Chapter 6

Afro-Caribbean Immigrants in STEM Careers: One Woman’s Experience Teaching in a STEM Field

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ABSTRACT

Afro-Caribbean immigrants have made a significant contribution to the STEM careers in the United States over the last 70 years. Their contributions have been mostly unrecognized, and they have had extraordinary challenges to overcome, as perceptions of people of color in these professions and their ability to competently excel has been constantly under scrutiny. This chapter examines the experiences of an Afro-Caribbean woman who came to the United States as a Mathematics teacher in 2002. Her story describes the racial prejudice she encountered while teaching Mathematics in two North Carolina high schools. It highlights some of the deep-rooted racial biases that exist toward people of color in the STEM professions, not only by non-Africans but also by African Americans themselves. It also reflects on the challenges that changing those perceptions will entail and the link those biases have to slavery and segregation in the United States.

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INTRODUCTION

From as early as the mid 1940’s Caribbean migrants have come to the United States, many as agricultural workers under the British West Indies guest worker program. Very little is documented of the migration of skilled labor from the Caribbean in STEM professions. However, people of color continue to face numerous obstacles to advancement in STEM professions. This chapter recounts the story of one Afro-Caribbean woman (Diane), who had to negotiate her way through a racially insensitive and misogynistic work environment in the United States. It analyzes her experience as an Afro-Caribbean immigrant and Mathematics teacher and finds parallels with the common misconceptions about black women in the STEM fields. Her experience was a profound and life altering one. The struggles she endured and the discrimination she faced, can be viewed in the context of history. Her coping mechanisms and strategies helped her to overcome the challenges she faced and are a direct consequence of the socio-cultural values associated with a Caribbean upbringing. This chapter will focus on the following:

1. The contributing factors leading to the paucity of African Americans in STEM professions.
2. The perception that People of African descent are unable to make contributions to the STEM careers
3. The need for research to understand the impact of different cultural and socio-economic influences on the responses to discrimination within the group classified as African Americans
4. An appreciation of the fact that despite the efforts made over the last decade to improve access and to make funding available, there has not been a marked increase in the enrollment of African-American women and the STEM fields and this can be explained by psycho-social factors that will not be rectified by increased access or finance.

DIANE’S STORY

Up until migration to the US, I never considered my African DNA as a hindrance to my academic performance. I was passionate about Math and Chemistry from the moment of introduction to those subjects. I enjoyed
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