Teaching while Black and Female: Navigating Mental, Curricular, and Professional Aggression

Abstract

It is evident that many Black women teachers (BWT) are leaving the teaching profession because they neither desire to nor are able to navigate the mental, professional, or curricular pressures of teaching. In this article, we use the story of Alicia to explore the instructional, professional, and emotional stress that many Black women teachers endure. We also provide insight on theoretical constructs and practical applications that impact BWT. In addition, we examine approaches that engage the retention of Black women teachers through a process of personal and professional support systems.

"Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated, but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society." Kimberlé Crenshaw, 1989

Fighting the Good Fight: Alicia's Story

Alicia was excited about becoming an elementary school teacher. She was vocal, participatory, and led many group discussions and projects as a teacher candidate. More importantly, she impacted her classmates by providing the perspective of an African American woman who had to navigate the cultural incompetence and racial fragility of White students, teachers, and administrators. Alicia was a self-professed feminist and a perfect teacher candidate and student. She excelled in student teaching and completed the program with a 3.8 grade point average. Alicia decided to teach in the inner city. Her dream was to teach second-grade and teach the same students until they reached the fourth grade. She had a mission to change her students' perspective and educational outcomes especially her girl students.

Alicia was hired to teach second grade in an elementary school where the student population was 90% African American and 10% Latinx and all the teachers and principals were women that included three African Americans, one Latinx, twenty-six White teachers, and three White principals. Alicia's first year was a mixed bag of successes and challenges. Although she reported zero referrals, no D's or F's on report cards, and her students outpaced other second grade students on grade level tests, she received neither recognition nor support from the principal or fellow teachers. In fact, she

was subjected to the visceral ire of her grade level colleagues. They taunted Alicia about giving students false hopes, preparing them for a harder fall in future grades, and trying to become the students' and parents' favorite teacher by attending events in her students' community. They also interrogated her about the content she used in her class. She was told by the grade level chair that she had too many "Black books" in her class and that she should have pictures of other races on the walls. But the worst for Alicia was the chair's insistence that she teach the story of thanksgiving just like the other teachers on the grade level. Despite the social, professional, and emotional aggression, Alicia continued to teach from a Black women perspective because of her commitment to her students, prayer, and support received from her Black and Latina colleagues. She believed it was her responsibility to decrease the number of Black boys and Black girls entering the school-to-prison pipeline and to give her students a historical identity that countered what was taught in media and schools.

Six years later at a community gathering Alicia and her husband ran into a parent of her former student. Mr. Reta raved about his child's experience in Alicia's class and chatted about how his daughter still talks of the emotional and academic things she learned in second grade. Now a seventh grader, Mr. Reta's daughter was a bright student from Alicia's first year of teaching and Alicia was honored that Mr. Reta's daughter had remembered the social and academic lessons she taught. It had been six years since Alicia had taught Mr. Reta's daughter and she confessed to Mr. Reta that she had taken a two-year break from teaching. She cited the mental and emotional stress of navigating whiteness in the context of a majority African American population, the deafening noise of white fragility as it relates to curriculum content, the stereotypical tropes of Black women, and constant disrespect for home language and nonwhite culture. Mr. Reta expressed his regret, but assured her that health is most important. Alicia felt a tinge of guilt for leaving Black students but knew it was for her sanity. Though Alicia was happy and fulfilled as a successful real estate broker, she kept her teaching credentials current and attended a local education conference once a year.

Alicia started work as a new teacher confident that she was equipped to handle any challenge she could face in her in the classroom. Like many Black women teachers (BWT), she viewed teaching as activism or an opportunity to actively and holistically support students. Alicia like many Black women teachers understood teaching as an "endeavor that simultaneously addresses content, classroom management, pedagogical skill, and life lessons" (Dixson &

Dingus, 2008, p. 832). In addition, Alicia believed that delivering accurate curriculum content coupled with nurturing strong racial and social identities was a form of mothering that was her reasonable service to her students. Dixson and Dingus (2008) describe this notion of teaching as spiritual or common sense for BWT. Perceiving teaching as a spiritual act underscore a care that require the sacrifice of status quo teaching, harmful content, and professional conformity. After four years of teaching, Alicia could no longer contend with the mental and emotional stress of navigating whiteness, white fragility as it relates to curriculum content, and constant disrespect for nonwhite cultural experiences and ways of knowing.

In this article we examine three major issues that impact Black women teachers' effectiveness, stability, and influence in schools. These issues include: mental and emotional health, curriculum fatigue, and professional stability. Secondly, we explore theoretical constructs and practical applications to support BWTs as they navigate the politics of schooling. Thirdly, we provide practical solutions that support retention of BWTs in PK-12 schools. And finally, we provide recommendations and resource in an effort to engage others in supporting the retention of BWTs.

Mental Health and the Pressures of Racial Stress

Alicia could not have imagined the level of mental and emotional stress she would experience in her role as a teacher. The challenge of burdening racial stress on a daily basis was crippling and contributed to a diminished sense of mental and social health. The constant barrage of aggression toward racial identity and cultural perspective is a common phenomenon for Black women teachers. Unfortunately, in school settings, racial aggression and stress not only

burdens teachers it also marginalizes students. DiAngelo (2011) contends that racial stress on Black people is a product of white privilege and white fragility that manifest itself in a form of racial taxation. Meaning that Blacks are often taxed with additional responsibilities, as it relates to diversity and inclusion, speaking and representing an entire culture, and shouldering the guilt of whiteness. Cultural taxation can also be a self-imposed or a personality stressor as many BWT feel that it is their motherly duty to protect Black students from the racist ideology of schools. We argue that cultural taxation is a type of racial stress that refers to the psychological and social distress associated with implicit and explicit experiences with racism. And it is important to understand that race related stress can be experienced through interactions with people, objects, concepts, or language. BWT are particularly burden with racial stress as they suffer from multiple oppressions. Namely, the oppression experienced at the intersections of race, gender, personality, and intelligence. Regrettably, racial stress on the intersectional axis of race, gender, personality, and intelligence adversely impacts mental health and often causes BWTs to leave the classroom.

Anderson, McKenny, and Stevenson (2019) contend that racial discrimination is the primary social stressor for Black people. The incessant and omnipresent images, language, and culture of inferiority toward Black women teachers is endemic in schools. Carter (2007) suggest the racial discrimination produces racial stress that can result in anxiety, depression, personality disorders, and PTSD. Unfortunately, BWT are more susceptible to personality disorder, anxiety, and depression as they navigate racial stress and professional resistance to teach holistically. Like Alicia, many Black women teachers entered the profession understanding that they influence the mental, social, intellectual, academic, and spiritual lives of students. In addition to the pressures of state standards, testing, school reform, and

lack of resources, Alicia was also weighted with the pressures of protecting Black students

from the white supremacy ideology of discipline, the white-centered curriculum,

administrative indifference, and the lack of cultural competence from white teachers. The

strain of these mental and emotional weights compelled Alicia to leave the classroom for

mental stability and personal wellness. She could no longer endure the pressures of teaching

holistically in an environment that was determined to maintain white dominance. Carter

(2007) contends that the cultural taxation that Alicia (and BWT in general) experienced

injured her emotional and psychological state of mind and leaving was an act of personal

survival.

Because racism is complex, endemic in society, and shielded by White privilege,

teachers like Alicia often suffer in silence and invisibility. Franklin, Boyd-Franklin, and Kelly

(2006) assert that the invisible syndrome of emotional abuse and psychological trauma

caused by racial stress is common for nonwhite people. In order to retain BWT in classrooms,

there must be a concerted effort to support the mental and emotional health of BWTs,

discard the whitewashed and racist curriculum, and recruit more Black women and other

nondominant candidates into teacher education programs.

Whitewashed Curriculum and the Practice of an Anti-Biased Curriculum

School curricula in the USA are grounded in a white and male perspective. As a BWT Alicia

was aware of how this white-male perspective viewed Black students and other nonwhite

people. She felt it was her duty as a holistic teacher to provide an alternative perspective of

her students. In her responsibility to protect and nurture her students, Alicia create a cultural

and gender affirming classroom that championed critical thinking as related to historical

events, positive images of black people, and books to support healthy identity development of her students. In fact, she taught her students that there was major conflict and lack of trust between the Wampanoags and the white settlers at Plymouth; she introduced Jewel Plummer Cobb, Jane C. Wright, and Alexa Irene Canady as women in science and medicine; and her students learned about the enslavement of Africans. However, she was told by the grade level chair that she needed to teach the events of Thanksgiving like her colleagues, change pictures on her walls, and alter the types of books she had in her classroom library. This form of harassment and professional resistance is the invisible racism syndrome that is couched in white privilege, rooted in white fragility and is the cause of curriculum fatigue. As a white woman, Alicia's grade level chair couldn't accept or navigate a classroom that didn't promote whiteness. Alicia's curriculum content didn't portray whiteness as the source of good and normal. Consequently, she directly challenged the power and influence of whiteness in the curriculum. The grade level chair's resistance is a common response to a direct challenge to the normalcy of whiteness. DiAngelo (2011) contends that anger, defense, and argumentation are common and justifies responses by white people when racism is challenged or exposed.

DiAngelo (2011) states that "white fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves" (p. 54). While Alicia had to shoulder the racial stress of the school environment, her grade level chair couldn't handle the racial stress that is caused by the absence or minimization of whiteness in the curriculum. In fact, her response to the representation of Blackness in the curriculum was masked in implicit messages asserting that students weren't prepared for non-white centered content, some of the historical content was not appropriate, and historical accuracy

is not relevant for young children. As a holistic teacher, Alicia grappled with this edict and

ultimately decided to continue challenging the whitewashed curriculum and the grade level

chair. She kept providing age appropriate information and activities for her students to

understand historical content and to develop healthy racial and gender identities. Alicia even

provided culturally responsive resources for her grade level. Though she was met with

resistance, she continued to teach social studies, math, language arts, and science from

multiple perspectives. While Alicia supported a anti-biased curriculum, she focused much of

her content from a Black women point of view in an effort to counter white narratives of

blackness. Nyachae (2016) argues that it's the responsibility of BWT to counter the

criminalization and pushout of Black girls (boys) in the curriculum. As an educational

activist BWT must continuing to highlight and center black women and men in the

curriculum. Alicia pushed her colleagues and students to not only know content about black

women and men in history, science, art, and academics she also challenged them to critical

think about the context and perspectives of these Americans. She enrichened the curriculum

with narratives of Marie Van Brittan Brown, Otis Boykin, and Mary and Mildred Davidson,

while also teaching her students about social structures. It is important to challenge the

white status quo of curriculum content in an effort to not only provide students with

authentic content but to also support the identity, perspective and intersectional identities

of BWT.

Professional Stability through Black Feminist Theory

Alicia was subject to bullying and harassment in the form of professional resistance that

hampered her stability as a teacher. She found herself in the clutches of white liberalism that

created a mask of self-delusion for whites. White liberals use the speech of self-defense (Van Dijk, 1992) to protect their moral character against what they perceive as accusations and attacks. The grade level chair passively used the speech of self-defense destabilize Alicia's professional activism and mothering. So instead of her colleagues seeing Alicia's work as a benefit for her students, the grade level, and school, her professional disposition was problematized. As evident in the dismissal of her pedagogical style and disregard for her Black feminist perspective, her grade level colleagues neither valued her input nor supported her content knowledge. Nonetheless, Alicia employed compassion, rigor, and activism as a teacher, she viewed her role as a form of mothering that nurtured and provided protection from false content and racist pedagogy.

Early in her teaching career Alicia realized that she was not prepared to handle the racial, social, and professional politics of whiteness that permeated every aspect of the school. Teaching she could do, but the emotional stress of navigating professionalism from the gaze of whiteness was crippling. Nonetheless, as a survival tactic, Alicia hung on to Black Feminist Theory as a source of sanity and strength. Dillard (2016) suggest that BWT must embody collective memory and spiritual activism if they are to survive in the politics of whiteness in schools. First, the notion of collective memory requires BWTs to remember the shared legacy of oppression of all women of African descent (Dillard, 2016). It is the global remembering of the plight of African heritage women that can inspire strength in BWTs as they navigate hostile school environments. Similarly, the collective memory of African heritage women success in science, math, literature, art, and sports can inspire hope and perseverance. However, for Alicia, a more practical collective remembering of her BWT colleagues helped sustained her and stabilize her professional disposition. Remembering the

stories of Mrs. Ann who taught at the school for ten years and the stories of the other BWTs

help support Alicia's perspective on the politics of whiteness.

Second, Dillard (2016) argues that Black women must embody a spiritual activism

that spans time, space, and location. The practical outcomes of black feminism in Alicia's

classroom was found in the content that included Black's (mostly women) across time

periods, countries, and perspectives. Nyachae (2016) contends that Black feminism is black

pedagogy which is innately activist teaching. The goal of activist teaching is to empower

black girls and other students through a concerted focus on Black women perspectives and

works. Unfortunately, Alicia's activist pedagogy was met with great resistance that required

her to rely on a connection to the memory and works of ancestors who persevered. In sum,

black feminist theory served as a helpful approach to professional stability. Despite the

harassment, bullying, and marginalization Alicia was able to find practical support from

Black colleagues to navigate the challenges that were presented to her.

Retaining BWTs toward a Theory of Mentoring Networks

Alicia is an example of many BWTs that reach a crossroads in their teaching careers. This

crossroads is usually met with guilt about should they continue to 'stand strong' in the

classroom and provide their students, particularly Black and Latinx students, with the types

of educational experiences needed for them to reach their full potential without

compromising their racial and cultural identities versus compromising their own mental

health due to microaggressions and the bullying/harassment related to the intersectional

axis of gender, race personality and intellect. In other words, Alicia's story details the

importance of retention strategies that are effective for BWTs. While many approaches to

increase teacher diversity in the classroom focus on recruitment; schools fail to have any

systematic retention models to support the needs of BWTs as they face a different set of

experiences from their White female counterparts. As a result, it is imperative that we learn

the type of mentoring that is needed to positively influence BWTs to not only remain in the

teaching profession but to effectively navigate the aggressive behaviors they face within

their school buildings. Based on Dingus (2008) findings, a very effective model for retaining

BWTs is based on Intergenerational Mentoring Networks (IMN) within the same biological

family. We build upon this model and expand it to support BWTs across families,

communities, and the nation.

First, we must address BWT standpoints (Dingus, 2008; Dillard, 2016; Nyachae, 2016)

and the creation of educational experiences that are respectful and beneficial. Dingus (2008)

suggest that BWT benefit from strong teacher networks that support the cultural, emotional

and spiritual aspects of teaching. Collins (2000) asserted that teacher networks that support

Black women provide knowledge and experiences that transcend generations and support

the concept of "mothering the mind" (in Dingus, 2008). We contend that intergenerational

mentoring networks can provide customized assistance for BWT and their students. In an

effort to naturally build these intergenerational mentoring networks, principals and school

district leaders must create opportunities for veteran (20+ years of experience); mid-career

(10-20 years of experience); and early career (0-10 years of experience) teachers to meet

and network other BWTs for the sole purpose of supporting and enhancing their experiences

as teachers but also to support their students. Dingus (2008) highlights three major themes

that compel BWTs to join networks that include supporting culturally based teaching,

mentoring for leadership, and developing safe cultural spaces for expression and relationship building.

Supporting culturally responsive teaching is a primary component in establishing networks for BWT (Dingus, 2008). Unfortunately, many BWTs are not able to find networks within their schools where culturally responsive teaching is a critical component of support. Alicia found support for her teaching in the few BWTs in the school. She was able to network with other BWTs on their perspective on certain perspectives and context of curriculum content. She was also able to discuss the effectiveness of strategies and appropriateness of material. Secondly, Dingus (2008) noted that it is important for BWT to model professional behaviors and responses. This is highly important for teachers like Alicia that may not have been aware of the most effective ways to handle the daily attacks and not only survive but thrive into leadership roles within their school buildings. Intergenerational Mentoring Networks for BWTs provide valuable advice for "professional preservation, learning how to pace oneself across a school year, picking and choosing professional battles, developing strategies to overcome the politics of teaching and advice on professional attire" (p. 370). This valuable component of Intergenerational Mentoring Networks can be implemented to support BWTs in schools and school districts across the nation. This type of retention strategy can move more BWTs into leadership roles and extend their teaching careers. Lastly, Dingus (2008) noted that Intergenerational Mentoring Networks provided BWT with the "affirmation they did not receive" from White colleagues (p. 372). These cultural safe spaces allow BWTs to affirm their identities as teachers and fuel them to continue teaching. In addition, strong networks are important to handle the daily racist behaviors BWTs experience from their White colleagues. As a result, school and school districts should

facilitate these Intergenerational Mentoring Networks to allow BWTs to affirm themselves

in these educational spaces a way to rejuvenate themselves to more effectively serve their

students.

Conclusion

It is evident that many Black women teachers are leaving the teaching profession because

they neither desire to nor are able to navigate the mental, professional, or curricular

pressures of teaching. Unfortunately, BWT in many public schools must contend with the

burdens of disrupting the racist and sexist curriculum while surviving the politics of

whiteness (hooks, 1994; Kholi, 2016; in Nyachae, 2016). Despite this reality many BWT find

teaching a spiritual act of mothering where they feel a duty to enlighten, empower, and

protect black students. Alicia found herself in a common space for BWT that placed her

between a responsibility to children and a responsibility to maintain mental health. As a new

teacher, however, Alicia lacked the official support needed to navigate a successful year.

Fortunately, she was able to rely on the strength of Black feminism, prayer, and the support

of other BWTs to navigate racial stress, curriculum fatigue, and professional apathy.

Recommendations for Retaining BWT

1. **Mentoring Networks/BWT Highlights** – it is well evidenced that networks can enhance performance by normalizing the presence and value of people from different backgrounds. To retain BWT schools must establish official mentoring networks to support professional stability and personal dispositions. In addition to networks, school officials must also create opportunities to highlight Black women and their achievements through commissioning photographs, (re)naming rooms, so that staff and students from diverse backgrounds can see themselves as valuable members of the school community.

2. **Diversify curricula content**– seek to deconstruct curricula through the lens of both race and gender to counter the influence of the historically privileged position of white men. Adopt and adapt the Anti-Biased curriculum to engage teachers, students, and support critical knowledge. Also engage multiple perspectives on curriculum content using an intersectional worldview that include race, gender, religious, socioeconomics, age, and disability.

3. **Critical Staff Development**– ensure all staff are trained in two major categories. The first category focuses on workplace bullying. All staff must engage in training on adult-to-adult bullying and harassment and become aware of practical forms bullying that include cultural omission and microaggressions. Specifically, how these forms impact nonwhite women teachers. The second category is cultural competence training where staff learns the phases of cultural competence and how low levels of competence impact how the address/approach people of different cultures.

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Additional Resources

For Teachers:

1. The History of Black Scientists
   https://www.asbmb.org/uploadedFiles/MinorityAffairs/ASBMB%20-
   %20A%20History%20of%20Black%20Scientists.pdf

   This is resource is a timeline of Black American scientist from 1864 – 2013. While it is not exhaustive it provides teachers and students with a picture of important, innovative, and groundbreaking work of Black women and men.

2. Loewen, James (2007). Lies my teacher told me: Everything your American history textbook got wrong. New York: Touchstone.

   This book acknowledges several whitewashed lies, misrepresentations, and the hero making of controversial and racist leaders. It provides its readers with clear facts, photos, narratives, and charts of historical events that impact present day America.

3. Educational Conferences (National and International)

   National Association of Multicultural Education NAME
   https://www.nameorg.org/

   This conference focuses on advancing and advocating for social justice. It is a conference open to all educators and focuses on supporting indigenous ideals and countering white male narratives of others. It is also known as a conference for rejuvenation.

   International Conference on Urban Education ICUE
   https://www.theicue.org

   This conference focuses on collaborative and solution-oriented outcomes. While ICUE focuses on urban, urban is viewed in a broader context which enables the conference to be open to all. It is known for the dynamic speakers, impactful sessions, and therapeutic location.

4. Mental Health Support
   https://www.mentalhealth.gov/talk/people-mental-health-problems

   This site is designed by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and provides steps to support mental and emotional health.