

Black Women Leaders: Sociopolitical Identity Development as a Pathway to Success

Dina C. Skeffrey

Abstract

Although they have poked a few holes in the “concrete ceiling” that represents the barrier to Black women’s entrance into influential jobs, Black women are still underrepresented in leadership roles in society. This commentary, which is offered through the lens of a Black woman in business leadership and higher education investigates ways to improve the educational achievement of young Black women, and to put them on a pathway to a lifetime of success in their post-college trajectory. Research asserts that resources are available to support the success of Black women and enable them to achieve influential roles in which they excel. This journey begins with school-age girls, specifically with their educational trajectory, which should provide teaching that models and exemplifies cultural acceptance. Exposing the inequality Black females experience in the school system enables opportunities for discussion and innovative techniques to emerge. However, this requires first acknowledging and celebrating Black girls as producers of knowledge in a socially stratified education system.

Keywords: Black women, diversity, communities of learning, culturally responsive pedagogy, sociopolitical identity

Mama Said There’d Be Days Like This

My perspective on learning, viewed through the lens of a Black woman, differed from that of many of my White classmates. Just like teaching, learning as a Black woman was not for the fainthearted. I was forced to develop my sociopolitical identity in the context of a country whose systems are not designed to support me or allow my personal and professional aspirations to flourish. My parents told me that, in order to have a shot at success in this world, I would have to work exponentially harder than the person next to me in school, in sporting events, and in community workshops. My parents had identified the social barriers that would impede my advancement, even at a young age: gender and racial stereotyping, and tokenism. They were deliberate and tactical in their approach to helping me develop a critical analytical lens so I could face the inevitable inequitable social and political strife I would encounter in my life.

Gender and Racial Stereotyping of Black Girls in School

Many assumptions made about Black girls in K-12 schooling have led to their marginalization. From the perspective of what has come to be known as reproduction theory, schools not only serve as sites for the construction of race, class, and gender identities, but they also reproduce existing inequalities in these areas (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Collins (1990) describes how intersectionality combines race, class, and gender into a mode of inequality intended to alienate and discriminate. Although Black girls inhabit a unique place in the education system, instead of being celebrated they often are stereotyped and demeaned. According to Morris (2007), Black girls in schools are told to act like ladies, but then are often called coarse and overly assertive and labeled as “loudies” (p. 491). Grant’s (1994) examination of the intersections of race and gender that Black girls encounter in the classrooms demonstrates that teachers tend to treat Black girls differently than they treat White girls or Black boys. According to Epstein et al. (2017), Black girls are seen as less innocent, which renders them more vulnerable to harsh treatment. Epstein et al. also purport that Black girls are not supported, protected, or nurtured at school because they are seen as independent, and therefore are not allowed to partake of the opportunities and advantages others enjoy. Disheartening and most perplexing is the current rise in out-of-school

suspensions Black girls are experiencing, along with their increased entry into the juvenile detention and prison systems (Pratt-Clark, 2010).

I remember inquiring about getting extra help when I was struggling with my ninth-grade sequential math course and being told that I didn't need help. Although there were a few Black students in the class, the classmates I observed in the extra help class were White. Moreover, only the White students sought to answer questions in class; the Black students who offered to answer were seldom acknowledged and the teacher responded to them in a manner that would make an animal run away. That was my experience with the mathematics department in my school district, whose employees resembled the majority of students—they were White. The math teacher's responses were tactless and nonchalant, along with an attitude that suggested, "Why, don't you know this?"

My parents raised me to express myself, so I questioned the teachers' attitudes, which led to sighs of exasperation and threats of detention. Fortunately, my parents demanded that I receive extra help and that I be treated with respect and sensitivity. My parents never hesitated to call a meeting with the teachers, principal, or superintendent to stand up for my educational rights. According to Walker et al. (2005), many Black parents are aware that their children are systemically maltreated in school, so they intentionally engage with the school personnel and work to cultivate a supportive learning environment.

According to St. Mary et al. (2018), the teacher's role is pivotal in creating a learning environment that will foster all students' talents and provide positive experiences. To this day, mathematics is not my strong suit, even though I am a business professional, and my disdain for the subject is the result of my early experiences. While I was fortunate to be raised by parents who advocated for me in school, many Black girls do not share my experience, which is why I am an advocate for research in this area.

Exposure to Success at an Early Age

According to Hughes (1988, p. 65), "Minorit[ized] women students have the most limited access to ethnic role models and mentors like themselves." This results in Black girls having to navigate the development of their professional and sociopolitical identities independently, especially if they aim to serve in executive roles when they are older. Black girls need to see influential Black women who serve in roles that are antithetical to gender stereotypes and who mirror success in a great variety of professions, such as business, science, and politics. According to Bage and Martinot (2011), it is important to expose young girls to female role models to encourage them to aspire to high-status positions, where at present they are greatly underrepresented and negatively stereotyped. Aspiring to achieve success begins by being exposed to a variety of places, professions, and people. According to Carter Andrews et al. (2019), conversation spaces such as "sister circles" are critical to Black women developing kinship and community.

Unlike many young Black girls, I was fortunate that my parents exposed me to mentors and organizations throughout my youth, such as the American Red Cross, where I was an HIV/AIDS peer educator. I was also a member of the Nassau County Youth Board, several athletic associations, and an entrepreneur group where I networked with professionals of color whose personal and professional goals mirrored mine. My parents' goal was to help me cultivate a sense of social and political responsibility, as well as a strong sense of identity. My parents' support, coupled with that of a wide range of organizations, such as youth boards, sports teams, human relation groups, and Black educator committees fostered my growth, widened my sociopolitical lens, and enhanced my belief that I could attain leadership roles.

Transitioning from K-12 to College

Even as systemic and institutional racism persists, young Black girls' transition from K-12 to college is cause for celebration. According to Arnett (2019), Gloria Ladson-Billings reminds Black girls to "remember who they are and understand their place on campus, and maximize opportunities" (p. 1). The strongest influence on young Black girls usually comes from outside their institution, where their impact is visible in the community. According to Jones (2021), affinity spaces for Black females have supported their development, healing, and resilience.

In my experience as a young Black woman, my preparation for college was synonymous to preparing for war, and I had assembled an arsenal of tools. The most essential tools during those years were the technology courses that had taught me to compete with the best and most innovative; affinity spaces where I encountered like-minded pre- and post-collegiate Black and Brown girls who supported me and offered words of affirmation; and, finally, the fellowships I experienced alongside professionals who looked like me and offered me guidance so I could maximize my potential.

While the recent increase in the number of events centered on supporting Black and Brown communities is important, I believe the more important key to success is having mentors who mirror young Black girls, support their endeavors, hold them accountable to being their best selves, and remain steadfast in their commitment. As Ladson-Billings (1994) reminds us, the learning process must include the experiences and culture of the students it is serving.

Transitioning from College to the Professional Sphere

In the transition from college to the professional sphere, it is critical to embrace one's visibility as a professional and as an expert in one's field. In an interview conducted by Lomboy (2020), Pamela Carlton and Alexis Smith offered five actions that lead to success: (1) maintaining resilience in the face of challenge, (2) building social capital and crafting conscious relationships, (3) taking risks and embracing all opportunities, (4) breaking barriers and developing confidence, and (5) staying true to your values in the face of adversity.¹

As a Black woman whose trajectory led her to the height of corporate America and higher education, I frequently had to readjust my lens in the presence of those who were intimidated by my golden-brown melanin and surprised by my ability to articulate. This need to readjust increased my fervor to build communities that would encourage, lead, and mentor Black and Brown women in ways that taught them how to conquer the world, using the arsenal of tools I had used.

After I left corporate America and continued in higher education, I noticed only a small number of Black women in my business courses who were dedicated to graduating with their master's in business administration. As an entrepreneur, I acted on that observation by transitioning the focus of my existing company, which centered on business development, to focus instead on the professional development, leadership goals, and mentoring of young Black women. My company seeks to give a voice to the voiceless and encourage the historically invisible to shine in all facets of life. At my company, which centers its practices on teaching, mentorship, and storytelling, we actively revitalize the hearts of Black women.

Where Do We Go from Here?

The challenges of life pre- and post- college do not occur in a vacuum, as they include the persistent issues of stereotyping, discrimination, and marginalization. There is no clear roadmap to success for young Black women, and there is still a lack of Black women leaders in the boardroom, much less around the executive table. Therefore, it is essential that I and others like me teach young Black women how to develop their sociopolitical identities, challenge the status quo, channel their potential, and create their own seats at the leadership table.

As failure is now viewed as an institutional problem (Smith, 2000) rather than an individual student or racialized problem, many schools are diversifying their pedagogical approaches. According to Delpit (2012), when course readings and activities do not support culturally relevant learning, educators must proactively refresh the curricular materials and create conversations that enable diverse voices to be heard and supported in the classroom. Strategies to achieve this include diversifying the teaching workforce by employing teachers of color and revamping the curricula across disciplines to include culturally responsive content, pedagogy, and community building. It has been imperative throughout history to create and sustain wide-ranging learning communities. According to Hurtado et al. (2012), learning communities provide an opportunity for growth through networking, difficult conversations, and embraced practices to help each other out. I believe these communities must include mentoring relationships that enable margin-

alized children to see themselves represented, and to see possibilities for themselves across the leadership sector.

Improving young Black women's access to opportunities and leaders and to success throughout their school years will require changes in the curriculum and in the way teachers think. Above all, the curriculum should include culturally responsive teaching that reflects the identities of all cultures. It also should incorporate contextual learning, a library of culture and community and relationship-building between teacher and student. As this more responsive mode of teaching is implemented, it must include strategies to clear the roadway to success and leadership for Black women. According to Haussler and Hoffman (2002, cited by Baker, 2013), these strategies should include real-world experiences that are of interest to the students, students' participation in the development of rubrics to assess their learning, and classroom interactions that value the students' points of view. To be successful, the teacher must employ materials that enable all students to participate and allow time for hands-on inquiry (Baker, 2013).

Having knowledge of and insight into students' diverse learning styles and cultures will help teachers develop strong bonds with their students and give them further insight into how to develop a culturally rich curriculum. Although reform-based strategies are not a panacea, they can encourage sociopolitical reflection and help students build leadership skills, and they can enable young Black girls to envision themselves in leadership roles. If Black girls are to understand why they must strive for leadership roles, they must first understand the current plight of the Black woman. This is where the history and the lived experiences of Black women must be heard and delved into.

Ladson-Billings (1994) argues that oral narrative has become an important force in the lives of African American women as they unmask the social injustice that is present in their lives. America's history is tarnished by a litany of violence against Black women, who have endured enslavement, rape by their slave masters, despair, humiliation, and desecration. The emergence of Black female leaders in the United States represents a history of struggle for liberation, of overcoming overwhelming oppression to "lift" the Black community out of racial, economic, and educational subjugation (Hanson, 2003). Black women leaders are not spared the prejudice associated with their race and gender, but changes in the education system have enabled them to be sufficiently empowered to rise and create a community of Black women leaders (Reed, 2012). Black women banding together around their sociopolitical power is a way for them to build real power, and their civic engagement promotes their feelings of belongingness. This emerging identity of having sociopolitical power is another vehicle for dismantling oppression, disrupting injustice and inequity, and uniting around Black women leaders.

According to Baker (2013), instructional strategies that focus on the student rather than on the teacher have helped to narrow the achievement gap as it relates to intersectionality. Instruction and activities that foster purposeful understanding of culture and engagement help to improve student achievement and provide the opportunity for Black girls to have voice and agency in their own education. Being listened to provides a way for these girls to deconstruct stereotypes and transform inequitable conditions while developing their sociopolitical identities. This shift to Black female students having a voice and representation in the curriculum, engaging with their communities, and promoting real-life action strategies is key to creating a future in which Black women leaders will thrive.

As diversity initiatives increase in the corporate sector and in academia, it is imperative that they center on a vision of future leaders. As long as Black girls remain marginalized, measures must be taken to alter the learning environment so that it incorporates every facet of students' lives—culturally, emotionally, historically, socially, and politically. Black girls must be taught to think critically about social and political change, and to recognize that they are not failing the system but that the system is failing them. As Black girls and women continue to unite to increase the salience of their voices and their representation in society and in leadership roles, Black women must remain steadfast in our commitment to deconstructing perceptions that plague them in school as well as in their work. We must continue to cultivate and support the aforementioned initiatives to encourage, embolden, and empower Black girls as they pursue a pathway to having influential leadership roles.

As a Black woman and current doctoral student who has been told to be silent in my professional career, I know the time to show up is now. Black girls must see more Black women as senators, judges, physicians, lawyers, and teachers. Young Black girls must be informed in ways that encourage them to aspire to leadership roles and create their own seats at the table.

Endnotes

¹ Pamela Carlton is president of Springboard, a consulting firm that assesses organizations for inclusive culture. Alexis Smith is an associate professor at Spears School of Business at Oklahoma State University, whose research spans workplace issues such as gender, diversity, bias, and discrimination.

References

- Arnett, A. A. (2019, November 5). Live panel discussion ensuring equitable access and inclusion during a pandemic. *Diverse Education*. <https://diverseeducation.com/article/158957/>
- Baker, D. (2013). What works: Using curriculum and pedagogy to increase girls' interest and participation in science. *Theory Into Practice*, 52, 14-20. doi:10.1080/07351690.2013.743760
- Bagès, C., & Martinot, D. (2011). What is the best model for girls and boys faced with a standardized mathematics evaluation situation: A hardworking role model or a gifted role model? *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50, 536-543. doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02017.x
- Carter Andrews, D. J., Brown, T., Castro, E., & Id-Deen, E. (2019). The impossibility of being "perfect and white": Black girls' racialized and gendered schooling experiences. *American Education Research Journal*, 56(6), 2531-2572.
- Delpit, L. D. (2012). *"Multiplication is for White people": Raising expectations for other people's children*. New Press.
- Dotson, K. (2011). Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, 26(2), 236-257.
- Epstein, R., Blake, J. J., & Gonzalez, T. (2017). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*. Georgetown Law, Center on Poverty and Inequality.
- Foner, N. (2008). Gender and migration: West Indians in comparative perspective. *International Migration Journal*, 47, 3-29. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2435.2008.00480.x
- Grant, L. (1994). Helpers, enforcers, and go-betweens: Black girls in elementary schools. In B. T. Dill & M. B. Zinn (Eds.), *Women of color in U.S. society* (2nd ed., pp. 43-63). Temple University Press.
- Hanson, J. A. (2003). *Mary McLeod Bethune & Black women's political activism*. University of Missouri Press.
- Hughes, M. S. (1988). Developing leadership potential for minority women. *New Directions for Student Services*, 1988(44), 63-75. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.37119884408>
- Jones, S. M. (2021). Not by magic: Perspectives on creating and facilitating outreach programs for black girls and women. *Journal of African American Women and Girls*, 1(1), 61-79.
- Ladson Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. Jossey Bass.
- Leonard, J., & Evans, B. (2008). Math links: Building learning communities in urban settings. *Journal of Urban Mathematics Education*, 1(1), 60-83.
- Lombay, E. (2020, November 6). *Race and work in 2020: How Black professional women break barriers and achieve success*. The Wharton School. <https://www.wharton.upenn.edu/story/race-and-work-in-2020-how-black-professional-women-break-barriers-and-achieve-success/>
- Morris, E. W. (2007). "Ladies or loudies?" Perceptions and experiences of Black girls in classrooms. *Youth & Society*, 38(4), 490-515.
- Nyachae, T. M. (2016). Complicated contradictions amid Black feminism and millennial Black women teachers creating curriculum for black girls. *Gender and Education*, 28, 786-806.
- Pratt-Clarke, M. A. (2010). *Critical race, feminism, and education: A social justice model*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smith, P. J. (2000). Failing to mentor sapphire: The action ability of blocking Black women from initiating mentoring relationships. *UCLA Women's Law Journal*, 10, 373-467.
- St. Mary, J., Calhoun, M., Tejada, J., & Jenson, J. M. (2018). Perceptions of academic achievement and educational opportunities among black and African American youth. *Child and Social Work Journal*, 35, 499-509. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-018-0538-4>
- Villegas, A., & Irvine, J. (2010). Diversifying the teaching force: An examination of major arguments. *Urban Review*, 42(3), 175-192.
- Walker, J., Wilkins, A., Dallaire, J., Sandler, H., & Hoover-Dempsey, K. (2005). Parental involvement: Model revision through scale development. *The Elementary School Journal*, 106(2), 85-104.

Dina C. Skeffrey is a doctoral student in the Department of Learning and Instruction of the University at Buffalo, The State University of New York. Skeffrey is the administrative director of Binghamton University's NYC MBA programs, an adjunct professor of business at New York University, and founder/CEO of Renaissance Consultants LLC, a company devoted to providing mentorship and professional development for young women pursuing careers in business, entrepreneurship, and higher education. She can be reached at dcs12@nyu.edu.