

REAL TALK: TEACHING AND LEADING WHILE BIPOC

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Leadership has no easy answers. In an environment that can be as calm as the sea on a windless day or as unpredictable as a hurricane, leadership is rife with complex questions. A simple leadership action can result in a tidal wave of progressive or adverse change for the organization. Leading through a global health pandemic coupled with a renewed spotlight on America's racial injustices, only increases the complexity of leadership at this present moment in time.

In particular, educational leaders lead and support the operational, cultural, emotional, and instructional needs of their communities. Teachers manage similarly within the microcosm of their classrooms with students. With the suffocating weight of standardized testing or tuition-paying parents demanding perfection, there is always immense pressure for school leaders and teachers to perform. Research shows that this pressure is significantly magnified for school leaders and teachers who identify as Black, Indigenous, Person of Color (BIPOC) (Khalifa, 2018). Despite great need, there are not enough first-person leader narratives that share and theorize from educational leaders' experiences (Lytle, et al., 2018). Given structural and systemic racism in and beyond the Academy, there are even fewer studies of BIPOC leaders' particular leader narratives and experiences (Pak & Ravitch, 2021; Santamaría & Santamaría 2013). Further, and highly relevant to us right now as BIPOC education leaders, there is a dearth of resources on BIPOC leaders' narratives as we face crisis, and it extends, intersecting crises like what we face right now in the United States (Coleman & Portlock, 2021).

In this chapter we share these practitioner voices from the education leaders we interviewed as a way to learn from and with them during this unprecedented time for all of us. We hope that lifting up and foregrounding these BIPOC crisis leadership experiences in this way will help us to create a platform for BIPOC leaders to connect, learn, and be inspired together as we build the future.

Transcending Adversity

The role of educational practitioners—leaders and teachers—requires the continued ability to negotiate between one's own needs and the needs of the community being served. For all leaders, knowing how to shift your language, tone, and approach to meet the needs of the intended audience is paramount to the success of the school community. For BIPOC leaders, these issues become deepened and intensified given the structural racism of schools (Coleman & Portlock, 2021; Santamaría & Santamaría 2013).

In this elongated crisis, we found that some leader characteristics are a true differentiator: they can help a community ride the turbulent waves of tension, uncertainty, and discomfort. In educational institutions across the United States, showing up unapologetically as oneself when you identify as Black, Indigenous, or as a Person of Color (BIPOC) is not at all easy. Teachers and educational leaders often describe having to code-switch in school, to manage parts of our identities in order to be better received (Anderson, 1999; Delpit; 1995; Delpit & Dowdy, 2002). This duality, this struggle with authenticity and the kind of double consciousness or "two-ness" that W.E.B. Dubois (1903) conceptualized, is a deep tension and source of racialized stress and trauma that many BIPOC folks contend with on a daily basis still (Anderson, 1999; Pak & Ravitch, in press).

Racial diversity among teachers and educational leaders have significant benefits for all students (Khalifa, 2018). Educators of color are seen as positive role models for students of color, are more likely to have higher expectations of students of color, to develop trusting relationships with students of color, to develop and enact culturally relevant curricula, and to play a critical role in ensuring equity (Egalite & Kisida, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). This relational and developmental work is critical for helping all students succeed, but especially students of color who do not often see themselves reflected in the teacher workforce or in the administrative offices (Love, 2019; Stevenson, 2014).

Transitioning to remote learning did not create new inequities. It not only exposed and intensified existing inequities that are legacies of racist institutions, it also revealed the truth of our unequal society as a whole. When COVID-19 forced schools to shut their doors, teachers and educational leaders scrambled to ensure that every child had a device. While most students were able to receive a computer, as one of the teachers shared, "a device and a hotspot does not equal access." While some

students may make significant educational progress, others will lose significant ground because of structural inequities, magnified familial dynamics, and shifting pedagogies. As we approach the new school year, we must reevaluate and co-create school models to more effectively respond to the needs of our learning communities (Ravitch, 2020).

The roles of teachers and educational leaders are difficult enough as it is. Factor in a worldwide pandemic and a seemingly endless reel of bolstered and violent anti-Black racism, teachers and educational leaders of color are shouldering the fears, tears, and anxieties of those around us, while having to “push through” and be resilient in such turbulent and threatening times (Baker, 2020). It is vital to explore and share the stories of the emotional and psychological toll it exacts on us, because we matter and this is not sustainable.

Black Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) bring a unique lens to our roles both in how and why we do the work and the distinct experiences we encounter with our colleagues and students as they enact their interpretations of our roles and leadership. As BIPOC leaders bring our own cultures and backgrounds, we also make room for fully seeing and affirming our students’ backgrounds. Likewise, we leverage our own experiences with inclusion and code-switching to help all students navigate their experiences in school and connection to adults in the building (Love, 2019). BIPOC teachers and leaders center relationships in our theories of action and instructional approaches, leading and teaching in a culturally responsive manner that reduces students’ racialized stress and therefore their wellbeing (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019).

Leading with People at the Center

The BIPOC teachers we spoke to lead from a culturally responsive approach, often without intentionally delineating their teaching and leadership style as such. We weren’t surprised to find educators (teachers and leaders) who framed their school’s immediate approach to the pandemic in care, who discussed what was gained and lost in instructional models based on their ability (or inability) to directly connect with students. Teachers described deep ways of knowing their students and their abilities. As a result, they framed recommendations for the upcoming school year centering and intentionally managing relationships. With students and faculty this might look like using looping as an instructional approach, or limiting in-person instruction to students new to the school (e.g., kindergarteners in a K-6 school or 6th graders in a middle school).

Likewise, leading with people at the center gives attention to how students learn, the specific types of support they need and the new emerging role parents play in the educational paradigm (Love, 2019). BIPOC teachers and leaders articulated a compassionate and empathetic lens for the stressors parents were facing at home, while also considering how to insert the pedagogical expertise of educators (Khalifa, 2018). Specifically, one leader expressed particular concern about ensuring Black students are encouraged and invited to continue taking academic risks, an issue that may often be in tension with parents’ desire to get the work done. Often parents want students to get the work done or to get it right. This must be balanced with building the muscle to take a risk whether or not the answer is right. This particular leader was actively grappling with how this might be accomplished going forward. Finally, BIPOC teachers and leaders almost universally recommended inclusion of a broad set of stakeholders (teachers and parents) to inform decisions about how school reopens in the fall.

Many BIPOC leaders come from communities that place a high value on inclusivity, collaboration and adaptiveness. These traits are in striking contrast to white supremacy culture but are powerful tools in navigating crises (Khalifa, 2018). Illuminating our discrete racial and cultural lens presents a unique advantage for educational leaders and teachers of color to lead through times of adversity. This leadership style and approach invites community actualization, giving the community agency and ownership to thrive amidst the tectonic shifts of the time and to cocreate a new way of educating and a new framework for education (Love, 2019).

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