Chapter 3
What Sports Do You Play? Actually, My Major Is Mathematics:
Experiencing STEM as a Woman of African Descent

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ABSTRACT

Although many different cultures contribute richly to the development of mathematics, many research scholars promote Western and Eurocentric perspectives of mathematics as dominant forces in mathematics history, texts, curriculum, and instruction. This absence of diverse mathematicians has worked to shape current negative narratives surrounding people of color in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Particularly, women of African descent remain underrepresented in STEM, comprising only 1.6% of STEM professionals with bachelor’s degrees, and only 1.4% of those with doctoral degrees. Marked by the intersection of systemic and institutionalized racism and gender oppression, these women experience “double bind” challenges. Using the author’s personal story, she explores these challenges to highlight how institutionalized racism and sexism permeated her mathematics-STEM experience. Lastly, approaches of how to navigate, discreetly and indiscreetly, the underrepresentation of young girls and women of color in STEM are offered.

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INTRODUCTION: UPWARD BOUND

Growing up my mother and father (an elementary school teacher-Head Mistress, and carpenter, respectively) always reminded us of the aphorism “learning is better than silver and gold.” I have inculcated the values inherent in this aphorism and have made strenuous efforts to pass these values along to my own children and to my students. During the early 80’s my father passed away, and my family decided to leave Guyana-South America and migrate to the United States (U.S.) in hopes of a better life - ‘The American Dream’. For my mother, this dream would come with the knowledge and understanding that her prior education did not matter. Her status as an Educator-Head Mistress, that was admired, and heavily respected was not accepted and or acknowledge here in America. In America she would have to start all over. As a result, life was tough for us, and so my mother switched her career as an educator and became a nurse. A lover of education, and learning she was ecstatic at the opportunity to learn something new. She reminded us daily that ‘education’ was a person’s ticket to a better life ‘freedom’. She told us that with a decent education one can attain ‘better things’ in life, you know ‘go places’. We made our home in, what at the time was a very troubled, New York City, in the heart of Brooklyn-Bedford Stuyvesant. Violence was at an all-time high in the City. There were drugs, and violence everywhere, especially in my school.

As a child, I attended P.S. 258, and Boys and Girls High School for middle and secondary schooling. During my years at both schools I witnessed both the challenges and strengths of the education system. In middle school I saw students using drugs in class. I witnessed students fighting with the use of knives, and other weapons. I was scared very scared. I often wondered if the other students knew what I knew about education. Did their parents tell them of the importance of education and how it was a ticket to freedom? I didn’t understand why the school wasn’t respected. I was baffled by the use of drugs. I was deeply saddened by the thought that my school mates weren’t going to have the opportunity to attain the ‘better things’ in life. Thankfully my High School experience would restore a sense of hope. Under the leadership of Dr. Frank M. Mickens my High School was a safe zone. Dr. Mickens worked tirelessly to protect his students from senseless violence, and drugs. At a time when I thought my mother was exaggerating
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