

# Broken People or Broken Systems? A Return to Community with Teachers Like Me

by Bridget Locke



Trinity (Staten) Davis, Ph.D., founder of Teachers Like Me. Photo credit: Kenney Ellison, 3 Shots Photography.

You don't often find grade school children who can speak with any depth of knowledge about gentrification, Black Wall Street, taxation without representation, segregation and integration ... but then, Trinity Staten was no ordinary child. She had a passion for black history and was born into a family of highly-educated people who were eager to pass their knowledge down.

"Whenever I went to visit my grandparents, aunts and uncles in Mississippi, they were waiting for me with a Malcolm X hat or Martin Luther King, Jr. shirt—and a wealth of information," she said. "They could see I was interested, so they were intentional in teaching me our history because they knew the effort wouldn't be wasted."

That passionate and engaged young grade schooler is now Trinity Davis, Ph.D., a wife, mother, educator and founder of **Teachers Like Me**, an organization dedicated to recruiting, developing, and retaining black teachers in public education in the Kansas City area.

## The more things change, the more they stay the same

Davis grew up in Parsons, Kansas, a small community in the Southeast part of the state. Though the town had an uncharacteristically large population of black people for a rural town, that diversity wasn't reflected in the teaching staff of the local elementary, middle and high schools.

"I started looking around the schools I attended and noticed that not much had changed from the early days following integration," Davis reflected. "The teachers were mostly white," she said. "I wanted to see myself reflected."

However, one of the few black teachers in Davis's life, Ms. Mary Collins, would have a lasting impact. With her high school graduation looming, Davis contemplated her future—and knew it wasn't in

Parsons. Originally convinced that attending an HBCU was her destiny, Davis visited Pittsburg State University, in nearby Pittsburg, Kansas, at the urging of her teacher.

"Ms. Collins sponsored the Black Student Union at our high school and took us on a college trip to PSU. Although it was close to home, PSU was not on my list of colleges to attend. She helped me to





The late Ms. Mary Collins, an English teacher who left a lasting impression on Davis's career and life.

see that I could get a great college experience at Pittsburg State. She knew I wanted to make an impact on the black community and believed the field of education was my best route.”

From there, it was decided: Davis would become a teacher.

### **Challenge and change**

Though she enjoyed her time in college – living independently, forming new bonds with people from all over the country, pledging Delta Sigma Theta – Davis knew before stepping foot in a classroom that her education hadn’t prepared her (or anyone else) to serve the students in the urban core.

“We learned about at-risk students in my undergraduate program,” Davis reflected, “but we didn’t learn about the history of education, and the policies and procedures that led to oppression. With that missing piece, it becomes easy to assume that the problem is broken *people*, and not a broken system.”

After graduation, Davis taught first, second, and fourth grades, served as a literacy coach for K-5, and spent a year as an eighth-grade teaching coach. If her time as a student teacher shielded her from the unique challenges that black teachers and students face in the classroom, she received a crash course in the subject once she taught full time.

First, there were the limits imposed on her employment prospects:

“Because of Brown vs. the Board of Education, I could only work in so many schools,” said Davis. “No one told me that I couldn’t apply for any job I wanted.”

Then, there was the overt racism she faced from a parent who didn’t want a black woman teaching her white child:

“She told me outright: ‘I really don’t want a black teacher for my daughter.’ But she didn’t really have a choice,” said Davis, who also holds a master’s degree in reading and a reading specialist certification. “Her child needed a lot of work with reading. I was the only one who could help. By the end of the year, she said I was the best thing that happened to her child.”

But worst of all were the low expectations that turned into disbelief when black students demonstrated their capacity to turn bad results around:

“I taught reading strategies at a grade school in Kansas City, Kansas that had low reading scores historically. I worked with the students, and their scores improved so drastically, some people questioned whether or not the data was authentic,” Davis said. “That’s when everything changed for me; it made me realize that very few people *really* believed that these children had the capacity to succeed. They were *expected* to fail. I started taking an honest look at the people around me. A lot of the people making decisions for these kids didn’t look like them. They didn’t live in their neighborhoods; they earned paychecks in their community but wouldn’t send their own children to these same schools.”

Davis made a decision: if she couldn't change the system, she would develop the teachers who were preparing to enter it. In 2005, she returned to PSU as an associate professor in the Education department. There, she taught for eight years, earning the College of Education's Teacher of the Year in 2008, before her heart led her back to the urban core.

### **Call to Community: Teachers Like Me**

In 2012, Davis joined Kansas City Public Schools and, over time, was promoted to Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. While leading a large team of educators and administrators in the district, Davis was also selected to participate in a program called Surge Academy.

"Surge opened my eyes to how I could dream big, focus on myself, understand the educational landscape for black teachers and make an impact."

After much reflection, Davis chose to begin her transition in September 2019. She resigned on June 30, 2020, and on July 1, Teachers Like Me was officially launched.

Teachers Like Me recruits, develops, and seeks to retain black teachers serving in Kansas City public education by removing barriers. The organization strategically targets black college-bound and currently-enrolled education majors from partner universities. Davis is currently recruiting high school juniors and seniors, community college sophomores, and university juniors and seniors who are student teaching to create a pipeline of educators.

Teachers in the program will be required to live and volunteer in the areas in which they teach, and there are incentives for students and first-year teachers to enter the program, including signing bonuses, relocation fees, affordable housing, and scholarships.

"The goal is 20/20: 20 future teachers and 20 classroom teachers coming into the program every year," said Davis.

As she looks to the future, Davis can't help but look back to her grandmother's words and her aunts' and uncles' experiences, which continue to influence her work today.

"My grandmother had six children; four were educated during segregation and two attended school after integration," Davis said. "She shared that during segregation, the teachers attended the same churches, shopped in the same grocery stores, went everywhere the students went. After integration, the parents didn't feel as welcomed



Davis facilitating a Reading and Professional Development Training session for other educators during her time at KCPS.



Mrs. Evelyn Williams, Davis's late maternal grandmother.

in the schools, the black students were often ignored in the classrooms and black teachers were lost to the students, because the white schools didn't hire them. That's been one of the long-lasting implications of integration in the black community; that sense of community in education has never fully returned."

Though Davis's younger aunt and uncle lacked the support and life-experience mentoring that their older siblings received in the classroom, they still went on to earn advanced degrees and establish successful careers.

"They were resilient and learned for themselves that they would have to be smarter, faster and more tenacious to achieve the same success as their white counterparts," Davis said. "But how powerful would it have been for them—and for the students of today—to be taught the truth about being black in America while having equal access to educational resources? To hear, from the very beginning, that more will be required of them, but that success is achievable and expected? To see their teachers living and investing in their communities? To know that they are loved and championed beyond classroom behavior and test scores? My motivation in establishing Teachers Like Me is to restore the village that has been lost to black children in education...and to honor the village that raised me while I do it."

*Are you interested in learning more about Teachers Like Me?  
Contact Dr. Trinity Davis at [teacherslikeme.org/contact](http://teacherslikeme.org/contact) or 913-461-4481 for more information.*



In honor of the village that raised her, Davis stands ready to prepare the next generation of black educators. Photo credit: Kenney Ellison, 3 Shots Photography.