



# Paut Neteru: Dreams of Leadership and Liberation—An Autoethnography of a Black Female Charter School Leader Using An Africentric Approach

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This article seeks to document and critique concepts of social and material inequalities embedded in institutional policies and practices in neoliberal education, utilizing autoethnography to explore the obstacles and experiences of a Black female charter school leader using an Africentric approach to educating Black children. A conceptual framework that blends African-centered pedagogy, African womanism, and transformational leadership was used to guide the qualitative autoethnographic study that anchors this article. Use of the autoethnographic method provides an opportunity to examine the relational dynamics of the experiences of this Black female charter school leader in the cultural context of the Black community and neoliberal education. Data analysis was captured from autobiographical storytelling within three key time periods or epochs of the researcher's 17-year experience starting, operating, and closing a charter school. The article highlights findings that indicate how attempts to implement an African-centered approach to educating Black children, in a DC charter school, in the U.S. Eurocentric education model, in the neoliberal era, was compromised by neoliberal policies; and illustrates how reported findings support the need to continue to examine how children of color can be educated, not just schooled, in a manner that places them at the center of their learning, builds agency, and develops them into creative and critical thinkers and future builders.

**Keywords:** women, educational leadership, Afrocentric education, charter schools, women leaders, anti-racist, neoliberal education

## INTRODUCTION

The inability of the United States of America (U.S.) educational system to properly address the cultural and educational needs of Black students continues to be one of the most perplexing problems in U.S. society (Hopkins, 1997; Hilliard, 1998; Shockley, 2007). As the population of Blacks and other groups increase, scholars note that the culture of schools has remained ethnocentrically White, the teaching force remains overwhelmingly White and female, and the academic achievement gap between Whites and other groups persist (Shockley, 2007).

This article seeks to document and critique concepts of social and material inequalities embedded in institutional policies and practices in neoliberal education, through the lens of a Black charter school leader. I, as the researcher and subject, utilized autoethnography, as a research method, to explore the obstacles and experiences I experienced as a Black female charter school leader using an Africentric approach to educating Black children. The purpose of the study was to analyze and

interpret challenges and experiences during my journey as a Black female charter school leader, in order to expose issues that may be determinant for the limited representation of people of color in school leadership serving children of color and/or availability of African-centered schools to serve students of color. A secondary purpose of the study was to empower women, particularly, of color, to aspire to social justice leadership and demand social justice for women and disadvantaged children of color.

Two questions informed the focus and direction of this autoethnographic study, in an effort to critically reflect upon the social and material inequalities and obstacles often experienced by female leaders of color. This intimate process of examining a journey in my life, as a female charter school leader of color, offers increased understanding of the social phenomenon of leaders of color aiming to serve children of color in the midst of the current neoliberal education era. These questions included:

- In what ways have social and material inequalities shaped my journey as a Black female charter school leader?
- What lessons can be learned from the obstacles and experiences encountered during my journey as a Black female charter school leader?

A conceptual framework that blended African-centered pedagogy, African womanism, and transformational leadership was used to guide the qualitative autoethnographic study that anchors this article. My experiences as a Black female leader illuminated the social and material inequalities and obstacles that a Black female leader of color can experience. I recounted my experience as a charter school leader in evocative detail and connected my experience with the theories of African-centered pedagogy and practice, African womanism, and transformational leadership, through a critical analysis and discussion of the knowledge and meaning that emerge from the autoethnographic material.

The central element driving and orienting the data collection process was my recollection of events, epiphanies, and experiences as a Black female charter school leader. My experiences were compiled and presented using hindsight because of their relevance to the overall theme of leadership for women of color and the connection of these experiences to the questions that informed the study. The autoethnography was structured mostly as a chronological evocative narrative of my experiences during three key epochs of a 17-year experience, from 1999 to 2016. The three key epochs included School Start-Up & Opening, School Operations – Me as Leader, and School Closing.

Various techniques, outlined by Chang (2007), were used to facilitate recall, organization of memories, and events as data, including, but not limited to: (a) collecting other field texts such as personal epochs, letters, official and pop culture documents, photographs, personal-family-social artifacts, and life experiences; (b) visual tools; (c) school artifacts, familial and societal values and proverbs, and cross-cultural experiences; and (d) chronicling the autoethnographer's educational history.

The critical interpretation of the data was grounded in the following strategies (Bogdon and Biklen, 2007): (a) review of

published studies related to this research for comparisons of concepts, ideas, theories, findings, and analysis; (b) examination of implications of my findings for practice, current events, and theoretical orientation; (c) speculations of assumptions my audience may have; (d) strategizing of how to interpret to audience what I have come to understand; (e) telling the story, if there is an incident from the research that captures a major insight or understand derived from my work; (f) creative thought about where and how to tell the story and how it related to theory, my findings, and so forth; and (g) writing of a clear paragraph summarizing what I wanted to tell readers. Other critical data interpretation strategies included: (a) review of the data to identify themes; (b) written analytic memos for each theme while identifying its spatiotemporal characteristics; (c) study of documents for interpretation of the themes; and (d) summarized findings (Hatch, 2002).

## Definitions and Terms

Definitions and terms are provided in prose to familiarize the reader with article content and grounding literature.

## African-Centered Pedagogy and Ways of Knowing

*Africentricity/Afrocentricity*: seeking to examine every aspect of the subject place of Africans in historical, literary, ethical, philosophical, economic, and political life (Asante, 2000).

*African-centered education*: designed to center learning, for Black students, in their own cultural information (Asante, 1991b).

*African worldview*: Afrocentric worldview emphasizes the relevance of traditional African culture in contemporary life (Dixon, 1976; James-Myers, 1987).

*Africanist Womanism*: an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women (Hudson-Weems, 1988).

*Schooling*: process designed to provide an ample supply of people who are loyal to the nation-state and who have learned the skills needed to perform the work that is necessary to maintain the dominance of the European American elite in its social order (Shujaa, 1994).

*Womanism*: the term “womanism” is centrally located in the sociohistorical and linguistic worldview of Black women (Troutman, 2002), was coined by Alice Walker in 1983, and has been later used and refined by other African American women writers such as Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1993).

## Neoliberalism and Racialization

*Charter Schools*: created through a formal agreement between a group of individuals and a sponsor (e.g., a local school board, state department, or an independent governing board). Charter Schools either receive blanket exemptions from most state codes and district rules regarding curriculum, instruction, budget, and personnel, or they may apply to waive requirements. Most charter schools are expected to meet certain accountability requirements, such as demonstrating

student achievement and participating in state testing programs. (Yamashiro and Carlos, 1995).

*Neoliberalism*: a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade (Harvey, 2005).

*Racialization*: Omi and Winant (1986) and Winant (1994) used the term to indicate the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group. Fanon (2004) contrasted social conditions that were racializing against those that were humanizing, demonstrating how racial oppression organizes and constrains a universal recognition of human capabilities. Fanon's usage of racialization is posed as a necessary precondition for colonial domination and a hindrance to the process of internal self-making among Black subjects.

## Leadership

*Transformational Leadership*: in a democratic context means that leaders must lead for social justice while promoting dialogue rather than using their authority (Weiner, 2003).

## Grounding Literature

Literature designed to ground my story includes: 1) an assessment of African-centered education; 2) neoliberal education; 3) history and presence of Black women school founders in America; 4) African womanism, as a lens to describe my experiences as a Black female leader; and 5) Black women and transformational leadership and Black woman's leadership to ground my commitment to social justice leadership and an Afrocentric way of leading.

## African-Centered Education

Molefi Asante is seen as the pioneer of Afrocentricity (Asante, 1991a). African-centered education is designed to center learning for Black students in their own cultural information. Hilliard (1998) argued that problems for Blacks in education are inseparable from problems for Blacks as people. Because educational systems often are mirror-images of the societies in which they exist (Asante, 1991a; Hilliard, 1998), Black children educated in a society that does not support their African culture are only seen and see themselves as being acted upon. Eurocentric education teaches Black students to despise their own culture (Adams, 1997). Woodson (1933) describes the U.S. educational process as one which inspires and stimulates the oppressor with the thought that the oppressor is everything and has accomplished everything worthwhile, yet at the same time depresses and crushes the spark of genius in the African-American by making the African-American feel that the African-American race does not amount to much and never will measure up to the standards of other peoples.

Hilliard (1976) and Hilliard (1983) is critical of the whole educational (i.e., tracking, special education placement) and judicial systems that reinforce and justify the racist social order. Asante (1991b) called for a transformation of the Eurocentric curriculum content of public schools. Asante's

position is that education can provide cultural models of what is possible; therefore, in the absence of Afrocentric content, African American youth are deprived of self-affirmation, while racist attitudes are reinforced among other children.

Ladson-Billings (2006) described further how the U.S. education system looks at students as individually responsible for their success in school vs. understanding the complexity of how individual, family, community, school, and societal factors interact to create school failure for some students. Shujaa (1994) echoed how some of the most intelligent advocates of public school education continue to blame the victim as if children have the capacity to educate themselves. He shared how these same advocates overlook the ever present political, racial, and economic reality of the major consumers of public education, Black and Latino children. He spoke to the way in which White supremacy (racism) manifests itself freely in the structure and systematic destruction of millions of unsuspecting children and their parents.

## The Value of African-Centered Education – Writing the Wrongs

Shujaa's (1994) work provides a historical context for the perspective of the African American on education, including evidence of early writings that demonstrate that African Americans, as far back as the 1860s viewed education as a birth right in the same light as freedom. He reported that since the age of integration, a fight has persisted to educate African Americans, and that Black schools and the Black church led the modern fight for full educational and political equality. He described the fight as a battle for an equal and level playing field in all areas of human endeavor, not to sit next to White children in a classroom.

The independent Black school movement grew out of the Black empowerment struggles and initiatives of the sixties resulting in the development of African-centered schools around the country (Shujaa, 1994). The Council of Independent Black Institutes (CIBI) is the professional organization established by the African-centered independent schools. These African-centered leaders were influenced by Black struggle and the work of W. E. B. DuBois, Carter G. Woodson, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Marcus Garvey, Harold Cruse, Chancellor Williams, E. Franklin Frazier, Mary McLeod Bethune, and others (Shujaa, 1994).

The first National "Infusion of African and African American Content in the Curriculum" conference (Hilliard, 1998) exhibited the collective expressions of John Henrik Clarke, Asa Hilliard, Wade Nobles, and Ivan Van Sertima that there are qualitative and quantitative benefits for African American youths who are exposed to their heritage in school. Asante (1988) argued that African consciousness may be fostered by embracing traditional African cultural values and one way to this conscious orientation is through Afrocentric curriculum reform. Asante (1990) maintained that children who are centered in their own cultural information are better students, more disciplined, and have more motivation for school work.

Africentric education is viewed to purport to offer a holistic approach for bringing about a sense of agency for Blacks by using education as one vehicle for change in the Black community (Shockley, 2007). Some Africentric educationists believe that Africentric education attempts to equip Black children with self-knowledge for the purpose of instilling in them a sense of agency for the purpose of nation-building (Shockley, 2007).

## Educating Versus Schooling

Shujaa's (1994) research supports the author's commitment to the cultural responsibility to educate vs. school African-American students, as an African-American school leader. Shujaa differentiated between education and schooling. He defined schooling as a process designed to perpetuate and maintain the society's existing power relations and the institutional structure that support those arrangements. He further explained how schooling exerts an influence on members' achievement expectations through policies e.g., tracking and testing, reward systems (grading, and awarding credential), and patterns of human interaction (e.g., social inclusion and exclusion) that reinforce and are reinforced by the society's structural conditions.

Shujaa (1994) viewed the role of public schools in the United States to include: (a) foster the development of adequate skills in literacy, numeracy, the humanities and technology; (b) instill citizenship skills based upon realistic and thorough understanding of the political system, and support such skills by promoting questioning and critical thinking skills and teaching democratic values; and (c) provide historical overviews of the nation, the continent, and the world which accurately represent the contributions of all ethnic groups to the body of human knowledge. He maintained that public schools, upon achieving the three goals above, would constitute a significant step toward empowering all citizens with the kind of skills needed for full and equal participation in the society. He argued that it is an inappropriate interpretation of public schooling's societal role to expect it to provide for the achievement of ethnic pride, self-sufficiency, equity, wealth, and power for Africans in the United States, goals that require a collective cultural and political world view.

Shujaa (1994) further put forth that a world view can only be transmitted through a process of education strategically guided by an African American cultural orientation and an understanding of how societal power relations are maintained. He, in advocating the importance of Black students receiving an education (vs. schooling), expressed the importance of Black students having a deep understanding of the political, racial, economic, scientific, and technological realities that confront the very survival of African American people locally, nationally, and internationally.

Shujaa (1994) advanced the following as keys to achievement for Black children: (a) possess a deep understanding of the world in which they will have to function, with such knowledge anchored in positive self-concept and an environment that encourages growth; (b) realize that all education is foundational, introducing and reinforcing values in school and non-school settings; and (c) understand that successful development is difficult with a quality education, but almost

impossible without one. He believed it to be the responsibility of each adult generation of African Americans to ensure the existence of an educational infrastructure for transmitting knowledge to their progeny. He offered the following as steps in fulfilling such responsibilities: (a) develop collective practices for determining what cultural knowledge is to be transmitted; (b) assess the extent to which cultural knowledge is being transmitted in schools, churches, early childhood programs, and other settings where organized learning takes place; and (c) create new resources to satisfy any aspects of the cultural knowledge base not addressed by existing facilities. He argued that the meeting of cultural responsibilities by African Americans can be facilitated by understanding the linkages that exist between the process of school and the oppression of people of African descent.

## The District of Columbia's History of Separate and/or Unequal Education

The provision of education for Black students and school leadership in the District of Columbia are grounded in racial and political inequities. A paper on the history of school superintendents in the District of Columbia from 1865 to spring 2000 reveals major issues of race (Anderson, 2000). In 1805, when the City of Washington organized its public schools, including establishing a board of trustees for which the first president was President Thomas Jefferson, the public schools were available only for White students, primarily boys (Anderson, 2000). The initial private schools for free colored students were founded by slaves, who had been recently freed, and a private donor (Hine, 1960).

The District of Columbia Education System is unique in that the Congress approves its budget and it once was controlled by the U.S. Congress. The District of Columbia could be identified as a colony as it continues to be denied full representation in the Senate or House of Representatives and Congress has, periodically, intervened in its affairs. In 1900, two separate school divisions were established: one White, one Black. In 1954, *Bolling v. Sharpe*, a companion decision to *Brown v. Board of Education*, created one integrated system. Congress consistently underfunded the District schools, and particularly underfunded programs for Black students. In 1864, Congress ordered DC Schools to set aside the proportion of school funds to match the proportion of Black children in the school population.

DC's school system has a history of not supporting African-centered education. Dr. Andrew E. Jenkins, III served as superintendent in 1988. Dr. Andrew Jenkins believed that he lost his job because of his desire to introduce an Afrocentric curriculum (Anderson, 2000). Dr. Jenkins showed his support for Afrocentric education in one way by creating an assistant superintendent for Afrocentric education. Dr. Jenkins was terminated from his position before he could make the appointment.

## Neoliberal Policies

Darder (2016) provided a historical context for neoliberal policy to be in the midst of the antiwar movement and civil rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s, as the United States university

was challenged to break with its lily-White, male, and class-privileged tradition. Darder located the seeds of neoliberalism in the long-term authoritarian strategies put in place by conservatives who sought to win an ideological war against liberal intellectuals. Neoliberalism in education has been found to increase measures of accountability through high-stakes standardized testing, a practice with impacts that range from access to federal funding to classroom instruction focused on teaching to the test (Hursh, 2008).

Public education policy on a national level, as represented by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), sought to address continuing savage inequalities (Kozol, 1991) in the U.S. education system. Kozol (2005) argued that NCLB manifested itself as a part of a larger structural framework that fixates on Black bodies as problems. Leonardo (2013) described people of color as objects of the knowledge industry called schooling, as they are either victims of its imposition or targets of its improvement such that school reform's success is dependent on the alleviation of their plight. Leonardo (2013) suggests that NCLB could be No "Colored" Left Behind, as the Black figure arguably became the litmus test for the initiative's ability to decrease the achievement gap. Gillborn (2005) described the formation of the racialized subject and its society through education policy as a violent act. While neoliberal policies provide opportunities for community individuals and organizations to participate in public education, only organizations capable of accumulating large amounts of capital can effectively enter that space (Nygreen, 2017).

## Charter Schools – a Neoliberal Policy

Charters are a part of neoliberal reform, designed to promote equal opportunity to people of color and to the disadvantaged. Because many people of color are concentrated in disadvantaged urban communities, race is embedded in charter school policies (Duncan, 2014). Through processes of racialization, race manifests in government policies in overt and covert ways (Small, 1994; Winant, 1994; Miles and Small, 1999; Bonilla-Silva, 2010). In the 1990s, individuals, communities, and organizations viewed charters as an opportunity for educational self-determination and community autonomy. Multiple pitfalls and barriers that can complicate the development of charter schools and often influence their success or failure include the lack of start-up funds and building sites, lack of organizational and financial skills needed for the sustained operation of the school, and policy and regulatory issues such as special education requirements, acquisition of Title funds, and the hiring of highly quality teachers (Brett, 1998). As a personal reflection, I viewed charters as an opportunity to fill a need for meaningful educating of disadvantaged Black students and the school community to be self-determined.

## Black Women School Founders

Literature on the history and presence of Black women school founders in America is presented to provide a context for my experience as a Black female charter school founder and leader. The African American community established schools for their

children from the beginning of their experiences in America (Anderson, 1988). During the enslavement of Africans in America, great risks were taken by many enslaved to learn to read and write (Douglass and Stepto, 2009). Piert (2013) described how newly emancipated African Americans intensely desired an education that they hoped would pave a path for participation within U.S. society with all the rights and privileges of first-class citizenry. Such desires were not realized, as the capitalist elite of both the North and South offered a dual or separate system of public education, legitimated by law, whereby schools that educated Black children were poorly funded and housed in dilapidated buildings. In 1954, the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declared this dual system separate and unequal. The African American community was hopeful, again, that Black children would receive a quality education and receive the opportunity to fully participate in the American dream. The price of integration for African American communities, however, was the forfeit of many of their own schools, curriculum, teachers, administrators, and culture (Piert, 2013).

Black women school founders in the early twentieth century, such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, and Charlotte Hawkins Brown, founded schools for Black girls and young women (Bair, 2009). These women, building on the legacy of late 19th-century education advocates such as Fanny Jackson Coppin and Lucy Laney, used education as a tool for racial uplift. These women were on a mission that combined educational, social, and economic goals and shared the belief that Black women had to assume the initiative in educating themselves and their people (McCluskey, 1997). Black feminist scholars, exploring the struggle for consciousness and self-definition experienced by Black women, describe how these women navigated multilayered and interlocking oppressive structures based on gender, class, and race (Higginbotham, 1992; Hill Collins, 1999; Johnson, 2000) and chose courses of action that advanced their aims (McCluskey, 1994).

A historical tradition within the African American experience of educating its own children, along with inequities and underachievement in the public schools, became the impetus for the development of independent Black schools in African American communities in the early 1960s (Piert, 2013). Black parents, frustrated and disillusioned with the public-school system, sought alternative educational options for their children, including African-centered schools (Piert, 2013).

## Africanist Womanism

Africanist womanism and Black feminism serve as the lens for my voice to describe my experiences as a Black female charter school leader. Africanist womanism is the identity that I choose over Black feminism as a woman of African descent that exists as part of the African diaspora, vs. just America. I embrace the Africanist womanism framework as it takes into consideration the merging together of experience, awareness, and action (Banks-Wallace, 2000). Sexism and racism, as experienced by Black women in America, will be outlined, starting with the slave experience, then within the feminist and Black liberation movements.

## Sexism and the Black Female Slave Experience

Sexism has impacted Black women throughout U.S. history in all aspects of daily living: employment, health, civil rights, law, and education (hooks, 2015). hooks provided a historical context for sexism and the Black female by examining the Black female slave experience, where the overlapping of the race and sex discourse began. She referenced how Black women's bodies were where racism and sexuality converged, and reported that sexism looms as large as racism as an oppressive force in the lives of Black women. She traced sexism back to the European homelands of White colonizers, where sexism was an integral part of the social and political order of White colonizers, and enslaved Black women were gravely impacted. She reported that enslaved Black people accepted patriarchal definitions of male-female sex roles, aligned with their White owners, including the notion that the woman's role entailed remaining in the domestic household, rearing children, and obeying the will of husbands.

While not invalidating feminism as a political ideology, hooks (2015) provided a historical reflection of racism and feminism in the United States as she exposed the racist foundation of every woman's movement in the United States. She described the women's rights movement as having mirrored the racial apartheid social structure that characterized 19th- and early 20th-century American life. She outlined how the racism White females felt toward Black women manifested in the women's rights movement, the women's club movement, and in the work arena. Nineteenth-century White woman's rights advocates attempted to make their lot synonymous with that of the Black slave as a means of drawing attention away from the slave toward themselves.

While White women in the women's movement may have needed to make use of the Black experience to emphasize women's oppression, they did not focus on the Black female experience. They chose, instead, to deny the existence of Black women and to exclude them from the women's movement (hooks, 2015). Some Black women, interested in women's liberation, formed separate Black feminist groups (hooks, 2015). Hooks (2015) expressed that, by creating segregated feminist groups, these groups both endorsed and perpetuated the very racism they were supposedly attacking, failed to provide a critical evaluation of the women's movement, and offered to all women a feminist ideology uncorrupted by racism or the opportunistic desires of individual groups. hooks (2015) further reported that, as colonized people have done for centuries, the Black women accepted the terms imposed upon them by the dominant group, White women liberationists, and structured their groups on a racist platform identical to that of the White-dominated groups they were reacting against. White women were actively excluded from Black groups. In fact, the distinguishing characteristic of the Black feminist group was its focus on issues relating specifically to Black women. Black female activists ceased to struggle over women's rights issues and concentrated their energies on resisting racism, when Jim

Crow apartheid threatened to strip Black people of the rights and achievements they had acquired during Reconstruction (hooks, 2015).

## Black Feminist Thought

African American women face systemic oppression based upon both race and gender. Generally speaking, Black feminist thought (BFT) is a framework that focuses on the experiences of African American women (Collins, 2008; hooks, 1989). Orbe et al., (2002) wrote, "Black feminist thought constitutes a conceptual approach that reflects the special standpoints that African American women use to negotiate their positioning of self, family, and society" (p. 123). BFT encourages Black women to speak on matters that may be difficult, rare to hear about, and/or controversial (Lorde, 2007; Collins, 2008). McClaurin (2001) concept of Black feminism is defined as an embodied, positioned, ideological standpoint perspective that bears Black women's experiences of simultaneous and multiple oppressions as the epistemological and theoretical basis of a pragmatic activism directed at combating social and personal, individual and structural, and local and global forces that pose harm to Black women's well-being.

BFT highlights the oppression that Black women face at the intersections of race and gender, while creating a space for their voices as Black women (hooks, 1989). Black feminist Kimberle Crenshaw uses the multidimensional experiences of Black women to demonstrate that a single-axis (e.g., race or gender) analysis is ineffective in capturing the experiences of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw (1989) recommended an intersectional analysis that analyzes experiences at the intersection of multiple categories (e.g., race, class, and gender), because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism when addressing the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated. Collins (2008) asserted that intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and oppressions work together in producing injustice. Collins (1986) discussed the "outsider within" (p. 14) as a position from which Black women can speak. Collins (1986) viewed the intersectional identities such as race, gender, and class, to be of benefit, and the Black feminist scholars as one of many distinct groups of marginal intellectuals whose standpoints may enrich contemporary sociological discourse.

By focusing on intersectionality, BFT emphasizes interlocking oppressions (Collins, 1986), which have also been understood as "multiple consciousness" (King, 1990, p. 69). When interviewed about multiple consciousness, Black women offered their insight on what it means to be oppressed at the intersections and how they deal with this oppression (Orbe et al., 2002). Some women described past experiences that "left them wondering if the problems were caused by racism, sexism, both, another issue, or simply a personality conflict" (Orbe et al., 2002, pp. 128–129). This autoethnographic research explored ways in which social and material inequalities shaped my journey at the intersection of my race, gender, and class, as a Black female charter school leader.

## Black Feminism and Black Liberation

hooks (2015) discussed how sexism in the 1960s diminished and undermined the power of all Black liberation struggles. Based upon patriarchal values, Black liberation was equated with Black men gaining access to male privilege that would enable them to assert power over Black women. She further discussed how the Black liberation struggles in the 1960s included a sexist emphasis on Black female submission and silence in the name of liberation. She shared how Black females clung to the hope that liberation from racial oppression would be all that was necessary for Blacks to be free.

## Africanist Womanism

African womanist thought (AFT) served as a framework or lens for me to use my voice to describe my experiences as a Black female charter school leader. While some African American women choose Black feminist to define themselves, the Black feminist label fails to satisfy other African American women who use the term womanist. The term womanism is viewed to be centrally located in the sociohistorical and linguistic worldview of Black women (Troutman, 2002)—was coined by Alice Walker in 1983 and has been used and refined by other African American women writers such as Ogunyemi (1993). A womanist believes in the goal that all should work for the benefit of the whole community, and all African American females and males should contribute to that effort (Walker, 1983). Womanists, Walker (1983) believes, should share a worldview of social philosophy, which emphasizes the primacy of a supportive social network of women, family, and community. Womanism is more attractive to many African American women to endorse, as it implies the idea of African American unity and African American Nationalism.

Hudson-Weems (1988) argued that Africanist womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent, grounded in African culture, and necessarily focused on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of African women. Hudson-Weems believes that African American women should create their own paradigm and name and define themselves. According to Hudson-Weems, relations between African American women and African American men are different than those between White women and White men. For African American women, the men in their community are not seen as oppressors; rather they are seen as partners in the fight for the great cause of racial equality. Hudson-Weems contended that racism, classism, and economic injustice supersede sexism (Maparyan, 2011). Ogunyemi (1985) renamed her perspective African womanism in 1996, to further show the importance of the concept of both genders working together for a better humanity. Maparyan (2011) explained that a central theme in African womanism justifies Black women as leaders in organizing, mediating, reconciling, and healing a world overrun with conflict, violence, and dehumanization. Womanism concerns global reorganization and healing vs. women's issues, and encompasses all oppressed people, men included, as a human problem. Dove (1998) advanced an imperative of African Womanism struggle as the herstorical (vs. historical) attempt by African women, particularly mothers, to regain, reconstruct, and recreate a cultural integrity that espouses the ancient Maatic

principles of reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness, and order.

The womanist concepts of empowerment, independence, interdependence, struggle, and activism have naturally found their way into the field of education. Womanist educators were exhorted to use their sense of collective responsibility to help the masses of African Americans understand and act on their rights as citizens in a democracy (Perkins, 1983; Higginbotham, 1992). African American female educators find themselves fighting for a voice and for those who are underserved (Bloom and Erlandson, 2003; Berry, 2005; Loder, 2005; Karpinski, 2006). For many of these women, being an educator is more than a job; it is a vocation, a calling, and a responsibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2004; Loder, 2005). hooks (1994) described the calling for womanist educators to use education as a movement that does away with boundaries and makes education the practice of freedom. Just as the foremothers Bethune, Burroughs, and Brown, contemporary African American women, particularly in the field of education, felt compelled to work for the disenfranchised (Case, 1997; Collins, 2008; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Maparyan, 2011). American female educators incessantly reflect on the suffering people endure, and many prefer to work with the oppressed. They challenge social injustice and extend their united support to oppressed individuals all over the world (DeLaney and Rogers, 2004; Williams, 2005; Comas-Diaz, 2008).

hooks (1994) suggested that the survival and future of the urban community could and can still be found in the schoolhouse. African American female educators face not only the task of providing a solid academic experience, but also the task to prepare students for life beyond the safety of the classroom (Case, 1997; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; King and Ferguson, 2011; Patterson et al., 2011). The African American female educator, moreover, produces a pedagogy that blends teaching what is mandatory with nurturing an understanding and pride in African American culture and history (King and Ferguson, 2011; Patterson et al., 2011). Like her foremothers, the African American female educator is committed to providing racial uplifting for the betterment of those disenfranchised (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005; Patterson et al., 2011).

## Black Women and Transformational Leadership

My study explored my experiences and obstacles during my journey aspiring to serve as a transformational leader in a neoliberal era of education. Transformational leadership, originated by James MacGregor Burns in 1978, recognizes the following characteristics: practices are distributed collaboratively among staff members; and relationships are interdependent and involve parents, community members, and professional staff (Lambert et al., 2016).

Darder (2016) spoke of the notion of critical leadership as a pedagogical practice beyond the traditional hierarchical and individualistic banking model of leadership. She described critical leadership as a practice that draws practitioners toward an understanding of leadership as a social phenomenon that must

exist communally and evolves pedagogically, through open structures of participation. She wrote about critical leadership, encouraging the vision to be learning together as a way of life where the world is transformed as community through humanizing inquiry and decision making, where the common good stretches across our differences and our institutional priorities.

Darder (2016) described the purposefulness of critical leadership as reflecting commitment to conditions of labor and life that create opportunities for collective empowerment and self-determination—with a particular focus on those who most experience disempowerment, alienation, or isolation. Wilson (2016) highlighted the benefits of transformational educational leadership that enacts critical care as a viable means of serving students of color impacted by poverty. She questioned the extent to which disadvantaged African Americans are educationally cared for in the United States given the inequities and educational struggles they systemically face. She suggested that the care for marginalized youth in a critical way, as a social complex and politically conscientious process, is a need that not all educators undertake. She, in her profile of a Black female transformational educational leader, advocated for the use of critical care that encompasses empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance, and risk-taking to advance student learning and social justice with disadvantaged children and children of color, as well as the infusion of critical care theories into transformational leadership frameworks and practice.

In this neoliberal era, Bogotch (2017) described school leadership as cultural and contextual or local, influenced by global forces. He argued: against neoliberal policies and that education should be constructed locally by community communications and dialogue based on the interest and needs of people; and that the challenge for educational leadership is pedagogical and curricular; that is, to reconstruct a more inclusive notion of the other locally, as a socially just response on behalf of public education. He further affirmed the challenge for educational leadership to shift our intellectual and dispositional activities taking into account the diverse values and needs of ourselves and the other.

## Black Woman's Leadership

Hall and Gray (1998) provided a working definition of Black women's vision of leadership and that the leadership of Black women (LBW) is comparable to Black feminism. Hall and Gray further suggested that LBW is about the empowerment of human beings to claim ultimate fulfillment. Within LBW, leadership acts as a process of both individual empowerment and is collective and nonpositional. King (1998) suggested that the vision of Black women's leadership is interwoven with the vision of the members of a Black community, because Black women's leadership aims at affecting change for all people. Collins (2008) viewed Black women's visionary leadership as an Afrocentric feminist sensibility to political activism. Collins (2008) viewed this as an empowering activist mode of leadership that initiates resistance, and believed that Black women's leadership is transformative and makes leaders out of followers. Collins

(2008) posited that Black women's leadership keeps the community and home together as a united group, uses an Afrocentric way of leading, is centered on a humanist vision, influences people through everyday experiences, and works for institutional transformation.

## My Identity Journey to African Woman Leadership

I am the granddaughter of deferred dreams, of freedom, fulfilled purpose, and peace. My maternal grandfather, Percy James Taylor, a sharecropper, fled Lineville, Alabama from the Ku Klux Klan, to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the early 1920s. He was forced to temporarily abandon his wife and children with her parents and family. He was very musically talented with a personality larger than life itself. My maternal grandmother, Flossie Mae Craig Taylor, also artistically talented, wrote poetry and was a visual and musical artist. Her brother, while in the navy, sent money for her to attend Tuskegee Institute; however, her father did not believe girls should attend school, thus she did not attend. She became, instead, a devoted wife, mother, grandmother, and selfless servant for Christ. One of her deferred dreams was to visit the Holy Land, which she achieved using dollars received from a settlement from the steel mill after my grandfather died of prostate cancer. My mother's dreams of the pursuit of higher education were deferred until her children were grown, at which time she completed a master's in social work in her fifties. My father never expressed his dreams, seemingly content with his role as provider, husband, father, and grandfather.

My first models of Black woman leadership were my grandmother, mother, aunts, teachers and other Black women leaders in my community. Growing up, having been raised with a strong sense of community and service, I knew I wanted to be a teacher and have my own daycare center. As a teen, I taught Sunday school and worked with children in summer programs. Upon completion of my undergraduate degree in elementary education, my aunt, a college professor in education, coached me to pursue a master's degree in special education. Since completion of my master's degree in specialized professional education, I have committed most of my professional career to serving disadvantaged and/or special needs populations, as both a teacher and school leader.

Since 1990, I have been committed to African-centered education pedagogy and curriculum for children of African descent. I believe that such pedagogy, curriculum, and practice take into account, and are designed to teach, African children in a manner that takes their history, culture, identity, and politics into account for the ultimate purpose of solving their problems (Asante, 1988; Asante, 1991a; Asante, 1991b; Wilson, 1993; Hopkins, 1997; Hilliard, 1998; Giddings, 2001). I engaged in intensive study and travel, including classes in and conferences on African-centered education. Travel to Egypt with Dr. Asa Hilliard, to study classical African civilization, and the African diaspora (Senegal, Ghana, Brazil, South Africa, and Mexico), blended with prior study, were tools toward my actualization of an African-centered education pedagogy and practice.



While working as a public administrator for a nonprofit human services firm in Washington, DC, I was led to respond to a call for community members to open charter schools in the District of Columbia. In 1999, I wrote the application to open Paut Neteru Community Public Charter School as a family-friendly, African-centered community school. The name Paut Neteru is a pseudonym (and used for confidentiality purposes). In 1999, conditional, then full approval of the charter application was granted. In 2000, the school was opened with 75 students and eventually grew to over 300 students. The school's population was over 95% African American and disadvantaged in each of the 15 years of operations. My dream of creating an institution to serve children stood on the shoulders of countless deferred dreams (never to be realized) of my family and community ancestors. My dream, to start and operate a school, while I believe somewhat realized, continues the seemingly endless thread of dreams and aspirations thwarted by social and political factors, including institutional and systemic racism.

As executive director, I operated the school until 2015 when the DC Charter School Board did not renew the charter. Obstacles and challenges faced over the 17 years of starting, operating, and closing the school were numerous and rooted, I believe, in the racialization of the neoliberal education system in the United States. The vision was to provide a family-friendly culturally competent holistic community school for at-risk African American students. My uphill quest to serve as a charter school leader included obstacles such as: (a) securing and retaining a facility; (b) recruiting and retaining highly qualified teachers and leaders; (c) inspiring and incentivizing positive parental involvement; and (d) creating a school culture of academic excellence, holistic well-being, and cultural pride for children and adult stakeholders.

These life experiences brought me, as a Black female leader, to the point of my research to conduct an autoethnographic study on the obstacles and experiences sometimes encountered by leaders of color in the field of education.

## Autoethnography as Method

Autoethnography is described as a qualitative research method, and rationale for using autoethnography as methodology, for this study, is provided. Autoethnography as a method: promotes investigating personal experience and how the personal interacts with culture; and provides an opportunity to examine the relational dynamics of my experiences in the cultural context of the Black community and neoliberal education. Ellis and Bochner (2000) suggested that autoethnography is a form or representation that allows the researcher to focus “outward on social and cultural aspects of their experiences” (p. 739). As such, self-analysis and self-reflection were used within the context of social and cultural experience. Reed-Danahay (1997) defined autoethnography as a “self-narrative” that can be done by anthropologists, non-anthropologists, and autobiographers who lace their life story within the social context of the research. Foster (2005), in her exploration of issues of race and prejudice in research, argued that new alternative research paradigms help free researchers from the racist, sexist, and class baggage from the traditional positivist approach.

Critical autoethnography, when viewed as a genre of research and writing that takes into account personal experience and becomes a “anthropology, as cultural critique” (Marcus and Fischer, 1986), can contribute to our knowledge of power and social inequality (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Alexander (2013) described critical autoethnography to be like capturing a picture of oneself in a glass borderless frame as one stories the meaningfulness of personal experience in a cultural context. I used the qualitative method of autoethnography to: present a critical narrative of my quest for transformative leadership, within an African-centered construct, as a female educator of color; and utilize such personal experience to contribute to our knowledge of social and material inequalities. Foster (2005) reported that academics rarely connect their theory with their own practice. Use of this research method facilitated the connection of African-centered education pedagogy, African womanism, and transformational leadership pedagogy with my own practice. I embraced the understanding among autoethnographers that the personal is cultural and the cultural personal, because the individual and culture are mutually influential and inextricably linked (Chang, 2007). Cultural frameworks, through which education is imparted to students, in this study is further at the center of the examination of how African-centered education and practice can better serve Black students vs. an Eurocentric approach to education.

## Findings – Social and Material Inequalities

An analysis of the shared experiences from the three epochs of my study are presented below, via overarching categories and comprehensive classes (Merriam, 2009), revealed from a thematic analysis of narrative and documents (with over twenty themes that were coded for pattern categories). The key overarching categories and comprehensive classes include: (a) Black Female Leader/Multiple Consciousness – Skills and Expertise; (b) Cultural Context of Black DC Community and Education of Black Children in DC; (c) Understanding My Place; (d) Identity Politics; (e) Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Class and Black Oppression; (f) Racialization of Neoliberal Policies; and (g) Access to Facilities and Equitable Access to Capital for Facilities. The study, again, explored: 1) Ways in which social and material inequalities shaped my journey as a Black female charter school leader; and 2) Lessons learned from the obstacles and experiences encountered during my journey as a Black female school leader.

## Black Female Leader/Multiple Consciousness

As a personal reflection, my mother is the first Black woman leader that I encountered. She was a leader in her home, church, and community. She was loved and highly respected in and outside of her community. As one of her three children, I accompanied her to most meetings, that she attended, as she kept her children close to her. I am so grateful that I was able to observe the dynamics of organizations at a young age, while I did

not enjoy it then. My expectation bar is extremely high for my service and how organizations and systems should function, given my mother's exemplary example.

I stand on the backs of mighty African woman education leaders such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Nannie Helen Burroughs, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, and Marva Collins, committed to using education as a tool of racial and social liberation and empowerment for Black children (Bair, 2009). As a Black woman leader, I faced the challenge to serve my community through the lens of multiple consciousness, considering race, culture, national, economic, and political factors. My leadership style reflected African-centered principles of leadership. I struggled to liberate the hearts and minds of Black children using an African-centered holistic approach. I was committed to leave an imprint on students to become academically competent, culturally knowledgeable, and socially attentive to the community.

Within the African diaspora, the African woman serves the role as healer, creates her own paradigm, and defines herself within an African-centered context (Hudson-Weems, 2004). Chapman (2013) described African-centered schools as serving a healing and restorative function for the numerous injuries sustained by the Black body and psyche as a result of centuries of oppression and marginalization. African-centered schools, Chapman (2013) explained, operate as agents of empowerment and identity construction for the Black families and youth they serve. I chose to define myself as an African-centered educator using the paradigm of an African-centered approach to fight for a better humanity for all by serving the under- and un-served students of DC.

In the era of neoliberal education, women of color, grapple daily with dilemmas of leadership and authority. Reflection of my leadership performance and positionality as a Black female leader revealed numerous examples of ways in which racialization and oppression created unwelcomed and unfavorable dilemmas of authority/leadership that compromised my African-centered/humanist beliefs, including: (a) expelling students who violated the code of conduct in reaction to their victimization as racialized and/or oppressed subjects; (b) terminating teachers who failed students/performed inferiorly as a result of their own self-hatred; (c) upholding principal decisions against students that perpetuate racist attitudes toward children of color; and (d) valuing, evaluating, and making decisions about students and teachers based upon neoliberal policies such as high-stakes testing.

I aimed to blend my experiences, awareness, and action to empower Black students to reach their highest good and subsequently serve humanity as functioning adults in society. I experienced enormous challenge, within and outside of my own identity, to serve in such an exemplary fashion. The history of my experiences grounds my social activism as a Black woman leader. These experiences are grounded in strong spiritual and family values and sense of community, African-centered pedagogy and practice, academic scholarship, commitment to service, hope for a better future for our children, and unconditional love for children. Like my mother, I am a nurturer. Throughout this

lived experience as a Black woman leader, I nurtured and inspired deferred dreams, children, parents, professional staff, and an entire professional learning community. My strong ethics positioned me to lead with integrity, providing an exemplary example for others.

Black women, I believe, intuitively know how to meet the needs of the Black community in concert with Black men. Notwithstanding my difference in class with the community that I served, I possess the historical experience of what poverty looks like and the issues that pervade disadvantaged families, thus successfully reached parents and children across class. Even when at odds with parents or when seen as representing the "man," I was perceived as authentically concerned about the wellbeing of children and their families. Parents also respected that fact that my son was educated right alongside their children, even though he could have attended a private school.

My struggles as a Black female leader within an Africanist womanist framework (Hudson-Weems, 1988) were grounded in African culture, as I worked for the benefit of the whole community. I took seriously my responsibility to celebrate Black roots and the ideals of Black life, while giving a balanced presentation of Black womandom, exuding nurturing, compassion, and strength. I view my struggles as part of a broader struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice for the Black community (Collins, 2008).

## Cultural Context of Black DC Community and Educating Black Children in DC

Having grown up outside of DC and never worked in the DC educational community, I only learned of the cultural context of the Black community in DC ten years prior to opening the school. As a mother of a Black student attending DCPS and charter schools, I received a glimpse of the disadvantaged state of public education in DC in the early to mid-1990s. Conducting research in 1999, as part of developing the charter application, revealed current demographics about the DC community and the educating of Black children in DC. I understood the gross and systemic poverty levels of the District. I underestimated, however, the lingering effects of the crack drug epidemic on the Black community, as some of my first students were the grandchildren of crack-addicted adults. Other social ills plagued our families. Many of my students' parents that were incarcerated had drug or violent related charges.

I understood DC had not been successful in attaining statehood. I underestimated how the lack of statehood would perpetuate an oppressor/oppressed existence, stall efforts for education reform, and impact me as a leader of a charter school whose funding allocations and the timely issuance of such allocations were under control of the Congress. I learned, as part of this research and literature review, of the full extent to which Black children in DC have received a separate and unequal or no education since its first free colored students attended private schools. DC's 200-year history of public and private schools where local schools organizations and governance were controlled by the Congress and structured around issues of race

included a lack of faith on the part of Congress on Black leadership in DC schools (Anderson, 2000). I underestimated the depth of underachievement of Black students, rooted in two hundred years of racist and/or failed policy (Anderson, 2000).

## Understanding My Place

As I review the history of educating Black children in DC or the lack thereof, and the timing and placement of my entrance into the charter school world, my lens was rose-colored. While I dreamt of accomplishing so much more, I believe that our school made a positive and powerful difference in the community. Past students, parents, and staff affirm the school's positive contributions with conviction. A number of former students, including my son, returned to work as summer youth workers, teachers, and teacher assistants. Sankofa is an Akan principle that reflects the importance of learning from the past. I believe that while the result of school closure might have been the same, had I better understood the history of education for Blacks in DC, I might have been more realistic about and less indicting of my efforts to serve the DC community.

Being an educator and Black female school leader is far more than a job or career; it is a calling and responsibility (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2002; Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2004; Loder, 2005). hooks (1994) described the calling for womanist educators to be to use education as a movement that does away with boundaries and makes education the practice of freedom. I remain committed to my calling to serve my community, using all tools received, from my lived experiences.

## Identity Politics

The benefits associated with the school's African-centered identity included: (a) cultural identity for students and staff; (b) students received an accurate history of the world; (c) leaders, teachers, and staff could instill in students racial uplift and pride; (d) the approach inspired creative and critical thinking; (e) African-centered principles, practices, and routines inspired development of self-knowledge and individual gifts for the betterment of community and spirit; and (f) the approach encourages love for all humans, other creatures and honoring of nature and spirit in daily life (Byrd and Jangu, 2009).

The challenges that accompanied adopting an African-centered pedagogy and identity were numerous. DCPS had a superintendent, Dr. Andrew Jenkins, who embraced Afrocentric education to the level of creating an assistant superintendent for an Afrocentric education position. I interviewed for the position. He was fired before he could fill the position. Dr. Jenkins believed he was voted out in 1990 due to his desire to introduce an Afrocentric curriculum. The succeeding superintendents did not share the same enthusiasm for Afrocentric education as Dr. Jenkins. Upon assuming her duties in 1997, Superintendent Ackerman would soon battle the chartering authority executive director against the conversion of one her junior high schools to a charter school.

While we were not discouraged from adopting an Afrocentric approach to educating our students, during the charter application process, the charter community never encouraged

the use of the approach. The chartering authority would, for the school's performance review visits, secure a so-called "Afrocentric expert" to serve on the review panel. Such inclusion is the extent of support for the African-centered approach on the part of the chartering authority. Staff of the chartering authority was reported to have made comments about the school being an undesirable place to work because we were Afrocentric. From time to time, I spoke to other of the few Afrocentric charter leaders about collaborating for professional development and other activities. The grind that accompanied the task of keeping the doors opened challenged my ability to carve time for initiatives not related to student academic performance and high-stakes testing. Both lack of support and insufficient time to collaborate with other Afrocentric leaders are examples of social inequalities that I experienced.

The greatest challenge we faced implementing an Afrocentric approach was the task of recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers who embraced the pedagogy and were willing to infuse the practices in daily instructional and non-instructional activities. The school's first teachers provided rigorous instruction and implemented the African-centered curriculum and approach to education. Most teachers hired after the first four years of operation did not embrace the African-centered approach to education at the level of authenticity desired.

Chapman (2013) research examined issues of Black identity among our school's educators and youth. As part of her study, a minority of the school's teachers and staff deemed the issue of African identity as fundamental to producing educational and long-term success. She found, in her qualitative study of our school, that the majority of the school's teachers reflected one or more of the following sentiments: (a) African-centered education was not a priority for African American children; (b) African-centered education will limit Black children's ability to appreciate difference and excel in diverse environments; (c) our school promotes a false reality for students and does not prepare them to function well in the world; and (d) they questioned the contemporary relevance of African-centered education. Prior to having to place high-stakes testing over all existing aspects of the school's emphasis, time was devoted daily to infuse the African-centered approach into academic and nonacademic activities. Consistent and authentic implementation of African-centered pedagogy and identity were compromised when the NCLB legislation, a neoliberal policy, was enacted, placing a much greater emphasis on student success on high-stakes testing vs. academic achievement and growth in concert with holistic development.

## Intersectionality of Race, Gender, Class, and Black Oppression

This comprehensive class reveals, from thematic analysis, examples of systemic social and material inequalities, through the intersectional lens of race, gender, class, and Black oppression. Leonardo (2013) described ways in which schools maintain race at the expense of students with color. Schools are part of how race is maintained through race's educative function. Educators teach young people the naturalized status of race and its foreverness on

a daily basis (Leonardo, 2013). Segregation studies explain that in a racialized social system, most Blacks attend school with other Black children, tracked with respect to one another rather than with Whites (Massey and Denton, 1993). My students, in addition to attending school with all Black students, descended from generations of Black students who received no or inadequate access to high-status knowledge and, for the most part, attended segregated schools (Anderson, 2000). DC's history of racialized, segregated and unequal education for Black students and underfunded facilities, as controlled by Congress, positioned DC Black students to suffer greater as victims of neoliberal education, given no state control of education.

Material inequalities were experienced, as other schools secured significantly greater support. I was never able to attract philanthropists that donated millions of dollars to charter schools in DC. As I encountered experiences that did not positively serve myself or my school community, I wondered if the problems were caused by racism, sexism, both, another issue, or simply a personality conflict (Orbe et al., 2002), as the oppressions interlock to be experienced as a "multiple consciousness" (King, 1990). As a school described as Afrocentric, we were caste as outside of the mainstream and thus not considered by some as candidates for some of the programs, sponsorship, or philanthropy that might have benefitted our students. My pro African-centered approach did not impede my ability to engage professionals from all fields and ideologies in any way.

Most of our parents, after the first few years of the school's operation, did not live an African-centered lifestyle. Some Black parents, unfortunately, projected negative attitudes and behaviors they likely experienced as people of African descent, as Byrd and Jangu (2009) described, onto others, particularly school leadership and security. Unfortunately, racialization can be experienced when members of the oppressed group assume the behaviors of the oppressor. I, along with other leaders and teachers, experienced numerous violent encounters from parents over the years.

Research shows the high correlation between poverty and school performance (Kozol, 1991). Chapman (2013) conducted research at our school and described poverty and lack of resources as vividly real, for many our families. African American women face systemic oppression based upon both race and gender. Our Black mothers faced the daily struggles that accompanied being Black, female, and often singly responsible for providing for their children. Most of my parents were Black mothers and grandmothers. The experiences of these Black women intersected race, gender, and status. I believe that the weight of oppression proved unbearable, even with the hosts of services we provided to thwart these villainous outcomes of oppression.

## Underestimating the Racialization of Neoliberal Policies

Our school was just opening in 2000, as an outcome of neoliberal policies included increased measures of accountability through high-stakes standardized testing. My experience with this practice at our school aligns with research that describes the impact of

high-stakes testing ranging from access to federal funding to classroom instruction focused on teaching to the test (Hursh, 2008). Schools receiving federal funds under NCLB were required to subject students to high-stakes testing and succeed in closing the achievement gap. As a school leader, I embraced this goal of realizing higher levels of student achievement and growth at our school.

Chapman (2013) observed educators, parents, and students at our school negotiating contestations that produced a tension in the school environment of which all community members were acutely aware. In her research findings on our school, she discussed how the discourse of NCLB and neoliberal education dominated the school environment in such a powerful way that nearly all of the conversations she had with teachers, parents, and staff, invariably came back to the themes of competition and selectivity.

Over the years, I pondered if it was political suicide to continue the aim to serve those with the greatest need in the neoliberal era of increased accountability as measured by high-stakes testing. While I may have privately shared the desire for a student body more balanced in terms of academic performance and growth, and thus enjoy an easier road to high levels of school performance, I knew that I could not and would not abandon those students who other schools screened out of their enrollment process. We were spiritually and culturally called to serve these children, as Black educators focused on and committed to the critical care and effective schooling and educating of Black children. It would have helped to have received additional resources and support for special needs and low achieving students from the chartering authority and the state.

Both ongoing school violence and the lack of qualified teachers at our school impacted our capacity to ensure positive achievement and growth for students. Our children were impacted from violence in their homes and community, while such violence easily carried over into the school environments, including while on field trips and being transported to and from school. As a leader, I insisted that we always had a full-time school psychologist, unlike most small charter schools in DC, and quality business and community partnerships to provide clinical support to students and their families. Even with constant investment in positive behavior intervention supports, violence in the school seemed perpetual and rooted in a systemic history.

In the early years, our African-centered family-friendly school succeeded in attracting high-quality teachers committed to uplifting Black students. With the facility shifts, increased enrollment, leadership changes, and high-stakes testing, our school climate shifted. Our second location, Hamer (a pseudonym), was far less intimate and challenged our capacity to recreate our "village" and safe space for students. Teachers, at our second location, faced poor facility conditions and reduced support from parents, in addition to year-round high-stakes testing preparation.

As the chartering authority responded to NCLB and its need to better measure school performance with assigning tiers to schools, our school rating floated between a Tier 2 and Tier 3, with more Tier 3 ratings (ratings ranged from Tier 1-Tier 3). Our

efforts to recruit quality teachers were impacted adversely by our school rating as a “failing” school, notwithstanding having over 95% disadvantaged students. Few charter schools had comparable poverty levels to our school. Teachers who joined us realized and hopefully appreciated the way in which we valued teachers and provided competitive salaries and benefits, and ongoing substantive and exemplary professional training and travel.

In line with the mandate to subject students to high-stakes testing, I developed a value-added or high-stakes evaluation system, for teachers and leaders where teachers were held accountable for the performance of their students. In hindsight, this value-added system may have unfairly judged teachers with low performing students who would, even with the highest percentage of growth possible, not test on grade level.

I bought into the system with all my heart, fighting to keep the school open for the children I so loved, and perpetuated the use of Black children as objects. As an educator, I did not believe that high-stakes testing would prove friendly to children of color. High-stakes testing was required as part of accepting federal/title funds. I needed these funds to serve the children and, at the time, charter renewal was determined mostly by student performance on state tests. I believed teachers would welcome the increased accountability and feel incentivized to work harder for our students. I did not know another way to motivate and inspire teachers to help the school jump the complex and ever moving targets of a neoliberal education system.

The requirement of charter schools to secure their own facilities added to the pressure of assuring enrollment targets were met. School enrollment determined the amount of a school’s facility allotment. Our need to secure facility financing required the school to abandon its initial vision of serving 150 students and secure approval to grow to 540.

## Access to Facilities and Equitable Access to Capital for Facilities

In 2000, there were far fewer facilities available for schools to occupy than the demand. Concurrently, a heated battle between the superintendent of DCPS and the executive director of the chartering authority resulted in two distinct interpretations of the DC School Reform Act as it pertained to the availability of surplus school buildings for public school use (DCPS and charter). I chose not to make a politically ill-advised decision as the first major decision for the school. As I reflect back at the decision I made in 2000, I really did not have an option but to pass on the offer for DCPS space without committing political suicide with a leader already ensued in heated battle. These circumstances may have made our school collateral damage and subjected to a social and material inequality, as the politics of the circumstances rendered economic implications.

Our founding aim was to operate a school of 150 students, providing intensive family-friendly community-based educational and holistic support to high-poverty, high-need families. The securing of an existing DCPS facility might have provided us the opportunity to: remain a school of 150 students; retain students; stabilize and increase student academic achievement and growth; and secure financing to purchase a

facility. While one might argue that we survived three major facilities hiccups, our aim was to thrive and serve our community in an exemplary manner. These hiccups included: (a) a 30-day notice to relocate a school in 2004; (b) emergency occupancy of a facility with infestations, poor health and safety conditions for students in 2004; and (c) a 6-month delay in occupying our newly purchased facility in 2007.

Our facility woes seriously impacted our ongoing plight to provide services and dominated considerable amounts of my attention that could have been devoted to effective school leadership, effective teacher and leader development, sustaining a professional learning community, sustaining business/community partnerships, world travel for students, and other initiatives integral to the school’s mission and vision. As my inability to remain focused on key schoolwide goals persisted, overall academic school performance fluctuated and/or faltered.

## The Price of a Dream

Pursuit of a dream to serve Black children and families in a quality and meaningful manner did not come without a price. My love and devotion for the children and commitment to excellence were often recognized by stakeholders, while my posture and actions were often unpopular. With the responsibility of keeping the doors of the school open, I did not have the luxury to forge high-quality relationships with staff, students, and parents. Little time remained to forge relationships, with constant pressure to navigate business-altering scenarios like: securing accreditation; relocating the school; overseeing the buildout of a new facility; and ensuring compliance with state and chartering authority mandates (such as changing standards, state assessments, and numerous audits and reviews). Such a posture compromised my aspirations for transformational leadership utilizing a constructivist approach.

I believed that I had to always put the children first. Fighting for the liberation of the minds and hearts of the children was my activism for social justice. My lens was rose-colored in the early years, in that I did not expect the mission to increase in difficulty with each year. By the time we purchased our own facility, and no longer had to fret eviction, the years of vicious cycles of ensuring fiscal viability, primarily through student enrollment and effective instruction and instructional leadership within a school community of enormous need, had taken its toll.

## CONCLUSION

I dissected, analyzed, and shared the social and political inequalities that shaped my journey as a Black female charter school leader. The autoethnographic method allowed me to mesh my personal with the cultural aspects of my experience, to shed light to the issues that face Black children, Black educators, and the Black community. As part of my life’s experience, I learned that the actualization of collective dreams is an incremental and ongoing process.

Asante (1990) maintained that children who are centered in their own cultural information are better students, more

disciplined, and have more motivation for school work. I believe that this premise still holds true for children from all cultures. Future research could explore how to enhance the fight against neoliberalism and develop successful policies and practices that ensure non-European children are educated, not just schooled, in a manner that places them at the center of their learning, builds agency, and develops them into creative and critical thinkers and future builders. Enhancing the fight against neoliberalism must include strategies that facilitate access to private and/or public funding for non-Eurocentric centered education that does not ascribe to the capitalistic tenets of neoliberalism.

Shujaa (1994) reminded us that the fight to educate African Americans and achieve full educational and political equality has persisted since at least the age of integration and is a battle for an equal and level playing field in all areas of human endeavor. Given the manner in which racialized educational practices are interwoven in educational pedagogy, instructional approaches, and practices, it is critical for leaders aspiring to offer students a non-Eurocentric practice, to consider the following lessons that one can learn from the obstacles and experiences that I encountered during my journey as a Black female charter school leader: (a) ensure a strong system of community and/or private support for your pedagogy and practice; (b) ensure that you have the holistic resiliency and fortitude to withstand fierce opposition from varying stakeholders and those in power; (c) ensure your personal beliefs are aligned with the developed institutional vision and values; (d) forge positive and effective

relationships with those in power and those to be empowered; (e) use a constructivist approach to build and maintain a professional learning community; (f) possess a willingness to assume no ownership to the entity that manifests from your initial vision; (g) possess the ability to love and appreciate Black children or children of color, with high expectations for students based on international standards, not the Euroamerican norm (Byrd and Jangu, 2009); and (h) ensure the provision of teacher training that supports teaching in a non-Eurocentric learning environment. In addition to providing tools for social justice leadership and culturally responsive schooling for disadvantaged students of color, this article offers opportunities for Black women leaders, researchers, and reformers, with the positionality, commitment, and passion to devise and implement systemic, equity-oriented educational solutions for Black students.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The datasets generated for this study are available on request to the corresponding author.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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