Rooted in justice: one Black woman's unique, intersectional educational leadership journey

Rooted in justice: Spotlighting one Black woman's unique, intersectional educational leadership journey

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Abstract

Historically, there remains an underrepresentation of Black women in and en route to the highest levels of organizational leadership. The divide is all the more pronounced in the field of education, one in which women represent a large share of the community. Particularly relevant for Black women is the incongruence between their heightened educational attainment levels compared to their lower status in the organizational pecking order. To advance both theory and research in this domain, social justice leadership theory (SJLT) serves as the framework for this paper, rooted in the context of the United States. This paper explores the multilayered journeys of Black women aspiring to and operating in senior-level leadership roles (i.e., executives, directors, and CEOs) in US-based education, highlighting the unique and intersectional experiences of one Black woman educational leader. Indeed, there is a need to increase collective consciousness about the impact of leadership cultures on Black women, their experiences, their personal and professional choices, and the ensuing ramifications. In addition, the education leadership sector can benefit from the advancement of more research and theory development relevant to the progression of Black women educational leaders in the United States.

Key Words: Black Women Educational Leaders, Educational Leadership, Equity, Identity, Intersectionality, Social Justice Leadership, Social Mobility

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Rooted in justice: One Black woman's unique, intersectional educational leadership journey

Among other sectors, higher education has been at the forefront of the push for more inclusivity of women and racial minorities, especially in the context of leadership. Research tells us that a diverse leadership team is an asset for organizations that provoke constructive conflict integral to achieving better outcomes (e.g., less turnover and improved performance and attendance). Corpuz, Due, and Augoustinos (2020) critically reviewed culture and gender in leadership literature from 2000 to 2020, finding an absence of culturally and linguistically diverse women in the leadership literature, information describing the obstacles they face, and illustrations highlighting how they view and manifest their roles. Previous leading studies, including one conducted by Watson et al. (1993, p. 599), concluded that diverse leader groups "became more effective on the task elements of identifying problem perspectives and generating solution alternatives" than did White homogenous groups. However, despite this popular discourse in education around disrupting these marginalizing cultures (Gunnarsson, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 2023), barriers to educational leadership, reflecting the intersection of race, gender, and professional cadre, remain problematic.

Organizational cultures, policies, and processes tend to echo mainstream values, beliefs, and customs that often create or reinforce non-inclusive practices, adversely impacting employees not belonging to predominant institutional groups. Consequently, a guiding framework is needed to inform culturally responsible and sustainable protocols for recruiting, promoting, and retaining employees from historically ostracized groups (Fuller et al., 2021; Paris, 2012; Showunmi, 2020). This paper, therefore, makes a case for an intersectionality paradigm to critically explore power, privilege, and inequity issues in education and educational leadership.

Critical Race Feminist Theory, A Precursor to Social Justice Leadership

Critical Race Feminist Theory

Critical race feminist theory seeks to provide African-American women with sound knowledge of themselves, crucial for self-understanding and recognizing their differences and shared experiences as a collective (Ngwainmbi, 2012). Intertwined into critical race and feminist theories, a third element – power relations – is a core component in the ongoing dialogue around gender, race, and class and the role these elements play in the social sphere (Verjee, 2012). More specifically, it involves the examination of the intersections of colonial oppression, identity, and development in the context of inequity and how these combinations converge in various settings (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Researchers in this arena, myself included, contend that this involves Black women's right to define themselves, find their place, and assert their own rights.

The juxtaposition of critical race, coupled with feminist theory, examines the intersections of race, gender, and power, all embedded within America's political, legal, and socioeconomic systems. Numerous scholars concur that critical race feminism can – and should – serve as a framework to transform public policies, educational opportunities, leadership development, and, more importantly, the lives of women of color (Horsford, 2016; Pratt, 2023, 2024). Specific to the Black female, class, gender, and race are intricately and undistinguishably interconnected. Thus, previous theories and studies focusing on subgroup homogeneity are lacking because they fail to address the varied differences among and within those subgroups (Chance, 2021). Critical race feminist theory argues for the analysis of Black women's experience coping with the matrix of racism, classism, and sexism, understanding that race does not exist without class nor class without race or sex.

Through the continued development of critical race feminist theory, Black women – as a whole – have the potential to become more equipped to perceive and express who they are as an exclusive group. In a society that sees as powerful both Whiteness and maleness, Black women possess no characteristic associated with power (Brassel et al., 2020). As such, CRFT is a substantial step toward forming an empowered collective – a group that is prepared, able, and likely to understand, define, and determine who, what, and where they are and whom they wish to become (Ngwainmbi, 2012). The juxtaposed tenets of CRT and FT are paramount to building the current framework (Crenshaw, 1989, 2013). Critical race feminism expounds upon these principles in the large-scale effort to bring forth an empirical voice that accurately reflects the needs and experiences of the Black female population (Horsford et al., 2021).

While there is a scarcity of extant works that speak directly to the lives and encounters of Black women, there is an even greater need for literature concerning the paths of Black women in and aspiring toward senior-level leadership positions. Further, Black women in educational leadership represent unique and complex experiences that have been underexplored for far too long. Given its androcentric nature, CRT alone does not encompass aspects pertinent to womanhood. That is, CRT has historically and overwhelmingly emphasized the experiences specific to the Black male. On the other hand, while grounded in Gynocentrism, the origins of FT do not always speak to matters regarding race and racial differences. Put another way, the FT frame overwhelmingly reflects the voices and perspectives of White women. The notions that CRT is "male" and FT is "White" justify critical race feminist theory as the theoretical foundation of this paper. Critical race feminism, then, indubitably speaks to the challenges and successes experienced by Black women in and through their work as educational leaders.

The belief that education is a 'great equalizer' for upward mobility and acceptance within society (Marcucci & Elmesky, 2016) remains a feature for Black women pursuing roles in education, leadership, and educational leadership. Therefore, examining the interactions between gender, race, context, and occupational level coalesced with identity and perceptions of identity within education is necessary. These elements are intertwined to develop and advance a framework that better encapsulates the complex, multifaceted experiences unique to Black women in the United States of America. Given that every day, women successfully carve their leadership paths despite all odds, I emphasize the responsibility of all connected stakeholders, especially educational leaders, in deliberately upholding the tenets of equity and social justice on behalf of all constituency members.

Critical Race Feminism, a Precursor to Social Justice Leadership

No one label will ever serve as a 'blanket for all.' The constructs 'race' and 'gender,' for example, in no way account for the many entrenched interconnections that subsist within and between groups (McCall, 2017). All homogeneous grouping is, at best, limiting and overreaching. Critical race feminism responds by fusing two unidimensional constructs (CRT and FT) into one (CRFT). This step aims to utilize extant literature to highlight the factors relevant to Black women, intersectionality, and the interconnection of multiple identities. Moreover, as representatives of educational equity and attainment, this paper explores the experiences, perceptions, and implications, all relevantly and directly connected to the paths of Black women and those aspiring towards educational leadership positions.

The trifecta that is equity, diversity, and intersectionality remains under-resolved in the ongoing effort to increase representation, especially in the realm of leadership, of groups that are reflective of all the members of the general population (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Tang &

Wang, 2023). Again, critical race theory is androcentric, as it speaks on behalf of the Black race as a whole entity, irrespective of gender. Feminist theory (FT), on the other hand, is gynocentric. It expresses gender-specific matters and concerns whole-scale, irrespective of race and ethnicity. Each of these frames independently overlooks the intersecting impacts of race, coupled with gender, on the lives, journeys, and experiences of Black women.

Therefore, the mounting need has emerged to characterize and represent the perspective of Black women in a myriad of capacities within the societal, educational, and organizational realms. This need is only further exacerbated as Black women aspire and advance toward leadership positions. Studies of this nature provide rich contexts illuminating the human condition pertinent to leadership. Yet, unfortunately, insights about the leadership experience of people of color from context-rich research within education, communications, and Black studies remain marginal in the field. For this reason, the ensuing frames – critical race feminism and its connection to Black women and social justice leadership theory – serve as the crux of this piece.

Intersectionality and Social Justice Leadership

Intersectionality is the idea that we live our lives not just as gendered people but also as racialized, classed, able-bodied, or otherwise. By emphasizing multiple and simultaneous dimensions of social inequality—most commonly gender, race, class, and sexuality—intersectionality reveals the unique experiences of individuals who occupy multiple marginalized social categories. This perspective exposes how socially constructed identities, such as race and gender, interlock and intertwine to render unique experiences in various contexts (Sales et al., 2020). However, this frame's guiding principles have not fully taken hold in policy and practice, as Black women continue to lack full-scale representation at the highest levels of educational leadership (Fuller et al., 2021; Johnson, 2021).

While this underrepresentation ultimately reflects the broader effects of institutional racism and sexism, conceptual and analytical shortcomings of prior research have not helped matters. Most prominently, higher education researchers have historically treated race and gender as mutually exclusive constructs. By doing so, studies have, unfortunately, ignored how the intersection of these constructs renders unique consequences for those facing double marginalization like Black women or double privilege for White men (Bridges, 2019; George et al., 2022; Logan & Dudley, 2021). They thereby restrict our ability to develop evidence-based frameworks designed to improve equity in education, recruitment, development, advancement, and retention (Thomas, 2023).

Black Women, Intersectionality, and Social Justice Leadership

These realities and the compounded effects of the patriarchal and racialized structures in the USS are why I specifically focus on Black women. I take this approach because research reveals that Black women's intersectional identities present unique personal and professional barriers (Collins, 1990, 2004; Collins & Bilge, 2016, 2020). Studying the experiences of this group can illustrate the importance of considering the nuanced complexities of race and gender and how identifying and examining these factors can dually advance science and practice. For example, these women have also taken up space in the modern workforce and are leading the pack in growth rates in educational attainment (Maylor et al., 2021). Illustrating the complexities of their lived experiences, Black women have made gains in these areas despite a considerable share of single-handedly managing households. This quandary is owed largely to mass incarceration and other social policies in the USS that separate far too many Black men from their families (Western & Wildeman, 2009). Additionally, although Black women in the USS have achieved higher levels of education in recent years than any other race-gender group

(Bartman, 2015; Gunnarsson, 2017; Johnson, 2021), they represent the group most likely to be strapped by student loans (Jackson et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, they have yet to attain equal access, pay, and leadership opportunities across industries (e.g., Galea & Abdalla, 2020; Hegewisch & Mefferd, 2022; National Committee on Pay Equity, 2020). These gaps are even more salient when looking at the leadership profile of organizations. For instance, Black women comprise eight percent of the personnel in the private sector and less than two percent of all leadership roles (Cohen & Huffman, 2007; Mattis, 2004). These statistics become starker when concentrating on institutions of higher learning (Alexander, 2010; Davis et al., 2011; Jean-Marie, 2008; McConner, 2014). Adding to this, predominant cultural forces impacting Black women's experiences in the workplace often prevent them from feeling like they truly belong and receiving the pay they deserve. For example, Melva LaJoy Legrand, founder and CEO of a national event planning firm, revealed that she felt she had to "shrink" herself throughout her career. She noted, "I was told to straighten my hair, to speak 'White,' to be more feminine, to be assertive but not too aggressive" – experiences unique to Black women (Corbett, 2021, p. 2).

These assertions around inclusivity have important implications for strategies promoting diversity and equity in the workplace. Moreover, this and other related discourse around pay and opportunity equity involves much more than simply "talking" about gender, all while ignoring race and class (Jordan-Zachery & Wilson, 2017). Numerous scholars in this arena assert that relevant conversations among academics include confronting the dangers of attempting to separate that which is 'inseparable' (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013; Pullen & Vachhani, 2018; Travis, 2016; Zerai, 2000). In light of this, how, then, can the matter of equity and intersectionality be responsibly addressed and applied within the context of educational leadership?

This question serves as the impetus for this article, considering the historical underrepresentation of Black women in and en route to the highest levels of organizational leadership. The divide is all the more pronounced in the field of education, one in which women represent a large share of the community. Particularly relevant for Black women is the incongruence between their heightened educational attainment levels compared to their lower status in the organizational pecking order (Ijames, 2022). This paper explores the multilayered journeys of Black women aspiring to and operating in senior-level leadership roles (i.e., executives, directors, and CEOs) in US-based education, highlighting the unique and intersectional experiences of one Black woman educational leader.

Rooted in justice: One Black woman's unique, intersectional educational leadership journey

This paper examined the intersecting identities and relived experiences of one Black woman educational leader. Dr. Ennia[2] was purposively selected because of her position as a veteran (i.e., Instructional Leader, Founding Principal, Doctor of Education, Graduate Program Director, and Faculty Member, to name a few) within the US educational sphere.

Interview method: Data collection

I employed the interview method, as it is widely used for collecting data in various education and social science research disciplines. The interview method allows researchers to gain in-depth information, insights, and experiences from respondents, which can provide a valuable understanding of social realities. Thoughtfully enacted interviews can generate unique leverage for describing and explaining complex phenomena in international relations research (Broache, 2022). Pertinent to qualitative research, in-depth interviews are particularly beneficial for collecting detailed information and have widespread acceptance and popularity as a data

[2] The study participant's name was replaced with a pseudonym to protect her identity and anonymity.

collection method (Golam Azam, 2022). Interviews also offer the opportunity to directly engage with personal data, allowing participants to interact with their data in real-time and providing researchers with valuable insights regarding a particular phenomenon (Hussein, 2022; Moore et al., 2021). However, interviews are subjective and often time-consuming, reinforcing the importance of researcher caution regarding bias and confidentiality matters when conducting interviews (Krämer et al., 2021).

Participant Selection and Guiding Questions

Dr. Ennia was purposively selected based on her status, rank, and position as a longstanding justice-centered educator and leader. When presented with the prospect of spotlighting her unique, intersectional educational leadership journey, she was immediately and positively responsive to being included in the furtherance of this work. Given her now almost three decades as an educator and leader, I was particularly interested in her unique insights and perspective, with the following five guiding questions framing this study:

1. What factors do you believe can, should, and do contribute to the number of Black women in educational leadership?
2. What challenges do you believe Black women aspiring to careers as educational leaders face?
3. What strategies for success have been shared with you along the way?
4. What advice and strategies for success do you have for Black women aspiring towards careers in educational leadership?
5. What concluding remarks do you have for those seeking to more fully capture the experiences of Black women serving in and aspiring towards careers in educational leadership?

In the sections below, I unpack the five guiding questions that were asked and the insights that emerged as a result of our progressive conversations.

Results

RQ #1: Factors Contributing to the Advancement of Black Women in Education Leadership

When asked, *What factors do you believe can, should, and do contribute to the number of Black women in educational leadership*?, Dr. Ennia reflected on her transition from K-12 administration to academia and said:

> My experience has been I felt like I had more opportunities in K-12 than I have in academia. I feel like academia, you know, I'm a staff member with a doctorate and experience. Right? But I feel like there's not a lot of opportunity. You know, I've interviewed...I wasn't offered the position to be a professor, assistant professor. You know, academia is very White. It's different. I just feel like there are a lot more barriers and restrictions — or less opportunity for Black women in academia than there are in K-12.

Reflecting further, she then said:

> I feel there's not a lot of opportunity, or I haven't been getting the success that I want from different types of opportunities in higher education. I was like, well, maybe I should just go back in a district and start as an assistant principal and work my way up again. Because I feel like that would be easier if that's what I really wanted to do. It's not really what I want to do. I really want to teach at the higher education level. I started out as an adjunct…and they've been giving me opportunities, so I've been enjoying that…but I really would like to research. I miss the research.

Based on Dr. Ennia's experiences, she posits that there are more explicit paths to advancement in P-12 and more apparent barriers in higher education regarding promotion and advancement. Black women, she says, are consistently seeking a roadmap. This sentiment is evidenced by the fact that Dr. Ennia was willing to consider leaving academia to assume the position of assistant principal to regain admission and advancement in the world of P-12 education.

In alignment with RQ1, *Factors Contributing to the Advancement of Black Women in Education Leadership*, Dr. Ennia pointed to the fact that while there is – and continues to be - much diversity in the student body, this, unfortunately, is not the case once those who enter academia begin moving up the ranks. This same point is underscored in other relevant research on the extant gaps that remain between men and women in the workforce (Rose & Hartmann, 2018), in the academy (Slay, 2023), and in academic leadership (Johnson, 2023).

RQ #2: Challenges Facing Black Women in and en route to Education Leadership

In response to the question, *What challenges do you believe Black women aspiring to careers as educational leaders face*?, Dr. Ennia replied with the following example:

> Our new district contact is a Black woman. [A] former principal who's now been given responsibility over leadership development, our work with principals with this district. Well, our consultant is having problems taking directives from this Black woman, and it has become a major problem…because she's all in her White fragility. I mean, it's that kind of stuff; I'm just like, you know what? I don't really have time for this, but because of the dynamics, and because you know, she's kind of been given reign of things because she's good friends with [a higher-up], it's just, it's race related.

Doubling down, she continued:

> It's a race issue. It is. There's no way to sugarcoat it because she had no problems taking directives or input when the person who was over before was a White woman friend of hers. So it's just, it's interesting to watch, and I'm not on the teaching side…I run the [program], but it's just, it's interesting to watch the dynamics of so many different things. It's just, it's interesting.

Moreover, Dr. Ennia expressed that as much as she desires to continue advancing in her current sphere, problems remain in how they "treat Black people, Black women." She said, "Why would I subject myself to that? I'm not, not gonna be your token Black, cause that's what it is. I didn't want to be the token Black".

Aligned with Dr. Ennia's sentiments, RQ2, *Challenges Facing Black Women in and en route to Education Leadership*, is supported by extant research on the racial stereotypes Black women educational leaders face (Aaron, 2020). Further considerations include Black women educational leaders' complex, intersectional, racialized, and gendered experiences (Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). In addition, it is important to note how challenges and adverse experiences influence the leadership development of Black women in senior-level educational leadership positions (Chance, 2021).

RQ #3: Strategies for Success for Black Women on the Path to Educational Leadership

I asked Dr. Ennia, *What strategies for success have been shared with you along the way*?, and she emphasized the importance of aligning with the right mentor:

> It's hard to live, you know? I mean, the struggle, I think it's just a different type of struggle, and I guess I'm at the point now; honestly, there are struggles everywhere, challenges everywhere we go as leaders. You know, I really believe in the proverb, 'To whom much is given, much is required.' I kind of feel like if I'm going to struggle, I'd rather be struggling for some students. I've had the conversation with [my mentor] because she's in a professor role, and she has stayed. I really believe she has stayed because of students like us [who] needed [her]. I can't imagine having gone through [my doctoral] program. I may not have gotten through that program if I didn't have [her].

Extending her train of thought, she added,

> I had other professors making underhanded comments to me, like, 'Are you going to graduate on time?' You're supposed to be my [professor]. They weren't really trying to support me. Honestly, I felt like they didn't want me to graduate on time, but I had [this mentor]. Thankfully, …she was very supportive…because their support's not there. It's not.…

Thinking about her own strategies for success as she embarked on her leadership journey, Dr. Ennia concluded, "I define success - or one way I define success – is winning. You know, achieving your goal; and so, with that definition, I've had a lot of success".

The ability to define, create, and establish one's successes is supported by the work of Johnson and Thomas (2012). The authors point to "persisting challenges of inequity in higher education [that] often position Black women as outsiders within their academic environments" (Johnson & Thomas, 2012, p. 156). As a result, say the authors, Black women's leadership styles remain unexplored in human resource development. Thus, "'being at the margins domestically or internationally, likely means that Black women everywhere engage in strategies in order to achieve power, identity, and voice" (p. 156). Similarly, and connected to RQ3, *Strategies for Success for Black Women on the Path to Educational Leadership,* Grant (2012) asserts that future research should "more closely examine the importance of mentoring relationships for African-American women to better understand the ways in which specific emotional support and career development mentoring contribute to successful job outcomes for those aspiring to the professoriate in educational leadership" (p. 114).

RQ #4: Strategies for Success for Black Women in Educational Leadership

Considering Dr. Ennia's tenure as an educational leader, I then asked, *What advice and strategies for success do you have for Black women aspiring towards careers in educational leadership*? She thought about her time as a K-20 leader and answered,

> When students go to class, how many Black professors do they see? The people of color are not Black; you know what I mean. The majority of people that they would encounter that are people of color are not Black. Not African-American, nor Black-American, you know? So, I think that subliminally sends the message that there are no opportunities for them in education.

Highlighting the importance of support in this regard, she continued:

> I wasn't given [a particular] opportunity because there was no support from the department. But I know now, from working here and being in faculty meetings enough, there would have been money to support me for that, but it wasn't a priority. But then I sit in these same faculty meetings where they talk about, 'We can't find people of color who are strong.' Well, you're not [supporting] programs for minorities, you know, graduate students, you're not supporting that? It's like you want to tout that a program is majority-minority, but programs or initiatives for minorities you don't support. Right? Okay. Sure.

In response, according to Dr. Ennia, "For those who don't practice the same release that I have, I say, you need a strong support team, village, you know? However you identify them."

Relatedly, Townsend (2021) speaks to identity politics and the need to address the absence of black women in administrative leadership. Townsend (2021) contends that "giving voice to African American women can be done through a review of hiring practices, parity in

promotion, time considerations in support of non-mandated mentoring of students of color, and funding for professional development and mentoring experiences" (p. 596). In this context, RQ4, *Strategies for Success for Black Women in Educational Leadership*, emphasizes occupancy within senior-level leadership spaces. After the journey to securing an educational leader (theme #3), theme #4 is specific to the lasting power required to stay in one's role, maintain a high standard of excellence, and remain relevant, all while still having the capacity to prepare and pour into the lives of current and burgeoning leaders (Davis et al., 2011).

RQ #5: Capturing the experiences of Black women serving in and aspiring towards careers in educational leadership

In summative fashion, I asked Dr. Ennia this final question (RQ5): *What concluding remarks do you have for those seeking to more fully capture the experiences of Black women serving in and aspiring towards careers in educational leadership*? Her immediate response was,

> I'd just say, remember who you are. Remember who you are and whose you are. Those would be my final comments. Cause that's something my mom would always say to me. When I would share different situations with her, she would just say remember who you are and remember whose you are. And those things have really helped, you know, not by any means to say that I'm perfect and have always got it right. But there have been times I've had to just say, 'This is not me. This does not reflect me; this is not who I want to be'…and I have to make that expressly clear to the people that I work with and work for…and if our views don't align, then it's time for me to do something different, you know? I'm not going to do things that I don't feel are the right thing to do.

Going further, Dr. Ennia then said,

> It [self-care] is so important. What I've learned is people will let you run yourself into the ground, especially when it makes them look good… so learning how to set healthy boundaries is so important. That's definitely another piece of advice, and being comfortable with saying 'no.' And I think that falls under healthy boundaries…at different times, I actually used to practice…saying no, I'm not gonna do that. …saying no with a smile so that when I kept getting asked, I'd say, 'No, I'm not going to be able to do that.' …I could be pleasant, and then they'll walk off like, 'Did she just tell me no?' I did. Yup, for my own well-being because there's that (Maya Angelou) quote…that we teach people how to treat us, and I've learned that is so true personally, professionally.

"I think one of the things that I've learned that just amazes me," said Dr. Ennia, "is the conversations that I have with grown people in the same way I talk to grown people; that's how I used to talk to my students in my classroom." Still, she affirms that even in the most difficult – or downright egregious – circumstances, particularly when facing any authority-related pushback, remember what is and is not within your control. At the end of the day, "maybe the person shouldn't have responded that way, and I can't control their response…they're a professional adult just like I'm a professional adult".

Discussion

As highlighted here, Dr. Ennia's lived experience is resonant. Her story represents a collective experience, one that is unique and intersectional, one that undoubtedly resonates with other women educational leaders across continents and contexts. Connectedly, Fuller et al. (2021) documented the collective experiences of a heterogeneous group of women leaders in education, accounting for the similarities and differences among these women and their leadership stories. Nevertheless, there was much collectivity among their stories, including

"accounts of challenges faced and overcome; of resistance enacted and agency exercised against the backdrop of institutional, systemic and societal misogyny and racism. Importantly, there are accounts of abundance in their cultural and leadership capital" (p. 421).

The discourse regarding capital is particularly relevant to and for Black women, considering the incongruence between their heightened levels of educational attainment (Corbett, 2021) compared to their current status within the organizational leadership sphere (Cohen & Huffman, 2007; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The path to leadership is even more complex and nuanced. For example, Showunmi (2020) found that different from White women leaders – who also experienced challenges due primarily to matters of gender or class,

> The challenges were considerably more numerous and severe among Black women leaders – many of whom felt they had encountered racial prejudice and discrimination at work, which hampered their progress as leaders. They felt that the general organizational culture of their employers was not friendly to Black women in leadership positions, such that the large majority of them saw the need to abandon their own culture and assume the dominant culture of their organization. (Showunmi, 2020, p. 58)

For reasons such as these, Dr. Ennia reminds us of the importance of remembering – and never straying away from – who we are and the path that led us here in the first place.

This awareness of self is significant, given the connection between memory and self and the multisensory experience of remembering, rooted in a first-hand experience (Simons et al., 2022). Dr. Ennia graciously gave us a vicarious look into her multilayered educational leadership journey. Her story underlines the need to increase collective consciousness about the impact of leadership cultures on Black women, their experiences, personal and professional choices, and all ensuing ramifications.

Conclusion

How to Best Support Black Women Leaders: The Role of Support Networks

As Black women increasingly seek leadership roles in education, assert Grillo et al. (2022), "it is critical that efforts to prepare, develop, and support them, as well as to evaluate their performance, consider the ways in which they lead as cultural markers and essential aspects of their leadership identity" (p. 48). More, "observing the specific ways in which Black women lead expands and deepens our current understanding of leadership as a collection of relational experiences between leaders and followers" (p. 48). Thus, by highlighting the unique journeys of Black women in and en route to educational leadership via Dr. Ennia's story, I "champion justice" (Balven et al., 2018; Cowan, 2016; Jessie, 2020). In this way, I seek to offer fresh insight into how social justice leadership theory and intersectionality theory can respond to the needs of Black women in and en route to senior-level leadership roles in education. Though not exhaustive, these frames are primed to speak to Black women educational leaders' distinctive "double whammy" experiences (see George et al., 2022; Logan & Dudley, 2021; Smith-Woofter, 2021). On a larger scale, they are potential gateways to inform policy through conceptual "bridging" (connecting research to practice) and reconciliation (creating safe, equitable, and inclusive spaces). Together, the best way to support Black women leaders across all spectra is by being allies and uplifting their voices, journeys, and lived experiences.

In Sum...

As we advance, says Dr. Ennia, "the journey continues. I'm excited…I'm trying to focus on doing the best work while I'm here…and I'm excited about whatever the future holds." In this same vein, and following the tradition of critical scholars in this arena, a goal of this paper is to "end some of the abstract debates about what intersectionality can and cannot do and encourage

more scholars to push the theoretical boundaries of intersectionality rather than disciplining and policing them" (Carbado, 2013, p. 841). For example, the ability – and need – to be resilient remains a common, interwoven theme among Black women leaders (Ijames, 2022; Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013). This is an area that is undoubtedly worthy of further investigation. While more work is needed to advance intersectionality in educational leadership, this piece seeks to critically review and distill available knowledge on existing conceptualizations and assessments of the effects of race, gender, and other identities in educational leadership literature.

I reason that greater empirical attention must be paid to intersectionality to better craft policies and practices to foster more equitable cultures, as this is a matter of justice. The journeys of Black women in and en route to educational leadership positions are unique, multiplicative, and relevant in all equity, leadership, and justice-based contexts (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021, 2022; Thomas, 2023). In addition, the education leadership sector can benefit from the advancement of more research and theory development relevant to the progression of Black women educational leaders in the United States of America.

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