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Black Women and the Politics of Education

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Abstract

This autoethnographic study sought to address how to retain Black teachers by examining how principals' leadership styles, workplace climate, and advancement opportunities impacted the author's decision to remain in the teaching profession. Using intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought as theoretical lenses, she self-reflexively explored her lived experiences in public education in vignettes. She problematized office politics as an influence on school culture and a potential source of conflict for principals to address. Situating her frustration in silence, she encourages readers to hold themselves and school leadership accountable for the microaggressions and slights that occur and encourages them to attend to the underlying biases that are present.

Key Words

autoethnography, Black feminist thought, intersectionality, school culture

Preferred Citation

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Black women are a stabilizing force for their families, communities, and society, yet they are racialized and marginalized more than any other group (White et al., 2020; White, 2023). In the American public education system, Black women historically played a prominent role in educating Black students, especially in the South prior to the Civil War (Farinde-Wu, 2018; Shipp, 2000). The benefits of Black female teachers include creating kinship relationships as othermothers, creating inclusive environments with not only same-race matches but also in advocating for all student voices in the classroom, and in helping students to navigate societal norms by explaining and helping students overcome White supremacist ideals (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; White et al., 2020). However, in recent times, Black women are underrepresented in the American teaching profession when compared to their White counterparts (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Madkins, 2011). A 2022 report from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) showed that the teacher workforce was 77% White female teachers while Black female teachers made up 6.8% of the workforce with private and public schools combined (NCES, 2023).

Politics should be understood as matters of encountering, ordering, and distribution more so than matters of interest or hegemony of the powerful (Gorur et al., 2019). Politics is about influence and relationships (Postma, 2021). Political intelligence refers to skills individuals master to curate their networks, build their brands, and handle all of the demands on their time and energy. This requires intentionality, focus, practice, being aware of language and how someone frames their reality, and not just focusing on establishing credibility through one's work, but also building the connections that can speak for someone (Postma, 2019). Black women need to understand how and where strategic relationships are built for career longevity and success.

Retaining Black teachers in public education is an additional challenge to the existing national crisis related to the teacher shortage (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017) and global issues of teacher attrition (Thomas et al., 2020). According to Farinde-Wu, Griffen, and Young (2019), although Black teachers

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enter the teaching profession at rates higher than their White counterparts, there is a Black teacher retention problem. Black teachers, both male and female, leave the profession at higher rates than any other race (Black & Rice, 2020; Nguyen & Gold, 2020). Black Women Teachers (BWT) are pushed out or forced to involuntarily exit the teacher workforce because of racial bias or stereotyping despite their need in the educational system (Farinde et al., 2016; Young & Easton-Brooks, 2020).

To understand why it is difficult to retain Black teachers, a look at the perceptions held about and by Black women teachers is needed. Griffin and Tackie (2017) assert that Black women are presumed to be irate, irresponsible, and incompetent, and that these negative perceptions adversely affect their work performance and result in the teachers' feelings that they are being pushed out of the profession. The existing literature indicates such factors as working conditions, school climate, and administrative support as primary considerations in teachers' decisions on whether to leave or stay in the teaching profession (Andrews et al., 2019; Benson et al., 2021; Campoli, 2017; Farinde et al., 2016; Hopper et al., 2022; Stanley, 2022; Sun, 2018). In addition, involuntary transfers and displacements result from school closings and school reform efforts (Royal, 2022). However, there is a gap in our understanding of how the leadership style of the principal contributes to school climate and Black teacher retention given that principals' leadership styles have been shown to affect teacher self-efficacy and school outcomes (Al-Safran et al., 2014; Maryati et al., 2020; Nir & Kranot, 2006). Illuminating how the leadership styles of principals impact BWT's decisions to leave or stay in the teaching profession can inform other practices and policies to recruit and retain Black women teachers.

Spelman (2018) suggests that Black women construct their identities around race and gender. To understand Black women's ways of knowing you must understand the multiple intersections of oppression that they experience (race, gender, color, age, sexual orientation, class, religion, and others) (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). Intersectionality and Black feminist thought provide the lenses to examine the experiences and conceptions of knowledge for this study. Black feminist thought is an overarching theory of knowledge used to comprehend Black women's individual and collective agency and struggle. Black feminist thought recognizes that race, class, and gender are interlocking systems of oppression (Collins, 1990). Findings in this study center on the role that race, age, and gender played in shaping my experiences related to achievement, engagement, and leadership roles in my work in the education field. A review of the literature follows.

Review of the Literature

Education is a powerful tool for social mobility, social change, and empowerment. Throughout the history of the United States, efforts to educate Black people have been marked by challenges, from making it illegal for enslaved people to learn or be taught, to present day inequities and disparities in educational resources available for students of color (Parker & Gillborn, 2020). The role of Black educators and their experiences cannot be overlooked. This literature review offers insight into some factors related to high teacher turnover and attrition, particularly for Black female teachers, that must be addressed.

Black Female Teachers

Black educators have long been pillars of the Black community. Prior to 1954, Black educators played an important and prominent role in the education of Black children in segregated schools as education was seen as an important step toward achieving independence, equality, and prosperity (Farinde-Wu, 2018; Green & Hebert, 2022; Tillman, 2004). Throughout the period following the Civil War, Black teachers were principally responsible for educating Black children of the South where Black communities erected schools to meet the educational needs of their children (Rucker & Jubilee, 2007). Black teachers were prepared in what were referred to as *normal schools*, which taught them curriculum and pedagogy; normal schools educated and developed Black educators to prepare future generations despite efforts by some to relegate Blacks to trade schools (Anderson, 1988). Historically Black colleges and universities would take on the charge begun by normal schools and have been responsible for preparing Black teachers more than any other entities since the end of the Reconstruction period (1865-1875) (Collins et al., 2013). However, barriers to entering the profession exist for Black teachers including financial burdens (i.e. fees), standardized testing (i.e. Praxis), and admittance to teacher residency programs, which is often

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contingent upon passing the state licensure exam (Beck, 2023).

The number of Black female teachers has declined dramatically since the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision in 1954 (Milner & Howard, 2004). Southern states anticipated the Brown decision and enacted policies to avoid racial integration, including whites-only voucher systems (Barkan, 2018). With these systems, public funds were used for white students to attend all-white private schools in addition to the leasing of unused public school properties to private schools. According to the National Association of School Boards, vouchers are "education tax dollars diverted from public schools to help subsidize private and religious schools" (2022, para. 1). Before 1954, approximately 82,000 Black teachers were responsible for educating Black children. Between 1954-1965, more than 38,000 Black teachers and administrators lost their jobs (Hudson & Holmes, 1994). According to the National Center for Education Statistics, Black women accounted for only 4.8% and Black men 1.3%, amounting to 6.1% of the 3.2 million teachers in public schools in 2021 (NCES, 2023). Black teachers, once revered and held in high regard by people in the Black community, were relegated to less prestigious jobs as school janitors or summarily dismissed following the Brown decision (Madkins, 2011). Tens of thousands of Black teachers lost their jobs as a result of the Brown decision and the effects and ramifications continue to be felt today (Fenwick, 2022).

From Reconstruction (1865-1875) to the period prior to desegregation, Black teachers were the primary educators of Black children (Hill-Jackson, 2017; Peters, 2019). The decision in Brown vs. Board of Education (1954), while hailed as a major civil rights victory, ushered in a new era in public education for Black teachers (Milner, 2006). The Supreme Court ended the separate but equal doctrine that had been the law since Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896) which allowed for separate, but equal, facilities, services, and accommodations for whites and Blacks. However, integration furthered inequality and inequity for Black students and Black teachers (Peters, 2019). More than two-thirds of Black teachers lost their teaching jobs because of integration. Schools in Black communities were closed, and White parents did not want their children taught by Black teachers, though the Black teachers often had more tenure, education, and experience than their White counterparts (Hill-Jackson, 2017). Once heralded as leaders of their communities, Black teachers became devalued, demoralized, and dehumanized when, and if, they were able to find work in education as they were overtly fired, displaced by less qualified White teachers in their schools, had their schools closed, or were not rehired in other schools (Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2021; Lutz, 2107; Thompson, 2022).

Gist and colleagues (2018) suggested that Black women teachers represent and embody who Black girls can become. They assert that Black women teachers display and enact an array of community cultural capital, that when applied in strategic and authentic ways, can navigate Black girls away from the pushout route where they are criminalized to instead push them along the route of intellectual potential via education. Black teachers proved to be good not only for Black students, but all students (Ladson-Billings & Anderson, 2020; Peters, 2020). Yet, barriers to entry in the form of high-stake exams impede many Black teachers from entering the profession, and those who are able to enter must overcome the structural barriers that exist in the form of racial stereotypes, lack of support, and ideologies of whiteness (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Elfers et al., 2022).

Efforts to increase the number of Black teachers in the educator workforce have been taking place for decades with limited success (Hill-Jackson, 2020). Teacher retention rates are low despite successful recruitment (Farinde-Wu et al., 2016/2020). Black teachers refuse to enter or leave the profession for reasons such as low salaries, other education opportunities, and alternate career pathways (Hill-Jackson, 2017). Collins and Schaaf (2020) in their study of teachers in Tennessee, found that teachers also left campuses or the profession in hopes of finding a better fit or because they received inadequate preparation or support for their school context. Additionally, they found that the more highly effective a teacher was rated, the more likely they were to remain in the profession.

Despite the growing diversity of the population within the United States, the teacher workforce remains disproportionately White and female (NCES, 2023). Although Black students comprise 15% of public school enrollment, Black teachers make up less than 7% of the public teacher workforce (NCES, 2023). Consequently, the teaching workforce in the United States is not reflective of its student population or overall demographic makeup. The disproportionate representation of Black female teachers in the teaching workforce is disconcerting given the historic role these

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individuals have played in educating Black students (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Black women teachers have been shown to be cultural brokers, othermothers, and role models for students of color (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Farinde-Wu, 2018; Samuels et al., 2021). Additionally, by sharing their cultural backgrounds and experiences, Black women teachers are able to relate to, inspire, and achieve success with Black students (Ellison, 2011; Samuels et al., 2021). Black women teachers are needed to provide positive representation and help students to reject the negative stereotypes perpetuated by society (Carrol, 2017; Samuels et al., 2020). As Milner (2006) posits, Black teachers are successful with Black students because they understand the challenges and degradation associated with being Black and work to counter them. Black women teachers also help students to deal with the stress and marginalization encountered due to racial aggression (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2014: Hancock et al., 2020). The impact of Black women teachers is tremendous, and factors that contribute to the ongoing shortage of Black women teachers must be examined. The conditions present at a school that influence the school's culture and climate are affected by the school's leadership as this has an impact on a teacher's decision to stay or leave (Hopper et al., 2022).

Leadership Styles

Leaders set the tone on campuses, and the style of leadership used has tremendous effects on teachers, students, and school communities. *Leadership* refers to the ability to mobilize and influence a group of followers for a specific purpose, motivate others to achieve goals, perform at a high level of commitment, and use minimal force (Atasoy, 2020; Bass, 1999). There is a significant relationship between leadership style, school culture, and organizational image with teacher turnover rates (Kalkan et al., 2020). Common leadership styles are transformational leadership, authoritative leadership, authentic leadership, laissez-faire leadership, transactional leadership, participative leadership, and servant leadership (Lambrecht, et al., 2022). Authentic leadership has been shown to significantly influence teachers' intentions to stay, their psychological capital, and perceived organizational support (Aria et al., 2019). Leadership style is associated with employees' quality of life and commitment to an employer (Nanjundeswaraswamy et al., 2019). Leadership style has also been associated with teachers' job satisfaction (Thomas, et al., 2020). Teachers and professional staff are more inclined to remain at schools when leadership acknowledges them and their efforts (Dos Santos, 2020). In a study of 1,100 teachers, researchers suggested that transformational leadership manifested by the principal created a positive effect for the members of the organization and contributed to forming a strong school culture (Kalkan et al., 2020). The researchers in the Kalkan study (2020) found that teachers' perceptions of school leaders were high when the leaders had a transformational leadership style. When leaders had a transactional leadership style, there was a weak and negative relationship between transactional leadership style and general school culture. Laissez-faire leadership was found to have a strong, negative relationship with organizational culture. With laissez-faire leadership, leaders provide resources and tools, but remain largely uninvolved in the work.

Prominent leadership styles in education are transformational leadership and transactional leadership (Bass, 1985). Transactional leadership involves straightforward exchanges between leaders and followers with the leaders guiding the coordination, control and supervision of curriculum and instruction (Atasoy, 2020; Bass 1985). Transformational leadership involves motivating people to higher levels of performance and effort, developing capacity and creating a sense of purpose that binds all teachers together (Bass, 1985; Fasola et al., 2013). The key difference between transactional and transformational leadership styles is in the leaders' approaches to goals and motivation, though elements of transactional leadership lie within transformational leadership (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013; Tyssen et al., 2014).

In their study of the job satisfaction and performance of health workers, Supriadi and colleagues (2020) asserted, "Transactional leadership is a leadership style that focuses on the interpersonal transactions that create an impact on exchange between managers and educators" (p. 300). Transformational leadership creates relationships, attempts to raise awareness of problems, and harnesses energies to create innovative solutions (Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013). The style of the leader affects their capacity to consider the perspective of others and show empathy, which influences the effectiveness of the workplace (Da'as, 2023).

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In a study of 2,171 teachers in the 2019-2020 school year, Atasoy (2020) found that principals that had transformational leadership styles had a more positive effect on teachers than principals with transactional leadership styles, and this contributed to a positive school culture and reduced some of the teachers' negative behaviors, particularly noncompliance and resistance. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2020) found that the transformational leadership of the principal was directly related to positive job attitudes held by teachers and helped to foster collegial support between teachers and indirectly related to teachers' self-efficacy.

Workplace Climate

Workplaces that allow negative behaviors and attitudes impact performance, job satisfaction, and organizational climate. There is a relationship between job satisfaction and teacher retention (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Madigan & Kim, 2021). Job satisfaction is understood as a state of mind when an individual perceives that their job-related needs are met and they experience some level of job comfort and job fulfillment (Evans, 1997; Toropova et al., 2021). In a meta-analytic examination of the relationship between job satisfaction and teachers' intentions to quit, Madigan and Kim (2021) found that there was a significant negative relationship between job satisfaction and teachers' intention to quit. They concluded that teachers who are more satisfied with their roles and whose jobs met their expectations are more likely to enjoy and remain in their roles, are more self-efficacious, and are more enthusiastic than teachers who were not satisfied in their roles. Further, the researchers posited that it is important to ensure that teachers are satisfied to protect them from wanting to leave.

For Black female teachers, administrative support is a factor in their job satisfaction (Farinde-Wu and Fitchett, 2018). Black female teachers and other teachers of color face significant challenges in the workplace that impact their job satisfaction, including microaggressions and racial battle fatigue (Benson et al., 2021). Racial microaggressions refer to subtle racial slights perpetrated against people of color (Thomas et al., 2018; Wintner et al., 2017). According to Smith and Griffiths (2022), microaggressions may harm individual health, wellbeing, and performance at work. Racial battle fatigue refers to the psychological, mental, and emotional stress experienced by people of color when they are addressing incidents of racism or being subjected to such incidents (Pizarro & Kohli, 2018).

Advancement

Black women must overcome considerable obstacles when seeking leadership opportunities and when given the opportunity to assume positions of authority. Advancement for teachers can take the form of being a mentor teacher, model teacher, lead teacher, instructional coach or moving into administration (Allen, 2018). Frazier (2023) posited that Black women feel the pressure of having to be perfect, are often challenged by their colleagues, and must learn to assimilate to white-centered norms. Further, she stated that learning how to navigate these spaces is more challenging when Black women have no one to share their experiences on how they made their positions attainable.

Black women face many challenges as leaders. In addition to the burdens carried by all in leadership positions, Black women are also burdened with gendered racism (Burton, Cyr, & Weiner, 2020). Young and Hines (2018) raised concerns of their spirits being killed by faculty and students. Flores questioned whether an opportunity gap exists for school leaders (2018). For women of color to advance, a culture that promotes equity is required (Corneille, et.al., 2017). Reed (2012) suggested that leadership preparation programs expose candidates to issues of gender and race to better prepare them for the issues they may face as Black female leaders. According to Gause (2021), Black female leaders are beneficial to organizations because they can help "in addressing bias, prejudices, and privilege to level the playing field and shift the influential power and decision-making structure of the institution" (p. 79). Hargons et. al., (2017) found Black women to be on the sidelines in attaining leadership positions though they could help bridge gaps for the marginalized.

According to Aaron (2020), being Black and female places Black women in two subjugated classifications that categorize them in two devalued groups in the United States. Black women are not spared the experiences of the double disparity associated with their race and gender when they seek or obtain positions in school leadership (Reed, 2012). Despite the many challenges that Black women face in the educator workforce, they persist. There is a dire need to retain Black women in education.

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Theoretical Framework

Categorical identities such as race and gender in many ways shape the professional identities of teachers and form the positional identities that emerge from their life experiences that are affected by gender, class, race, ethnicity, and religion (Moore, 2008; Olitsky, 2020). This study uses intersectionality and Black feminist thought as analytical lenses. These frameworks increase understanding of the oppressions Black women experience from the intersecting aspects of their identities. They reveal how these intersectionalities form indivduals' knowledge about the world, because they allow individuals to address the multi-structural oppression of being Black and female (Crenshaw, 1989). Both frameworks highlight the invisibilities of Black women's experiences in feminist and anti-racist literature (Aaron, 2020).

Intersectionality grew from legal discourse to expose the problematic understanding that exists with the multiple identities held by Black women in their plight for social justice (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (1991) provided instances of Black women being denied visibility and wholeness under the law by highlighting several legal decisions that ignored Black women as more than just women, while simultaneously being women and Black in their workplace harassment and discrimination lawsuits. According to Crenshaw (1991), their legal claims demanded recognition of the intersection of race and gender to fully account for the wholeness and humanity of these individuals as Black women. Race, gender, class, and similar systems of power are interdependent and co-constructed (Crenshaw, 1991; Quinn & Ferree, 2019). The experiences of Black women that historically have been different from Black males and white females can be more fully examined through an intersectional lens (Peters & Nash, 2021). In their call for an intersectional leadership framework, Peters and Nash (2021) state that intersectionality permeates the lived experiences of Black women. Quinn and Ferree (2019), in their study of interactions between teachers and paraprofessionals, found that the women of color who were paraprofessionals were largely invisible and unsupported by the predominantly White teachers within the school district. The researchers highlighted the need to address the intersectional effects of gender, race, and class because of the inequalities that existed. Cho and colleagues (2013) asserted that intersectionality examines the dynamics of difference and sameness in considering gender, race, and other axes of power in political and academic discussions. Through intersectionality, the various intersections and groupings that compound discrimination for Black women can be analyzed (Cho et al., 2013).

Black women's experiences have been shaped by the historical discrimination experienced by Black people and women in the United States, a shared commonality (Collins, 2000). Black Feminist Thought focuses on the uniqueness of Black women. According to Collins (2004), Black Feminist Thought (BFT) examines dialogue, the caring and nurturing nature of Black women, and the significance of accountability. BFT emerged from the exclusion of Black women's experiences from the Black Power movements and women's rights movements (hooks, 1984). Race, age, gender, class, and other societal constructs intersect for Black women on the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000). BFT promotes radical self-love, recognizing that Black women are magical as mothers, daughters, aunts, sisters, friends, warriors, truth tellers, healers, memory keepers, and educators (Farinde-Wu et al., 2023). Black women do not universally identify with shared experiences of oppression. By bridging the personal and professional lives of the researcher, this framework allows the reader to better understand the author's life at the intersections of race, class, and gender (Clemons, 2019).

Method

Ellis and Bochner (2000) defined autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). Autoethnography is a form of narrative research that uses aspects of autobiography and ethnography to describe and analyze the personal experiences of the researcher and understand the cultural experiences (Ellis, et. al., 2011). Researchers examine themselves in relation to a topic or within a context. According to Poerwandari (2021), it is an approach to research where the researcher is an active participant and the center of attention. The researcher uses their experience, knowledge, and access to the setting (either where they live or work) to collect various materials for research purposes. Poerwandari (2021) suggested that autoethnography is a good method to "capture and analyze valuable experiences" and an "effective way for researchers, particularly from marginalized groups, to uncover the phenomena they have experienced or faced so that the issue can be

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recognized by the public" (p.314). As with other forms of narrative research, autoethnography focuses on the personal and social significance of the stories, the temporal components of the stories, and the place or situation that the stories occur.

In this autoethnographic study I examined my experiences as a Black woman teacher. I described and navigated the educational landscape of multiple campuses as a response to the racialized, gendered, and colorized experiences I witnessed. The research question that guided this work was: How does a Black woman teacher persist in the teaching profession when faced with negative working conditions?

Positionality

I am a Black woman. I am the mother of two beautiful Black daughters. I have been an educator for 18 years. During the time of this research, I have been a classroom teacher, instructional coach, mentor teacher, department chair, new teacher induction facilitator, and site coordinator. I currently serve as an assessment and data specialist for two campuses.

Data Collection

The data used is drawn from eight years of observations and journal entries that I collected from 2014-2022 in various roles, including classroom teacher, department chair, instructional specialist, instructional coach, site coordinator, and assessment and data specialist to 3rd, 4th, 5th, and 6th grade students. My primary method of data collection was to record my daily experiences, responses, reactions, and interactions in a notebook. Anything that could change or affect my mood or behavior was recorded (Guest et al., 2013). The amount of time spent writing varied depending on what occurred that day, my level of tiredness, and other factors. I kept notebooks to help me remember what occurred. My journals were used for reflection so that I could improve my practice as an educator (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

I organized the data from the autoethnography, verbal accounts, and journal notes using inductive approaches characteristic of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). In accordance with the analytical techniques provided by Miles and Huberman (1994), I first read data and reread for familiarity, developed a coding list to describe the data, and then coded data by assigning a code from the list or creating new codes upon rereading the data (Guest et al., 2017). I then reexamined data for any outliers that did not fit into patterns or within the themes identified.

This paper presents findings in a series of vignettes that highlight my experiences and attempts to make sense of how my multiple identities have played out in unexpected ways during my tenure in public education. According to Humphreys (2005), autoethnographic vignettes are texts that blend analytical and representational strategies to increase self-reflexivity, a type of fragmented prose that elicits emotion from the reader and shows respect for the culture and context experienced by the author.

Findings

The vignettes that follow represent the action/talk that constituted my lived experiences and organizational life. Through autoethnography, I was able to switch from observer to the observed and share personal narratives within specific contexts (Huber, 2022).

Vignettes: Seen, but Unseen

In this first series of vignettes, I document the ways in which I channeled my racialized experiences—low expectations and microaggressions—while starting my journey in the teaching profession.

They really put Baby in the corner. Seriously! In a school of Black and Brown children, why are there less than 10 people of color? I guess they are trying to make up for it because they hired two Black women in one day. But why did they place us both out of the way and away from each other? Why do I feel like I am being hazed? I wonder if R.H. feels like I do. Probably not, she says she loves her trailer.

How is it that she and I have the same mentor, but she is visited weekly and somehow I never get a visit? T.W. is white. I am not. She was here first. Oh that's right. I seemed like I got it and picked it up pretty quick, so she did not have to support me as much as she did the other newbie who happens to be White. I hate to state the obvious, but it's because I am Black isn't it and all of my students are Black, so you figured I would be fine. I guess I should have not said anything about being in the corner. For the third time in as many months, I got to pack up my classroom and move and make room for somebody else. Why am I the only one who ever has to move when you need to make room?

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You are the classroom reduction teacher, remember. All of the other teachers delightedly gave you all of their students with behavior problems or who were low performing. Don't say anything. They may move you again–maybe out to the street because that is the only place left for you to go.

Nothing like blending into the surroundings. One day as I waited for my turn at the copier, there was a discussion about the fight that happened in my room. One comment left me baffled and speechless– "A Black woman her size. I can't believe that she would ever have discipline problems in her room." Some of my midwestern colleagues speak freely. I was often referred to as a mother hen. It is like I don't exist or maybe they don't care that I am in the room. It is me. They see me, but don't care that I am there. Why am I here again? The students need you. Or at least that is what I tell myself.

It is always a joy to get the "Are you mixed?" question. Looking at you, you can tell that you are not just Black. I didn't respond. I am glad that she thought it was okay to just walk up to me and ask. What the….
I would love for CH to check on me. Her response to every concern I raised is you will be fine. She made it clear that she does not like conflict. Can I get some support over here?

Despite my challenges, 84% of my students passed the TAKS test my first year. I was reaching the kids. No parent complaints. Students did not ask to get moved. My final evaluation was decent.

The culture was not what I expected. My principal provided no authentic, transformational leadership. She did not like conflict, so I had no administrative support. My mentor was not available to help me, though she helped my White colleague. Microaggressions, whether in the form of microassault, microinsult or microinvalidation (Sue et al., 2007), racial battle fatigue, and lack of support were an ongoing reality for my first two years, but the impact I had on my students' lives was more important.

Nevertheless, I was finding success in my classroom that gave me a level of satisfaction that allowed me to persist. Like many other Black teachers who entered the profession, I wanted to support my students and address content, classroom management, and pedagogy by using the strengths of my students through nurture and structure (Dixson & Dingus, 2008: Hancock et al., 2020). However, dealing with the disrespect, lack of administrative support, and the leadership style of my principal made it hard.

Vignettes: Advancement Opportunities

When I finally sought opportunities outside of the classroom, I was 40 years old. I was no longer contending with just being a Black woman, now I had to justify my age and why I waited so long to pursue leadership opportunities. Consider the following:

I entered my teaching career with multiple degrees. My mother has instilled the importance of education in me and I am a lifelong learner. Moreover, I am a first generation college student, so not continuing my education beyond my bachelors [sic] *degree was never a consideration. I wanted to apply to the district's leadership academy. I needed my principal's approval. She read my resume and asked me about my degrees and whether I had fudged a little on my resume. I assured her that everything was correct. She told me that I had too much education and that I would need to remove at least one of my masters* [sic] *and my doctorate from my resume because that amount of education was intimidating. No principal would ever hire me if they saw that. She said that she would not approve me going further with my application until I provided her with a resume that had been revised with her suggestions. I did as she said and submitted my application. I was denied admittance because nothing on my resume or in my application indicated that I was a lifelong learner. Talk about irony. I applied again the next year. This time I was accepted. Then they changed their mind and said that my acceptance was a mistake. I am not normally someone who wants to ruffle feathers and I tend to go along to get along, but I questioned what was happening and why the reversal. The director of the program was offended that I questioned her and suggested that I pursue other options because she did not believe that the program would be a good fit for me.*

I questioned my sense of belonging in this district. There was and still is a lack of connectedness between me and leadership, at the campus and district level. I checked every box for what they sought in an ideal candidate for every position. I was never the right fit. I am frequently called on to present my ideas, demonstrate how to do something, and facilitate professional development, but I am never afforded the title that accompanies the roles and responsibilities the district wants me to perform. More often than not, leadership positions are filled by non-Blacks in their 20s who often only have three years of teaching experience.

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I continued applying and was rejected for seven years. After seven years of rejection, I decided that I could not take it anymore. Seven is the number of completion in biblical times. The road to advancement was far more political than I anticipated, and I was not well-equipped for what was required. I watched the younger, white girls get promoted over me, stay less than a year, then leave the district more than a few times. As a single mother of two girls, just up and leaving the profession was never a consideration, but switching districts crossed my mind almost every day. I had to be mindful of the example that I set for my daughters, carefully consider when to speak up, and decide when situations were best left alone. The costs of speaking up have been tremendous in terms of my career advancement and my mental health. I find myself balancing these costs with what is best for my children on a regular basis.

Vignette: It's Not About a Title

I made one last attempt to move into administration, again to no avail. This time it was not the rejection that was gut-wrenching, but the response I received when I reported for duty at the beginning of the next school year.

With raised hands, my principal excitedly exclaimed, "I am so glad you are here. I know you really wanted that position, but I am so glad you will still be with me. Remember it's not about a title. It's about influence. Think about all of the influence you wield around here. You will be just fine."

My assistant principal, never one to miss an opportunity to add her two cents, chimed in, "You know you really know too much. And people like you, so we could not risk letting you go. Who would be our go to?"

What the ___? Yet again I am the sacrificial lamb. I bet she thought that was a compliment. Was this their way of keeping me in my place? Let it go. Saying something will not change the outcome. Just let it go. But, since I have so much influence, what can I make happen???

I have come to understand that to maintain my sanity and strength, I must embody collective memory and spiritual activism if I am to survive the politics of education. Dillard (2016) suggested that as a Black woman teacher I must remember the shared legacy of oppression of all women of African descent.

Discussion

Through an exploration of my experiences as a Black woman in public education and focused on microaggressions, leadership and advancement opportunities, this study considered how I developed my own political intelligence through lenses of intersectionality and Black Feminist Thought. Political intelligence, a type of emotional intelligence, is a skill that equips individuals to build relationships, collaborate and gain power and influence to obtain desired outcomes (Agrawal, 2013; Meisler & Vigoda-Gadot, 2014). The question I sought to answer was: How does a Black woman teacher persist in the teaching profession when faced with negative working conditions? I came to realize and recognize that office politics are a part of every organization, including a public school system (Postma, 2021). The leadership style of the principal is important as it impacts the work culture; accordingly, leaders must be willing to confront and tackle the office politics that may adversely affect the school climate and support their teachers in the process (Kalkan et al., 2020). My principal's desire to avoid conflict diminished her willingness to address the microaggressions within the school climate that I experienced. Black teachers have been shown to benefit all students, and they need to be supported (Bristol& Martinez-Fenandez, 2019; Griffin & Tackie, 2017).

Despite fostering and cultivating relationships with team members and colleagues, I was often left at the sidelines. My responsibility as a Black woman was to not remain silent, but to speak my truth, earlier than later, and recognize the interdependence and interconnectedness we all had (Griffins 2012). Administrators made no attempt to establish a relationship with me beyond producing positive outcomes for the students and the campus. However, the reality is that so much of education stands on the premise that relationships are important because human beings have a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagenauer & Volet, 2014). Hopper and colleagues (2022) asserted that it is the responsibility of administrators to support all teachers and build positive relationships within the school community. To this end, the care of relationships and the necessity of progress over product should not be lost to a focus on the end result. My lived experience of being a woman, a teacher, and a mother requires that I lead with and stand firm on the importance of relationships. In the

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language of BFT, it is about the ethics of care and lived experience that are at the core (Collins, 2002).

The significance of accountability is important within BFT (Collins, 2001). In trying to avoid conflict, it has not been uncommon for me to be asked to overlook certain things or forgo doing something to make others feel comfortable. My colleagues, however, had no regard for whether I was comfortable. Being referred to as "a Black woman her size" is nothing short of disrespectful and made me feel very uncomfortable. These types of microaggressions were the norm. Microaggressions are slights and put-downs based on one's identity that have no place on school campuses (Smith & Griffiths, 2022). Leadership must establish cultures that foster positive relationships between members of the school community and not allow these behaviors to continue (Hopper et.al., 2022).

Within the literature, for several years there has been a call for a pipeline for Black teachers through retirement (Ahmad & Boser, 2014; Barth et al., 2016; Farinde-Wu et al., 2020; Gist et al., 2018; Perrone 2022; Smith, 1988; Williams et al., 2020). A recent article in Issues in Higher Education (2022) says that a pipeline is not enough. I am inclined to agree because I have found that inner circles and nepotism are far more impactful than a pipeline could ever be.

In this study, I sought to identify ways that my multiple identities as a Black woman affect my role in education and the factors that impact my decision to remain in education based on my personal experiences. As a single mother over 40 years old, it is important for me to keep the best interests of my own children at the forefront of my mind. My daughters were the people most affected by my experiences at work, and it was their opinion of me that navigated the paths I took and my responses to the happenings that transpired. In addition, I have found that my love for teaching and the children I serve have provided me with reason enough to remain, though it is becoming increasingly more difficult.

Schools should support, retain, and promote Black female teachers. Mosely (2018) suggested Black teacher affinity groups to provide professional development, support, and retain Black teachers. Carver-Thomas and Darling-Hammond (2017) pointed to mentoring and principal training programs as potential strategies to prevent Black teachers from leaving. To this end, every staff member should be privy to job openings, graduate school opportunities, and mentorship. The culture of the schools we work in is related to job satisfaction and influences not only how well we do our jobs, but whether we choose to remain in those locations (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018; Maidgan & Kim, 2021). Politics are not limited to elections. Office politics can be as polarizing as the two-party system that exists in American politics (Postma, 2021).

Implications

Future researchers who wish to extend discourse on supporting Black women in politically polarized environments and retaining them in the teaching profession may wish to extend this line of research with more participants. The subject of this project was one woman, but multiple women, Black and other races, could provide additional insights. Additionally, future research could include focus groups, interviews, or other forms of qualitative data collection. As this study was limited to one participant, the results may not be generalizable to other populations. Principal leadership style also played a role in this study. Future research, quantitative in nature, could address the leadership style of principals in relation to teacher retention.

Conclusion

In this article, I provided vignettes of my experiences as a Black woman in public education. I sought to answer the question of how to persist in the teaching profession under negative working conditions. My longevity is more a product of my role as a single mother who needed to provide a stable environment for my children than anything else. Although I gained satisfaction in my students' performance as measured by state assessments and the experiences they had in my classroom, my lived experiences as a teacher were less than ideal, and I must hold myself and my leaders accountable. My experiences as a Black woman may give voice to others and help them to remain and advance in the teaching profession.

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