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Accept, Adjust, or Move Forward: The Pivotal Additional Roles and Responsibilities of Black Teachers

Virginia Redwine Johnson, PhD
Texas A&M University

Abstract

This study explores the unrecognized additional roles and responsibilities of Black teachers in K-12 education. Despite comprising only 7% of the teaching workforce, Black educators frequently assume duties beyond their formal job descriptions, including serving as mentors, cultural liaisons, disciplinarians, and advocates. Utilizing Role Theory, this research examines how these hidden roles impact Black teachers' professional experiences, job satisfaction, and emotional well-being. Through semi-structured interviews with 17 Black teachers across various US regions, the study reveals not only the burdens but also the sources of pride and fulfillment that these additional roles can generate. The findings highlight the urgent need for systemic changes, such as peer support groups, culturally relevant professional development, and equitable compensation policies. These measures aim to acknowledge and support the multifaceted contributions of Black teachers, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and sustainable educational environment.

Keywords: Black teachers, hidden roles, duties, support

Introduction

In educational discourse, teaching is often regarded as a noble profession. Formal job responsibilities, such as curriculum delivery, lesson planning, student assessment, classroom management, professional development, and school collaboration, are not only identified in scholarly literature but are also consistently outlined in national teaching standards and district job descriptions (Ingersoll et al, 2012; US Department of Education, 2021). These foundational duties constitute the universally recognized expectations for K-12 educators across the United States. This standardized framework informs both public perceptions and institutional policies, framing the essential work of teachers in terms that are measurable and observable. However, such definitions of teaching often overlook the less visible, yet equally significant, responsibilities that certain groups of educators assume. Understanding these additional roles is crucial, particularly in discussions about teacher well-being, equity, and retention in today's diverse educational settings.

For Black teachers, especially, these formal expectations often represent only a portion of their professional reality. In addition to standard instructional duties, Black educators frequently assume unrecognized roles and responsibilities that are rooted in historical inequities and systemic racial dynamics (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Dixson & Dingus, 2008). Black teachers are commonly expected to serve as role models, mentors, disciplinarians, cultural translators, community liaisons, and advocates for marginalized students, particularly Black students (Foster, 1997; Howard & Navarro, 2023; Irvine, 1989). These roles, while central to student support and school culture, are rarely acknowledged or compensated within institutional structures. Consequently, the emotional and professional burdens associated with such hidden labor can directly affect job satisfaction, well-being, and long-term retention for Black educators. Recognizing and examining these dynamics is vital for any meaningful conversation about equity and sustainability in educational policy and practice.

These hidden expectations have persisted for decades. A long history of systemic inequities has positioned Black educators as crucial cultural links within segregated or racially hostile schooling environments (Ladson-Billings, 1994; de Royston & Madkins, 2020). Throughout American history, Black teachers have often been tasked not only with academic instruction but also with emotionally supporting Black students. At the

same time, they have had to negotiate and survive within educational systems structured by policies and practices such as segregated schooling, exclusion from leadership roles, or inequitable resources. These systemic conditions have consistently marginalized the professional growth of Black educators (Foster, 1997; Walker, 2000).

Black teachers are responsible not only for supporting students but also for educating non-Black colleagues on issues of race, equity, and cultural awareness (Coleman-King et al., 2021; Duncan, 2019). School systems rarely formally acknowledge or compensate this additional emotional and professional labor. Williams et al. (2023) explicitly argue that the persistent, unpaid, and undervalued extra roles required of Black teachers are significant contributors to burnout and professional dissatisfaction, often leading Black teachers to consider leaving the profession. Cormier et al. (2021) further support this, emphasizing that these hidden forms of professional labor are significant factors in the stress and burnout experiences of Black educators. These responsibilities are frequently expected, becoming recurring components of the daily school experience for Black teachers, yet are often rendered invisible. The lack of recognition by administrators means this labor is adding to, rather than replacing, formal teaching duties, compounding already demanding workloads. Over time, the cumulative effect of these uncompensated obligations not only jeopardizes the well-being of Black teachers but also undermines efforts to retain a diverse and effective teaching workforce.

Recent teacher-working-conditions research shows that pandemic-era stressors, staffing instability, and shifting student needs intensified teacher burnout and attrition, with uneven burdens in schools serving low-income and racially minoritized communities (Baker & Koedel, 2024; Kraft et al., 2021). Candeias and colleagues (2021) highlighted how stress was a predictor of burnout. They reported that higher levels of burnout are correlated with increased vulnerability to stress, as evidenced by symptoms such as perfectionism, inhibition, and a lack of social support. Urban districts also continue to face persistent resource and spending disparities that shape educators' roles in ways that extend beyond formal job descriptions (Bifulco & Souders, 2024; Farrie & Kim, 2023). Positioning Black teachers' hidden labor within these contemporary pressures clarifies the mechanisms through which role expectations accumulate and why they matter for retention.

The purpose of this study is to unpack and highlight the hidden expectations, roles, responsibilities, and additional duties that Black teachers in the United States encounter. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 17 Black K-12 teachers, representing diverse regional and educational contexts and guided by Role Theory (Biddle, 1986; Turner, 2001), this research seeks to illuminate how these multifaceted duties impact their professional experiences and job satisfaction. The following sections comprise a literature review that provides historical and contemporary context for understanding Black teachers' roles, followed by a description of the research methodology, a presentation of the findings through a Role Theory lens, and a discussion of the implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Literature Review: Historical Context of Black Teachers

The history of Black teachers in the United States is deeply intertwined with larger struggles for educational access, cultural preservation, and social justice. Despite systemic barriers, Black educators have long served as crucial agents of resistance and empowerment for their communities (Anderson, 1988; Foster, 1997; Walker, 2000). As evidenced during various time periods, Black educators have displayed being more than just an educator. Their task of teaching, encouragement, and carrying on traditions was not without challenges.

Pre-Civil War

During the colonial and antebellum periods, Black teachers operated under intensely oppressive conditions as laws in many states criminalized education for Black individuals (Cornelius, 1991; Douglass, 1845). Yet, Black educators persisted, often risking their lives to teach literacy, critical thinking, and African

Role: Educator, Cultural Preserver

Responsibility: Teaching literacy under threat, protecting African traditions

cultural values (Anderson, 1988; Fairclough, 2007). Their roles extended beyond instruction to include preserving African heritage and fostering identity among Black students (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Walker, 2000). During segregation, Black teachers created rigorous curricula and

community-based schools that affirmed Black identity and challenged racist narratives (Walker, 2000). In response to direct resistance to educational exclusion, many Black teachers organized community meetings or

provided literacy classes to adults after school hours (Foster, 1997). These foundational acts of resistance and empowerment established a legacy that continues to shape the roles of Black teachers today.

Jim Crow Era

Following the end of Reconstruction, Black teachers continued their work during the Jim Crow era, navigating segregated and underfunded schools. Despite limited resources and pervasive racial inequities, these educators cultivated rigorous academic environments that fostered both intellectual and personal growth

Role: Educator, Community Leader

Responsibility: Building self-pride, resisting racial oppression in the curriculum and discipline

(Butchart, 2010; Walker, 2001). As educators and community leaders, they not only imparted academic knowledge but also emphasized character development, civic responsibility, and collective racial uplift. Black teachers' daily practice involved academic excellence and building self-pride and resilience among Black youth, repeatedly serving as powerful role models who challenged stereotypes and instilled a sense of

possibility (Fairclough, 2007). Furthermore, Black teachers resisted racial oppression by advocating for culturally affirming curricula and equitable disciplinary practices, positioning themselves as essential defenders of their students' dignity in the face of systemic prejudice (Fairclough, 2007). These multidimensional roles laid the groundwork for future generations and solidified their influence as pillars of the Black community.

Post-Brown v. Board of Education (1954)

The landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954 sought to dismantle legally sanctioned segregation in public schools. However, its aftermath brought complex challenges for Black educators. As segregated Black schools closed, thousands of Black teachers and principals lost their positions or were relegated to subordinate roles. This resulted in a sudden and profound disruption to their careers and communities (Lutz, 2017; Peters, 2019; Tillman, 2004).

Those who transitioned into predominantly white schools frequently encountered professional isolation, overt racism, and a loss of status and authority, making their work environments deeply hostile and

Role: Advocate, Cultural Mediator

Responsibility: Supporting Black students in integrated but inequitable schools, confronting systemic racism

alienating (Kohli, 2018). Nevertheless, Black teachers continued to serve as essential advocates and cultural mediators for Black students navigating these new and regularly inequitable settings (Walker, 2009). Their responsibilities expanded to include not only academic

instruction but also supporting students through cultural tensions, advocating for the rights of marginalized groups, and confronting systemic racism embedded in integrated schools. By actively defending their students and fostering inclusive spaces, Black educators sustained their legacy of resilience and advocacy in the face of ongoing educational inequities.

Black Teachers in the Late 20th Century

The 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s witnessed significant shifts in educational policy and practice, marked by a national focus on achievement gaps and an increase in high-stakes testing that redefined both student and teacher expectations (Irvine, 1990; Ladson-Billings, 2006; National Commission on Excellence in Education,

Role: Mentor, Surrogate Parent

Responsibility: Providing all-inclusive support for students amid shifting educational priorities

1983). This considerably impacted the responsibilities and visibility of Black teachers. As policies shifted focus to standardized testing and the “achievement gap,” Black teachers remained steadfast advocates for their students.

Black teachers found that students needed more intensive support both academically and emotionally. Increased academic pressure often magnified existing barriers, requiring Black educators to act as mentors, surrogate parents, and advocates to help students cope with higher stakes, limited resources, and persistent inequities (Foster, 1997; Walker, 2000). However, the cumulative burden of these formal and informal responsibilities went unrecognized by educational systems.

Black Teachers in the 21st Century

Today, Black teachers continue to navigate the demands of formal instructional responsibilities. They are completing those tasks alongside significant hidden duties, such as mentoring students, managing classroom and community crises, serving as cultural liaisons, leading diversity initiatives, and providing

Role: Role Model, Crisis Manager, DEI Expert

Responsibility: Cultural translation, conflict resolution, and emotional labor for both students and staff

emotional support to colleagues and families that extend far beyond their official job descriptions (Benson et al., 2021; Cormier et al., 2021). Research consistently documents that the roles of Black teachers as cultural brokers and student advocates are most pronounced in schools with significant racial and ethnic diversity. While research acknowledges the vital importance of these roles (Griffin & Tackie, 2016; Howard

& Navarro, 2023), a notable gap remains in fully recognizing how these compounded responsibilities affect Black teachers' job satisfaction, emotional health, and career longevity (Williams et al., 2023).

Throughout American history, the expansive, overlapping, and emotionally taxing responsibilities carried by Black educators have been critical to the development, support, and success of Black students and communities. Yet the emotional, professional, and psychological toll of these layered responsibilities remains underexplored, especially in relation to job satisfaction and career sustainability. To inform future policy, practice, and support structures, it is essential to investigate the experiences of Black teachers and the nuanced ways they accept, adjust, and move forward within an evolving educational system.

Roles and Responsibilities of Black Teachers

When envisioning teaching as a career, traditional images often come to mind: a teacher standing at the front of a classroom, guiding discussions, reading aloud, or leading small-group activities. While these depictions capture essential aspects of the teaching role, they represent only a fraction of what it entails, particularly for Black educators. However, such mainstream perceptions often obscure the layered and uniquely demanding realities faced by Black educators, whose work routinely extends beyond these visible classroom

activities. In addition to fulfilling formal teaching duties such as lesson planning, grading, and classroom management (US Department of Education, 2021), Black teachers often shoulder additional roles that extend far beyond their job descriptions. These roles, frequently invisible and undervalued, make significant contributions to the well-being and success of students, particularly students of color (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Foster, 1997). The following subsections outline the key roles that Black teachers frequently assume, along with the specific responsibilities associated with each.

Mentor (Role)

Responsibilities:

- Providing academic and personal guidance to students, especially Black students
- Offering socioemotional support and encouragement
- Helping students navigate racialized experiences within school environments

Mentorship is a critical role that Black teachers fulfill. They often become trusted confidants for students who lack other Black role models within educational spaces (Irvine, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Through mentoring, Black teachers foster resilience, affirm identity, and create safe spaces for students to imagine their futures. Yet, despite the critical impact of their mentorship, these additional responsibilities are rarely acknowledged by school leaders, leaving much of this emotional and guidance labor invisible within formal job descriptions and organizational practices.

Cultural Liaison (Role)

Responsibilities:

- Bridging cultural gaps between Black students, their families, and predominantly white school staff
- Educating colleagues and administrators on racial and cultural issues
- Advocating for culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices and curricula

In serving as cultural liaisons, Black teachers play a crucial role in ensuring that school environments are more inclusive and affirming for marginalized students. This role often includes informal professional development for colleagues and community-building efforts within the school (Coleman-King et al., 2021;

Khalifa, 2012). This significant role is often layered to extend to all areas or people. Despite the vital nature of this cultural work, Black teachers' contributions typically go uncompensated and unrecognized, widening existing labor inequities in school settings.

Disciplinarian (Role)

Responsibilities:

- Mediating disciplinary issues involving Black students to ensure fair treatment
- Addressing behavioral challenges while preserving students' dignity
- Handling disruptive students from other teachers
- Protecting students from biased or inequitable disciplinary practices

Black teachers are frequently positioned as disciplinarians for Black students, particularly in predominantly white schools. If they are on campus, they are often the 'go-to person' for mitigating behavior. Black teachers navigate complex dynamics, balancing firm expectations with culturally informed approaches that affirm student identities rather than criminalize behavior (Williams et al., 2020). A major element of Black teachers' roles involves serving as disciplinarians, maintaining order, and addressing behavioral concerns not only in their own classrooms but often throughout the school.

Surrogate Parent (Role)

Responsibilities:

- Providing emotional nurturing stability for students facing adversity
- Supporting students' all-inclusive development beyond academic achievement
- Filling gaps left by absent or disengaged family support structures and other teachers

Many Black teachers are seen and see themselves as surrogate parents for their students. They offer consistent support, discipline, love, and guidance, often without institutional recognition or support (Sandles, 2018). By acting as surrogate parents and providing essential emotional and social support, Black teachers help fulfil critical developmental needs for students that may otherwise go unmet within academic settings. While this role can be deeply meaningful, it also requires significant emotional investment that extends far beyond

contractual expectations. Recognizing and valuing this labor is essential to ensuring that Black teachers are supported, sustained, and not overburdened with responsibilities that should be shared collectively.

Role Model (Role)

Responsibilities:

- Representing positive images of Black excellence and leadership
- Challenging stereotypes and expanding students' visions of success
- Demonstrating resilience, professionalism, and cultural pride

As some of the few Black professionals that students encounter in their schools, Black teachers often carry the heavy burden of serving as exemplars of success, hope, and resistance against societal stereotypes (Duncan, 2019; Maylor, 2009). Black teachers displaying professionalism or depicting positive images, where it may otherwise indicate negativeness, drive hope and aspirations among their students. Black teachers' presence alone can disrupt deficit-based narratives by providing students with tangible examples of success that reflect their own identities and lived experiences. In doing so, they not only affirm students' potential but also redefine what achievement and leadership can look like within and beyond the classroom.

Crisis Manager (Role)

Responsibilities:

- Managing emergencies and conflicts involving students, families, or staff
- Intervening in crises both inside and outside of the classroom
- Providing emotional triage and problem-solving during high-stress situations

Black teachers regularly serve as informal crisis managers within schools, expected to "put out fires" not only for their own students but also across the school community (Williams et al., 2023). While vital, this labor often contributes to emotional strain and professional burnout. Managing crises as Black teachers and navigating any issues that arise can be beneficial to students and the overall school, but it can also be personally taxing. This dual responsibility highlights both the indispensable role Black teachers play in maintaining school stability and the often-unrecognized emotional labor embedded within their daily work.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Expert (Role)

Responsibilities:

- Leading DEI initiatives, committees, and professional development efforts
- Serving as the unofficial spokesperson for racial justice issues
- Supporting the emotional labor of diversity work often neglected by others

Many Black teachers are implicitly expected to advance equity efforts within their schools, often without compensation or formal recognition. This DEI work requires emotional labor and expertise that extends well beyond classroom teaching (Howard & Navarro, 2023). Understanding the depth and complexity of these hidden duties is crucial for comprehending the professional realities that Black teachers face and for developing effective policies that support their well-being and retention. Without intentional structures of support, this responsibility can become an unsustainable burden placed on a small group of educators. Recognizing and redistributing this work across all staff is essential to creating truly equitable and inclusive school environments.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by Role Theory (Biddle, 1986; Turner, 2001), a framework that examines how individuals understand, negotiate, and respond to multiple roles they are expected to perform within complex social contexts. In educational settings, Role Theory provides a compelling lens for exploring how teachers interpret both formal job duties and the informal, often unacknowledged, expectations placed upon them. These expectations are shaped not only by institutional policies but also by societal norms and cultural assumptions about teachers' roles. As a result, teachers often navigate responsibilities that extend beyond formal job descriptions, requiring ongoing interpretation and adjustment in their daily practice. The following concepts inform this analysis:

- *Role Expectations* refer to the behaviors and responsibilities others anticipate from an individual occupying a particular role.
- *Role Conflict* arises when competing or contradictory expectations are placed upon an individual, leading to tension and stress.
- *Role Strain* occurs when the demands of a role become overwhelming, even without direct conflict, due to the intensity or volume of expectations.
- *Role Identity* reflects the internalization of a role into one's self-concept, shaping how individuals view themselves in relation to their work and community.
- *Role Set* refers to the multiple, interconnected roles a person is expected to perform simultaneously.

For Black teachers, who routinely juggle instructional, disciplinary, and representational duties, Role Theory illuminates the adaptive strategies and emotional toll arising from layered, sometimes conflicting demands. This framework not only guides our interpretation of behaviors and identity negotiation but also helps explain how larger social and institutional dynamics contribute to the professional strain and satisfaction experienced by Black educators. By centering Role Theory, this study highlights the importance of examining not just what teachers do, but how and why these expectations are constructed and sustained. Such an approach provides critical insight into the need for more equitable and supportive structures that acknowledge and address the full scope of teachers' roles.

Methods

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative design to explore the lived experiences of Black teachers navigating hidden roles and responsibilities in K-12 schools. Phenomenology was selected as the guiding approach to capture the authentic, first-hand accounts and lived experiences of Black educators and how they interpret and make sense of their professional realities (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Unlike grounded theory, which aims to generate new theory, or case study, which focuses on in-depth analysis of particular contexts, phenomenology enables the identification of essential themes across diverse experiences.

Settings and Context

Participants worked in public schools across the South, South Central, Southwest, Southeast, East, Mid-Atlantic, Mid-South, and Midwest regions of the United States. Urban schools in the sample typically served majority Black and Latinx student populations.

Participants and Recruitment

Seventeen Black teachers currently employed as full-time K-12 teachers in public or charter schools in the United States participated. We used purposeful sampling and recruited through social media networks and educator organizations. Eligibility required self-identification as Black and at least two years of classroom experience. Teachers in private schools or those not presently teaching were excluded.

Table 1

Summary of the participants' demographic and professional characteristics

Pseudonym	Gender	Grade Level	Region	Years of Experience
Chase	Male	Elementary/Middle	South Central	18 years
Johnny	Male	Middle School	South Central	7 years
Chris	Male	Elementary	South Central	14 years
Tech	Male	High School	Mid Atlantic	13 years
Carrie	Female	Elementary	South Central	8 years
Muhammad	Male	Middle School	East	3 years
Janet	Female	Elementary	Southwest	18 years
Q	Female	High School	Southwest	9 years
Ainsley	Female	Elementary/High School	Southwest	11 years
Andre	Male	High School	South	10 years
Lewis	Male	High School	South Central	11 years
Tom	Male	Middle School	South	2 years
Paul	Male	Elementary	South	19 years
Carmel	Female	Middle School	Mid South	17 years
Brittany	Female	Elementary	Southeast	14 years
Georgia	Female	Elementary	South	5 years
Nicole	Female	Middle School	Midwest	18 years

Of the seventeen participants, eleven taught in urban schools, three in suburban schools, and three in rural schools. Most urban schools serve predominantly Black and Latinx student populations, with average enrollment rates for free or reduced price lunch eligibility commonly above 70 percent. Participants' years of experience ranged from 2 to 19 years and spanned elementary, middle, and high school levels. This diversity in settings allowed us to examine how school environments shape the roles and responsibilities of Black educators.

Table A
School Context

School Type	N	Percent	Student Composition
Urban	11	65%	Majority Black/Latinx
Suburban	3	18%	Mixed
Rural	3	18%	Mixed to majority white

Sample Size Justification

We targeted 12 to 20 interviews to capture variation. Code saturation occurred near the fifteenth interview, and the final two interviews yielded no new themes.

Data Collection

Prior to data collection, the study received approval from the Texas A&M University Institutional Review Board. All participants reviewed the study purpose and procedures, and provided written informed consent and were reminded of voluntary participation and the right to withdraw at any time.

We conducted semi-structured interviews via Zoom to support flexible scheduling. Interviews lasted approximately 30–45 minutes and were audio-recorded with verbal permission. An interview protocol, developed from existing literature and piloted with two teachers for clarity, included questions on formal teaching duties, hidden responsibilities, challenges, sources of support, and reflections on professional identity. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, and pseudonyms were assigned for confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages: familiarization, initial coding, theme construction, review, and refinement. Two researchers independently coded transcripts and met to discuss discrepancies. Themes were supported with frequency counts and illustrative quotes. Themes are presented with exact participant counts and percentages. Key findings are displayed in summary tables for transparency. Coding occurred across two iterative cycles. During the first cycle, open coding was used to identify recurring roles and responsibilities described by participants. In the second cycle, codes were refined and grouped into themes through constant comparison. After themes were finalized, Role Theory was applied as an interpretive lens to examine patterns of role expectations, strain, and identity across participants. Analytic memos and frequency counts were used to support consistency and transparency in theme development.

Researcher Positionality

I am a Black woman educator with almost two decades of experience in K-12 public schools as a teacher and a principal. This proximity supported access and rapport, especially when discussing race, discipline, and hidden labor. It also posed risks of assuming rather than asking or normalizing extra duties as part of "good teaching." To address these risks, I wrote reflexive memos from proposal through coding, treated early interpretations as provisional, co-coded transcripts with a second researcher, and reviewed disconfirming cases during theme construction. These procedures document how my standpoint informed, but did not determine, the analysis.

Ethics and Data Management

The researcher de-identified transcripts during transcription, stored audio files and transcripts on encrypted drives with restricted access, and retained only pseudonymous IDs in analytic files.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the hidden roles and responsibilities Black teachers assume beyond their formal job descriptions, and how these experiences shape their professional journeys. The findings, based on thematic analysis of 17 interviews, revealed five recurring themes: Disciplinary, Caregiver,

Representation, Surrogate Parent, and Crisis Manager. Each of these themes illustrates the ways Black teachers experience role expectations, role conflict, role strain, and role identity, which are the key concepts from Role Theory (Biddle, 1986; Turner, 2001). Together, these themes highlight the multifaceted and often invisible labor that shapes Black teachers' daily experiences and underscores the need for greater recognition and structural support within educational systems.

Table 2

The frequency of major roles identified across the 17 participants.

Role	Number of Participants	Percentage
Disciplinarian	14	82%
Caregiver	13	76%
Representation	15	88%
Surrogate Parent	12	71%
Crisis Manager	11	65%

Participants often described navigating multiple, sometimes competing roles that significantly influenced their emotional and professional well-being. Each theme is reported with exact counts and brief interpretive commentary, followed by illustrative quotes.

Disciplinarian

Fourteen teachers (82 percent) reported being called upon to handle building-wide discipline, often outside their assigned responsibilities. Participants said colleagues and administrators relied on them to "talk to" or "get through to" students. Although this role validated trust, it diverted time from instruction and planning. These disciplinary expectations often conflicted with their instructional roles, creating role strain and reinforcing their visibility within the school community primarily through behavior management. For example, Johnny, a middle school teacher in South Central, stated, "I'm the one they call when things get out of hand. I have to get like Deebo from *Friday* and get gangster in the room. My presence changes the situation, but it's exhausting being the 'fixer' all the time." Similarly, Chris, an elementary teacher, reflected, "I had to make it

known that I'm not just the disciplinarian; I can teach, too. But the assumptions follow you. When I have to, sometimes we have come-to-Jesus meetings to get some [students] to act right."

Tech, a veteran high school teacher, describes his role as the fixer, stating, "Confrontation is often misconstrued at a predominantly white school. However, I have to be the department chair, enforcer, and the fixer." Lastly, Carrie, a high school teacher, shares that she is often the go-to person for teachers to send students they may have difficulty handling. "I'm the Black mom for kids in their classrooms that they can't handle." Participants described these experiences as emotionally taxing, especially when they felt reduced to disciplinarian roles instead of being recognized as full educators.

Caregiver

Thirteen teachers (76 percent) reported providing sustained emotional support for students, and at times, colleagues. In providing support well beyond academic needs, the Black teachers described daily check-ins, informal counseling, and coaching around grief, appearance, housing instability, or food insecurity. This role often blurred professional boundaries, leading to role strain. Teachers valued the relationships yet noted fatigue when care work was continuous and undocumented. Muhammad, a middle school teacher, shared, "Sometimes boys just need someone who looks like them to listen. I'm that person because no one else takes the time." Janet, a veteran elementary teacher, explained, "I have no balance anymore. I'm expected to be everything—the teacher, the counselor, the parent—even though it's emotionally challenging." Chase, a long-time elementary classroom teacher, adds, "My students sometimes just need a hug or a listening ear from a Black male. I provide that for them."

Creating positive spaces to meet students' needs is a bonus. Johnny explained that, due to behavioral issues with boys, he runs a club after school to discuss and teach them topics not covered in the curriculum. Q, a high school teacher, also expressed meeting the emotional needs of her students. She said, "I am there for my students. I have observed distrust for authority, so I break down mental barriers." The caregiving role was seen as deeply meaningful but also emotionally draining, highlighting the unofficial expectations placed disproportionately on Black teachers.

Representation

Fifteen of seventeen teachers (88 percent) described being positioned as visible role models, cultural bridges, or primary points of contact for Black students and their families within their schools. This visibility came with both pride and pressure; a tension tied to role identity and role expectations. Several teachers emphasized the importance of being present on their campuses, linking this visibility to purpose and belonging, while noting that added mentoring and liaison work rarely appeared in their schedules or evaluations. Q emphasized, "The students see themselves in me. That matters. But it's heavy when you realize you're the only one they have. It's hard to get people to sit at tables where they have no representation." Ainsley, who has experience in teaching both elementary and high school levels, added, "Being a Black teacher means showing up differently. It's about posture, presence, and politics, even when you don't feel like it."

Johnny said, "Me being in the building makes a world of difference. They need us: We have a different body posture; we bring the culture." Paul, a veteran elementary teacher stated; "If you don't speak the same language... they won't respond. Black teachers aren't many, but Black male teachers are dinosaurs." Chase expressed the magnitude of being a male teacher, "I am the first example of what a man is to them.... For some, it's their only example." Like Chase, Chris emphasized how big a deal it is to be a Black male teacher, saying, "Students love to be in my presence." Lewis, a teacher with over ten years of experience, said, "My presence is a huge benefit. It sets the tone in the atmosphere not only for students but for everyone." For the novice teacher, Tom, he also acknowledged what his presence does. "As a Black male teacher, Black students look up to me." Lastly, Andre, a veteran teacher, said, "I don't think my white colleagues have seen our children in this light."

Several participants noted that this representational labor was rarely acknowledged formally but was crucial for student success and belonging. Together, these narratives suggest that representation is perceived as both a source of purpose and a conduit through which additional expectations accumulate. Role Theory helps clarify why: visibility increases the salience of role identity, while unmet institutional supports increase role strain. Prior work documents similar patterns in which teachers of color serve as cultural brokers and mentors without formal structures that recognize or distribute this labor (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011).

Surrogate Parent

Carmel said, "I am often depleted. I go beyond the scope of my teaching standards making sure I am taking care of my students like I am their parent." Brittany insists she takes on it all. "I take on all roles... nurturer, counselor, mom, hairstylist. You name it." Chase embraced the school dad label: "When they call me their 'school dad,' I don't take offense. I am sometimes the only male they see. I lead like a father would, with love and accountability."

In contrast, Paul, an elementary teacher with 19 years of experience, expressed discomfort: "I'm not their daddy. They would behave differently if I were and sometimes the expectation crosses a line. It's unfair." This tension illustrated how the surrogate parenting role could be affirming for some, but intrusive or burdensome for others. Twelve teachers (71 percent) described acting as family liaisons or parent-like figures, including crisis calls, arranging transportation, or coordinating food, hair, or clothing. They insisted that these duties were frequent and open-ended rather than occasional.

These expectations produced emotional strain, especially when teachers felt solely responsible for student well-being without parallel institutional supports. In Role Theory terms, this reflects role expectation and role overload, where unofficial duties accumulate on top of formal tasks. In urban schools in this sample, limited on-site services and high unmet needs made the surrogate role more visible and persistent. Although leaders praised these efforts, participants said the labor was largely invisible in schedules, evaluations, or pay.

Crisis Manager

Ainsley explained, "I'm literally Olivia Pope in education. They call me to fix everything. It's flattering, but it's too much." Paul states, "I am called on to help students, colleagues, parents... you name it. It's much easier to loosen the reins than tighten them." Nicole, a middle school teacher, noted, "I put out fires every day – with no extinguisher." Georgia, an elementary school teacher, added, "It's always assumed I can handle it. I am always in crisis mode with no recognition, but you have to be ok without the appreciation. No one ever asks if I'm okay." "My biggest challenge is handling everything. I put out fires. I get called on to do it all. I have a hard time compartmentalizing," says Carmel.

Eleven teachers (65 percent) recounted coordinating responses to acute events, such as safety incidents, mental health crises, or community issues. Teachers noted that colleagues often routed crises to them because of their trust with students and families. Participants linked this concentration of crisis work to emotional depletion and a reduction in instructional time. These crisis management expectations compounded other hidden duties, demonstrating the layered complexity of Black teachers' work.

The findings depict a consistent pattern: unofficial responsibilities clustered around five roles and were widely shared across participants. Most teachers carried several roles simultaneously, which created competition with planning, grading, and small-group instruction. Participants linked this accumulation to emotional and physical fatigue, even as they emphasized purpose and commitment to students. The roles were praised informally but rarely recognized through schedules, staffing, or evaluation systems, which left the labor invisible and unevenly distributed. Within Role Theory, these dynamics reflect identity-linked role expectations, role overload, and role conflict. Importantly, narratives suggested that not all teachers were tasked in the same ways. The distribution and meaning of these roles varied by race and gender. We examine those differences in the discussion that follows.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the hidden roles and responsibilities Black teachers assume beyond their formal job descriptions and to understand how these additional expectations impact their professional experiences and job satisfaction. Using Role Theory as a guiding framework, the findings reveal that Black teachers frequently navigate multilayered roles such as disciplinarian, caregiver, representation, surrogate parent, and crisis manager, often simultaneously with limited institutional support. These dynamics were most pronounced in the urban schools in our sample, which typically served majority Black and Latinx students with high free and reduced lunch rates. These findings suggest that the concentration of need within these school contexts often amplifies the expectations placed on Black teachers, positioning them as essential supports beyond instructional roles. As a result, the cumulative weight of these responsibilities has important implications for teacher well-being, retention, and the broader functioning of school communities.

Intersectional Role Expectations

Accounts suggested that role expectations vary by gender as well as race. Black men described being positioned as visible disciplinarians and surrogate fathers, which elevated their presence but narrowed colleagues' perceptions of their instructional expertise. Several Black women described experiencing intensified expectations to provide emotional care, serve as family liaisons, and provide equity leadership. These patterns align with Role Theory's emphasis on identity-linked expectations and help explain why similar contexts can impose distinct forms of hidden labor on Black teachers. These identity-linked expectations highlight the importance of developing equitable staffing and recognition policies that are sensitive to both race and gender.

The Findings Through Role Theory

Role Theory (Biddle, 1986; Turner, 2001) offers a powerful lens for understanding the pressures Black teachers face. Participants' experiences highlight several key concepts: role expectations, role conflict, role strain, and role identity. First, Black teachers face intense and often contradictory role expectations. While they are formally expected to provide instruction and support academic achievement, they are also informally expected to manage student behavior, mentor students, advocate for diversity, and serve as emotional caregivers. These expectations are rarely acknowledged formally, but they shape daily experiences in significant ways.

Second, many participants described role conflict as feeling pulled between competing demands. For example, balancing instructional duties with crisis management often resulted in time and energy being diverted away from core teaching responsibilities. Teachers expressed feeling that they were required to "fix" systemic problems with few resources or recognition. Third, role strain was evident throughout participants' narratives. Teachers spoke of exhaustion, emotional depletion, and a lack of personal-professional balance. The cumulative burden of their hidden roles contributed to stress, health problems, and, in some cases, thoughts of leaving the profession altogether.

Finally, the findings also highlight a complex sense of role identity. Many Black teachers embraced their unofficial roles with pride, viewing them as extensions of their commitment to Black students and their communities. They take on the notion that these roles are what they have to do. At the same time, the pressure

to embody multiple roles without adequate support took a toll on their emotional well-being and professional satisfaction.

Hidden Labor, Burnout, and Retention of Black Educators

Disruptions after 2020 intensified these pressures, particularly in schools serving low-income communities where needs expanded without corresponding support. For Black teachers, a sense of purpose and commitment to students often coexisted with emotional depletion, as trust-based responsibilities continued to grow without formal recognition or compensation. Over time, this imbalance contributes to unsustainable working conditions that place Black educators at greater risk of burnout and attrition. Retention strategies must therefore extend beyond recruitment efforts to focus on improving daily working conditions and redistributing responsibilities for mentoring, diversity initiatives, family engagement, and crisis response across staff. These responsibilities should be supported with dedicated time, professional development, and proper compensation to ensure sustainability.

Connection to Prior Research

These findings are consistent with earlier research demonstrating the critical yet often invisible labor Black teachers perform within schools (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994). Prior scholarship has long documented Black teachers' roles as mentors, disciplinarians, and cultural brokers (Irvine, 1989; Khalifa, 2012). This study further illustrates how these roles are not isolated responsibilities but are layered and continuous demands embedded within teachers' daily experiences. In doing so, it reinforces existing evidence that the accumulation of these responsibilities contributes to heightened emotional labor and professional strain (Kariou et al., 2021).

However, this study contributes a new dimension by focusing explicitly on how the accumulation of hidden duties affects job satisfaction and career sustainability. While past scholarship has emphasized the importance and impact of Black teachers' contributions, fewer studies have directly connected these expanded roles to burnout and decisions to leave the profession (Cormier et al., 2021; Williams et al., 2023). Notably, the identification of Black teachers as informal crisis managers, responsible for addressing emergencies both within and beyond their classrooms, introduces a dimension of labor that remains underexplored in existing

scholarship. This finding highlights the need to more fully account for the responsibilities Black teachers assume and the implications of this work on their well-being.

Although there is extensive literature on the importance of Black teachers, there remains a significant gap in understanding how hidden roles and responsibilities influence Black teachers' job satisfaction and long-term retention. By situating participants' narratives within Role Theory, this study highlights the cumulative emotional and professional toll of navigating these expectations. Recognizing this gap is crucial. Without systemic changes, the very educators most vital to supporting marginalized students may continue to experience burnout, attrition, and diminished well-being.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Based on these findings, several recommendations emerge:

1. **Formal Recognition of Hidden Labor:** Schools and districts must acknowledge the unofficial roles Black teachers fulfill. Schools and districts should explicitly name the mentoring, family liaison, equity leadership, and crisis response work that many Black teachers perform. These responsibilities should appear in job descriptions, evaluation rubrics, duty schedules, and school improvement plans so they are not invisible. Compensation models can include stipends, supplemental contracts, or release time tied to clearly defined deliverables. Principals should assign these duties across staff to prevent concentration on a few individuals, and track distribution each semester. District HR can audit evaluation comments and stipends by race and gender to monitor equity.
2. **Peer Support Networks:** Instituting structured peer mentoring groups within schools can provide Black teachers with safe spaces for shared experiences, stress management, and affirmation. Participation should include access to facilitation training, mental health resources, and budgets for materials so the groups are sustainable. Pairing novice teachers with experienced mentors should include guidance on boundaries and referral pathways to counselors, deans, and family liaisons. Leaders should protect these meeting times in the master schedule and recognize facilitation as

leadership service in evaluations. Annual climate surveys can include items on belonging, workload fairness, and access to support to evaluate impact.

3. **Culturally Relevant Professional Development:** All educators, not only teachers of color, should engage in ongoing, culturally relevant training that addresses systemic inequities and distributes the burden of diversity work more equitably. Training should be tied to coaching cycles and observation feedback so it translates into daily routines rather than one-and-done sessions. Schools can rotate responsibilities for family nights, student affinity events, and equity committees so diversity work does not default to teachers of color. Districts should provide toolkits, sample agendas, and co-facilitation models that enable mixed teams to lead this work. Progress can be tracked through observation notes, participation logs, and reductions in referrals concentrated on specific student groups.
4. **Policy Restructuring:** Educational policies at the district and state levels should consider emotional labor when designing teacher workload policies, compensation, and supports. Examples include adding licensed counselors, social workers, and family liaisons in high-need schools, so that teachers are not the default for every crisis. Contracts and handbooks should define referral pathways, duty rotations, and protected planning time to reduce role conflict. Budget processes can prioritize time-bound stipends, release periods, highlight pay differentials for mentoring, family outreach, and crisis response. Public dashboards can report staffing ratios, distribution of extra duties, and retention by race and gender to ensure accountability.

Limitations

This study relies on self-reported interviews with a purposeful sample, which may overrepresent teachers motivated to discuss hidden labor and related challenges. Although the sample spans multiple regions and school types, it excludes private schools and non-instructional roles. Reported counts reflect salience within this sample rather than population-level prevalence. Additionally, the cross-sectional design captures participants' experiences at a single point in time and does not account for how these roles and perceptions may evolve across teachers' careers or in response to changing school contexts. Researcher interpretation in thematic analysis may also introduce bias, despite efforts to ensure consistency and credibility in coding. Future mixed-

methods studies pairing qualitative depth with representative surveys and longitudinal designs would strengthen generalizability and provide a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics over time.

Implications for Future Research

Future studies should use diary or ecological momentary methods to capture the day-to-day cadence of hidden labor and how it competes with planning, instruction, and recovery time. Researchers should examine how role expectations differ by race and gender using larger samples that include school-level variables, such as staffing ratios, counseling capacity, and student needs. Mixed-methods designs can test mechanisms by linking qualitative narratives to time-use data, referral records, and observation notes. Intervention studies should evaluate models that formalize, distribute, and compensate mentoring, family liaison work, and crisis response, comparing outcomes for teacher well-being, instruction, and retention. Finally, multisite or longitudinal projects can assess generalizability and track whether changes in policy or staffing actually reduce hidden labor over time.

Conclusion

This study highlights the essential but often invisible labor that Black teachers provide in schools, extending far beyond formal teaching duties. By applying Role Theory, the research illuminates how layered expectations contribute to emotional strain, complex role identities, and threats to professional sustainability. The five roles we identified concentrate mentoring, family liaison work, behavior management, and crisis response on a small group of educators, creating persistent role overload and conflict. Since Black teachers are already underrepresented, allowing this hidden labor to remain unrecognized and unsupported will accelerate burnout and attrition. Losing Black teachers would diminish instructional quality, relationships with families, and the cultural expertise that many schools rely on every day. Retention, therefore, requires formal recognition of this work, equitable distribution across staff, and material support through time, staffing, training, and compensation. Investing in these changes is not only a matter of fairness for Black teachers, it is a prerequisite for healthy schools and better outcomes for all students.

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Virginia Redwine Johnson (she/her) is a newly-minted PhD in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Urban Education at Texas A&M University. With approximately 20 years of experience in K-12 education, she has served as both a classroom teacher and campus principal, bringing a practitioner-informed lens to her research and teaching. Her scholarship centers on teacher expectations, affirming teacher dispositions, and the experiences of educators and students in urban schools, with a particular focus on how these factors shape student outcomes and teacher sustainability. Her dissertation examines the role of teacher expectations and affirming practices, leadership support for these dispositions, and Black students' perspectives on classroom experiences. She is the developer of the Taking A.C.T.I.O.N. framework, which translates affirming teacher dispositions into actionable practices for educators and school leaders. Her work has been published in peer-reviewed journals, including *The Teacher Educator*, and reflects a commitment to bridging research and practice in meaningful ways. In addition to her research, Redwine Johnson is actively engaged in leadership and mentorship within higher education. She serves as President of Bold Leaders in Urban Education (BLUE) and is dedicated to supporting emerging scholars and advancing equity-focused educational practices. Her work aims to prepare educators and leaders to better serve diverse student populations through intentional, affirming approaches to teaching and learning.