

IN PURSUIT OF REVOLUTIONARY REST: LIBERATORY RETOOLING FOR BLACK WOMEN PRINCIPALS

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Abstract:

Research shows that Black Women principals are often assigned to lead and turn around the most challenging schools with limited resources. This article provides a brief review of the historical trauma and incessant work-related stressors that Black Women principals encounter. The strategy of Revolutionary Rest is proposed as a collaborative and communal based strategy to address the inequities that Black Women principals face when leading schools in the United States.

Keywords: Black Women principals, Intersectional Identity-Based Discrimination, Revolutionary Rest, Stressors, Seven Types of Rest, Equity Broker, Retool, School Leadership

Leading a school is a complex task consisting of endless demands from stakeholders, compounding accountability mandates, extensive middle management organizational duties and evolving educational leadership responsibilities. A recent survey conducted by RAND indicates that “84 percent of school principals are experiencing job-related stress” (Doan et. al, 2022, p. 49). While the level of stress is high for all school leaders, research shows that Black Women principals are enduring a disproportionately high level of incessant job-related stress because they also face working conditions that are mediated powerfully by their social identities, structural Anti-Black racism and broader discrimination in relation to their intersectional identities (Steiner et. al, 2022; Doan et. al, 2022; Jang, 2022; Nittle, 2022; Peters, 2012; Smith, 2021; Crenshaw, 1989). Research shows that Black Women Principals endure multiplicative experiences of denigration due to their intersectional identities that manifests in the form of second guessing, challenging decision making, patterns of inadequate support, exclusionary silencing, non-recognition of contributions and accomplishments, intentional undermining, insolence, gaslighting, discrediting with erasure, unrealistic expectations, pay gap differences, inter and intraracial misogynoir and expressing disbelief with dismissal regularly from direct reports, supervisors, colleagues, parents and school visitors due to their intersectional identities (Bailey & Trudy, 2018; Smith, 2021).

In addition, the byproducts of the pandemic have further complicated educational leadership for Black Women principals. The pandemic produced changes in standard operating procedures and public debate surrounding race and education generating additional burdens. After the George Floyd murder, school systems and companies throughout the nation committed themselves to anti-racism and paved a path to explore DEIB work by hiring consultants, equity officers, and Diversity personnel. However, one year later some of those same individuals are not being adequately supported to do the work that they were hired to do (Opperman, 2022; Woo et. al., 2022). In addition, anti-black racism has caused many educators of color to experience secondary racial trauma from news stories detailing the termination of Black superintendents and educators throughout the United States. The current political climate has magnified the target on the backs of Black Women principals and intensified the level of exhaustion they experience because it requires a higher degree of mental gymnastics, strategic pivoting and masking that negatively impacts their well-being.

Moreover, the pattern of inadequate support that Black Women principals are experiencing aligns to a phenomenon that is described as the glass cliff (Ryan & Haslam, 2005). CNN reporter Ellis reports that Black Women leaders are encountering glass cliffs because they are being offered positions to lead companies that are in crisis that they are expected to fix without adequate support (Ellis, 2022). Some may not expect the glass cliff to exist in education because it is antithetical to foundational aspects of education. However, numerous studies reveal that Black Women principals are often assigned to transform low performing schools with minimal resources and without adequate support (Burton et al., 2020; Peters, 2012; Smith, 2021). According to the research, when Black Women principals have been placed in these roles they advocate fiercely for their schools and students despite the challenges they face personally or professionally (Nittle, 2022; Peters, 2012).

Scholars proclaim that Black Women principals endure these circumstances because they are viewed as “others” or Superwomen who can handle any challenge presented to them without assistance which relegates them to a solitary category that does not recognize their humanity and consequently isolates them from natural opportunities to develop a sense of inclusion and belonging amongst their colleagues (Woods-Giscombe, 2019; Allen et. al., 2019; Jang, 2022). The supernatural characteristics that are assigned to Black Women educational leaders perpetuate a recursive cycle of intersectional identity-based discrimination because it reinforces the narrative that Black Women are superhumans capable of handling anything that

they encounter alone (Smith, 2021). Although it is well-documented that Black Women are able to operate in normalized chaos it is also important to understand that it negatively impacts their well-being (Ricks, 2018). Black Women have disproportionately higher disease burden rates for stress-related illnesses and allostatic loads than other women. Some scholars attribute the stress-related illnesses to the discrimination and racism Black Women experience (Allen, 2019; Geronimus et. al. 2006).

Despite the stress-related illnesses amongst Black women and lack of support, research suggests that Black Women principals continue to excel and work hard to advocate for the stakeholders in their schools, othermother students and staff and maximize limited resources to improve educational outcomes (Case, 1997; Geyton et. al., 2022; Jang 2022; Lomotey, 2019; Loder 2005). A recent study from the University of Minnesota determined that there is a positive correlation between Black Women principals and higher math achievement for students and it also revealed that Black Women principals foster conditions in schools that produce “high levels of teacher investment” (Jang, 2022). Supervisors often view these accomplishments as the standard for Black Women rather than a sign of excellence. Therefore, they rarely applaud their efforts, and they often fail to recognize the tremendous impact that it has on the health and well-being of Black Women principals (Smith, 2021; Allen et. al., 2019).

Hence, advocates and allies must highlight these issues of inequity in educational leadership. They must use the tools of statistics, research and current events to help others recognize that Black Women principals continue to endure high levels of intersectional identity-based discrimination that necessitates immediate action and support to increase the opportunity for Black Women principals to pursue well-deserved Revolutionary Rest. To achieve this aim, advocates and allies of Black Women principals must work collectively together with individuals who have the power to create conditions that will foster safe spaces for Black Women principals to pursue Revolutionary Rest.

What is Revolutionary Rest?

Revolutionary Rest is a type of authentic rest that extends the definition of the term beyond the concept of sleep as rest. Revolutionary Rest is a term that I use to describe the type of rest that allows individuals who have identities that have been historically marginalized and oppressed to experience authentic respite from minoritized stress and other discriminatory actions. Revolutionary Rest requires individuals to engage in multiple types of rest consistently over time. During her Ted Talk, Dr. Sandra Dalton-Smith describes seven types of rest that every person needs-Physical Rest, Mental Rest, Sensory Rest, Creative Rest, Emotional Rest, Social Rest and Spiritual Rest (Dalton-Smith, 2021). Individuals should consider how they will engage in several types of rest in order to truly experience Revolutionary Rest so that it becomes a lifestyle change rather than another itemized health checklist.

Collective Retooling: Revolutionary Rest for Black Women Principals As Essential

Promoting Revolutionary Rest for Black Women principals as Essential will require Collective Retooling from the masses. Collective Retooling means that those in the field of education must innovate and change the way that they support Black Women. Audre Lorde said, “For the Master’s Tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Lorde, 2007). Revolutionary Rest requires educators to provide the space and opportunity for Black Women principals to rest. Allies and advocates of Black Women principals must use their agency to translate the words of Lorde into new tools that will generate structures and systems that will allow Black Women principals to rest. The work of promoting Revolutionary Rest will require allies and advocates to intentionally reckon with the history of the past, recognize the calamities of the present and reimagine the future.

Retool: Resting As A Revolutionary Act

While it is important for advocates and allies to work collaboratively with Black Women principals as they pursue Revolutionary Rest, Black Women principals must prepare to resist, retool and reimagine their future which includes embracing the liberatory practice of Revolutionary Rest. Black Women principals have become accustomed to shifting, role flexing and engaging in respectability politics and tempered radicalism (Alston, 2005; Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Dazey 2021; Geyton et. al., 2022). Some of these choices have elicited self-violence, pampered those who oppress them and drained energy from Black Women principals producing a high level of stress, extreme exhaustion and illness. It is time for Black Women principals to retool and actualize Audre Lorde’s quote (1988), “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that it is an act of political warfare” (p. 27). Black Women principals must pursue Revolutionary Rest to thrive. This means that Black Women principals must visualize rest beyond the “typical” definition of rest that requires adults to sleep at least 8 hours a day. Black Women principals must retool and reimagine a future where they are thriving and practicing Revolutionary Rest as a lifestyle change.

Here are some agentic strategies for Black Women principals:

1. Listen to the Ted Talk “The Real Reason Why We Are Tired and What to Do About It” by Sandra Dalton-Smith, MD.

2. Develop a Rest Plan which allows you to engage in the seven types of rest from Dr. Saundra Dalton-Smith's Ted Talk throughout the month. Create a visual calendar of rest. Mark off different types of rest that you will engage in each day.
3. Plan how you will rest. When you implement your plan, remember to R.E.S.T.-Regularly **R**elax with **E**ase using **S**elf-Care to protect your **T**ime of Rest.

a. R-Regular Relaxation

Intentionally engage in relaxation every day. Select a task that helps you to relax. Ideas such as journaling, spending time with friends, taking walks, crocheting, foot soaks and meditating are some relaxation techniques that may help you.

b. E-Ease the Embrace

As you embrace this new journey of rest, ease into your plan. If it is too much for you to select a different type of rest each day. Try the same type of rest for a week or a month. Be gentle and kind with yourself.

c. S-Self-Care Solidarity

Create a self-care plan that is suitable for you. You must be in solidarity with you. Take inventory of how you take care of yourself. Self-care surveys are available online. The results will provide you with data to center your self-care practices on the type of self-care that works best for you.

d. T-Protected Time

Protect your time. When you decide upon the type of rest you decide to engage in for the day, schedule it into your calendar. Solicit your loved ones and friends to help you to implement the designated period of rest.

Conclusion

Advocates and allies of Black Women principals should work collaboratively together with Black Women to promote conditions that will support Black Women principals as they pursue the liberatory practice of Revolutionary Rest. This collective synergy may spark a sense of urgency and the initiation of a communal response rooted in justice to address the inequities Black Women face.

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