain their careers. Addressing these factors is essential to ensure that efforts to diversify the teaching workforce are not only symbolic, but transformative and lasting.

Building on the discussion of systemic barriers and the need for targeted support for Black male educators, Bristol et al. (2020) investigated how alternative teacher certification programs can serve as viable pathways to increase the representation of Black male teachers in K–12 classrooms. Their study centered on a teacher preparation initiative specifically designed to recruit, train, and support Black male preservice teachers, recognizing that traditional certification routes often exclude or inadequately support candidates from marginalized backgrounds. Using a qualitative case study methodology, Bristol et al. (2020) followed 15 Black male preservice teachers enrolled in the program over the course of one academic year. Data collection included interviews, focus groups, classroom observations, and document analysis, providing a comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences, challenges, and perceptions of readiness.

The findings highlighted the value of culturally affirming teacher preparation spaces, where Black male preservice teachers reported feeling seen, supported, and empowered to bring their identities into their future classrooms. Participants described the program's emphasis on culturally responsive pedagogy, mentorship from experienced Black educators, and community-building among cohort members as critical to their development. However, Bristol et al. (2020) also identified persistent challenges. Despite the program's intentional design, many participants expressed concerns about their readiness to navigate the realities of under-resourced schools, including racialized expectations, classroom management challenges, and lack of institutional support once they transitioned into full-time teaching roles.

This raises an important question: do alternative certification programs focused on increasing representation provide Black male teachers with the comprehensive preparation needed to succeed and thrive long-term in the profession? While representation is a key goal, Bristol et al. (2020) argued that programs must also prioritize sustained professional development, mentorship, and structural supports to ensure that Black male educators are not only entering classrooms but also retaining their roles and advancing within the field. Future research should continue to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of such programs, particularly in how they prepare Black male teachers to navigate and resist the systemic inequities that often shape their professional experiences.

As we continue to extend the conversation around support structures and identity-affirming spaces for Black male educators, Thomas (2025) explored how Black male teacher-coaches leverage Black counterpublics—intentional spaces that affirm Black experiences and resist dominant narratives within the educational system. This study offered a nuanced understanding of how Black male educators not only navigate systemic constraints but actively construct alternative cultural spaces that foster student empowerment, community, and academic growth. Using a qualitative ethnographic methodology, Thomas (2025) conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews with 10 Black male teacher-coaches working in urban high schools across the southeastern United States. Data was collected over a full academic year and included coaching sessions, classroom instruction, and community engagement events, providing insight into how these educators use both formal and informal spaces to affirm Black identity and support students' holistic development.

The findings revealed that these teacher-coaches function as cultural mediators, using their dual roles in athletics and academics to create counter-narratives to deficit-based

conceptions of Black masculinity and student potential. Through these counterpublics—often built in locker rooms, after-school mentoring sessions, or culturally responsive classroom spaces—Black male educators foster a sense of belonging, resilience, and intellectual curiosity among their students, particularly Black boys. Thomas (2025) emphasized that these spaces serve as critical hubs for resistance and identity affirmation, allowing students to see themselves as capable, valued, and intellectually competent individuals in contrast to the limiting stereotypes often reinforced by mainstream school culture.

However, Thomas (2025) also raised important concerns about the fragility and marginalization of these counterpublics. Many of the teacher-coaches in the study expressed that these spaces, while powerful, were often created in the margins of the school day and lacked institutional recognition or support. As a result, their impact on the broader school culture remained limited. This brings to the forefront a critical question: can Black counterpublics be sustained and scaled within mainstream educational systems that are not structurally designed to affirm Black identity, or will they remain isolated interventions led by a small group of committed educators? Thomas (2025) called for institutional policies that legitimized and integrated these counterspaces into the fabric of school culture, ensuring that the work of Black male educators to support and affirm students is not confined to the periphery, but rather central to educational equity efforts.

Building upon the role of Black male educators as cultural and institutional change agents, Lynn (2002) investigated how Critical Race Theory (CRT) inform the teaching philosophies and practices of Black male educators working in urban schools. His study provided a deeper theoretical lens through which to understand how race, identity, and systemic inequities shape the experiences of both teachers and students, emphasizing that Black male educators

often bring a critical consciousness to their work that directly challenged racial bias, deficit thinking, and structural barriers in education. Using a qualitative research design grounded in CRT, Lynn (2002) conducted in-depth life history interviews with four Black male teachers working in public schools serving predominantly African American student populations in California.

The teachers in the study shared narratives that reflected both their lived experiences with racism and their efforts to resist educational inequities through culturally affirming pedagogy. These educators viewed their roles not just as classroom instructors, but as advocates committed to racial justice, using their positions to challenge low expectations, critique Eurocentric curricula, and support students in navigating racially hostile school environments. Lynn's (2002) analysis highlighted how CRT empowered Black male educators to position their teaching as a form of resistance, transforming the classroom into a space where students are both academically challenged and racially affirmed.

However, the study also points to the significant barriers educators face when attempting to apply CRT principles in public school settings, including institutional resistance, administrative pushback, and a lack of professional development that supports race-conscious pedagogy. Participants described feeling isolated in their efforts and noted that their work was often misunderstood or marginalized within a broader educational system that prioritizes colorblindness and standardized achievement metrics over racial equity.

Lynn's (2002) work underscored the potential for CRT to serve as a transformative framework for educational practice, particularly when wielded by Black male educators who understood its relevance through lived experience. Yet, it also raised pressing questions: how can educators navigate the political and institutional resistance to CRT in K–12 settings, and what

support is needed to ensure that this critical perspective is not only present but influential in shaping school policy and culture? Future research should explore strategies for integrating CRT into teacher education programs and district-level policies, ensuring that educators, especially those from marginalized backgrounds—are equipped to enact transformative, justice-centered teaching in schools that often resist such change.

In summary, the research reviewed highlighted the critical role Black male educators play in fostering more equitable and culturally affirming school environments, particularly for Black male students who are disproportionately affected by exclusionary discipline and educational trauma. Across multiple studies, Black male teachers are shown to contribute not only as role models, but as advocates, mentors, and culturally responsive practitioners who use their lived experiences to build affirming spaces, challenge racialized school policies, and promoted academic engagement and emotional well-being among their students. Studies by Lynn (2006, 2002), Pabon (2017), Brockenbrough (2014), and others demonstrated that Black male educators bring critical perspectives informed by race, identity, and social justice, which enable them to support students in ways that many of their colleagues may not be equipped or encouraged to do. However, the literature also underscored the persistent structural barriers that limit the entry, retention, and leadership opportunities of Black male educators. These included racialized role expectations, professional isolation, inadequate institutional support, and limited access to culturally sustaining professional development. While increasing the number of Black male educators is widely recognized as a necessary goal, the research emphasized that representation alone is not sufficient. Efforts must also address the intersectional challenges Black men face in the profession, including economic barriers to teacher preparation, lack of mentorship, and the burden of being expected to single-handedly address systemic inequities.

Ultimately, creating supportive environments for both Black male students and educators requires systemic change. This includes rethinking hiring practices, expanding alternative certification programs, investing in mentorship and leadership pipelines, and developing teacher education programs that center racial consciousness and cultural relevance. The presence of Black male educators offered powerful potential to transform school culture, but this impact can only be sustained if it is supported by structural reforms that value their contributions and respond to the complexities of their roles.

Conclusion

The exploration of educational trauma experienced by Black male students in the U.S. education system has underscored the critical role that systemic factors—such as racialized discipline practices, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the underrepresentation of Black male educators—play in perpetuating academic and emotional challenges for these students. The research consistently demonstrated that Black male students are disproportionately affected by biased disciplinary measures, which not only hinder their academic progress but also contribute to their disengagement from school and increased involvement in the criminal justice system. The absence of Black male educators further exacerbates these challenges, leaving Black male students without mentors who can relate to their lived experiences and provide guidance through the unique difficulties they face.

Racialized discipline practices, as discussed by Dutil (2020), Mallett (2016), and Wald and Losen (2003), fuels the school-to-prison pipeline by systematically pushing Black male students out of the educational system and into the criminal justice system. These exclusionary measures disproportionately target Black male students, reinforcing societal stereotypes and deepening their sense of alienation within the school environment. The trauma caused by these

practices is not only academic but emotional, as Black male students often internalize feelings of failure, criminalization, and marginalization. Singletary (2020) and Crosby et al. (2023) emphasized the severe mental health consequences of these practices, noting that they lead to long-term effects on the emotional and psychological well-being of Black male students.

Restorative justice (RJ) practices emerge as a critical strategy for addressing the negative effects of racialized discipline. As Payne and Welch (2015) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) demonstrated, RJ offered an alternative to punitive measures by fostering a supportive environment where students can engage in conflict resolution and relationship-building rather than exclusion. RJ not only reduced disciplinary disparities but also promoted a more inclusive school culture, which is essential for Black male students who are often subjected to systemic exclusion. However, as Brown (2021) and Hoyte et al. (2019) argued, for RJ to be effective, it must be culturally relevant and context-specific, ensuring that these practices resonate with the lived experiences of Black male students. This calls for schools to adopt culturally sustaining practices that address the specific needs of Black male students, not just implement a one-size-fits-all approach.

The underrepresentation of Black male educators remains a significant barrier to the success of Black male students. As Lynn (2006), Pabon et al. (2011), and Brockenbrough (2014) argued, Black male teachers serve as powerful role models who understand the cultural, social, and emotional needs of Black male students. These educators help challenge harmful stereotypes and foster an environment where Black male students feel valued and supported. The systemic barriers, as noted by Jeter and Melendez (2022) and Pabon (2017), that limit the number of Black male educators must be dismantled. Increasing the representation of Black male teachers is essential not only for providing mentorship but also for creating a space where Black male

students can see themselves reflected in their educators, thereby enhancing their academic success and emotional resilience.

The combined impact of racialized discipline, the school-to-prison pipeline, and the lack of Black male educators highlights the need for systemic change in how schools engage with Black male students. The implementation of restorative justice practices and the concerted effort to recruit and retain more Black male educators are pivotal steps in dismantling the systems that fuel educational trauma. As Woodson et al. (2020) and Thomas (2025) argued, Black male educators play a crucial role in reshaping the educational experience for Black male students. They not only teach but also advocate for policies that address racial disparities, ensuring that Black male students have the support they need to succeed both academically and emotionally.

The research presented in this review highlights the urgent need for a multi-faceted approach to reform the education system. Restorative justice practices must be prioritized alongside efforts to increase the representation of Black male educators, ensuring that both the academic and emotional needs of Black male students are met. As Brown (2021) and Dixon and Anderson (2018) pointed out, a broader systems approach that incorporates Critical Race Theory (CRT) is necessary to fully understand and address the root causes of racial disparities in education. Only through this comprehensive approach can we create an educational environment that supports Black male students, mitigates the effects of trauma, and empowers them to thrive.

In conclusion, while some progress has been made, much work remains to be done. The trauma faced by Black male students is not merely an individual issue but a reflection of broader systemic injustices that require sustained attention and action. The adoption of restorative justice practices, the recruitment of more Black male educators, and the consistent application of culturally relevant pedagogy are critical steps toward building an educational system that

genuinely serves the needs of Black male students. By addressing these systemic issues, we can break the cycle of trauma and create a more equitable educational experience for all students, especially those who have historically been marginalized.

The literature clearly outlined the deeply embedded challenges that Black male students face in public education, particularly in the areas of discipline, representation, and access to culturally responsive support. These challenges are not theoretical—they are lived realities that manifest daily in classrooms like those at City Middle School. Having examined the research, the next step is to translate these findings into practice. The following action plan builds on the themes identified in the literature review and proposes concrete, equity-focused strategies to disrupt trauma and foster healing-centered schools for Black male students.

Action Plan

This action plan builds upon the literature review that investigated the educational trauma experienced by Black male students within the U.S. education system. The literature revealed three interrelated themes contributing to this trauma: (1) racialized discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline, (2) restorative justice as a mitigation strategy, and (3) the underrepresentation of Black male educators. Together, these systemic issues contribute to academic disengagement, mental health struggles, and long-term inequities in educational and life outcomes for Black male students.

The practice setting for this action plan is "City Middle School" (pseudonym), a diverse public middle school in an urban district in Washington State where I currently teach. City serves a majority BIPOC student population, including a significant number of Black male students who are disproportionately affected by disciplinary practices. The school's faculty and staff do not reflect the racial diversity of the student body, and there is limited representation of Black

educators—particularly Black male teachers. Disciplinary data shows a troubling pattern: Black boys received a disproportionate number of suspensions and office referrals, often for subjective infractions like "defiance" or "disrespect." While there has been a district-wide push to explore restorative practices and equity initiatives, implementation is uneven and under-resourced. This school context serves as a valuable comparative site for exploring the research-to-practice gap and proposing grounded, meaningful reforms.

Racialized Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

This table focuses on how exclusionary discipline practices, such as suspensions and expulsions, disproportionately affect Black male students and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. The literature makes clear that punitive disciplinary systems are embedded with racial bias and structural inequality, pushing Black boys out of the educational system and into the juvenile justice system. These patterns of discipline do more than disrupt learning—they generate lasting psychological harm, foster alienation, and undermine trust in school environments. Furthermore, many schools lack adequate reentry or reintegration supports, compounding the negative outcomes for these students. At City Middle School, we observed these dynamics firsthand: Black male students are often subjected to disciplinary action for nonviolent, subjective behaviors, and there is limited focus on addressing the underlying causes of student behavior through trauma-informed or culturally responsive approaches. This table identifies key research findings in this area, describes how they align (or misalign) with current practices at City, and outlines targeted recommendations for reducing racialized discipline and its associated harms.

Table 1

Racialized Discipline and the School to Prison Pipeline

Research Findings	Current Practice at City Middle School	Recommendations
<p>Research showed that Black male students are suspended at rates 3-5 times higher than their White peers, contributing to disengagement and juvenile justice involvement (Dutil, 2020; Wald & Losen, 2003).</p>	<p>Black boys are the most suspended group. Suspension is often used for subjective infractions (e.g., defiance).</p> <p>African American students at City Middle School are disciplined at a rate of 31%, while only making up 13.9% of the enrollment (OSPI, 2025)</p>	<p>School leadership (principal, assistant principals) must revise the student discipline policy to reduce reliance on exclusionary practices. The district equity office should oversee policy compliance. Teachers are accountable for implementing equitable classroom management strategies, supported through mandatory training.</p>
<p>Exclusionary discipline has long-term mental health impacts and promotes alienation and internalized despair (Singletary, 2020; Crosby et al., 2023).</p>	<p>Minimal mental health support for disciplined students. Suspensions are rarely followed by reintegration meetings.</p>	<p>Counselors and school psychologists must lead the development of trauma-informed reintegration protocols. Administrators must ensure these are implemented following all suspensions. Teachers should be involved in reintegration meetings to repair relationships and restore trust.</p>
<p>Schools with culturally responsive policies see lower racial discipline disparities (Mallett, 2016; Marraccini et al., 2023).</p>	<p>Cultural responsiveness is not a focus of current discipline policy.</p>	<p>The school’s equity team, under the guidance of district equity leaders, must develop a culturally responsive discipline framework. All certificated staff must participate in ongoing professional development. School leaders must be held accountable for progress monitoring.</p>

Restorative Justice as a Mitigation Strategy

Restorative justice (RJ) is a relationship-centered approach to school discipline that seeks to transform the culture of accountability and repair within learning environments. Rather than focusing on punishment or exclusion, RJ builds pathways for students to take responsibility,

restore relationships, and remain connected to their school community. The literature identifies multiple dimensions of effective restorative justice practice: prevention (community-building circles), intervention (restorative dialogues and harm circles), and reintegration (supporting students after incidents). RJ not only reduces the frequency and severity of disciplinary incidents but also cultivates empathy, fosters inclusion, and strengthens students’ sense of belonging—particularly for those most often marginalized by traditional discipline systems, such as Black male students.

The research is clear: when implemented with cultural relevance, schoolwide consistency, and institutional support, RJ becomes a powerful tool for disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and addressing historical harm. At City Middle School, however, restorative justice efforts are limited, fragmented, and under-supported. While a few staff members incorporate restorative circle practices, there is no formal framework or policy guiding RJ implementation across the school. Moreover, current RJ efforts lack culturally sustaining practices and rarely provide space for student-led conversations about race, identity, and equity. The following table synthesizes key research on RJ, evaluates how these insights compare with current practices at City, and outlines clear recommendations with designated accountability for school staff and leadership.

Table 2

Restorative Justice as a Mitigation Strategy

Research Findings	Current Practice at City Middle School	Recommendations
RJ reduced suspension rates and improved school climate when fully integrated into school culture (Payne & Welch, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020)	RJ is used sporadically by a few trained staff members. No schoolwide framework.	The principal and assistant principal must initiate and lead a schoolwide RJ implementation plan. All staff must receive formal RJ training facilitated by district

		RJ coordinators. A restorative justice leadership team should be formed with representation from administrators, teachers, counselors, and students.
Culturally sustaining RJ practices fostered engagement and empowerment among Black male students (Hoyte et al., 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2014)	RJ practices are not explicitly culturally responsive or linked to student identity	The equity team and restorative justice leads must revise RJ practices to incorporate culturally sustaining pedagogy. Student representatives should be involved in shaping circle themes and dialogue. Administrators are responsible for providing time and space for culturally grounded circles.
RJ is most effective when aligned with mental health services and equity initiatives (Brown, 2021).	RJ and counseling services are disconnected. No clear referral pipeline between them.	The school counseling department must partner with RJ leaders to establish referral protocols. Administrators must coordinate joint planning time and professional development for RJ and mental health staff. This integration should be monitored by a district-level support team.

The Underrepresentation of Black Male Educators

A recurring theme in the literature is the powerful, positive influence of Black male educators on the academic and emotional well-being of Black male students. These educators offered more than content instruction—they served as mentors, advocates, and cultural role models who challenged deficit-based narratives and fostered affirming spaces. Yet, Black male teachers remain significantly underrepresented across the education system. Structural barriers including bias in hiring, lack of support, and burnout contribute to low recruitment and retention

rates. At City Middle School, the absence of Black male educators is stark: there is currently only one other Black male staff member in a school counselor role. This absence not only deprives students of vital representation, but it also limits the school’s capacity to engage in truly inclusive, culturally affirming pedagogy. This table outlines research-based findings on the importance of representation, examines current practice at City, and provides recommendations to increase recruitment, retention, and support of Black male educators.

Table 3

The Underrepresentation of Black Male Educators

Research Findings	Current Practice at City Middle School	Recommendations
Presence of Black male educators improved engagement and achievement among Black male students (Lynn, 2006; Jeter & Melendez, 2022).	Currently only one Black male teacher (me) within the entire school building.	The district HR department must prioritize hiring Black male educators by partnering with HBCUs and local preparation programs. School leadership must commit to diverse hiring practices and eliminate implicit bias in interview protocols.
Black male teachers often face role overload and are tasked primarily with discipline (Brockenbrough, 2014; Pabon, 2017).	Black male staff are often called to handle behavioral issues regardless of role.	Principals must establish clear professional roles and avoid assigning disciplinary duties based on race. Leadership should provide mentorship roles with compensation and professional development opportunities. Equity coordinators should monitor role clarity and job satisfaction.
Alternative certification programs and identity-affirming spaces increased retention (Bristol et al., 2020; Thomas, 2025).	No known targeted recruitment or support systems in place.	The school and district must develop affinity groups and mentorship networks for BIPOC staff. A designated diversity coordinator should oversee these supports and

		report progress to district leadership.
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Summary

This action plan bridged key findings from educational research with current practices at City Middle School. It identified three areas—racialized discipline, restorative justice, and Black male teacher representation—as crucial for intervention. The recommendations aim to move beyond acknowledgment of inequities toward transformative change. Implementation of these recommendations would not only address the trauma experienced by Black male students but also foster a more equitable, inclusive, and healing school culture for all learners.

Next steps involve sharing this plan with school leadership, identifying allies in staff development and equity roles, and mapping out professional development sessions and policy proposals aligned with these action steps.

While the action plan outlines practical steps toward addressing the trauma Black male students face—through restorative justice, increased representation, and systemic reform—these strategies are only part of the larger picture. Understanding why these changes are necessary requires a deeper examination of the root causes of harm and the broader educational context that allows trauma to persist. The following discussion section builds upon the action plan by critically analyzing how the research and my own experiences at City Middle School intersected, highlighting the systemic patterns that sustain inequity and exploring the transformative potential of targeted, equity-centered interventions.

Discussion

The purpose of this project was to examine how educational trauma manifests in the experiences of Black male students, who are disproportionately affected by racially biased

discipline policies, a lack of identity-affirming adult role models, and inconsistent access to restorative and culturally responsive practices. This project merges my professional experience as a Black male educator with a comprehensive literature review to identify patterns of harm and offer actionable, research-aligned responses. The following discussion aims to interpret the findings and draw conclusions regarding their implications for school systems, educators, students, and future research.

Discussion of Findings

The following section expands on the guiding questions from my rationale using both empirical research and personal experience at City Middle School. The aim is to explore in greater depth how educational trauma is perpetuated through policy, representation, and practice—and how schools like mine can better respond.

Racialized Discipline

The first question that posed in the rationale was how does racialized discipline contribute to racialized trauma?

Numerous studies demonstrated that Black boys are subject to discipline practices rooted in subjective interpretation rather than objective misbehavior (Wald & Losen, 2003; Dutil, 2020). Research by Singletary (2020) revealed that Black male students experienced a cumulative psychological toll from repeated, punitive discipline—particularly when tied to perceptions of disrespect, non-compliance, or “defiance.” These terms are rarely neutral; they reflect implicit bias and expectations steeped in white, middle-class norms of behavior. The racialized lens through which behavior is viewed contributes to a system in which the same actions are interpreted and responded to differently based on a student’s race.

Moreover, these perceptions are not isolated to individual educators—they are embedded within broader institutional cultures. When school systems normalize the disproportionate discipline of Black male students, they implicitly communicate to all students and staff that Blackness is inherently problematic or dangerous. This creates a hostile learning environment for Black boys, where they are constantly under scrutiny, often having to work twice as hard to earn the benefit of the doubt. The literature makes it clear that this type of surveillance and scrutiny is not just about behavior management—it is about power and control (Skiba et al., 2014).

At City Middle School, these findings are not theoretical—they are observable and recurring. My colleagues and I have often discussed the inconsistency in disciplinary responses. For example, two students may engage in the same behavior—say, interrupting a lesson—but the Black student is far more likely to be removed from the classroom or issued a referral. The white student might receive a redirection or even a joke. What is deemed “challenging” from one student is “spirited” from another. This racial double standard doesn’t just disrupt academic progress; it chips away at students’ sense of self and safety. Many of my students anticipate being punished before even stepping into the classroom. Some have said things like, “I know I’ll get in trouble anyway, so why even try?” This kind of internalized defeatism is a direct result of an environment where discipline is applied inequitably.

The psychological effects are profound. Students who feel targeted begin to disengage—not because they don’t care, but because they don’t feel safe. They become reluctant to participate, hesitant to ask questions, or emotionally distant in classrooms. As Marraccini et al. (2023) noted, exclusionary discipline created a feedback loop of disengagement, misinterpretation, and further punishment. When Black male students are suspended or sent out

of class, they miss instructional time, fall behind academically, and re-enter classrooms labeled as troublemakers. The system sets them up to fail and then blames them for not succeeding.

City Middle School's discipline policy does not yet reflect the trauma-informed research that could help interrupt this cycle. The current code of conduct includes broad terms like "non-compliance," "aggression," and "disruption," but fails to define those behaviors in culturally aware or developmentally appropriate ways. Nor does it offer guidance for staff on how to de-escalate, re-engage, or understand behavior as a form of communication. Instead, discipline is framed primarily as a matter of control and consequence.

To change this, City Middle School must revise its approach to discipline through an equity and trauma-informed lens. This would involve reviewing discipline data disaggregated by race, offering professional development on implicit bias and culturally responsive behavior management, and shifting the purpose of discipline from punishment to support. Until our system shifts to recognize and respond to the root causes of behavior—such as stress, identity conflict, or systemic marginalization—discipline will remain a driver of trauma, not a remedy.

Systemic Barriers to Black Male Representation

The second question I posed within the rationale was what systemic barriers contribute to the underrepresentation of Black males in the teaching profession?

Bristol et al. (2020) and Thomas (2025) provided compelling data which showed that Black male teachers face a series of systemic obstacles, from high certification costs and non-supportive teacher prep programs, to workplace environments that marginalize them. These barriers begin as early as undergraduate education, where Black men are often underrepresented in education departments and lack mentorship. Many teacher preparation programs lack culturally sustaining pedagogy and fail to address the unique needs and assets of Black male

candidates. This alienates potential teachers and contributes to the belief that teaching is not a space where Black men belong or can thrive.

These barriers do not stop at entry into the profession. Once Black men become teachers, they are frequently funneled into roles that focus on behavior management rather than academic leadership. Brockenbrough (2014) and Pabon (2017) highlighted that Black male educators are often expected to “fix” discipline issues involving Black students, becoming informal school security figures without being given full authority, professional development, or career advancement opportunities. The result is a toxic paradox: schools desperately want Black male educators to address racial gaps, but do not provide the environment or respect that allows them to flourish as educators, mentors, and leaders.

At City Middle School, these challenges manifest in both visible and invisible ways. There are currently no other Black male classroom teachers. One Black male paraprofessional has informally assumed the role of a “behavior manager,” frequently being called to intervene with students despite lacking formal training or authority. He has shared with me that he feels both honored and burdened—students trust him, but he is not empowered to make long-term change. There is no clear pathway for him to become a certified teacher within our district, despite his interest. The administration, while appreciative, has not taken concrete steps to support his development. His role, like many others across the country, reflects a missed opportunity to invest in culturally grounded educators who already have strong relationships with students.

This lack of structural support reflects broader national trends. Many districts fail to build internal pipelines for Black male paraprofessionals to transition into teaching roles. The costs of certification exams, unpaid internships during student teaching, and the absence of mentoring

networks create overwhelming barriers. Even when alternative certification programs exist, they often fail to recruit from or retain within the communities most in need of representative educators.

The literature shows that retention is just as critical as recruitment. Pabon (2017) argued that Black male teachers are often isolated and overburdened with the responsibility of “saving” students without being supported or promoted into leadership roles. This aligned with what I’ve seen in my district: even when Black male teachers are hired, they often leave within a few years due to burnout, lack of mentorship, and exclusion from professional decision-making spaces. Without spaces for cultural affirmation, professional growth, and peer collaboration, Black male educators face the emotional toll of being both hyper-visible and undervalued.

To dismantle these systemic barriers, schools and districts must move beyond symbolic gestures and develop intentional strategies that create sustainable and affirming environments for Black male educators. This includes paid teacher residencies, certification support, ongoing mentorship, and identity-affirming affinity groups. It also requires leadership to challenge the deficit narratives that reduce Black men to disciplinarians and instead recognize their capacity to lead, inspire, and innovate within the classroom and beyond.

Black Male Teachers and Black Male Student Outcomes

The third question that I posed within the rationale was does the presence of Black male educators influence the academic and social outcomes of Black male students?

According to Lynn (2006) and Jeter & Melendez (2022), Black male teachers served as both mirrors and mentors. Their presence disrupted narratives that pathologized Black masculinity and replaced them with models of professionalism, intellect, and empathy. Having a teacher who understands one’s lived experience without needing it translated can make the

difference between resistance and engagement. For Black male students, it is not just about academic instruction—it is about identity affirmation and emotional safety. When they are seen, understood, and respected by someone who shares their cultural background, their sense of belonging and motivation significantly increase.

Beyond relationships, research shows that Black male educators directly influence educational outcomes. Gershenson et al. (2018) found that Black students who have a Black teacher by third grade are significantly more likely to graduate from high school and consider attending college. This impact is especially profound for Black boys, whose academic confidence and persistence are strengthened by seeing themselves reflected in positions of academic authority. These educators not only teach content—they model possibility. They offer a counternarrative to deficit-based views of Black masculinity and provide students with an alternative image of what success can look like.

At City Middle School, the absence of Black male educators is deeply felt. Students have asked me, “Why are there no Black men teaching here?” Others have assumed I’m a coach, not an academic teacher—because that’s the only professional role they’ve seen filled by Black men in the building. This reflects a systemic failure in both recruitment and representation. The lack of visible Black male professionals contributes to a school culture that unconsciously communicates that teaching and learning are not associated with Black male identity. It also restricts students’ understanding of the intellectual capacity and leadership potential of Black men.

Representation—or the lack thereof—affects how students interpret their environment. When Black boys consistently see authority figures who do not look like them, while Black men are only associated with security or discipline, it reinforces a limited and harmful worldview.

The literature supportd what I see in my own classroom: when students do not see themselves in their teachers, they are less likely to connect, engage, and trust. When they do, the academic and emotional dividends are profound.

My relationships with students often take on more weight because of this context. They share things with me they don't share with other staff—not just about school, but about identity, stress, and aspirations. This is not because I'm a better teacher, but because they feel safer. Representation allows for cultural shorthand, for empathy without explanation. These connections have led to improvements in classroom behavior, increased participation, and greater willingness to take academic risks. I have seen students who typically shut down in other classrooms become leaders in mine—not because I change who they are, but because I affirm them as they are.

In short, the presence of Black male educators is not just beneficial—it is transformational. Their absence in schools like City Middle creates a vacuum of mentorship, guidance, and affirmation that disproportionately affects the students most in need of those things. Addressing this underrepresentation is not simply a staffing issue—it is a matter of educational justice. If schools are serious about closing opportunity gaps, improving school climate, and fostering belonging, then increasing the presence and support of Black male teachers must be a core priority. The impact is academic, social, and emotional—and deeply human.

Restorative Justice

The fourth question that I have posed within the rationale was can restorative justice practices mitigate the negative impacts of punitive discipline policies, and what role do Black male educators play in implementing these practices?

Restorative justice (RJ), when implemented schoolwide and rooted in cultural responsiveness, can dramatically reduce exclusionary discipline and increase student voice (Hoyte et al., 2019). Ladson-Billings (2014) argued that culturally sustained RJ helps schools reclaim discipline as a process of healing rather than punishment. When implemented effectively, RJ shifted school culture from one of compliance and control to one of community, where harm is acknowledged, accountability is shared, and repair is possible. This philosophical and structural shift is particularly essential for Black male students, who have been disproportionately harmed by punitive and exclusionary systems.

However, many schools fail to implement RJ with fidelity, reducing it to informal conversations or one-off circles disconnected from school policy. As Payne and Welch (2015) cautioned, without infrastructure, training, and administrative buy-in, RJ risks being performative. It may become a checkbox activity—one that centers adult comfort rather than student healing. In some schools, circles are held sporadically, facilitators are untrained, and follow-through is inconsistent, all of which can retraumatize students or erode trust in the process.

At City Middle School, RJ existed more as a concept than a system. A few teachers, including myself, practice restorative conversations, but there is no formal coordinator, no time built into the schedule for circles, and no alignment with mental health services or behavior intervention plans. Teachers interested in RJ often do so off the clock, using their own materials or piecing together training from outside sources. This isolates the practice and limits its reach. Students may experience radically different approaches depending on which classroom they're in, creating inconsistency and inequity. Without a coordinated plan or staff-wide training, RJ

remains fragile, reliant on the goodwill of individuals rather than supported by the strength of a system.

The potential role of Black male educators in restorative leadership is significant and often underrecognized. As noted by Brown (2021), RJ is most effective when led by facilitators who reflect the identities of students and can engage them authentically. This cultural alignment built trust, enhanced communication, and ensured that restorative spaces are not just emotionally safe but also culturally affirming. At City Middle School, I have facilitated circles where Black boys shared experiences of racial profiling, family stress, and school frustration—stories they may not have voiced in more traditional settings. These conversations were not just cathartic—they were relationship-building and transformative. Students began to see the classroom as a place where they could bring their full selves, including their pain, and not be punished for it.

However, these moments cannot rest solely on individual initiative. Black male educators should not bear the burden of restoring school culture alone, but their leadership should be intentionally cultivated and compensated. Schools need to build infrastructure that positions these educators as community builders, not just disciplinarians. RJ should not be an extracurricular interest—it should be embedded in the fabric of the school day, with designated time, space, and support.

To move from rhetoric to repair, schools must center RJ as a whole-school framework, not a niche program. This includes changes to policy language that prioritizes reintegration over removal, a schedule that allows time for conflict resolution, dedicated RJ coordinators, and professional development that equips all staff with both the theory and tools of restorative practice. Equally important, they must recognize and empower Black male educators as vital to this work—not just as disciplinarians, but as restorative leaders, cultural bearers, and catalysts

for change. Their lived experience and relational expertise are assets that must be valued, nurtured, and elevated.

These findings, drawn from research and my experience at City Middle School, reveal that the trauma experienced by Black male students is not just a symptom of broader inequality—it is produced by specific decisions, structures, and absences. RJ offers an opportunity to rewrite those decisions and rebuild those structures. Addressing this trauma will require bold leadership, community accountability, and a willingness to reimagine what education looks like when healing and justice are at the center.

Implications for Future Teachers, Students, and/or Schools

The implications of this research for teachers, school leaders, and districts are broad and urgent. If schools are serious about addressing educational trauma for Black male students, they must move beyond awareness into intentional, sustained action. This begins with shifting how educators view behavior, culture, and equity—not as separate topics, but as interwoven realities that shape every classroom decision.

For teachers, there is a need to critically reflect on how power and perception operate in their classrooms. As Wald and Losen (2003) emphasized, disciplinary disparities are not accidental—they are the result of biased systems that often reflect educators' unconscious assumptions about race and behavior. Teachers must receive training that unpacks implicit bias and teaches culturally responsive pedagogy (Mallett, 2016). This training should not be a one-time workshop but a core component of ongoing professional learning. Additionally, teachers should be coached to adopt restorative approaches that emphasize dialogue, context, and accountability rather than punishment.

School leaders play a pivotal role in setting the tone for equity. They must not only support but champion trauma-informed school cultures. This includes allocating resources for schoolwide restorative justice (RJ) training, hiring a full-time RJ coordinator, and embedding RJ into student handbooks and staff expectations. Moreover, leaders should revise discipline policies to remove subjective language and promote alternatives to exclusion. Leadership must also model vulnerability and reflection, recognizing that leading equity work means being willing to challenge the status quo—even when it is uncomfortable.

For districts, one of the most pressing needs is to address the underrepresentation of Black male educators. Research from Bristol et al. (2020) and Thomas (2025) outlined actionable strategies, such as launching teacher residencies targeted at Black male candidates, partnering with HBCUs, offering financial incentives, and creating identity-affirming mentoring programs. Recruitment is only one part of the equation—retention matters just as much. Schools must create environments where Black male teachers are valued for their instructional expertise, not burdened with the sole responsibility of managing behavior.

Students also deserve to be centered in this transformation. A trauma-informed, equity-focused school is not simply a safer space—it is a space of possibility. When students feel seen and affirmed, their willingness to take academic risks increases. Their relationships with adults deepen. Their vision of what school can be begins to shift. For Black male students, this means no longer walking into classrooms expecting to be punished, dismissed, or misunderstood. It means having access to mentors who look like them and to systems that are designed not to control them, but to empower them. Even small changes—such as implementing regular check-ins, co-creating classroom norms, or integrating culturally relevant curriculum—could have a powerful impact on student engagement and emotional safety.

Ultimately, the implications of this work are not just logistical—they are moral. Schools have a responsibility to repair the harm they have historically caused and to build structures that nurture rather than exclude. This is not extra work—it is the work. Every educator, regardless of role or identity, must ask: “How am I contributing to either the trauma or the healing of my students?” And then act accordingly.

Implications for Future Research

Future research must continue to critically examine the systemic factors that contribute to the trauma experienced by Black male students, particularly within public school settings. While existing literature has provided a foundational understanding of racialized discipline, representation gaps, and restorative practices, there remains a pressing need for more localized, participatory, and intersectional inquiry.

First, there is an urgent call for research that centers the lived experiences and voices of Black male students themselves. Much of the literature analyzes outcomes or trends, but fewer studies capture students’ own narratives about how discipline, school climate, and adult relationships shape their academic and emotional trajectories. At City Middle School, I have observed how students often articulate their frustrations and hopes in informal conversations, but these insights are rarely documented or used to guide policy. Future research using methods like ethnography, student journaling, or focus groups could illuminate the everyday realities of navigating school while Black and male. This type of research can inform more grounded and responsive reforms.

Second, longitudinal studies that assess the combined impact of culturally sustaining restorative justice and increased representation of Black male educators would be highly valuable. While RJ and teacher diversity are often studied separately, little is known about the

synergies created when both are implemented together with fidelity. At City Middle School, for example, one can only speculate how the presence of culturally aware Black male educators leading restorative practices might transform discipline dynamics and student-teacher trust. A longitudinal mixed-methods design could measure not only academic outcomes but also shifts in school climate, student engagement, and emotional well-being.

Third, future researchers should investigate how school and district-level policies either support or impede equity work in practice. Policy documents often espouse commitment to equity, but implementation is inconsistent, especially in resource-constrained schools. Comparative policy analysis across schools with differing discipline policies, teacher demographics, or RJ infrastructure could yield insights into which conditions are most conducive to meaningful change. Researchers could also explore how funding allocations influence the sustainability of programs aimed at supporting Black male students.

Finally, more intersectional research is needed to explore how race interacts with other social identities—such as disability, language background, or LGBTQ+ status—to shape students' experiences of trauma in school. While this project focused specifically on Black male students, I recognize that identity is complex and multifaceted. For instance, how might a Black male student with an IEP experience compounded trauma within punitive systems? Or how might language barriers influence how behavior is interpreted and disciplined across racial lines? Future studies that take an intersectional approach would allow for more nuanced, inclusive solutions.

Overall, future research must be brave enough to ask difficult questions and imaginative enough to envision better possibilities. By centering student voice, tracking long-term impact,

and investigating systemic conditions, researchers can help schools move from theory to transformation—and from harm to healing.

Limitations of the Project

While this project offers critical insights into the trauma experienced by Black male students and the systems that perpetuate it, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. First and foremost, the absence of primary data collection—such as interviews, surveys, or classroom observations—limits the ability to capture lived experiences in real-time. Much of the analysis is drawn from secondary research and professional reflection, rather than from direct narratives of students, families, or educators beyond my own perspective. Including those voices in future work would provide a richer, more multidimensional understanding of how trauma is both experienced and resisted in educational settings.

This project is also deeply informed by my experience as a first-year teacher. While my role in the classroom has given me direct access to students' day-to-day experiences, I am still developing my own pedagogy and classroom systems. My understanding of schoolwide operations, policy implementation, and long-term outcomes is limited by the scope of my experience thus far. There are insights I may not yet have, simply because I have not lived through a full school cycle with consistency or access to leadership decision-making processes. Simultaneously, my proximity to these early challenges offers an honest lens into what it feels like to navigate systems that are still unfamiliar, which mirrors the disorientation and institutional barriers many students—particularly Black male students—also face.

In addition to teaching, I am also a graduate student and a parent of three children. Balancing these roles has undoubtedly shaped how I approached this project. Time constraints, emotional exhaustion, and competing responsibilities meant that I often had to conduct research,

reflect, and write in fragmented moments. This limited the depth of analysis I may have otherwise been able to bring to certain sections or the breadth of literature I could explore. However, my role as a parent also grounded this project in urgency and clarity. I understand, as both a father and a teacher, that systems do not just shape academic outcomes—they shape children’s emotional development, their identity, and their understanding of justice.

Additionally, this study is rooted in the context of a single school—City Middle School. While this site provides a valuable lens into common systemic issues, it cannot speak for all schools, districts, or communities. Factors such as regional demographics, funding levels, leadership priorities, and district policies vary significantly and may influence how trauma manifests and how schools respond. Therefore, while many of the challenges and recommendations are widely applicable, the solutions may require adaptation to different school contexts.

My own positionality as a Black male educator is both a strength and a limitation. It grants me a level of insight and empathy into the experiences of my students that cannot be replicated from the outside. However, it also introduces subjectivity, particularly in how I interpret both research and events at my site. This project reflects my values, my frustrations, and my hopes, and while that authenticity is a strength, it may narrow the scope of perspectives considered. Triangulating my findings with those of students, parents, and fellow educators would improve the reliability and scope of the analysis.

Another limitation is the focus on race and gender without a deeper dive into intersectional identities. While this project highlights the unique challenges faced by Black male students, it does not fully address how those experiences may differ for students who are also LGBTQ+, have disabilities, are emergent bilinguals, or navigate other marginalized identities.

Understanding the intersection of these identities would allow for more nuanced and inclusive approaches to trauma-informed schooling.

Finally, while this project offers an action plan grounded in research, it does not measure the outcomes of any interventions. The recommendations remain aspirational until tested in practice. Future work should explore how schools that implement these recommendations—particularly those focused on restorative justice and representation—are able to track and evaluate progress over time.

Recognizing these limitations is not about undermining the value of the work—it is about being honest about what it is and what it is not. It is a starting point. It is a contribution. And it is an invitation for others to build upon, deepen, and expand the work toward healing-centered education.

Conclusion

The trauma experienced by Black male students in American public schools is not accidental. It is the consequence of longstanding policies, practices, and ideologies that position Black boys as problems rather than as learners. This trauma is perpetuated through exclusionary discipline policies, the erasure of identity-affirming educators, and the absence of culturally responsive supports. This project has sought to illuminate these patterns and offer a research-informed, action-oriented pathway toward healing-centered education.

The literature confirms the need for structural transformation. Scholars like Wald & Losen (2003) and Singletary (2020) provided clear evidence that punitive discipline exacerbates mental health struggles and fuels disengagement. Hoyte et al. (2019) and Ladson-Billings (2014) demonstrated how restorative justice, when fully embraced, can shift school cultures away from punishment and toward relationship-building. Lynn (2006) and Jeter & Melendez (2022)

reminded us that representation is not symbolic—it is essential. Their work affirmed that Black male educators serve not just as teachers, but as protectors, advocates, and cultural mentors.

My experiences at City Middle School affirm these findings. I have seen the consequences of reactive discipline policies and the absence of Black male leadership in classrooms. I have also witnessed the transformative power of restorative conversations, even in small, unsupported pockets of practice. These moments—when students are seen, heard, and cared for—offer a glimpse of what schools could become if they chose to center healing, equity, and justice.

To move forward, educators and school systems must commit to the hard work of transformation. This means implementing culturally sustaining restorative justice not as a behavior strategy, but as a framework for community. It means investing in the recruitment, mentorship, and retention of Black male educators. It means analyzing discipline data with a racial equity lens, rewriting policy to eliminate harm, and involving students in the reimagining of school culture.

This project is not an endpoint—it is a beginning. It is a call to educators to recognize their role in either sustaining harm or disrupting it. It is a call to school leaders to move from statements to action. And it is a call to policymakers to allocate resources not just for compliance, but for justice.

For Black male students, justice in education looks like safety, opportunity, affirmation, and love. It looks like classrooms where they are not criminalized for their curiosity. It looks like schools where they are not disciplined for their brilliance. And it looks like a future in which their humanity is never in question.

My hope is that this work contributes to that vision—one where all students, especially those historically harmed, can thrive in schools that recognize their power and invest in their healing.

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