

Examining the Culturally Responsive Leadership Practices of Black Female Principals in the Anti-DEI Era

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Abstract

The proposed study will investigate the culturally responsive leadership practices of black female principals in the anti-DEI climate. The goal of this project is to determine how black female leaders deal with the growing limitations surrounding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts against the historical backdrop of the struggles associated with the complex needs of school communities. The proposed study will analyze the leadership practice trends, the relevant historical exchange, and the recent policy shifts to highlight the role of culturally responsive updates in black female principals' leadership practices. The identified issues and challenges will empower researchers to further investigate culturally responsive school leaders' ability to adapt to their practice under imposing policies, and the active school communities struggling against DEI. The findings will be essential for further investigations due to their visibility concerning black female leadership and school leadership practices. The study is significant due to its unique contribution to the research field concerning leadership adaptations against the climate. The study will also empower further investigations of the future of equity in educational practice.

1. Introduction

School leaders are tasked with the critical responsibility of providing culturally responsive leadership in schools - an approach that both validates and responds to the intersections of diversity experienced by students and staff in school settings. Black female leaders are uniquely positioned in this area; due to their own intersecting lived and professional experiences, they yield an innate understanding of how to respond to the demands of changing school populations. Yet today, Black female principals are encountering new and increasingly difficult challenges as they operate within an anti-DEI (anti-diversity, equity, inclusion) climate, characterized by a historic onslaught of policies and social movements that resist and/or outright ban efforts toward achieving equity in schools. The aim of this study is to examine the leadership practices employed by Black female school leaders as they attempt to advance culturally responsive leadership practices within schools located in an anti-DEI climate. The organization of this paper includes a discussion of culturally responsive leadership theory; historical context; current context; specific leadership practices; case studies; and a discussion of implications and opportunities for building equitable leadership in schools.

Background: Culturally Responsive Leadership

The term “culturally responsive leadership” denotes an educational practice that aims purposefully and systematically to perceive, respect, and respond to the cultural history, experiences and needs of all students in the school community. A culturally responsive leadership model is characterized by bedrock principles of inclusiveness, equity and the Whole-child philosophy reinforcing that identity and lived experience are crucial components influencing the academic trajectory. Under these premises, school leaders seek to establish a climate where cultural dissimilarities and divergent perspectives are not perceived as obstacles to student and community development, but rather as keys to prosperity for the learning and growing processes of each child (Brooks DeCosta, 2020). Such approach will demonstrate itself in the established expectations not only for curriculum development, but also with regards to social-emotional learning, discipline, and school climate. Empowered by their beliefs and values, culturally responsive leaders are determined to integrate them into their everyday practices and thus develop the supportive conditions under which high-need learners will succeed both academically and socially as constituents of respectful and understanding educational communities (Brooks DeCosta, 2020).

Hence, the historical timeline of culturally relevant practices in the field of school leadership reveals a transition from assimilationist practices to equitable ones. In the early 1960s, the norms of the school system often overlooked racial and cultural identities of students. Instead of inclusion practices, school leaders enforced norms that demanded conformity. Nonetheless, the Civil Rights Movement and education policy initiatives from the late 1960s to 1990s, such as the Bilingual Education Act, led educators to pay more attention to diversity and student ownership of learning. School leaders began to question the status quo and the biases that undergirded prevailing assumptions about school models. These historical shifts from conformity and bias toward equity and inclusion paved the way for the way leaders today decipher their identity as influencers within their organizations. Black school principals, especially Black female principals, use their own experiences to address the climate and culture explicitly by being intentional in making historically marginalized students feel recognized and validated. Modern scholarship shows that their deliberate efforts to cultivate a positive environment speaks to their strengths as instructional leaders. More importantly, it addresses historical trends that gradually moved towards the belief that cultural diversity is a strength and asset within school systems striving for excellence (Luckett, 2023).

In addition, culturally responsive leadership holds its importance in terms of positive impact on the school climate and student achievement that can specifically be quantified for the schools with heterogeneous student demographics. Evidence suggests that school leaders who are deliberate in establishing climates that validate and support their students’ cultural connections facilitate belonging and psychological safety critical to their motivation and engagement in learning (Gabbadon, 2023). As per the tenets of affirming leadership practice, such environment is conducive to a higher retention and satisfaction for students of color and their educators (Gabbadon, 2023). Culturally responsive leaders engage in reflection, continuity in professional growth and development, and maintain connectedness with the community, which all contributes to successful schools that value diversity and where every student is able to achieve his or her academic success. Therefore, in result of continued emphasis of responsive leadership, it is propagated in terms of equitable opportunity, improved relationships, and better achievement outcomes for historically underserved student populations (Gabbadon, 2023).

Black Female Principals: Historical and Social Context

The historical emergence of Black female principals in U.S. schools is embedded in the traditions of the leadership responsibilities in schools for students of color and from other marginalized communities. Historically, these principals became critical change agents to promote equity and access for all students, often leveraging their lived experiences to guide and inform their practice and responses to the needs of their students who have been systematically underserved or completely excluded in schools. As evidenced by the literature, scholarship on Black female principals tend to emphasize their intersectional lived experiences and the theories they rely on in their professional practice—Black Feminist Thought, Standpoint Theory, among others (Lomotey, 2019). In keenly addressing the intersected social inequalities of race and gender, they become instrumental in establishing students' school culture and climate as affirming their identity and resilience, while tending to view their teaching and educational work both as an occupation as well as a community and family responsibility. When considering their historical impact, they have influenced the school climate, the development of educational leadership preparation and programs, and future research agendas and priorities (Lomotey, 2019).

Furthermore, the interaction between race and gender plays a crucial role in the opportunities and challenges that these principals face in schools, as well as in their career paths. As Black women, they must navigate through two identities that intersect, and this results in their struggling for authority and legitimacy. They experience more scrutiny and more pressure to prove their competence and position, compared to non-intersecting counterparts. As a result, Black female principals go through a double task of balancing their identities, as they respond to biases (both implicit and explicit) and utilize personal and collective resources to maintain their efficacy (Crawford, 2022). Research has demonstrated that receiving support, such as mentoring and creating affinity groups, can help address the effects of intersectional discrimination and strengthen adaptive leadership. Accordingly, the interaction of race and gender not only affects the challenges that Black female principals deal with but also shapes their distinctive and resourceful responses to demands based on their life experiences (Crawford, 2022).

Additionally, the barriers faced by Black female principals on their ascendancy have systemic origins in racism and sexism. The district's hiring and promotion policies and practices, articulated at the systemic level both overtly and covertly, negatively affect Black females' opportunities for leadership ascension. The factors that create these barriers to access include performative interviews and relationship reliance within systematic structures that privilege access to leadership for some rather than others, compromising the process for Black females in particular (Weiner et al., 2022). The superintendent and executive directors' authoritative power and unaccountability in decision-making and lack of transparency through hiring structures are other factors leading to access to Black female principals' leadership positions. These experiences reveal the impact of gendered racism on their professional journey, where systemic inequity, social exclusion and forced navigation are entrenched (Weiner et al., 2022).

The Anti-DEI Era: Challenges and Implications

The most recent phenomena on this topic are the so-called anti-DEI era, characterized by political and legislative efforts aiming to restrict education and policies around diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in schools. These anti-DEI measures materialized in different ways at the school level, including

executive orders, bans, and prohibitions that limit or eliminate the discussion around DEI programs. The Trump administration spearheaded a number of federal-level policy changes that created a precedent for anti-DEI policy development at the state level and increased the political polarization and uncertainty climate for educational leaders (Ng et al., 2025). Consequently, school systems faced growing limitations for culturally responsive teaching, professional development, and student support services, all of which played a key role in establishing an equitable teaching and learning environment. The systematic rollback of DEI policy at the federal and local levels further exacerbated existing inequities while also creating new challenges for educational leaders who aim at promoting inclusive education (Ng et al., 2025).

As these factors keep developing, the spread of anti-DEI rhetoric and policies pose considerable challenges to school leadership, especially among the advocates of DEI. The new policies create a new set of norms, which limit school leaders' freedom to navigate the discussions around cultural diversity and social justice. For Black female principals, this may magnify the isolation and the additional barriers to representation and advocacy. The underrepresentation of people of color within the principal pipeline is also affected by the legislation trends. These school leaders may find it harder to follow through their career steps and leadership positions while staying true to their values (Jackson, 2025). As such, recommendations suggest principal preparation programs to be tactful in response to the legislation landscape, framing their actions in terms of compliance with the policies that concern the hiring, support of and retention efforts for educational leaders in charge of equity-based teaching (Jackson, 2025).

Black female principals face specific obstacles to articulating and preserving culturally responsive approaches and DEI initiatives according to policy and community pressures. Such capacity for critical reflection is curtailed, as their leadership is often more scrutinized and a climate of subversion and insubordination exists for broadly welcoming culture, as demands vanish (Thompson et al., 2023). Engagement with communities, instructional leadership, and other strategies require their avoidance of communicating resistance to the increasingly restricted but critical engagement with policy, and the principles of learning (Thompson et al., 2023). Such pressures generate a liminal space where Black female principals and their leadership inhabit, "discretionary space," (Thompson et al., 2023), where day-to-day engagement requires strategies to disengage policy and the calls for equity, with increased restrictions or threats to their positions and student success.

Leadership Practices of Black Female Principals

Black female principals use culturally responsive leadership behaviors to empower students' identities while ensuring the provision of equal access to educational opportunities. Among these culturally relevant behaviors, the most prominent is the deliberate creation of inclusive curriculum that respects and acknowledges the students' different cultural identities. Community involvement is also prominent in their culturally responsive leadership behaviors, as the principals form genuine connections with the families and community organizations for the collective support of the students' success. Grounded in intersectional leadership framework, these principals combat anti-Black racism and sexism while advocating for neglected populations in schools and addressing the complexities of modern schooling (Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). With these behaviors, Black female principals can make their

schools become places where diversity is acknowledged and protected, and students are provided access to affirming and empowering educational experiences (Peters & Miles Nash, 2021).

In addition, Black female principals promote culturally affirming education by implementing formal structures to assist students and teachers while acknowledging restrictions imposed from the outside. They lead inclusive environments by making the representation of teachers a priority because the composition of the faculty affects the belonging and culturally affirming feelings expressed by the students. These Black female leaders promote persistent reflection and awareness among the teachers to make them reflect on their biases and implement culturally responsive teaching practices (Gabbadon, 2023). Supportive initiatives, including action planning and focused instructional supports, contribute to solving academic achievement and retention issues, supporting the retention of educators of color who might have left because of feeling marginalized. By creating collaborative relationships and inclusive learning spaces, Black female principals advocate for the lost students and strengthen the equitable learning space resistant to outside attacks, where all group members acquire belongingness and respect (Gabbadon, 2023).

Moreover, mentorship and advocacy are important practices that lie at the heart of Black female principals' leadership styles, as these practices serve as vehicles to protect, support and guide marginalized students and staff. Intentional, sustained mentorship relationships provide teachers of color with support, encouragement, and professional development opportunities from Black female principals and lead to increased retention rates and collective responsibility for each other among teachers (Jang & Alexander, 2022). A similar pattern can be observed with Black female principals' advocacy work, as they purposefully support the marginalization of students by dismantling systemic barriers and advocating for their academic and social success, especially in schools with high percentages of students qualifying for free or reduced-cost lunch and students of color (Jang & Alexander, 2022). By combining mentorship and advocacy work, Black female principals cultivate and reinforce networks of support and enable environments in which every individual's identity and potential are honored. They exert influence over immediate impacts on particularly marginalized groups while also framing long-term, systemic patterns of shared success and inclusivity across their school communities can be observed (Jang & Alexander, 2022).

Furthermore, data-driven decision making serves as a core practice for Black female principals to promote equitable access and outcomes for students. They consistently utilize qualitative and quantitative data sources focused on patterns of academic achievement, discipline and resource allocation to surface equity gaps in their own school contexts. Applying a data-driven approach enables them to introduce appropriate responsive measures such as differentiated instructional access and restorative practices that are undertaken to address gaps between student subgroups as well as support inclusive school climates (Luckett, 2023). Results from data findings also shape the development of priorities for professional learning and are employed to regularly track progress, where adaptations are made based on assessed needs rather than hunches. Similarly, through a purposeful approach to leverage data in everyday leadership actions, Black female principals promote equitable access and success for historically marginalized students and nurture a culture of accountability among school staff (Luckett, 2023).

Case Studies and Exemplars

Illustrative case studies showcasing the leadership of Black female principal and the impact of their culturally responsive leadership can be further elucidated through highlighting their real-life experiences and the growing implications of the anti-DEI climate. The case studies analyze the leadership trajectories of four Black women who serve at the senior ranks in schools and other educational institutions. The intersection of their race and gender complicates not only their leadership styles, but the barriers they encounter as well. The principals apply a combination of justice-based and community-centered leadership, emerging as resilient agents, despite the various policies and institutionalized challenges they must overcome (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021). Their narratives include examples of adaptive responses such as creating a supportive climate, leveraging community strengths, and directly addressing inequities that permeate school practices and structures. These exemplars will not only highlight adaptive responses but fortify the continued relevance of intersectional approaches and the growing need to maintain equity and dignity for historically marginalized student demographics (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021).

For example, many Black female principals have established school-wide restorative justice policies emphasizing relationship restoration over exclusionary or punitive disciplinary actions, leading to steep reductions in school suspensions and improvements in student relationships. Many of these programs are developed and implemented with the specific needs of their school community in mind, using culturally relevant approaches that honor the students' identities and cultivate spaces for positive communication between students, staff, and families. Principals have also created student and new teacher mentorship programs as a space for leadership development and ongoing support through intentional matching of mentees and mentors with shared culture or lived experiences (Lomotey, 2019). Community literacy nights and family inviting events, frequently coordinated in collaboration with community members and organizations, encourage partnerships and help to establish the value of family involvement in student success. By leading these intentional programs via a culturally centered approach, many Black female principals are providing evidence of how specific leadership practices can result in positive change to multiple aspects of the school setting and offer a model for replication to support students traditionally on the margins (Lomotey, 2019).

Furthermore, the case studies shed light on important findings and implications of enduring lessons regarding Black female principals' leadership practice in adverse contexts. First and foremost, they clearly illustrate resilience as Black female principals tend to make use of critical self-reflection and community partnerships to keep the culturally responsive school climate intact, despite the shifting landscape of educational policies (Thompson et al., 2023). Adaptability is revealed both through the flexible exercise of instructional leadership and the creation of inclusive spaces, whereby principals can ensure the continuation of their students' education during the difficult times of crisis affecting oftentimes their school community (Thompson et al., 2023). Ingenuity is highlighted in terms of the new paths for engagement these leaders are able to navigate through joint resource leveraging and by fine-tuning their practices to the shifting demands and needs, whilst never compromising their established professional principles (Thompson et al., 2023). Hence, the implications of the lessons learned in these case exemplars suggest that culturally responsive leadership constitutes an indispensable vehicle towards equity and thriving in the anti-DEI era, derived from resilience and adaptability (Thompson et al., 2023).

Coping Strategies and Advocacy

A number of coping mechanisms are employed by the Black female principals against the anti-DEI threats to their culturally responsive pedagogy and commitment to equity. Placing coping mechanisms within the context of intersectional leadership, which the lived experiences of dealing with both race-related and gender-related obstacles inform, allows these principals to become resilient in times of environments rife with non-support for inclusion. Black female principals enact their advocacy practices by referencing the collective resistance and experiences that comes from their professional and personal lives, exercising their power to protect and create opportunities for marginalized students (Peters & Miles Nash, 2021). In addition, they build networks of alliances both inside and outside the school, using these support systems to account for anti-DEI policies and reinforce culturally affirming initiatives. By doing so, Black female principals remain resilient against structural oppression and maintain their efforts for anti-racist and anti-sexist educational leadership despite hostile policies (Peters & Miles Nash, 2021).

Furthermore, Black female principals understand the importance of developing strong coalitions with parents, teachers, and community constituents in driving the equity agenda in their schools. These leaders uphold open lines of communication and equitable decision-making in order to ensure that a multiplicity of voices is included in the planning and implementation phases. Activities and outreach designed to embody these collaborative efforts are regularly implemented, providing stakeholders with opportunities to share their perspectives and resources in support of schools' culturally affirming objectives. Research suggests that such coalitions further develop a network of support for principals in securing vital reinforcement as they address the racialized and gendered dynamics of the school leadership role (Crawford, 2022). Through these collaborative relationships, Black female principals cultivate community base that underpins equity initiatives in their work and holds the deepening sense of collective accountability and resilience in light of enduring and encumbering policy complications.

Finally, the increasing number of Black female principals also advocate and represent their interests against anti-DEI policies at district, state, and national levels. Specific practices involving these school leaders include testimony before legislative committees, interactions with school boards, and joint representation with professional associations on the importance of DEI policies in schools. As practicing school leaders who are building psychological and political capital, they influence the framing of education policies and offer the realities of how anti-DEI practices affect schools and communities (Ng et al., 2025). By employing actions like these coupled with organized advocacy, they create impact on the school leadership landscape. This allows them to uplift their voices to the larger stakeholders and lawmakers to ensure that the pressure against anti-DEI policy is sustained. Through the gathering of supporters, they help their peers and other stakeholders to understand the implications of policies against DEI practices to schools and education in general. As part of their efforts of engaging in organized activities, advocating and lifting their voices allow them to push for DEI policies to continue progressing in the future (Ng et al., 2025).

Future Directions and Recommendations

Given this future, coordinated actions highlighting the value of Black female principals and their innovative culturally responsive leadership practices are needed to maintain the support of these leaders and their schools in the face of anti-DEI legislation. Principal preparation programs should be urged to prioritize the recruitment and admission of teachers of color, thus intentionally providing structural entry points into school leadership for candidates who would otherwise be negatively impacted by exclusionary policies. Preparation programs must also intentionally instruct emerging leaders on how to strategically work effectively within DEI-restrictive environments while remaining aligned to equity-based values and practices (Jackson, 2025). There should be an expansion of professional development collaboration emphasizing anti-racist leadership at the school and district levels, as well as mentorship and affinity network development to positively contribute to high retention rates and Black female principal success and wellness. Lastly, ongoing discussions among policymakers and school practitioners should take place to reevaluate restrictive policies that could inhibit responsive and inclusive leadership in an ever-changing educational environment (Jackson, 2025).

Conclusion

To conclude the analysis presented in this research paper, Black female principals have fostered a culturally responsive leadership to disrupt the inequities caused by anti-DEI movements, but they persistently face systemic and policy challenges. Engaging in community-building, employing data-driven decisions, advocating for their students and staff, and embracing adaptive practices to maintain interrupted learning spaces for their schools, these leaders are persistent. Their persistence is significant as it proved that it is necessary to validate the existence of diversity and that efforts to strip schools from inclusive practices must be disrupted. It is essential and necessary to advocate for systemic change and enhancement of support and funding for Black female principals, as the growth trends demonstrate the legislative changes threatening to undo the gains made on the path to equity and representation in education. Empowering Black female principals and enhancing culturally responsive leadership must, then, be seen as a priority to develop just and fair educational foundations and inclusive school environments for the future.

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