Leadership and intersectionality: Constructions of successful leadership among Black women school principals in three different contexts

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Abstract

Using intersectionality theory, the paper presents constructions of successful leadership by three Black women school principals in three different contexts: England, South Africa and the United States. The paper is premised on the overall shortage of the literature on Black women in educational leadership, which leaves Black women's experiences on the periphery even in contexts where they are in the majority. Through a life-history approach, we interviewed three Black women leaders on their experiences of gender and race in constructing success in leadership and used intersectionality theory to analyse their accounts. Our analysis suggests that Black women leaders' constructions of success are shaped by: overcoming barriers of their own racialised and gendered histories to being in a position where they can lead in providing an education for their Black communities, where they are able to inspire a younger generation of women and to practice leadership that is inclusive, fair and socially just. We conclude with a range of implications for the scholarship of intersectionality and educational leadership practice.

Key words: *intersectionality; leadership; Black women; gender; race*

Introduction

As a field of research, women in leadership has increasingly received attention over the last four decades. From the works of Schmuck (1980), Shakeshaft (1989), Hall (1996), Blackmore (1999), Coleman (2003), we note the bias towards white middle class women as the mainstream group of women from the west, and less focus of differences between different groups of women, and particularly women of colour. The focus on Black women emerged in the United States with the political movement on black feminist thought, driven by hooks (1989) and Hill-Collins' (2000) challenge on white feminism. In this work, Hill-Collins' commitment to give voice to black women recognised the interlocking nature of the systems of oppression of racism and sexism, which made the experiences and social positions of Black African-American women leaders unique. Her additional focus on social class as a compounding system of oppression contributing to the marginalisation of Black women was confirmed earlier in hooks' (1989: 194) assertion that "even when black women are able to advance professionally and acquire a degree of economic self-sufficiency, it is in the social realm that racist and gendered stereotypes are continually used as ways of defining black women's identity and behavior".

Indeed the ensuing literature on Black women in educational leadership highlights the disproportionate predominance of Black women in predominantly Black and challenging schools (Murtadha and Watts, 2005; Bloom and Elandson, 2003; Newcomb and Niemer, 2015; Edge, Descourse and Oxley, 2017; Phendla, 2008; Schmidt and Mestry, 2015; Johnson and Campbell-Stephens, 2013), arguably a result of the "social realm" of racism affecting Black women's opportunities.

In this paper we contribute to the literature documenting experiences of Black women leaders' by examining these experiences across different cultures. Against the backdrop of different geopolitical and sociohistorical contexts and their impact on current societies, we use intersectionality theory (Crenshaw 1991) to bring the experiences of the marginalised Black women leaders in the three different contexts (South Africa, England and the United States) to the fore. Primarily, we analyse how black women as a marginalised group construct success and successful leadership in education in the three different contexts. Murtadha and Watts (2005) argued that the missing voices of black female leaders together with the lack of adequate understanding of the contexts in which leadership has been or is successful, constrain our ability to contribute to ways that improve schooling experiences and advance lives in communities that are poor and disadvantaged. Without these black leadership narratives, it becomes increasingly difficult to build schools and provide education that responds to the lives and needs of black children, their families and their communities (Murtadha and Watts, 2005: 598) and how they can be liberated (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Understanding Black women's stories of success serve as valuable resources in framing problems and producing viable strategies for school improvement (Murtadha and Watts, 2005).

Leadership and intersectionality

Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) to express the multi-layered forms of discrimination experienced by women while being black. In its original sense, intersectionality as a theoretical lens addresses the gaps exposed by feminist and anti-racist dialogues in the experiences and struggles (for empowerment) of "women of color" (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw argued that by looking at gender and race separately, legal frameworks tend to ignore the experiences of women who are black. Indeed Hill Collins' (2000) challenge to white feminism was based on its negligence of the experiences of African-American women. In stressing the significance of black feminist thought, she argued that difference should be conceptualized in a manner that exposed the nature of interlocking inequalities of race, class

and gender. Similarly, the work of Bryan, Dadzi and Scafe (1985) recognized the failure of white feminists to seriously address women's issues that concerned race and class as injustice to the oppression of Black British women. Intersectionality has since gained momentum as it acknowledges the interlocking nature of not only racism and sexism but a range of other social identities, including social class, and the effect their interaction has on the lives of black women and other marginalised groups (McCall, 2005).

As central tenets of intersectionality, Smooth (2010) has emphasised *(i)* its historical institution and ability to cut across geographical spaces and *(ii)* its ability to recognise the coexistence of oppression and privilege, or the simultaneous experience of advantages and disadvantages related to the different social class groups (Richardson and Loubier, 2008). Smooth (2010) argued that in the larger scheme of things, women leaders by virtue of their authority and power, are privileged individuals. However, these women do experience marginalisation since, despite the power they hold, they are often "beholden to the trappings of marginialisation within their organisations" (p. xx; hooks, 1989). These elements are particularly relevant for our analysis in this paper as we examine lived experiences of Black women across various geographical locations that have similar historical legacies. As Smooth (2010) posits, the formation of identities and organisation of power structures vary according to locations in which they are studied. It is this variation that we are interested in comparing, as a way of evaluating marginalisation and privilege within the context of particular histories, socio-political and economic opportunities.

Our use of intersectionality is found particularly useful in this analysis as it enables analysis "within, through and across cultural differences" (Brah and Phoenix, 2004: 78), while it remains true to "cultural specificities". Brah and Phoenix argue that this aspect of intersectionality, "encourages each feminist scholar to engage critically with her own assumptions in the interests of reflexive, critical, and accountable feminist inquiry" (Davis, 2008: 79).

Methodology

Using intersectionality as a theoretical framework leads directly into using it as a method of analysis and informing the research design. However, the literature is still scant on intersectional methodology, particularly as it concerns the extent to which we are able to adequately measure what we claim to be measuring (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). We therefore found life history narrative as a social constructivist approach appropriate to study the lives and understand the experiences of the Black women as marginalized groups on the one hand,

together with structural mechanisms and institutional arrangements that shape these experiences on the other hand. By studying their lives within their own contextual backgrounds, we acknowledge that "the context of the lived experience of black women, ... provides us with a deeper understanding of both structural and political intersectionality" (Jordan-Zachery, 2007: 261), as it allows us to understand how the participants experienced intersectionality. Through the life-history interview method, we thus, interviewed the three Black women leaders following a set of topics that informed the interviews, allowing personal narratives to emerge.

Research sites

The three research sites involved in the study are England, South Africa and the United States of America (USA), chosen on the basis of the different research collaborators' locations and interests as well as the countries' shared legacy of racial discrimination and contemporary racism. We were aware of the vast differences in geographical, economic, socio-political and cultural terms between the countries, with two western and highly developed countries against one developing country. However, such comparative analysis as premised on a shared legacy of the post-slavery, post-colonial and post-apartheid eras, was deemed necessary and timely in the wake of current political developments including a continuation of contemporary racism. This scholarship is thus believed to advance Black women's ways of knowing and has significant implications for policy in their respective contexts and globally. We acknowledge further, the differences in the conception of "Blackness" in the participating countries. 'Blackness' is in this context used as a representation of both "Western and non-Western contexts" (Alabi, 2005: 16), where Black is African in the South African context; Black and Global Majority/Black and Minority Ethnicity (BGM/BME) in England; and African American in the USA. We provide the flexibility for these differences to accommodate Blackness as used and understood in each particular context.

Positionality and interviewing

In view of the insider-outsider debates in feminist research (Riessman, 1991, Beoku-Betts, 1994), we find it prudent to be reflexive about our approach as an attempt to alleviate some of methodological dilemmas concerning the right to knowledge. While the researchers were all women and one of the researchers was black, none of us claim congruity between ourselves, as researchers and the participants. In fact, previous scholars argued that, sometimes, even blackness (Beoku-Betts, 1994) as is being a woman (Riessman, 1991) is not enough as

there are other more subtle cultural nuances that the researcher may not share with the participants.

Thus, while researching a familiar terrain wherein racial and/or gender congruity exists can aid the collaboration in both the narrative process and the interpretation of the participants' story in feminist research, congruity will not necessarily legitimize the illegitimacy of the researcher's status. We subscribe to the notion of 'giving voice' to those who are in positions of oppression (Hancock, 2007), and in privileging a political and social standpoint that moves experiences of marginalized groups "from margin to center" of theorizing regardless of their own belonging (Choo and Ferree, 2010:132). After all, Reissman (1991: 234) acknowledged that "perfect congruity" between the researcher and participants is "rarely possible". We ensured mutual trust by engaging with different kinds of "self-disclosure" (Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker, 2002) before the interviews, which created rapport and enabled participants to know a little more about us. Although self-disclosure may be a constructive gesture of reciprocity, we were conscious of Zinn's (1979: 218) contention that "gestures of reciprocity" do not in and by themselves change unequal power relations between the researchers and the researched. However, adopting a reciprocal relationship based on mutual trust enables us to be reflexive on our positionality and in taking the "political responsibility" to speak for those we represent [the Black women leaders]. Problems posed by our 'outsiderness' serve to "compel us to carry out our research with ethical and intellectual integrity" (Zinn, 1979: 218).

Data analysis and reporting

By way of analysis, interviews were transcribed and each transcript read, re-read and coded with emerging themes of a pupil-centred approach to leadership; a focus on the 'holistic' development of children; and positive role modelling. These themes are demonstrated fully below. Each of the three stories was written up using pseudonyms in reporting on the stories of the women principals, but their stories remain actual constructions of what they shared with us. Each researcher followed the ethical approval protocols of their own institution and we have used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. For purposes of a nuanced analysis in this paper three interviews were analysed. These were selected specifically because these women described working class origins and their achievement of social mobility. For the purposes of this paper we see social class in terms of access to forms of capital i.e. economic, cultural and social (Bourdieu, 1986) that positions these women in particular positions in the fields of education and educational leadership (Fuller, 2013; Thomson, 2017). Each has crossed boundaries in the achievement of headship.

Who are the Black women leaders?

In her late 30s, *Nicola* described herself as a "triple whammy". She was 'too young, too female and too Black' to be a headteacher in a context where only 3% of BME women held headship positions. She was heading a mixed secondary school with 80% BME children half of whom spoke English as an Additional Language. As a Black British child of immigrant parents, she grew up in a deprived white area with limited resources and she says she always knew she wanted to be a teacher from a young age. *Molly* was a Black woman who grew up in the heart of apartheid South Africa, where life opportunities were limited for Black people. She was a child of the migrant labour system with parents who had come from neighbouring countries to South Africa to work. At 60 something, she was in her third principalship in a large township secondary school ravaged by poverty and substance abuse. *Kay,* an African-American woman in her 50s, grew up in foster care, as her own parents were troubled with the life of drugs, crime and prison. She headed an economically-disadvantaged primary school where the majority of children were served by a nationally-subsidized nutrition programme and had a non-English speaking background.

Findings: what successful leadership means

The analysis brings to the fore each of the women's constructions of success and successful leadership and how they are shaped by the intersection of race, gender and class in their own unique contexts, but also collectively. The three women leaders' construction of successful leadership is along the lines of leadership that is pupil-centred in its priorities that realise students' achievement, focus on the holistic development of a child and provide positive role modelling for students.

Pupil-centred approach to leadership

For Nicola, successful school leadership was about creating a team that has a common purpose towards students' outcomes and that is

> *"all focused on wanting the best and doing whatever it takes to get the best for those groups of students year-in, year-out, with all the difficulties, with everything that will be presented to you, and to, as a team, pull together to achieve for those young people and for those young people ultimately to achieve…"*

In this extract Nicola mentions 'achieve' four times in relation to students' outcomes. This school-wide academic success is realised when students have achieved, suggesting a collective construction of success within a collaborative style of leadership, also seen with the Black women in Bloom and Elandson's (2003) study. In this collective effort, Nicola's critical consciousness ensured values of justice and fairness were at the forefront of her leadership, where she questioned policies and practices that carried unfair advantage and she was concerned about the acquisition of privilege. For her, successful leadership is achieved when;

> *"the young people that you produce feel whole, feel they can go on, make those steps whatever that is, whether it's further education, apprenticeships, whatever that is, they are happy to go on and do ...."*

These utterances are underpinned by the desire to do what is right for the pupil, which Nicola captures again in emphasising the importance of motherhood. Her son and husband visited the school and she takes time out to attend her son's assemblies. Likewise, she allows parents on her staff to attend their children's significant events. By modelling balanced leadership she hoped others would see it was possible to be a mother and to lead at the same time, and that "we can work a way through [as] ... life happens".

'Developing a holistic child'

A similar approach to pupil-centredness is espoused in <u>Molly's</u> instructional support, wherein her involvement in learners' work and her hands-on nature and her engagement with the community serve as key factors that determine her success as a leader. She says "*a lot of things go wrong when you are not hands-on*". Her weekly routine involves monitoring and checking learners' books to see what work they have done. Although Molly exhibits a managerial instructional leadership modus operandi in her hands-on approach with pupils' work, she is not driven by results. Ironically, the focus on results is what creates a tension between her and the education officials, whose construction of "*success is through end of final year results*". For her, success is producing,

> *"a self-disciplined, hardworking, loyal person that I can present to society. These are people that would take their society out of poverty which characterise today's society".*

And Molly sees bridging the poverty gap as the role education should play, rather than just focusing on "*results and figures*". Successful leadership is in this sense defined in terms of **"***developing a holistic child - what the learner becomes at the end of his or her schooling, whether he or she [has] achieved a good grade or not*". Murtadha and Watts (2005) observed

this commitment to improving lives of people at the very core of Black African American principals.

In her previous and current principalships, all in Black schools within struggling communities, success for her entails *"bringing everybody on board"* – a collective approach she refers to as a little "black box" of ideas that helped her to overcome being called *"a small girl who does not know what she is doing"*. In her previous headship she brought parents on board by teaching female parents how to crochet and earned a great deal of respect. Molly believes that appreciating and caring for her staff, ensures success in school leadership because people like to be acknowledged and appreciated and leads to adopting a holistic approach that does not only focus on the academics:

> *"I normally do not only talk about academic things, but I ask even about their families, I want to know about their children. They ask ma'm, may I go fetch my child's report – I give permission. When she comes I say how is the child, did she pass and I find that it shows you look at them as human beings, not only as workers".*

The care, empathy, compassion and emotional intelligence she displays, resembles Nicola's balanced view of leadership, which Black women principals have been found to possess while "navigating difficult circumstances to bring about change" (Reed, 2012: 42).

Positive role modelling

As for Kay, success is also not only constructed in terms of what she has achieved as a principal, but also in terms of the impact her achievement has on others, and particularly the children. Her transformational approach is seen in her recognition of the significance of her achievement and the impact it has on the pupils.

> *"I am the only professional woman my students see. We've evolved from nurses and teachers, nannies and housekeepers. It's important that girls see us in positions of power."*

Improving the instructional programme for the school is at the centre of her focus and this is where she often encounters microaggressions of sexism where she is sometimes referred to as "princess" when demanding what is due to the children. The uniqueness of her situation is in what she regards as sabotage from fellow African-American women. Kay constructs leadership success in terms of the positive role modeling she provides for younger women and girls. She is not alone in this, as Nicola and Molly also believe in impacting the lives of younger women and girls. In this sense, gender and race have a huge significance as participants believe that being a Black woman has a positive impact on their leadership as they serve as role models for

black girls and women. They have all worked in disadvantaged Black schools and are passionate about demonstrating that success is possible for the young women and girls similar to them as Coleman and Campbell-Stephens (2010) also established. The dual pressure to serve as a role model and to represent their race was noted in Mitchell (1994) but these women seem to embrace it. This may however, need further investigation and unpicking.

Discussion: the intersection of gender, race and class

A striking commonality among the three Black women leaders was that they all came from working class families, impacting their cultural, financial and social capital access, social networks and career ambitions. Schmidt and Mestry (2015) argue that capital is a powerful dimension of socioeconomic status, accounting for the way intersections of race, class and gender benefit networking opportunities, advancement in education and cultural knowledge. The influence of the women's background played a significant role on their choice of career and the type of leaders they have become. At the heart of success for these three Black women is leadership that strives to serve pupils in socially just ways. They have worked in schools where the majority of children were predominantly Black and poor, arguably as a result of their own poor background as Black people. There is an immediate intersection of race and social class, which manifests in the women's childhood and adult life in terms of their identities and environments in which they work. Recounting their experiences makes these intersections stark; as although they have escaped the poverty of their own childhood circumstances, and were leading 'middle class' life styles as professionals (privilege), whether by design or default, their gender, race and social class still arguably determined their workplace environment, continuing the reproduction of their marginalisation as black women (oppression). These social identities of race and social class are then compounded by the gendered and sexist employment circumstances, wherein they find themselves in schools that 'fit their profile'. For these women heading disadvantaged schools in Black communities may not be a choice, but a result of their own status and the employment opportunities it gives them. This intersection is as a direct result of their social positioning (author) and a unique experience to Black women. While BGM school leaders in Coleman and Campbell-Stephens (2010) sought working with "the community" schools as a fast track to promotion, we see this 'ghettoization' (Wilson, Powney, Hall and Davidson, 2006) as a form of structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991: 1245) that may be experienced differently by white women leaders. We argue that the empowered position of leadership, which affords these women the opportunity and ability to serve as role models to younger Black women, and influence and shape 'their own' Black communities, is

packaged with both privilege and oppression - an analysis made possible by an intersectionality. That it is a common ground shared across the three women leaders in their respective geographical spaces, is a significant finding on a cross-cultural level.

While the study demonstrates that Nicola, Molly and Kay as Black women principals across three different countries are "living with the challenges of [class], race and gender" (Reed, 2012), their constructions of success were also characterised by variation. In a previous analysis we highlight the nature of self-drive and self-determination that these women espoused in breaking out of the powerful structures of oppression in their own childhood, thereby defining their success and "demonstrating their exercise of agency" (Moorosi, Fuller and Reilly, 2017: 90). Success is by definition a positive construct that would indicate privilege, however, these women's position of privilege afforded to them by attainment of headship, is compounded by sexist and racist forms of oppression further intersecting with social class. They attained the principalship under different circumstances, wherein no training was provided, as in the case of who Molly learnt principalship on the job, while Nicola and Kay benefitted from preparation programmes as mandated in their respective contexts. While Molly's label as a little girl who "does not know what she was doing" was blatantly sexist, her situation was exacerbated by poor role socialisation and lack of preparation. Her agency comes to the fore, where she taps into her own "black box" to navigate a difficult terrain. As she gets older in the profession, her age, experience and familiarity with context and system work to her benefit. Nicola's "triple whammy" is a classic intersectionality case of oppression on multiple layers compounded by contextual issues: Only 3% of headships were held by BME women in England and her daily experience of racial and sexist microaggressions (Sue, 2010; Delgado and Stefancic, 2001) exist in her current workplace. Her dismissal of these as "ridiculous" demonstrates resistance but as a Generation X leader in an urban setting (Edge et al, 2017) her situation calls for a different set of leadership development implications. Kay's experience of internal sabotage from fellow African American women illustrates a fascinating dynamic of structural intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) linked to historic slavery mentality wherein low self-esteem amongst fellow Black women is the biggest impediment to successful leadership.

Implications

Four implications arise from this investigation. Two address the scholarship of intersectionality and Black women in leadership and two address practitioners of educational leadership. First, we must continue to unpack and deepen our understanding in all three contexts of the effects

of the historical struggle on the current practices of leadership, as well as the mentalities and attitudes that inform them. Second, we need to expand on this research to address some of the emerging issues we have noted. Third, leadership preparation programs and ongoing leadership development require reflection and revision in each of our countries. Finally, we must address our findings with recommendations for the schools and systems these women serve.

Deepening the Analysis

We recognize that key constructions about successful leadership for these Black women are informed by their own gendered, racialised and classed background. These categories have simultaneously shaped the type of leaders the Black women have become; the type of leaders who prioritise a 'holistic' development of the child and care about providing positive role modelling for children who may not have much exposure to success in their communities. We find this depiction distinctive to the lives of Black women leaders, but acknowledge it needs further unpicking. From our work, we are constructing new theories that can underlie the unique nature of how broad intersections look when viewed through the lens of Black women in the leadership of schools. The theories gain more clarity for us as we continue to gather data from a growing group of participants.

Expanding the Intersections

While we conceptualized our study in terms of gender and race intersections, class emerged intersecting with gender and race in shaping the lives of the Black women leaders in the three contexts. Other intersecting aspects of identity such as age, ethnicity and culture could be traced, suggesting the need to open up parameters of the intersectional analysis. We have also identified three, recurring historical intersections related to the impact racism plays in our three countries, namely, how slavery, apartheid, and colonialism still affect women's understanding of themselves as Black female leaders in 21st century schools. While discussion of racism comes with many obstacles, we believe the time has come to address it unflinchingly and how it affects our broader global society.

Leadership Preparation and Ongoing Leadership Development

By and large, school leadership preparation in South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States is standards-based, focusing on leadership and management-related dispositions

and skills, and includes little, if any, discussion on the impact of gender and race. While more research exists to suggest how much gender and race do affect organizational dynamics and the children these women serve, our countries have been slow to respond to the inclusion of these topics within leadership preparation. More specifically, leadership preparation and development do not address how gender and race affect these women's views of pupil-centred leadership approaches and capitalize on these strengths. Ongoing leadership development would likewise benefit from an audit to address many of the issues we raise here.

Designing Approaches

Through our work, we must consider with practitioners how our findings can affect authentic school change in our three countries. One example would be the development of an audit that organizations could use to conduct, to assess the strengths, growth areas, and opportunities that arise from understanding the impact Black women leaders have on their organizations. In the realm of human capital, organizational analysis may also provide insight into recruitment and retention of Black women principals within schools, which remains a significant problem among our three countries.

Conclusion

We recognize through our work that we are disrupting centuries of assumptions and beliefs about Black women and uncovering new ways of supporting these women as leaders while benefitting from the unique perspectives they bring to leadership. Our commitment to unpack and reframe how intersections of gender, race and class affect the black women principals is also a commitment to recognizing that the greatest beneficiaries of this work are future generations.

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