

Challenging and reconstructing controlling images of Black women teachers in school workforces: counter-narratives of agency, commitment, and resistance through consciousness of Black feminist thought

Educational research examining the lived experiences and the value of Black women teachers within the teaching workforce in England has remained under-explored. Tereshchenko et al. (2020) acknowledges that “research has not attended to the impact of nuanced inequalities that matter in the professional lives of teachers from different ethnic subgroups” (2020, p. 22). Further, Bradbury et al. (2022) state “there is a lack of research which examines the experiences of women of colour in teaching” (2022, p. 4). The ways in which Black women teachers in England experience their school workplaces as racialised spaces tend to be embedded and essentialised within broader conversations about a much wider aggregated demographic of ‘minority teachers’ or ‘BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) teachers’ and is often highlighting their oppression. Addressing the research vacuum specifically involving Black women teachers, beyond the leadership lens, this paper provides a platform for 10 participants at various stages of their careers to voice their racialised and gendered intersectional experiences of working in English schools. Moreover, rather than contributing to existing discourses on oppression and subjugation, its focus turns to positive counter-narratives of Black women teachers and the benefits of their presence in school spaces. It utilises the little used consciousness of Black feminist thought framework (Collins, 2000) to create counter-narratives of success, activism, and navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) to challenge dominant normative stereotyped views of Black women at work, which is rarely found in literature. This paper, therefore, adds to the discourse of Black feminist literature and provides an England-wide positive perspective of Black women teachers, which is scarce. To answer the research question, ‘How do Black women teachers successfully navigate and operate in white-dominated educational workspaces?’, this paper presents the outcomes of interviews with 10 Black women teachers to understand how they challenge normative assumptions of stereotypes or controlling images (Collins, 2000) and oppression to form professional identities grounded in agency, resistance, and commitment to enhancing social justice within their school workplaces. Counter-narratives were produced by examining their personal stories through the four lenses of consciousness of Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), as a mechanism to challenge and reconstruct prevailing stereotypes placed on Black womanhood. Through the four lenses of self-definition, self-valuation, self-reliance, and self-knowledge, thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2012) illuminated stories which revealed how Black women teachers engaged in activities of personal empowerment, despite facing racialised oppression and appropriated stereotyping within their schools.

Inductively emerged themes illustrate examples of research participants championing their own skills, qualifications and abilities, their commitment to young people's education and the teaching profession, utilising their agency for positive change, and resisting the practices of normative group members which maintain Black women teachers' subordination. Black feminist research recognises the importance of enabling participants to share their stories to create counter-narratives. Hence, narrative inquiry methodology was utilised, which centralised the lived experiences of those who chose to participate in this research. Narrative inquiry allows storied lives, which frame lived experiences, to act as windows to comprehend individual's social realities (O'Toole, 2018). Recruited through mutually known contacts who acted as trusted gatekeepers, the participants met the criteria of defining as 'Black or Black British', 'female', 'qualified as a teacher' and 'working in a predominantly white school staff demographic'. Personal stories were collected through unstructured interviews to provide participants freedom to narrate their experiences how they wished to. Further, Osler (1997) notes, interviews enabling Black women to share their personal stories can be painful as they recall incidents of perceived oppression. Therefore, participants' vulnerabilities were considered in the university's ethical approval process to mitigate any emotional harm and possible adverse effects of researcher/researched power dynamics. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed creating a rich and powerful dataset. To build trusting relationships, researcher positionality was also considered in depth, with assumed insider/outsider researcher positions interrogated, particularly as the researcher is not 'race' matched (Vass, 2017). As Black women teachers can contribute to the success of underrepresented learner groups, there are significant institutional implications and benefits to increasing their representation at all levels and recognising their value as staff members beyond stereotyped roles supporting behaviour and Black History Month (Haque and Elliot, 2017). Recruitment and retention could potentially improve with narratives which demonstrate how Black women teachers can thrive and be agents of change for social justice. Reverse mentoring schemes can develop school leaders' racial literacy to drive for structural and cultural changes to create more inclusive workplaces which

acknowledge the value of Black women teachers.

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Themes

Race, Equity and Social Justice