



**A Paut Neteru Journey; An
Autoethnographic study of a
black female charter school
leader using an africentric
approach**

Dr. Patricia L. Williams

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ngozi4ankh@gmail.com

Statement of the Problem

Students of color and high poverty fail to be served effectively in a holistic manner that ensures students' academic, emotional, psychological, and physical well-being, achievement, and growth. While populations of color increase, the culture of schools remains ethnocentrically White, the teaching force remains overwhelmingly White and female, and the academic achievement gap between Whites and other groups persists (Shockley, 2007).

Shockley, K. G. (2007). Literatures and definitions: Toward understanding Africentric education. *Journal of Negro Education* 76 (2), Spring, 103-117.

Research Questions

In what ways have social and material inequalities shaped my journey as a Black female charter school leader?

- I. What lessons can be learned from the obstacles and experiences encountered during my journey as a Black female charter school leader?

Purpose of the Study

- To analyze and interpret challenges & experiences during my journey as a Black female charter school leader in order to **expose issues that may be determinant for the limited representation of people of color in school leadership serving children of color and/or availability of African-centered schools to serve students of color**
- **Contribute to existing literature regarding transformational leadership opportunities for Black women in education**
- **Empower women, particularly, of color, to aspire to social justice leadership and demand social justice for women & poor children of color**

Conceptual Framework

- **Blended African-centered pedagogy, African womanism, and Transformational leadership**
- **Blended conceptual framework served as lens from which perspectives the autoethnographic information was analyzed and interpreted**
- **African-centered education pedagogy and African womanism, were used as useful tools for social justice, given social complexities that compromise education**



Methodology

- **Qualitative - Autoethnography**

- **Autoethnography**

- **Used to promote investigation of personal experience, using**
- **autobiographic materials as primary data, emphasizing cultural analysis and interpretation, and designed to enhance cultural understanding** of challenges and experiences leader faced as a charter school leader of color

- **Data Collection** — was based upon the recollection of events, epiphanies, and experiences

- **Structure** was a chronological narrative of a Black female leader's experiences during three key epochs: 1) School start-up; 2) School Operations; and 3) School closing

- **Data Interpretation Strategies** — reviewed literature; reviewed data to ID themes; reviewed categories and determined overarching categories and comprehensive classes; summarized & examined implications of findings



Data Presentation – 3 EPOCHS

1. Epoch One – School Start-Up & Opening
2. Epoch Two – School Operations & Performance
3. Epoch Three - School Closing

Episodic description of events were designed to shed light on ways in which social & material inequalities can impact Black female leaders in today's society.

EPOCH ONE - School Start-Up & Opening

Social & Material Inequalities

- Start-Up challenges were enhanced by attitudes & behavior of parents experiencing oppressed conditions
- Neoliberal policies subjected Black female leader to pressures of securing facility and meeting enrollment targets to ensure adequate funding levels
- Neoliberal policies require charter school leaders to secure their own facilities. Leader faced facilities crisis when receiving 30-day notice to re-locate the school



Data Presentation – EPOCH TWO

School Operations & Performance

Social & Material Inequalities

- Domino effect of neoliberal policy, that mandates facility acquisition, included recruitment and retention of students and staff, upon urgent re-location of the school
- Neoliberal policies, that require charter school leaders to secure their own facilities, resulted in school increasing its enrollment ceiling, to secure facility financing, compromising the school's original mission to serve 150 high need students.
- Neoliberal policy, NCLB, requiring schools that receive federal title funds to subject students to high stakes testing, adversely affected high poverty high need school and its efforts to achieve high levels of student academic achievement and growth
- Neoliberal policies related to high stakes testing, created stress for all stakeholders, students, teachers, parents, administrators & staff
- Neoliberal policies related to high stakes testing, compromised school's focus on African-centered teaching and learning pedagogy & practice as school's dominating focus shifted to high stakes testing
- Black female leader was perceived to represent neoliberal policies as enforcer and monitor of neoliberal policies such as high stakes testing
- Teacher attitudes toward African-centered education adversely impacted Black teacher buy-in of African-centered pedagogy, practices and routines
- Black female leader struggled to recruit & retain quality leadership
- Black female leader felt unsupported by chartering authority, as a leader of a fledgling school of high need low performing students
- Black female leader felt isolated, as one of few Black and Black female charter leaders; further isolation was felt as one of few African-centered charter leaders
- School was perceived as a "failing school" in neoliberal climate of high stakes testing, regardless of plight and baseline achievement levels of high poverty high need students
- School was perceived negatively by charter community as an "African-centered" school utilizing African-centered pedagogy, practices & routines

Data Presentation – EPOCH THREE

School Closing

Social & Material Inequalities

- Process of school closure approval/charter revocation, including public hearing, impacted School stakeholders; middle academy students expressed feelings of abandonment by teachers and school
- School as charter school was subjected to charter revocation laws as part of school reform act, a neoliberal policy that non-DC charter schools are not subjected to
- Chartering authority Board chair abused his authority & promoted the takeover of the school by a new privatized charter school
- Leader, as executive director, experienced unequal treatment by her Board of Trustees, regarding bonus payment due to her Board's receipt of legal advise that application of same pay formula as other employees & Board member/employee would generate more \$\$ than a non-profit should offer
- Leader, as executive director, recommended her own termination, as Board threatened to resolve the school prior to sale of the building, thus eliminating opportunity for property sale proceeds to fund severance for staff and bonuses for two Board members

Data Analysis

Black Female Leader/Multiple Consciousness

- As adherence to neoliberal & State school reform policies dominated leader focus, struggles, through the lens of multiple consciousness, considering race, culture, and national, economic, & political factors, to serve the Black community, were many
- Efforts to facilitate empowerment & identity construction for Black students & their families were crippled by focus on high stakes testing

Cultural Context of Black DC Community & Education of Black Children in DC

- Impact of the lack of Statehood was underestimated by leader

Understanding My Place

- Leader's place as a Black female charter leader, committed to using an African-centered approach to educating Black youth, fell victim to the local and federal politics of the time period and circumstances of her entrance into the DC charter community
- Leader's commitment to serve the District's lowest performing students was sabotaged, as neoliberal policies, such as No Child Left Behind, where low test scores could result in school closure, prevailed

Identity Politics

- There was no external support for African-centered education; teacher support was limited & insufficient in later years

Intersectionality of Race, Gender & Class & Black Oppression

- Black students - 250 years of receipt of unequal and underfunded education
- Impact of the "Everydayness" of racism experienced by parents, students, and staff (Leonardo, 2013)
- Impact of racism manifested as internalized racism including projection of violence by students & parents
- Impact of poverty on ability of students to focus on academic achievement & parents to support higher levels of student achievement
- Racist attitudes regarding expectations for student behavior

Racialization of Neoliberal Policies

- Discourse of NCLB & neoliberal education dominated school environment to the extent that stakeholder contestations produced a tension in the school environment (Chapman, 2013)
- Our school performance rating, which fluctuated between Tier 2 & Tier 3, Tier 3 being the lowest rating, based upon DC chartering authority's rating system devised in response to NCLB, impacted school's ability to recruit & retain students and high quality teachers
- Leader bought into NCLB aims, including developing a value-added teacher & leader performance system; my buy-in impacted my relationship with school stakeholders, including sometimes being perceived as representing "the man"

Access to Facilities & equitable Access to Capital for Facilities

- Real estate market in DC - demand for school facilities was far greater than supply
- Repeated facility woes subjected leader to increased pressure to secure facilities (facilitating 2 moves in less than 2 years), & ensure adequate student enrollment numbers to fund school operations and a safe environment for students & staff
- Leader's focus on facilities challenged leader's capacity to achieve vision- and mission-specific goals

Lessons to be Learned

from journey obstacles & experiences

- Ensure a strong system of community and private support for pedagogy & practice that honors approach to educating Black youth
- Forge positive relationships with those in power & those to be empowered
- Build & sustain professional learning community, utilizing constructivist approach, creating a trusting environment for students & staff
- Possess the resiliency & fortitude to withstand fierce opposition from varying stakeholders & those in power
- Ensure alignment of personal beliefs, self-esteem & epistemology with the developed institutional vision & values
- Set high expectations for leadership, staff & student performance based upon holistic, non-Eurocentric norms
- Provide teacher training that supports effective teaching in a non-Eurocentric learning environment
- Embrace and empower parents, students & community
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- Provide teacher training that supports effective teaching in a non-Eurocentric learning environment
- Embrace and empower parents, students & community



IMPLICATIONS

SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

- Study provides, for women leaders, particularly of color, committed to social justice leaderships, social and material inequities that may occur, particularly if choosing to employ a non-Eurocentric pedagogy & practice as tools for social justice and educating youth of color
- Study provides women and educators of color an illustration of the use of the autoethnographic method as an ethnographic inquiry to utilize autobiographic materials as primary data, emphasizing cultural in interpretive orientation (Change, 2007)
- Study provides, for leaders, particularly of color, social complexities that compromise education daily for children of color, particularly oppression and the impact of neoliberalism

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

- Practice – Utilizing a non-Eurocentric curriculum and/or framework to school and educate non-White students
- Practice – Providing teacher training that supports teaching children of color, in general, and, particularly, in a non-Eurocentric learning environment
- Research – Exploring what culturally competent strategies can be employed to confront & overcome oppressive conditions for the oppressed?
- Research – Exploring the mis-education of teachers of color and other factors that prevent their belief in and buy-in of non-Eurocentric teaching and learning practices
- Research – Exploring collective practices that can be developed to determine what cultural knowledge is to be transmitted; assess the extent to which cultural knowledge is being transmitted to Black children or children of color; and create new resources of cultural knowledge (Shujaa, 1994)

Grounding Literature

African-Centered Pedagogy

- Asante, M. K. (1988, 1990, 1991, 2000)
- Hilliard, A. G. (1976, 1992, 1997)
- Karenga, M. N. (1980, 1995, 1998)
- Shujaa, M. J. (1994)

Africana Womanism

- Beauboeuf-Lafontant, T. (2002, 2004, 2005)
- hooks, B. (1989, 1994, 2015)
- Ogunyemi, C. O. (1985, 1993)
- Walker, A. (1983)

Transformational Leadership

- Ladson-Billings, G. (1999, 2006, 2009)
- Lambert, L., Zimmerman, D. P., & Gardner, M. E. (2016)

Autoethnography

- Alexander, B. K. (2013, 2015)
- Ellis, C., & Bochner, A. P. (2000)



What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun? Or fester like a sore—and then run? Does it stink like rotten meat? Or crust and sugar over—like a syrupy sweet? Maybe it just sags like a heavy load. Or does it explode?

Langston Hughes

