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Increasing diversity in leadership: Perspectives of four Black women educational leaders in the context of the United States

Natasha N. Johnson

Georgia State University, njohnson93@gsu.edu

Janice Fournillier

Georgia State University, jfournillier@gsu.edu

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Recommended Citation

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Abstract

This paper is a collation of the vicarious experiences of four Black women, all senior-level educational leaders in the United States of America. Considering the predominance of White males in educational leadership, our paper furthers the conversation around increasing race-gender diversification in this realm. We employed the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology, focusing on the intersections of race and gender, in the effort to challenge extant epistemologies manifested within this context. Using in-depth, timed, semi-structured interviews, participants reflected on their journeys, experiences, and perceptions as non-archetypal leaders in education. In highlighting contributors' perspectives, our objective was to bring the matter of race-gender underrepresentation in educational leadership to the forefront. Study participants revealed the importance of visibility, education, collaboration, exposure, mentorship, pursuit, authenticity, and living one's truth in the move towards diversifying the educational leadership sphere. Participants' recollections revealed the need for more research specific to the journeys of non-typical educational leaders in the context of the United States.

Key Words: Educational leadership, Black women educational leaders, Race-gender intersectionality, Equity, Social justice

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Increasing Diversity in Leadership:
Perspectives of Four Black Women Educational Leaders in the context of the United States**

Having considered the specific duty of leaders in spearheading systemic educational change and reform (Courtney et al., 2021; Khalifa et al., 2016; Peters, 2011; Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014), we believed that the matter of increasing diversity within the educational leadership sphere could no longer be treated as a non-primary issue. Hence our study of the perspectives of four Black women educational leaders in the United States, in which we examined the lived experiences of these women, all holding senior-level leadership positions in education. Our "why", consistent with and specific to this subject matter, includes the fact that the co-authors are both Black women in academic leadership positions. Our communal relationship, coupled with our responsibility to uphold the verity of participants' insights, provided us with a unique and interminable opportunity in which to exercise the tenets of reflexivity. This added accountability, an essential component of the qualitative research process, allowed us to dually reflect upon our own experiences as Black women educational leaders coalesced with our effort to continue advancing the path and progression of Black women in the realm of educational leadership.

Considering the predominance of White males in educational leadership, our paper furthers the conversation around increasing race-gender diversification in this realm. As such, this paper is structured in four parts. First, we provide a background and the purpose of the study. We then present the objective of our study that stems from our awareness of the increasing diversity in education and what we view as the role of leaders. We follow with an examination of the literature that suggests the need for reframing the narrative through the use of social justice leadership in education. Finally, we detail the methodology, the insights the participants offer, discuss our findings, make recommendations, and present possible implications.

Background

Sixty-seven years since the inception of *Brown v. Board of Education*¹, educational inequities and segregation remain pervasive within our nation's school systems (Warren, 1954). The work towards advancing from perspectives steeped in the Civil Rights era towards modern theoretical methods includes identifying and discussing the implications stemming from the recounted stories of those who experience the lack of diversity in academic leadership firsthand (Arnold et al., 2013, 2014, 2016; Curtis & Showunmi, 2019; Davis, 1990). Therefore, we assert that the time has come to rethink and reframe existing leadership epistemologies, particularly those rooted in coloniality and eurocentrism. Worth discussing, then, is the relationship between current leadership cultures and the progression of non-archetypical leaders in and aspiring towards these positions of headship (King, 2015; Marshall & Oliva, 2017; Showunmi, 2021).

The co-authors' roles as researchers involved creating a space in which study participants could reflect upon their experiences and share their firsthand accounts as Black women who have and continue to successfully navigate the academic leadership sphere. In so doing, we began to understand from their perspectives, their paths as underrepresented individuals in the realm of educational leadership, and its impact on them. Drawing from historical cultures in educational leadership while simultaneously examining the impacts of significant structural and technological changes our study connected these elements to gain valuable insight from this particular subgroup (Barker, 1997; King, 2015; Nee-Benham & Cooper, 1998; Peters, 2011; Prime et al., 2009; Watson & Normore, 2017). In this way, and by highlighting the experiences of Black women in educational leadership, we hope to add to the existing research and promote

¹ https://www.whatsoproudlywehail.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/Warren_Brown-v-Board-of-Education.pdf

the development of action plans and recommendations for strategic improvement, specific to the path and progression of Black women in and en route to positions of leadership in education.

Framing the Narrative: Critical Race Feminism, a Precursor to Social Justice

We recognize the role that Critical Race Feminist Theory plays in “seek[ing] to provide African-American women with sound knowledge of themselves, knowledge that is crucial for self-understanding as well as the recognition of their differences and common experiences as a group” (Ngwainmbi, 2004, p. 98). Intertwined into both critical race and feminist theories, a third element – power relations – serves as a core component in the ongoing dialogue around gender, race, and class, and the role these elements play in relation to the social sphere (Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Parker & Villalpando, 2007). More specifically, it involves the examination of the intersections of social oppression, identity, and development in the context of inequity, and how these combinations converge in various settings (Crenshaw, 2005; McCall, 2005).

As it is particular to the experiences of the Black American female, class, gender, and race are intricately and undistinguishably interconnected; thus, previous theories and studies focusing on subgroup homogeneity are lacking in that they fail to address the varied differences that exist among and within those subgroups (Klenke, 2004; Larson & Murtadha, 2002; Peters, 2011; Prime et al., 2009). Crenshaw maintains that critical race feminist theory “argues for the analysis of Black women’s experience coping with the matrix of racism, classism, and sexism, understanding race does not exist without class nor class without race or sex” (as cited in Russell, 2015).

Through the continued development of critical race feminist theory, the objective is that communally, Black American women will become more equipped in perceiving and expressing who they are as an exclusive group. This is regarded as a major step in the formation of an

empowered collective – a group who is prepared, able, and likely to understand, define, and determine who, what, and where they are and whom they wish to become (Horsford et al., 2021; Ngwainmbi, 2004; Prime et al., 2009). The juxtaposed tenets of CRT and feminist theory are paramount to the building of the current framework. Critical race feminism expounds upon these creeds in the large-scale effort to bring forth an empirical voice, one that accurately reflects the needs and experiences of the Black female population (Crenshaw, 2005; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Harris et al., 2012; Wing, 2003).

The purpose of this first step is to provide the foundation, utilizing existing literature, to highlight and address the extensive array of associated factors relevant to Black women, intersectionality, and the interconnection of multiple identities. Moreover, as representatives of educational equity and attainment, this study concomitantly explores the experiences, perceptions, and implications directly connected to the paths of Black women in – as well as those aspiring towards – positions of leadership within the educational sphere.

Increasing Diversity in Education and the Role of Current Leaders

For Black women in and en route to leadership, challenging these pre-existing notions involves confronting leadership cultures that tend to be hegemonic in nature (Pratt-Clarke & Maes, 2017). Equity theory, for example, employs a unidimensional concept of justice (McCall, 2005). It is the theory's assumption that individuals judge or assess the fairness of rewards versus punishments based solely on the principles of merit (Belden, 2017). Fairness, according to equity theory, exists when rewards and punishments are divvied out in proportion to and in accordance with one's own contributions (e.g., karma). Yet, in understanding the difference between equity and equality, one inherent problem with this theory is that it "emphasizes only the fairness of distribution, ignoring the fairness of procedure" (Leventhal, 1980, p. 27). Confronting the

prevailing theories of equity and fairness in societal relationships means also confronting the dominant and longstanding notions regarding equity, equality, and democracy.

Educators and leaders alike are held to a higher level of accountability – the choice is to either create a context that surfaces important questions or one that shrouds their discussion (Orelus, 2012; Tenuto, 2014). For the critical educator and leader, there is an engrained responsibility to struggle within inequitable institutions and do what must be done to remain connected to the struggles, voices, and needs of the community-at-large (Bell, 2007; Krathwohl & Anderson, 2009). In the effort to mitigate dissidence, the academic system has been known to teach an abridged form of democracy that pretends as if the impact of racialized crimes against marginalized groups can simply be done away with by not engaging in difficult discussions (Orelus, 2012). The objective in maintaining silence, it appears, is to see social injustices magically disappear by not confronting them directly (i.e., not addressing the ‘elephant in the room’) (Mabokela & Madsen, 2005).

The moral responsibility of educational leaders is especially important here, considering the numerous social problems that marginalized groups face as a result of oppression (Watson, 2020). Indeed, the significance of moral leadership is “magnified in a social context where no one takes charge” (Bryson & Crosby, 2006, p. 283). Just as relevant to this conversation is the existing literature, largely suggesting that moral responsibility should be taught and instilled in schools. Education, nevertheless, is an open system entrenched within a complex social environment. Leaders in education are constantly urged to examine educational problems, given the educational system’s position as a microcosm of society-at-large. According to Adams and Copland (2005), Klenke (2004), Krathwohl and Anderson (2009), and others, an appropriate

examination includes investigating how these issues are formed in and connected to this broad, expansive, and pluralistic social context.

A growing number of educational leaders are realizing their own commitments to being actively engaged in the community (Howard-Hamilton, 2003), to promoting environments that support social justice (Mabokela & Madsen, 2005), and to becoming more involved in the policy arena through advocacy and coalition building (Black & Murtadha, 2007). In their dialogue on how to realize social justice in the world, Marshall et al. (2010) argue that if these practices are to thrive, policies and norms must be transformed in both schools and the surrounding communities. This transformation begins with the responsibility of the leader as an advocate, promoting justice for all. Thus, when we connect theory and practice to the moral use of power, we can better understand why social justice as an educational intervention is an unceasingly pertinent topic for every era (Alexander & Nderu, 2003; Leventhal, 1980; Patton, 2010).

The interminable challenge for leaders in the academy is to create social and political spaces for all advocates and stakeholders to productively function and vigorously engage. Yet, transcendent of any single institutionalized structure is the work involved in deliberately and explicitly promoting activism, intellectualism, and social justice for all (Hill et al., 2016; Rawls, 2009). As educational visionaries, we must demand from ourselves, that we do not leave or produce “educational outcomes [which] mirror and safeguard longstanding societal disparities” (Pignatelli, 1993, p. 14). Relevant to this discussion is the definition of ‘good’ leaders as advocates for social justice (Adams et al., 1997; Black & Murtadha, 2007; Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 2005). This connection between theory and practice, particularly as they relate to the moral use of power, reveals why social justice, as an educational intervention, is relevant in every era (Hodges & Welch, 2018). As a continuous social construct, educational leadership

cannot be comprised of one design, one program, or one worldview, to the exclusion of other perspectives and approaches (Belden, 2017; Pratt-Clarke & Maes, 2017).

This conversation is all the more applicable to and for Black women, in the educational leadership sphere, currently primed and positioned for advanced roles in this very capacity. According to Pratt-Clarke (2010), progress can be made through the provision of an analysis that focuses on praxis, the relationship between the construction of race, class, and gender categories, and social justice outcomes to provide a transformative next step in the evolution of this and other correlated scholarship. As such, the purpose of the current work was our intent, as researchers, to deliberately and explicitly promote the values of equitability and justice (Horsford, 2020; Richardson & Loubier, 2008; Watson & Normore, 2017) in this regard.

Reframing the Narrative Through Social Justice Leadership in Education

The leadership sphere is inundated with philosophies, paradigms, and theories, including critical, critical race, postmodern, post-structural, feminist, and multiculturalism. A common thread amongst these constructs is that they all fundamentally espouse social justice and reform as the objective. The common thread among these theories is the demand for institutions to unveil and transform oppressive policies and practices (Mthethwa-Sommers 2014). Among the many responsibilities of leaders is the mounting need to be transformative through a culture of responsiveness as opposed to one of reactivity (Alexander & Nderu, 2003; Tillman & Horsford, 2017). Particularly relevant in this specific context is the necessity for those in positions of power in educational organizations to intentionally seek and spearhead institutional reform (Rawls, 2009).

Pertinent to the social justice leader, Walsh (2012) identified the “near absence of solutions that address the sources of disparity in educational performance between what

continues to be considered as ‘mainstream’ [American as compared to those] who are culturally, ethnically, or linguistically different” (pp. 7-8). The present, ongoing discourse involving ongoing plans for educational improvement is striking. In a space riddled with complexities of this nature, it is precisely why there remains a dire need for lasting, proactive social justice leadership within the educational realm (Dillard, 2000; Mthethwa-Sommers 2014; Tenuto, 2014). Another example of this is the call for leaders who more aptly and adequately represent the demographics of the general population. Additionally, there is increasing evidence that more considerable attention is being paid to the social fabric of education, and the infusion of social justice into educational leadership programs and curriculum.

Increasing Diversity: Perspectives of Four Black Women Educational Leaders

Four Black women, all purposely chosen from the population based on their authority, knowledge, and judgment (Hones, 1990; Tongco, 2007), were invited to serve as the members of this criterion purposive sample (Barbour, 2013; Suri, 2011). They represent various regions throughout the United States of America, and all are senior-level leaders in K-20 education. They were selected because they all have experiences directly relevant to race-gender intersectionality and leadership in education. For this reason, they have been able to provide essential information specific to this unique phenomenon. Further, they all represent a diversity of locations, knowledge, and experiences, and all serve in an array of educational leadership capacities. Through the implementation of this phenomenological design, the intention was to produce quality research that uncovers a breadth of relevant information regarding these women and the totality of their unique leadership experiences.

Study participants hold the following titles: one K-20 district-level executive, two program directors (one, college-to-career transition, the other, principal preparation and

leadership), and one CEO of two STEM-based, K-20 LLCs. Maintaining respondent confidentiality while presenting thorough, comprehensive accounts of contributors' lived experiences remains a challenge for qualitative researchers. As such, and in the interest of protecting the identity of the study contributors, their full names have been replaced with pseudonyms (see Table 1 below):

[Insert Table 1 about here]

These women possess a plethora of experiences directly relevant to leadership in the academic realm. Moreover, they represent an array of locations within the United States (Northeast, Southeast, Northwest, and Southwest), a vast collection of knowledge, and substantial educational leadership experiences. As exclusive members of this sample, all were personally contacted, and all four readily accepted the invitation to participate in this study.

Specific to this work, Orbe (2000) speaks to the usefulness of the phenomenological approach in gaining insight into the lived experiences of cultural group members traditionally marginalized in research and theory development. Orbe (2000) cites the value of this inquiry as an “alternative to traditional social scientific research that has been criticized for creating ‘caricatures’ to represent certain racial and ethnic groups” (p. 603). Further, the processes, key assumptions, and primary challenges inherent in utilizing phenomenology are widely regarded as a “humanistic methodological approach” (Orbe, 2000, p. 603), in race, ethnicity, and intercultural research.

We embarked upon the hermeneutic phenomenological route (Heidegger, 1977, 1996) because this perspective focuses on interpreting the structures of experience, and on how things

are understood by people who live through these experiences and by those who study them (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Further, hermeneutic phenomenology is widely accepted as “an engaging process where the orientation towards the phenomenon is the matter of central concern and its reporting rhetoric demands for a unique richness” (Gadamer et al., 2004; Guba et al., 1994; Kafle, 2011; Lavery, 2003). This cyclical approach is shown in Figure 1 below:

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

The hermeneutic cycle reflected our attempt to better understand and accurately depict these senior-level leaders’ lived experiences within the educational sector. Central to moving this needle forward, study contributors were asked to draw from their own recollections and personal experiences as Black women who continue to successfully navigate the realm of leadership in the context of K-20 education.

Guiding Questions

The overarching question that guided the focus and direction of our study was:

How have the racial and gender identities of Black women informed their educational and professional experiences in and on the path to leadership?

The open-ended nature of this question allowed both the participants and the co-authors the opportunity to engage in a fluid, organic, and progressive series of dialogues. The first round of interview questions was specific to participants’ personal and professional backgrounds, qualifications, and support/accountability systems. The second round of interviews focused primarily on the factors that impacted participants’ decisions to become educational leaders, their unique paths en route to leadership, and their distinctive experiences as current leaders in

education. The final round of questions highlighted participants' successes, barriers, challenges, and the overall complexities of their experiences as educational leaders, concluding with their advice, strategies, and recommendations for those seeking to more fully capture the experiences of Black women serving in and aspiring towards careers in educational leadership. Participants spoke openly and candidly about matters of representation, diversification, and the importance of reframing current narratives in academic leadership. In all, these contributors revealed the following eight insights and recommendations in the move towards diversifying leadership in education (see Figure 2 below):

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

I. Visibility

All study contributors spoke to the importance of seeing people who look like them in positions of influence. These images, they shared, assisted all of them in their transitions into the real world. Regarding this, one person stated that growing up, she saw:

An abundance of Black excellence. Black people are not just regulated to...one community. ...It is not normal for Black people to not be professionals, to not be smart. Being smart does preclude you from being Black or understanding, or... not embracing who you are. ...you don't have to be White and be smart. Or, or turn your back on who you are, Black culture, in order to say, in order to embrace excellence and being smart (Simone F.).

For this reason, she said, she is "so glad we started there...so that I could continue to thrive..." (Simone F.).

II. Education

Each interviewee spoke to the importance of education in their families. Now on the other side of the student space, one added the importance of not just ‘an’ education, but a ‘good’ education. Recalling her experiences as a student–turned–leader in the academy, she shared:

School prepares you for a world that is not. It is not here. So, when I jump out of school, I come into this world, I’m thinking I’m going to experience what school has prepared me for, which is this oasis, this utopia. And it’s not there. It’s not what we said we wanted in school. What we learn about in school, about how we want to teach the kids ...level the playing field... When you get into the real world, that’s not there. And when you speak up and say, ‘wait a minute, weren’t we trying to go for this’? Be quiet. What are you doing? Don’t say that. So, I consistently get disappointed in the real world. Consistently.

(Annie C.)

This same interviewee was explicitly referring to the disconnect she experienced with what she believed she was striving to do versus what the educational sphere actually resembles. An example of this was when she asked, “How do we sit on scholarship and not know that Black people, Black children need Black instructors? ...it’s important to have that representation. It’s important to be diverse... We sit on this foundation of scholarship. And we don’t use it” (Annie C.).

III. Collaboration

As one participant transitioned from student teacher to teacher to educational leader, she revealed:

Being in this position, being an African American female [connecting with] African American females...I think that has served me well because I relate to them, I share my

personal stories with them. And especially when they get to the point where they say, 'I'm not meeting with them unless I, somebody from the board office comes'. And if I show up to the meeting and they see an African American, oh it's a done deal. Like, it's, it's resolved. The issue is going to be resolved. (Jacqueline G.)

Essential to the building of community, she talked about the importance of visibility in the effort to build the spirit of collaboration amongst one's constituency. School leaders must connect with parents, she said, because "they just feel like somebody's on their side and that's what I try to teach the schools, that we have to make parents feel that it's not us against them" (Jacqueline G.).

IV. Exposure

One interviewee spoke to her reality as a Black woman, underrepresented in the world of academia. She said,

I think exposure is very key. For many different levels and many different lenses. Academia is very White. It's different. I just feel like there are a lot more barriers and, um restrictions, or less opportunities for Black women in academia than there are in K-12... I feel like the opportunities are not as numerous as they are for Black women in K-12. At least that's been my experience... But in administration and faculty, it's predominantly White. And predominantly White male. You know ...the administration and teaching space is, lacks diversity. (Annie C.)

Another participant spoke about African American students and their general lack of exposure to the STEM fields. Recalling her decision to select her major, she said,

... I went on to major in Chemical Engineering... My transition as a STEM educator was kind of accidental. It wasn't intentional. ...how I ended up starting my nonprofit is just,

when I was working at a school, just seeing kids who, um, didn't do, didn't even think about STEM careers.

“Heartbroken” by this, she began “trying to see what the barrier was, and most of it was just exposure. ...the things that they were naming [were] careers that they were exposed to”

(Monique M.).

V. Mentorship

All participants shared their advice and strategies for successfully navigating the educational leadership realm, oftentimes as the only woman and/or person of color at the table.

In response to this, Monique M. said:

Village... mentorship, I think, is important. ...And then, mentorship, really you know, grit and resilience, I think is important. And knowing who you are, you know. Because people will really challenge you and try to take you places that you really don't have to go with them. ...I think it's important to, you know, set goals for yourself. Professional goals and personal goals. And you know, just the whole self-care. You know, taking time for vacation, doing the things that you like to do. Thinking about the things that bring you joy, make you happy. And making sure you integrate those into your schedule so that you can do the hard work and not go crazy...

VI. Pursuit

Numerous interviewees have STEM backgrounds, a realm in which Black women remain underrepresented. One participant shared much regarding her path as a STEMpreneur; in general, she spoke to what she views as a very individual, and oftentimes isolating experience. In that same vein, she had this advice to share with burgeoning Black women, aspiring towards leadership positions:

Whatever your dreams or ideas are, [be] okay with the risk associated with pursuing them. [Be] authentic to whatever you envision for your career and what you want to do. Um, and going with it as it changes in your career. ...Don't silence [your voice] cause we as Black women don't even have enough chances to say our voice. (Interview 3)

Relevant to Black women who aspire to become leaders in education, another interviewee added this:

Keep your purpose the forefront of what you do. ...90-95% of what I do, I love. It's just that other part, 5-10%, I'm still trying to navigate. I am. And I think we'll all continue to try to navigate that. I don't think that's ever going away. That fight, it's going to be the same. It may be different iterations; it may have different masks on it. ...So, same fight. I don't think these fights are going to change at all. (Simone F.)

Her advice regarding tools and strategies for those preparing for this potential 'fight'? She said, "It's a matter of being able to just live your life and live a healthy, happy life based upon your purpose in life. And not let anyone – I mean no one – take that from you".

VII. Authenticity

The importance of maintaining one's own vision cannot be understated, shared Monique M. Her advice to those preparing to navigate the leadership sphere is:

Definitely be authentic. ...never be...afraid to grow and evolve and change directions. Or start over. ...it is okay to make shifts. ...recognize early what you need and want out of your personal and professional relationships and try to get there. ...work on having an abundance of the most important things.

Being authentic, she said, is much less pressure than trying to have it all. As a Black woman in leadership, there are "many expectations of us, and we're being pulled in different directions,

and so that causes us to have a diversity of emotions. But nobody says, ‘she has to work leave her alone, right’? So that’s just the nature of it” (Monique M.).

VIII. Truth

Finally, Annie C. emphasized the importance of living in one’s truth. She said,

Stand in your truth...the truth of who you are. The truth that you want to accomplish, and the mark you want to be, and how you want to live your life. ...be sure that when you’re making decisions about your life, you’re getting counsel and maybe different perspectives. But when it’s time to make the decision, you need to hear your own voice and if you believe in God, God’s voice.

Staying true, she continued, means “find[ing] a way to do things that are good for you mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally” (Annie C.). Remember to honor all that makes us who we are, said Jacqueline G., because Black women are “multi-dimensional”.

These and other conversations regarding diversity in leadership serve to advance relevant discussions regarding the importance of mentorship, visibility, and knowing one’s ‘why’. Educational institutions remain rooted in the promise that they have the credentials and the capital to provide global platforms for matters relevant to all members of the constituency. For the participants of this study – as Black women and as educational leaders – these revelations shed light on each person’s ability to connect and hold fast to the ‘why’ that led them, kept them, and continue to keep them in the educational leadership sphere. Moreover, their recollections reinforce the importance of furthering this necessary research toward increasing diversity in educational leadership.

Bringing it all Together: Diversifying the Educational Leadership Sphere

Highlighted in this paper, the intersections of race/ethnicity and gender as relational dimensions, combined with leadership theories, provide fertile ground for research and theory toward increasing leadership diversification in K-20 education. As leadership theory continues developing to more accurately match the complex intricacies of modern organizations, greater attention must be paid to the multiplicative aspects of identity and leadership development. Given the growing educational status of Black women in today's workforce, it is becoming increasingly important to create and identify research that acknowledges their variant, non-traditional, non-archetypical experiences (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; 2010).

More and more scholars agree that continued research around diversity in educational leadership will allow for a path in which to sufficiently inform and address pertinent policies in this regard (Patton, 2010; Russell, 2015; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The administrator experiences of Black women, as well as the challenges they face in institutional settings, illustrate the extreme importance of developing organizational leadership-based strategies and gathering more narrative evidence from these underrepresented groups. According to Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), the residual outcomes resulting from increased diversity in leadership would undoubtedly benefit all members of the collective constituency.

Yet, racial and ethnic disparities persist, calls for diversity in leadership continue, and Eurocentric frames remain pervasive in leadership cultures and spheres (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Given the lack of a definitive space in which the voices of Black women can truly be heard, theories that address the interests and needs of the underrepresented are wholly necessary (Bell, 2007). This need is amplified as non-traditional leaders continue to advance through the pre-established academic, societal, and organizational ladders (Horsford et al., 2021; Richardson

& Loubier, 2008). For this reason, it is all the more important to extend the conversations around the development of frames that speak to the unique identities of Black women in educational leadership.

Moving the Research Forward

Sawyer et al. (2013) assert the importance of “studying and understanding the realities of identity through intersectional research” (p. 80). Parker and Villalpando (2007), as well, speak to identity and the importance of using critical theory analysis to challenge dominant ideologies in the move towards more democratic, justice-based leadership spaces. Existing paradigms, expressed Adejare (2018), cannot be uprooted without open and honest conversations about the presence of gender and racial inequalities in educational leadership. A current and connecting thread between Dillard (2000), Iverson (2007), Larson and Murtadha (2002), and Wing (2003) – among others – was their communal emphasis on the extant racial and gender imbalances in the realm of educational leadership, and the struggle involved in disrupting the status quo.

Given the challenges presented in work of this nature, a growing number of studies highlight the complicated path for leaders when the groups they lead represent the demographic majority. Through their work, Cho et al. (2009), Richardson and Loubier (2008), and Rosette et al. (2016) underscored the necessity of equitable representation, particularly for those who have been historically and generally excluded from the leadership sphere. Moorosi et al. (2018) conducted a study in which they examined three Black women’s leadership journeys in three different countries – England, South Africa, and the United States. Through their work, they highlighted the concurrent racial and gender barriers these women regularly faced as they worked to effectively lead, all while navigating unique, complex, and multifaceted work environments.

Similar to the work of Courtney et al. (2021), our paper adds to the existing research on the experiences of Black women in educational leadership spaces. According to Nee-Benham and Cooper (1998), Black women in educational leadership remain neglected in the area of school leadership research. In this same vein, according to Alston (2012), in this context of “preparation, practice, and research, a few cornerstones of leadership (power, control, authority, and influence) have historically been used in a negative fashion to marginalize, silence, and erase the accomplishments of historically underrepresented groups” (p. 127). In alignment with Alston’s stance, we bring to the forefront the relevant conversation regarding this new generation of non-archetypal leaders, researchers, and policymakers, scholars who are educated, primed, and ready to take the helm and advance the realm of leadership in academia (Adejare, 2018; Hohepa, 2013).

In this same vein, our paper responds to the call to add to the growing, yet underdeveloped literature specific to the representation of Black women in leadership capacities in education. The incorporation of a hermeneutic phenomenological design allowed us to investigate the multiplicative identities of four Black women in educational leadership and discuss the impact of gender and race on these women’s experiences. Through this work, we highlight the need for more relevant theory, research, and actionable policy geared towards reducing the noted leadership gaps within the educational realm.

Implications and Recommendations for Improvement

Our paper has revealed that the tangible elements of justice-based leadership perspectives remain understudied (Lambert, 2002; 2003). This is a matter of justice. As such, Bogotch (2000) states, social justice “requires an ongoing struggle [i.e., to share power, knowledge, and resources equitably] and cannot be separated from how educational theories and practices are

being [re]defined and practiced by professionals within schools, academic disciplines, and governmental circles” (p. 140). This connection between theory and practice, particularly as they relate to the moral use of power, reveals why social justice, as an educational intervention, is relevant in every era (Dean et al., 2009; Hodges & Welch, 2018; Moorosi et al. (2018).

Brunner and Grogan (2007) conducted a study in conjunction with the American Association of School Administrators (AASPA) in which they provided a historical overview of women in top leadership positions. In their work, they profiled several women atop the school system pyramid, examining the factors that drive some to accept the challenge of top-level leadership while others to remain in middle management. They found that (1) White males make up approximately 85% of top-level leadership positions within the educational sphere, and (2) most published research related to educational leadership has failed to examine the voices of female leaders. According to Brunner and Grogan (2007), this comprehensive book is the only large national study entirely dedicated to women’s leadership. This piece, connectedly, seeks to add to the literature relevant to the successful navigation of Black women in top leadership positions.

Studying women’s experiences with a district-based aspiring leaders’ program, Sherman et al. (2010) found that “the various needs of a diverse population of aspiring administrators have not been effectively met. Women, although they clearly seek leadership positions, have been constrained by traditional norms surrounding educational administration in the district” (p. 707). Finally, Peters (2011) noted that there is a “silence in research regarding the experiences of Black women faculty in the field of educational leadership/administration. The field of leadership is written typically by and for a mainstream, masculine audience. To this end,

women and African Americans are and continue to be ‘othered’” (p. 147) in this conversation.

The above-listed bodies of work and this study indicate that there are present, persistent barriers that exist within the educational leadership sphere. An important first step to impacting change is to first recognize that these inequities do exist (Better-Reed & Moore, 1995; Rivera-McCutchen & Watson, 2014). This is paramount because only then can true and lasting change – i.e., increasing diversity, and promoting positive and inclusive leadership cultures – occur. Recommendations, in this regard, include the establishment of more research studies related to the development and advancement of Black women within the scope of educational leadership.

Conclusion

Diversity and inclusion matter in the realm of educational leadership (Harper, 2018). We believe Newcomb and Mansfield (2014) put it best when they penned this memoir:

The only storylines from our history that we were exposed to in our K-12 schooling were that of enslavement, segregation, and Dr. Martin Luther King... Black women beyond Rosa Parks getting on the bus were portrayed as tertiary, not necessarily instrumental to pivotal moments in our history. Now that we are greater architects of our own knowledge and have found epistemologies that better align with our experiences as young Black women, we have come to realize that activism is very much a part of our history and is an innate component of our moral core. (p. xiv)

Activism remains a relevant component of the day-to-day, lived experiences of Black women as a collective. Embedded within the very fiber of our beings, the intersection of epistemologies (research and theory) to social action and engagement are critical in advancing the historical literature, building a current and relevant knowledge base, creating equitable cultures for

underrepresented communities, and developing best practices for reform. Thus, this paper marks our effort to facilitate the convergence of social justice and diversity in the realm of academic leadership (Hohepa, 2013; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Encompassed in the creed of the activist is a commitment to equity, inclusion, diversity, and ‘justice for all’.

Increasing the representation of qualified people – regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, etcetera – in positions of educational administration and management is a necessary component of this conversation. In line with numerous scholars, including Horsford and Tillman (2012), Watson (2020), and other scholars, we concur that while recognition is a first step, all leaders must see fit to address inequity in leadership by promoting the advancement of non-archetypal leaders. Our goal remains to further the work involved in deliberately and explicitly promoting the values of equitability and justice. Correlated with the education, understanding, cultivation, and development of all members of the constituency – including the advancement of non-archetypal leaders in education – this work seeks to directly address matters such as equity, fairness, and the role of social justice leaders in overtly supporting and promoting these values (Pratt-Clarke & Maes, 2017; Prime et al., 2009).

A major step towards advancing equity in academic leadership involves acknowledging how current leadership practices enforce and reinforce the extant, ‘normative’ standard. As such, this is our call for justice. The connected, emergent themes highlight the need for all members of the constituency to actively engage in conversations around race-gender intersectionality and the importance of shifting the existing, single-track leadership paradigm. Current leaders must understand the role they play as part of this legacy and confront the matter of diversity and equitable representation in leadership spaces.

Aligning with Wright, Marsh, and Khalifa's (2019) assertion that "critical analyses of power and how that power is deployed within our educational systems and structures have shifted perspectives about the ways in which systemic change and reform have been framed in the field" (p. 1), this paper adds to the essential conversation around inclusion and diversity expansion within the realm of educational leadership. With this in mind, it is our intent to shed light on the factors connected to the increased representation of Black women in US-based, K-20 educational administrative and managerial capacities. Indeed, it is and remains our position that in the move towards equity and diversification in the realm of educational leadership, what is necessary, and what is good, is leadership that is inclusive, equitable, advocacy-based, and rooted in social justice.

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