

Chapter 7

The Lived Experiences of African Americans in International Education: Why So Few Choose to Teach Abroad

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the contents of this chapter is to explore the lived experiences of African American teachers who chose to work in international schools, while at the same time discussing the reasons that the number of these teachers is so low in comparison to those of their counterparts of European descent. While African Americans make up over 13% of the American population, they only make up about 7% of the nation's teacher pool. When this is narrowed down to those who chose to teach internationally, the disparity in the number between the races becomes even greater. Although there are no statistics kept on the number of African Americans working in international schools, data collected through conversations with African Americans who are engaged in international teaching tends to show that the number of African Americans in international schools is very low. This chapter will examine the beliefs of those who are working abroad as to why they believe that this is the case.

INTRODUCTION

Over the author's time as an international educator, considering the 24 years and sizes of faculties, they have worked with nearly 1900 educators. Of that 1900, only 11 have been African Americans (less than one percent). The reality of that number has often been a topic of conversation among that small group of eleven former colleagues. The author's number of 'African Americans worked with eleven (11), is nearly the largest number total within the group. All but one of the author's African American former colleagues have worked with fewer than five (5) other African American educators in international education.

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The rarity of African Americans in international schools can be illustrated by a greeting at the Kuwait airport in the author's last school year (2000-2001) working at the *American School of Kuwait* (ASK). For two (2) of the three (3) years that they worked at ASK, they were assigned to work as the new teacher orientation leader. Part of their role was to greet the new teachers at the airport when they arrived. ASK had the tradition of flying all new teachers into the country on the same day. The director would meet all the new faculty members at the layover point in Europe, make sure they were all together and then bring them into Kuwait. Orientation to the host country literally began before new faculty arrived in Kuwait. In August 2000, as the author was standing outside the customs area of the Kuwait Airport, new teachers slowly worked their way out of the terminal to where the author was standing. In one group, a tall African American man came towards the author. When he saw the author, the new teacher at once started smiling, walked over to the author and they started hugging one another and laughing. Within just a couple of minutes, another young African American man walked out. When he saw the author and the first teacher, he began to laugh, walked over to them and the process of hugs and laughter repeated itself. To that point in their international careers, neither of them had worked with another African American, let alone another African American male. It would be another nine (9) years before the author worked with another African American man overseas; and that was because the author convinced his brother to join him working at a school in Egypt. The author's son would join the faculty of the same school a year later, becoming only the fourth African American male with whom the author would work in their years internationally. Amazingly enough, of the 11 other African Americans who worked with the author internationally, three (3) would be related to the author in some way.

The scarcity of other African Americans in international education is a constant topic of conversation amongst the author's African American colleagues. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the lived experiences of African Americans teaching internationally and to explore ways in which other African American teachers could be convinced to consider the choice of using/taking their skills and experience abroad.

BACKGROUND

Historically, African American teachers are more likely to be employed in inner-city and urban environments (Press Release - Black or African American teachers teach in city schools at a higher rate - February, n.d., n.d.). Given this dynamic, combined with the fact that the schools found in these areas are more likely than their counterparts in rural and suburban settings to be under-performing, African American teachers are, in some cases, viewed through an inequitable lens as being under-performing teachers. This view is even shared by some in the African American community. An example of this can be found in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) and an incident that occurred in the early 2000s. A group of minority parents, at three of its high schools (which were perennially underperforming) accused the district of spending more money at Bellaire, the single majority white campus in the district, than at the majority-minority campuses (Spenser, 2005). They also believed that teachers at Bellaire (at present, white teachers still make up the majority, 58%) were more qualified (more degreed and credentialed) than the African American (and Hispanic) teachers on the other high school campuses in the district. Presently, at Kashmere High School, one of the three under-performing high schools, the teaching staff is 82% African American (*Houston ISD*, 2023). A staff writer for the Houston Chronicle, Jason Spenser, undertook a study of these assertions. What he found was exactly the opposite. The district invested more

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