

Chapter 35

More Than the Sum of Their Struggles: Success Factors of First-Generation African American Women With Doctorates

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ABSTRACT

Even in 2020, the plight of Black women in higher education saturates the literature. For decades, Black women have been trying to find their place in the academy. This chapter reveals the success factors of five first-generation African American women with Ph.D.s discovered through a narrative inquiry. The theoretical framework used in this study contends that social location and ideas produced by Black women help demystify the orientation of Black women and help illuminate their points of view. This study focused exclusively on capturing the success factors that contributed to the participants successfully navigating their doctoral journey. The findings exposed five success factors and better position the academy to support and replicate mechanisms to foster success and not assumptions of incompetence. This study allowed participants to provide wisdom to future generations and evidence to assist in shaping the trajectory for first-generation African American women doctoral students.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents findings from a qualitative research study on the success factors for five first-generation (first in their families to obtain a college degree) African American women who obtained Ph.D.'s in education at predominately white institutions. The sister scholars in this study represented the professoriate in various educational sectors including a military educator, a linguist, a dual language educator, a clinical therapist, and a sex therapist. The contributors to success uncovered through participant interviews include understanding the collective impact of education, being encouraged by an

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educational figure during their educational journey, having faith in God, demonstrating perseverance, and having solid support systems throughout their doctoral journey.

Historically, Black women have struggled to find their place in society and higher education. Even in 2020, the struggles of Black women in higher education saturate the literature. In history, Black women have been one of the most insulated, underutilized, and subsequently demoralized segments of the scholastic community (Carter, Pearson & Shavlik, 1988). The voices of African American women are often ignored and not reflected positively in the literature. Because academia is historically made up of white, heterosexual, middle-and-upper class, those who do not represent this classification are often “presumed incompetent” by colleagues, students and administrators alike (Muhs, Niemann, Gonzalez, & Harris, 2012).

Using semi-structured interviews, the author, Wilson (2019) captured the success stories of five first-generation African American women with a doctorate, in their own words, through a narrative inquiry—a tool to investigate the ways humans experience the world. This study aimed to change the legacy of invisibility and misperception by breaking the silence and speaking truth to power by intentionally exposing success factors despite the struggles for first-generation African American women who obtained a doctorate degree. hooks (2014) underscored that finding one’s voice and using it, especially in acts of critical insurgence and opposition, thrusting past fear, continues to be one of the most authoritative ways feminist philosophy and praxis can change lives. This study gave five women the ability to find and express their voice.

Black women have rich, powerful, transformative, and informative stories to tell. Yet, people have rarely asked to hear those accounts, especially those narratives connected to triumphs, like the ones that were captured in this study. Michelle Obama (2019), former First Lady and a first-generation African American woman with a doctorate stated there is power in authentically sharing your unique story with others to be known and heard. And there’s honor in longing to know and understand others. She provided a compelling illustration of the sovereignty of both hearing and providing an avenue for others to share their unique stories with others. Throughout history, storytelling has provided opportunities for enslaved people to preserve memories related to their dialect, reflections, sounds, smells, and textures of their homeland while also staying in touch with friends and family, expanding new kinships, disseminating information across plantations, and obtaining more knowledge about their new environment (Banks-Wallace, 2002).

This chapter does not strive to provide an exhaustive list of success strategies, nor a framework to guarantee success for all Black first-generation graduates who are now Ph.D. students, nor an in-depth description of Black feminist thought, nor a prescribed blueprint for creating success. Instead, it aims to share the counter-stories of five women, sister scholars who refused to allow their past to determine their future and became successful scholars in their own right. Beginning with a brief history of Black women in higher education, this chapter then reviews the significance of the study, highlights the theoretical frameworks anchoring the work, explores the methods, presents the success factors for study participants, offers recommendations on ways to replicate the success in the academy to glean similar results and concludes with reflections on implications for both practice and future research.

Background

Due to the weight of the historical injustices of both Black men and Black women in the quest for knowledge, it will take an intentional effort to undo this unfortunate legacy and to position African American

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