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Recommended Citation


Johnson, N. N. (2024). Spotlighting the Need for More Minority Women in K-12 Education Leadership. In A. Walters (Ed.), *Minority Women in K-12 Education Leadership: Challenges, Resilience, and Support* (pp. 219-234). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-1773-0.ch011>

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Chapter 11

Spotlighting the Need for More Minority Women in K–12 Education Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Minority women encounter a myriad of challenges and disparities in their pursuit of leadership positions in K-12 education. While the number of women leading independent schools has increased, they are more likely to achieve headship in small and K-8 schools rather than in larger schools and secondary settings. Marginalizing policies and climates still exist within schools, but women leaders are working for change through activism and efforts intended to promote gender equity. Equitable leadership and social justice are essential concepts in addressing the needs of women and minoritized people in educational leadership. As such, increasing the number of women of color in educational leadership positions can have a positive effect on such topics as racism, poverty, oppression, and work-life balance, among others. Moreover, advancing the number of minority women in K-12 leadership can, and indeed does, positively contribute to students' academic success.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-1773-0.ch011

INTRODUCTION

*“I am where I am because of the bridges that I crossed. Sojourner Truth was a bridge. Harriet Tubman was a bridge. Ida B. Wells was a bridge. Madame C. J. Walker was a bridge. Fannie Lou Hamer was a bridge.”*¹ — Oprah Winfrey, Talk show host, Television producer, Actress, Author, and Media proprietor.

In the realm of K-12 education, minority women in leadership regularly encounter challenges that impact their professional pursuits and personal lives (Walters & Shannon, 2024). The journey undertaken by minoritized women in educational leadership is frequently characterized by a sequence of beginnings and halts, necessitating a profound level of tenacity, mentorship, and guidance (Walters & Shannon, 2024). These components are critical in fostering longevity, accomplishing objectives, and ensuring overall well-being. Despite the theoretical backing and intentions of extant organizational frameworks, the actuality often falls short in terms of supporting the leadership roles of minority women educators. Existing frames frequently lack the necessary preparation or concerted effort to adequately speak to the distinctive needs of these women, thus impeding their capacity to sustain achievements over a prolonged period of time.

Although there has been an increase in the number of women leading independent schools, they are more likely to attain headship in smaller K-8 schools rather than in larger schools and secondary settings (Shakeshaft et al., 2014). Despite policies and environments that marginalize certain groups within schools, women leaders actively strive for change through their activism and continued efforts to promote gender equity (ElAtia et al., 2022). Equitable leadership and social justice hold significant importance in attending to the needs of women and individuals from marginalized communities in educational leadership (Shakeshaft et al., 2014). Increasing the number of women of color in positions of educational leadership can have a positive impact on pressing issues such as racism, sexism, poverty, and oppression, to name a few. Furthermore, minority women in K-12 leadership roles can, and indeed do, positively contribute to students’ academic success (Msila, 2022).

MINORITY WOMEN IN K-12 EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

*“We are not in this fight to win. We are in this fight to struggle.”*² — Dr. Gloria Ladson-Billings, Pedagogical theorist and Teacher educator.

Gender disparity at the leadership level of large independent schools in the United States remains a critical issue, with women being less likely to achieve headship of

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large schools (Flaxman, 2023). Further, gendered discrepancies at the leadership level of large (defined by the National Association of Independent Schools as >700 students) K-12 independent schools – also demarcated by the National Association of Independent Schools as over 700 students (Flaxman, 2023, p. 107) – is a persistent and critical issue in the continuing effort to advance equity and justice in historically White and male-led large and independent schools in the United States.

From 2009 to the present (circa 2021), the number of women leading all independent schools has increased from 31% to 41% (Flaxman, 2023). However, while a growing number of women lead independent schools today than in years past, they more often achieve the headship in small and K-8 schools and remain less likely (22%) to achieve headship in and of large independent schools. In addition, women in school leadership positions tend to face challenges due to negative attitudes, gender discrimination, and perceived lack of confidence (Shava, 2022). Disparities favoring men are among the challenges faced by female heads. These include negative attitudes from parents and community members and being undermined because of factors such as race and gender, in addition to questioning the leader's education and experience, among others. In addition to external sources of conflict, there are other "intra" matters that minority women leaders must frequently address. Leader-stakeholder misalignment, for example, speaks to the natural rifts that occur when the demographic of the leader does not necessarily reflect the typography of the greater constituency (typically a majority population). As a result, many women leaders face being victimized in their very own schools. As such, it is vital to acknowledge the challenges women face in education leadership, given that cultural and social barriers do exist and cannot be ignored in this and other related work (Shava, 2022).

In their pursuit of advanced education and leadership positions in education, women of color report being met with minimal efforts to support their representation in leadership roles (Morgan et al., 2021). There appears to be an increase in women of color seeking advanced degrees and navigating the educational leadership journey, but these numbers are still relatively small overall worldwide. While stakeholders are tirelessly working to increase the number of minoritized women in educational leadership positions, this work has yet to have much impact on a global scale. A central question commonly asked in this arena is, how do institutions of learning ensure that the educational leaders are equipped with the tools they need to adequately meet the needs of a growing and diverse student body (Rodriguez & Brown, 2021)? Advocates maintain that promoting a more diverse group of educational leaders, women of color, in particular, will only benefit students and increase their opportunities for success (Morgan et al., 2021).

Connectedly, minority women in academia, including K-12 outreach programs, continue to lack consistent support, opportunities, and mentorship (de Paleville, 2022; Lyle & MacLeod, 2016). Despite recent and overt improvements for women

en route to leadership in education, marginalizing cultures, climates, and policies are still quite present in today's schools (Broadhurst et al., 2021). As such, activism by teachers and administrators can provide powerful, compelling instruments for change in PK-12 schools. Women leaders within PK-12 working for change in their schools have commonly shared experiences with institutional sexism, mentoring other women, and working to change institutional policies and improve educational climates. These women continue to provide insights on effective ways to lead and advance from mid-level positions and how to navigate institutional sexism and promote equity in education (Broadhurst et al., 2021; Johnson, 2023).

Despite the increase in women leading independent schools, again they are more likely to achieve headship in small and K-8 schools rather than larger schools and secondary settings (Flaxman, 2023). Marginalizing policies and climates still exist within schools, but women leaders continue to work for change through activism and efforts to promote equity (Broadhurst et al., 2021; Msila, 2022). As such, increasing the number of women of color in leadership positions can positively affect specific issues such as racism, poverty, and oppression (Johnson, 2021, 2022). Further, women leaders often use resilience and eclectic approaches to leadership and building feminist consciousness through empowering small groups in their institutions of learning (El-Amin, 2022; Lyle & MacLeod, 2016).

THE NEED FOR MORE MINORITY WOMEN IN K-12 EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

“The school board that hired me has been very supportive, so you do have to have a supportive governing body. That’s No. 1. I think my school board was fully aware [of] the challenge I would be faced with coming into this role during the pandemic, coupled with the fact that it was a historic appointment, with me being a woman and a woman of color. That was a difference from what I heard from some women going into the role being the first—it’s that I have to say the support of my school board was there.”³ — Dr. LaTanya McDade, Superintendent, Prince William County Public Schools.

To date, women are still underrepresented at the highest levels of educational leadership. However, studies worldwide have shown that schools with increased female participation and engagement improved school outcomes regarding students' knowledge, female empowerment, and gender-learning gap reduction (Alves, 2022). Despite this disparity in educational leadership, data also show and continue to prove that schools with increased female presence in leadership positions, influence, and governance are positively associated with school outcomes. Beyond the content

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learned and knowledge gained, female students also report optimistic sentiments regarding their representation, female empowerment, and a commitment to reducing extant learning gaps (Alves, 2022; Porritt, 2021).

Minoritized women, including Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Indigenous women, remain underrepresented in K-12 education leadership roles. Longstanding systemic barriers create unique challenges that minority women leaders in education may face, including bias and stereotypes, to name a few (Butcher et al., 2022; Johnson, 2021, 2021). Thus, strengthening diversity in leadership remains essential to embracing and promoting differing perspectives and silencing false narratives. Reinforcing positive experiences and perceptions can undoubtedly benefit all stakeholders and the educational system on a whole scale. Equally vital, these women can and do customarily serve as role models for students from similar backgrounds, with extant research pointing to the necessity for burgeoning leaders of people in positions of influence and power who look like them (de Paleville, 2022; Johnson, 2022, 2022; Thomas, 2023).

There are ample opportunities for stakeholders to create educational environments that are inclusive and equitable. Every institution already has extant partners; that said, various organizations can align to create initiatives that support and empower minority women in education leadership roles. Bolstering these and other networking prospects are among the many ways this can be achieved. There are numerous success stories of minoritized women who have risen to prominent leadership roles in K-12 education, breaking barriers and positively impacting their communities (Coleman & Taylor, 2023). This and other relevant research and data are essential to better understanding the challenges and progress of minority women in education leadership (Rahim-Dillard & Johnson, 2023).

IDENTIFYING THE NEED FOR MORE MINORITY WOMEN IN K-12 EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

“Women belong in all places where decisions are made ... It shouldn't be that women are the exception.”⁴ — Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, US Supreme Court's second female Justice.

Several critical factors drive the need for more minority women in K-12 education leadership. Firstly, the importance and value of role modeling cannot be overstated. Having, seeing, and experiencing minority women in leadership roles provides representation for students from similar backgrounds. Through this visibility, emergent leaders can be inspired to aim for leadership positions and succeed academically (Johnson, 2021, 2023; Thomas, 2023). Secondly, diverse perspectives: Diverse

leadership teams bring different perspectives and experiences to the table, leading to more comprehensive decision-making and better solutions for the challenges in education (Johnson, 2021, 2023; Thomas, 2023).

Minority women in leadership are primed to be at the forefront of progressive conversations around increased equity and inclusivity in education. Current allies can advocate for policies and practices that ensure all women in and en route to leadership can operate in safe, balanced, high-quality environments. Pertinent to the larger community, engagement is necessary, as it allows minority women leaders to better connect with and engage historically underserved communities. Existing research indicates that diverse leadership teams positively impact educational outcomes, confirming the need for more diversity in educational leadership by fostering collaboration and community support for minoritized women leaders. Moreover, breaking through barriers and succeeding in leadership roles allow historically excluded populations to confront and challenge stereotypes and biases, thereby paving the way for more inclusivity and diversity in the paths of their successors (Rahim-Dillard & Johnson, 2023).

ACKNOWLEDGING THE NEED FOR MORE MINORITY WOMEN IN K-12 EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

“To bring about change, you must not be afraid to take the first step. We will fail when we fail to try.”⁵ — Rosa Parks, Civil Rights activist, honored by the United States Congress as “The first lady of civil rights” and “The mother of the freedom movement.”

Recognizing the significance of the participation of minority women in leadership positions within the K-12 education system is of the utmost importance. The acknowledgment of the invaluable contributions made by minority women in leadership roles within the K-12 education system holds great significance to and for all members of the constituency (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021, 2022). Consequently, it is imperative to implement measures to achieve a more comprehensive and equitable educational system. This matter is significant and evidences the necessity of achieving a more just and equitable educational system, a natural byproduct of achieving equity in educational leadership.

By promoting equitable hiring practices, learning institutions go beyond merely talking about change. Educational organizations and systems should overtly promote inclusivity in hiring and other related practices by considering diverse candidates for leadership roles. Doing so can involve setting diversity goals and implementing blind recruitment processes to reduce bias (Coleman & Taylor, 2023). Educational

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institutions should actively promote inclusive hiring practices by considering diverse candidates for leadership roles. This can involve setting diversity goals and implementing blind recruitment processes to reduce bias. Current research has and continues to show that a wide-ranging education positively impacts all constituency members, not just those with diverse needs, and is considered the gateway to full social participation (Volker et al., 2022).

Education leaders' sense of self-efficacy is a critical indicator of the success of comprehensive education initiatives, and their experiences, perceived administrative support, and stress levels can impact inclusion success (Sharma & Subban, 2023). To successfully implement inclusivity on a large scale, educational stakeholders and leaders should consider various critical aspects and use contemporary indicators to assist in planning and development (Thomas, 2023). To improve the quality of the educational leadership candidate pool writ large, institutions of learning need to overtly work on communicative strategies that address structural sources of exclusion through equitable design of assignments and learning activities. Advocacy in this arena far surpasses mere discourse concerning transformation. Educational establishments and systems should work overtly and actively for inclusiveness in employment and other associated methods by contemplating varied applicants for authoritative positions. Accomplishing this can encompass establishing targets for diversity and implementing impartial employment procedures to diminish partiality (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021, 2022; Sharma & Subban, 2023).

We know that representation matters, so we must uplift the achievements and stories of successful minority women educational leaders to inspire others and demonstrate that such positions are attainable. This conversation includes and reinforces the importance of programs and networks explicitly designed with aspiring and current minority women leaders in mind. Programs of this nature can provide guidance, networking opportunities, and skill development. Professional development, for example, provides tailored experiences designed to speak to the unique challenges that minority women may face in leadership roles. Opportunities of this nature can include workshops, training, and leadership academies. By implementing these strategies, we can work towards a more diverse and inclusive educational leadership landscape, positively impacting minority women leaders, students, community members, and the overall quality of education writ large (de Paleville, 2022; Lyle & MacLeod, 2016).

ADDRESSING THE NEED FOR MORE MINORITY WOMEN IN K-12 EDUCATION LEADERSHIP

*“If you’re doing something outside of dominant culture, there’s not an easy place for you. You will have to do it yourself.”*⁶ — Ava DuVernay, Filmmaker, Emmy, NAACP Image, BAFTA Film, and BAFTA TV Award recipient, Academy and Golden Globe Award nominee.

Minority women in leadership play a crucial role in advancing equity and inclusivity issues in education (Soda, 2023). Diverse leadership teams have been shown to positively impact educational outcomes, reinforcing the need for more diversity in educational leadership (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021, 2022). Allies and representatives alike have a hand in advocating for policies and practices that create safe, balanced, and high-quality environments for all women in leadership. Engaging with historically underserved communities is essential for minority women leaders to better connect and understand their needs (Ardoin et al., 2019). Breaking through barriers and succeeding in leadership roles allows women to challenge stereotypes and biases, paving the way for greater diversity in the future (Alves, 2022; de Paleville, 2022). By fostering collaboration and community engagement, minority women leaders can significantly impact the work to promote equity and inclusivity in education.

To address the need for more minority women in K-12 education leadership, educational institutions must take an active, overt stance regarding hiring practices. In addition, they must offer ongoing professional development opportunities and actively advocate for policies that promote diversity in leadership roles. Collaborations and other partnerships matter; research and data equally matter, given that the ability to regularly collect and analyze data on minority women in education leadership measures progress and identifies areas in need of improvement (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021, 2022). The commitment to doing so can undoubtedly lead to creating more equitable and inclusive educational and leadership environments for all shareholders (Alves, 2022; de Paleville, 2022; Schnackenberg & Simard, 2023; Walters & Shannon, 2024).

Moreover, minority women in positions of authority frequently advocate for themselves and their peers. They can provide support for equitable and inclusive policies and procedures, ensuring that all constituency members have equal and fair opportunities to progress into leadership roles. Proponents do this by disrupting preconceptions, as their presence and accomplishments challenge longstanding stereotypes, notions, and biases, fostering a more inclusive and diverse educational atmosphere for all (Soda, 2023). Involvement in the Community: Minority women leaders are better equipped to engage with underserved communities, thus fostering

collaboration and garnering community backing and collaboration for educational institutions (Soda, 2023).

Steps Toward Achieving Inclusivity

*“Diversity is a fact, but inclusion is a choice we make every day. As leaders, we have to put out the message that we embrace and not just tolerate diversity.”*⁷ — Nellie Borrero, Managing Director and Senior Strategic Advisor, Global Inclusion & Diversity at Accenture.

To actively consider diverse candidates for leadership roles, it is imperative to implement inclusive hiring practices, as supported by relevant scholarly works. In order to foster the growth of aspiring women leaders, it is essential to address the unique challenges minority women leaders face (Johnson, 2023; Rodriguez & Brown, 2021; Volker et al., 2022). Policies supporting diversity in leadership roles should be actively supported, something many relevant researchers and sources assert. In order to inspire others, we must continue to spotlight the success stories of minority women leaders, as emphasized by pertinent literature. Iterative collection and analysis of relevant data are necessary to measure progress in diversity within leadership, as recommended by appropriate references (Rodriguez & Brown, 2021; Walters & Shannon, 2024).

The education sector presents significant challenges for female leaders globally due to the disproportionate number of male leaders compared to their overall numbers in education systems. However, efforts to address these challenges are underway through a grassroots movement that aims to bring about change. Female empowerment is achieved through various means, including a vibrant presence on social media, regularly sharing up-to-date research, engaging in online dialogues and virtual events, and organizing supportive and challenging events on Saturdays and after work hours. These initiatives are supported by emergent anecdotal evidence, which reinforces existing research findings and highlights the substantial impact of gender on the promotion and retention of female teachers, equitable pay, and the limited availability of flexible working opportunities, particularly within schools.

Reinforced throughout this chapter is the sheer importance of the visibility of minority women in K-12 education leadership roles (Johnson, 2021, 2022, 2023), as this is crucial to fostering diversity and inclusivity in the education system. Minority women bring diverse perspectives, experiences, and insights to educational leadership, enriching decision-making processes and fostering innovation (Schnackenberg & Simard, 2023). As was previously mentioned, it is necessary not to undervalue women’s presence as leaders, as it provides a critical opportunity for women to be present for those who identify with, trust, and look up to them (i.e., modeling). As

visible representatives, they inspire young women who wish to pursue leadership roles and attain their own educational success.

Women benefit from efforts to address personal barriers such as imposter syndrome, perfectionism, the need for approval, and the fear of negotiation and failure by having other women share their stories of success, failure, and the ability to overcome. In addition, we must address organizational and systemic barriers, including unconscious bias and discrimination, as well as the lack of professional development opportunities for female educators provided by employers. Furthermore, we must continue to explore the reasons behind the inequitable treatment of women leaders en route to understanding the intersectional impact of various factors such as class, gender, race, ethnicity, disability, age, and sexuality (Lyle & MacLeod, 2016; Mulvaney et al., 2024; Porritt, 2021).

DISCUSSION

“Do not desire to fit in. Desire to oblige yourselves to lead.”⁸—Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks, Poet, Author, Teacher, and the first African American woman inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Marginalizing climates, cultures, and policies still exist within far too many schools, but women leaders are vigorously working for change through activism and ongoing efforts to promote gender equity (Broadhurst et al., 2021; Msila, 2022; Thomas, 2023). Women leaders in PK-12 schools continue to share their experiences with institutional sexism and work to change policies and improve educational climates (Ardoin et al., 2019). This includes the added work of serving as advocates for other women through their influence and rank as administrators within higher education. Overall, these relationships can be complicated, given that terms such as “feminism” and “activism” are frequently used to describe how they participate in social change for women and other historically excluded people in various (e.g., individual, group, community, etcetera) contexts. Strategies to advance fairness for minority women educational leaders involve both short-term and long-term approaches—such as self-advocacy, intentional professional development programs, increased representation, and policy development (Ardoin et al., 2019).

Minority women in K-12 leadership worldwide address gender, race, and patriarchy through resilience, eclectic approaches to leadership, and building feminist consciousness (Igiebor, 2021). Concerted efforts to transform existing cultures have introduced formal strategies to reinforce equity principles and practices. This is evidenced through the creation of centers and the adoption of justice-based policies in universities both near and abroad. However, existing literature reveals that despite

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these formal measures, this imbalance in academic leadership is still prevalent (Igiebor, 2021). Gender equity policies have not gained much traction, especially for advancing women to academic leadership positions, indicated by reports of silence (and being silenced), women's exclusion, and how male dominance is perpetuated through existing policies. Thus, women educational leaders must engage in social change for women and other historically excluded people in individual, group, and community contexts (Sotiriadou & De Haan, 2019).

Efforts to transform current cultures within education must continue to reinforce equitable principles and practices (Porritt, 2021). Board members and other relevant stakeholders also have a governing role in championing policies and strategies that challenge stereotypes and promote women in leadership roles. Existing research informs us that there is little to no leadership preparation for new teachers when they enter the field of education. Teachers need to view leadership styles through different lenses; this will help them understand the elements of leadership and learn how to progress into their own leadership roles. A healthy and thriving relational work environment will be established through exposure to and collaboration with different leadership styles (Paradiso-Testa, 2023).

Burton and colleagues (2020) noted that it is essential to discuss gendered racism in educational leadership. This includes acknowledging and naming the numerous isms minoritized female school leaders face and the constant energy required to cope with these isms regularly. Information of this nature is necessary to provide much-needed insights and strategies for supporting and promoting the success and well-being of minority women in K-12 educational leadership roles. The focus is not merely on the challenges these women face; this serves as a testament to women educational leaders' resilience and ability to succeed with or without adequate support systems, celebrating their successes (Walters & Shannon, 2024). A holistic, multifaceted approach spotlighting the various dimensions of minority women's leadership experiences is required as we continue working to address the need for more minority women leading – and succeeding – in all K-12 systems and settings and at all educational levels.

CONCLUSION

“Never be limited by other people’s limited imaginations.”⁹ — Dr. Mae Jemison, Doctor, Engineer, and NASA Astronaut.

Minoritized women continue to encounter a plethora of challenges and disparities in their pursuit of leadership positions in K-12 education. Although there has been a rise in the number of women assuming leadership roles in independent schools,

they are more inclined to attain headship in smaller schools and K-8 settings rather than in larger schools and secondary institutions. While schools still possess policies and climates that marginalize certain groups, women leaders are actively engaged in advocating for change and implementing initiatives aimed at fostering gender equality. The principles of fair and just leadership and social equality are of utmost importance in addressing the needs of women and individuals from marginalized communities in educational leadership. Consequently, the augmentation of women of color in educational leadership positions can yield positive impacts on pressing matters such as racism, poverty, and oppression. Furthermore, an increase in the representation of minority women in K-12 leadership unquestionably contributes to student success in and beyond the classroom.

The most effective leaders and managers are those who are not focused on power, control, and wealth. Instead, they are focused on serving their colleagues and customers, transforming organizations into institutions that care equally about offering creative opportunities while also creating a more just, inclusive, and equitable society (Paradiso-Testa, 2023). Thus, it is important that we acknowledge the contributions of minority women in K-12 education leadership and work towards breaking down barriers to create more inclusive educational systems for all (Butcher & Baker, 2022). By following these and other related steps, we can all do our part – as allies – to create more diverse and equitable educational systems, benefiting students, schools, and society writ large (Mulvaney et al., 2024; Shava, 2022).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ <https://learningliftoff.com/family/society-and-culture/15-motivational-quotes-from-black-leaders-that-inspire-courage/>
- ² <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/325033298082286665/>
- ³ <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/cultivating-the-next-generation-of-women-leaders-in-schools-and-districts/2023/04>
- ⁴ <https://www.theceomagazine.com/business/management-leadership/women-empowerment-quotes/>
- ⁵ <https://www.ellevatenetwork.com/articles/8013-inspirational-quotes-from-black-women-pioneers>
- ⁶ <https://www.sheknows.com/entertainment/slideshow/2002252/black-history-month-quotes/13/>
- ⁷ <https://chally.com/blog/inclusion-quotes/>
- ⁸ <https://www.ellevatenetwork.com/articles/8013-inspirational-quotes-from-black-women-pioneers>
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