Needles in a Haystack: Exploring the Experiences of Early Career Black Male Teachers in England

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This paper examines the experiences of Black male teachers in primary schools in England. Drawing on life history interviews it examines the nexus of professional and social identities and how these are (re)constructed in or by schools. Against a background of teacher workforce reform and gender-based recruitment initiatives, a policy ‘blindspot’ is illuminated and identified as a contributory factor to the invisibility and silence of black male teacher experiences. Agentic actions provide insight to the intersections of race, ethnicity, gender and class and point to the ways that social and professional identities are in a constant state of (re)formation as they traverse (and tip-toe) within and between social and professional contexts.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Intersectionality are deployed to explore the ways in which racialised, gendered and classed subjectivities form the backdrop to day-to-day experiences and perceptions of black males as they narrate their lives as professional black male primary school teachers. These lenses provide vistas to explore the ways in which they negotiate the education landscape and, how they are conceptualised within and by primary schools. Along with CRT, intersectionality emphasises the way in which people are characterised by their complex multiple identities and promotes a greater understanding of the complexities posed by different axes of differentiation.

The study comprises of 10 black male teachers who have qualified to teach in state primary schools. Participants are ‘recently qualified’ or ‘early career teachers’ (i.e. they have no less than 1 years teaching experience and no more than 3) and have come into teaching via traditional university-based and employment-based routes. Participants were interviewed twice; near completion of their teacher training programme and between 18 to 24 months later.

Themes examined include: teaching as a career and the interrelation of professional and social identities. The study sheds light on and draws parallels with US research in the ways that black men (circum) navigate and (re) negotiate their identity/ies in schools, illuminating the space between policy discourse and praxis. Whilst adding to, and complementing, a broader discussion of black male teachers in the UK, US and North America the study facilitates transnational dialogue amongst scholars internationally and contributes to an opening up of new areas of research in the UK. Comparative perspectives provide a way of framing discussions about the inter-relationships of agency, structure and the social identities of ethnicity, gender, class and race alongside that of teacher and professional identities.