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Black Female Leaders in Education, Role, Reflections, and Experiences

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Synonyms

Black female leaders and Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) female leaders are used interchangeably

Introduction

The experiences of black female leaders in education are unique, encompassing the lived experience of being black and being a woman while forging forward to make a social difference. It is therefore essential to reflect upon the historical systems and structures of racism that are embedded within the Western education system to understand the positionality of the black female leader in education. These structures draw on negative societal stereotypes and representations that seem to be fixed. The current political climate appears to exacerbate this by the continued reinforcement of whiteness and white supremacy which have become the lens that the world sees through. Small steps forward are ongoing with

leadership development programs being designed to support aspiring BME leaders. However, revolutionary changes are needed to challenge the negative narratives of black women as being represented as hypersexualized, inferior, and uneducated (Hooks 1992). Furthermore, the shade of skin color (colorism) has been another factor that has been reported as a barrier to career progression. It is vital to continue to unpick the structural and organizational racialized biases that affect the progression of BME female leaders, who have both race and gender issues to deal with daily.

The Shortage of Black Female Leaders in Education

England currently has 32,113 schools (primary and secondary) with a workforce of 498,100 teaching staff (including teachers, deputy and assistant headteachers, and headteachers). BME teachers make up approximately 10,000 (2.1%: Black African, 1.3%, Black Caribbean 1% and Black Other, 0.4%) of the teaching workforce, which is a cause for concern. Even more worrying is that approximately 3,000 are men and 7,000 are female. Regarding senior leadership posts in England, there are 900 BME deputy and assistant headteachers (combined) and 200 head teachers (0.7% male and 1.2% female). Most BME teachers are currently working in secondary education (DfE 2018). On the other side of the

teaching trajectory for aspiring BME applicants, only small numbers are admitted annually on the Graduate Teacher Training Registry compared to their white counterparts. Similar findings in America reveal that less than 10% of teachers are from a BME background. Entering the education training system as a trainee teacher excludes many due to social disadvantage, a lack of support in achieving the required grades, financial instability, and limited mentoring support in navigating through the school, university, and teacher training routes. Scholars discuss the absence of black female leaders in Higher Education which again reflects the organizational and structural barriers for potential black academics to thrive and survive within these contexts (Arday 2018). This paper draws briefly on where black female leaders are within the education system along with their experiences in the lived role. The internal and external challenges of being a BME female leader are explored. The Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, concepts of white sanction and assimilation are reviewed to understand how BME female leaders in education experience power, race, and inequality. CRT offers a necessary framework to understand the ramifications of racism against the backdrop of white supremacy. Within the CRT framework, non-white voices have the space to express their truth. Deep insights and meaningful data capture the lived experiences of individuals who have been affected by the destructive overt and covert practices of racism. The experiences of BME female leaders in education offer rich insights into the work and personal complexities experienced by these unique women who are entering leadership spaces in white domains (Rollock 2011). Many factors influence whether BME female leaders continue in their role; i.e., social class, support networks, background, and family commitments. The experiences of persevering through societal, cultural, and workplace adversity could be deemed as heroic, considering the consistent harmful practices of racism and the psychological demands of the BME female leader.

The Journey to Leadership: The Role

The BME student ratio compared to the number of BME teachers and leaders is not representative in both England and America. It is essential to keep asking why educational institutions are not reflecting diversity in their leadership teams while the shortage of BME teachers and leaders is increasing. If this continues, student outcomes, cultural understanding and the acceptance of others within educational contexts will be affected. The journey to leadership for black female leaders is one that equips them with a range of networking and visionary skills to survive in challenging contexts. Social justice knowledge and having a clear understanding of the educational landscape puts them in a position that understands the importance of cultural sensitivity, moral purpose, and the destructiveness of inequity. Studies suggest that obstacles appear to be at all stages of the career trajectories of black women in education. Despite these obstacles, black female leaders assert that they chose to teach as a profession to make changes to the education system and to give opportunities to young people. Being a role model, increasing social mobility, and making a difference in their communities were at the heart of their decisions. Scholars note the visible impact of BME leaders that are leading in white spaces and report on the relationship changes and tensions that can occur when they enter into leadership positions. White colleagues can sometimes feel uncomfortable and unsettled when black employees with leadership responsibilities are managing them. Challenging the norm can also lead to white employees feeling threatened and unable to cope with being led by someone who looks different from themselves. To maintain white power, BME female leaders might experience the micromanagement of behaviors and attitudes from other senior leaders. Continued microaggressions from subordinate colleagues coupled with micromanagement, sometimes become standard practices within the role. The black female leader would then have to decide which battles to address or silently accept the injustice, especially if they are aspiring for leadership. Scholars report on the continued concerns

regarding aspiring BME female leaders throughout all stages of their career trajectories from entry into the profession to leadership. Role challenges include role insecurity, lack of personal confidence, ostracization. Further challenges highlighted include cultural insensitivities, low self-esteem, and continued relationship tensions which are rarely addressed. Limited opportunities for career progression have been experienced, as their white colleagues achieve higher positions over shorter periods. The under-representation of BME female teachers and leaders is disturbing. The Western society is a culturally diverse one, and so it is paramount that all educational institutions reflect the diversity and cultural capital in their workforce.

The organizational structures of racist practices in education are also pervasive in society reflecting damaging media representations of black women (Hooks 1992). These representations portray negative stereotypes of black women as hyper-sexualised, subservient and unintelligent which are embedded in media and remain somewhat unchallenged. However, scholars discuss the alternative, innovative, and opportunist ways that BME teachers are adopting to forge ahead in their careers challenging these stereotypes. These include utilizing both black networks for support and guidance through their career journeys and white systems that maintain the powers for career progression. Black-led leadership preparatory courses are now on the rise in England. Over the past years, the Government has supported the funding of BME leadership preparatory courses. This shift indicates a change of direction in governance with an acceptance of the selective, racist leadership processes that have been a barrier to BME teacher and leader progress. Within these programs, aspiring BME leaders can discuss the real-life challenges experienced when considering race and working in educational institutions. Collaborating and seeing other BME leaders is not only inspiring but essential to personal development, drive, commitment, and vision to making a long-term difference as a BME leader.

Training and Development

Research shows that aspiring BME leaders are less likely to experience regular in-school mentoring and coaching into leadership roles. The percentages of BME senior leaders (male and female) on national leadership training schemes are low. BME female teachers spend a longer duration in their roles and are less supported regarding the skills development of their leadership competencies compared to their white colleagues. In some cases of white sanction, BME leaders have experienced thorough training, including insider knowledge about roles, only when a white colleague in power has chosen them. They will, at that point, have entered into the insider status within the organization, reflecting leadership acceptance and entering into the inner circles of leadership. Within that relationship, the process of nurturing trust, reliance, and acceptance of the inner circle leadership culture takes place.

Research suggests that aspiring BME leaders experience ongoing pressures and tensions as they adopt the organizational characteristics while learning the expected behaviors and ways of leadership within that context. These behaviors and expectations might go against their cultural, religious, and personal morals, and the change of identity might infer to other BME colleagues that they have "sold out". These experiences can lead to aspiring BME leaders having to choose their workplace identity as they go up the leadership ladder. This experience of detachment can result in feelings of "not fitting in" on both sides, along with internal and external relationship tensions. On the other hand, if BME educators are not part of the "in" group, they might experience exclusion from the informal professional conversations about job competencies and useful inside information. These informal professional conversations provide essential insights that are helpful in understanding roles and leaders within organizations. The exclusion from these groups means that potential future black leaders are not as prepared for the application and recruitment processes as their white colleagues within the organization, which could hinder their progress in the long term. The development and training

phases within educational institutions reflect both organizational and structural hostile practices and procedures. These approaches ultimately affect the long-term progression and leadership competency development (both practical and theoretical) in aspiring BME leaders.

Experiences and Reflections

Many studies regarding BME female leaders highlight the positive achievements that have been reached within the role. On deeper reflection, the journey has been often overshadowed by negative experiences throughout their career trajectories. The ongoing challenge of navigating race and gender barriers, especially during the recruitment process, has been widely reported. The experience of role loneliness working within a homogenous teaching workforce and challenges with being accepted and respected by white colleagues and school families are some of the daily experiences of BME female leaders in education. Despite these negative experiences, BME female leaders show inner resilience, determination, and perseverance within their role. They also show career navigation strategies that have helped them to achieve and maintain senior leadership roles within education.

The concept of whiteness reflects how power, privilege, and identity can establish a traditional organizational culture where racialization is not recognized, thus masking dangerous and damaging ideologies and practices. Discourse on race reveals how white colleagues use their white privilege and power to introduce new job opportunities to their friends and colleagues. In some cases, these privileges are extended to potential BME teachers, enabling entry into higher leadership roles. This process is known as 'white sanction' (Miller 2016) where the skills and experiences of individual BME educators are acknowledged and recognized as having leadership potential, only after being sanctioned by the white employee. These findings reflect the continued use of white power to determine the future of aspiring BME educators. Equitable practices regarding leadership preparation and professional skills

development do not appear to be the priority. Scholars report the psychological and physical processes endured by aspiring BME female leaders in white spaces which often include assimilation practices. These practices involve changing or denouncing personal behaviors, religious practices, and cultural values to be accepted into the dominant school culture. The processes of entering into leadership is therefore heavily relationship-based; i.e., the socialization process (breaking in and settling into the role), mentoring or coaching experiences, inclusion, vertical or horizontal role changes, movement into the inner circles, advancement or withdrawal, all of which demand elements of adopting sameness characteristics along with an acceptance of the dominant culture. This acceptance can be perceived as dangerous as there is no space to challenge destructive practices, and there is the likelihood that the majority upholds these practices. Therefore, the relationships within the organizational structure determine whether an employee moves up the hierarchical ladder, and the trust and acceptance by colleagues within the organization are fundamental. If an employee experiences difficulties in accepting the organizational cultural norms or does not gain trust from the senior leadership, then their long-term job opportunities might be limited. BME female leaders have had to work hard to ensure that they are professionally sound and socially accepted within the workplace, despite the continued racial and sexist microaggressions.

BME females in positions of leadership now have opportunities to drive more significant changes within the workplace while bearing the emotional and psychological scars of oppressive behaviors. In drawing on their unique experiences of hardship and adversity, BME female leaders are bringing unique ways of enacting leadership. They work in different contexts and have become proficient in working biculturally and multiculturally within their communities. In this way, they can reach others providing exceptional opportunities for social change. BME female leaders in education are now able to "chip away" at cultural insensitivities and use their cultural capital to offer new ways of helping their white counterparts to

understand the impact and importance of diversity and the richness of difference.

Moral Purpose

Research describes how BME female leaders have been able to transform the negative racialized experiences to make lasting change through leadership. Moral purpose is an essential driver within BME female leader career trajectories. It goes beyond the physical acts of supporting marginalized communities and reflects the internal commitment to strive for justice and social change through narrowing the achievement gap in all levels of the education system. The commitment to support marginalized groups, in turn, feeds into long term career prospects, life-course development, and personal achievement. Research suggests that the female leaders lead from the starting point of being a black woman. Many have had experience of disadvantaged communities, multilingualism, and understand the importance of community. Part of their manifest is to support and develop potential BME leaders within communities to gain leadership positions in educational institutions. They are using their social and cultural capital to mentor, advise, and guide younger BME teachers in understanding the education system. This investment reflects the moral purpose, which is different from the traditional perspective of white, middle-classed men and women. The moral purpose from a BME standpoint includes social justice and equitable practices, especially for the vulnerable, disadvantaged, and marginalized communities. The depth of understanding that BME female leaders have of these communities helps to identify the historical and current barriers to progression. These insights serve to contribute to collaborative and practical solutions to these ongoing problems. Cultural literacy and emotional intelligence informs the understanding of different groups and their backgrounds and along with seeing diversity through a cultural lens. Within education, many BME female leaders lead with the understanding of being racially minoritized and being female in oppressive spaces.

Conclusion

Research suggests that black female leaders have acquired the life skills and experiences to strategize and navigate through racist and sexist tensions by being solution orientated, aspirational, and determined to make a positive change within their role. Drawing on other black female professional networks and family becomes a vital source of support. In some cases, the negativity and racist tensions from others become an expected part of being a black woman in a white educational space. These behaviors and attitudes need to be challenged due to the long term professional and psychological effects which are emotionally distressing.

To support the promotion of BME female leadership, headteachers and university principals should commit to developing principles of moral duty and cultural competencies. This commitment should aim to portray the physical presence of leadership that encapsulates the diversity of race. Diversity in educational leadership can be perceived as being laced with many challenges. In supporting multicultural leadership, there are many opportunities to harness the rich cultural experiences and leadership skills that making these changes could bring. If this is not present, the students learn that what is said is not always a reality or truth. The literature to date about the experiences of BME female leaders in education are, on the one hand, valuable and insightful in reflecting the triumphant and sacrificial experiences endured. On the other hand, the literature is concerning, reflecting the ongoing cultural, structural, and organizational biases and prejudices that are pervasive within educational institutions.

Racialized and disharmonious practices and policies will inevitably impact on establishing the diverse workforce that required in education. There continues to be abundant literature on educational leadership; however, little is known about BME female leaders, their experiences of

socialization and the continued impact of structural and organizational racism. The words entrenched racism, and endemic racism has been used to describe the practices that are active within the England and American education system. Although there are currently innovatively designed programs and courses to address these issues, BME teachers and leaders are not being given equal chances and opportunities as their white counterparts. The shortage of BME leaders is damaging to the education system. This shortage is depriving educational institutions of the opportunities to reflect cultural diversity in the curriculum instead of teaching from the dominant white male worldview. It is for the gatekeepers to engage in honest reflection followed up with action, as to why diversity is not present in their schools, colleges and universities. Only then can change be demonstrated to redress unfair, racist practices throughout the Western education system. The presence of BME female leaders in education challenge the stereotype of the characteristics of a female leader, especially visually. It is now time for honest reflection along with policy change, tighter accountability, and a commitment to seeing and accepting diversity to dismantle the historical overt and covert forms of racialization in educational institutions.

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