

A Qualitative Study of Black Women Superintendents' Use of Critical Spirituality as Leaders

Dr. Stephanie Gumbs-Bennett

Manhattan University, United States

ABSTRACT

Black women comprised only 1.4% of superintendents leading school districts in the United States as of 2021 (Grogan & Nash, 2021). These professionals face challenges to their leadership driven by systemic inequities deeply embedded in traditional leadership perceptions regarding race and gender, and contend with being undervalued and overlooked, overwhelming exhaustion, stress, burnout, strain on the health and well-being, and unfair job expectations (Kingsberry & Jean-Marie, 2022). These challenges prompt the question: How do these women persist and prevail, seemingly against the odds? The purpose of this qualitative study was to amplify the voices of Black female superintendents by chronicling their experiences of professional advancement in public education. Drawing on Dantley's (2003a) theoretical framework of critical spirituality, this qualitative study sought to understand the ways in which Black women used spirituality as they encountered challenges and barriers in superintendent leadership. Informed by narrative inquiry, this study collected data through multiple semi structured interviews with Black female superintendents to uncover challenges to their leadership and identify how spirituality was a strategy for overcoming challenges. The findings of the study revealed four themes: (a) Servant Leadership, prioritizing the needs of others as a "calling" for their leadership, (b) Identity Matters, how Black women leaders centered their race and gender in voicing their commitments, (c) Spiritual Leaders, the role of spirituality in their leadership, and (d) Equity Warriors, how these leaders sought to dismantle systemic educational inequities. Following a discussion of these findings, this study provides recommendations for local school districts and leadership professional development programs.

Keywords: black women superintendents, educational leadership, race and gender, systemic barrier, resilience burnout and well-being, leadership persistence, underrepresentation in education, Intersectionality Critical spirituality