

SURVIVING BLACK GIRL MAGIC, THE WORK, AND THE DISSERTATION

Christina Grant

Ed.D Candidate, University of Pennsylvania GSE

To: Black Women Pursuing Doctoral Studies

Re: Surviving Black Girl Magic, the Work, and the Dissertation

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On July 1 2020, Dr. Lisa Herring was sworn in as the Superintendent of Atlanta Public Schools (APS). I was randomly scrolling on Facebook and a friend of a friend posted the swearing in as a watch party for all to virtually attend. This is yet another reflection of the quarantine times in which we are living and leading. In a moment's time, in the middle of a pandemic, I could pop into the swearing in of a woman I have never met in a school district that is over one thousand miles away from where I live and work - I was blessed to have shared this moment with so many near and far.

I watched in awe as the very intersections of my race, my gender, my role, my education, and my research were, vicariously, on display. Looking at and listening to a Black woman, taking the helm of one of the largest school systems in the United States, wondering about her interview process, her choices that morning--her outfit, her hair--then I thought about her word choices, wondering about all of the thoughts that must be swirling in her head as she walked up to take the microphone (and that system). Then she spoke, she lifted up the question "Are our children well?" and then with power she asked "How do we manage the two seasons of life in which we find ourselves?" So powerful. The seasons she addressed are first of a global pandemic and then of a whole race of people calling out that our lives matter, our humanity matters. She promised academic grace, promised to serve our children well, and promised to commit herself, once again, to the seat of leadership.

This all reaffirmed my emerging research questions, Who is sustaining this leader? How is she taking care of herself? And after delivering such amazing and inspiring words, making such promises everyone knew she would keep given her track record, I wondered: What's the charge to her own life for the work before her? And what does that look like for so many of us, who every single day are working hard and wondering "How do we get right for our kids?" and "How do we get it right for our communities?" and "How do we get it right for ourselves?"

What are those experiences? What does it mean to just survive? What does it mean to chart a course toward thriving?

I have been thinking, researching, and writing about Black women leaders and our wellness and survival. I have had the honor of interviewing Black women superintendents to understand their lived professional journeys. Several things have surfaced from all of these readings and deep conversations that I wish to share with you all as you navigate your magic, your work, and the dissertation. And as I go on this journey myself now, I offer these words of encouragement, thoughts, ideas, and early research findings to the Black women today leading at this moment in time when many of us were called to serve, and attempting to complete a dissertation. These are just some early thoughts about *you*, for you, about how you should not just focus on surviving, but thriving - through it all.

Here are five chapter themes (framed around the dissertation design) I offer along this powerful and important journey.

Chapter 1: Introduction and Significance

Defining YOUR Why.

You matter. You're not alone. And this too shall pass. Sometimes you may be in class and no one looks like you or sounds like you...they don't have the experiences that you have had, or you're struggling with a huge case of imposter syndrome. You are wondering if you can really complete the task before you, and you're attempting something that you may have seen some others complete, but you're just unsure that you can complete it yourself – especially now. Remember that Chapter One of the dissertation makes you think about your *WHY*.

Why are you putting together this study? Why are you going on this research journey? Why are you pursuing this degree at this specific time? When you think about your own why and your own journey, I encourage you to write a research question for yourself, a theory of action of self. What is it that you hope to learn about yourself? How will this process or getting this degree, help you go on a journey of inquiry about yourself? When I think about one research question that I would frame for myself if I

were to start over, my question would be: *How will the process of earning my doctoral degree allow me to conquer fear, break generational curses, and find a new level of confidence in myself?*

We have to be our own cheerleaders and we have to ensure that we're pushing ourselves forward. This starts with being honest about why you are choosing to pursue these studies in the first place. I encourage you, as you continue on this journey, to think about your own significance, why are you significant, why is it important for you to be on this journey at this time. And then, know, that this too shall pass. It is unbelievably hard and complicated right now, regardless of your circumstances, and you should have faith that there is something on the other side, something that is better. Hopefully defining your why gives you the courage and grounding to push further.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Finding your Faith, Reading for Pleasure, and Centering Yourself

Chapter Two of the dissertation journey is the chapter that has broken all of my spirits. The formal review of academic literature is a humbling place, and it forces you to go within, to fight with research and become the master of the content that you are seeking to understand. This often feels like building an intellectual bridge as you attempt to cross it. I would encourage you to go through this same kind of disciplined and discerning exploratory process within yourself as you continue through this dissertation journey. The focus is self-care, how do you nourish and sustain yourself through all of this?

Think about the literature and the sacred texts that guide you in your life. Think about the readings that bring you joy, the readings that encourage you, the readings that push you forward. There are three types of literature that I'm reading right now as I'm going through the dissertation process. First, I'm going deep within the literature of my research topic, but I'm learning in this process that I have to balance the review of literature for the dissertation and the review of literature for self. I'm spending more time with my Bible. I would encourage you to spend more time in the sacred texts of your faith, or in a spiritual text that allows you to think beyond what's directly in front of you, texts that help you think more about yourself in this place, at this time. Even if you find an app that sends you a daily dose of encouragement, your immersion in reading this type of literature is transformational at this time.

No one in the doctoral program is going to tell you this, but you should continue to read for pleasure. Many people who have gotten on the other side of the degree will say "Oh, you need to spend four hours a day reading and the only things you should be reading are things for your dissertation" which is not true. You should take time to read magazines. I have read one or two books that were just for joy--romance, comedies, novels, listening to books on Audible. When you find yourself stuck, and you find yourself pressing pause on your research, grounding yourself in another type of literature will still stimulate concepts for your research. I've sat and listened to a book and said "hey, I should really think about my outline in a different way."

Last, but not least, think about how to intentionally identify and engage literature that allows you to center yourself. Try monitoring your social media intake. It's critically important to call that out at this time. You must ground yourself in literature (media) that is affirming, that pushes you forward, that centers your needs and your desires at the forefront of the conversation.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Finding the Balance, Rest, and Meditation

Chapter Three is the "How are you going to get this done?" chapter.

Method #1: You have to find balance where there is none.

If you are a wife, a mother and/or if you have a career that is all-consuming, you understand how these realities impact your life as a Black woman, and you know that someone telling you to find balance right now might send you over the edge. But if you step back and you say to yourself, "getting this degree is not just important to me, but it is important to the lives that I directly impact and support", and it will push my community forward. For me that has meant carving out time every day on my calendar for academic engagement, building out a pretty expansive timeline with my dissertation chair, and optimizing time management. It has meant sharing these strategies with people who care for me, and it has also meant **saying no**.

When someone says, "Oh do you have time to talk on the phone about x y and z?" I now say "No I'm writing." Or when they say "Oh, can you hop on this zoom because we're celebrating this thing?" I feel fine saying now "No I'm writing." Finding balance means structuring your time and saying no.

After you have blocked out your research time I encourage you to then step back and say, "Where is my rest?", "When will I intentionally be taking time to step back, step away and get centered?" It's only when you're able to give the body rest that you are able to think, create, and have clarity to attack the dissertation journey in a way that feels healthy and is productive. Without

rest there's exhaustion, without rest there's anxiety, without rest the false narrative that you can't complete this task sets in...all of your fears start to become real if you are too tired.

The practice of meditation and being still has been transformational for me. Those of you who are in the process of data collection, or even preparing to present your proposal in your oral hearing are filled with stress. There is so much anxiety, fear, and stress attached to every part of the dissertation journey. I would offer that meditation has allowed me to take moments of time to center myself, to collect my feelings, to journal about what I'm experiencing at a specific moment. This has grounded me and given me the courage, strength and energy to move forward. Meditation doesn't have to look as fancy as we may see it on television, it doesn't have to involve candles or sage, it literally can be a repeated mantra or repeated practice of stillness where you allow yourself to breathe and notice your breath. You can repeat a chant that brings you joy, happiness, or courage like: I am enough.

Here's a sample way to practice. Set a timer on your phone for five minutes. Find a comfy space. Close your eyes. You may want to put on an instrumental song, and just sit for five minutes and say, *I am enough. I am enough. I am enough. BREATHE DEEPLY. I am enough. I am enough. I am enough.*

If you've completed a full outline of your dissertation, every single day you could meditate and set an intention (lovingly) on the one (realistic) thing you want to accomplish for the day. I know that when I am feeling most overwhelmed or am my most stressed out, taking five minutes to do a meditative practice calms me down, helps me find my center, and allows me to push through to that next hour and day. For many of us, this isn't even a week-to-week journey. This is a day-to-day or even an hour-to-hour journey of combatting anxiety, staying focused and pushing forward and, with energy, getting back into the research. When everything is crowding around you the first thing you will give up is your research. The practice of meditation, rest, and balance allows me to continue to reprioritize the things that are important, not just urgent, it reminds me that my research matters and that I am enough. Even though things are exceptionally hard right now.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

Journaling and Building Your Self-Care Data Set

Finding balance, rest, and practicing meditation are three methods that allow you to ground yourself so you can stay in the work. Chapter Four is all about exploring and learning about how you think about yourself during this process, unpacking a data set about you. I would encourage you to do this in the same way that you have thought about your data collection methods of balance, rest, and meditation. I'd encourage you to journal, reflect, and build your own self-care data set. When you start this, practice carving out time on your calendar just for doing your research. Carve out practices that allow for rest. When you think about reviewing literature, that grounds you in self-care which then grounds you in reading for your own pleasure. This then helps you in centering yourself, in creating a data set on your own self-care that starts to show you that things are getting better and you're moving forward. That all of your work to care for yourself is working all around, including in your research. And when you start to step back and look at what the data is showing you, you will see things about yourself you did not realize, "Oh wow I actually can complete this crazy process." You can also find moments when you are thriving through this process.

Chapter 5: Findings and Conclusion

You are needed. You are called. And you matter.

Here's the thing. I am knee deep in data collection. I've just finished my dissertation proposal. I'm in the process of cleaning up Chapters 1-3, making sure that they're really conceptually solid and methodologically tight. And so, I don't actually have a Chapter Five yet. I don't have the concluded dissertation that I can put in a bow and share with all of you and say like "Hey y'all I made it." But I am getting closer by the day.

I think there's something powerful about being a doctoral student and a Black woman and a systems leader at a time such as this.

We have yet to see what your light will bring forth in this world. We have yet to see the impact that your research will have on generations to come. And so it's critically important that you stay the course and remember, you are needed. If no one has said this to you, I will - you are needed. Let me be more specific, Black women pursuing doctoral studies at this moment in time are needed. The spiritual side of me says that you are called to do this work at this time. I believe that all of what you bring to your work and to your research is a calling. You are called to do this research. You are called to contribute to academia.

Black Women Matter.

We matter in education. We matter in academia. We matter in research. Our lived experiences matter. I applaud Black women who are on this journey, seeking to complete doctoral studies during a global pandemic. To all of my sisters at Penn GSE, I applaud you specifically because we're on this journey together. And to any Black woman who's doing research right now who may have said "I should pause my studies until there's a vaccine" or "I should think about my studies differently because I don't have all of the support I used to have" or "my family needs me, I should press pause." I want you to know that you matter. I expect you to keep going when you may want to give up. Keep going, keep writing, keep making magic.

Christina-Marie Grant is a doctoral candidate in the Mid-Career Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership at the University of Pennsylvania. She serves as the Chief of Charter Schools and Innovation with The School District of Philadelphia and an education consultant. Her research interests include educational leadership for black women, sustainability, systems leadership and the role of the superintendent.

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