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‘You ain’t my daddy!’: Black male teachers and the politics of surrogate fatherhood

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Recent scholarship on male teachers across several national contexts has investigated the dilemmas of hegemonic masculinity for male educators while only recently beginning to examine race as a mediator of masculinity politics in teaching. Conversely, an emergent body of work on Black male teachers has centred analyses of race and culture, but has yet to explicitly question Black male teachers’ relationships to hegemonic masculinity. Drawing upon critical analytic perspectives from Black masculinity studies, this article explores how 11 Black male teachers in an urban, predominantly Black school district in the USA negotiated popular discourses that position Black male teachers as father figures for Black students. By delving below the surface of these discourses, this article identifies a complicated set of Black masculinity politics that may shape the experiences of Black male teachers, and that warrants further consideration by educational researchers, teacher education programmes and urban school districts committed to preparing and supporting Black men in the teaching profession.

Keywords: Black male teachers; Black masculinity; father figure; urban education; teacher narratives

Introduction

In response to the chronic struggles of Black youth in American schools, a growing chorus of educational stakeholders has called for efforts to increase the pool of Black male teachers, who by recent estimates comprise a mere 1% of the nation’s teaching ranks (Lewis 2006). A small body of research literature (Cooper and Jordan 2003; Lewis 2006; Lynn 2002, 2006b) and a slew of popular press accounts (Basinger 1999; Matus 2005; Milloy 2004) have cast Black male teachers as ideal role models and surrogate father figures for Black youth, especially Black boys, who often lack adult male figures in their homes and neighbourhoods.¹ Given the palpable cultural angst over the paucity of father figures in Black families and communities (Dyson 2008), convincing more Black men to become teachers offers a tangible strategy for filling a highly publicised void in the lives of many Black youth. However, these appeals raise a number of questions around race, gender and pedagogy that deserve careful consideration. For instance, what understandings and expressions of Blackness, masculinity, authority, and caring make one a good father figure for Black boys in particular and Black youth in general? How many current and prospective Black male educators actually want to serve as father figures for their students, and how should schools

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respond to Black male teachers who are unwilling or unable to fulfill this expectation? These questions point to the father figure status of Black male teachers as a complex and potentially contestable pedagogical and cultural project. As such, these questions warrant the close and critical attention of educational researchers, teacher education programmes and school districts that are interested in the recruitment and support of Black male teachers.

In an attempt to expand the scholarship on Black men in the teaching profession, this article explores Black male teachers' perspectives on the challenges of serving as father figures for Black students. Drawing upon findings from a qualitative study on the experiences of 11 Black male teachers in an urban, predominantly Black school district in the USA, this article reveals a complicated set of Black masculinity politics encountered by study participants as they attempted to negotiate their presumed status as father figures in the classroom. By drawing conceptually on Black masculinity studies and methodologically on qualitative inquiry methods, this article offers new insights into how Black male teachers may negotiate the pressures to be both pedagogues and patriarchs in their classrooms, and it raises crucial issues to consider in future attempts to understand, recruit and retain Black men in the teaching profession.

(Black) Masculinity, race and Black male teachers

Growing concerns over the past decade regarding the educational and developmental plights of boys have generated appeals in Australia, Canada, Great Britain and the USA to attract more men into teaching as role models for male students (Martino 2008a; Weaver-Hightower 2009). Echoing similar discourses dating back to the late-nineteenth century (Martino 2008a), recent calls for more male teachers have imagined these men as embodiments of what Connell (1995) describes as hegemonic masculinity, the virile and assertive brand of masculine identity and expression that consolidates patriarchal rule in the modern west. A growing body of critical scholarship on masculinity politics and schooling has critiqued recent public discourses on male teachers for lauding these men as role models for boys based on questionable criteria (Carrington et al. 2007; Martino 2008a; Sevier and Ashcraft 2007; Skelton 2003). Scholars have also chronicled and raised concerns about male teachers' efforts to secure masculine legitimacy, particularly at the elementary level, by performing and reproducing hegemonic masculinity in their classrooms (Allan 1994; Francis and Skelton 2001; Martino 2008b; Martino and Frank 2006; Sargent 2001). Building upon Martino's (2008a) observation that the White male heterosexual subject is often invoked in discourses on male teachers as a universal role model for all youth, critical scholarship on male teachers has recently begun to explore race as a mediating factor in masculinity politics, most notably within Canadian discursive contexts (Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2010; Rezai-Rashti and Martino 2010). Although these recent works signal an important turn to matters of race in the scholarship on male teachers, ample terrain still exists for further explorations of race as a mediator of masculinity politics for Black men and other men of colour in the teaching profession, particularly in the USA where such scholarship (Allan 1994; King 1998, 2004; Sargent 2001) has yet to fully embrace an analysis of race in the lives of male teachers.

To date, explicit analyses of race in the scholarship on male teachers in the USA have been situated primarily in a small body of literature on Black male teachers that

builds upon a rich corpus of research on the experiences and practices of Black educators in the USA (Foster 1994; Irvine 2002). For instance, Lynn's work (2002, 2006a, 2006b) has described Black male teachers' interest in serving as role models and father figures for young Black males, framing their culturally mediated pedagogies as an 'other fathering' mix of 'tough love, discipline, and caring' (2006b, 2517). Brown (2009) has explored a variety of culturally relevant pedagogical styles employed by Black male teachers to address the needs of Black male students, and other scholars have echoed claims that Black male teachers can serve as role models for Black boys (Brown and Butty 1999; Cooper and Jordan 2003). While raising important insights, this scholarship has yet to fully question how Black men may reproduce and/or resist the hegemonic masculine power that has been traditionally ascribed to and expected of men in the teaching profession. Thus, just as critical scholarship on male teachers still requires a greater attention to race as a mediating factor in masculinity politics, the research on Black male teachers warrants a closer examination of Black men's relationships to traditionally hegemonic constructions of masculinity in the teaching profession.

In an effort to wed critical analyses of race and masculinity in the experiences of Black male teachers, this article draws conceptually upon a body of scholarship within the interdisciplinary field of Black masculinity studies that explores how Black males navigate the gulf between dominant notions of manhood and their invariably subaltern social positionalities (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001; Carbado 1999; Harper 1996; Wallace 2002). While not discounting the extant scholarship on masculinity politics in the lives of male teachers, this article acknowledges Black men's historically strained relationships to dominant notions of American manhood, and it consequently explores Black men's unique and precarious negotiations of hegemonic masculine discourses in the teaching profession. Furthermore, this article draws upon the dual attention in Black masculinity studies to the material and ideological conditions that fuel pervasive, socially constructed notions of Black male subjectivity at a given historical moment, and to the varied negotiations of that subjectivity by a diverse range of Black men (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001; Carbado 1999; Harper 1996; Wallace 2002). In doing so, this article understands the paternal Black male teacher as a popular contemporary construct that is fuelled by anxieties around the absence of father figures in Black families and communities – and that attempts to script the participation of adult Black male bodies within American K-12 schools accordingly – while also exploring the possibility of myriad responses to this script by individual Black male teachers.

Finally, the strand of Black masculinity studies that informs this article problematises recurrent cultural discourses since the mid-twentieth century that have responded to the deleterious effects of White supremacy and capitalist oppression on Black America by resituating Black men within hegemonic definitions of masculine power, reifying patriarchal regimes within Black social contexts and policing Black men's compliance with these regimes (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001; Carbado 1999; Harper 1996; Hemphill 1991; Neal 2005; Reid-Pharr 2001).² As a result, this article assumes a critical stance towards cultural discourses that attempt to position Black male teachers as father figures without questioning the potential reproduction of patriarchal power within the classroom, and without considering the possible psychic detriments of patriarchy on the Black male educators who are expected to reproduce it. In all, the engagement with Black masculinity studies enables this article to challenge the taken-for-granted nature of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal power while concurrently

exploring race as a mediator of masculinity politics. These affordances open new terrains for research on race and masculinity in the lives and careers of Black male teachers.

Study design

Research methods

In order to delve more deeply into the experiences of Black men in the teaching profession, this study employed qualitative research methods that were particularly suited for ‘understanding the *meaning*, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with and of the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences’ (Maxwell 1994, 17, emphasis in original). Drawing upon a regimen for in-depth interviewing developed by Seidman (1998), data collection for this study began with in-depth, one-on-one life history interviews in which each participant described the formation of his Black male identity over his life span. After generating rich biographical overviews of participants’ life experiences during the first round of interviews, a narrower focus on being a Black male teacher defined a second round of one-on-one study interviews, during which participants were asked to describe the particular role of Black maleness in shaping various elements of their pedagogies and professional experiences. A third and final round of one-on-one interviews provided participants with the chance to reflect on themes that had emerged throughout the study and to share ideas for how study findings might ultimately be put to use. All one-on-one data collection sessions were conducted as semi-structured interviews, and Lichtman’s (2006) ‘strategies for questioning’ during in-depth interviews were employed to make sure that key issues were addressed while still enabling enough flexibility for participants to narrate their life experiences on their own terms.

In addition to the one-on-one interviews, two separate, one-time focus group sessions were conducted to enable study participants to collectively explore the significance of their experiences as Black male teachers. Major themes from one-on-one interviews were intentionally revisited during both focus groups in order to generate more opportunities for triangulation across data sources, and time was deliberately reserved towards the end of the sessions for participants to raise new issues and concerns. In addition to supplying more data, the focus groups allowed participants to meet and bond with other, Black male teachers working in similar environments, and to collectively act as co-producers of scholarly knowledge on their experiences as Black men in the teaching profession. In all, data collection extended from January to October of 2007 for nine study participants and from October of 2007 to February of 2008 for two participants who were enrolled later in the study and consequently were not included in focus group sessions. One-on-one interviews lasted between one and two hours, at an average of 90 minutes, and both focus group sessions lasted for two hours. All data collection sessions were recorded with a digital audio recorder and transcribed for coding.

Data analysis for this study consisted of three phases. In the first phase, interview transcripts were reviewed to develop an overarching sense of the range of themes across data sources. Based on this review, an initial list of coding schemes was generated with a particular attention to two broader categories – Black male identity politics and pedagogical perspectives. In the second phase of analysis, data on each participant were revisited in order to construct an analytical participant profile, refine

emergent coding schemes and look for triangulation of codes across multiple data sources on each participant. These individual participant profiles proved crucial in illuminating the connections between participants' identities and politics as Black men and their pedagogical stances as Black male teachers. In the third phase of analysis, participant profiles were used to look for triangulation of codes across participant narratives, and to group codes into broad, overarching categories. Overall, the three phases of data analysis afforded examinations of common challenges and triumphs across participants' narratives as Black male teachers as well as in-depth portraits of each participant's negotiations of those challenges and triumphs. Feedback on preliminary study findings from the author's writing group also helped to refine the analysis of data.

Research context and participants

Pseudonyms for the research context and study participants are used throughout this article to protect participants' anonymity. All of the 11 participants in this study were employed at the time of data collection in the public school system in Brewerton, a large urban centre on the east coast of the USA. Black youth comprised the majority of the Brewerton School District's student body, and most Brewerton schools offered free meal programmes for a majority of their students, indicating the working-class or impoverished socio-economic status of the families of many Brewerton youth. Like numerous urban districts in the USA, the Brewerton School District has struggled in recent years with scarce financial and material resources, underperformance on high-stakes testing, high student drop-out rates and frequent teacher and administrative turnover.

Participation in this study was limited to Black male educators with middle and high school teaching experiences in order to draw upon and speak to the greater presence of male teachers at those levels. Efforts were also made to recruit teachers from schools with sizeable percentages of Black students in order to investigate claims of a special connectedness between Black male teachers and Black youth. Participants were identified and recruited through personal contacts and professional networks to which the author had access, and purposeful sampling was used to achieve some diversity of background experiences and teaching subjects.

Researcher perspectives and study limitations

As with any qualitative inquiry, the interpretive lens of the researcher played an important role in this study. The author's status as a Black male researcher, teacher educator and former K-12 instructor afforded a familiarity and rapport with study participants that proved crucial in earning their trust and eliciting their detailed narratives. Yet despite his insider status, the author intentionally resisted presumptions that his identities, experiences and perspectives as a Black male educator necessarily mirrored those of his study participants. The data collection and analysis procedures described above helped the author to carefully and respectfully note moments of overlap and divergence between his assumptions and the perspectives of the men who so generously contributed to this study.

While the study described in this article was carefully designed to unearth participants' unique perspectives on their experiences as Black male teachers in an urban, predominantly Black school district, it is not without its limitations. The self-reported

nature of the data, along with the locally bound study sample, works against the generalisability of study findings. Additionally, since the aim of the study was to foreground study participants' perspectives on their experiences, data collection did not elicit insights from other stakeholders on the roles of Black male teachers in urban schools. Nevertheless, the unique nature of the recurrent themes presented below points to several issues that beg for closer examination in future research on the lives and work of Black male teachers. These issues will be explored in Section 'Discussion and implications' of this article.

Findings

As noted earlier, popular discourses on Black male teachers have identified these men as ideal role models and father figures for Black students, and a burgeoning body of scholarship has started to explore the role modelling and 'other fathering' practices associated with Black male teachers' culturally relevant pedagogies. Echoing these sources, six of the men in this study – Bill, Damon, Ira, Karl, Quincy and Solomon – pointed to deep connections with Black male students as central aspects of their work as Black male teachers. The salience of these connections emerged in descriptions of Black boys' unique responsiveness to these participants as Black male educators, as well as in participants' accounts of their unique pedagogical and emotional investments in their Black male students. Although this article will focus primarily on the dilemmas associated with discourses on surrogate fatherhood, it is crucial to note that some of the participants in this study described caring and sometimes paternal relationships with Black male students that echoed claims elsewhere of Black male teachers' potential status as role models and father figures. The significance of these descriptions of a special rapport with Black male students will be revisited in Section 'Discussion and implications' of this article.

Although some participant accounts reiterated popular perceptions of Black male teachers as role models and father figures, others revealed palpable anxieties surrounding the responsibility to serve as father figures – anxieties that have not been explored to date in scholarly inquiries into the experiences of Black men in teaching. Two challenges in particular emerged across participant narratives: seven expressed their own ambivalence towards the extra-pedagogical responsibilities associated with the role of father figure, and four described student resistance to the paternal nature of their teacher authority. These themes are explored in the following sections.

'Not in my job description': the extra-pedagogical responsibilities of the father figure

Across a number of participants' narrative accounts, the role of the father figure was associated with levels of personal and emotional engagement with students that did not always fit into participants' conceptions of their responsibilities as teachers. Contrary to scholarly and media depictions of Black male educators' readiness and eagerness to serve in this capacity for Black students, seven of the 11 participants in this study articulated a bounded conception of their job descriptions that questioned or eschewed what they marked as the extra-pedagogical responsibilities of being a father figure. These participant perspectives are illustrated in the narrative excerpts that follow.

One of the participants who expressed a bounded conceptualisation of his role as a teacher was Oliver. After describing Black students' resentment towards male teachers because of the absence of their fathers, Oliver explained in a one-on-one interview that he did not venture into discussions of such issues with his students because, in his words, 'I think you get into areas that may get very dangerous. It's not in my job description. I don't feel I'm trained to do that.' Situating personal and emotional investments in students' lives beyond the domain of his job description, Oliver articulated strict boundaries that precluded discussions about absentee fathers and Black students' other personal dilemmas for which he felt unaccountable as a teacher. Similar sentiments emerged during a focus group session as participants were asked about popular perceptions of Black male teachers as father figures for Black boys. In his response, Victor pushed back against these perceptions by asserting the need for more mental health support for his Black male students, and not just more Black male teachers:

- Victor: I've been recently reflecting, looking at my male students. In addition to just having Black male teachers, we need mental health support. [Others: Mmm-hmm] I mean the issues that particularly a lot of my young Black males are dealing with, I can't help them. Even when you try to get rapport with like 'what's wrong with you, son?', they just put all this against you. So even though I'm there, it's like I'm not even there. The ones that are real problematic, that I really wanna try to reach, or maybe ... I don't know. I'm just at my wit's end. I send them to the counsellor. And even then, that's not helping really because it's a large school, [lots of] kids and [few] counsellors.
- Author: So it sounds like you actually have been feeling the limits of your ability to connect with Black male students.
- Victor: Yeah, the limits. You know, they come in angry, there's tension. You try to talk to them like 'what's wrong son?' 'Nothing.'

In this exchange, Victor challenged presumptions of a father-son rapport between Black male teachers and Black boys by describing his limited capacity as a Black male educator to help these boys process the anger and other emotional issues that manifested in school. Victor's remark sparked similar comments in the focus group from Oliver and Greg, who challenged presumptions of their capacity as well as their responsibility to mitigate the psychological and emotional scars exhibited by some of their Black male students, and who supported Victor's call for more mental health professionals in urban schools. Responding to popular perceptions of Black male teachers as father figures for Black students, all three men countered these perceptions by delimiting the boundaries of their capacities and/or responsibilities as Black male educators.

Another participant who asserted the limits of his duties as a teacher was Mitch. When asked whether he saw himself as a father figure for his Black male students, Mitch replied that he preferred a measure of distance from students that precluded the type of personal connections he associated with the father figure role. Declaring that 'my job is to teach', Mitch distinguished his teaching duties from the willingness to probe into students' personal lives, which he ascribed to a school counsellor. He then went on to suggest that he was more like a 'cool uncle' than a father:

- Mitch: I'm the cool uncle, that's what I am. I'm the cool uncle that you kind of wanna go hang out with, but you know he's still your uncle, and he still treats you like you're the child and you're the nephew. You guys might go out and play

basketball and have fun together, and do all that kind of stuff. But if you do something that you're not supposed to do, he's still gonna correct you about it.

Author: But uncle as opposed to father because ...?

Mitch: There's a much closer connection with a father. You go to your father for a lot of things that you're not gonna come to me about. And if you do, I will stop you immediately and say 'do you need to go to the counsellor? Because if what you're saying is what I think you're gonna say, then you need to go to the counsellor.' Honestly I could be that person, but I just ... that's not me. I don't wanna deal with those types of things. It's a much greater investment emotionally and personally than I'm willing to undertake.

In this exchange, Mitch envisioned himself as an authority figure – the cool uncle – who maintained a cool distance from the more intimate details of students' private lives. The greater personal and emotional investment that Mitch associated with the father figure did not fit into his definition of his role as a teacher.

Like Mitch, Bill was another study participant who expressed ambivalence towards serving as a father figure, particularly when that role was associated with the performance of an authoritative approach to classroom discipline. Reflecting on pressures from teacher colleagues to serve as a firm, paternal disciplinarian for Black students, Bill declared at one point in his narrative, 'I'm not raising children. That's not my job. It's not in my job description to raise children.' He also noted that his distaste for an authoritative classroom persona aimed at enforcing good behaviour put him directly at odds with Black female peers' expectations of Black male teachers. In the following passage, Bill recalled how a Black female teacher coach at his school had advised him to adopt a firmer style of classroom management as a Black male teacher:

So we were talking. I was just telling her some of the problems I was having in the classroom. She basically was like, 'You're a Black male, and a lot of these kids don't have a Black male presence in their life. So when you're in the classroom, they expect for you to be firm. They expect for you to lay down the law. They expect for you to do all of this stuff.' She specifically said because you're a Black male, they expect you to be firmer with them than they would expect from these other teachers.

Elsewhere, Bill noted that a Black female mentor teacher also had echoed these sentiments. While sensitive to the cultural context that informed discourses on Black male teachers as authoritative, patriarchal disciplinarians for Black children, Bill offered a poignant explanation of his dissonance with this popular image of the Black male teacher:

Bill: It's not that I can't be a father or a father figure, but maybe I'm just not the lay-down-the-law type of father [chuckle], you know what I mean. Maybe the type of father figure that I envision being effective is not the one who goes to work, brings home the bacon and disciplines the kids when they need it, but a different type of father. And the type of father that they need is not the type of father that I can be. Does that make sense?

Author: Yeah. It sounds like you're saying you can be ... like the talk-it-out type of dad versus let-me-get-my-belt.

Bill: Yes, yes. But it seems like they're saying, 'No, you can't talk it out with these kids. You have to get the belt out. That's what they need, they need the belt.' Well, you know, I'm not the belt dad [chuckle]. And if that's what you're expecting, I'm gonna disappoint you.

In this passage, Bill envisioned himself as an alternative to the images of Black fatherhood entrenched in patriarchal narratives of dominance. This alternative, however,

was at odds with the ‘belt dad’ persona that his colleagues seemed to repeatedly demand of him. Bill’s deviation brought into relief the narrow confines of the father figure role that he felt pressured to serve as a Black male teacher in a predominantly Black urban school.

Like the teachers referenced thus far in this discussion, two other study participants provided perspectives on the boundaries of their roles and responsibilities as Black male teachers. One was Quincy, who expressed notable ambivalence towards the prospect of serving as a father figure:

Even though I always say ‘I’m not your father’, for some kids that’s the way they react to me because I’m that Black figure. And whether they have a father or don’t, they still try to figure out, ‘Well what role is he playing in my life?’ So because of that, sometimes I feel responsible in that role of trying to model one way that a Black male can be, or Black male role model, Black male father figure, whatever you wanna call it – mentor, whatever – can be. On the other hand, I feel a little overwhelmed, like why should I have to when there should be a lot of other folks doing the job?

Quincy noted in this excerpt that despite reassuring his students that he was not trying to be their father, he sensed that some of them still precariously positioned him as such. While he felt motivated at times to take on this role, he also felt overwhelmed by it and, ultimately, not primarily responsible for it. Ira, another study participant who acknowledged his status as a role model for urban Black students at several points throughout his narrative, also expressed slightly mixed feelings towards serving as a father figure:

I don’t totally welcome it [the expectation to be a father figure]. But at the same time, I don’t view it as unfair either. I just look at it as part of the reality of teaching urban kids. You do have single mothers trying to raise boys who are impressionable with the ills in their community, and they do desire some African American male presence. It’s just a reality, so I don’t shun it, I don’t look at it as unfair. [But] I’m not trying to step outside the box; I’m not trying to go too far. I’m not going to be Joe Clark knocking on your door.³ I’m not doing that, unless I feel it’s totally serious, like red light, emergency, that kind of thing. But I haven’t gotten to that point yet. But here, calling parents, requesting if it’s okay to sit down and talk to a student about issues ... I’ve been there. But definitely not like, ‘I’m going to pick you up and take you to a ball game’ kind of approach.

In this exchange, Ira revealed that he was certainly aware of and sensitive to the social and cultural circumstances of Black urban life that fuelled public desire for Black male teachers to serve as father figures. However, in contrast to the popular cinematic depiction of Joe Clark in *Lean on Me* (1989), Ira set limits on the lengths to which he would pursue this role, despite his sensitivity to the conditions that this role could potentially address.

All of the participants referenced in this discussion provided insights into the boundaries they imposed on their roles and responsibilities as Black male teachers. Repeated references to job descriptions underscored participants’ contentions that it was not their professional charge to contend with the emotional, psychological, and behavioural spillover from students’ personal lives. Together, the narrative passages discussed above revealed ambivalence towards a central hope within popular narratives on Black male teachers: the willingness of these men to serve Black children by blurring the boundaries between classroom pedagogue and surrogate Black patriarch.

'You ain't my daddy!': student resistance to Black male teacher authority

Idealised perceptions of Black male teachers as father figures belied the struggles that could complicate study participants' encounters with Black students, especially during moments of disciplinary enforcement. Contrary to pervasive expectations of Black student responsiveness to Black male father figures, four participants cited their status as Black male authority figures as the very cause for student backlash. As revealed in the narrative excerpts below, Black student resistance to Black male teacher authority challenged presumptions of Black male teachers as ready-made father figures for Black youth.

One participant who spoke to this theme was Mitch. While describing his interactions with Black male students, Mitch noted, 'There's certain nuances you have to deal with with boys, especially as they start to smell themselves. And then they wanna be the cub trying to assert his authority, and you gotta rough him up a little bit and remind him he's still a cub.' Mitch used 'smell themselves', a colloquialism for a sense of overconfidence, to describe a burgeoning cockiness among some male students that led to masculinist struggles for power in his classroom, and he asserted that such power struggles emerged specifically in response to male teachers and not their female colleagues, whose mother-like qualities seemed to make their authority more palatable for Black students. Similarly, Oliver also contrasted students' compliance with female teachers to their defiance of male teachers like himself. In Oliver's narrative, urban Black family and community contexts, more so than puberty, proved key in explaining the student antagonism he witnessed:

I think female teachers don't have it as difficult as male teachers because a lot of these children are accustomed to having female authority figures. They're brought up by their grandmothers or their aunts or their mothers. So when a male figure tells the students to do something, they wanna know, 'Well who are you to tell me to do something?' You know, that's the feedback I get. They're so accustomed to having women tell them to do things and following the instructions of women, whether it be their grandmother or whatever, because the father's not there. The father's absent. So all of a sudden it's 'who is this man telling me to do something, when I've never had a man telling me to do something before?'

In Oliver's view, his Black students' familiarity with women authority figures in their families, along with their resentment towards absent father figures, produced a resistance to his authority in the classroom – one that was not commonly experienced by his women counterparts. This excerpt provided another example of the animosity towards patriarchal Black male authority that, in the eyes of some participants, seemed to complicate their roles as adult Black male figures in the classroom.

Like Mitch and Oliver, Victor described student resistance to his authority that stood in stark contrast to student compliance with women teachers, and that also was articulated through a very striking choice of words. Victor noted several times in his narrative that while Black boys generally were receptive to the mother-like authority of Black women teachers, some of them would balk at his attempts to establish order in the classroom by declaring 'you're not my father'. He offered the following explanation of this phenomenon during a one-on-one interview:

Victor: Well, in the beginning of the year with me and my boys, most of the time everything is just kinda cool. First of all, some of them are kind of like in awe because they may not have had that many male teachers before. So it's like, 'It's cool, we got a male teacher.' After the honeymoon rubs off with the boys,

particularly when you start setting limits and parameters, then tensions will start arising. Tensions will start arising with the boys. 'You ain't my father!' This whole notion that 'you ain't my father!' And you treat them like your kids, [but] this whole tension with the 'you're not my father' kind of thing goes on with the boys more so than with the girls.

Author: And what's that about?

Victor: What it's about is, the ones that are saying it in most cases lack a father. So because of the lack of the father, 'You ain't my father, my father ain't here, you don't have nothing to say to me. Leave me the f ... alone. My mom is the one that is doing everything, and I don't really have nothing to do with you men folks because my father wasn't around.' I have less tension with the boys that have their fathers. There'll be normal tensions, but it's not like 'you're not my father' tensions. It's more like 'I'm a man, you're a man.' It's more a man tension. They won't say 'you're not my father'.

In the above exchange, Victor revealed that while tensions with Black boys were not limited to those who did not have fathers, the absence of father figures in some students' home lives marked a crucial distinction in his assessment. For Victor, 'you're not my father' reflected the psychological and emotional baggage of Black boys who were struggling to deal with absent father figures in their lives. That this retort arose as he attempted to establish the parameters of his classroom environment suggests that the father figure, for his students, may have been a loaded framework for processing adult male authority. Despite his willingness to 'treat them like [his] kids', Victor reported that his classroom management-related interactions with some Black male students foundered under the symbolic weight of surrogate Black fatherhood.

Some of the most provocative accounts of discipline-related confrontations with students were offered by Quincy. Like Victor, Quincy reported that some students responded to his authority by saying 'you ain't my daddy'. In the following passage, Quincy explained how such moments transpired:

There were situations when I was like, 'You need to sit down' or 'you need to calm down and stop doing that'. And they'd be like, 'You can't talk to me like that, my dad doesn't tell me what to do. You ain't my daddy, you can't tell me what to do.' And some of them, I didn't know what their relationship was with their dad, if their dad lived with them or whatever. But to me, eventually I just had to let them know, 'Whatever relationship you and your dad have is fine. I'm not trying to make any plans or changes or anything like that. But you're in this classroom, you gotta follow the rules of this classroom. So if you don't like that, that's fine, but we're going to have some problems. And whether or not you want your dad to come up here and talk to me about that ...' 'Well, my dad's gonna beat you.' 'Well, that's fine. Bring your dad up here; we'll deal with that when we come to that bridge. That may be. Your dad maybe has killed three people, I don't know, that's fine. But the point is, when you're in here, you gotta follow the rules of the classroom, and if you don't like the rules of the classroom, you gotta find somewhere else to go, and I'll make sure that we can figure some way to make that happen.'

In this narrative excerpt, 'you ain't my daddy' operated as a student counter-stance to Quincy's authority as a teacher. It was when Quincy attempted to assert control over and set limits within the classroom that 'you ain't my daddy' challenged his right to do so. Not only did this retort seek to discredit Quincy's authority by excluding him from the father figure role, but it was also followed by a threat to subject him to the wrath of the legitimate occupant of this role, the student's actual father. In his quest to establish dominion over his classroom, Quincy thus faced two challenges: student defiance of the legitimacy of his father-like authority, and the threatened confrontation

with other patriarchs should he continue to pursue his claim to patriarchal power in the classroom.

From boys 'smelling themselves' to the possibility of fisticuffs, the accounts referenced above offered examples of the sometimes precarious nature of study participants' authority over their students. For the teachers quoted above, student compliance with female teachers and student defiance of male instructors marked two important obstacles to the legitimacy of their authority: the predominance of women authority figures in the lives of their Black students and the emotional and psychological resentment harboured by some Black students towards absent fathers. Contrary to the popular presumption of a culturally mediated rapport between Black male teachers and their Black students, the participants cited in this discussion revealed that their potential status as Black male father figures, rather than endearing them to their students, could trigger a palpable and problematic disconnect with the Black youth in their classrooms.

Discussion and implications

As the men in this study reflected on discourses that positioned them as surrogate fathers for Black students, two key images of the Black male father figure surfaced in their accounts. One image was that of the stern patriarch who was expected to perform a domineering Black masculinity that could discipline Black youth. Echoing the extant research on male teachers' thorny negotiations of hegemonic masculinity (Martino 2008b; Martino and Frank 2006; Sargent 2001), this study revealed that patriarchal notions of Black masculinity, rather than ensuring classroom order, generated pedagogical dilemmas for some participants in this study. Drawing upon critiques in Black masculinity studies of recurrent cultural and political efforts since the mid-twentieth century to reclaim patriarchal privilege for Black men in America (Byrd and Guy-Sheftall 2001; Carbado 1999), popular discourses on Black male teachers can be understood, at least partially, as another attempt to reproduce patriarchal constructions of Black men, this time in the form of the paternal Black male teacher while obscuring potential critiques of patriarchy's potentially deleterious effects on Black men, Black youth and Black educational settings. As future research continues to explore the experiences of Black men in the teaching profession, it is imperative that this work brings a critical eye to the reproduction of patriarchy vis-à-vis the positioning of Black male teachers as father figures. More scholarly inquiries into Black male teachers' negotiations of patriarchy will afford deeper understandings of how these teachers encounter and respond to opportunities to reproduce patriarchal power in the classroom. Furthermore, given study participants' nods to the pivotal roles of other stakeholders in shaping their negotiations of the stern, authoritarian mode of surrogate fatherhood, future research should include investigations of how students, fellow teachers, administrators and parents may reinforce and/or subvert the pressures to situate Black male teachers as agents of patriarchal Black masculinity in K-12 schools.

In addition to the stern, authoritative disciplinarian, another image that emerged in participant narratives was that of the more sensitive and emotionally accessible paternal figure who cared for Black youth by intentionally attending to their psycho-emotional well-being. As discussed in some extant research on men in teaching, one strategy for male teachers to comply with the pressures to perform hegemonic masculinity in the classroom is to assume an emotional distance from students (Allan 1994;

King 1998; Sargent 2001). However, an understanding of some study participants' reticence to attend to the psychological and emotional well-being of their students may be further complicated when race and culture are considered as mediating factors. For instance, while an emotional distance from students may resemble the constructions of ruggedness and rationality traditionally associated in the west with hegemonic masculinity, it could also be seen as a self-preserving – and therefore strategic and perhaps valuable – avoidance by some Black male teachers of the enormous psychological weight of filling the father figure void in the lives of Black students. Furthermore, given the valorisation of hypermasculine performances of Black manhood in contemporary Black culture (Neal 2005), Black male teachers' emotional distance might be read as a legible presentation of Black masculinity for Black students, perhaps indicative of Black male teachers' culturally relevant pedagogical approaches to constructing instructional identities that resonate with Black youth. Possibilities like these do not negate the potential links between emotional distance from students and attempts to comply with hegemonic forms of masculinity. Instead, these possibilities suggest that racial context may add new layers to how we understand these and other negotiations of Black masculinity by Black men in teaching. As future research continues to document Black male teachers' performances of Black masculinity, it must employ racially and culturally attuned sensitivities to why and how Black male teachers take up certain modes of Black masculinity while avoiding others.

It should be noted that this article's focus on study participants' dilemmas with the fatherly connotations ascribed to their work was not meant to wholly dismiss the possibilities of Black male teachers as father figures for Black students. As mentioned earlier in the findings, six of the men in this study described deep connections with Black male students that echoed the father-like rapport depicted in popular discourses on Black male teachers. Moving forward, it is imperative that future research balances the impetus to trouble patriarchal discourses on the roles of male teachers with sensitivity to some Black male teachers' apparent and/or conditional compliance with the father figure role. This balance is especially important given the rich scholarship cited earlier on Black educators, which has indicated the pedagogical affordances of a parental-like rapport with Black students. To date, minimal overlap has emerged between critical scholarship on masculinity politics in the lives of male teachers and critical scholarship on the pedagogical insights and traditions of Black teachers. Creating opportunities for more intimate engagements between these two bodies of scholarship is a crucial next step towards building a corpus of research that attends to both gender and race in Black male teachers' identities and pedagogies.

Along with possible directions for future research, the findings described in this article raise questions for teacher education programmes and school districts (as well as educational researchers) to consider as they work with Black men in the teaching profession. For instance, given the significance of surrogate fatherhood in the narratives of the men in this study, what opportunities do prospective and current Black male teachers have to openly discuss and critically analyse popular discourses on their presumed status as father figures for Black students? In light of the numerous times that participants in this study pushed back against popular perceptions of themselves as father figures, what are teacher education programmes and school districts doing to help Black male teachers effectively manage the stresses associated with the father figure role, and what should these institutions do when Black male teachers, like some of the participants in this study, cannot or will not fully assume that role in their classrooms? By delving

below surface-level valorisations of Black male teachers as father figures, future scholarship will not only develop a deeper grasp of how Black masculinity politics shape the experiences of Black male teachers, but also provide better insights for teacher educators and school district officials who want to support Black male teachers as they tend to the educational needs of Black youth.

Conclusion

Widespread cultural angst over the absence of father figures in Black families and communities in the USA has fuelled growing calls for schools to hire more Black male teachers who can serve as surrogate fathers for Black youth. Through careful analyses of the narratives of 11 Black male teachers, this article identified the challenges that emerged as study participants considered if and how they wanted to serve as father figures for their Black students. Critical perspectives from Black masculinity studies afforded further analyses that problematised patriarchal discourses on Black male teachers as father figures and underscored the dilemmas that these discourses produced for men in this study. By bringing Black masculinity politics to the fore, this article contributes to recent bodies of scholarship on male teachers and Black male teachers which have investigated the effects of hegemonic masculinity and the pedagogical influences of race and culture, respectively, but have yet to fully explore the intersections of these factors in the experiences of Black male teachers. This article also raises critical questions that should be considered by researchers, teacher education programmes and school districts that want to recruit and support more Black men in the teaching profession.

Notes

1. The distinction between 'role model' and 'father figure' is often blurry in popular discourses on Black male teachers and warrants further examination. This article highlights the notion of surrogate fatherhood because, as discussed in Section 'Findings', considerable anxiety surfaced in study participants' narratives around this particular construct of Black male teachers.
2. This strand of scholarship marks a departure from and an inherent critique of works by authors such as Hare and Hare (1984), Kunjufu (1986) and Madhubuti (1990) that identify a 'return' to hypermasculine and patriarchal forms of manhood as a sign of the cultural and political rehabilitation of Black men in America from the scars of White supremacy.
3. This was a reference to the iconic cinematic portrayal of Black male educator Joe Clark in *Lean On Me*. The film depicted Clark as a figure who repeatedly went to extra lengths, including making house visits, to support his Black and other racial minority students, emerging in the process as a tough but caring father figure.

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