

Using the Intersectionality Theory to Explore Its Impact on the Experiences of Black Female Principals Compared to Their Male Counterparts

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Abstract: Intersectionality Theory provides a basis for understanding the influence of overlapping social identities, including race and gender, in creating distinctive experiences of disadvantage and discrimination. The objective of this paper is to review how the Intersectionality Theory explains the difference in experiences between Black female principals and their male counterparts within schools in the United States. This has been analyzed through three significant case studies, which reveal the challenges experienced by Black female principals working at the forefront of institutional hierarchies and with a high level of complexity. The paper further discusses the implications of intervention and leadership procedures regarding the experiences of Black female principals for the future in terms of policy and actions. Trends and potential changes have been identified, including legislative interventions and comprehensive policies to support Black female principals. Lastly, recommendations were provided based on research to address broader fields of interests that can inform management regarding policies and approaches to improve schools for Black female principals.

Keywords: *Feminist Theory, Standpoint Theory, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality Theory.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Intersectionality Theory, a concept connected to educational leadership, provides an understanding of how multiple social categories, like race and gender collectively create dynamics of oppression and marginalization distinct from each category considered alone. For Black female principals, this intersection allows researchers to analyze the complexities of how they are treated by exploring barriers created by their unique intersection that their male counterparts do not experience. As educational equity focus emerges, the theory provides a lens for understanding how the distinct intersection creates unique discrimination experiences for Black female principals. By revealing the distinctive experiences, this dynamic theory fosters a discussion of the system inequities based on the understanding of the principals and the opportunities presented in their careers.

II. UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

Intersectionality Theory is a theoretical framework focusing on how difference categories such as gender, race, sexuality, and class interact to form hierarchies and inequality. The term Intersectionality Theory was introduced by the legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, referring to the experience of Black women, who were discriminated against twice in the race and gender perspective (Roth, 2019). Intersectionality Theory was invented to emphasize the importance of the simultaneous and interconnected approach to social phenomena rather than addressing each dimension separately. The term appeared in the works of feminists, color activists, and Global South feminists, so this theory can be considered diverse in terms of origin, context, and intellectual background. Intersectionality Theory provides understanding of how social categories combine and morphing in time and space reveals the complexity of inequality that is impossible to perceive through an opposition of binary and dual categories (Roth, 2019).

III. KEY CONCEPTS OF INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

Intersectionality Theory is based on the concept that categorization of difference, such as race, gender, and class, function as interlocking and interconnected components, rather than single isolated attributes that influence individuals' experiences in the social world. This theory's framework emphasizes the social construction of identity as a process that occurs simultaneously and co-created through context and experience, impacting power distributions and interactions in multiple settings (McDonald, 2019). Moreover, Intersectionality Theory provides a framework to seek out systems and patterns of differentiation that result in unequal consequences due to competing or overlapping identity categories, particularly within institutions and legal systems (Al-Faham et al., 2019). Feminist approaches to organizations, such as critical frameworks like Feminist Standpoint Theory and Post-Colonial Theory have taken this foundational theory and expanded it into a global and organizational application that has reshaped how intersectionality and difference are perceived (McDonald, 2019). Intersectionality Theory not only connects multiple categories that can cause systemic discrimination; it goes beyond single axis models and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how systemic discrimination operates at the intersections of social categories.

In addition, Intersectionality Theory is especially significant for its ability to reveal the relationships between multiple identity categories, particularly how they shape each person's unique realities and create unique forms of social inequality. Framing a study through the Intersectionality lens helps researchers and activists reveal layered forms of privilege or discrimination that would otherwise remain hidden in analyses limited to a single identity category (Rutherford & Davidson, 2019). By helping practitioners identify these layered privilege and discriminatory patterns, Intersectionality Theory has contributed to social and legal reform that addresses discrimination towards members facing multiple, overlapping social locations (Carbado & Harris, 2019). Furthermore, Intersectionality Theory contributed to the re-writing of historical and disciplinary discourses by prioritizing the voices of people at the intersections of marginalized identities, and highlighting the cumulative effects of systemic racism, sexism, and other forms of exclusion. Finally, the contributions of Intersectionality Theory to the establishment of new discourses help strengthen both scholarly and activist practices against inequality and injustice by destabilizing the population categories and definitions of equality and expanding the means of social change.

IV. COMPARATIVE TREATMENT ANALYSIS

When analyzing the workplace settings of Black female principals and Black male principals, it can be seen that discrimination and bias has been systematically integrated into the fabric of institutions. The Black male principal experiences

a workplace that is rife with demands of discrimination due to his racial identity. Black female principals, however, often find themselves battling demands for discrimination at school that are not purely racial, but intersect with the demands of gender (Macias & Stephens, 2017). It is often the case that policies that govern institutions and workplace expectations not only allow for but exacerbate the discrimination findings of Black women in leadership positions once more (Macias & Stephens, 2017). Discrimination, here, emerges as a factor that combines race and gender to produce barriers that underpin the professional experiences of Black female principals. Attitudes that surround gender and racial expectations influence relationships, opportunities for professional growth, and authority among teachers and school communities. In this regard, intersectionality highlights the fact that Black female principals face unique forms of discrimination due to their intersecting identities, compared to their male counterparts (Macias & Stephens, 2017). This difference highlights the need for not only recognition and understanding but the importance of specific interventions regarding discrimination in education systems.

Furthermore, Black female principals further experience specific patterns that significantly differentiate them from their Black male counterparts and their white female counterparts. By the nature of their compounded identities, they also suffer disproportionate disadvantages. Their employment and leadership profiles, for example, show even more pronounced disparities in prospect and opportunities, with Black women encountering a far lower likelihood of attaining principal positions or other significant administrative positions relative to white female and Black male employee figures. Data shows that women of color in education constitute the least likely cohort of teachers hired to assume school leader posts, a cultural phenomenon traceable to hiring and institutional tendencies that directly and indirectly devalue their employment prospects (Fuller et al., 2019). Their preparation programs also fail to render significant assistance in this regard, as ineffective programs cannot meaningfully mitigate entrenched inequity patterns. The need thus arises to consider how the institutional and personal barriers that shape Black women's leadership experiences are distinctive in their intricacies (Fuller et al., 2019).

➤ *Black Female Principals' Experiences*

Black female principals have to grapple with lived experiences in which the climate of intersectional racial and gender bias continue pervade the realities of educational leadership settings. Not only are these leaders precariously situated within a professional context in which their competence is often called into question along racial and gendered lines but the result is a broader context in which other professionals and stakeholders continue to diminish their authority as school leaders. In this regard, descriptive studies have uncovered the nuanced experiences of Black female principals detailing greater lack in access to opportunities for professional advancement as well as unreliable support from

peer institutional leaders who may unwittingly reinforce stereotypical beliefs about who is deemed appropriate to hold such leadership positions (Crawford, 2022). Simultaneously, these principals have described feeling profoundly subjected to the expectations incumbent in being held accountable for their decision-making as school leaders thereby creating both a burden in having to continuously validate themselves while also being required to build resilience against both implicit and explicit racist and sexist sentiments. Ultimately, the intersectionality of their racial and gender identities informs both the lived experiences of Black female principals and the subsequent obstacles defining their everyday realities in school contexts (Crawford, 2022).

Moreover, the psychological and professional consequences that arise from intersecting racial and gender barriers can be particularly pronounced in the cases of Black female principals, who often find themselves feeling socially isolated due to a lack of access to informal career networks or mentorship and sponsorship opportunities available to the rest of their colleagues. Structural mentorship deficits can also exacerbate career inequities by resulting in underdeveloped professional networks; additionally, such deficits can contribute to perceptions of institutional isolation on the part of professionals. The implications of these intersectional stressors have been explored in psychological studies, including research examining the intersectional dynamics of experiences that impact the work and mental health of women of color in people of color in leadership roles (Rutherford & Davidson, 2019). As the work of feminist psychologists has revealed, these outcomes are not the result of random chance; exist at the intersection of systemic oppression that consistently devalues and fails to support the work of Black female principals (Rutherford & Davidson, 2019).

➤ *Black Male Principals' Experiences*

Black male principals, as opposed to their Black female counterparts, generally experience issues relating to race, instead of intersectionality concerning race and gender. Their leadership style is influenced by stereotypes embedded into societal beliefs, which reflect on other people's reception of their work and performance in schools. Black male principals reportedly use a unique ethic of "caring" in terms of their leadership approach, as they strive to reverse stereotypes and create supportive environments that are relationally-driven (Bass, 2019). However, due to the stereotypes concerning Black masculinity, other people fail to recognize the principles of this ethic of caring and use it as a basis for logical assumptions. As such, even though Black male principals experience discrimination and barriers in terms of systemic oppression, they are not based on gender, which can potentially influence both similarities and differences in their experience (Bass, 2019).

On the other hand, the barriers preventing Black female principals from accessing leadership positions involve different elements and are of a different nature than those experienced by

their male peers. According to national survey data, compared to Black male principals, Black female principals are less likely to have held an athletic coach position, which is common among Black male principals, and can affect future employment opportunities in schools (Cheng et al., 2023). Besides, workloads of Black female principals are more oriented towards parent and community engagement, and curriculum and teaching which refer to gender-based expectations of institutional representation and teaching leadership. These common features about these characteristics shared by the Black male principals in their leadership positions also involve the consequences of racial discrimination on their access to leadership positions. However, due to the intersection of the Black female principal's characteristics, they are more disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts because their careers are limited due to the demands for more relationship labor and the limited career path. These features reveal how the barriers access and opportunities in Black women face in their leadership positions are different from their male peers, although both are Black principals (Cheng et al., 2023).

➤ *Case Studies in Practice*

A synthesis of empirical literature that investigates Black women principals' experiences in the school setting challenges their unique response to intersectionality's complexities. One case study explores the experiences of four Black women who operate in senior-level administrative positions in schools across the United States. The case study reveals the race and gender intersectionalities that influence the participants' narratives of leadership pathways (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021). The described participants are not only consistently underrepresented in their workplaces, but also employ the elements of social justice leadership to address the inequalities, marginalization, and discrimination they encounter in trying to build equitable and friendly school environments. The case studies based on the lived experiences of their participants underline the resilience Black women need to demonstrate in order to remain in educational institutions characterized by inequitable structures and relationships. In addition, the study narratives capture the participants' lived experiences and express the urgency of further investigation focused on the leadership experiences particular to Black women, thereby enhancing Intersectionality Theory's relevance for academic and practical purposes in research and policy analysis (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021).

In particular, Bennett's narrative study highlights how a Black female principal experienced the intersectionality as an obstruction and a resilience mechanism in her professional context. Through repeated episodes of racism and sexism, the principal revealed that her voice and input in the key decision-making arenas were often undervalued. The principal established her own intersectional practices to overcome this experience and emphasized her agency, fostering the collaboration between the underrepresented staff and developing the inclusive schooling experience that resisted

dominant practices based on institutional discrimination (Bennett, 2024). The importance of intersectionality and its relevant experiences in this case is evident through the fact that the Black female principal was influenced by both her professional identities – race and gender – rather than either one of them influencing her experience. For this reason, narrative inquiry as a methodology that aimed towards recording the Black female principal's voice is essential, as it promotes the awareness of her experience and the challenges Black female principals face in schools that potentially influence the understanding of their leadership practices (Bennett, 2024).

➤ *Challenges Faced by Black Female Principals*

The barriers facing Black female principals, however, continue to be multi-layered and embedded within systems of school leadership practice. At the core of the issues highlighted by the data include micro-aggressions as they continue to share similar experiences of gendered racism in hiring and promotion situations that often challenged their credibility and inclusion in the discourse (Weiner et al., 2022). Moreover, the severity of a representative gap at the highest level of leadership means that Black female principals often find themselves at a loss of further access to connected opportunities in these significant platforms for networking and mentorship that are often monopolized by outsiders. In addition, systemic barriers also exist within the interview and selection processes as trivial and clichéd inquiries often overshadow an in-depth interrogation of leadership potential (Weiner et al., 2022). Finally, opaque and disconnected processes surrounding district-level decision further exploit the obstacles necessary in achieving administrative justice, creating an exclusionary process for the advancement of Black women into educational leadership roles.

Furthermore, the systemic nature of these challenges is amplified by the consequences on Black female principal health, professional success, and job performance. The regular presence of micro-aggressions and an absence of relevant professional networks limit the application of transformational leadership capacities, which negatively affects school change initiatives (Lomotey, 2019). This job context may diminish both self-efficacy and job satisfaction, wherein the presence of exclusionary practices leads to an increased psychological and emotional toll. The interaction of spiritual, racial, and gendered identities may serve as a protective factor for some, but are not all-encompassing in their ability to mitigate the deleterious effects of barriers on health and professional outcomes. As evidenced by qualitative research, the intersectionality of compounding factors limits upward mobility while also creating a need for individualized strategies to carry on in the face of adversity (Lomotey, 2019).

➤ *Success Stories and Overcoming Barriers*

Primarily, Black female principals' achievements who have overcome intersectionality barriers may provide evidence on both the difficulties and adaptive mechanisms underlying such leaders' practices. Their leadership styles are based on the concept of intertwined racial and gendered identities, whereby

transformational leadership is effectively used to build positive learning environments and enhance academic performance among Black students. Existing inquiries suggest that spirituality alongside a profound understanding of cultural obligations, as well as the capability to utilize Black Feminist Thought and Critical Race Theory, have assisted successful Black female principals to deal with the intricate institutional environment (Lomotey, 2019). Qualitative methodological framework has been employed in several cases to discover how Black female principals utilized their personal experience in decision-making and enhancing systematic staff cooperation and advocacy within the schools. The implications of their success extend to the challenge of existing leadership stereotypes alongside the emergence of perspectives that stress the vital importance of systemic changes aimed at ensuring long-term leadership success among women of color (Lomotey, 2019).

Moreover, strategies for Black female principals to navigate compounded challenges in educational leadership correlate with the existence of effective support systems and deliberate self-advocacy. The intentionality of obtaining formal mentorship contributed significantly to the development of such educational leaders by providing them with support, reaffirmation, and access to information and resources that mitigated the established gender stereotypes and systemic barriers they encountered (Bodalina & Mestry, 2020). Further building resilience through commitment and self-advocacy empowered Black female principals to thrive despite the institutional pressures associated with patriarchal leadership and societal expectations that constrained them in the workplace. The conclusions derived from these findings emphasize the importance of the development of committed peer networks and formal mentorship programs designed to address the emerging challenges of women of color in educational leadership. Based on these insights, educational leaders of the future should prioritize the implementation of inclusive mentoring and resilience-based leadership approaches to serve as a critical mechanism for addressing persisting disparities in educational institutions and facilitating diverse leadership at all levels of the organization (Bodalina & Mestry, 2020).

V. FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The implications of the research on the intersectional treatment of the Black female principals suggest important changes for the future of educational leadership and the overall development of school administration. As the schools evolve in their diversity along multiple vectors, such as race, ethnicity, language, and other identities, leadership not only need to recognize this increasing complexity in their communities (Scanlan & Theoharis, 2020). The growing pluralism means that the demands increase for the leaders and policy-makers, who are tasked with managing an array of interests and voices, promoting inclusivity and creating place-based responses that work for the disadvantaged groups, such as female minorities.

To avoid perpetuating existing inequalities and disparities, the establishment of institutional culture that actively promotes social-justice leadership in schools becomes increasingly important. Moreover, the highlighted trends also suggest that intersectionality and its implications for the treatment of marginalized groups entering educational environments should become part and parcel of the preparation of leaders, design of policies and everyday administrative practices to ensure sustain the results of equitable practices in terms of their outcomes in the schools with increasingly diverse student bodies (Scanlan & Theoharis, 2020).

➤ *Potential Trends and Developments*

As could be predicted based on the changes and developments within society, emerging trends in school leadership indicate that the status of Black female principals will change in accordance with the changes in the school leadership demographics and sociopolitical developments. A declining division of white male administrators and the increasing number of women of color among school leaders may affect the existing frameworks and expectations in the system (Fuller et al., 2019). Greater consciousness of the intersectional barriers can lead educational policymakers and advocates to address targeted reforms that will focus on improving opportunities and representation for Black female principals and assistant principals. While some progress has been recorded, women of color – particularly Black females – have the worst chances of being appointed to leadership positions, meaning that the historical gap needs more attention and interventions (Fuller et al., 2019). In the years to come, the progress achieved through policies relies on the genuineness of institutional promises and the continued efforts of advocacy for intersectional inequalities in education leadership positions.

Therefore, amplifying the recognition of intersectionality in educational leadership may provide an opportunity for the transformation of the recruitment, retention and promotion practices targeting the Black female principals. If educational institutions recognize the intersections of race, gender, and class on the leadership trajectories, they may be able to create selection and supportive frameworks that respond more closely to the unique disadvantages that women of color experience (Showunmi, 2020). An intersectional approach may encourage school districts to rethink the standards their use to judge the prospects for leadership and to identify the likelihood that implicit bias undermines the progress of Black females. Furthermore, the improved understanding of the intersectional identities heightens the ability to develop mentorship and career development programs that serve the specific needs of Black women in leadership positions – contributing to a higher retention rate. The suggested intersectional framework may then not only enable the Black female leaders to thrive but also lead to more diversely responsive leadership within the educational institutions by addressing the mechanisms behind the entrenched inequality (Showunmi, 2020).

➤ *Impact on Policy and Practice*

As a result, intersectional analysis can support educational policy and practice challenges that are pivotal to advancing equity and inclusion efforts in schools. By engaging in a systematic recognition of the interconnectedness of race and gender to professional experiences and leadership impacts, policymakers can devise strategies that advance positive and targeted solutions to the challenges associated with issues faced by principals who are Black women. Quantitative evidence indicates that schools with Black women principals are positively correlated with collective teacher efficacy, as well as student achievement, pointing to the potential for inclusive policies around selecting and retaining school leaders to have a positive impact across the school (Jang & Alexander, 2022). In addition, professional learning and assessment processes that draw on intersectionality may assist in surfacing and overcome the biases that often act to impede the progression of women of color. Through engagement with intersectionality within the educational policy domain, policymakers may create approaches that are more aligned with their administrative leaders' various realities and experiences, which are integral to the long-term, impactful progression of work connected to equitable school settings (Jang & Alexander, 2022).

In this regard, schools and the district may further the intersectional consciousness through infusing the ideas of difference and simultaneous identity experiences into the preparation and evaluation procedures of school leadership. For this purpose, the training modules should be institutionalized within the leadership preparation frameworks that would put the relationship among race, gender, and other socially constructed identities in the forefront to help the school leadership identify various intersecting forms of inequality as possible (McDonald, 2019). Moreover, the established leadership preparation frameworks should include critical theories, such as Feminist Standpoint and Post-Colonial theories to allow the leaders comprehend the effect of the structural power relations on the organizations. Finally, creating collaborative learning communities and ongoing discussions across the district may help the schools exchange ideas regarding intersectional consciousness to have them integrated into the inclusive organizational culture. In other words, intersectional consciousness should be a priority during the leadership preparation and evaluation procedures whereby the district may have the desired culturally responsive leaders to promote equitable conditions among the stakeholders (McDonald, 2019).

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Structural and policy changes are key recommendations to address the issues of providing equal opportunity for Black female principals in educational settings. Educational institutions should assess their leadership platforms and hiring practices and analyze them through the lens of social justice leadership theory to identify barriers that Black women face during recruitment and selection process (Johnson &

Fournillier, 2021). The development of mentorship and peer-support programs might counterbalance the lack of accessible options for Black female leaders to obtain guidance and solidarity. Educational districts and boards should implement policies encouraging frequent equity audits and transparent anti-bias training for stakeholders involved in the hiring, assessing, and promotion of Black female principals. Based on research findings that have studied the experiences and resilience of Black female principals, these recommendations will allow educational institutions to promote a more diverse and inclusive environment in their leadership processes (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021).

VII. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the analysis provided in this research paper illustrates that Intersectionality Theory must be applied to understand the specific barriers faced by Black female principals in their educational leadership roles. By placing their role at the intersection of race and gender, it becomes possible to see how the unique forms of discrimination experienced by this group manifest on the levels of institutional policy and day-to-day interactions in the workplace. In particular, moving beyond mere comparison helps identify significant barriers that are unique to Black women and that shape the approach they use to secure effectiveness in their role. By focusing on intersectionality, it becomes possible to see that educational institutions, policymakers, and administrators must focus on reforms addressing specific barriers and dismantling systemic obstacles, rather than solely pursuing broad policies and rhetoric. The action must continue to be taken to ensure that the immediate and future progress towards equity in school leadership is both relevant in light of the specific intersectional disadvantage and secure against the threat of inequality.

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