Examining the Culturally Responsive Leadership of Black Principals in the Anti-DEI Era: A Comparative Analysis of Black Female and Black Male Principals

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Abstract: This paper aims to examine the culturally responsive leadership practices of Black female principals in comparison to their Black male counterparts during the anti-DEI era, utilizing a review of past and present school policies as a framework to understand how these leaders have adapted to evolving educational environments that exhibit increasing resistance to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. The review will examine the evolving nature of school leadership, the historical and current factors affecting Black school leaders, with a specific emphasis on the experiences and responses of Black female and male principals in evolving environments. The study will compare Black female principals with Black male principals to evaluate their similarities and differences, which could shape future educational policies and implementation in practice.

I. INTRODUCTION

Culturally responsive leadership in an educational setting involves proactive administrative decisions aimed at addressing the cultural, racial, and socio-political needs of diverse student groups within schools. In light of the recent surge in anti-DEI ideology within policy-making circles, the proposed comparative analysis will examine the decision-making and adaptation strategies of rising Black female and Black male principals in relation to culturally responsive school leadership in their practices. Comprehending these techniques is essential, especially when facing the modern political landscape that poses escalating obstacles to the execution of culturally responsive school leadership. This analysis will examine the connections between these principals' leadership styles and current challenges in politics, evaluating their approaches in relation to historical and contemporary educational policy-making. The research aims to conduct a comparative examination of the ways of Black female and male principals' approaches surrounding their influence, development, and constraints in the anti-DEI era, in relation to contemporary and historical school policies and leadership practices.

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF SCHOOL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY

Historic and systemic factors have impacted the availability of opportunities afforded to Black principals in positions of leadership in schools over the course of the last century. These factors include the legacy of school segregation and Black schools, followed by Civil Rights era anti-segregation policies that dismantled legal segregation, after the historic 1954 verdict of the Brown v Board of Education court case. This verdict led to the removal of many prominent Black principals and other leaders from the very schools that served as cultural, and economic institutions for Black communities (Fenwick, 2022). With these removals, the opportunities for Black teachers to pursue leadership opportunities were greatly diminished, and schools began to face disparities in authority and representation. The system-level decisions of this period shaped the inequalities and underrepresentation patterns in the schools, establishing the context for the current pipeline and leadership opportunities for Black principals. Understanding the history of how the decisions impacted school leadership today will further clarify how the legacies of the past still shape the context in which Black female principals lead and Black male principals lead schools (Fenwick, 2022).

Additionally, the influence of previous policies such as desegregation and affirmative action impacted the career paths for Black educators who sought to access leadership positions. Desegregation policies that were meant to achieve racially equitable access ironically led to the dislocation of several competent Black administrators that struggled to re-enter leadership positions in schools after the establishment of integrated positions. Affirmative action policies that were later established to address such disparities opened up limited but significant opportunities for Black educators to access to entry points into the principal pipeline, and to undermine years of white exclusion from the ability to gain access to leadership positions (Diem & Welton, 2020). These policies, however, were contested in national debates on race, equity and justice, which influenced both the access to leadership opportunities but also the withdrawal of demands placed on Black principals operating in white dominated schools. Therefore, the discussion of these historical policies established precedents that influenced the representation as well as the demands of Black female principals and Black male principals in the next decades.

Also, the impacts of both desegregation and affirmative action policies were iteratively intersected via historical lenses for Black female and Black male principals. While both were ultimately blocked from principalships, extra barriers applicable to Black female principals encompassed racial along with gender oppression. While Black males received less discrimination in general, they enjoyed more access to informal sponsorship and employment opportunities through "sponsored mobility" (Berry & Reardon, 2022). Black female principals, however, were limited to formal access or "contest mobility" that required extra credentials and administrative experience, and which could be used as a further barrier toward access. As such, the unique demands for access and experience have bred separated expectations of Black female and Black male principals as they cling to experiences within the politics of educational leadership (Berry & Reardon, 2022).

III. THE ANTI-DEI ERA: POLICY SHIFTS AND CHALLENGES

The rise of anti-DEI or anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion policy implementation represents a dramatic turnaround of recent educational policies aimed at dismantling the current state of school practices targeting the advancement of educational equity. The increasing politicization of all federal agencies is particularly demonstrated through the legislative proposal to eliminate and defund the Department of Education to limit its federal supervision and enforcement of anti-discriminatory requirements reflected in Civil Rights efforts. Specifically, educational policy changes illustrate legislative promotion to reduce the Department of Education's ability to protect educational equity goals through prioritizing equity-centered leadership positions and decreasing supports for principal preparation programs designed to improve the cultural responsiveness of educational leaders (Jackson & Sondah, 2025). With the increased political uncertainty

stemming from the anti-DEI movement, the educational growth and sustainability of equitable leadership practices among school leaders, predominantly among Black principals, face increased political uncertainty and decreased institutional supports. Educational policies evident in the anti-DEI movement imdicate a space of uncertainty regarding competing educational values, particularly influencing how the role of policy evolution can influence the response of Black female and Black male principals to adjust the national constraints to preserve culturally relevant leadership in schools (Jackson & Sondah, 2025).

Thus, anti-DEI policy measures result in unique adaptive leadership challenges and opportunities created by institutional constraints facing Black principals in public schools. Constraints are most often materialized through limited curricula development and implementation, increased administrative oversight, and the reduced allocation of resources aimed at equity-related initiatives. Black principals must respond to these constraints with adaptive leadership practices to preserve their commitment to cultural responsiveness in the face of increasing opposition to such policies from various stakeholders (Tarrant, 2025). On the other hand, the current policy environment also creates unprecedented opportunities for collective practices to promote solidarity among principals in resisting exclusionary agendas and protecting marginalized and under-served student populations. As such, the adaptive leadership challenges and opportunities created by institutional constraints work together to produce adaptive compliance with institutional mandates and promote advocacy for marginalized groups (Tarrant, 2025).

Additionally, Black female principals face unique pressures from the trends of anti-DEI policy due to the intersectionality of gender and race in the role of educational leadership. While both Black male and female school administrators experience racial marginalization, Black women are often subjected to compounding effects of different barriers than their male counterparts that restrict their agency in the most severe ways, particularly in the increasingly restrictive institutional environments (Zajicek et al., 2020). Compounding effects of anti-DEI policy may include reduced access to pathways to leadership positions or diminished power in school settings largely populated by white staff (Zajicek et al., 2020). In contrast, Black male public school administrators may benefit from access to larger informal networks or face different expectations that while still rooted in systemic racism provide alternative pathways for career development or influence in the organization. Therefore, in the context of anti-DEI policy, Black female principals must navigate the effects of these policy trends in their roles as both Black school administrators and women where the recent shifts in policy further intensify historical patterns of exclusion and impact the practical realities of culturally responsive leadership instruction (Zajicek et al., 2020).

IV. CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE LEADERSHIP: DEFINING THE FRAMEWORK

Culturally responsive school leadership addresses the conscious establishment of practices that support and validation of cultural identities and lived experiences of marginalized students. It requires an attitude and focus on the historical experience of marginalization for the communities of color by recognizing and honoring cultural heritages of the students' communities of color in school curricula, policies, and leadership processes (Khalifa, 2020). Critical self-reflection of the school leaders, building culturally responsive teachers, creating inclusive and anti-oppressive school environments and practices, and supporting and involving families as co-partners in their students' education are considered critical components of culturally responsive school leadership concepts. These critical leadership behaviors take time, practice, and commitment to changing the dominant school structures responsible for inequities and exclusion in order to impact the culturally responsive spaces in schools. Using the culturally responsive leaders' approach "with a grounded knowledge and maintenance of cultural awareness" empowered Black school principals to make the change for optimal learning outcomes, equitable participation, and school cultural change for historically marginalized students (Khalifa, 2020).

Furthermore, culturally responsive leadership can be manifested in tangible practices, particularly in the school context in terms of curriculum design, discipline, and stakeholder engagement. Black principals place value and importance on including perspectives and content in practices that highlight their students' cultural backgrounds, hence, students' sense of belonging and relevance and meaning are preserved in their academic pursuit. Discipline practices tend to be relationship-oriented and restorative rather than punitive, as an understanding of student's realities prevails over punishment (Dawn, 2020). Families and community stakeholders are invited into schools, not just as support systems, but also as active participants/apprentices in creating the desired school climate and student outcomes, thereby broadening the influence of their leadership (Dawn, 2020). Culturally responsive leadership manifests as targeted actions that promote social-emotional development and inclusive educational environments (Dawn, 2020); it emphasizes not only academic achievement but also the importance of these concerns.

V. BLACK FEMALE PRINCIPALS: APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES

Black female principals engage in culturally responsive leadership styles that utilize humanizing pedagogy to prioritize the needs of underprivileged student groups.

Rather than setting up rigid curricular and administrative policies, Black female principals lead with humanizing pedagogy grounded in students' cultural history and experiences as a basis for decision-making (Crawford, 2023).

Culturally responsive leadership emphasizes welcoming environments where students' social contexts inform policies and practices that align with culturally relevant standards (Crawford, 2023). Oftentimes, hostile policy climates compel Black female principals to partner with teachers, creating learning environments that culturally respond to their students and influence instructional practices. By engaging in culturally responsive school leadership, Black female principals influence teacher perspectives and practices concerning students, teachers, and the broader school learning community (Crawford, 2023).

Moreover, gendered racism systematically affects Black female principals, which is a type of discrimination duality located at the intersection of a racial and gendered form of bias, which significantly impacts the nature of their leadership context. The combination of the workplace obstacles experienced by these leaders – one involving gender stereotypes and expectations and the other based on their race – leads to a work context peculiar and exclusive to them. For this reason, work contexts where their professional power is even more prone to marginalization and devaluation require the use of solid networks and patience from Black female principals (Crawford, 2022). Working against this double bind, Black female principals tend to employ representation practices to culturally responsive leadership that carefully considers the intersectionality of their circumstances. As a result, the incorporation of those experiences into their leadership in terms of motivation also considers the corresponding implications of intersectionality regarding their organizational strategies for equitable advocacy and representation. In this sense, the overall experiences of Black female principals also define the context of their work as a source of motivation since they attempt to achieve school environments that are more sensitive to the exclusivity that traditional ideas about schools often embody from the intersectionality standpoint (Crawford, 2022).

While many school leaders remain staunch supporters of their communities, Black female principals have launched a myriad of advocacy, mentorship, and community-building programs designed to empower both students and staff during times of institutional hardship. Many of these school leaders prioritize critical reflection and the intentionality of their own actions to cultivate safe spaces for marginalized students, often leveraging community engagement as a primary tool for navigating crises (Thompson et al., 2023). Via mentorship programs, these school leaders enact culturally responsive methods to provide guidance and support to both students and pre-service teachers alike, reinforcing the notions of collective agency and resilience in the process. These principals also prioritize instructional leadership and maintain high standards for education, all the while advocating for the resources and opportunities that broaden their notions of equity, irrespective of pushback from administrative bodies or district officials. Their continued participation in these practices exemplifies an unwavering commitment to their school communities, forging

networks of interconnectedness for shared belonging and support during turbulent policy shifts (Thompson et al., 2023).

VI. BLACK MALE PRINCIPALS: APPROACHES AND STRATEGIES

Black male principals use the culturally responsive leadership model to employ transformational leadership practices to build trust, inclusivity, and engage with inequities within their particular school contexts. Their leadership model prioritizes relationship building with students, staff, and the surrounding community, using storytelling and shared cultural experiences to ignite a collective sense of ambition and buy-in. Similar to Black female principals, Black males advocate for the establishment of an affirming environment for marginalized student populations; however, they may also depend on informal channels of mentorship and collaborative group efforts to disband traditional structures and institutional expectations (Lomotey, 2019). Both Black female and male leaders advocate for the socially-just principles of culturally responsive-pedagogy, yet Black men may utilize different pathways of influence—through visible support and strategic relationship alliances—to promote equity-based advocacy in policy-driven environments. In doing so, Black male principals engage unique, yet similar, methodologies to elevate their voices while adopting adaptive measures to continue promoting cultural responsiveness in the field of educational leadership (Lomotey, 2019).

Likewise, Black male principals also experience challenges aligned with the pervasive influence of racialized stereotypes endemic to society and applied to them within the educational context. Such stereotypes may influence how others regard a principal's perceived authority, credibility, and leadership approach, where they may face increased scrutiny as well as the desire for a response towards all themes related to race or discipline present on their school campuses. This pressure may lead to Black male principals adjusting their leadership approach as their practice becomes rooted in relationship and community building to first disrupt these deeply entrenched stereotypes whilst remaining prominently visible in their efforts to support students of color (Jackson, 2025). Similarly, anti-DEI policy efforts work to further constrain the avenues available for Black male principals towards leadership and influence in their practice as the prevalence of institutional support for equity-minded professional development opportunities declines. Thus, these influences shape the developing leadership identity and daily strategic decision-making of a Black male principal in how they may employ relationship-driven leadership in a proactive manner to navigate the realities of a system that is rife with obstacles and hurdles that remain firmly entrenched (Jackson, 2025).

Additionally, Black male principals intentionally cultivate their schools as inclusive spaces where every child—especially those from marginalized and underserved communities—can

feel a sense of validation and belonging (Jackson, 2025). They resist practices that foster exclusion by centering culturally relevant pedagogy, facilitate transparent candid conversations about identity and race, and establish relationships built upon mutual respect with students and school staff (Jackson, 2025). They frequently communicate with families and community agencies outside the school to strengthen ties between the school and the larger social context and preserve inclusive support networks (Jackson, 2025). Even in the face of restrictive anti-DEI educational policies—such as funding cuts to equity initiatives—Black male principals demonstrate resourcefulness in meeting the students' needs and fostering student engagement according to institutional guidelines (Jackson, 2025). Although they must comply with certain policies, Black male principals' persistence in prioritizing inclusivity and navigating the school culture toward a climate that celebrates diversity, academic success, respect, and understanding is evident (Jackson, 2025). Balancing policy compliance with ethical responsibility, and often demonstrating high levels of persistence, Black male principals guide their schools gradually toward a climate of respect and understanding for racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity (Jackson, 2025).

VII. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: BLACK FEMALE VS. BLACK MALE PRINCIPALS

A side-by-side analysis of the shared and divergent culturally responsive principal leadership practices employed by Black female and Black male school leaders, individually, to navigate the current anti-DEI climate reveals their unique yet shared responses to this politically hostile era. Both groups employ culturally responsive strategies that affirm marginalized student identities and not only align in advocacy, engagement, and inclusive climate-building efforts in the face of rising political adversity, but also diverge based on the more intensifying barriers they individually navigate. For instance, whereby Black female principals may employ more frequent and intentional formal mentoring, critical reflective practices, and obvious advocacy for intersectional equity in their policymaking to navigate the compounding structural challenges of being both Black and a woman, Black male principals may enjoy more informal networking opportunities that assist them in relationship-building with policymakers (Nwokocha, 2024). While Black male and Black female school leaders exhibit shared and differing practices along these themes, it is still reasonable to note that both groups emerge as responsive to the current political climate's anti-DEI policies through adaptive, active practices that continuously disrupt exclusionary policies' agendas and resolve to identify avenues for engagement, resources, and affirmation for marginalized student populations. In this way, a side-by-side analysis of their differing yet aligned practices not only demonstrates a commonality of commitment to culturally responsive leadership practices, but also infers shaping themes of intersecting identity as a catalyst for varying tactical approaches

to emerging trends in anti-DEI leadership practice responses within the educational sphere (Nwokocha, 2024).

Yet, the intersectional realities of Black females and males in these leadership roles do explain distinctly different ways in which cultural contexts impact their engagements within anti-DEI policy settings—primarily because these realities shape access to authority networks and modes of resilience. While the access to leadership is influenced by intersecting gender and race-based biases, Black female principals generally resort primarily to formal advocacy approaches and critical reflection to address institutional silencing and exclusion and create space for the voice of the marginalized. Black male principals, meanwhile, while still facing systemic obstacles based on race, generally access leadership through other internal portals (such as affiliation with certain alumni networks) and typically adopt informal strategies, which shapes their tactical response to anti-DEI policies (Zajicek et al., 2020). The result is that, while both efforts seek similar culturally responsive forms of practice, the realities of race and gender in the production of opportunity within a school district impacts how both male and female Black principals respond tactically to anti-DEI obstacles based on reliance—in different and uneven degrees—on the inside composition of the community and on individualized pathways of influence. The differential response reflects how intersectionality serves as a source of unique barriers and privileged access to creative forms of leadership that seek equity in contested environments (Zajicek et al., 2020).

In addition, the type of setting in which the schools operate (e.g., urban, suburban, rural) influences the level of impact that culturally responsive leadership from Black male and female principals can have. While urban districts may offer more possibilities for activism and outreach connected with the community, they often entail greater scrutiny and a heightened level of accountability under which Black principals may have to address structural and resource-based barriers with greater care. On the other hand, rural and some suburban schools may involve additional containment barriers. These include issues such as worse access to networks and a decreased visibility of diversity-oriented projects which may hamper the organizational reach and impact of culturally responsive work (Berry & Reardon, 2022). In particular, this relates to whether or not principals can rely on informal networks for sponsorship or whether they need to focus on a formal upward trajectory based on credentials and further management experience. The type of setting and opportunity available provide, thus, a framing mechanism for understanding how progressively Black male and female principals may adjust their leadership styles according to the unique demands, possibilities, and barriers that accompany their specific environment (Berry & Reardon, 2022).

VIII. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finally, the capacity for future efforts to promote further culturally responsive leadership from Black principals will be limited by anti-DEI policies. Such policy environments that limit the work of any equity-based initiatives do not just reduce access to potentially useful resources; they serve to increase administrative demands to somehow develop a skill set for surviving in unfriendly environments, where this is necessary (Diem & Welton, 2020). The need for focus on intersectional barriers related to race and gender prevents aspiring and practicing Black principals from being given the support that permission acknowledges these inequalities, but which is allowed to prevent behaviors that challenge exclusionary practices. It continues to be a priority and community engagement for school leaders to work with community stakeholders to promote policy changes around racial equity and fight systemic racism (Diem & Welton, 2020). For Black aspiring and practicing principals, moving forward, policymakers' recommendations should work to restore an institutional commitment to supporting equity-focused leadership, develop programs for ongoing skill development and education systems to commit to continually articulated actionable anti-racist mandates.

In discussing recommendations that address policy challenges impacting cultural responsive leadership for Black female and Black male principals, it is important that a unified set of strategies is designed to defend cultural responsive leadership as a promise. School districts should organize recommendations to advance cultural responsive leadership among Black principals by proposing leadership training that particularly equip Black leaders to withstand restrictive policies persistently but not lose sight of the agenda to uphold equitable-focused educational practices. In addition to this, they should advocate mentoring arrangements and formal policies surrounding support networks to reduce risks of isolation and attrition as developed by Black principals working in conservative political settings (Tarrant, 2025). To support this, policy changes should ensure certain regulations that protect space for culturally relevant curricular while developed advocacy channels. These help ensure that school administrators are not compelled to compromise their principles and leadership styles. These recommendations ensure that Black female and Black male principals continue to pursue cultural responsive leadership in failing policies and shifting political conditions (Tarrant, 2025).

Lastly, schools and districts could proactively enact transformative measures to develop policies that support an enduring paradigm shift towards the proactive growth of equity, inclusion, and culturally responsive leadership throughout every level of the organization. In terms of policy change, schools and districts should set a clear framework to implement mandatory and ongoing process of commitment for self-reflection, engagement in culturally relevant professional

development, recruitment policies explicitly aimed to increase and retain the representation of minoritized leaders. Additionally, schools and districts could develop decision-making processes that include ongoing engagement with the local community to ensure that curricular content and administrative policies are grounded in the lived experiences, identities, and cultural heritage of all students enrolled in their institutions (Khalifa, 2020). Furthermore, school districts ought to implement policies that promote anti-oppressive classrooms and spaces, and hold the relevant stakeholders accountable in each school for promoting classrooms and spaces that are inclusive and elevate the voice of marginalized students. With these intentional policy changes, educational policymakers and administrators could set the tone and conditions for the active support and promotion of culturally responsive leadership, enabling Black school principals to purposefully use their unique position to promote equitable, affirming, and just school cultures that disrupts normalized patterns of marginalization in their schools (Khalifa, 2020).

IX. CONCLUSION

In summary, a comparative analysis of the culturally responsive leadership of Black female and male principals underscore both commonalities and specific divergences rooted in their distinct experiences and social identities. While both categories of principals have prioritized advocacy, connection-building, and uplifting students that are marginalized in traditional schooling, the reliance of Black female principals on formal mentorship and intersectional forms of advocacy contrasts with their male counterparts' use of informal and relational approaches. Persistent legacies of segregation, desegregation, affirmative action, and the recent climate against DEI-related educational policy structurally produced enduring opportunities and constraints for these leaders' ability to promote educational equity. Therefore, implicit and explicit efforts to support culturally responsive leadership in today's educational context should not only consider the differing tactics of Black male and female principals, but also work to mitigate the adverse impact of policies that constrict their opportunity structures. Committed to a focus on all students' success and equity, the leadership of Black male and female principals in schools must remain a top priority despite evolving political contexts that resist progress and promote uneven outcomes.

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