COMPOSING A CANONICAL NARRATIVE OF BLACK AFRICAN IMMIGRANT SCHOOL LEADERS IN THE UNITED STATES

Componiendo una narrativa canónica de líderes escolares inmigrantes negros africanos en los Estados Unidos

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Resumen: Este estudio da voz y visibilidad a líderes escolares inmigrantes negros africanos y les proporciona una plataforma para describir y dar sentido a sus experiencias vividas a través de la construcción de sus narrativas desde una perspectiva marginada. Utilizando la investigación narrativa, se identificaron y entrevistaron a trece narradores mediante preguntas abiertas y detalladas. Los tiempos iniciales de las entrevistas variaron de una a dos horas, y todos los participantes tuvieron al menos una conversación de seguimiento. Este estudio produjo una radiografía de sus almas y delineó seis constructos temáticos que sembraron el desarrollo de sus narrativas canónicas. La discusión generó una alineación entre los hallazgos y la literatura consultada e indicó recomendaciones para la investigación, la política y la práctica.

Palabras clave: *Inmigrantes negros africanos; Investigación narrativa; Liderazgo de los marginados; Epistemología del punto de vista de los inmigrantes negros africanos; Liderazgo escolar.*

Abstract: This study gives voice and visibility to Black African immigrant school leaders and provides them with a platform to describe and make sense of their lived experiences through the construction of their narratives from a marginalized standpoint. Using narrative inquiry, thirteen narrators were identified and interviewed through in-depth open-ended questions. Initial interview times varied from one to two hours, and all participants had at least one follow-up conversation. This study produced a radiography of their souls and outlined six thematic constructs that seeded the development of their canonical narratives. The discussion elicited an alignment between the findings and the literature consulted and indicated recommendations for research, policy, and practice.

Keywords: *Black African Immigrants; Narrative Inquiry; Leadership of the Marginalized; Black African Immigrant Standpoint Epistemology; School Leadership*.

INTRODUCTION: A STRUGGLE FOR VOICE AND VISIBILITY[1]

Relative to other minority immigrant groups, Black African immigrant school leaders appear invisible because of their numerical minority and a lack of research interest about them (Moore 2013). They are not the unique subgroup marginalized. Research by and about African Americans in school leadership is also underdeveloped and undervalued leading to gaps in the discourse on school leadership (Tillman 2004). The invisibility of Black African immigrant school leaders from the body of literature on school leadership is not accidental nor does it imply epistemic non-existence or social worthlessness. The reality is quite the opposite. Black African immigrants have made "significant contributions [but], their lived experiences and voices have been mostly silenced" (Ukpokodu 2013: xiii). The White dominant discourse (Mendez-Morse 2000) orchestrates this silence to exclude, negate, and neglect minority narratives to control them.

In fact, traditional imperial epistemologies have focused on the "great man" theory - the metaphor for White male dominance. This Eurocentric lens does not equate African immigrant school leaders with greatness. It views them as marginal beings despite their achievements and successful journeys through the same psychological trauma all immigrants have always experienced (Jones 1960).

This marginalization of Black African immigrants has led to a struggle for voice and visibility. Reclaiming their voice became a matter of consciousness and critical thinking. In this regard, the positionality from where they speak counts the most. They start from a location of "'double visibility' as Blacks in the eyes of Whites and as foreigners in the eyes of native-born Blacks" (Bryce-Laporte cited in Warner 2012: 92). They balance between two boundaries: on the White dominant border, their racialization exposes them to the bigotry of systemic racism; on the Black diaspora border, it is a more complex equation. On the one hand, they embrace blackness with all the

[1] This article summarizes the findings from a doctoral dissertation (Tchoumi 2020a) that attempts to understand the lived and professional experiences of Black African immigrant school leaders in the U.S. and how they construct the narratives of their lives.

advantages it entails; and, on the other hand, they contest their racial affiliation to African Americans because of the negative connotation it may imply (Warner 2012). This game of belonging and *un*-belonging may impact their relationships with native African Americans, but it does not change their social location from the dominant caste standpoint.

This narrative inquiry investigates and explicates the emergence and the development of Black African immigrant school leaders as well as defines their location on the educational landscape. It gives them voice and visibility and provides them with a platform to describe and make sense of their lived experiences through the construction of their narratives from a marginalized standpoint. The essential question becomes: How do Black African immigrant school leaders understand their lived and professional experiences and construct narratives of their lives? In the process of collecting and (re)composing the narratives of Black African immigrant school leaders, this investigation (re)produced a radiography of their complex souls and unveiled six thematic constructs which seeded the development of their canonical narrative.

1. COMPOSING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK MOSAIC[2]

This study was framed through a multi-perspectival approach. The theorization started from people's constructed realities. Then the position of Black African immigrants on the racial checkerboard was conceptualized through the critical race theory lens. Next, the standpoint epistemology was employed to frame the life and experience of marginalized groups leading to the centering of Black African immigrants within the standpoint discourse (Tchoumi 2020c).

1.1. Starting from people's constructed realities

The constructivist/interpretivist approach provides a framework for understanding the production of the social world and seeking the meaning of experience (Creswell 2007) from the emic point of view (Schwandt 1994). It emphasizes the centrality of people involved in the

[2] Here, I draw from an early essay (Tchoumi, 2020c).

inquiry (Cousins 2002) and posits knowledge and reality as a construction from people's minds (Guba 1990, Schwandt 1994, Glesne 2011). Constructed realities also derive from the interaction between individual and social institutions. The sum of perspectives resulting from those interactions can reveal the collective thoughts and behaviors of specific groups of people (Glesne 2011).

Constructivist thinking assumes the plurality and plasticity of reality (Schwandt, 1994). Black African immigrants develop their own consciousness and construct their reality based on their personal and professional goals. The sensitivity to diverse perspectives produces a more comprehensive understanding of reality (Klein & Meyers 1998, Morehouse 2011).

1.2. Black African immigrants on the racial checkerboard

Critical race theory (CRT) positions race and ethnicity at the forefront of social issues and provides a set of concepts that allow Black African immigrants to name and validate their American experience. In addition, CRT provides a theoretical space for examining how racial considerations have permeated their identities' construction. More importantly, CRT frames the de-construction of the master narrative and advances an alternative discourse about Black African immigrants.

To understand the system of power and subjugation and its impact on racialized people, it is important to understand how race and racism work and how they "explicitly and implicitly impact social structures, practices and discourse" (Yosso 2005: 70); to understand other people's experiences and their understanding of their experiences, it is important to understand their location on the racial checkerboard. CRT provides a critical platform for examining how the racialization of Black African immigrants works and how master narratives are developed to attempt to codify their social identity (Cook 2013).

Master narratives tend to advance a monolithic view of subjugated people's identities and, consequently, homogenize the group to which they belong (Ladson-Billings 2013: 40). Oppressed people have in common their social location and their oppression. Apart from that, they live at the intersection of two or multiple identities. The ideas of intersectionality and anti-essentialism provide

a space for theorizing multiple identities and multiple consciousnesses within Black African immigrant school leaders while recognizing their shared immigrant status.

1.3. Grounded in marginalized lives

The marginalized have a "clearer and better" worldview (Hartsock 1998) and an epistemological advantage. Starting off with the standpoint of the marginalized provides a comprehensive representation of reality reflecting their interests and values as well as the variety of their experiences (Jaggar 1983).

They experience different material circumstances and develop different viewpoints based on the intersectionality of their social locations. The standpoint epistemology focuses on that embodied experience. But their experience and lives are problematic due to the social stratification that creates an uneven and unjust social order with differential power relations establishing different social locations for people. That positionality affords them a "more accurate and less false" knowledge (Wood 2005). The validity of that kind of knowledge rests on a "strong objectivity" (Harding 1993) taking into consideration the experiences of an intersection of people from diverse backgrounds and identities (Hirsh, Olson and Harding 1995). Strong objectivity implies "strong reflexivity" because the subjects and the object of knowledge are placed on "the same critical casual plane" (Harding 1993: 136). Therefore, the standpoint epistemology produces a marginalized centered knowledge. That knowledge is advantageous and highlights the "double consciousness" of Black African immigrants through their ability to operate intimately and efficiently within two contradictory epistemological locations (Narayan 1989 and Wood 2005): at the margin and at the center of the society.

People living under oppression may develop a "critical emotional response" (Narayan 1989: 219) leading to an oppositional consciousness. They can become "subjects" rather than "objects" of research (Harding 2004: 3) and therefore authors and masters of their agentive narratives. The standpoint is thus an "intellectual achievement" (Wood 2005) attained through political and scientific struggle to understand one's experience through critical stances on the social order within which knowledge is produced (Harding 2004, Jaggar 1983, Pohlhaus 2002). It demonstrates an understanding of how power structures and shapes knowledge in specific contexts (Intemann

2010). A standpoint theory is, therefore, an empowering act (Harding 2004) and a manifestation of human agency.

1.4. Toward a Black African immigrant standpoint epistemology

Black African immigrant school leaders live at the intersection of multiple consciousness: being Black in America, immigrant, gendered and diversely sexually oriented. They also position themselves in relation to African Americans. The dominant groups use "manipulative deflection" (Okonofua 2013) to reinforce the racialist myth of African Americans' cultural inferiority by associating Black African immigrants with superior cultural capital and positive behavioral dispositions that may be lacking to African Americans. This subversion and manipulation of the "ethnicity paradigm" repackages the "culture of poverty" and the cultural deficiency discourse to perpetuate a "cultural racism" that adversely affects all Black people in the United States.

This contentious perception of the world confirms the diversity within the Black community as well as the Black African immigrant distinctiveness. It also inscribes this "ethnic distinctiveness" within the context of power relations and ongoing practices of racial subjugation. It is from that shared location of inequality and marginality that the Black African immigrant group is constituted. Narratives emerging from that social location of disempowerment, dehumanization, and marginalization help understand the relationships located within the social power relations (Ardill 2013: 334).

Many Americans associate Black African immigrants with the images of "Tarzan, wild animals, and the 'Dark Continent', which have made the 'African' in African American something to be avoided and reviled" (Traore 2003: 2). The significant migration of Black African nationals from their homelands to Western countries may reflect a sense of disillusionment with their countries of origin. Upon arriving in America, they seek new opportunities and better living conditions (Takougang 2006). Their identity is shaped by a blend of traditional and ancestral values, along with cultural influences inherited from colonial history.

A Black African Immigrant Standpoint Epistemology (BAISE) encompasses the totality of their lived experiences as being

Black and alien at the same time. It gives pre-eminence to the experiences and realities of Black African immigrants around the world. It assumes that only Black African immigrants can produce Black African immigrant standpoint, that Black African immigrants as a community share certain commonalities, that there is diversity and varieties among Black African immigrants. In addition, it highlights how Black African immigrant school leaders make sense of their work at U.S. public schools.

Black African immigrants live within a triple cultural interface including how they look at the world, how they understand it, and how and what knowledge they operationalize. (Nakata 2007). BAISE theory of action is at the third prong of this interface. Black African immigrant standpoint framework provides knowledge and strategies to negotiate and navigate the cultural interface (Ardill 2013) as well as strategies that interrupt and redress the stereotypical images of Black African immigrants in the United States and disrupt the underlying cultural racism that supports it.

Black African immigrants position themselves as "epistemologically significant" subjects producing knowledge rooted and delimited by their social position as marginalized others (Pohlhaus 2002: 285). BAISE also gives them voice and visibility within the intellectual knowledge production system. A Black African immigrant standpoint perspective provides a platform for developing alternative views that can help understand the differences within and among groups and help identify possible commonalities.

2. THE LEADERSHIP OF THE MARGINALIZED[3]

The demographics of school leadership do not match the changing population at U.S. public schools (Sanchez, Thornton & Usinger 2009). The voices of women and minorities are still missing (Lovelady-Dawson 1980, Chin 2007) and the disparity between minority administrators and students persists (Magdaleno 2006). In addition to their underrepresentation, they are stereotyped and

[3] See Tchoumi (2020b)

discriminated against based on their ethnicity, their nationality, and their gender. They disrupt those stereotypical representations through the construction of alternative narratives (Bloom & Erlandson 2003, Chin 2007).

Diversifying educational leadership is now a moral imperative. There are both symbolic and practical reasons why school leadership should reflect the demographic of students (Sanchez et al. 2009, Williams & Loeb 2012). It disrupts the White male hegemony and provides alternative leadership perspectives (Magee 2016). Minority school leaders empathize with students and can positively influence student achievement (Sanchez et al. 2009, Haynes 2015). The existing literature has focused more on women and has continued the research trend of homogenizing women and other minorities. This homogenization of minority groups (Ifedi 2008, Morris 2003) makes it challenging to highlight the voices, the lived experiences, and the leadership of Black African immigrants.

2.1. The meaning of leadership for the marginalized

Minority school leaders perceive themselves as change agents (Loebe 2004, Murakami, Hernandez, Mendez-Morse & Byrne-Jimenez 2015). Their leadership requires a "sense of calling" (Dantley 2009: 42). They commit to make a difference in the lives of students and uplift the social groups embodied in their identities (Coleman & Campbell-Stephens 2010). The moral imperative driving Black African immigrant school leaders did not appear in the literature examined.

Minority leadership also focuses on organization and community transformation (Romo 1998). They position themselves as "cultural brokers" (Murakami et al. 2015) or cultural translators, and creators of an adaptive organizational structure. Their ascension to leadership is a groundbreaking event and a pioneering achievement (McKenley & Gordon 2002) affirming and validating their leadership skills and abilities (Nwabah 2006), and providing diverse images and models of leadership. They exemplify successful leadership for all students in various school contexts (Tillman 2004, Brown 2012).

2.2. The journey to successful minority leadership

The literature reviewed did not address the relationship between race and specific leadership pathway models. There has also been no indication about the pathways Black African immigrants follow to become school leaders. It appears that the leadership journey of the marginalized begins with the development of a leadership identity involving multiple stages and steps (Komives et al. 2005, Ande 2009) from the classroom and to the principal office or at the central office (Williams & Loeb 2012, Morales 2014).

Their pathways cross different hierarchical boundaries (Ortiz 1982) that require a socialization process. There are multiple pathways to socialization (Crow 2006, Auva'a 2010). First generation immigrant educational leaders are acculturated toward both language and cultural competencies, and self-identified identity dimensions (Aghamirza 2015). Socialization is a collaborative and intentional process between the individual, the leadership preparation program, and the school system (Bengtson 2014). Interestingly, organizations have failed to socialize women and minorities so that they have equal opportunity to learn and ascend to school leadership positions (Auva'a 2010).

2.3. Leadership frames and personal attributes

Minority leaders bring their leadership lenses and personal attributes (Suzuki 1994). Some use multiple leadership frames consistent with their diverse background. This model appears to align with Black African immigrant leaders' multicultural experiences. Others have reframed and synchronized the mental model of leadership with the urgency of the moment (Foster 2009). The African-centered education model is grounded in the symbolic frame (Heggins & Pitre 2009). Research reviewed did not indicate whether Black African immigrant school leaders were inclined to adopt the symbolic leadership lens or any other leadership frame.

Minority leaders' emotional abilities were not always explicit in the literature reviewed; However, minority leaders displayed their self-awareness and abilities to grapple with American contradictions and negotiate "multiple realities" (Shullman 2009). This adaptability reflects their cultural intelligence when living in a White dominated culture (Kumaran 2012). Marginalized people also seek

insights into other people through interpersonal relationships with their peers and subordinates (Ande 2009). Furthermore, minority leaders are transformational leaders (Crow & Glascock 1995, Porter & Daniel 2007) as well as humane leaders displaying an ethic of care, compassion, and sensitivity (Carr 1995, Northouse 2016).

Cultural and contextual factors influence leadership frames and personal attributes. People do not have fixed traits or qualities (Niesche & Gowlett 2015). The behavior of Black African immigrant school leaders should be consistent with the standard of leadership practices and culturally oriented leadership behaviors congruent with their multicultural identities.

2.4. Experiences with leadership for minority leaders

The leadership experiences of school leaders from minority backgrounds are described through a dualist paradigm: on the one hand, it examined the challenges and barriers they face, and, on the other hand, it emphasized the strategies they have used to overcome those impediments. Minority leaders encounter personal and external roadblocks based on race, gender, and origin (Haven et al. 1980). Personal factors include a low career aspiration (Holtkamp 2002) and language proficiency (Pacis 2004). External factors include racism and discrimination (Bush et al. 2006, Coleman & Campbell-Stephens 2010, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis 2010, Morales 2014).

Minority women face a double marginality (Bloom & Erlandson 2003) or "triple marginality" (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis 2007) based on gender and/or race. Organizational barriers also exist including a lack of recognition (McKenley & Gordon 2002), constant scrutiny, and professional challenges (Brown 2012) obliging them to "prove" themselves (Loebe 2004).

Success is often driven by a combination of personal and external factors. Internally, individuals benefit from personal agency and self-efficacy (Coleman & Campbell-Stephens 2010), a strong belief in their leadership abilities (Nwabah 2006, Morales 2014), and a powerful intrinsic motivation to pursue ambitious goals (Falk 2011). They also draw resilience from their religious beliefs (Brown 2012) and use their cultural heritage as a resource to overcome leadership challenges. Assimilation into the new culture and leadership training

are also key to success (Pacis 2004). Minority leaders rely on a strong family and community support systems (Pacis 2004, Bush et al. 2006, Nwabah 2006, Falk 2011, Morales 2014), encouragement, and motivation.

2.5 Seizing the opportunity

The body of knowledge on Black African immigrant school leaders is limited, nascent, or obscured within the homogenization of minority groups, highlighting the need for focused research. This literature review underscores the importance and relevance of investigating the experiences and narratives of Black African immigrant school leaders. Such a study amplifies their voices, bringing their unique perspectives to the forefront and contributing meaningfully to the development and expansion of this critical area of research.

3. THE EXPLORATION OF THE MARGINALIZED EXPERIENCE

The methodology used to construct the canonical narratives of Black African immigrant school leaders is grounded in the life and experiences of the marginalized. It "describe[s] the meaning of experience for those who frequently are socially marginalized" (Marshall & Rossman 2011: 22) and examines the construction of counternarratives and the composition of alternative discourses (Wortham 2001). This research design gives meaning to both personal and social life experiences (Connelly & Clandinin 1990) of multiple Black African immigrant school leaders.

The construction of people's lived experiences is relational and complex. Narrative inquiry describes how Black African immigrant school leaders compose and constantly revise (Carr 1986) their narratives to match their transitional and continuously changing life and experience within the three metaphorical spaces of temporality, sociality, and place (Clandinin & Connelly 2006).

3.1. The construction of coherence

The production of narratives imposes "a meaningful pattern" to the disconnected and distorted lives and experiences (Reissman 2008: 5). Black African immigrant school leaders have diverse lived experiences. The composition of their narratives attempts to bring a sense of coherence and unity to their life and experiences. It facilitates the construction of identities and shifts the way Black African immigrant school leaders see themselves. It helps uncover how they grapple with social contradictions and negotiate their social status, making it possible to examine the link between the evolution of subjectivity and changes in the development of their identity (Bloom 1998).

3.2. A researcher in the narrative parade

The primary role of the researcher was to invite narratives. He gave up control of the narrative interview process and followed the narrators "down the trails." As narrator-composer, he made important editorial decisions about the final research text. He also positioned himself as editor and annotator, "reviewing" and "re-owning" stories collected. As a result, he became co-author of their narrative. Finally, he constructed narratives that "could lead to a better world" because he is not living "on the high road;" he is "part of the parade," and complicit in the world he studies and lives in (Clandinin et al. 2016: 61). This "reflexivity" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 16) makes him a co-narrator in the narrative world created. Narrative inquiry is "always strongly autobiographical" (Clandinin et al. 2016) because of the congruence between the research focus and the interest of the inquirer. In fact, as a Black African immigrant school leader, the researcher could very well have been a member of the narrative production cast. This "member-based knowledge status" (Johnson 2012) makes him a true insider in the narrative parade.

3.3. The "mise-en-oeuvre" of the narrative inquiry

This section focuses on the recruitment and selection of narrators, working with them ethically, ensuring the validity of the narrative text, and constructing a framework of meaning.

3.3.1. Recruiting and selecting Narrators

The term "narrators" (Chase 2005) emphasizes the story worthiness of participants. Thirteen narrators were recruited among Black African immigrant educational leaders working at several public and private schools in the United States. They were selected through a purposive and non-probability process (Patton 2002, Maxwell 2005, Creswell 2012) based on three major criteria: ethnicity, leadership credentials and professional experiences.

3.3.2. Working with narrators ethically

Establishing trust with the narrators started with the blurring of identities and places (Connelly & Clandinin 2006) to keep the confidentiality of narrators and the stories they have shared. Some narrators chose their pseudonym, and the researcher assigned a pseudonym to those who did not. Next, the researcher negotiated the narrative account with narrators (Connelly & Clandinin 2006) through the composition of research texts that respectfully represent the narrators' lived and told stories.

3.3.3. Collecting personal narratives

The collection of narratives was mediated through in-depth, open-ended narrative interviews that stimulated the narrator's interpretive capacities (Brenner 2006) and "activate[d] narrative production" (Holstein & Gubrium 1999: 39). The goal was achieved through carefully crafted interview questions focusing on meaningful "biographic particulars" (Chase 2005: 662). Initial interview times varied from one to two hours, and all participants had at least one follow-up conversation. Interviews took place at public libraries, at their offices, or at the researcher's residence. All interview sessions were recorded.

3.3.4. Ensuring the validity of narrative texts

There are no standard procedures for establishing the validity of a qualitative inquiry (Mishler 1990, Reissman 2008). Trustworthiness was established in various ways: (1) by sharing the transcripts of the narrative interviews and the interpretative draft with narrators electronically. Their feedback was used to refine the stories and the interpretations; (2) by seeking the validation of qualitative researchers

as well as researchers interested in the experiences of diverse and minority populations or in educational leadership; (3) by conducting at least two rounds of interviews with each narrator, listening to the recordings and reading the transcripts repeatedly; (4) focusing the analysis on critical "episodes;" (5) and by maintaining an electronic and hard files documenting the research.

3.3.5. Constructing a framework of meaning

The interpretative analysis examines how the narratives of Black African immigrant school leaders provided a temporal and conceptual coherence (Miskovic 2007). It was the result of comparative analyses, search for commonalities and differences, attention to patterns and themes, and paradoxes and surprises (Miskovic 2007). In developing the thematic narratives of Black African immigrant school leaders, the researcher thought narratively through the three-dimensional metaphorical narrative space (Clandinin & Connelly 2000).

The researcher has constructed an "author-evacuated" (Geertz 1988: 116) narrative text that objectively describes (Eisenhart 2006) the complexity of the lives and experiences of Black African immigrants in school leadership. For that purpose, he worked with metaphors and used word images showing the complex and multi-layered nature of the souls and experiences of narrators (Connelly & Clandinin 2006). He focused on events and experiences related to Black African immigrant school leaders. In short, he offered readers knowledge of their unique conditions as they negotiate their lives and school leadership experiences.

In conclusion, this narrative research design reveals a multifaceted researcher walking within the narrative parade and using his imagination to re-present the narrators' experiences and understandings. To construct engaging and inspiring research narratives, he borrowed from literary practices. The challenge with this design was ensuring the centeredness and credibility of the voices of Black African immigrants in school leadership. To that end, multiple strategies were employed to evacuate the omnipresence of the researcher and highlight the narrators' stories.

4. TOWARDS A CANONICAL NARRATIVE OF BLACK AFRICAN IMMIGRANT SCHOOL LEADERS

The narratives of Black African immigrant school leaders and their understandings of reality reflect their diversity. This section focuses on two constitutive elements of their canonical narrative: the radiography of their souls and the thematic constructs.

4.1. An MRI of the souls of Black African immigrant school leaders

The storied accounts of the narrators' lives and leadership experiences provide a space to start reconstructing their multidimensional personality, their leadership tropes, and their ideological orientations.

4.1.1. Multidimensional representations of selves

The comprehensive examination of their symbolic representations depicts various portraits and personalities. The narrators express themselves through references to animals, mental states, and material possessions.

4.1.1.1. Zoological referent

They choose a zoological "totem" (Alioune). In some African countries, a totem represents the double of a person in an animal form. Alioune's totem is the *dauphin sauveur*. The *Dauphin Sauveur* represents altruism and selfishness. Hence his devotion to teachers because they most significantly impact students' achievement. Other totemic representations include the lion, the tiger and the eagle. The lion symbolizes adaptive leadership. It is oxymoronically portrayed as "more protective than aggressive." Black African immigrant leaders leverage their adaptive leadership to protect and serve their stakeholders. Tiger woman made high intensity and the sense of urgency her lifestyle. Her mantra is: "if it is not good enough for my child, it is not good enough for someone else's child" (Dr. Binta). She is the keeper of other people's children. Finally, the eagle represents Black African immigrant school leaders "striving for the best" (Adekunle) for themselves, their students, and their staff. Semiotically, these four animals show a progression from underwater to the sky, the measure of excellence and high achievement.

4.1.1.2. Mental referent

This is an abstract representation of their personalities. The symbols describing their thinking systems are faith, team player, creativity and ambition. Dr. Mbeh stands up for a syncretic faith. He believes in God and in his ancestral religious practices. Above all, he believes in himself and in his ability to succeed in this opportunistic environment. Mvondo considers leadership as the trope for a team sport in which he is a player and the coach. He does not see himself "above anybody." He believes in collaboration and teamwork because "one single member of the team [. . .] is not able to accomplish that goal." His success depends on the effectiveness of his teachers. Dr. Sorntee's creative mind is "constantly and continuously working" resulting in the creation of innovative multilingual immersion schools.

Some Black African immigrant school leaders don't hide their ambitious mindset. Dr. Azi is a dynamic go-getter motivated to succeed in everything he does. Although he has not yet attained principalship, he refuses to give in to favoritism and nepotism. He wants to work hard to deserve his promotion.

4.1.1.3. Material referent

This category refers to natural elements (hard rock and shining star) and manufactured objects (family pot, locomotive, and sculpture). The hard rock symbolizes strength, resilience, and determination. Ngabeu embodies toughness and resilience. Leadership and guidance are the two attributes of shining stars. They are the light that "shines in the darkness." Dr. Adoalisa advocated for equitable educational opportunities for minority students at the expense of her position; she gave voice to her voiceless and powerless students.

Manufactured objects symbolize family and generosity, leadership in action, and artistic quest. The family pot represents care for one's family and community. The pot is the metonymy of the "nice cooked big pot of beans" that Kwacely cooks for her family. The pot is also a receptacle that welcomes everybody in the community. It is a container of non-perishable goods she regularly exports to her home country to be generously distributed to schools and needy people.

The unstoppable locomotive symbolizes the two Ps of their leadership: Power and Performance. For instance, Dr. Abidoye is a

tireless and flexible leader: “it doesn’t matter whether the terrain is an incline, a decline, or got leveled; [he] keep[s] going.” Student achievement is the only final relevant destination. He is equipped with superior skills and a strong will that allow him to outperform his peers.

The beautiful sculpture represents artistically and aesthetically minded Black African immigrant school leaders. They seek beauty and transcendence in everything they do. Beauty stands for perfection, excellence, and success, and transcendence is all about longevity.

4.1.2. Leadership tropes

Black African immigrant school leaders have developed self-centered and student-centered metaphors.

4.1.2.1. Self-centered metaphors

Self-centered metaphors are thinking modes that focus reflexively on the school leaders. There are four self-centered leadership tropes that characterize them: the mind map, the bouquet of virtues, the trilogy of humility, and the electrocardiogram (EKG). Ngabeu drew a tortuous mind map mirroring her serpentine ascension to school leadership. Kwacely points to a computer-generated bouquet of leadership virtues as the attributes of her personal leadership. Alioune defines leadership through the trilogy of “Ear, Book and Hand” as a humble act of listening to learn and serve. Humility can help school leaders negotiate their leadership journey. The EKG will reveal the conditions of their heart along that journey. Drew’s EKG is not “beep, beep, dead.” He confessed that taken at an early stage of his leadership, “there [would have been] more lows than … highs.” He is currently cruising in his leadership.

4.1.2.2. Student-centered metaphors

For Black African immigrant school leaders, student achievement is the most important measure of effectiveness. They make a difference in the lives of students by growing the teacher's capacity to “shine.” A school leader cannot do it alone. She needs the active involvement of all stakeholders. The school leader's role is to build the coalition and set clear expectations for optimal collaboration and engagement. The

position of Dr. Binta at the center of her "leaf of leadership" is therefore very significant:

> These are our students [...] and [...] these are the different branches, parents, community, district, state holders, expectations [...]. I am somewhere here in the middle trying to balance all these things out focused on improving these folks [students].

Improving students' achievement should be a fair and equitable process in accordance with the American moral standing: "the whole construct of America is set up on the concept of fairness" (Dr. Mbeh). America is also a diversity society and many school systems around the country reflect that diversity. Black African immigrant school leaders embrace differences. Fofana drew a circle of unity including different shapes of beings symbolizing diversity and the acceptance of differences: "I embrace all of them [and] I serve the global world." By embracing differences, Black African immigrant school leaders provide a template for a global and inclusive leadership.

The characteristics of their personalities and their conceptions and enactments of leadership are ingrained in their personal experiences as well as the sociocultural, economic, and historic environments where they have lived, are now living and work. In this regard, their narratives offer both a personal and contextualized understanding of school leadership that is unique and distinctive because of their complex identities and the combination of their multicultural experiences.

4.1.3. Ideological orientations

The constructed profile of Black African school leaders unveils four major ideological orientations: the anointed deterministic orientation, the righting of the wrong belief system, the innovative approaches, and the global-minded idea.

4.1.3.1. The anointed deterministic orientation.

Some Black African immigrant school leaders believe that God has chosen them "to touch young lives" (Dr. Abidoye) or "to bridge the

gaps between the haves and the haves not" (Kwacely). Their mission is not to enrich themselves, but to enrich others cognitively. They cannot "be extravagantly rich" but they are "rich in humanity." (Dr. Abidoye). Their goal is to make sure "that somebody else is being successful" (Dr. Abidoye). They are passionate and altruistic.

4.1.3.2. The righting of wrong belief system

The righters of wrong focus on the brokenness of the educational system that creates "separate and unequal education" (Dr. Azi) opportunities for students. They are aspirational and inspirational leaders committed to disrupt "the generational curse of poverty" by providing "feasible options" (Dr. Binta) and restoring educational justice and equity. They are not only critics of the endemic crisis of the public education system, but they are also problem solvers: Dr. Adoalisa refused to give in to wealthy and empowered parents' requests to discriminate against poor students; additionally, she intentionally hired minority teachers to insure a cultural congruence between students and staff. Dr. Binta transformed a school with no coherent curriculum into an engaging learning environment.

4.1.3.3. Global-minded idea.

Black African immigrant school leaders show an orientation towards diversity and globally minded education approaches. The world is becoming increasingly interconnected and very "small," and students who don't see themselves as global citizens will struggle to be functional members of the global economy and to adjust to technological advancements. (Drew). Unfortunately, the gap between the poor and the rich persists. Students in poor urban schools are very narrow-minded and "limited in their thinking;" they are not exposed to global knowledge and culture. Drew refers to this kind of education as "the pedagogy of poverty;" a system that disenfranchises students and worsens their isolation and suffocation within the borders of their immediate impoverished environment.

Black African immigrant school leaders want to help students "think out of the box" by "expand[ing] their microcosm and see[ing] themselves as global citizens" (Drew). They offer themselves as cultural artifacts: "I wear my culture and my heritage every day […]. When students are studying about the rainforest and I am in the

rainforest, I take pictures" (Kwacely). In addition, they bring African artists to their school sites to entertain and educate students about world cultures.

4.1.3.4. Innovative approaches.

These innovative approaches refer to curriculum and programmatic creativity. Dr. Sorntee refers to creativity as "taking what already exists and improving it." She has created some innovative schools in a poor urban district in the United States; a design so unique that "you have to have an excellent mind to have created such a program" (Dr. Sorntee). Innovation could also be seen as the first to lead an innovative educational program in a school district. Dr. Adoalisa led a new school model for 12 years resulting in multiple state accolades including the Blue-Ribbon recognition.

Dr. Mbeh considers trailblazing as a Black immigrant school leadership imperative:

> You have to blaze the trail; you have to sit back and create a situation, create scenarios where you don't have any leads (Dr. MBeh)

He launched a successful after-school remediation program that saw a dramatic gain in students' scores and implemented a program for girls in his school district. Ngabeu successfully oversaw the application process for her school to become an excellence education center.

The reconstruction of the personalities of Black African school leaders outlined the idiosyncrasies of each leader. With the leadership metaphors and the analysis of their ideological orientations, some clusters of meanings emerged.

4.2. The thematic constructs

The narratives of Black African immigrants in school leadership represent their interpretation and understanding of school leadership and the construction of a storied discourse of their immigrant lives. They are constructed around six thematic units: education, determination, service, gratitude, opportunity, and difference/discrimination.

4.2.1. Education

Education plays a pivotal role in the life and professional positioning of Black African immigrant school leaders. They all credit their homeland education for equipping them with the mental toughness to face the challenges of immigration and the academic readiness to study and compete anywhere in the world. Some of them have studied through very harsh conditions that have built their stamina and their resilience and increased the premium to put on a good education. The rigor of instructional practices required constant effort and engagement to be successful.

Academic competition is an important educational feature in most African countries. Teachers encourage competition through systematic ranking and overt communication of grades. Students adapt to these practices by competing to earn the highest grade. This competitive mindset gave them an edge when they enrolled at American universities:

> African students tended to congregate in [their] own little circle, and [...] made [them]selves competitive [...]. It showed in the grades. When we took the exam, the first 10 or 20 students were international students. (Dr. Abidoye)

Consequently, they found themselves skipping introductory classes because they had sufficient background knowledge to access advanced academic courses.

Many of them have earned a terminal degree, and they encourage other Black African immigrant school leaders to seek one as well. Earning a doctorate degree in America validates their intellectual ability and increases their professional clout and opportunities. Dr. Azi confessed that people pay more attention and listen to him since he earned his doctorate.

4.2.2. Determination

Immigrating to America can be an existential equation to solve. You either “sink or swim” (Dr. Mbeh). For them, the first option is out of question, and they must do all it takes to be successful. Most of them come to America with “a baggage of knowledge” (Adekunle), and an imperturbable willingness to succeed. Unfortunately, savage

inequalities are a major hurdle they must navigate with their unprivileged students. Drew spoke about his determination to overcome the contagious hopelessness that corrupts the mind of his high school students and makes them impenetrable. To avoid getting infected by the desperation spreading around him, he relied on the potency of his "immunization" growing up in a very oppressive environment in his homeland.

Dr. Binta inherited a failing school and came in with a tiger's roar: "This place must be successful." She made sure that cognitively disadvantaged students took full advantage of the opportunities available to them. In her toolbox, she carries "that immigrant resiliency for coming from a place very tough, for living through wars." The badge of "immigrant" is not always negative; it can be critical when serving and caring for students.

4.2.3. Service.

Serving students is their ultimate purpose. They position themselves as "keepers of other people's children" (Dr. Binta). They are not just academic leaders; they become their parents. Dr. Binta developed such a profound relationship with her students that even parents went through her to get information about their child. The resource officer relied on Dr. Adoalisa to get a student on probation. Dr. Abidoye became surrogate father to two female students.

Black African immigrant school leaders care about the socio-emotional well-being of their students, and they understand that their destiny converges with theirs. They want to disrupt the cycle of nihilism, "educate the next generation of students" (Drew) and transform them into "leaders of tomorrow" and "productive citizens;" not only it is the right thing to do, they have a stake in it:

> education is a matter of life and death [...]. You don't know where. . .students left behind are going to meet your child [...] and rob her (Dr. Binta)

They also care about teachers because their actions directly impact student achievement. They build teachers' capacities to serve and meet students' needs effectively. They help teachers become "top notch

professionals" (Dr. Mbeh) and their "first multipliers" (Dr. Abidoye). They develop teachers' capacities through collaboration and involvement in the decision-making process. They define their success through the eyes of people they have made successful.

4.2.4. Gratitude

Black African immigrant school leaders are showered with various appreciative actions from their school community. Many current and former students have found very creative ways to say "thank you" to their former teacher or current administrators. For instance, Dr. Abidoye received a royal send off when he was reactivated to go and serve the country at war: "I will never forget it; they made me feel like a king going away; these children rallied, they made posters." Even the principal was so grateful that she did not fill his vacancy until he returned from war and got his job back. Years later, at the same school, another principal openly stated during the end of year staff meeting that he could not run the building without Dr. Abidoye.

Kwacely points with excitement at handprints and many other souvenirs her former students gave her as well as other gifts she received for 30 years of continued service. She remembers the uproar of students in the auditorium when her name was called. Teachers have also shown their appreciation to Black African immigrant school leaders. Drew received a particularly emotional letter from one of his teachers at the end of the school year. In the letter, the teacher expressed her gratitude for all his support in making her a great teacher and concluded that Drew is a model of the kind of school leader she would like to become. All these paychecks of gratitude are evidence of the significant impact they have on their stakeholders.

4.2.5. Opportunity

The ascension of Black African school leaders to school leadership results from their self-agency and their proven record of leadership effectiveness. They got noticed and invited to school leadership. Dr. Abidoye shares his reflection on the importance of working in an environment where people genuinely notice your abilities:

> It is important to have folks in your sphere of influence that see all your capacity, all your potential, all your skills. And those [...] knowing that the skills [...] you have can make

> you a strong leader, can make you an effective leader and will impact the whole building.

Most of them got their initial leadership position as if it was tailored for them. Mvondo was leading a workshop for district administrators when he was approached and offered a district job. Then, when a principal position opened at a school, someone who knew his abilities advised him to apply. Drew's transition from teacher to school leader was "osmotical and spontaneous"; he was recruited as a teacher-mentor, and when the assistant principal position opened at the school, the principal offered him the position. Dr. Abidoye was encouraged to seek a leadership position and complete leadership courses. Once he was ready to become an assistant principal, he was appointed to the position while on vacation out of the country because his principal did not want another school to select him. Kwacely was also appointed in absentia. The school started searching for candidates to fill the leadership position she currently occupies while she was out of the country, the staff told the search committee that "the person is here" and that person was Kwacely.

4.2.6. Difference and discrimination

Some of them are still holding their initial positions despite multiple attempts to move to the next step. They blame this promotional stagnation on godfatherism and nepotism favoring sorority and fraternity members. These practices are unfavorable to Black African immigrant school leaders because their sphere of influence is still developing. There are other reasons preventing their ascension to principalship. In his self-reflection, Dr. Mbeh asked: "Why is it that additional promotional leadership opportunities are eluding [us]?" Here is Dr. Binta response:

> There are some politics. Folks don't want to admit it but when they speak you can put things together especially against Black Africans. They are willing to give European folks, nonblack folks a chance; look at the principal at GSA; she is from [...] Europe; she has a very heavy accent; how was she able to move up like that? Sometimes, I

> wonder if an overqualified Black African would have had a chance.

The politics of discrimination seem to be constraining many of them to play second roles indefinitely despite their high qualifications and leadership readiness. Being racialized immigrants limit their opportunities. It is a harsh awakening for them: "Here, race comes first, that is how you are judged. They put you in a pigeonhole [...]. [R]acism is ever-present here" (Dr Adoalisa). The derogatory assumption is that some racial groups are better than others; however, the only differentiating factors are the color of the skin, the accent, and other phenotypical indicators of ethnicity. Unfortunately, in the distorted mind of the dominant group, the dark color of their skin is synonymous to mediocrity and poor performance: Dr Mbeh describes how it works:

> There is this false perception that the color of your skin translates to mediocrity [...]. [F]or whatever reason, some people believe that you cannot achieve at the highest level (Dr. Mbeh)

Therefore, they start from a location of perceived deficiency and social disadvantage. This position is very detrimental for them because they may have to lead, mobilize, and influence people sharing the ethnocentric belief that their leader originates from a "subservient" group. This perception can weaken their authority because those people "don't see [them] as someone capable of giving them directions [...]. [They] don't fit in" (Fofana).

Dr. Adoalisa has experienced a double exclusion phenomenon: when she found herself as the only Black African immigrant in an African American organization, she was invisible and excluded when it came time to co-opt members for leadership positions. When she joined a White dominated circle, she realized that there was a limit to her interaction with White folks.

This feeling of inadequacy increases the level of suspicion when interacting with people from different backgrounds. Their intentions are always questioned, and suspicious, and Black African immigrant school leaders proceed with caution. For instance, Dr.

Sorntee is very circumspect about being singled out. She declines any invitation when she perceives that the intention is not to recognize her contribution to education and her personal expertise, but to be used as "the minority" representative in the room. She rejects political correctness and token politics.

This suspicion is symptomatic of the tensions between social groups. Drew has personally experienced the absurdity of those racial tensions. An African American principal "mistreated and abused" (Drew) him because he thought that Drew's African pride and his Ivy League education would get in the way of their relationship. The principal had a very proud Black African college roommate. He felt so insecure that he turned his internal insecurity and fear into a hatred of Black African immigrants.

INSIGHT FROM NARRATIVES

This investigation started on the premise that Black African immigrant school leaders were underrepresented and invisible both in school leadership and in the research. Therefore, the literature review was more tangential because there were no direct references to Black African immigrants in school leadership. In fact, most sections of the literature reviewed ended either with inferences about their potential relevance to Black African immigrants or with questions probing their potential relevance to the lived experiences of Black African immigrants. This approach created a great anticipation about the data analysis and the findings: would they confirm the relevance of the literature review or depart from it? If yes, how much departure would it be? In this case, there was a consistent alignment between the review of the literature and the findings.

Despite some slight differences in the acculturation process due to their foreignness, their pathways to school leadership start in the classroom like most public-school administrators and continue through various stages consistent with standard practices. As school leaders, they position themselves as servants to students and the Nation. They assign a high moral imperative to their leadership because they are conscious of the huge inequalities plaguing education in the US. They strive for significant presence and high leadership impact. They refuse

to be defined by their accented voices and portray themselves as highly educated and competent leaders who understand the urgency for creating learning conditions that are socio-emotionally and culturally congruent with students' backgrounds, and intellectually stimulating for maximum learning and performance. Therefore, they see themselves as leaders without connotations.

This study demonstrated the urgency to increase the number of Black African immigrants in school leadership; it also showed that there are many more opportunities for research about this marginalized group. For instance, quantitative studies could be conducted to compare the leadership practices of Black African immigrant women versus those of Black African immigrant men. Researchers could also compare the leadership styles and frames of Black African immigrant school leaders with other groups such as African American or White school leaders.

Considering the effectiveness and the success stories of Black African immigrant school leaders, in-depth portraitures or case studies of successful Black African immigrants in school leadership could yield deeper knowledge about their experiences and leadership practices. Qualitative ethnographic studies could yield similar results. Other research topics could include the socialization of Black African immigrant principals and how it impacts their leadership practices.

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